

The best-skilled generation in the face of the pandemic

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Youth is often described as one of the best periods in people's life given that key events for their own personal and professional development take place. But the Covid-19 crisis has put young people's prospects at risk in Europe.

Studies by the International Labour Organization (ILO) show that although young people are one of the most resilient groups to the health effects of the pandemic, they are nevertheless one of the most vulnerable groups in the economic and social crises that have unfolded.

As also happened during the 2008 crisis, the economic breakdown caused by the pandemic has hit young people disproportionately. Figures leave no doubt in this regard: one in six young Europeans who were employed before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic have lost their job or have been dismissed. Working hours among employed youth have fallen by nearly a quarter, and two out of five young people have reported a reduction in their income.¹

Low incomes, precarious working conditions and limited access to social protection are the reality of labour conditions that thousands of young people are now experiencing in their daily lives. Moreover, unpaid traineeships and over-representation in non-standard forms of work (such as part-time jobs, temporary jobs or digital platform work) create the perfect conditions to turn the highest-educated generation so far into the most vulnerable one. Vulnerability is of particular concern from a gender perspective due to worrying imbalances in the labour market. We should never forget that young women in particular suffer a double discrimination, for being young and for being women.

The current generation of young Europeans is highly skilled. Re-skilling and up-skilling cannot therefore be the answer to tackle high unemployment rates among them. If we want to empower and create favourable conditions for young people to develop all their potential, what we need to provide is quality and sustainable jobs.

That said, we must acknowledge that the EU is currently taking major steps towards Sustainable Development Goal 8 of the UN's 2030 Agenda: the reduction of youth unemployment by at least 50 per cent by 2030 and the inclusion of criteria for quality job creation.

1 European Parliament (2020), resolution on the Youth Guarantee, 8 October.

The strengthening of the Youth Guarantee, the modernisation and expansion of policies in favour of vocational education and training, a more inclusive Erasmus+ Programme for 2021-2027, the commitment to invest 7 per cent of the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism in the young generation, and the new Agenda for a Sustainable Social Europe are good examples of the steps the EU is taking.

In sum, only if we develop the right tools and ensure that the job offers for young people are of the best quality in terms of decent wages and working conditions, will we be able to avoid the high societal cost of losing the best-skilled generation.