First Preparatory paper on the Education and Employment Theme

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The official point of view… (?)

In March 2009 I was managing a Future Dialogue [1]workshop in my hometown in northern Sweden. The topic was youth (un-) employment. At the end of the day I asked one of the young voices, an unemployed young man, what was his most important finding from participating in the workshop. The young man, who earlier that day had given us all a wonderful story about what his life had turned out to be in the year 2013, looked me in the eyes and said: "Besides all the new contacts and connections I have made through the day, I have to say that the biggest surprise was when I suddenly realised that all these people here today really are seriously interested in helping me finding a job…"

Many of the challenges facing the member states today are particularly prevalent within the group referred to as "young people" - with which we mean people up to the age of 25. Young people, who often find themselves in relatively precarious employment situations and facing difficulties related to professional and social integration, are likely - especially those with fewer opportunities - to be particularly vulnerable in the present economic situation. Most probably, they will find it more difficult to access stable and good-quality jobs. We now see unemployment rates across Europe rising, young people, especially the ones facing fewer opportunities, find themselves being among the groups affected harder than other groups within the labour force. It is a time of contradictions; a time when young people in general on the one hand are considered to have numerous options and choices, highlighted to be the most precious assets in building our future – and on the other hand, in parts marginalised, not invited, not involved, not empowered. School dropout rates are still high in many countries and in some countries we are discovering a situation with an increasing number of young people living outside the formal systems – the NEET[2] phenomenon – making it even harder to find them and to connect.

Besides this, young people sometimes are being described as a homogenous group by professionals (i.e. adults), often in terms of how they think and act and relate – both in general and to issues like employment; "…they don't want to stay too long on the same job, the only thing they are interested in is to fulfil their dreams, doing it their own way, they want to travel, work abroad, go global, and above all, they are difficult to understand and to communicate…." – when I myself, after working with young people's aspirations for more than 30 years, find myself thinking that maybe these explanations are no more than professionals' and adults' own need of creating a new truth – while the young themselves rather, at least to some extent, would be referring these explanations to their experience of the rapid change of society and, specifically, of the labour market. As permanent jobs are being reduced and replaced with time based employment (on a project basis), what other strategy could you possibly have but to follow the trend and accept what is offered? When companies and employment "go global", what could you do other then follow the workflow? When the formal systems fail to connect to and create transitions between education and employment, what could you possibly do but to try to develop your skills in other ways and in other environments then the formal ones?

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[1] Future Dialogue is a workshop format developed by Robert Arnkil. Different actors – called the "voices" – are being inteviewed about their situation some years ahead, what made it possible to get their, with whom they had interacted with, what kind of problems they did discover – and how they managed to solve them.
[2] NEET - "Not currently engaged in Employment, Education or Training"

In Gothenburg's first analysis of cities' needs according to the E/E theme, the abstracts stress, to a great extent, the need for creative thinking, coordinated actions and youth involvement in order to strengthen the link between education and labour market. Some voices from the cities regarding education and youth (un-) employment:

Warsaw
Warsaw is focusing on young people living in one of their poorest districts. In Praga Pólnoc young people do not believe in their competence and possibilities. New ideas and solutions are really needed. Warsaw wants to focus on two vocational schools where there are a lot of problems with dropping out, violence, juvenile delinquency and alcohol.

Tirgu-Mures
The main entry point is Employment and Youth. Young people tend to emigrate abroad in search for better-paid jobs or due to unemployment. A great challenge to the community is to reduce unemployment among newly graduated students. They wants to establish a so-called "Office for Counselling and Orientation in Career" in order to promote young people as positive resources to employees and society.

Valencia
The City of Valencia wants to state there is a great potential in the Arts sector as an industry. The creation of jobs in the artistic sector is an unexploited area but the opportunities are identified. Valencia is planning to:
- Promote entrepreneurship in arts
- Organise complementary training in order develop self confidence
- Facilitate easier access to housing
- Offer information services
- Make all relevant information available to young people - and it needs to be done differently…

Patras
There is a lack of coordination and cooperation between different youth teams across the city. Patras wants to build a network of youth associations to gather their power and inspiration. They also want to bridge the gap between the University of Patras and the City of Patras. The city needs to tackle social problems such as youth unemployment from different point of views with the help of a coalition of young teams.

Antwerp
Antwerp's main entry point is employment and how to achieve a better integration of local youth on the labour market. Antwerp wants to strengthen the link between education and labour market. They also want to develop their youth competence centres. In comparison with

the Flemish youth unemployment rate the Antwerp one is high. Non-European origin is overrepresented (Moroccan and Turkish origin)

One priority is to diminish the number of unqualified school leavers and to find efficient methods to integrate workless young people. Diversity as a strategy needs to be developed – a mental change is required. A weakness in former attempts has been to only involve the young people in a position as user/client. There is a need for new strategies on youth participation as well as cooperation of education and enterprise.

Rotterdam
Rotterdam has too little coordination between training and the labour market. They look for structural solutions. Focus should be on the young person and what is needed to develop his/her talent (for instance in vocational education). Every agency tries to put its own bit in order, they are talking about the same young person but not with each other. What is needed is tailor made support at the right time, the right place and in the right way. Preventive care. A higher degree of participation can be achieved by education – inclusion through education. Rotterdam wants to:
- Profile itself as a city with good career opportunities towards students
- Prevent school drop-out and youth unemployment

Göteborg
One target group is young people at the age of 16-19 that does not attend school nor have a job. This includes preventing dropouts from upper secondary school.
One priority is to develop sustainable strategies that reduce youth unemployment and youth dependence on social welfare. A breakthrough area is to further tighten the connections to the local community and to the business society in order to better reach and provide the target group with alternatives that leads to employment.
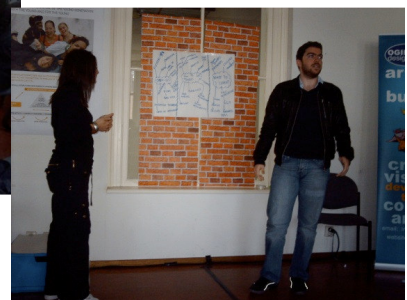
EU actions and attempts

Commenting on the ***new EU strategy for youth***[3], presented this April, the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth, Jan Figel, highlighted these viewpoints: *"Youth is our present and our future – and we must make a concerted effort to open up as many avenues as possible for our young citizens, especially in the light of the current economic and financial crisis. The key is to empower our youth to deal with the many challenges they encounter in today's globalized world. Our new strategy is a timely response to these challenges, which opens the door to a new era in the development of youth policies at EU level."*

So what are the real challenges in the sense of education and employment with regards to young people? According to the new strategy, developed to be working from 2010, one of three priorities is to create more opportunities for youth in education and employment (i.e. further development of non-formal education, easier transition from education to work, investment in the skills required for labour markets, development of creativity and entrepreneurship). Therefore, stressing the fact that we must – even with a stronger emphasis while dealing with the specific challenges posed by the present economic downturn – continue working to enhance smooth transitions for young people *from* education, inactivity or unemployment *to* employment, some key areas that need to find new and better solutions are:

- a formal education system that in different aspects fails to meet the ever changing demands of the labour market and society at large
- difficulty to obtain widespread accepted recognition for skills and knowledge obtained outside of this formal education system (so called non-formal learning)
- lack of a legitimate instrument for the communication of one's actual competences to potential employers
- lack of alternative paths to further education
- difficulties in measuring the true value of non-formal qualifications and competences
- lack of attention paid to the important role young people play in increasing creativity and innovation as well as in promoting entrepreneurship and information and communication technologies

No doubt difficulties like the above lead to many of today's youth having a feeling of exclusion from the society in which they live and whose future lies in their hands. It must be frustrating to experience the contradictions that Europe is facing a demographic situation where the young shortly will be representing only 15 % of the potential labour force (from 20 % at present day)[4] when, at the same time, we are facing high levels of youth unemployment. It is also a fact that many companies and workplaces communicate that they are having difficulties in finding employees with the right competence profiles. Not due to the fact that these individuals do not exist, but rather because of the lack of a legitimate method to better communicate actual skills and competences from individuals to (potential) employers.

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[3] http://ec.europa.eu/youth/news/news1458_en.htm
[4] Demographic trends will have a major impact on labour supply. Eurostat
estimates that the EU working age population (15-64 years) will peak in 2012 and
then start shrinking as the "baby-boom" cohorts retire, resulting in a slight but continuous decline of total EU labour supply

Highlighting one example - the growing importance of mapping and acknowledging young people's non-formal learning skills

The existence of knowledge, skills and competences that are acquired outside of the formal school system is unequivocally acknowledged as being of increasing importance for the continued development of the labour market in particular and society in general. While many of today's youth still follow the traditional educational path, a growing number continue to seek and find new ways to increase their knowledge and develop their skills, often within informal and non-formal learning environments. The key questions are – how can we create legitimacy for and confidence in competences achieved outside of the formal education system, and how can we develop models of understanding and collaboration between the formal, informal and non-formal systems?

One answer is validation. A number of validation models have been (and continue to be) developed in Sweden in order to formalise non-formally acquired competences. There is no doubt that validation is a vital instrument that needs to be developed further. At the same time we see an inherent limitation with the validation models currently available, namely that they require a formally approved curriculum within upper secondary school or within college/university as a reference point. This is why validation alone cannot lead to a bridging of the gap between sought after and available competences within the labour market, since many of the competences, both those that are specifically related to a profession as well as those of more general character, cannot be found described in formal study curricula.

…and some voices from the real experts

Some very interesting information, delivered by the young themselves addressing the Education and Employment theme, is from the E and E Workshop carried out under the supervision and management of Helen Arfvidsson, city of Gothenburg at the My Generation Youth Exchange event in Rotterdam in the beginning of April, 2009. As the full workshop report already has been distributed among the My Generation cities, I would only like to pinpoint some of the discussions as they bring food for thought when trying to bridge the gap between cultures, generations and levels.

a) Employment - what matters?
The importance of money was only mentioned a few times in the first, individual round. When categories were formed and each individual had two options to choose what matters the most, money became the most frequently chosen option. When this was discussed, quite a few of the participants agreed that it is not surprising that money, and the stability it brings along, becomes more important when there are two options to choose from, even though it might not be the most important category or concern in regard to future employment.

One overall opinion was that jobs should be chosen with passion. Without loving it you will not reach your goals. It is therefore not about choosing your job, but rather to follow your passion. Without motivation, creative ideas are hard to come by.

b) Education and learning – what counts?
During the presentations, the need to facilitate work experience was addressed by several groups. Work experience is however not the only experience needed. Many of the groups discussed the importance of other experiences and life skills to be as important for the learning process, but that these experiences are not as highly valued by employers. It is

therefore crucial that future employers not only require or look for formal education qualifications or work experience, but additionally take into consideration other experience and qualities which the young possess. The employers must better understand (and value) these informal qualifications.

In a labour market which at times poses contradictory demands and asks for unattainable qualifications, it is important to keep trying and to get second chances, to be allowed to make mistakes, the wrong choices, and to change your mind. There must be a safety net to fall back on, particularly in regard to becoming your own entrepreneur. It is risky business, and young people should be encouraged and helped to become entrepreneurs, but there must be safety mechanisms in place in case of failure.

Where do I learn what is needed to get there?

School/family/friends
College/university
Youth centers
Public organisations/NGOs/business organisations
Leaning opportunities are everywhere
Need confidence and loving yourself
Need to communicate
Learning from friends, travelling, volunteering, mixed experiences
From work experience and work placements
By experimenting
From hobbies
Everywhere!

c) Reality – what is…?
Young people find it quite difficult to make all the necessary choices in today's society, especially at a young age. The pressure is enormous and the choices overwhelming. The pressure comes from family, friends, society, school, the media and others. From time to time these are contradictory and difficult to deal with.

The focus on educational achievements in favour of other experiences becomes rather slanted. Future employers should to a larger extent value various kinds of activities/experiences outside school, first of all because this is where young people learn the most, secondly because the experiences more and more often prove to be valuable competences at the workplace.

But the reality for young people is also about dealing with self-confidence. It is important to have faith and trust to stand up for choices when afraid of walking down unknown paths, and to find confidence to realise that one is worthy to be employed. And as this can be difficult to realise, support and encouragement must come from everywhere.
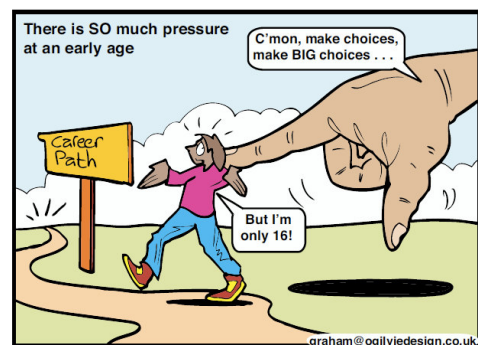
Watch the movie about this Employment/Education workshop:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7R5BIYtUKs

Education and Employment within the My Generation context

So, what could we reasonably expect from the work carried out within the framework of the My Generation project? First of all, I believe that the single fact that we are dealing with these issues in the light of developing the participating cities and regions is going to bring us all new insight, tools/methods, actions and hopefully also motivation to build on foresight and strategy discussions on how to find better ways to include young people in the process. In order for this report to work as a starting point for the first E and E case study as well as for

the E and E workshop in Gothenburg in September, I would like to challenge you all. Not that I believe that this project has all the resources necessary to solve all problems, but hopefully enough to look for – and find – some interesting ideas and examples that can prove to be very useful to the participating cities. The My Generation Baseline has a strong focus on connections, and I strongly sympathise with that. Thus, when preparing for writing your first case study, please emphasise the importance of establishing connections that could bring in new ideas, openness, insight, and, not to say the least, action. What connections are lacking in order to promote social innovation, new thinking and learning? According to the E and E section in the Guidelines report some further starting points for your searching could be – even though not to be accounted for to be fully covering the theme – the following:

- The current economic situation tends to become even more problematic to the young regarding the job situation – what ways are there, no matter the level, to reduce the damage? How could we engage the business society, the employers?

- Changes are occurring in society, but the instruments used within educational and labour market policy are not keeping pace with these changes. The regular school system cannot by itself meet these challenges. We need a more flexible way of acting when it comes to the acknowledgement of competences; what is working, or what is required?

- 'Exclusion' is a definition that is based upon a systematic way of thinking that does not match with today's reality. Young people's inclusion should be more about organisation, perspective and our view towards learning than about how to get as many as possible back within the mainstream, not just a focus on problems and shortcomings.

- Young people's choices in life do not follow the system's predetermined paths; the young create their own strategies for life. One should much more clearly than is the case today, work from the basis of young people's own strategies in meeting the future and establishing themselves on the labour market.

- The EU promotes creativity, (social) innovation and entrepreneurship[5] to be drivers for future development. What is or could be interesting experiments in developing these themes? How could (new) local actors and environments foster the development of creative processes? How could entrepreneurship (of all kinds) be promoted and supported with the regard to young people's own ideas and aspirations?

For more information: www.urbact.eu/my_generation

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[5] http://www.create2009.europa.eu/