Young people and professional life: a difficult relationship in the context of economic crises

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyze the situation of young people to illustrate their difficulties in dealing with the process of transition into working life, particularly in the current context of economic crisis. Firstly, there is explored the EU proposal, so-called ‘renewed Lisbon Strategy’. Secondly, there are presented the implementation of the European recommendations to the Spanish context and the development of some concrete examples associated with the Andalusian reality. Finally, there are provided some tools to facilitate young people’s transition into the labour market at the present time.

KEYWORDS: labour market transition, labour supply.

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE EMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH POLICIES

For a long time, the European Union has been working on job creation, mainly regarding the most vulnerable groups. The
Lisbon Strategy is the main instrument the European Commission has developed for working on this issue. Nevertheless, five years after it started, according to the intermediary revision, the assessment made was not completely satisfactory\(^2\): the European economy has not reached the expected results as regards productivity and employment. Furthermore, a growing difficulty has been detected concerning disadvantaged groups, of which young people form a part. Consequently, the renewed Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs was built up in 2005. This renewed strategy tries to deal with the problem by increasing investment on R&D and bringing closer the National Action Plans regarding Employment, under the logic of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC)\(^3\).

The present situation regarding the projected date for the fulfilment of the Lisbon Strategy objectives is not seen as very optimistic. A supplementary effort must be done in the creation of employment, increasing productivity, sustainable development, the improvement of education and training, the promotion of the use of information and communication technologies (TICs) etc. The main instruments that the European Employment policy has set up for facing this situation are the following: Community programme for employment and solidarity-PROGRESS; EURES: the European Employment and Job Mobility Network; EUROPASS-Serving citizen mobility; Programme for mutual

\(^2\) Reports of high level groups «Facing the Lisbon Strategy of Growth and Jobs» (November 2004)

\(^3\) The open method of coordination (OMC), created as part of employment policy and the Luxembourg process, has been defined as an instrument of the Lisbon strategy (2000). The OMC provides a new framework for cooperation between the Member States, whose national policies can thus be directed towards certain common objectives. Under this intergovernmental method, the Member States are evaluated by one another (peer pressure), with the Commission’s role being limited to surveillance. The European Parliament and the Court of Justice play virtually no part in the OMC process (http://europa.eu/).
learning in employment; European Employment Observatory (EEO); and Employment Committee. Each of these programmes and actions contains concrete measures concerning young people. Indeed, the White Paper (March 2001) established that questions related to young people would be treated in a transversal way in the framework of other important policies, such as the Employment and Education policies.

It is also important to mention the Programme for Community Action in the Field of Lifelong Learning (the Lifelong Learning Programme – LLP) as an instrument for boosting the advanced knowledge society, and to obtain more and better opportunities of employment and better social cohesion. To achieve this aim, the LLP has four sub-programs, trying to make it easier to provide for exchanges of people, co-operation and the mobility between education and training institutions and systems within the European countries, and fostering permanent learning in both formal and informal ways.

We can see how the European Strategy regarding Youth focuses on transversality. Indeed, the policy instruments that are to deal with young people’s transition from education to working life are Employment, Education and Training policies. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that recently a policy called “EU Youth Strategy 2010 – 2018” has been created as an instrument to work with this target group in an integral way. The aim

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4 For more information visit: http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/employment_and_social_policy/community_employment_policies/index_es.htm


6 Refers to Comenius Programmes (for the levels from kindergarten and primary school to secondary school), Erasmus (for participants attending university), Leonardo da Vinci Programmes (professional formation) and Grundtvig Programmes (paying attention to necessities of education and learning of participation in each manner of education for adults).
of this tool is to create more and equal opportunities for young people in education and in the labour market and to achieve an active citizenship, social inclusion and solidarity among young people. This instrument is, at that moment, the closest we have been to having a European-wide youth policy.

THE REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF COMPETENCIES IN SPAIN
AND THE MANAGEMENT OF EMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH POLICIES

In Spain, due to its system of regional government and the distribution of power, the authorities who are competent to plan and implement the employment and youth policies are the regional ones. Naturally, they are coordinated at the European level, especially regarding the renewed Lisbon Strategy Plan and the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018.

Within the framework of these European regulations, and regarding the national policies on employment, the Economic and Social Council differentiates between direct measures concerning the labour market or economical incentives (bonuses for contracting etc.) and measures addressed to the qualitative improvement of adjustment processes between supply and demand (through training, promotion of geographical mobility, improvement of labour information channels etc.).

But what assessment can be made of the implementation of these policies regarding youth? As shown by the alarmingly high current rate of unemployment for young people in Spain, it is clearly necessary to keep on working to safeguard a greater and better transition to professional life. The data offered by Eurostat are not very optimistic: one of the main problems in the present economic crisis is the rate of unemployment among young people, reaching 20% in the 27 EU countries on average, and rising to an alarming 40% in Spain.
Not only have different social actors already been attempting to tackle the issue, but the Spanish Youth Conseil (Consejo de Juventud de España) has also declared, for instance, that the employment and youth policies implemented in Spain have ignored working through an improvement of capacities and opportunities for young people in view of defining their personal projects. This means that these policies are not achieving their goal of providing the younger segment of the population with skills and abilities needed in the current context for building their own vital itineraries. Another frequent and relevant critique is that, despite the existing declared intention of including these policies in a transversal way through other more general political sectors, this has not worked in fact. On the contrary, the employment and youth policy consists of just a sum of little actions carried out around young people. Finally, it is pointed out that an effective coordination between the different governments involved (European, national, regional and local) is required so as to avoid any duplication of activities and to create a more coherent process.

ANDALUSIA, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EMPLOYMENT

The European Social Found (ESF), as part of the Structural Funds, is the main financial instrument for Employment Policy in Andalusia. Among all the activities co-financed by it, it has given priority to actions addressed to women, people aged 30 and under, those aged 45 or over, immigrants and other disadvantaged groups.

Within the EFS framework, numerous projects have been or are being developed in the region. One of the most relevant projects is the “EQUAL-Andalusia project: Employment strategies” (within the community initiative EQUAL); an experiment that has been in the last ten years a laboratory for designing solu-
tions for the exclusion problems in the labour market. This experience has established a very particular methodology, called Development Associations (AD), where various institutions, i.e., public administration, universities, companies, associations, NGOs, syndicates, etc. work together. The aim of this methodology is working in networks for the dissemination and transfer of results and good practices related to the incorporation to the labour market of groups in vulnerable social situations, among them, young people.

Other experiences implemented in Andalusia that could be highlighted are projects called “HÉRCULES” and “FIDES” (within the Leonardo Da Vinci Programme), whose main objectives are to develop new approaches in the fields of professional education and training and lifelong training. The target group of these projects is young people in vocational education and training. Thanks to these projects, young Andalusian people can enjoy of internships or work experience in other European countries in different companies while also receiving linguistic training.

Given the current unemployment data and the recent European reports, we conclude that keeping working in youth and employment is an urgent matter. For doing so, and while developing new tools for facilitating the transition of young people from university to work, we have to keep in mind that the historical moment in which we live is a moment of social changes with a direct impact in the relationships between school/university and work life.

YOUNG PEOPLE’S TRANSITION FROM EDUCATION TO PROFESSIONAL LIFE:
TRAINING AND TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCES

According to the latest unemployment rates, reports and recommendations at European level, it is crucial to keep working
on employment policies for young people. For this purpose, when thinking about the necessity of developing new tools for young people to facilitate their transition to the labour market, it has to be taken into account that the time we are living in is a historic moment characterized by a constant change (this is the difference to other periods in history). And this situation of “constant change” has a direct impact on the relationship between the education and working life.

In this context, it is necessary to refer to the labour market in terms of acceleration, turbulence and the universality of its changes (Planas, 2003)

When we stress the acceleration as a characteristic of the current labour market, we want to emphasize the importance of being aware of the changes that are occurring now and that will also occur in the future professional life of a person, because these changes are much more important than the changes in any other period in the past. The first and main question regards the idea of a “permanent job”, something that previously structured and stabilised our lives but does not exist any longer. Furthermore, every worker has a very high probability of changing the kind of job during his/her career, i.e., a young person who starts his/her career as an administrative assistant, then gets a job as a bank cashier, and later –why not– as an accountant in a messenger company. This sort of career development is a very common practice nowadays. Moreover, even if someone has the opportunity to keep the same job for a long time, there will be permanent and increasing changes that he/she should adopt to: learning a new computer programme, the acquisition of new skills for a new activity, learning a new language to reach a new sector of clients, learning about the organisation and new ways of doing things after staff restructuring, etc. The speed of all these changes is becoming faster and faster, and, because of this, we call this phenomenon acceleration.
As for turbulence, the second characteristic of the current labour market, it means recognizing that these changes are becoming more and more difficult to predict and, as a result, more difficult to deal with. The education system has shown itself unable to predict the expectations of the changing labour market and it can be observed, for example, how the provision of different university degrees, even high school and vocational training qualifications, does not correspond with the demands of the market. How many university graduates are employed in jobs with nothing to do with their studies? This is a direct consequence of the inability of the educational system to predict the changes occurring in the labour market.

The last characteristic, universality, is something as simple as admitting that the changes take place at a planetary scale.

This situation generates a certain uncertainty about what kind of competencies should young people and future workers have, and what the training needs will be to provide students with such a labour market as the one defined above. In that regard, the main problem is that companies express themselves depending on the present and near future context and in a changing way, while the educative system acts more fixedly, thinking on the long term. This creates a situation of imbalance between the education of young people and the demands of the labour market.

In this context, another question arises: what kind of education should be provided to young people in order to facilitate success in their integration into professional life? The answer is quite easy to give, but not so easy to implement: young people have to be educated more in skills and competences than in contents.

Nowadays, a university degree is no longer a guarantee of automatically getting a job. Due to the dynamics of social change in which we are living, the old concept of a young person possessing all the skills needed for performing a job does not exist
any more. Regarding the right moment for a student to finish his/her studies, it is highly recommended that they adopt the concept of lifelong learning and recycling formation and training that should last until the end of his/her professional live. Thus, the most important competence that should be offered to this segment of the population is to help them become aware of the fact that the knowledge and skills required by the labour market that have been acquired in formal educative institutions cannot be acquired at one time only and then last forever, but in a progressive way and in different contexts and depending on any changes occurring in the society.

However, how can this be achieved? Earlier on, the concept of “transversal competences” was mentioned, referring to skills, abilities, capacities, tools and educative instruments that are common to a large number of jobs (and this is the reason of their utility). As mentioned above, the idea of a “permanent job” for the whole of one’s life is relative nowadays. Some professions have almost disappeared (especially those related to manual labour), and others are transforming their contents. In this situation, the most important thing is that young people acquire competences which are useful in various kinds of profession, e.g., basic knowledge about informatics, languages and “human competences”, i.e., ability to communicate, capacity to learn etc., all of which are competencies that are unlikely to be acquired by “machines”. For this purpose, it would be necessary to keep promoting and acknowledging non-formal education and guaranteeing a high quality of the informal learning through initiatives and projects such as those mentioned above7, all for reaching the recommendations and advice provided by both the original and the re-launched Lisbon Strategy.

7 EQUAL-Andalucía: Estrategias para el Empleo, HÉRCULES, FIDES.
REFERENCES