

Big Bang Project

Comparative Study - Executive Summary

'Big Bang' is a two-year project supported by the European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme. The overall aim of the project is to explore the issues involved in building bridges between work-based culture and young people's culture. As part of the Big Bang project, organisations from five countries - England, Iceland, Austria, Spain and the Netherlands – undertook a study into some of the specific aspects of these issues, to compare findings and identify effective practice. As a background to the report, Big Bang has highlighted that there are young people who are some way from being successful at school, apprenticeships or employment.

Amongst the findings of the report, one factor amongst many in this situation is the effect of peer sub culture, which can have consequences that can alienate employers (timekeeping, defensiveness), attitude (appearing disinterested) and language (using slang or inappropriate expressions). Other findings are summarised below:

The situation for young people at risk achieving and keeping a job

School drop-out rates vary in the five countries from 2,5% to 33%. However each country struggles with issues arising from young people who do not finish school. This group constitutes the core of young people who do not become employed. There is a common factor in that the educational system does not prepare everyone sufficiently for the world of work. In most countries there is little evidence of internship opportunities in schools, and few opportunities to be introduced to the labour market during school education (except the Netherlands). Furthermore, the reality of school behaviour and culture (encouragement of expression) does not always match with that which is often expected at work in companies (obedience).

In each of the countries surveyed, youth unemployment is higher than average unemployment, in some cases by a factor of 100%. The economic crisis has added to the uncertainty and lack of security felt by many young people in terms of their future prospects. With the exception of Iceland, each of the countries struggles to deal with the specific needs of young migrant people. Many migrant groups were twice or three times as likely to be unemployed as those individuals without migration backgrounds.

There is a disconnection between employers and young people in terms of different expectations on each side, which is irrespective of the specific economic situation. For employers, it is widely considered to be very important to develop soft skills for work. For instance, to be punctual, communicative, open to feedback etc is often considered more important than knowledge or skills of a particular occupation – and employers often feel that these and other personal qualities can be lacking in young people. However, there can also be a lack of understanding on the part of employers about youth culture, including stereotypes and negative perceptions and prejudice. The table below illustrates some of the underlying disconnection:

<u>Employers</u>	<u>Young people</u>
Struggle to engage with young people, perceive them as difficult and a 'risk'.	Do not know about job opportunities that are available and what it is they want to do.

Are not sure on how to bring a young person into their organisation.	Do not know how to apply for a job and how to 'market' themselves to employers.
Have high expectations and are regularly disappointed by young people during the recruitment process.	Do not know how to talk about their skills, how important preparation and presentation is and are intimidated by an interview situation.
Do not know how to access someone with no work experience.	Struggle with accessing work experience and hence lack insight into the working world.

Successful actions in supporting vulnerable youngsters at work

Early intervention, even starting in primary schools, to prevent school drop-out is a key factor of success. The vocational system in which students go to school one day per week and work at a company for four days (BBL) in the Netherlands is considered to be very successful at connecting education and apprenticeship.

Countries achieve the most success in bringing youngsters at work when they are connecting different stakeholders: companies, NGO's, government and schools. For companies, social enterprise and social conscience are important drivers to do this kind of work. Successful actions involve companies by paying them for accepting young vulnerable people. Integrated support is apparently successful when they combine employment, training and individual counselling and coaching. Programmes that seek the active involvement of young people are seen as being successful.

Difficulties or failures in supporting vulnerable youngsters at work

There appears to be a lack of value placed on certain vocational qualifications by society and parents in the surveyed countries. For most young people at risk, the vocational route is the most appropriate. An extra negative dimension is that, exacerbated by the economic crisis a degree does not lead to a guarantee of a job. It is also the case that young people with migration backgrounds are more highly represented in unemployed groups than young people without such backgrounds.

The research highlights that qualities such as 'soft' employability skills, the ability to work in a team, manners, punctuality, respect, behaviour, reliability, responsibility, honesty and loyalty are important in the world of work. In education in general, and in vocational and employability programmes, these qualities are not always the most important part of the curriculum, which are often more focused on the knowledge and skills requirements of the vocation in question.

Almost all of the skills and employability programmes that were identified in the research do not target or focus upon involving communities and parents. This is an important consideration when bearing in mind that those qualities that are particularly valued by employers are not always understood by all cultures. With this in mind, programmes that engage positively with migrant communities are likely to have a more successful impact on young people from those communities.

For more information about the project visit <http://bigbangllp.eu>