

# EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT IN EUROPE:

## FOSTERING YOUTH EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS



# INTRODUCTION

**Over coming years, the European Union's current large and growing youth population will play a critical role in directly influencing the economic and social progress and prosperity of the EU and each of its Member States. For this reason, tackling the stubbornly high rates of youth unemployment seen across many European countries has become a key priority for organizations of all types and backgrounds to help ensure young people can both enter, support and grow a thriving labor market.**

Recognizing both the great opportunities in creating an empowered youth workforce, and also the challenges that need to be overcome, the European Institutions have pursued targeted strategies to tackle youth unemployment, with the European Youth Strategy supported from 2010 to 2018. Reinforcing the need to increase access to gainful employment, the strategy has positively promoted a number of key initiatives in areas ranging from employment and entrepreneurship, social inclusion, participation in civil society, education and training, and health and well-being. For each focus area, the European Commission has promoted varying initiatives targeting employment and entrepreneurship, including

through the 'Your first EURES Job', the 'Erasmus for young entrepreneurs' and the Erasmus+ programme. These initiatives have already played a fundamental role in boosting youth employment, as well as furthering the mobility and cultural exchanges available to young people.

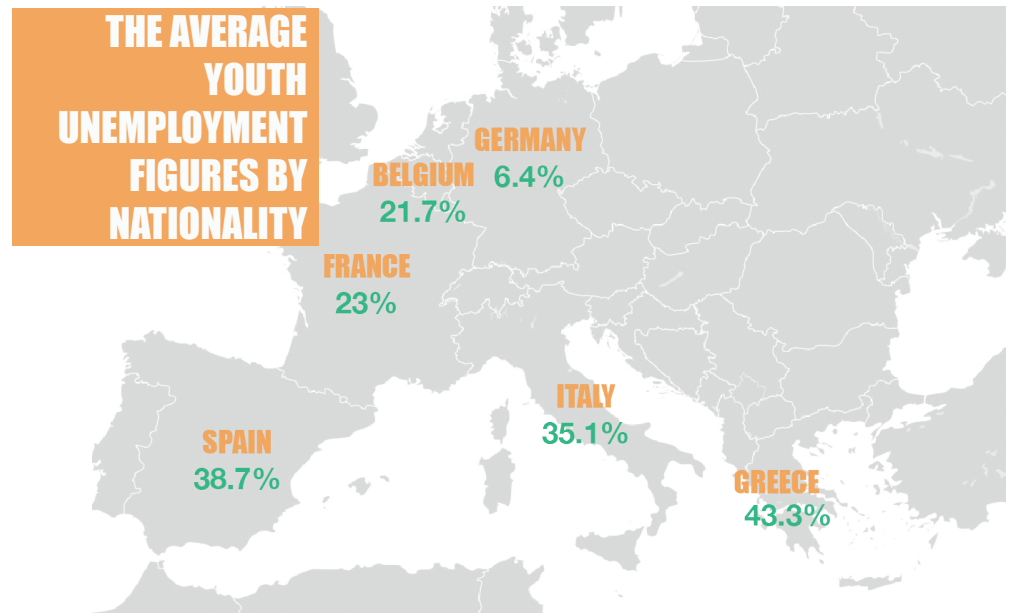
Importantly, these initiatives have been promoted alongside formal education; offering 'learning-by-doing' experiences for young people and ensuring theoretical knowledge acquired in formal education is attained in parallel with practical on-the-job experience. This focus point is crucial in providing the necessary skills and attributes required in the modern day job market.

With this in mind, the following paper will present an overview of some of the key trends in employment, education and entrepreneurship, and will detail the varying non-formal education opportunities present for young people to gain the skills needed for a very modern and constantly evolving employment market. Moreover, it will demonstrate the [important role that cross-sector partnerships can have in the smooth transition from education to employment](#), and ensuring long-term economic and social progress in communities throughout the European Union.

# Key European Trends: Employment, Education and Entrepreneurship

When exploring the current employment status of young people between the ages of 15-24 years old in the European Union, it is clear that there are some significant variances in youth unemployment rates across the single market. While the average figure for youth unemployment in the EU lies at 16.7%, this can range from high-levels of unemployment in southern European countries such as Greece (43.3%), Spain (38.7%), and Italy (35.1%) to comparatively low-levels in France (23%), Belgium (21.7%), and Germany (6.4%).

These high unemployment rates can have a dramatic wider impact on overall economic strength. As the European Commission recognized in its EU Youth Report, 1.2% of GDP from Member States is lost due to the growing NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) population, which also does not reflect the positive economic contribution that could be made through gainful employment. In 2016, 6.1% of young people aged between 15 and 19 were classified as a NEET, with this figure rising considerably amongst the population aged between 20 and 34 years old (18.3%, or roughly 16.9 million young people).



This figure increased by 1.8% in the period between 2008 and 2016.

With this in mind, and taking into account the fact that unemployment is not only an economic concern but also actively impacts the positive role of individuals in society, forging new and innovative ways to create opportunities and overcome hurdles has become of paramount importance.

Bolstering the human capital element is crucial, as this represents a collection of resources including the knowledge, talents, skills, abilities, intelligence, training, judgment, and wisdom possessed individually and collectively in a population. As a result, and in line with the efforts currently being undertaken by the EU, positively influencing and creating opportunities for employment, ensuring active participation in European democratic life, and supporting non-formal education for the unemployed is key.

**N - Not in  
E - Employment  
E - Education or  
T - Training**

## EDUCATION: ADAPTING TO FUTURE DEMANDS



**One of the key contributing factors to youth unemployment in Europe is as a direct result of the skills mismatch that exists between education and gainful employment, and avoiding young people failing to be equipped with the skills necessary in the labor market.**

Across Europe, young people are educated, qualified and motivated to enter the workforce, yet are failing to find employment directly linked to their skill-set and competencies, which have been built over many years in structured formal education.

A further key aspect that must be taken into consideration is a 'vertical mismatch', where there is a discrepancy between young people's education or skills and the level of education or skills required by the jobs that are

currently available and being created. This is driven by a convergence of well-qualified graduates and job seekers who are failing to find work and the lack of opportunities available. In 2013, two of the countries with the highest over-qualification rates (above 30%) were Greece and Spain, drawing a parallel between countries with the highest youth unemployment rates and those that have the highest over-qualification rates. This implies that when young graduates face difficulties in finding a

suitable job, they tend to accept employment despite the fact that it requires a lower skill-set which may not allow individuals to achieve their full potential. As a result, adapting to this trend is crucial in fostering improved linkages between graduates and gainful employment, and ensuring well-educated, skilled graduates are able to forge careers to their full potential which in turn can make the largest contribution to regional economic growth.

# NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET)

## VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND LEARNING (VET)

Aims to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly on the labour market.

In seeking gainful employment, young people are often told that they lack practical on-the-job experience. In an effort to combat this, ensuring the provision of high quality education, with a particular focus on the role of [Vocational Education and Training \(VET\) and apprenticeship programmes](#) has become a [key focus point for policy makers in Europe](#). With the intention of increasing youth employment, and in providing a smooth transition from school to gainful employment, this has consequentially been given top priority

Perceived as a route that facilitates access to the labour market, the recent and substantial expansion of apprenticeship programmes across Europe reiterates the current climate of fostering training programs designed to mutually benefit both VET students and enterprises, through the combination of theoretical and practical

skills development. Moreover, national studies have provided consistent evidence of apprenticeships providing better job matches, apprentices spending a longer time in their first job when compared to other educational paths, and many apprentices securing work upon completion.

On a national level, various Member States have put in place a vocational model. [Countries including Austria, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany encourage students to follow the vocational path alongside formal education where available. Subsequently, Member States with a dual-education system combining both practical and school based learning have widely been credited for their low rates of unemployment when compared to the European average.](#)

With university graduates often finding it challenging to apply theoretical knowl-

edge to real-life employment, the dual-education system represents a concrete and highly successful example of enabling students to embrace both theoretical and vocational learning. Alongside this, companies also benefit from this exchange, as young people tend to build fresh and innovative ideas that are as much learned in the workplace as in the classroom. Finally, and as a result of the practical skills acquired, graduates tend to be seen as more employable, removing any concerns for employers and ensuring young people can immediately contribute positively to organizational growth.

These are some of the many reasons that explain why promoting VET activities to both go alongside formal education and to act as attractive and viable alternative are beneficial to both youth employment, the labour market, and non-formal versions of skills training.

# European Entrepreneurship: The Gender Divide

Harnessing the ambition and aspiration of a future generation of talented and well-educated young people is accurately seen as a way to support future economic growth and directly tackle youth unemployment, and represents a key focus point for EU policy and research. However a significant gender disparity remains. As of 2017, 52% of the EU population are women, yet only 30% of entrepreneurs are women.

**As a result, female creativity and entrepreneurial potential is a significantly unexploited resource, which must be further nurtured and developed.**

While starting a business in Europe comes with a variety of challenges and difficulties, these can be most acutely felt as a female entrepreneur, with access to finance, information, training, and networks all critical capabilities and resources that women frequently have less access to than men.

Recognizing this challenge, the European Commission is attempting to directly support female entrepreneurship with a variety of initiatives and programmes. A few examples include the Small Business Act, a framework for SMEs that aims at improving the approach toward entrepreneurship and to simplify the barriers to the development of SMEs, and the Entrepreneurship 2020 Action plan. The European Commission is also focused on facilitating the networking of women entrepreneurs.

Lastly, the Commission offers support tools and online platforms to foster entrepreneurship amongst women. Some examples include the European Community of Women Business Angels and women entrepreneurs, the European network to promote women's entrepreneurship (WES), the European network of female entrepreneurship ambassadors, and the European Network of Mentors for Women Entrepreneurs. While all of these measures have made significant progress, it is critical that supporting entrepreneurship is not solely the responsibility of the EU or Member States and that platforms and measures are introduced that can facilitate and establish a true start-up culture across Europe.



# Changing the Narrative: From Failure to Second Chance

A frequently overlooked point in entrepreneurship is the prevalent preconception of failure and the systems and structures in place to respond. Specifically, the fear of failure is a considerable barrier that prevents many people from developing their ideas and consequently to launch their businesses.

**For every successful start-up, there are many others which fail to make it.**

In today's society, failure is treated as a taboo, particularly when it can require significant personal financial resources as well as time commitments to attempt to establish a successful business.

In an effort to overcome this, the European Commission has financed, developed and launched the Failure Aversion

Change in Europe (FACE) Entrepreneurship, a project under the Horizon 2020 program. The goal of this is to promote ICT entrepreneurship amongst young Europeans by fighting against the fear of failure by promoting a risk-taking culture. As a result of the FACE Entrepreneurship initiative, the Delphy Study was subsequently produced to analyse the main fears present amongst European entrepreneurs. According to the study, the entrepreneurial fear of failure is temporary, and represents something that must be overcome to achieve success. Taking these considerations into account, accompanied by the preceding discussion of employment and [non-formal education as viable means to make the most of the potential present amongst European youth](#) – an insight into how best to forge these circumstances through cross sector collaboration is required.



## 'Triple Helix' Partnerships: The Role of Private, Public and Civil Society Actors

The concept of a triple helix partnership brings together stakeholders from three fields: university and NGO, industry, and government.

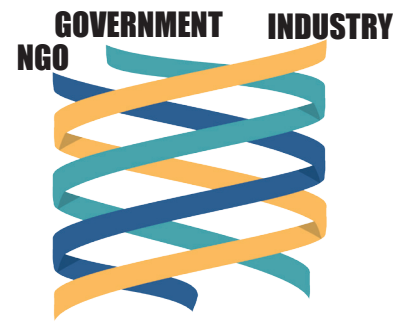
The aim of these partnerships is to form a hybrid consortium that blends unique strengths from each area to drive forward innovation, development and the assimilation of a product. Common examples of triple helix partnerships in the field of youth typically involve the utilisation of experiences and opinions from the grass-roots level of universities and NGOs, the expertise and resources from companies, and the integration of outcomes through changes in legislation and curriculum by governmental bodies.

A good example of this is the [Jet-Net project](#). Conceived in 2002, the project brought together leading Dutch technology companies and secondary schools to revolutionise the science curriculum in order to demonstrate its relevance and use through practical examples. Due to the local success of the initiative, the concept drew international recognition, leading to the creation of a triple helix partnership known as [the EU STEM Coalition](#). Based on its success the partnership

shares best practices throughout Europe in order to integrate similar initiatives into other EU Member States.

Other examples of triple helix partnerships can be found through public funding opportunities offered by the European Commission. [The HousErasmus+ project](#) is a well-known initiative designed to tackle the challenges faced by exchange students to find reliable accommodation during their academic exchanges. The project's consortium brought together numerous NGOs and university networks with companies working in the field of student accommodation, with the aim of engaging policy makers from EU institutions in a dialogue to advocate for policy improvements. The NGOs and university networks were responsible for reaching out to their local members for testimonials about the current situation and the companies brought their field-specific expertise to help develop the final recommendations to be brought to European policy makers.

Finally, triple helix partnerships can also be used to improve youth participation in democratic



processes. The European Citizen Action Service developed the [DEEP-Linking Youth](#) project alongside NGOs, consultation companies and the European Commission as an instrument to foster young people's empowerment and active participation in democratic life. The project is still underway as they are mapping youth mobility channels and creating analytical tools so that policy makers can better understand the concerns of young people in order to guide their perspectives in the policy-making process. In each example, partnerships were crafted in order to collectively amplify the strengths of each individual body. Successful trends among triple helix partnerships stem from shared ideology and common missions towards their respective members and stakeholders. Idea conceptualisation can be a lengthy process, but a combination of the three sectors has the potential to produce much more impactful outcomes and should be encouraged to combine strengths, capabilities and convening power to ensure that the great opportunity in harnessing the talent of youth is realized for the good of all.



# CONCLUSION

Despite youth unemployment being a crucial focus point for European policy-makers, the labour market, private sector businesses, and young people alike – significant steps have been taken to modernise the link between education and employment, with growing commitments being made to ensure young people are afforded the opportunities they deserve. Boosting youth employment is an essential step in forging a future where young people can positively impact the economic and social fabric of the EU as a whole.

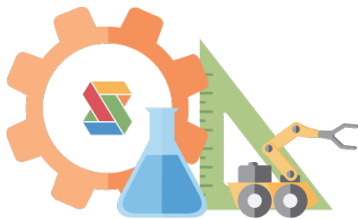
**As a result, and based on the preceding discussion, further steps need to be made to carry on the positive changes already implemented, particularly in terms of promoting non-formal modes of education and skills training to combat the skills mismatch, and for closer collaboration between private, public, and civil society actors in the field.**

# 8 Points to Support European Youth Empowerment

In order to support the increasing efforts undertaken to tackle unemployment levels across Europe, and to ensure a smooth transition for young people into adulthood, the EU and European policy makers working in tandem with private sector businesses and civil society organizations must continue to:

**PROMOTE** further **cross sector collaboration** between educators, policy makers and industry in order to increase the understanding of the requirements of the labour market, and how education can successfully adapt to these changing demands.

**ENCOURAGE** young people to recognize the great opportunity in pursuing careers in the **Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)** education and sectors, particularly focusing on increasing the number of female students and graduates in these areas.



**COMBAT** the negative perception towards VET studies and informal education as a viable means to securing gainful employment. Further improving the image, uptake, and cross sector mobility **of VET and Apprenticeship** students and graduates is crucial in further providing young people with the skills and attributes to be successful.

**REMOVE** unnecessary red tape and bureaucracy for **investors in start-ups, namely Business Angels, Venture Capitalists and Private Equity** firms in order to facilitate and improve the up scale of startups and small businesses with a focus on youth and young people.

**FINALIZE** the creation of a fully functioning European Single Market, taking advantage of the 500+ million people living in Europe who can contribute to its economic and political development. This is not only a key priority for multinational companies, but is increasingly crucial in the growth and development of young entrepreneurs and startups.

**STRENGTHEN** current initiatives designed to foster further direct interaction between young people and decision makers both at the local, regional and EU level. Current examples including 'Big 6', 'Raise Youth Voice' and 'The Dropouts' highlight the fundamental role of direct interaction in allowing young people to express their views, concerns, and experiences, and in policy makers to design interventions specifically targeting youth issues from a youth perspective.

**IMPLEMENT** initiatives focused on the development of youth independence, mobility, cultural exchange, and skills development particularly in reference to programmes like Erasmus+ supporting youth education, volunteering and training in another country.

**ENSURE** that while employment and education are at the forefront of initiatives targeting young people, the creation of stable and well-paid jobs continues to be the top priority. With this in mind, initiatives must take into account the wide variation of political, socio-economic and cultural factors present in Europe.

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