

WORKING GROUP III

ESTABLISHING TIGHTLY KNIT SAFETY NETS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AT RISK

Issues paper



MAKING TRANSITIONS WORK

Final Conference on the Transition from Initial Education to Working Life

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Introduction

The OECD Thematic Review of the Transition from Initial Education to Working Life has given particular emphasis to policies in favour of those at risk in the transition process. The “safety net” approaches developed in some of the Nordic countries have attracted particular attention: especially Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The effectiveness of these approaches is evident in a number of indicators:

- Few young people leaving school directly for unemployment (Denmark, Sweden).
- Teenage unemployment rates that are substantially lower than would be expected on the basis of adult unemployment rates (Sweden).
- Low rates of long term youth unemployment (Denmark, Norway).
- Falling rates of long term youth unemployment (Denmark, Norway).
- Relatively few teenagers who are neither in education nor employment (Denmark, Sweden).

Such outcomes can only be achieved if the very large majority of young people can be integrated and retained in mainstream education and training; if drop outs are closely tracked and intensely supported; and if definitions of at risk youth allow for early intervention, including not only unemployed youth but also those who are at risk of dropping out, as well as at risk youth in unstable and low quality jobs and those neither in education nor employment. **What can schools, municipalities and other actors do in order to keep track of young people at risk of getting lost in the transition process?**

It has been shown in the Nordic countries and elsewhere that individualised and multiple support is most effective in helping young people at risk to develop their own strategy of success. Such support is relatively expensive and requires unconventional programmes and unconventional forms of co-operation among different agencies. **What are the key features of effective individualised services to young people at risk? What are the main obstacles? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such approaches compared to more traditional labour market measures for young people?**

The Nordic countries and others have in recent years developed strategies of financial support for young people which are conditional on participating either in education and training or in work programmes (“carrot and stick” approaches). **What has been the success of such programmes? To which extent and in which ways have they contributed to improve the qualifications of young people at risk? To which extent have such programmes contributed to reduce the hard core of at risk youth?**

In many countries migrant youth and the children of minority groups face particular difficulties in the transition from school to work. **What is the nature of such difficulties? To which extent do they require specific responses? What are they? Are particular institutional arrangements needed?**

More detailed issues relating to these questions are outlined below under “Key issues for discussion”. They provide the background for discussion in Working Group III. Interventions by participants should be informal and brief (no more than 3 minutes), in order to allow for an exchange of ideas.

Background

Many of the elements of the tightly knit safety nets observable in the Nordic countries can also be observed in other countries' recent policy initiatives. The key features of successful safety net approaches in favour of young people at risk are:

- An emphasis upon keeping the number of early leavers low -- by making school attractive for the widest possible range of students; by remedial programmes for the weakest students; and by an emphasis upon personal guidance and counselling -- as well as a strong priority to early tracking of and assistance to those who leave school early and are at risk.
- Co-ordinated national education, labour market and welfare policies to reduce young people's incentive to regard inactivity as an attractive option.
- Clarity about the primary goal of assistance for early school leavers under the age of 20: to encourage them to quickly return to education in order to obtain an upper secondary or occupational qualification, rather than to obtain work if that is poorly qualified, insecure and temporary.
- Definitions of those who are at risk that extend beyond standard definitions of unemployment and that include for instance at risk youth in unstable and low quality jobs.
- A specific requirement for schools to report early leavers to local authorities and for local authorities to provide such young people with assistance.
- Locally managed tracking mechanisms that allow early leavers at risk to be quickly identified and provided with assistance.
- Flexible, individually tailored assistance based upon the individual young person's needs, and built around personal action plans that are regularly reviewed.
- Co-ordination of services across different portfolios and across different levels of government, and the possibility of complementing education, training and employment assistance with personal, health or welfare assistance.
- Local resources that are generally appropriate for size and nature of the task.

The effectiveness of the Nordic approach to building safety nets for those at risk is most evident in the case of those under the age of 20, who have been the principal targets. Those aged 20-24 have only more recently become the targets of such an approach, and the impact upon them has to date been weaker.

Further reading: Final report section 4.3.

Some key issues

Some OECD countries have seen a rise during the 1990s in the proportion of young people who are inactive: neither in education nor in the labour market. Is this necessarily a problem for the transition? How can such young people be identified and their needs assessed?

How are early leavers at risk identified a) while they are at school b) after they leave school? In each case is there clear responsibility allocated for doing so?

What special provisions do schools make for encouraging those wishing to leave school early to stay? Is this provision in the form of special classes, special institutions, separate courses, remedial classes, counselling and guidance, personal and welfare assistance?

The group at risk in the transition is wider than the group defined by conventional Labour Force Survey definitions of unemployment (being available for work and having looked for work in a defined period). For example it can include those neither in the labour force nor in education, and under some circumstances those in low-qualified, insecure and poorly paid work. How has this distinction been reflected in national policies: for example in criteria for providing assistance and programme eligibility criteria?

What barriers exist to co-ordinating national education, labour market and income support policies for youth? Do co-ordinating mechanisms exist? What steps have been taken in the last five years to review and improve co-ordination?

What are the goals of programmes aimed at unemployed and at-risk early leavers: to help them get jobs; to help them return to education and gain an upper secondary or occupational qualification; or both?

Are programme guidelines flexible enough to allow young people's needs to be assessed and responded to on a case-by-case basis?

Are early leavers and those at risk in the transition required to actively participate in education and training in order to gain income support? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this?

What barriers exist to local co-ordination of services to early leavers and those at risk in the transition? For example: competition between programmes for funds; competing jurisdictions between agencies, either across different portfolios or across levels of government; a lack of agencies in a position to co-ordinate different types of programmes and assistance; the absence of a central government requirement that local or regional governments provide such co-ordination; the absence of mechanisms to track and follow up early leavers; the lack of appropriately trained personnel to assist young people?