



**Engaging the ‘missing middle’:  
Status quo, trends and good practice**

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## Introduction

Across Europe, young people have been hit hard by the economic crisis, and their labour market prospects have deteriorated sharply in the majority of EU Member States. While the UK has been recovering comparatively well after the crisis in terms of youth unemployment, at European level more than 20% of young people aged 15–24 are currently unemployed. More than 40% of young people are unemployed in some European countries, and the rate of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) remains high across the majority of countries.

While close attention has been placed on the re-integration of the most vulnerable – those with lower educational levels or with additional vulnerabilities – some issues persist, including concerns over the ‘overlooked middle’, which refers to young middle attainers who do not follow academic routes, in particular into higher education, and who may be confronted with a range of challenges when trying to find alternative ways into employment, further education or training. They fall into a group called the ‘missing middle’, as middle attainers are often excluded from the policy discourse, which tends to be focused on those with lower educational levels and on those with higher educational levels who fail to enter the labour market (Roberts and MacDonald, 2013). However, there is a great heterogeneity among the EU Member States when it comes to both middle attainers and non-academic pathways for young people, and countries may profit substantially from exchanging good practice in this area in their pursuit of an improved labour market situation for all young people.

The aim of this paper is to describe the ‘missing middle’ and then to outline policy trends and good practices in response to this challenge from across the EU Member States. The first section highlights the current state of play with middle attainers from a comparative perspective, describing interesting trends across the EU and in the UK. Next, the concept of youth transitions is used to depict some of the key challenges young people are facing in today’s labour market. This is followed by an examination of recent trends in policy aimed at engaging middle attainers; this is illustrated using policy initiatives from different EU countries. Finally, a concluding section sums up the findings and looks to the challenges ahead.

## 1. Exploring the missing middle in Europe

The recent economic crisis has had an impact at various levels of the labour market attachment of young people. Not only have young people experienced more unemployment than ever recorded in the EU before, but as a result of increasing difficulties in entering the labour market, transitions from education into work, and into adulthood in general, have been prolonged and delayed in many instances. The crisis has affected all young people, but with education still being a shield against disengagement and unemployment, the low and middle attainers have experienced most difficulties.

### Status quo of middle attainers

At European level, 46% of young people aged 15–24 are middle attainers, meaning that the highest level of education they have achieved is International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) Level 3–4 (Table 1). This percentage ranges from less than 39% in Cyprus, Denmark, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain to approximately 61% in the UK, which, given also the high share of young people who have completed tertiary education, is the country with the most educated youth. Young women have a higher level of education than young men: in the EU, 46.5% of young women have completed secondary education against 45.8% of young men. In the UK, 61.8% of young women completed secondary education, against 60.7% of young men.

**Table 1: Educational attainment of young people (aged 15–24), EU, 2014**

Country	ISCED 0–2 %	ISCED 3–4 %	ISCED 5–6 %	ISCED 3–4	
				Men %	Women %
<b>EU28</b>	<b>44.6</b>	<b>46.1</b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>45.8</b>	<b>46.5</b>
Austria	40.0	44.7	15.3	44.3	45.0
Belgium	43.4	42.9	13.7	43.2	42.7
Bulgaria	43.1	51.9	4.9	53.2	50.6
Croatia	38.3	56.7	5.0	57.0	56.3
Cyprus	42.2	38.6	19.1	45.3	32.8
Czech Republic	42.3	51.5	6.2	52.5	50.6
Denmark	59.5	36.3	4.2	34.3	38.5
Estonia	46.5	45.4	8.1	44.6	46.3
Finland	49.8	47.5	2.8	46.7	48.2
France	41.1	44.5	14.4	44.6	44.4
Germany	53.9	42.9	3.2	42.0	43.9
Greece	41.6	52.7	5.6	52.2	53.2
Hungary	47.1	47.8	5.1	47.5	48.1
Ireland	46.0	42.1	11.9	42.6	41.7
Italy	51.3	44.5	4.1	43.6	45.5
Latvia	45.0	45.2	9.8	44.8	45.7
Lithuania	45.0	45.0	10.0	46.1	43.9
Luxembourg	59.6	32.9	7.6	33.3	32.4
Malta	35.9	52.6	11.5	53.1	52.1
Netherlands	49.5	41.1	9.5	40.6	41.6

Country	ISCED 0–2 %	ISCED 3–4 %	ISCED 5–6 %	ISCED 3–4	
				Men %	Women %
Poland	45.1	46.6	8.3	47.4	45.8
Portugal	54.4	36.4	9.2	35.2	37.6
Romania	51.1	43.2	5.7	43.4	43.0
Slovakia	43.9	48.6	7.5	50.9	46.1
Slovenia	41.7	53.2	5.1	53.9	52.4
Spain	51.5	36.3	12.1	34.1	38.6
Sweden	46.0	45.0	8.9	46.0	44.0
United Kingdom	21.1	61.3	17.6	60.7	61.8

Source: Eurostat, 2014

Regardless of their educational level, the share of employed youth was 32.4% in 2014 in the EU. This value varies from below 16% in Greece and Italy to 48% or higher in Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK. The share of employed youth increases with educational level, varying from 18% among those with a low educational level to 43% among those with secondary education and 56% for those with tertiary education. In the UK, the employment rates recorded are 33% among those with a low educational level, 54% among middle attainers and 74% among those with higher education.

### Middle attainers among the NEET group

While constituting the largest cohort among young people, middle attainers are also the largest cohort among the NEET group in the EU. The NEET population reached 12.5% in 2014 in the EU and approximately 50% of this group have completed secondary education. This share varies from 82% in Croatia to less than 40% in Germany, the Netherlands, Malta, Portugal and Spain. In all these latter countries, the largest population of NEETs is made up of those with low educational attainment. According to Eurostat, in 2014 the UK recorded a NEET rate of 11.9%, composed mainly of middle attainers (46%) followed by those with a low educational level (41%). Examining the incidence of being NEET among the various educational levels shows, however, that those with a low educational level are most at risk: 20.3% of those with low attainment are NEET, followed by middle attainers (15.4%) and then those with tertiary education (11.4%). In the UK, this difference is even more marked and skewed towards the lower skilled: about one-third of those with low attainment are NEET, followed by 12.5% of middle attainers and 9% of those with tertiary education. Finally, looking at the composition of the NEET groups with secondary education in the UK shows that 42% of them are short-term unemployed, followed by those with family responsibilities, 22%, whereas 16% are long-term unemployed, and 5.5% are unavailable for work due to illness or disability.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A detailed exploration of the characteristics of the NEET group will be published in the forthcoming Eurofound report *Exploring the diversity of NEETs*.

## 2. Youth transitions

Protracted school-to-work transitions are a concern for young people, as the quality of transitions early in a young person’s life are a strong determinant of subsequent labour market outcomes, such as lifetime earnings and future employability (Arulampalam, 2001; O’Higgins, 2001; Dietrich, 2012). Yet successful school-to-work transitions have much wider implications. They are an important step towards a young person’s full integration into society and their general transition into adulthood. If the move into (secure) work and financial independence is delayed, this may have spillover effects for these other aspects of adulthood and may postpone those transitions. In this way, problematic school-to-work transitions delay the passage of young people into adulthood and their establishment as independent citizens (Eurofound, 2014).

### Smooth school-to-work transitions

Capturing the time between leaving formal education and securing a first job, which can be a major challenge for young people, school-to-work transitions are the most important youth transition from a labour market perspective. The reason for this is that young people can deal relatively well with short spells of unemployment, while protracted unemployment at a young age is likely to have a negative impact on young people’s working lives both in terms of labour market status and wages (Eurofound, 2014, 2015).

### Average time before starting the first job

According to Eurostat’s 2009 EU Labour Force Survey ad-hoc module on youth entry to the labour market, the average time taken to start one’s first job after leaving education was 6.5 months in the EU. This value varies from five months or less in Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK, to eight months or more in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Romania and Spain. Interestingly, those countries with a higher share of students who combine school and work are also those with a shorter average gap between finishing education and starting a first job. Acquiring early labour market experience permits young people to learn the norms and behaviour of the labour market and hence to find a job more quickly.

The average time between leaving education and starting one’s first job decreases as the level of education increases. At European level, students with at least a lower secondary education wait, on average, almost 10 months before getting a job, while middle attainers wait 7 months and those with tertiary education wait about 5 months. At Member State level, middle attainers wait 4 months or less to start their first job in Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK, compared with 10 months or more in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Romania. School-leavers with a tertiary education wait three months or less in Estonia, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands and the UK, compared with seven months or more in Greece, Italy, Romania and Spain.

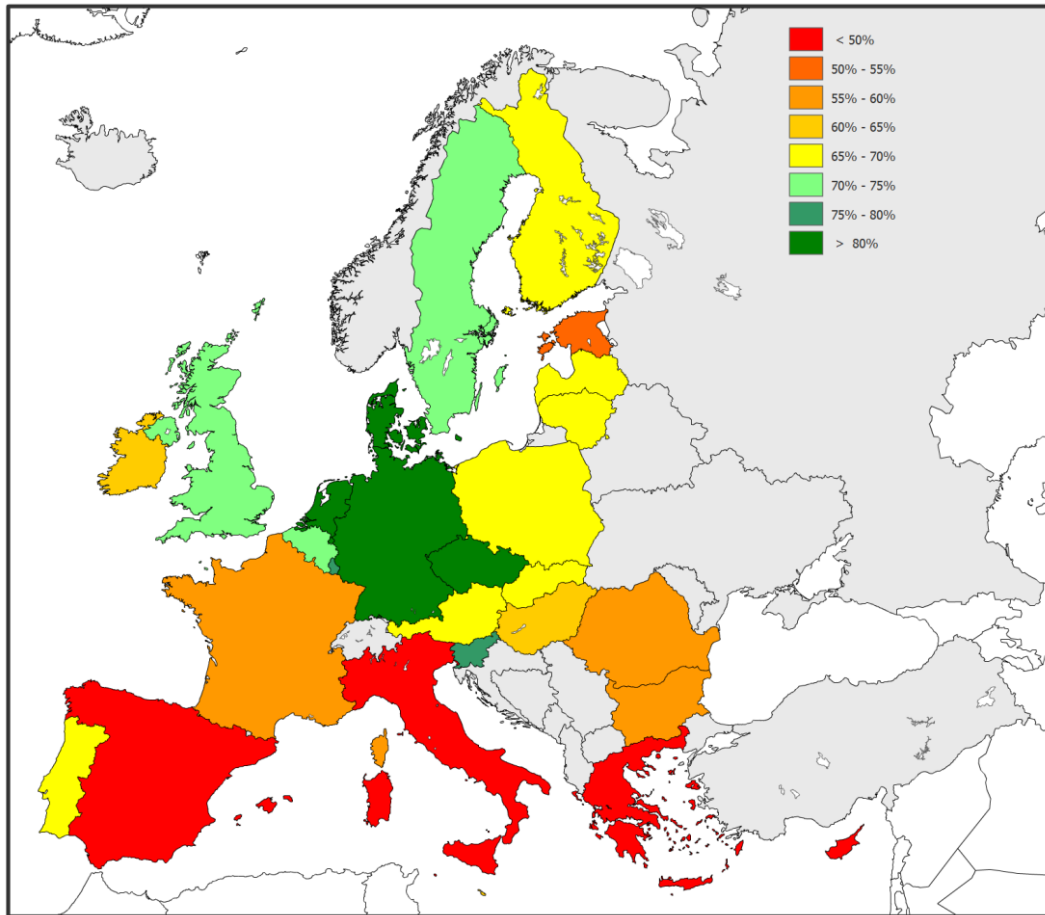
### Share employed a year after graduation

Together with the average time before starting a first job, the share of school-leavers employed one year after graduation is an equally important indicator to better understand the extent to which school-to-work transitions are smooth and quick. According to Eurostat, regardless of the educational level attained, about 68% of European school-leavers were recorded as being employed one year after completing their education. However, huge differences exist among countries (Figure 1).

In Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, where there are strong institutionalised vocational training systems, as well as the Czech Republic, 80% or more of school-leavers are employed one year after leaving education. This share decreases to 75%–80% in Luxembourg and Slovenia and then to 70%–

75% in Belgium, Sweden and the UK. The share of school-leavers similarly employed in Finland, Austria and Cyprus drops to 67%, 66% and 48% respectively, although it has to be noted that, in these countries, a considerable number of young people must do military service one year after graduation. As expected, the share of school-leavers who are employed increases with educational level. In the EU, in 2011, about one-third of those who left education with a lower secondary education found employment within a year. This share increases to 65% for middle attainers and reaches 79% for those with tertiary education. The UK performs better than the EU average. In particular, in the UK on average more than 74% of school-leavers are employed one year after graduation. This value varies from 55% of those with primary education to 72% of middle attainers and 80% of those with tertiary education.

Figure 1: Percentage of school-leavers in employment one year after graduation, EU, 2011



Source: Eurostat, 2011, Eurofound elaboration

### 3. Recent policy trends at EU and national level

Supporting young people’s successful transition from school to work has become central to European and national-level policy agendas. With a steady increase in the number of university graduates in the majority of European countries over several years, and even decades, and with an increased policy focus on early school-leavers, policy attention towards the middle attainers seems to have decreased. The economic crisis has, however, highlighted the problem of integrating young people into the labour market. In this regard, some countries have found it increasingly challenging to provide effective assistance to young people who chose alternative pathways into the labour market. And while the youth unemployment problem is not new, what is new from the recent crisis is the size and scope of the problem. As a result of the crisis, 17 out of 28 Member States have recorded their highest ever level of youth unemployment, according to Eurofound research. Moreover, and in contrast to previous economic downturns, the most recent crisis revealed that while education still constitutes a shield against disengagement, higher education may no longer sufficiently enable young people to avoid unemployment if the skills they learned during education are not relevant to the labour market.

In the attempt to help young people back into employment, education or training, a range of policy initiatives at Member State and EU level have been deployed in recent years (Eurofound, 2015). Launched by a Recommendation of the Council of the European Union in 2013 and put in place in the course of 2014 across the EU, the Youth Guarantee is the most important policy initiative at European level and includes some key features to help Member States to effectively support middle attainers. The Youth Guarantee is a policy framework that aims to ensure that all young people under the age of 25 receive a good quality offer of employment, apprenticeship, further education or training within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education (Council of the European Union, 2013). Inspired by similar, well-functioning schemes in Finland and Sweden (and to some extent in Austria), the Youth Guarantee seeks to launch long-term reforms to make structures better prepared to deal with young people while in parallel offering policy interventions for this group to avoid leaving them stranded. The implementation of the Youth Guarantee started in 2014 with the presentation of the national Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans (YGIPs). To support the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, Member States receive financial assistance from the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) (European Commission, undated a). In addition, following a request from the European Parliament, a total of 18 Youth Guarantee pilot projects were put in place across the EU starting in August and December 2013 for around 12 months, which provided countries with the opportunity to gather early experience in Youth Guarantee implementation (European Commission, 2014b). Building on the preliminary and recent experience of Youth Guarantee implementation, its most relevant aspects in view of assisting middle attainers back into employment, education or training are outlined below.

#### Early activation and tailored support for young people

The four-month intervention point guarantees early activation without leaving young people at risk of the long-term consequences of protracted disengagement.<sup>2</sup> Together with personalised support measures, the short intervention time is therefore a key feature of the Youth Guarantee, which has been largely inspired by previously existing schemes in some Nordic Member States.

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<sup>2</sup> In the course of 2016, Eurofound will conduct a research project on the situation of long-term unemployed young people. An overview report will be published in 2017.



### **Early activation and personalised approach in Finland and Sweden**

Finland and Sweden have played a pioneering role in setting up Youth Guarantee schemes, having introduced such provisions as early as the mid-1980s and early 1990s. Their Youth Guarantee systems are still in place, although they have been periodically revised. Early activation and personalised support for young people are the central building blocks of these initiatives, with the aim of reducing the time young people spend in unemployment or inactivity. In both cases, the public employment service (PES) plays a central role in assisting young people back into employment or education. At the start of their engagement, the PES and the young person draft a personalised development plan with the guarantee of a place in work, education or training and focusing on the identified needs and challenges of the individual. The intervention point is set at three months after registration with the PES.<sup>3</sup>

A distinctive advantage is that the personalised support helps young people, including middle attainers, to take more informed decisions about their transition into the labour market. In terms of focusing on middle attainers, the European Commission found that recent reforms in Finland, which include measures to extend working careers at the beginning by six months, will improve ‘both vocational and higher education, combining vocational upper secondary education and apprenticeship training’ (European Commission, 2014a, p. 16). In concrete terms, Finland has been strengthening the vocational guidance and career planning services provided by its PES and now offers more work experience training for young people. At the same time, the PES differentiates clearly between young people with or without vocational qualifications. For the former group, work trials are promoted as a valuable option, with the exception of recent graduates where employment incentives for employers are used to foster labour market attachment. For those without qualifications: ‘more vocational labour market training in the form of further and supplementary training and licence training can be provided to young people who have not completed their studies in vocational upper secondary education or higher education, or whose professional skills are not sufficient to meet the requirements of the labour market’ (Ministry of Employment and the Economy, Finland, undated).

Recent evaluations show that the Youth Guarantee in Finland has helped ‘67.8 % of guarantee beneficiaries start a job, a traineeship, apprenticeship or further education within four months of registering with the Finnish public employment service (after six months this increased to 89.6 % of guarantee beneficiaries)’ (European Commission, 2015, p. 59). Due to the Youth Guarantee, the share of long-term unemployed and discouraged workers recorded in Scandinavian countries is the lowest in Europe (Eurofound, forthcoming).

### **Partnership approaches to re-engage young people**

Inspired by the Finnish example, the Youth Guarantee should function as a public–private–people partnership. Especially for policies targeting middle attainers, which are frequently linked to the provision of training experiences, work-based learning or vocational education including apprenticeships more broadly, it can be crucial to ensure that employers are involved in the design and delivery of different measures. More generally, partnerships may help to generate synergies, capitalise on the experience of different partners, identify gaps in service provision and limit the risk of duplication of efforts (Department of Social Protection, Ireland, 2015). This is why the setting up of local partnerships can be very beneficial for bringing stakeholders such as employers as well as different institutions working with young people to cooperate with one another.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on these initiatives, see Eurofound, 2012.

### **Good practice among Youth Guarantee pilot projects: Ballymun’s success story of working together**

The Ballymun Youth Guarantee project in Ireland is one of the 18 pilot projects, mentioned earlier, set up in response to a request from the European Parliament. Since its inception in January 2014, the project has been frequently mentioned in the EU policy debate as an example of good practice in enlisting a range of actors to design and deliver initiatives for young people. By engaging and building links with local employers, who provide guidance and training elements, this pilot project ensured that young people received support targeted to the needs of the labour market, which in turn generated work placements for participants.

Three different target groups of young people were identified in terms of their distance from the labour market:

- young people with a Junior Certificate or equivalent or less, and little or no work experience;
- young people with a Leaving Certificate or equivalent or some work experience;
- young people with a qualification above a Leaving Certificate or equivalent or good work experience.

Out of the participants in the pilot project, 35% belonged to the first, 47% to the second and 18% to the third target group. Under the guarantee, each young person received access to career guidance resulting in an individual career plan including follow-through to training, education, work experience or full-time employment, provided in partnership with a range of stakeholders. Out of the 739 clients, young people belonging to the first target group most often were referred to further education and training programmes (at Irish National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Levels 3, 4 and 5), followed by publicly funded employment and blended learning. In the case of the second target group, the majority took part in further education and training programmes at different levels, followed by publicly funded employment; a small proportion subsequently secured full-time or part-time employment. The largest proportion who secured private sector employment and completed further educational training at higher levels (NQF Level 5 and above) were in the third group.

One of the most interesting aspects of this project is the cooperation among stakeholders at local level, which enhanced formal and informal contacts for identifying work placement opportunities for young people. In the case of Ireland, employers have been involved at both national and local level in advising the PES on how to better engage with businesses. The measures identified to create better cooperation were far-reaching and included:

- designing information materials;
- regular information exchange with employers and taking on board their suggestions to tailor Youth Guarantee training elements to employers’ needs;
- employers hosting information and training sessions for young people (for example, on employability skills or running a blended learning programme).

Outcomes suggest that this strategy was successful in terms of bringing employers on board, especially given the previously identified lack of private sector opportunities for job-ready young people in the Ballymun area. While existing evaluations do not allow conclusions to be drawn on causality, the proportion of young people registered as unemployed in Ballymun fell by 29% throughout the duration of the pilot project (compared to a decrease of only 19% nationwide).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For more details on this project, see Department of Social Protection, Ireland (2015)

## Employability and life skills of young people

There are a range of approaches that focus on building up young people’s employability in the broadest sense. In particular, those who are not yet ready to enter the labour market directly may need some forms of assistance first before re-engaging in employment, education or training. In this respect, Member States are deploying a range of measures focusing on strengthening young people’s life skills. Typical measures include non-formal education, civic work including volunteering, and work placements in the non-profit sector (Eurofound, 2015). In addition, countries are also putting in place a diverse range of measures focusing on individual capacity-building, skills development, as well as access to services and support for young people.<sup>5</sup>

### Production schools from Austria

Frequently considered as examples of good practice, so-called ‘production schools’ in Austria try to re-engage young NEETs. Inspired by similar initiatives in Denmark and Germany, production schools have been in place for a number of years with the aim of supporting school-to-work transitions for young people who have difficulty finding a work or training opportunity in the first place or who have dropped out of apprenticeship training previously.

The aim of this measure is not to leave these young people stranded but to engage them in practical training in basic and social skills and ultimately bring them back into education and work. Another central aspect of the programme is to help identify achievable training and labour market options for the young participants. The young people who engage in this initiative receive a basic income. Production schools also allow young people to catch up on any missed qualifications while increasing their practical skills (Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, Austria, 2014). The programme is highly individualised, coordinates its efforts with other youth-centred measures and includes the possibility to follow up with individuals after they have completed the production school. As part of this programme, young people up to the age of 25 engage in up to 30 hours of practical work in an area such as trades and crafts, office and multimedia skills or sales for a period of up to 12 months (with a possibility of extension). A coach assists each young person in setting and achieving their individual goals. Continuous monitoring of the young person’s move into employment, education or training is an integrated pillar of this programme, closely involving the PES in following up with participants.

Actors involved are local, regional and national stakeholders including the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, the PES, the Ministry of Education, schools and employers whose main role is to ensure that the target group of young people in need of support can be identified and reached. The first production school in Austria was set up in 2001, but most production schools were opened in 2010 and partly co-financed by the European Social Fund. In 2014, a total of 30 production schools were in operation, with a total of 2,749 young people participating (Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, Austria, 2015). An evaluation of the outcomes of this measure found that since 2006 the number of participants has grown ninefold (Bergmann and Schelepa, 2011). Moreover, it found that production schools are performing very well in terms of reaching their target groups and also in terms of young people moving into employment, with one-third of previous participants being in (non-subsidised) employment after one year of participating in this measure.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of recent examples of measures fostering the social inclusion of young people in the broadest sense, see Eurofound (2015), Chapter 4.

## Vocational education and training and dual educational pathways

While the measures described above play an important role for young disengaged people, it can be argued that vocational education and training (VET) and apprenticeships play an even more important role for the middle attainers.<sup>6</sup> As previously mentioned, the crisis has revealed that higher education may no longer shield young people from becoming unemployed, as well-educated young people have been struggling to get a foothold in the labour market in recent years. Another interesting fact is that Member States with well-functioning VET and especially well-established apprenticeship systems have been performing comparatively better than the majority of EU Member States in terms of youth unemployment.

In particular, the German apprenticeship system is often referred to as a good example of training young people with good subsequent employment and earnings prospects. In view of the well-functioning German model, the majority of EU Member States have committed to revamping their VET systems, including the set-up of dual educational pathways in line with the Austrian, German or Swiss apprenticeship models. In these countries, apprenticeships are highly standardised, typically last around three years and take place at company level, where young people work and study in alternation, working towards a vocational qualification while earning money. All of these factors may take some time to develop and require both medium and long-term investments. In general, many countries still need to develop a culture of apprenticeships and dual trajectories, and even traineeships. For the time being, Member States are especially struggling to provide meaningful VET pathways due to:

- a large stock of unemployed young people as a result of the crisis;
- a negative attitude towards VET among young people, which is often paired with a low level of trust of young people by employers and linked to a lower willingness to engage in VET;
- underdeveloped and underresourced apprenticeship systems.

The European Commission has therefore launched the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (European Commission, undated b), which now accompanies the Youth Guarantee under the current Youth Employment Package and sets out to support Member States in developing apprenticeship cultures. Launched in 2013, the aim of the Alliance for Apprenticeships is to increase the supply, quality and attractiveness of apprenticeships in Europe. It acknowledges the important role that high-quality apprenticeship schemes can play in dealing with and preventing youth unemployment by:

- promoting smooth school-to-work transitions;
- fostering skills relevant to the labour market;
- tackling skills mismatches across the EU.

This initiative focuses on supporting the reform of apprenticeship systems through peer learning, ensuring the smart use of EU resources, and exploring the option of including apprenticeships in the EURES network (European Commission, 2013).

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<sup>6</sup> Apprenticeship is defined as ‘systematic, long-term training, alternating periods at the workplace and in an educational institution or training centre. The apprentice is contractually linked to the employer and receives remuneration (wage or allowance). The employer assumes responsibility for providing the trainee with training leading to a specific occupation.’ (Cedefop, 2014)

### **Reformed apprenticeship systems across the EU**

Since the onset of the crisis, the majority of Member States have started reforming their VET systems, and redesigning and improving the delivery of apprenticeship training. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) identifies a number of important trends to have taken place between 2010 and 2014 across Europe, including making VET more attractive; incorporating lifelong learning provisions; encouraging innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship in VET; and making VET socially inclusive. The most important trend for middle attainers, however, is likely to be an increase in quality, efficiency, attractiveness and relevance of VET.

A number of countries have been improving their VET and, most notably, their apprenticeship offering to attract, train and retain young people across different professions.<sup>7</sup> Examples come from Mediterranean countries such as Greece, Italy and Spain, which are all currently expanding and modernising their VET provisions. In view of the low take-up of apprenticeships, Italy decided to simplify the hiring conditions for apprenticeship contracts in order to make apprenticeships more attractive for employers. Greece meanwhile decided to introduce a dual system by setting up a so-called ‘apprenticeship class’, which essentially is an optional fourth year of studying at Vocational Senior High Schools.

New efforts in France include financial incentives for small and medium-sized enterprises to train young apprentices. Meanwhile in Belgium, new opportunities including apprenticeship offers have been set up in cooperation with service providers, the PES, employers and youth organisations. Provisions in Ireland are also subject to ongoing reform of its further education and training (FET) system, employment support schemes and apprenticeship programmes, with the aim of making apprenticeships more relevant for the labour market. Austria continues to provide supra-company apprenticeship schemes for young people unable to secure an employer-based apprenticeship. In this case, young people are trained in state-financed training facilities where they alternate between classroom and practical training and acquire a qualification equal to that of company-based apprentices. As most of these initiatives are relatively recent, few evaluations of them are currently available.

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<sup>7</sup> See the European Commission web page *The Youth Guarantee country by country* for more detail on individual country actions.

## 4. Conclusions

Despite the considerable proportion of young people belonging to the ‘overlooked middle’, prior to the crisis most policy efforts were devoted to low achievers, which has been further reinforced with the continuation of the economic downturn. In addition, the latest crisis revealed that, in contrast to previous crises, those with higher education may no longer be adequately protected from becoming unemployed due to skills mismatches in the labour market. As a result, policymakers across many EU countries have been devoting more efforts to assisting the labour market entry of highly educated young people. Therefore, there is a gap in both research and policy measures relating to middle attainers, a group of young people that is now being referred to as the ‘missing middle’.

Research shows that smooth school-to-work transitions are an important aspect of young people’s lives and contribute significantly to their labour market performance in the short and long run. The longer it takes for young people to gain a foothold in the labour market, the more difficult the transition from the world of education to work can be. In an attempt to smooth labour market transitions of young people not opting for tertiary education, Member States have recently committed to improving their VET and, especially, their apprenticeship systems, using the German apprenticeship model as a guideline. Reforms are concentrated on apprentices alternating between training institutions or VET schools and practical company-based training. However, setting up the structures to provide good-quality, efficient, relevant and attractive apprenticeship training is not an easy task and will need mid-term and long-term investments. At the same time, the involvement of labour market actors, especially employers and the PES, may be an important aspect to accelerate improvements both in VET and policy measures targeted at young people more generally.

To conclude, more has been done in recent years at EU and national level to reach and engage middle attainers, notably in the framework of the Youth Guarantee, which puts a strong focus on VET and apprenticeship systems. Despite an increase in recent policy action in this field, given that middle attainers form the largest group of NEETs in the EU, more efforts are required to understand the situation of the missing middle and to subsequently engage the young people affected in meaningful ways.



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