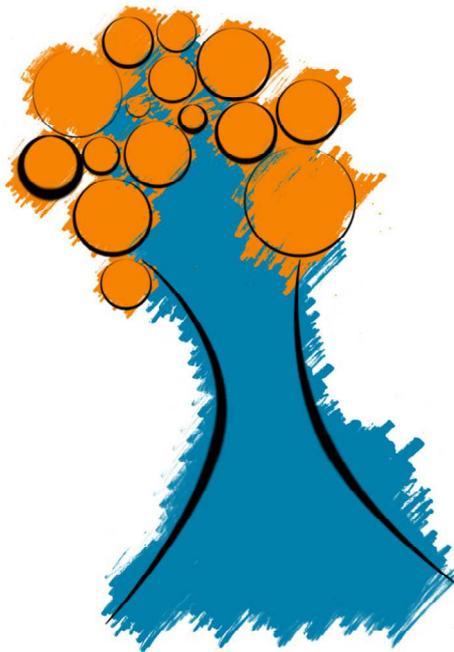


THE 'BIG BANG'
- BRIDGING THE CULTURE CLASH BETWEEN
EMPLOYERS, YOUNG PEOPLE AND LOCAL CULTURES



A SHORT REVIEW OF EUROPEAN
POLICY AND PROGRAMMES

FOR THE BIG BANG CONFERENCE,
11TH SEPTEMBER 2014





BACKGROUND TO BIG BANG

The 'Big Bang' Project was designed in the later part of 2011 and was approved by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme, Leonardo da Vinci strand (which supports the European dimension in Vocational Education and Training) in 2012. Big Bang was designed against a backdrop of rising youth unemployment, made worse by the effects of the financial crisis that hit Europe and beyond in 2008 and in some cases manifestations of civil unrest (e.g. in London and the UK in 2011).

The partnership was formed to explore issues concerned with the 'culture clash' between work, school and negative peer group dynamics between young people that can lead to social exclusion and low ambition.

One particular factor which has distinguished youth unemployment in Europe in recent years from that in previous recessions has been that levels of youth unemployment have exceeded the average levels of unemployment for all other age groups – in some cases considerably so.

A significant contributory factor for the high level of youth unemployment has been the lack of jobs that are available to young people in the wider economy. This problem has been compounded by the contraction in the number of low skilled entry level jobs historically filled by young people. With an ample supply of better educated and motivated applicants from which to choose those young people, often from marginalised communities who are less well equipped with the skills employers demand find it increasingly difficult to secure employment. However, given how recent mass unemployment has had a disproportionate impact on Europe's young people, it also suggests that other factors have also come into play.

In the Big Bang project, we were interested in exploring one of these "other factors" – the idea that there is a 'culture clash' – between employers, young people and their respective cultures and expectations. We were interested in transferring and testing different approaches that some of the partners had implemented in their own contexts to support young people and employers to 'build a bridge' between work-based culture and some aspects of local or youth cultures.

Big Bang has focused on this identified 'clash' of cultures where young people's behaviour, attitude and language are interpreted negatively, for example: behaviour (poor punctuality, defensiveness); attitude (appearing disinterested); and language (using slang or inappropriate expressions). Given youth 'subculture' and its associated modes of behaviour, it can be very difficult for young people to successfully negotiate and adapt to the world of work. There can also be a lack of understanding on the part of employers about youth culture, including stereotypes and negative perceptions and prejudice.

In some countries the project has had a particular focus on the most disadvantaged and disengaged young people who are some way from succeeding at school, apprenticeship or



work, sometimes caused by anti-social and negative peer behaviour. In other countries this was less of a factor – but in all contexts, the project explored how to bridge the gap by bringing together the staff working with young people and employers to foster the ‘soft skills’ and emotional resilience – which has been identified by both the International Labour Organisation and (in the UK) the CBI as critical for young people to be successful in the labour market.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Despite signs of recovery across Europe, youth unemployment remains a real challenge and young people in Europe continue to experience great difficulties in entering the labour market. Unemployment amongst young people at the time of the application stood at 22.9% in the EU28 and 23.5% in the Euro area and remains at stubbornly high levels in the EU at 14.6m, costing €153 billion annually (Eurofound 2014).

Although the youth unemployment rate in a few Member States has started to fall, overall 23% of young European job-seekers aged 15–24 could not find a job in January 2014. In 2012, 14.6 million young people across Europe were not in employment, education or training (NEET), accounting for 15.9% of the entire population of those aged 15–29 (Eurofound 2014). Despite the huge variation in unemployment figures among Member States, 18 countries have recorded their highest levels of youth unemployment since the financial crisis in 2008 (Eurofound 2014).

The specific issue of mismatches in expectations between young people and employers as one factor amongst several in the causes of youth unemployment has been attracting interest from many quarters.

For instance, The Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development in the UK published a major report about it in 2013. *Employers are from Mars, young people are from Venus: addressing the young people/jobs mismatch* found that the mismatch between employers’ expectations of young people during the recruitment process and young peoples’ understanding of what is expected of them was hindering young people’s access to the labour market, contributing to the high rates of youth unemployment. The report noted various aspects of

- No experience, no work; no work, no experience: A well-known and long-standing problem, but now many employers even require ‘experience’ for relatively junior roles;
- A lack of feedback, or even acknowledgement, after applying for jobs is demotivating and crushing the confidence of many young people;
- Young people often have no idea about selection and recruitment processes or what they should do to prepare. Employers often fail to tailor interviews for people who



have no prior experience of work (only one in four employers reported that they adapt their recruitment practices for young people);

- Poor careers advice and guidance in schools, coupled with a lack of support available to young people during the transition from education to work, has meant that many young people have little understanding of the world of work and don't know where to turn to or how to improve their chances of finding a job

Impetus-PEF's *Make NEETs History in 2014* report shows that as little as six months out of education, employment or training before the age of 24 has a profound impact on a person's earning potential and job security well into their 40s. Unemployment while young can lead to long-term reductions in wages, increased likelihood of subsequent periods of unemployment, and poorer health outcomes. The report concludes that the world of work has changed and schools need to change too.

The underlying problem, as the Economist highlighted in its 2013 article *Generation Jobless*' has been a lack of jobs (the number of young people without a job in OECD developed countries) has risen by 30% since 2007 – yet while criticism is widespread that education and labour markets are mismatched and employers complain that young people do not have the skills that they need, they have not stepped up to invest in them.

Even for many of those young people that have been able to get through this and get into work, the drop in earnings for the youngest age bracket is significant. In the UK, for instance, this drop is now a breathtaking 14% in real terms setting them back a full 16 years to 1998 wage rates. For many this increasingly necessitates staying at home with parents, but for those 20-somethings who choose or are compelled to move out, disposable income is down by around a fifth (*The Guardian*, 20th August 2014).

EU POLICY INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMMES

There have been a number of initiatives from European institutions in recent times, consisting of either specific responses to this situation or the adoption of new priorities and measures to respond to it.

In 2012, the European Commission adopted its **Youth Employment Package**, which includes a Recommendation to Member States on introducing the '**Youth Guarantee**' to ensure that all young people up to age 25 receive a quality offer of a job, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed. To facilitate school-to-work-transitions, the Package also launched a consultation of European social partners on a Quality Framework for Traineeships so as to enable young people to acquire high-quality work experience under safe conditions. Furthermore, it announced a European Alliance for Apprenticeships to improve the quality and supply of apprenticeships available by spreading successful apprenticeship schemes across the Member States and outlines ways to reduce obstacles to mobility (moving across regions and borders) to learn, study or work for young people.



This was followed and reinforced in 2013 by the **Youth Employment Initiative (YEI)**, with a budget of €6 billion for the period 2014-20. This is to particularly support young people not in education, employment or training in the European Union's regions with a youth unemployment rate in 2012 at above 25%. The YEI funds are available for EU countries to finance measures to implement in the eligible regions the 'Youth Guarantee'. The Youth Employment Initiative is seen as complementary to other projects undertaken at national level, including the European Social Fund (ESF).

Alongside this, Europe's Flagship '**Youth on the Move**' is intended as a comprehensive package of policy initiatives on education and employment for young people in Europe. Launched in 2010, it is part of the EU Education and Training 2020 (ET2020) Strategy and the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Youth on the Move aims to improve young people's education and employability, to reduce high youth unemployment and to increase the youth-employment rate by:

- making education and training more relevant to young people's needs;
- encouraging more of them to take advantage of EU grants to study or train in another country;
- encouraging EU countries to simplify the transition from education to work.

In 2014, the European Union launched **Erasmus+**, which is the EU Programme in the fields of education, training, youth and sport, with a budget of towards 15 billion Euros for the period 2014-2020. Part of the stated aim of Erasmus+ is to fight rising levels of unemployment - particularly among young people, noting that too many young people leave school prematurely and run a high risk of being unemployed. Erasmus+ aims to encourage strong and well performing European education, training and youth systems to help deal with these challenges by providing citizens with the skills required by the labour market and a competitive economy.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PROGRAMMES

There is a widespread consensus across policy makers and commentators that the persistent and stubborn levels of high youth unemployment being experienced across Europe have not only been serious and corrosive in their impact on the lives of young people and their families in recent years, but will leave a negative impact on European economies and societies for some time to come.

There is also a widespread recognition that this recession really has been different in terms of its disproportionate impact on young people, which has been specific and enduring, and that targeted and large-scale action is required.

A long period without work, while young, can have a long-lasting effect on a person's life chances. In the longer term, this can lead to a higher future likelihood of unemployment and lower future earnings. In the shorter to medium term, it can contribute negatively to personal and societal well-being and cohesion and generate huge waste in economic and



personal terms. By preventing young people from becoming NEET in the first place, working to ensure that they are equipped to make the transition from school to work makes sense every which way – yet without specific and targeted action, we run the risk of paying for the costs of high levels of youth unemployment for many years after ‘youth unemployment’ may have become much less of a problem than it is now (if things go well!)

However, there is much less of a consensus as to what, exactly, needs to be done, and how to do it.

In our work on the Big Bang project, we have been able to undertake and share research. We have also been able to transfer and test examples of practice, and share publications, studies and information about educational structures and vocational training systems for young people. We have also explored how to equip Information, Advice and Guidance Professionals working in the field of Employability with young people NEET with some resources to help address the culture clash between employers, young people and local cultures.

As a result of this experience, we have listed some of our main observations and suggestions. We do not suggest that these are comprehensive, but rather that we hope that which may inform be of interest to those attending the Big Bang Final conference.

- For those who do not go to university, a strong workplace-based vocational education and training system, with high employer involvement, contributes more to a smoother transition from education to work and a low risk of being NEET than anything else. This is the evidence from those countries in Europe that perform best in respect of the proportion of NEETs – such as Germany, Denmark and Big Bang partner countries such as Austria, the Netherlands and Iceland - all of which have NEET rates that are least than half the rate in the UK.
- At one end of the spectrum, the ‘Nordic’ and ‘Apprenticeship’ (Austria and Germany) models are characterised by a more rapid transition to adulthood and a quicker transition from school to work. At the other end of the spectrum are the ‘Eastern European’ and ‘Mediterranean’ models. The UK, despite its flexible labour market and recent reductions in employment, is in the ‘middle’. In general, countries with a higher integration of school and work, through apprenticeship programmes or through more young people effectively combining school and early labour market experiences, display a smoother and quicker transition from school to work.
- There is little doubt that employers are absolutely vital in all this. They are the ones that are providing, or not providing, jobs for young people. However, should we expect them to ‘lead’ solutions in areas such as apprenticeships, as is the case in the UK for instance? Do we have any evidence that this approach will meet skills mismatches or tackled youth unemployment better than, for instance, systems where the government, business and employee representatives plan skills and training policy together, through joint mechanisms, as in countries such as, for instance, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands (see above ...)



- The European Commission, for instance, is making ‘Sector Skills Alliances’ one of its centralised priorities in the Erasmus+ programme and in the UK. However, whilst it expects to see industry and employer representative organisations in these alliances, it also requires other stakeholders, such as vocational education bodies and ‘social’ partners to be represented.
- For those working in what we call ‘Employability Information Advice and Guidance’ being able to ‘bridge the culture clash’ is a daunting prospect, depending as it does on the ability to have, or to develop, a good understanding of the requirements and needs of employers, with an understanding of the challenges faced by young people – particularly those from marginalised communities or those with the fewest qualifications – and with the impact on this of local cultures – whether the culture of home, or the culture of peers. The more than employers can be brought together with young people – and with educational stakeholders, with parents – the better.
- As the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working conditions noted in its 2014 report *Mapping Youth Transitions in Europe*, it is crucial to recognise when designing policies that young people are a very diverse group with different characteristics and often multiple needs. Policies, while sharing the same aim, should have different approaches and be tailored to individual needs, with personalised support from personal advisers who seek to optimise the match between the individual and any intervention.
- Before young people become NEET, there is much work to do in schools. Careers education and guidance play a crucial role in ensuring a smooth transition from education to work in those European countries that have low rates of youth unemployment. In other countries, the situation regarding careers education is less coherent. 15 billion in the UK is pioneering careers work in the curriculum from primary school onwards, but the overall situation in the UK has been the subject of much criticism, with a lack of careers guidance from specialist advisers about vocational courses, traineeships, apprenticeships and liaison with local employers.
- More broadly, can we be sure that our vocational education and training systems are modern and broad-based enough to meet tomorrow’s needs as well as today’s? UNESCO’s International Bureau of Education notes how there is a growing emphasis on generic competences (“knowing how’ rather than ‘knowing that’) that are not discipline- or subject-based, along with a progressive shift of attention towards learning outcomes with cross disciplinary subjects emerging that require profound changes in training, education systems and curricula.
- Indeed, learning through non-formal learning environments or imaginative sector based I-VET can have a unique and motivating quality which, with its connection to growing job prospects, (re)motivates those young people who may be talented and entrepreneurial, but have been disaffected by ‘traditional’ educational experiences (Attractiveness of Initial VET: Identifying What Matters, CEDEFOP 2014).



- A question for UK colleagues and perhaps for those from other EU countries too: Who in government is actually responsible for tackling youth unemployment, for managing the transition from education to work, and for reducing and ending the NEET situation?

Finally, just recently (August 2014), the Institute for Public Policy Research for published *Remember the young ones: Improving career opportunities for Britain's young people*. This report looks at five critical elements of the school-to-work transition for young people – the role of employers, vocational education, apprenticeships, careers guidance, and the benefits system – and at lessons the UK can learn from European economies with better youth employment records. It makes a series of recommendations to address five critical policy areas, each of which requires a focused response:

- **Employers** are dissatisfied with the school-leavers who are applying to them for jobs, but a large part of the problem arises because employers are not prepared to be sufficiently involved in young people's training to ensure that they develop meaningful, useful skills. The best way to increase employers' engagement is to have them take a financial stake in the success of the system.
- **Vocational education** in England needs to be reformed so that it is held in higher esteem by employers and young people alike. As a pathway into work, higher-level vocational education should be seen as a valid alternative to a university education.
- Policy on **apprenticeships** in recent years has been dominated by a preoccupation with quantity, putting quality at risk. Apprenticeships should be seen by students and employers as a high-quality vocational route into work for young people.
- In those European countries that have low rates of youth unemployment, **careers education and guidance** play a crucial role in ensuring a smooth transition from education to work. The report's recommendations focus on embedding and resourcing careers advice in schools, particularly at key milestone moments when young people make vital decisions about their future.
- The current **benefits system** fails to differentiate between the needs of younger unemployed people and older jobseekers, such as finishing basic education or receiving on-the-job work experience. The report proposes that a distinct work, training and benefits system should be established for young people.

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