



SOC/647
Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee

OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions
Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation
[COM(2020)276 final]

Proposal for a Council recommendation on A Bridge to Jobs - Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee
[COM(2020) 277 final – 2020/132(NLE)]

Rapporteur: **Tatjana BABRAUSKIENĖ**
Co-rapporteur: **Michael McLOUGHLIN**

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 The EESC welcomes the fact that the reinforced Youth Guarantee (YG) presents Member States (MS) with a set of measures aiming to fight youth unemployment, entailing different tools that include apprenticeships, traineeships, education and job offers and calls for further steps to turn this into a permanent instrument. However, it regrets that the measures are not balanced and are mainly focused on education and skills and less on the active labour market policies. In the time of the post COVID-19 crisis, the EU's youth, who are most affected by unemployment, should have access to quality work opportunities.
- 1.2 The Committee urges MS to take further steps to reinforce the fourth and first principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in order to foster cross-sectoral and multilevel cooperation for implementing **a holistic and integrated approach to supporting young people** facing multiple barriers to **educational, social and labour market inclusion**.
- 1.3 The EESC calls for the immediate placement of youngsters who register for the YG. A **good quality solution such as a good quality job or training opportunity** must be provided quickly or within 4 months. This should take into consideration sometimes lengthy procedures for validating non-formal or informal learning (NFIL), which can be combined with the availability of training possibilities on offer during a certain period of time.
- 1.4 The EESC points out that support for young people needs to start with **validation of NFIL**, which ideally should lead to qualifications that clearly define European Qualification Framework (EQF)/National Qualification Framework (NQF) levels and a professional title or certification. In order to meet the four-month objective and provide individual support, systems of validation and training provision should be more **flexible** and agile.
- 1.5 The Committee calls for an EU initiative to enhance the provision of **quality and inclusive guidance and counselling, starting in early school education**, to provide more information to young people on their further education and subsequently on career possibilities in the context of the green and digital transition of the labour market.
- 1.6 The EESC notes that job placements for NEETs (young people not in employment, education or training) need to comply with labour legislation, collective agreements and tax regulations to avoid long-term precariousness for the young workers supported by the YG. **Decent salary and working conditions, accessible workplaces, health and safety at work, democracy at work**, as defined in national legislation, and collective and/or sectoral agreements need to be respected for job placements for young people as workers. The EESC recommends that Member States apply active labour market policies to create jobs for young people in the public and private sectors and to ensure long-term solutions. Short-term and temporary contracts may solve urgent problems, but long-term precariousness is equally harmful for young people, companies and the economy.
- 1.7 The Committee suggests that a **quality framework** governing the youth guarantee should be developed in association with the **relevant social partners and civil society players at EU, national and local levels** in the design, implementation and evaluation of the scheme, to ensure

that what is on offer meets a certain standard. Since increased public resources have been allocated to YG provision, supported by EU funds, it is paramount to monitor the **quality of what is on offer with quality criteria and conditionality**¹ for youth placements. We welcome the work of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the European Youth Forum (EYF) in this regard.

- 1.8 The EESC welcomes the Commission's suggestion of enforcing **post-placement feedback and monitoring the YG** to continue to enhance monitoring and evaluation of support for effective youth policies. The EESC calls on the MS to put in place both **qualitative and quantitative monitoring** of national YG schemes, based on a commonly agreed Indicator Framework to be carried out annually and improved by a qualitative list. **Monitoring and evaluation** mechanisms should also focus on quality, involve civil society players, including youth organisations, and seek direct input from young people.
- 1.9 The EESC calls for European and national level **cooperation on effective social, employment and education and training policies** based on alliances to be built among ministries, public employment services, social partners, youth organisations, National Youth Councils and other relevant stakeholders in order to find the best solution for young people and ensure better **outreach to those in need**, focusing in particular on the **inclusion of the socio-economically disadvantaged and ensuring gender equality**.
- 1.10 The Committee recommends that the Commission conduct an EU-level study on the impact of the **COVID-19 crisis on early school leaving** and increased rates of **NEETs**. It also recommends **revising Eurostat data on the youth unemployment rate** to also cover young people from the age of leaving national compulsory education up to the age of 30 (so not only between the age of 18 and 25) and ensure **appropriate support measures and adequate levels of and access to EU funding** under the Youth Guarantee scheme.
- 1.11 The EESC urges EU MS to ensure effective education, training and labour market measures to provide efficient support for young people. It is important to ensure that a) an appropriate leaving age from education and b) sustainable public investment in quality and inclusive education and training reduce the rate of **young people and NEETs with few skills and qualifications**.
- 1.12 The EESC calls for effective support for **public employment services (PES)** for getting people into further education and training and quality jobs. It notes that the **increase in the age** for access to the YG should not decrease the quality of opportunities provided by PES or put more pressure on PES or on the education and training systems facing increased demand. The EESC requests further support for the **capacity of PES** and for people to receive **more information** about available apprenticeships, traineeships and quality job offers in companies.

¹ See ETUC suggestions on quality criteria in [the ETUC Youth Resolution](#) entitled "Revisited fight against youth unemployment", 2020.

- 1.13 The Committee recommends improving the **Europass platform** with trustworthy information for young job seekers, including people with disabilities, in different languages, including the major languages of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.
- 1.14 The EESC calls on MSs to further cooperate so any major reforms to the YG are reflected in the **legal instruments governing the relevant funding**. The EESC calls on the Commission to **increase EU funds** available for the YG, considering all **EU investment on the YG, all existing EU programmes** and an evaluation of the use of EU funds. Information on available EU funds for the YG needs to be better communicated to those who help young people, and MSs need to receive guidelines in their own languages. The EESC welcomes the fact that targeted support for youth will be integrated into the **European Semester**.
- 1.15 The EESC calls for the involvement of social partners and other relevant stakeholders in the **implementation of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**, granted by the European Code of Conduct on Partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds. Such involvement needs to be extended to the EU financial instrument supporting the reinforced Youth Guarantee in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (2021-2027). This would ensure participatory programming and effective monitoring of its implementation so that the funds really reach those in need.
- 1.16 The EESC welcomes the Commission's plan to set up a **Monitoring Framework on Access to Social Protection** and provide solutions to ensure adequate working conditions for people working on digital platforms, as otherwise crowd and platform work would not provide the best long-term solutions for good quality job placements for young people within the YG.
- 1.17 The EESC proposes to link the forthcoming **European Child Guarantee to the YG** to give more efficient support to young people with children, be they employed or unemployed.
- 1.18 The EESC encourages the **Commission** to define an **Action Plan for the Social Economy** to provide effective support for **youth entrepreneurs and business start-ups** and increase green skills at local level, with a special focus on vulnerable groups and with the involvement of the relevant social partners and civil society organisations.
- 1.19 The Commission suggests that MS encourage companies to hire young unemployed people and provide them with **good quality job offers**. The EESC notes that **employment incentives, wage subsidies and recruitment bonuses, as well as tax incentives for companies**, could indeed be good solutions for this, and should be accompanied by ensuring access to suitable training opportunities. Incentives to companies should provide effective solutions that fit in with their medium- and long-term business plans.
- 1.20 The EESC recommends conducting an EU-level study to map out **existing micro-credentials** and pinpoint the needs and interests of European companies, employers, workers and job-seekers as regards obtaining and requesting micro-credentials, with a special focus on young people.

- 1.21 The EESC welcomes the Commission's suggestion of strengthening social dialogue on improving apprenticeship provision and **calls for effective monitoring of the implementation of the Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEF)**² at national and company levels. Assessing and improving apprenticeships against the EFQEF criteria is important.
- 1.22 The EESC calls on the Commission to support the **European Apprentices Network** in defining a clear mandate in order to support apprentices in line with the EFQEA.

2. **Background and general comments**

- 2.1 In April 2013 the Council recommendation on the Youth Guarantee was adopted when the economic and financial disruptions and the economic crisis brought about the **highest unemployment rate** for people in Europe, many of them young people.
- 2.2 The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the European economy into deep recession and towards a rising unemployment rate. In June 2020, 3 million young people under the age of 25 were unemployed in the EU (17.1% of the total active population in that group)³, and this is expected⁴ to rise to 4.8 million (26.2%) by the end of the year. Furthermore, the number of NEETs is expected to rise from 4.9 million to 6.7 million. Reinforcing the implementation of the Youth Guarantee is **timely** in order to avoid reaching the highest levels of unemployment in the history of the EU⁵ in the 21st century. The proposal on the reinforced YG presents Member States with a set of measures to fight youth unemployment, with different tools, including apprenticeships, traineeships, education and job offers. The focus of the proposal is on the **school-to-work transition and labour market integration of young people up to the age of 30, within 4 months of registration at a public employment service (PES) or a YG provider**.
- 2.3 As the last economic crisis showed, young people are hit harder by the crisis. They are more **vulnerable on the labour market** and lack, or have only weak, social protection. Many of them have **students' loans, lack resources for developing their skills and face a high risk of mental illness** due to inactivity. Youth unemployment has long-term consequences on individuals, making them a "lost generation". Eurofound⁶ calculated that European economies lost around EUR 162 billion per year during the Great Recession as a result of a lack of action on the integration of young people. Youth unemployment can have a negative impact **not only on the economy but on the whole of society**, as young people may opt out of democratic and social participation.
- 2.4 Young people who are NEETs constitute a **diverse group**. They have different levels of skills, formal qualifications and personal backgrounds. Some education systems are not flexible

² [OJ C 153, 2.5.2018](#).

³ Eurostat, data retrieved in August 2020.

⁴ Intereconomics, [article](#) on the "COVID-19 Crisis: How to Avoid a 'Lost Generation'", 2020.

⁵ 23.5% with 5.5 million young people (under 25) being unemployed in September 2013 (Eurostat).

⁶ Eurofound (2015), "[Social inclusion of young people](#)".

enough to allow **permeability** between different education sectors. Effective solutions should be provided to them according to their qualifications and skills levels. **Targeted social, employment and education support** should be given, in particular, to those who are vulnerable and come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. **Gender equality and equal opportunities** for migrants and refugees, minorities, the Roma and young people with disabilities are needed. Poorly qualified and young early school leavers should receive assistance for **improving their skills and competences, to reach qualification levels "towards EQF level 3 or 4"**, according to national circumstances. This would allow them to be integrated into the labour market, in line with the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways⁷.

2.5 When it comes to supporting young adults, it is essential to define them as being **between the compulsory education leaving age⁸ and 30 years old**. The revised YG extends the support to the age of 30 and foresees effective support for people to obtain **decent employment and upskilling and reskilling provision**. Young people leaving education at an early age and a lack of public investment in inclusive education for all contributes to the high rates of **young people with few skills and qualifications**. This increases the need for measures to integrate them into further education and into the labour market.

2.6 Jobs created in different industries may disappear because of the current crisis. According to the fourth Principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), "Young people have the **right to continued education, apprenticeship, traineeship or a job offer of good standing** within 4 months of becoming unemployed or leaving education." The first principle of the EPSR also needs to apply in providing support for young people on reskilling and upskilling and combatting early school leaving steps, to ensure their "**right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning**." Member States should guarantee these rights by fostering cross-sectoral and multilevel cooperation to implement an integrated approach to supporting young people facing multiple barriers to **social inclusion, beyond employment⁹**.

3. Specific comments

3.1 As already identified by the EESC Labour Market Observatory, in its 2014 Study on Youth Employment¹⁰, the implementation of the Youth Guarantee has faced **many obstacles** in EU Member States, such as the poor quality of what is on offer under the scheme, intervention outside the promised four month period and inadequate outreach strategies for offering support to young people furthest from the labour market (like the NEETs). More effective **governance** structures are needed to ensure better implementation of the YG. Funding should be well-targeted with a higher rate of registration of young people. Thus, better **involvement of the relevant stakeholders, such as youth organisations, national youth councils and other**

⁷ [OJ C 484, 24.12.2016, p. 1. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AJOC_2016_484_R_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AJOC_2016_484_R_0001)

⁸ Eurydice: [Compulsory Education](#) 2018/19. Compulsory leaving age from education is age 15 in 7 EU countries, 16 in 16 countries, 17 in 1 country, and 18 in 3 countries, while it is 16 in 5 German Länder and 18 in 11 Länder.

⁹ European Youth Forum: [Updated position on the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee](#), 2018.

¹⁰ [EESC Labour Market Observatory study on youth employment](#), 2014.

relevant NGOs and the social partners at European, sectoral, national and, if relevant, company levels needs to be guaranteed in the design, implementation and evaluation of the YG scheme, which can help ensure acceptance and smooth implementation of reforms.

- 3.2 Reinforcing the **mapping system** to obtain a more profound understanding of **the diversity of NEETs** is needed. Monitoring support for young people should be combined with **enhanced research**, taking into consideration the heterogeneity of the group of NEETs particularly vulnerable groups of young people for evidence-based policy, while respecting laws on data protection. NEETs are difficult to reach, and therefore an integrated supply of social and employment services - both public and private is necessary – based on reliable evidence and data.
- 3.3 Involvement of the social partners and relevant stakeholders in **implementing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**, enabled under the European Code of Conduct on Partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds, should be extended to the EU financial instrument supporting the reinforced Youth Guarantee in the next MFF (2021-2027). This would ensure participatory programming and effective monitoring of its implementation, so that the funds really reach those in need.
- 3.4 From this perspective, effective social, employment and education and training support must indeed start with **cooperation among relevant ministries and support services**. Alliances should be built among ministries, PES, youth organisations, national youth councils and other relevant NGOs, social partners and other stakeholders to find the best solution for young people. The fact that the **four-month target** was not met in the previous YG must be a central concern in the revised version. There is a need to enhance and support **public employment services' role and capacity** in getting people into quality jobs. NGOs and social enterprises can also provide support to young people by offering temporary employment and traineeships. There should be more information about **available places** in companies, as PES cannot provide support if there are no places or no information about these. As regards the involvement of private employment services, it is necessary to ensure that YG support is provided to young people free of charge, as public support.
- 3.5 It is important to continue to improve links with – and outreach to – communities, youth organisations and other social groups, consistent with some of the examples shown in the Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a Bridge to Jobs - reinforcing the Youth Guarantee¹¹. Importantly, the Communication on "Youth Employment Support - a bridge to jobs for the next generation"¹² considers that outreach to the most vulnerable "remains insufficient", thus further illustrating the centrality of this and other forms of **outreach work**.
- 3.6 We note that, according to ILO analyses¹³ of the YG, a "**lack of [national] resources** has had detrimental consequences on the ability of countries to provide all NEETs with an opportunity

¹¹ [SWD/2020/124 final](#).

¹² [COM/2020/276 final](#).

¹³ ILO, [Working Paper](#) on "The European Youth Guarantee: A systematic review of its implementation across countries", 2017.

to work or to attend training within four months". The **increased budget for the YG** is welcomed in line with the expansion of the age cohort of people targeted by the initiative. However, the EESC regrets that while the EU Recovery Plan provides EUR 750 billion for the economic recovery of Europe, the YG only receives EUR 22 billion which, according to the EC¹⁴, comprises European Social Fund and Youth Employment Initiative investment, including **national co-financing**. The Commission has also presented the use of **additional funds**: this includes EUR 55 billion for 2020-22 from REACT-EU and EUR 86 billion from ESF+ that can also be used by countries for youth employment support, among several other funds. Research¹⁵ suggests that effective support could be achieved under the revised YG with **at least EUR 50 billion per year**. The EESC urges the Commission to provide MSs with clear calculations and guidelines on the full amount of EU-level investment for supporting the YG and an evaluation on its effective use. As the sustainability of the support mechanism enhanced with public investment is needed, we welcome the integration of targeted support for young people into the European Semester.

- 3.7 The EESC welcomes the fact that the policy initiative proposes a targeted approach to vulnerable individuals based on a wider partnership with social partners and youth organisations and focuses on the gender dimension. Such partnerships need to operate **beyond national capitals, in local communities, and obtain feedback directly from young people**. It is important that young people be supported in starting family life and the forthcoming **European Child Guarantee** should include provisions for young employed and unemployed people with children linking the policy to YG.
- 3.8 The EESC welcomes proposals for youth entrepreneurial support in the **Commission Action Plan for the Social Economy**, and its provisions on green skills at local level, with a special focus on vulnerable groups. The EESC asks the European Commission to involve the relevant social partners and civil society organisations, especially youth organisations, in developing such an action plan, to include the experience of young people, apprentices, trainees and young workers. **Business start-ups of young people need encouragement and entrepreneurial education needs to be promoted**. Self-employment opportunities in the digital and green economy, offered to **groups suffering discrimination and vulnerable groups**, need to be in line with targeted information to these groups and require concrete support for them. **Intermediary bodies**, such as PES, youth organisations, national youth councils, other relevant NGOs and trade unions play an essential role in this connection.
- 3.9 In order to set up **effective strategies** for all groups of young people in need, it is important to clearly define the cohort of young people covered by the YG. The reduction in the **compulsory education age** in countries can have a detrimental effect, increasing the number of NEETs. The EESC welcomes the increase in the age covered by the YG; it recommended as already as 2013¹⁶ that the **age limit** for accessing the Youth Guarantee be raised to 30, particularly in those countries with higher levels of youth unemployment. However, it would urge caution in this regard with reference to quality and capacity. It may be necessary to **ensure MSs** have

14 [COM/2020/276 final](#).

15 Intereconomics, [article](#) "COVID-19 Crisis: How to Avoid a 'Lost Generation'", 2020.

16 [OJ C 271, 19.9.2013, p. 101](#).

flexibility in defining the age cohort they need to support. The expanded age cohort should not exclude young people who have already had some work experience and are entitled to **unemployment benefits**. However, it is important to clearly define the cohort age range.

- 3.10 The Commission suggests that MSs encourage companies to hire unemployed young people and provide them with **good-quality job offers**. We need to best match of jobs with **the qualifications and interests** of young unemployed people and motivate them with good quality and **inclusive upskilling and reskilling** offers to keep them in the jobs concerned. Nevertheless, the EESC considers that Member States should have flexibility in determining whether or not they wish to extend the scope of the YG scheme, taking into account the nature and extent of youth unemployment at the national, regional and local levels.
- 3.11 Merely reinforcing the YG is not a sufficient aim while there is a crisis, and **immediate measures** are needed to help young people. **Active labour market policies** in the MS need to ensure that what is on offer here can propose **long-term solutions for young people**, ensure **quality jobs**, good quality working conditions and fair recruitment and retention options. Labour laws and collective agreements should be respected and promoted, in particular as regards the link between qualification levels and salaries as well as democracy at work. Young people on the labour market should be treated in the same way as the adult population, particularly in terms of receiving the same minimum wage, access to pensions and protection against precarious employment contracts (zero hours), unpaid traineeships and bogus self-employment. Short-term and temporary contracts for young people may solve urgent problems, but long-term precariousness is equally harmful for young people, companies and the economy.
- 3.12 Flexibility is key as regards the **four-month** period of the YG after registration with a YG provider, which is usually a PES. A job or education offer or training opportunity should be proposed **immediately**¹⁷, but it should also be a **good quality solution and a good quality job or education offer/training opportunity**. This should take into consideration the sometimes lengthy procedures of validation of NFIL, which can be combined with the availability of the training on offer during a certain period of time. In order to meet the four-month objective and provide individual support, systems of validation and training provision should be more **flexible** and agile.
- 3.13 The YG needs to start with **good quality professional guidance and counselling** in early school education for young people; recognition and **validation of NFIL** ideally should lead to a qualification which clearly defines EQF/NQF levels and a professional title or certification which clearly states which tasks and skills it certifies and how the certificate links to a full qualification. The new **Europass framework** should make it possible to include all kinds of certificates and qualifications in the Europass CV in a clear, practical way.
- 3.14 Micro-credentials are alternative solutions for documenting additional skills provided by companies or VET and higher education institutions. As there is no common European definition or understanding of **micro-credentials (MCs)**, further European policy may be considered as regards MCs as a help to young people when they are added to full qualifications

¹⁷ [OJ C 161, 06.06.2013, p. 67.](#)

and following an agreed European definition of and understanding on **micro-credentials** with workers' unions and employers.

- 3.15 The COVID-19 crisis has had an impact on apprenticeship provisions; in many economic sectors affected by the lockdown, apprentices have had to postpone their apprenticeships or have even been made redundant; in other sectors, apprentices have continued their apprenticeships via home-based project work or simulations. **Matching apprenticeship places in companies with VET students** is indeed a problem, and PES in particular should receive more information from private and public companies of all sizes to support VET schools and teachers trying to find practical learning places for future apprentices.
- 3.16 The EESC stresses that apprenticeships are not only for young people, as the very first paragraph of the EFQEF underlines this double focus of apprenticeships for **young people and adults**. The fact that apprenticeships were put into the Youth Employment Support policy document contributes to a mistaken understanding of apprenticeships as being confined to young people. The EESC welcomes the fact that the Commission has proposed that MSs step up learning offers and school-to-work transitions via **good quality apprenticeship or traineeship provisions**. This can also provide effective support to reduce early school leaving and can ensure better integration of migrants and refugees into the labour market, while respecting the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships and the Quality Framework for Traineeships.
- 3.17 The Commission proposes renewing and giving new impetus to the **European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA)**. While the EAfA has secured a high profile regarding apprenticeship provision by increasing the number of company pledges, this is not sufficient. Micro and small enterprises still face considerable challenges in offering apprenticeship places. Therefore, the provision of "**collaborative apprenticeship**" offered by several companies could be encouraged. The quality and effectiveness of all apprenticeships should be ensured with reference to the criteria provided by the EFQEF and companies should be acknowledged and awarded by the Commission according to the EFQEF.
- 3.18 The Committee welcomes the increased focus of the Commission to ensure **apprenticeships in the digital and green sectors** but notes that good quality apprenticeships should also be offered in any other sectors that are undergoing digital and green transitions.
- 3.19 Successful VET systems and apprenticeship systems leading to quality jobs require **effective social dialogue with trade unions and employers' representatives**. The EESC welcomes the Commission's suggestion regarding the need to strengthen social dialogue at European and national level, and further capacity-building possibilities could be enhanced via the Commission's Apprenticeship Support Services. While already several sectoral social partners have pledged support for the EAfA, the EESC underlines the autonomy of the European sectoral social dialogue committees, which define the work programme for themselves in line with agreed joint priorities.

3.20 For those unemployed young people who have already been awarded a qualification, the Youth Guarantee should also serve as a job guarantee¹⁸, meaning that young people gain their first experience of employment in the public or the non-profit sector.

Brussels, 29 October 2020

Christa SCHWENG
The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

¹⁸ Pavlina R. Tcherneva, Levy Economics Institute, Working Papers Series No. 902, "[The Job Guarantee: Design, Jobs, and Implementation](#)", 2018.