Peer Review on Active inclusion of young adults receiving social assistance benefits

Thematic Discussion Paper

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1. Minimum income support and activation

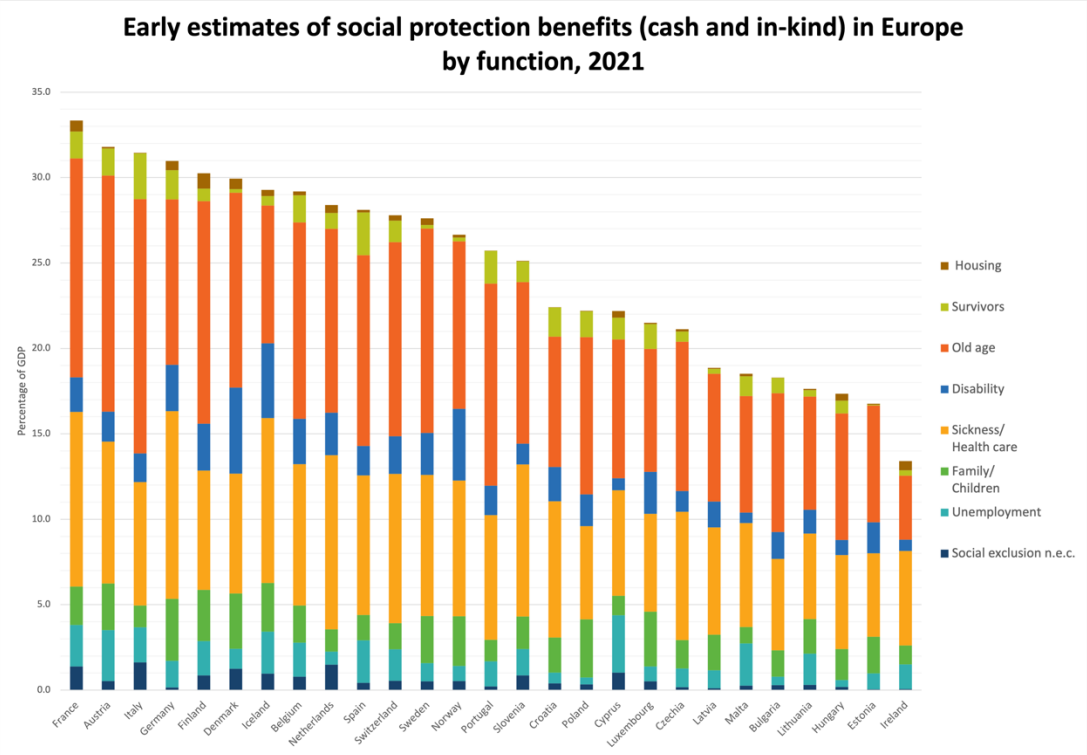
Through the adoption of the 1992 Council Recommendation 92/441/EEC, the European Union recognised the importance of ensuring 'the basic right of a person to sufficient resources and social assistance to live in a manner compatible with human dignity' (Council of the European Communities, 1992). The EU made another step forward in this field in 2008 with the Commission Recommendation on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market. Importantly, this document advocated the design and implementation of 'an integrated comprehensive strategy for the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market combining *adequate income support*, *inclusive labour markets* and access to *quality services*' (European Commission, 2008).

In other words, in Europe social assistance (or minimum income support) and labour market activation go hand in hand. Therefore, it is important to view minimum income schemes in relation to other forms of income protection as well as active inclusion policies (Frazer and Marlier, 2016; Bahle et al., 2011). Minimum income benefits are typically understood as means-tested monetary transfers to working-age individuals who have insufficient income or wealth to guarantee a decent level of living (Jessoula, 2021; Frazer and Marlier, 2016). Across Europe minimum income schemes differ greatly in design. Parameters along which benefits may be compared include coverage, take-up, adequacy and generosity. Linked to the latter two are questions of inactivity traps or disincentives to work and what measures are in place to prevent such effects (Coady et al., 2021; Frazer and Marlier, 2016). Minimum income schemes tend to face a trade-off between the goals of poverty reduction (equity) and avoiding inactivity traps (efficiency). In many countries there has been a trend towards strengthened conditionality attached to the receipt of benefits and an enhanced focus on activation policies to mitigate the equity versus efficiency trade-off. Frequently used conditions include an obligation to register with the public employment services, the drawing up of a labour market integration contract or plan, concrete job search activities, a willingness to take any job offered or the participation in mandated training or development activities (Frazer and Marlier, 2016).

While there is abundant academic literature that considers either minimum income schemes or approaches to active labour market policies or a combination of the two, there are fewer contributions that concentrate explicitly on the combination of minimum income recipiency and activation for young adults. However, there is relevant literature that looks at institutionalised school-to-work transitions and also changes in typical pathways to adulthood (Dingeldey et al., 2017).

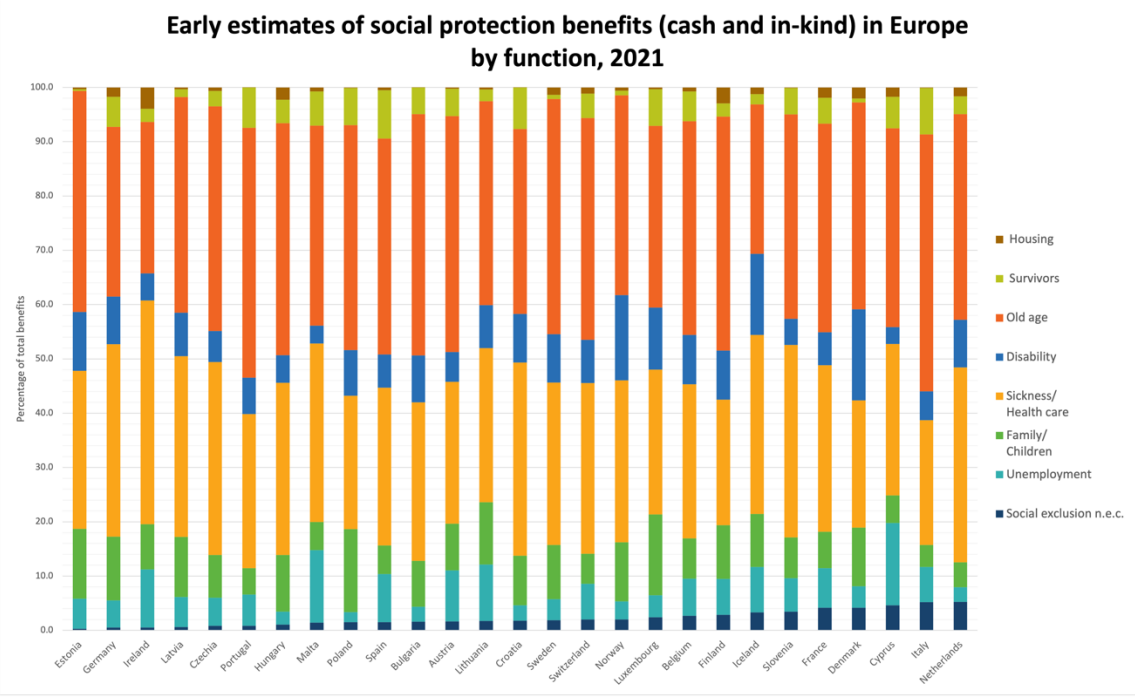
Minimum income benefits and activation policies are part of the institutional configuration of national welfare states and more specifically systems of social protection. According to the most up to date (but preliminary) estimates from Eurostat, European countries spend between 13.4% (Ireland) and 33.3% on social protection in 2021. Figure 1.1 illustrates that there is considerable variation not only in countries' social protection effort but also in the composition of social expenditure across Europe. Spending on minimum income schemes is located in the category 'social exclusion not elsewhere classified' and such spending is rather modest compared with other budget headings (see Figure 1.2). Nonetheless, such schemes represent an important last-resort financial safety net to reduce the depth of poverty and social exclusion for the most vulnerable.

Figure 1.1: Large variation in size and composition of social expenditure across Europe. Percentage of GDP



Source: Eurostat. Early estimates for ESSPROS main indicators for 2021 (last updated 07/11/2022).

Figure 1.2: Expenditure on social assistance takes up a small share of social protection budgets. Percentage of total benefits



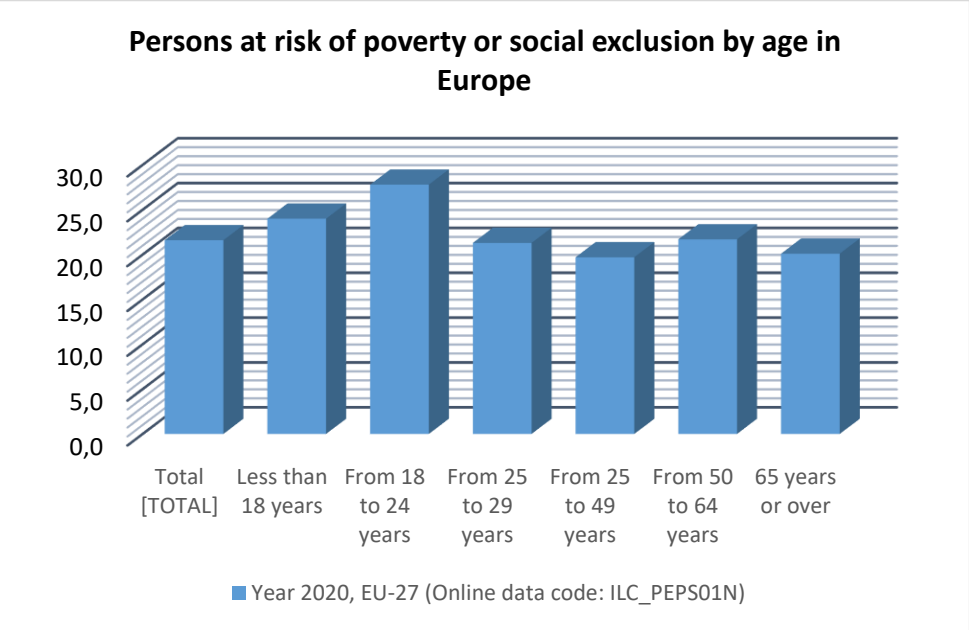
Source: Eurostat. Early estimates for ESSPROS main indicators for 2021 (last updated 07/11/2022).

2. Background: Changing labour markets and young people at risk of poverty and social exclusion

Since the 1970s, labour markets in affluent democracies have undergone profound structural changes as the economies of most of these countries have experienced deindustrialisation. Technological progress has increased productivity and greatly reduced the number of industrial jobs and the need for manual labour. Instead, in the 21st century the provision of services plays a greater role with more jobs being available in the tertiary sector (ILO Department of Statistics, 2018; Emmenegger et al., 2012; Pierson, 2001). Moreover, labour market flexibilisation or so-called precarious jobs have become more prevalent as there has been an expansion of atypical or non-standard employment contracts. That is, especially young labour market entrants cannot take for granted that they will have access to a full-time, permanent job, which in turn has implications for both their earnings and the extent of individual social insurance entitlements (O'Reilly et al., 2015; Emmenegger et al., 2012). Thus, minimum income (social assistance) schemes represent a crucial social safety net for young people.

In this setting labour market entry is not straightforward for everyone. For some individuals the transition from education to work is associated with considerable economic vulnerability. In fact, many young people, who are at the start of their labour market careers, face an increased risk of poverty and social exclusion compared with their older peers (see Figure 2.1). However, there are substantial differences across European countries (Figure 2.2). The pattern of this variation is surprising. Together with Romania and Turkey, the Nordic countries Denmark and Norway are among the countries in which poverty rates are particularly high.

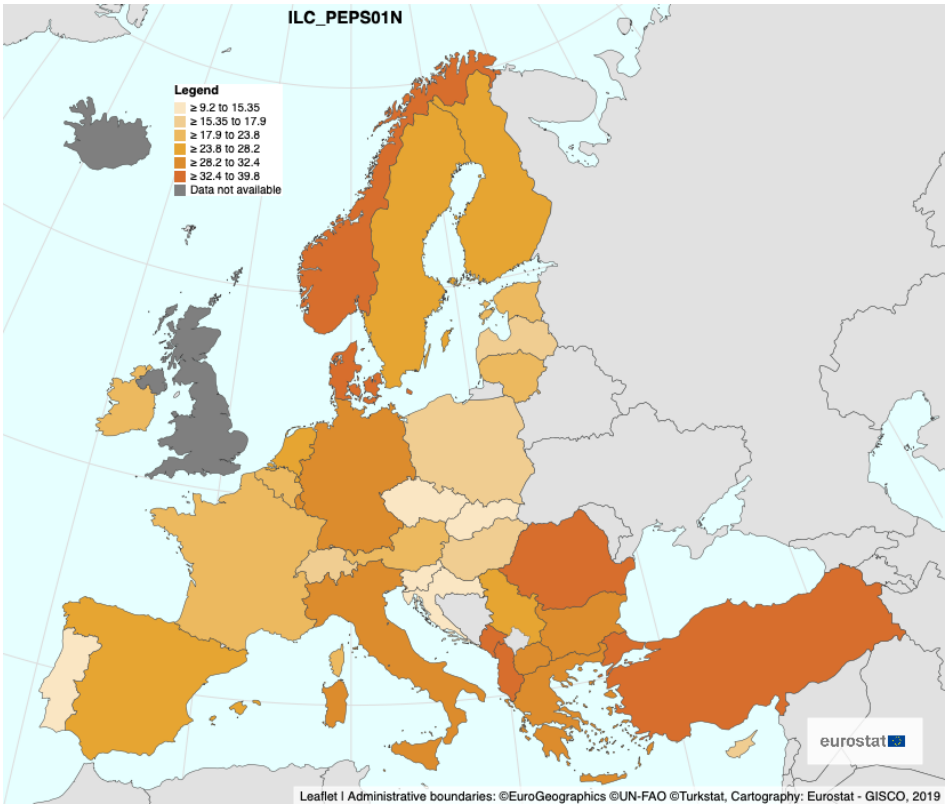
Figure 2.1: Young people are more at risk of poverty or social exclusion than other age groups



Source: Eurostat

Figure 2.2: Substantial variation in poverty risks for young people across European countries

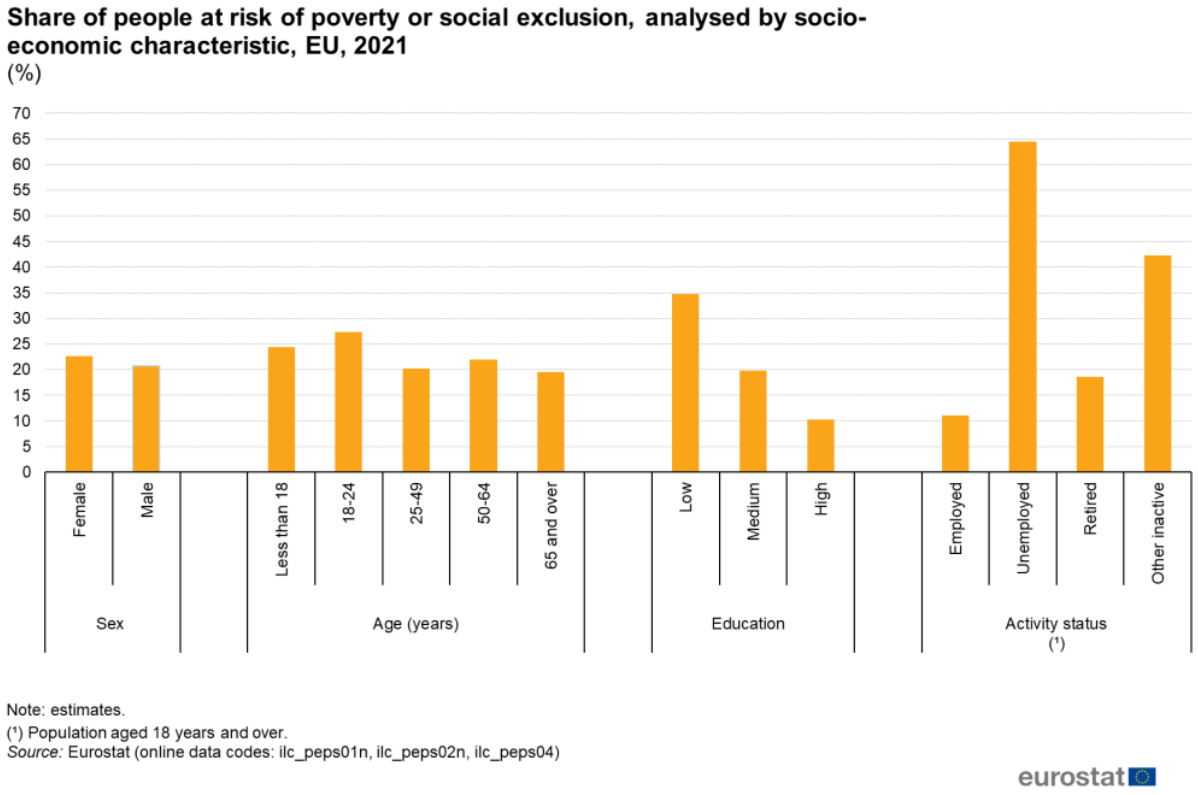
Share (%) of young adults (age 20-29) at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Europe, 2020



Source: Eurostat, online data code ILC_PEPS01N

As a general trend, we know that young individuals without higher education or a vocational diploma are particularly vulnerable to labour market exclusion since the demand for unskilled labour is declining (ILO Department of Statistics, 2018). Therefore, for job market entrants is has become increasingly important to arrive with higher education or specialised vocational skills to move successfully from school to work. The importance of education is reflected also in the available data on poverty and social exclusion in Europe. Figure 2.3 demonstrates clearly that a lack of education and unemployment are two socio-economic characteristics often associated with undesirable economic outcomes.

Figure 2.3: Unemployment and a low level of education enhance the risk of experiencing poverty or social exclusion



Note: estimates.
(1) Population aged 18 years and over.
Source: Eurostat (online data codes: ilc_peps01n, ilc_peps02n, ilc_peps04)

eurostat

3. Uncertain education-to-work transitions and challenging pathways to adulthood in Europe

With the changes in occupational structure and more frequent job changes along with increasing demands for communication, information-processing and social as well as academic skills in the workplace, the conditions for participating in the labour market have changed. Therefore, many young people experience a transition from education to work that is no longer a linear one-way process but often involves complex dynamics between education and work, e.g. circular processes or combinations of education and work (Allen and Velden 2011). Rather than a single and linear transition, inclusion in the labour market depends on several interrelated and largely parallel transitions (e.g., Lorentzen et al., 2019; Sirniö et al., 2017). These involve moving from education to paid work as main activity, from living in the parental household to independent household formation, from being off-spring of your parents to having your own family and off-spring, from being dependent on parents' advice and support to being economically independent, making independent choices and taking responsibility for these.

Overall, these transitions tend to take longer time than before and difficulties in one may delay others (Addabbo and Kjeldstad, 2017). For instance, having children before you have finished education delays the completion of education and achievement of paid work. Fluctuation between paid work and education, temporary positions and part-time work has been associated with risk of prolonged financial dependency on parents or social security benefits for shorter or longer time spells. Some youth may have to move back to the parental home while waiting for new employment opportunities (Gökşen et al., 2017). Lack of affordable and relevant accommodation affects geographic mobility of young adults and consequently the ability to seek higher education and find paid work.

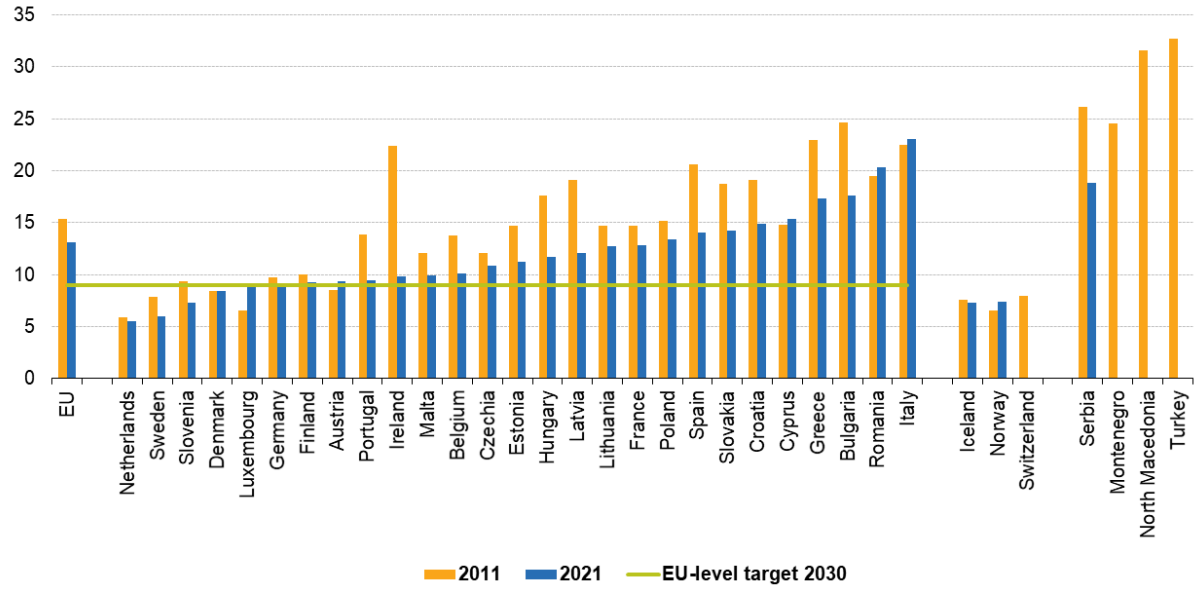
Labour market and social policy scholars have also documented how the structural and institutional settings that shape youth transitions differ across Europe. For instance, the approach to active labour market policy and social protection, the institutional design of the vocational educational and training system, and the division of responsibility between the family and the state for financially supporting youth, as well as practices concerning independent household formation all affect the education-to-work trajectories of young people across Europe (Unt et al., 2021). In fact, the surprisingly high poverty rates in the 15-29 age group in Denmark and Norway may in part be explained by a tradition of moving away from the parental home at a young age compared with their European counterparts. Given the cultural norm of early transition out of parental home, *young people* constitute a group with special risks. In Scandinavia many young people will live on a low income while being enrolled in higher education. However, special circumstances, including fairly generous financial support for students and *inter vivo* intergenerational transfers, that are not captured in the income poverty statistics, may ease young peoples' financial situation. In addition, the administrative capacity of the public employment services (PES) in terms of caseload and available funding matter for the quality of the support available to young people that struggle with the transition from education to stable employment (Dingeldey et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, for more than a decade social and economic inclusion of young people have been high on the agenda of labour market and social policy in the EU and at the national level. Particularly in the aftermath of the global financial crisis (2007-2008) when youth unemployment skyrocketed in some countries, giving young people better prospects of labour market integration became a strong policy priority of national governments and at the European level. In the following years the European Union launched a number of initiatives and programmes with a view to tackling the challenge of youth unemployment in Europe. Among the most prominent examples of policy were the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative which were rooted in a belief in early intervention and labour market activation (Dingeldey et al., 2019). More recently, the topic has been included in the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). Principle 4b of the EPSR addresses the delicate transition from education by declaring that 'young people have the right to continued education, apprenticeship, traineeship or a job offer of good standing within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education' (European Commission. Secretariat General, 2017). The group referred to as NEETs – neither in employment, nor education or training – has received particular attention since these are inactive individuals. They are not seeking employment nor undertaking a qualifying activity that may improve their future labour market prospects.

Again, the available data demonstrate wide European disparities (Figure 3.1). In countries like Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Sweden, along with the EEA countries Iceland and Norway the NEET-rate was already below the EU-level target for 2030 of 9%. With NEET-rates above 20% Italy and Romania were positioned at the other end, and far above the EU-average of 13.1%. Generally, the challenges are greater in Southern and Eastern Europe. Not surprisingly, in most countries the risk of not taking part in neither education nor employment differs according to the level of education (Figure 3.2). Higher education reduces the likelihood of inactivity. For young people aged 15-29 in the EU, the NEET rate was 9.2% among individuals with higher education. By contrast, among those with respectively a medium and low level of education it was 13.1% and 15.5%.

Figure 3.1: Variation in European NEET rates persists

Young people (aged 15-29) neither in employment nor in education and training, 2011 and 2021
(%)



Note: Break in series in 2021.
Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_lfse_18)

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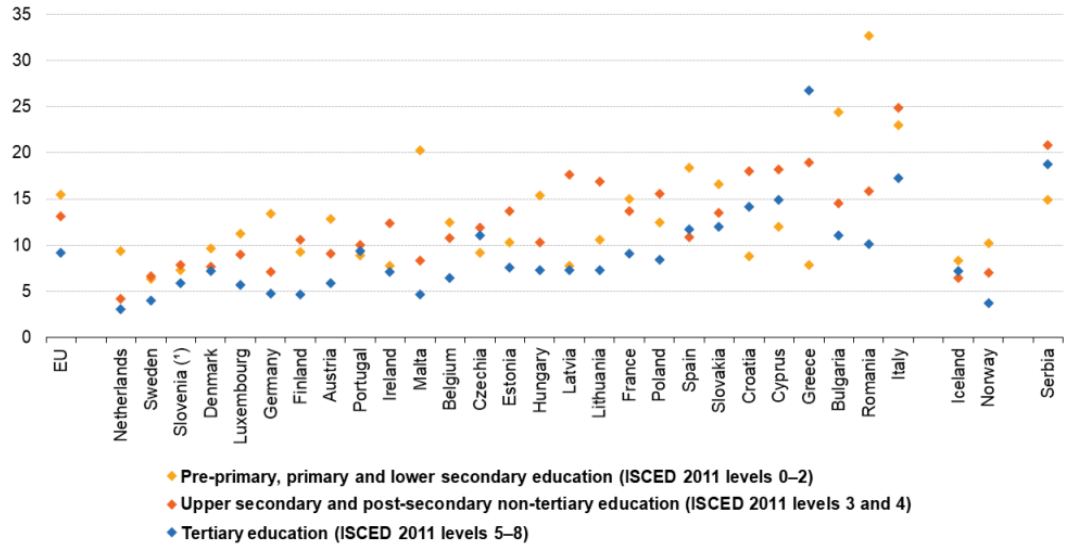
Figure 3.2: Higher education reduces the likelihood of inactivity

Young people (aged 15–29) neither in employment nor in education and training, by educational attainment level, 2021
(%)



Note: Ranked on the overall NEET rate.
(1) ISCED 2011 levels 5-8: low reliability.
Source: Eurostat (online data codes: edat_lfse_21)

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4. Approaches to active inclusion

In the international academic literature in the field of social policy, scholars have developed different frameworks to describe and identify differences and similarities across countries in how they approach active labour market policies. One perspective distinguishes between a work-first approach and a human resource development (HRD) approach. The work-first approach aims at rapid labour market integration through any job, regardless of whether the job matches the level of qualifications and interests of the service user. Policies with a work-first approach tend to favour coercive strategies, e.g. conditionality and sanctions. The human resource development approach aims at stable and long-term employment and therefore seeks to provide the service user with competencies and qualifications that are requested by employers and the labour market. Policies with a HRD-approach tend to use enabling strategies – e.g. skill training and motivational work (Lødemel and Gubrium, 2014).

Another approach in the work inclusion research literature is to distinguish between supply-side and demand-side (Frøyland, 2020). Supply-side refers to the unemployed, or service users, demand-side to employers and the labour market. Depending on how one understands and define the problem and its root causes (of unemployment, inactivity or NEETs), the two approaches are targeted differently through policies. For instance, a typical supply-side policy targets the individual with measures that are meant to enhance her or his employability. In this perspective the problem of unemployment is defined as an individual problem that will be solved through the individual's ability to become a more employable citizen, for instance through upskilling and enabling strategies, or through work seeking and/or coercive strategies (as in work-first approaches). In any case, the responsibility for the situation or the problem of unemployment is placed in the individual. The supply-side perspective has since decades been the dominant perspective in European active labour market policies (ALMP) (Eichhorst et al., 2008). The *demand-side perspective* acknowledges the role of the labour market, employers, and workplaces in work inclusion. Demand-side policies may target employers and workplaces in various ways, for instance through job-creation measures in regional or local areas or with financial incentives such as wage subsidies to hire persons with alleged lower productivity or needs for skills training (Halvorsen and Hvinden, 2018).

Finally, Bonoli has developed the scheme represented in Table 4.1 to describe variation in active labour market policy. He distinguishes between two underlying dimensions. On the one hand he refers to *pro-market orientation*, i.e., the extent to which policies aim to bring people back to unsubsidised employment in the regular job market. On the other hand, there are programmes which focus on *investment in human capital*. When the two dimensions are assessed separately four types of activation emerge: occupation, incentive reinforcement, employment assistance and upskilling.

Table 4.1: Comparative categorisation of approaches to active labour market policies

		Investment in human capital		
		None	Weak	Strong
Pro-market employment orientation	Weak	(passive benefits)	***Occupation*** Job creation schemes in the public sector Non-employment-relate training programmes	(basic education)
	Strong	***Incentive reinforcement***	***Employment assistance*** Placement services	***Upskilling***

		Tax credits, in-work benefits Time limits on recipiency Benefit reductions Benefit conditionality	Job subsidies Counselling Job search programmes	Job-related vocational training

Source: Table 7.1 in Bonoli (2012: 184)

The practical role and achievement of active social policies appear generally to be somewhat variable and context-dependent (e.g. related to national policy legacies and institutions, stage of welfare-state development, the business cycle or main target groups). Attempts to assess practical impact have been faced with the variety of ways in which active social policies have actually been designed and implemented at national and local level

There have been some suggestions that active labour market policy measures have historically been most successful in periods of overall expansion and growth or in phases of the business cycle when the demand for labour has started to increase again (OECD 2009, 2015). If hardly any job vacancies are available or does not increase the qualifications of the participants active labour market policy measures may have degenerated towards serving mainly as tests of willingness to work or enabling young adults to extent or renew their entitlement to benefit payments. Active labour market policy measures appear to have been exposed to policy erosion. In particular this has been the case if the agencies responsible for their implementation experience a growing deficit of time and other resources, substantial difficulties in getting employers to offer jobs or placements to youth claiming cash benefits, or open conflicts with the young adults when staff enforce duties or sanctions non-compliance.

Earlier research from the Nordic countries has documented conflicts between staff and the target groups about the complexity of their needs, the barriers they experience, which training programmes the benefit recipient should attend and which posts to apply for. Staff has complained about uncooperative, unrealistic and unmotivated clients. Young benefit claimants have complained about meaningless training and counselling activities, surveillance, lack of understanding of their needs and interests, the absence of a long-term perspective in the efforts to qualify for and achieve a permanent position, whether child care and family obligations are legitimate reasons for not pursuing a labour market career, whether meaningful activities or any employment should be the objective, and whether paid work in the ordinary labour market is a realistic objective (e.g. Halvorsen et al. 2007, Halvorsen and Hvinden 2014, Halvorsen and Bøhler 2018, Lundahl and Olofsson 2014: 28, 31).

5. Concluding comments: ‘new’ challenges for European social protection systems

In this paper we have argued that young adults in Europe are facing new challenges that extend beyond the effects of the economic recession in the aftermaths of the financial crisis in 2008 and the ensuing fiscal consolidation measures. We have emphasised the new risks for young adults associated with the emergence of post-industrial knowledge economy (Taylor-Gooby 2004). With the emergence of the knowledge economy, transitions from education to work takes longer time and entrance criteria to the labour market have changed and are more demanding than before.

We have distinguished between two dimensions of active inclusion policies: First, whether the activation policy measures are based on a *work-first approach or a human resource development approach*. Policies with a work-first approach tend to favour coercive strategies, e.g. conditionality and sanctions. The human resource development approach aims at more long-term employment and therefore seeks to provide the service user with competencies and qualifications that are requested by employers and the labour market. Second, we have distinguished between *supply-side oriented policy measures* aimed at assisting and helping the individual person, and *demand-side oriented policy measures* targeting employers and aimed at fostering the recruitment of young adults with needs for skills training or accommodation of the workplace (e.g. wage subsidies).

We have argued that the practical role and achievement of active social policies appear generally to be somewhat variable and context-dependent Effective implementation of activation policies is probably dependent on what the service providers manage to achieve of collaboration from the service beneficiaries. One challenge for European activation policies is how to accommodate the interests and choices of young adults themselves in the delivery and implementation of the active labour market policy programmes (Beck 2017). Social and educational services need to be accommodated to the diversity of needs and aspirations among young adults. If social and educational services are designed in a strict top-down manner by national authorities and leave little space for manoeuvring by local agents, the diversity of needs will be difficult to take properly into account.

From a human resource perspective, certain activation policy measures can be inappropriate or even harmful for people at a long distance from the labour market, for instance by exposing them to new failures and loss of self-esteem. For instance, courses in writing job-applications can be appropriate for persons with high formal qualifications, earlier job experiences and no other social or medical issues. For persons with a different point of departure, participation in such a course risks undermining their self-esteem and ambition to seek paid work. Therefore, it is generally important to have a differentiated menu of activation policy measures, understood as a “ladder:” For some people it will be more relevant to start at a lower level and with more limited ambitions, for instance to acquire basic social skills before it is relevant to start on professional skills training. For some persons it will be a considerable achievement to complete upper secondary school or professional training, independent of whether the person manages to achieve paid work in the ordinary labour market or not. Some people will then be able to climb one step on the ladder and enroll in more demanding and ambitious activation policy measures.

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