

# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## Making capabilities work: New ways to tackle young Europeans' transitions from education to the labour market

Experiences, findings and policy implications  
from nine countries

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### INTRODUCTION

**Educational programmes from a micro perspective: nine case-studies from nine European countries**

This **WorkAble** policy brief focuses on the findings of nine case-studies carried out in nine European countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom). The research looked at innovative programmes and interventions that dealt with problems, risks or failures in one or more of the following transitions: from compulsory school to further education; from education/vocational training to the labour market; and from unemployment or a position outside the labour market to employment. By doing this, the assumptions, aspirations and practices of the actors who implemented the educational and training programmes have been reconstructed; key observations have been drawn adopting a comparative perspective; and recommendations to policy makers have been drafted.

**A Capabilities perspective: skills, opportunities and resources that young people need**

In line with the special focus taken by the EU 2020 strategy for the smart, sustainable and inclusive growth of young people's opportunities and their empowerment, **WorkAble** aims to make available to policy makers an in-depth understanding of the capabilities (skills, commodities and opportunities) that young people need to acquire in order to be able to act as capable citizens in European labour markets. By using the Capability Approach, **WorkAble** substantially broadens human-capital perspectives, because capabilities are about choice in terms of valuable options and not only about having useful and marketable capacities and skills. On this basis, **WorkAble** argues that the expansion of the capabilities of young persons is necessary to enable them to act as capable citizens in the

labour markets of European knowledge societies. Not only does this prepare young people to meet the needs of the labour market, it also secures the capabilities which they need to steer actively their own future development.

### A “mainstreaming approach”

Generally speaking, our research points to the need to make young people adequately empowered to choose the life they have reason to value. Due to the Capability Approach, it is possible to develop a “mainstreaming approach” that underlines unity in diversity, as there are many pathways to lead a life which the individuals have reason to value and to improve their wellbeing.

More specifically, we will refer to the capabilities for education, work and voice:

### Capabilities for education, work and voice

The **capability for education** is the real freedom to choose a training or curriculum programme one has reason to value. This requires looking both at the quality of educational systems (especially their ability to integrate everyone at any given stage of the curriculum) and at the ability of young people to make their own educational choices instead of having only adaptive aspirations.

Likewise, we use the notion of the **capability for work** to indicate the real freedom to choose the job or the activity one has reason to value. This entails investigating: a) the quality of training programmes and of available opportunities in terms of jobs and activities; b) the entitlements linked to job loss and inactivity and their conditionality; c) the way the notion of “good work” is constructed (i.e., who decides, and with what criteria, what is a good job that is recognised by society and paid as such).

### Changing the political setting

The **capability for voice**, finally, is the capacity to express one’s opinions and to make them count when decisions concerning oneself are made. Voice, then, can be seen as a mechanism by which the other two capabilities are realised. This capability implies that the youth have the skills and influence to put forward their viewpoints, are entitled to do this and are free not to express their voice without having to incur penalties. These different capabilities have to be understood in terms of their interdependency and the influence of the different contexts within which they are realised. They encompass specific challenges to public policy and would change the political setting of the mainstream education as well as the social and youth policies of today.

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## KEY OBSERVATIONS

### Vulnerable young people

**WorkAble** focuses particularly on vulnerable young people who are at risk of social exclusion and considers programmes that provide better opportunities for them to play an active part in dialogue with relevant stakeholders.

Politicians and experts have been calling for special, and often, individualised measures. Yet such measures may increase the stigmatisation or even social exclusion of vulnerable young people. They may be characterised as “losers”, and this status can easily undermine their already low motivation and self-esteem.

### The transition system may reproduce inequality

Young people are chiefly faced with two risks. Firstly, in the transitional phase between school and work, some remain or become socially excluded and are not reached by educational and vocational preparatory measures. As most of the **WorkAble** case studies show, young people’s education and job options are mainly determined by the socio-economic background of their parents. Because of early negative selection, social exclusion is then reproduced during this transition. Secondly, the mechanism systems for the school-work transition are in general unable to offer a guarantee of a vocational training placement. In this way the school-work transition system may contribute to, and reproduce, social inequality.

### Resources and chances

One of **WorkAble’s** main objectives is to identify the resources and conversion factors that affect the capabilities for voice, work and education. According to the Capability Approach, conversion factors are the features and elements that contribute to the transformation of resources and goods into freedoms.

The case-studies reveal that:

### Supportive and constraining: the family

**The role of the family is ambiguous.** On the one hand, it may be supportive in its attitude towards education and serve as an important source or information, and emotional support as a “stability factor”. However, it may also constrain the individuals’ free choice or even promote certain preferences.

### Professionals’ norms and beliefs

**The skills and values of professionals influence the choices of young people.** Among these professionals are tutors in Italy, social or project workers in Germany, Switzerland and the UK, teachers in Denmark and France, trainers in Poland, Austria etc.. These professionals are often placed at an intersection between the actualisation of formal rights and active labour market legislation. They become ‘gatekeepers’ for the space of opportunities the young people have at their disposal. Furthermore, professionals influence capabilities through *creaming*, that is focusing on the students with the best results, and thus reproduce inequalities in terms of capabilities.

### The informational basis of choice making

Different guidance services, such as **those provided by** study and career counsellors in the transition from school to work, should strive for **equipping the individual with a comprehensive basis for making informed choices**. This service should not only relate to the transition from school to work, but also to employment-related aspects as well as the potential decision to return to education for a certain period (life-long education). For the group of vulnerable young citizens, mediation services by professionals could also be included where problems arise between the young adults and the company or training placement.

### Available jobs and activities

**The provision of sufficient valuable opportunities in terms of available jobs and/or activities** is not only a question of resources, commodities and social justice in general. It also is the condition and target pathway for the institutions and measures in itself (e.g., in Germany, Denmark, Austria, Italy). Often the free choice of occupation is formally granted, it is true, but if the respective internships or apprenticeship positions are not guaranteed, this guarantee remains merely an empty formal right with no chance of realisation. Therefore, enabling youth to actualise their voice and choice in the selection of placements cannot be achieved without taking the services' external context into account. The major factors in this respect are the **local labour market conditions, funding issues, the social responsibility of companies and the wider policy environment**.

### Education as *Bildung*

The aspect of **capability for education as “Bildung”** may be crucial (in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria etc.). A precondition for processes of *Bildung* (understood here as cultural self-formation) is to create a context for, and stimulation of, practical reasoning and the enabling of biographical reflexivity. This entails taking a wider perspective on informal and non-formal learning, points to artistic, creative and non-standardised experiences, and can be path-breaking for the orientation, formation and recognition of young adults ( in Switzerland, France).

### Infrastructure and resources of the transition measures

**Infrastructure together with the (material) resources of the transition measures, constitute indispensable preconditions** for practical learning and the encouragement to participate in constructive, productive, useful and tangible learning processes (see especially the Austrian case study). Here, a supportive work environment becomes essential, which can help young people sustain their work placement.

### Enabling adequate skills vs. realistic perspectives?

**Sometimes it is hard for young adults to reflect on what they value and on the desirability of different options**. There are various reasons for this, such as the *constraints of the labour market*, or the fact that aspirations for valuable work may not have been developed because of *a lack of education or a lack of knowledge of the working life* due to the biographical background and social networks in which the young person operates. On the other hand it is a crucial point of several

programmes to develop “realistic perspectives” (see Germany, Denmark). This can be read in two directions: in a positive version - as the creation and support of *a condition for practical reasoning* - and in a negative perspective - as a form of *adaptive preferences*.

### Institutions as enablers: supporting the capacity to aspire

**Programmes and interventions can make a major difference if they facilitate the capacity to aspire**, which indicates the desire for, and imagination of, the future and the normative frameworks from which they take form. Thereby, institutions can become the main driving force in the development of young people’s positive attitudes towards learning and their becoming capable citizens in European societies. To a certain extent, the capacity to aspire can be helpful when persons who have had very negative schooling experiences are brought into situations where they experience themselves as “able to learn”. Therefore, institutions should function as enablers of an empowering learning process. The capacity to aspire and the will to learn or (in case of drop-outs) to get back to school (France) can both be effectively supported by accompanying cultural activities.

### Good work

The definition of **the notion of “good work”** should be comprehensive enough to encompass all types of activities that young people think of as valuable. This not only pertains to what each young adult could consider desirable or what aspirations are favoured (and socially accepted), but also to the opportunities which the transitional sector offers - as an institution of social mobility or as an institution attending only to the demand side of the labour market and thus activating young people for employability.

### Room for trial and error

Youth as a specific period can be seen as an important aspect when securing the opportunity to re-make these choices. This period is conceptualised as a **refugium for young people**. Whereas adolescence is often considered as the delay or suspension of an activity or a law – which would point to standing still – the term ‘refugium’ refers to a time of growth and human flourishing, because the young people have time and space to express their desires, keep their aspirations and give an account of the life they have reason to value. From this perspective, job orientation could be understood as a long-term issue and leave designated room for trial and error as part of a period of self-determination.

### Options for voice?

Voice options are mainly available in the young people’s relationship with local agents and professionals. This is why participation in the support process becomes crucial. This does not only entail that multiple opportunities and aims are possible and made transparent, but also *that the youth are involved in the process of decision-making and perceive themselves as part of a working alliance*. This contrasts, however, with the sense of constraint that can typically be observed in working class and ‘underclass’ youth. Many young people may have

very narrow horizons in terms of what type of employment they aspire to. They are sceptical and uncertain about social institutions and do not expect them to meet their needs and requirements. Thus, a “*sense of entitlement*” has to be institutionally enabled and subjectively instilled into them, with the aim of fulfilling young people’s self-conscious expectation that institutions and their agents respond to their needs and aspirations.

More generally, a *capacitating project in terms of voice* is one that implies the active involvement of young people but also grants them the freedom not to participate. Young persons should not be compelled to participate in experimental programmes; rather, they should be invited to get involved and therefore receive good and sufficient information.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

### How to expand young people’s capabilities?

At this stage the recommendations are centred on the identification of dimensions and factors that may expand young people’s capabilities to act as fully participating citizens in the working, political and social lives of European knowledge societies.

**WorkAble** identifies the following main areas:

- **Policy approaches**

### Holistic, multidimensional and integrated youth, education and social policies

The case-studies have confirmed the relevance of having policies characterised by **holistic, multidimensional and integrated approaches** that are intended to:

### Early intervention

**Maintain the idea of early intervention as part of broad, active and continuing support.** Early intervention is crucial in order to avoid youngsters, especially those with difficult social and/or migrant backgrounds, finding themselves « outside » the educational or vocational training system. This situation arises because it is quite difficult and cost-intensive to win them back for training or education, not to mention the crucial socio-psychological dimension.

### Prevention, intervention and compensation

**Prevent inequalities, equalise opportunities and avoid negative selection mechanisms.** In line with this approach, the EU has established new priorities for the coming years in the field of education and training for close European policy coordination (Strategic Framework for Cooperation in Education and Training - ET 2020). The policy design for early school leaving should make use of a policy mix of prevention, intervention and compensation measures.

### Coordination

**Coordinate services and measures.** Interventions to prevent or counteract school dropout need especially to take into account several factors related to school leaving, such as transport, health, housing, social assistance, employment, etc.

### Labour market and policy environment

**Take into account the importance of the differing contexts in which young people are embedded.** The mere provision of placements or work experience will not necessarily enable disadvantaged young people to sustain employment in future. Rather, unemployment must not be seen in isolation from housing, health, family and other social relationship. While young people's choices may be developed by providing role models, their decisions are still shaped and restrained by the wider context of labour markets and policy environments.

### What hinders people from using institutional resources?

**Pay close attention to non take-up processes,** in particular to the reasons why young people are about to drop out or have already done so. It is not enough to make use of existing resources. In order to fully promote capabilities for voice, education and work, it is important to know in detail what prevents young people from using the institutional resources available.

### Voice

**Give space and time to the voice of those concerned.** The case studies show the value of **bottom-up approaches and initiatives** that take the perspective, ideas, objectives, and needs of young people into account.

- **Governance**

The governance of capability-based youth, education and labour market policies should:

**Build up synergic measures among different levels and actors.** As the cases of France, Italy and Poland clearly demonstrate, policies should be oriented towards horizontal (intersectoral) and vertical (territorial) coordination.

### Cooperation and coordination

**Sustain cooperation between the various organisations involved.** Many organisations have valuable experience in working with young people. It is important to promote their participation as equal partners in all aspects of the planning and delivery of services.

- **Transition dynamics**

### Multilevel and multiactor governance

A crucial common problem of the education systems analysed by **WorkAble** is that they are at risk of increasing inequalities. As stated above, in some cases it is very clear that the inequalities originate in education systems that select pupils at very early stages in their schooling paths, and at a moment where professional preferences are not yet fully formed. Programmes and measures should consider the following aspects:

### Early and rich education and career counselling

As far as the secondary and higher education systems are concerned, education and career counselling should be strengthened, but also made more visible. Countries should create a system that gives all pupils and students **the opportunity to make real, well informed**

**educational choices.** This presupposes that appropriate and high quality career counselling services are available. In fact, however, career counselling is rare, comes late and does not give a full picture of opportunities and rights. Here, closer cooperation between the different education levels would be necessary.

### Work experiences and connections

**Countries should also offer well organised work experience placements,** enabling those with less favourable personal social networks and job experiences to get valuable experiences and connections in the labour market. Work experience placements are highlighted as an element that enhances the capability for work, but – especially in the section on higher education (Sweden) of the **WorkAble** research- questions are raised about placements with respect to their organisation and quality. And as long as there is no visible cooperation between the providers of education on the one hand and the work placements on the other, the quality of the practice is jeopardised.

### Long-term programmes

**Countries should promote interventions that are meaningful in the eyes of the beneficiaries.** In most cases, a positive attitude towards educational or vocational programmes is the result of the establishment of a trusting relationship between the young person and the social worker and/or the coach/project worker. This moment is a turning point which determines retrospectively the youth's success or failure in the programme (as well as being a symbol of institutional trust, an embodiment of social recognition and a source of motivation for the beneficiaries). What is also crucial is the feeling of being listened to and being given the opportunity to choose the education/training the young person desires. At the same time, social pressure to take quick educational decisions and « to have to stick with it » - under any condition – are constraining factors. In fact, the development of a trusting relationship needs time and involves the availability of long-term programmes.

### Real access and real freedoms

**Countries should not put pressure on young people** so that they can take their time over finding “their individual way” to education and work. The resources provided by schools aimed at equalising the skills of their students, as well as catch-up classes and individual consultations should ensure that each young person not only has access to information, but has i): the capability to form their own informational basis for choice making in relation to education and work, and ii) real freedoms and not merely formal entitlements in relation to transitions between employment and education.

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## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

### Objectives

**WorkAble** scrutinises strategies to enhance the social sustainability and economic competitiveness of Europe by strengthening the capabilities of young people to shape actively their personal and working lives in knowledge societies and cope with today's economic, cultural, demographic and technological challenges.

### Methods

To understand the state of the art of existing educational/training policies and programmes in Europe and thus the embedded opportunities and problems due to national, socio-cultural and political-economical factors, it was crucial to carry out in depth studies and to focus on the very subject of interest: the young adults in question.

### Theoretical perspective

**WorkAble** not only sought to capture the skills, qualifications and educational and work experiences of the young person, but also sought to capture the full range of capabilities the young person has. Therefore the Capability Approach was used as a broad analytical framework for the design and analysis of the case studies.

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