The importance of vocational training in tackling youth unemployment

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As the EU struggles to come to grips with crippling unemployment rates among its youth, perhaps vocational training could be the answer, argues Brando Benifei.

The most disruptive consequence of the economic crisis - and the ensuing Eurozone crisis - has been the dramatic rise in unemployment across Europe.

The adverse economic trend and the policies adopted in response to it, have generated a complex situation in which the inability to properly address the issues in the short-term, paved the way to a deepening of the problems, producing long-lasting effects, especially on the European labour market.
In December 2016, according to Eurostat, 20.065 million men and women in the EU were still unemployed of which 15.571 million resided in the Eurozone. Despite some encouraging results, youth unemployment remains a major challenge - unemployment figures among young people are double that of overall unemployment.

However, this conceals huge differences between countries, with a gap of over 30 percentage points between the member state with the lowest level of youth unemployment - Germany, at 6.5 per cent - and those with the highest, Greece - (44.2 per cent), Spain (42.9 per cent) and Italy (40.1 per cent).

Last December, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, together with Slovak President Robert Fico - representing the rotating Council presidency - and the then European Parliament President Martin Schulz, put employment and growth at the top of the EU's six priorities for 2017, confirming a positive trend towards the implementation of the social dimension of integration, constantly supported by the European Parliament.

During the discussions on this year’s EU budget, Parliament fought to secure around €500m for the YEI to help young people seeking a job, and another €200m to boost growth and employment through projects like CEF, Horizon 2020, COSME and Erasmus+.

Today, only two-fifths of employers are confident they will find skilled graduates to fill entry-level positions, while a third of them have difficulties in recruiting skilled staff.

Therefore, vocational education and training (VET) plays a critical role in equipping young people with the right skills to meet labour market needs, fuelling competitiveness while reducing youth unemployment.

This is the reason why the Commission has recently promoted a new pilot project on long-term mobility for apprentices, ‘A European framework for mobility of apprentices: Developing European citizenship and skills through youth integration in the labour market’.

This is a positive step which stems from the Riga conclusions and the new skills agenda for Europe, aiming at increasing the quality and effectiveness of apprenticeships.

It is by following this path that Europe can efficiently combine work-based learning with formal education, developing a true sense of European citizenship.

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