

## BRIEFING NOTE

# Career guidance in unstable times: linking economic, social and individual benefits

## Economic crisis, social exclusion and uncertain careers: lifelong guidance responds to a triple challenge

The economic crisis that peaked in 2009 sent shockwaves that will be felt for years to come. It affected businesses, increased social risk for many and destabilised job and career prospects.

Young people, particularly, have been badly affected. They are suffering the highest unemployment rates and their prospects have been damaged most. But, despite high unemployment rates in many countries, skill shortages are reported in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) occupations. Europe's working population is also getting older.

In response, European Union (EU) countries have devised several education, training and labour market policies. In all of them, career guidance and counselling increasingly play a central role due to their effectiveness in developing the right skills and attitudes people need for successful careers.

Although centred on individuals, benefits of guidance and counselling go much wider. Guidance and counselling, by their nature, link individuals' agendas, enterprises and governments' economic and social goals. Being flexible, guidance and counselling can help individuals realise their aspirations, while giving them a better understanding of their career prospects and learning needs. They can be used in enterprises, local communities or schools to improve learning outcomes, knowledge transmission, productivity and innovation. In short, guidance and counselling help people and organisations to adapt and be productive under new and atypical economic and social conditions.

### Responding to the economic challenge

A European Council resolution of 2008 recommends EU Member States provide access for all citizens to

lifelong guidance to develop career management skills, such as professional communication, budget management, critical thinking and project development. Such skills help people adapt to career contexts, including workplaces or learning environments. Career management skills concern how workers use key competences in enterprises to learn, manage work, communicate and identify and solve problems effectively and autonomously. They also enable people to make more structured and informed career decisions. OECD's survey of adult skills (PIAAC) shows that workers frequently using key skills at work not only have better career outcomes, but also integrate better into enterprises and are more productive. By developing career management skills, guidance and counselling help improve economic outcomes for enterprises and career outcomes for individuals.

#### Box 1. *'Accords seniors': Crédit Industriel et Commercial (CIC) France*

The programme informs senior employees about their career development possibilities in the enterprise and about retirement procedures for leaving CIC. Each year, the human resources (HR) department offers employees older than 45 an interview with an HR manager. Participation is voluntary. Employees can discuss various options, such as skills assessment, mobility, a new position, training, serving as mentors, information about retirement and organisation of work time. Each activity is carefully planned and complemented by additional counselling, advice and skill development.

As Europe's workforce ages, enterprises need to ensure that skills of retiring workers are replaced and their knowledge passed on to younger workers (Box 1). Guidance can balance business strategies for

older workers between preparing them for retirement and transferring their knowledge in the enterprise.

Older workers' contributions to the enterprise can be maximised by assessing their skills, attitudes and preferences and devising an end-of-career strategy that adapts their functions, or provides skills they need, such as ICT skills. This increases workers' motivation and productivity and supports longer working lives. Guidance can also support mentoring and tutoring activities, enabling older more experienced workers to act as mentors/tutors to monitor and steer new workers' progress.

Similarly, guidance supports social and labour integration of migrant workers into enterprises, allowing for quick levelling of productivity with established workers. Several types of assessment, advisory and counselling methods and tools are available to assist various levels of management, including senior management, to integrate migrant workers better.

Guidance is not only for people in particular circumstances. Importantly, it allows for developing workers' skills in a lifelong perspective, which can be carefully planned to combine personal with enterprise needs. Integrating this approach into human resource management can reduce skill mismatch in enterprises and increase productivity and work satisfaction.

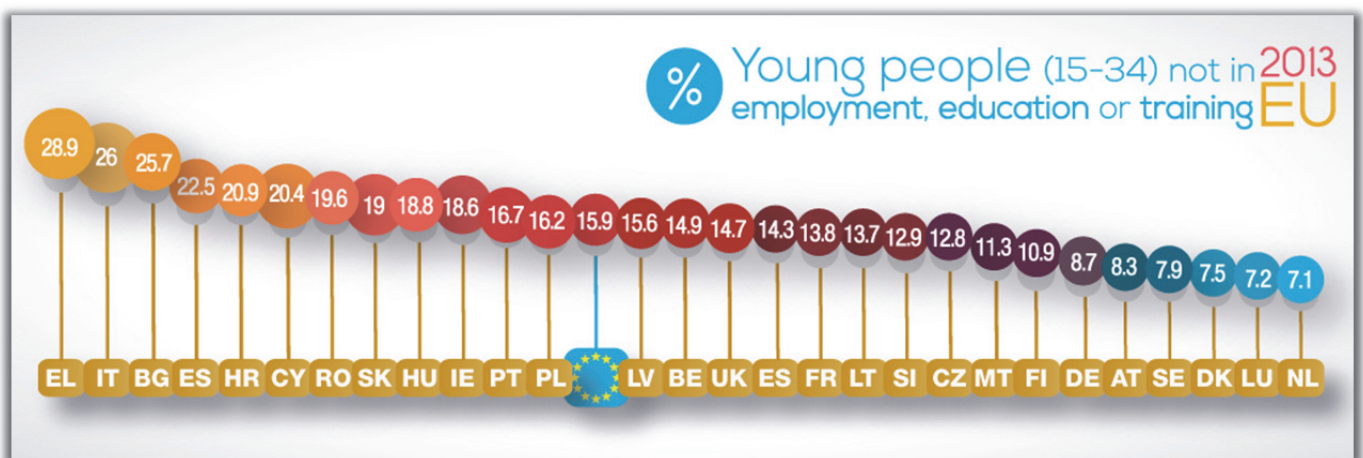
**Responding to challenges of social exclusion**

The economic crisis increased social risk for young people and mid-career workers in sectors particularly affected.

Despite more highly-qualified young people having better labour market outcomes and sustained demand in certain occupations, many young people are disengaging early from education. Shares of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) are near or above 20% in a third of EU Member States (see Graph). NEETs have a higher risk of long-term unemployment, irregular career pathways, poverty and social exclusion. Economic inactivity at a young age can have deep and persistent consequences, damaging career outcomes and identities, the so called 'scarring effect'. Migrant young people are particularly affected by early leaving from education and tend to have worse learning and labour market outcomes.

Member States have responded to this challenge through the youth guarantee to ensure employability for people under 25 years old. The youth guarantee attributes an important role to career guidance. It is seen as a tool to prevent young people leaving school early, help reintegrate disengaged young people into the labour market and support their transition from training to work. Being flexible and embedded in public services and local communities, guidance reaches groups at risk of exclusion, such as young people disengaged from education, migrants and unemployed people. By doing so, it also supports social integration objectives, such as reducing unemployment and poverty and increasing qualification levels.

Guidance and counselling can help prevent young people from becoming NEETs by assessing students' level of risk of educational disengagement and by clarifying their career options, all in close cooperation with family and teachers. For young migrant workers



Source: Eurostat

## Box 2. Project Kumulus, Germany

The programme provides young people from migrant backgrounds with guidance support to increase their skills through on-the-job training and internships. Activities include: counselling in schools with high percentage of immigrants, professional orientation events, events for parents, and individual counselling in the main office of the project. Cooperation with employers is undertaken in schools authorised to develop recovery training and search for internships. The programme also attempts to include companies owned by individuals from migrant backgrounds. Counsellors have multicultural training.

Project website: [www.aub-berlin.de](http://www.aub-berlin.de)

and severe social exclusion, career guidance is frequently provided in close cooperation between local communities, employment services, schools and training providers (Box 2).

This type of public service outreach can also bring young people back into the labour market. Young people who left education and training early can be identified, contacted and reengaged through training with help of community leaders and families. Mentoring involving local community members with successful careers is effective in both prevention and recovery strategies. Other effective ways to reengage young people in training and education include providing comprehensive information about all qualifications and occupation choices the system offers. Guidance and counselling can highlight flexible pathways to qualifications, including validation of non-formal learning, which is especially important for young people outside education for a prolonged period.

Career guidance also reaches cases where people feel excluded from participation in learning and the labour market. A combination of targeted information, careful assessment and validation of skills and support for career planning can bring positive change for individuals and communities.

## Responding to individual needs

Frequent periods of unemployment and irregular careers are increasing across Europe, particularly for individuals in mid-career. Cedefop's 2014 study *Navigating difficult waters* <sup>(1)</sup> analysed careers and

(1) <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/navigating-difficult-waters-learning-career-and-labour>

stories of middle-aged individuals. It identified many cases of instability and difficulty in establishing coherent career paths that often arise due to lack of access to quality career information and career management skills (Box 3).

Best practices in career guidance report positive results with tailored approaches, where skills, attitudes and

## Box 3. Mid-career: individual stories

### *Mette: in search of career counselling*

Mette, from Denmark, is single and in her 40s. She started her own business as a massage therapist, but only after a long journey of moving around and many different types of job. Mette worked several times as a legal secretary, a job for which she is qualified and experienced. She finds the job easy, but also boring, lacking any challenge. 'It's the wrong life for me; I should not be working in a law firm. But that is what I can do [...] and you get a good wage.'

At various points Mette could have benefited from career guidance tailored to her needs to explore career and learning opportunities. Having so many jobs was 'a search for what I wanted to do'. She enjoys working with her hands and with people. She wanted to change her line of work, but for Mette the public employment service are not taking time to really listen to people, but '[...] are so busy trying to fit us back into the [...] job [...] we are trying to escape [...]'].

### *Mercuzio: a mercurial talent*

Mercuzio, from Italy is in his forties and currently works part-time as a janitor in a city hotel.

He started work at 16, helping in his brother's snack bar. He has worked as a barman and waiter; in a factory repairing coffee-making machines; owned a coffee bar and managed a wine bar; an assistant chef; a partner in a shoe-designing and -making business; and in a restoration and renovation business. Plans to become a professional pianist did not work out. He is now thinking of becoming a writer.

Mercuzio's learning path is fragmented; high school, courses in repairing coffee machines and shoemaking and, after many years working, a university degree in humanities, majoring in art history. But through these learning and development options, Mercuzio has developed strong practical and social skills. He can interact with all types of people and integrate into different environments. Mercuzio has shown adaptability in a challenging labour market, but lacks the skills and knowledge to plan his career decisions better.

For more personal stories, see *Navigating difficult waters – Background material: methodology*.

preferences of people are assessed and discussed (Box 4). A thorough initial assessment followed by a structured discussion of next steps in learning and searching for work also have lasting effects on people's careers. Preferably this approach is supported

**Box 4. *Bilan de compétences* (competence portfolio)**

This approach comprises detailed assessment of competences, based on month-long series of research interviews, group work in workshops and individual research work, supported by a counsellor. Besides being a stocktaking exercise, the portfolio also helps individuals wanting to make realistic, informed career choices.

The *bilan* is a basis for planning learning and validation for individuals and organisations. Enterprises can also propose that employees use portfolios to plan promotions, skill development and redeployment. Being flexible, portfolios can support social integration for at-risk groups, mid-career changes or innovation in enterprises. They can also be combined with training under benefit systems, apprenticeships, internships and be used to follow up transitions to work.

*Bilans* and the centres developing them are generally supported by networks of local stakeholders, which may include public administration, trade unions and employers, professional and civic associations.

*Bilan de compétence* centres are controlled by the employment ministry, but managed locally by representatives from the employment and national education ministries, trade unions, employers' associations, chambers of trade industry and commerce, and representatives of organisations from economic, employment, work and training environments.

Project website: <http://www.cibc.net/>

by networks that include enterprise managers and professional associations and by systematic follow-up of individuals.

Two fundamental advantages of these approaches are their adaptability to highly irregular career paths and a favourable long-term cost-benefit relationship. For example, people who receive this type of career development support provided by public employment services are less likely to return to the service under social benefit regimes.

Lighter approaches to career information and advice can be implemented with greater tailoring of provision to individual needs, as long as initial profiling of clients is sufficiently detailed. In these cases, information about the labour market, education, training and validation must be reliable and competently delivered by counsellors who can adapt it to a client's profile.

## Conclusions

Lifelong guidance activities provide an effective response to issues affecting individuals, groups and enterprises.

They improve success of learning activities at all stages and are among the most effective labour market provisions for ensuring long-term career outcomes. They support policy strategies in lifelong learning and employment while translating them into direct support to citizens. A well-coordinated lifelong guidance system generates coherence of education, training and employability support, and, most importantly, clarifies available options for citizens.

Guidance is a positive response to social and economic instability: science and practice of adaptability.

