

Youth employment strategy

If there is economic news that particularly distresses me, it is statistics relating to youth unemployment. I have always viewed this phenomenon as an unacceptable economic and social scourge and a definite indicator of the failure of a society towards its young people and future citizens.

Imagine being in your mid-20s, out of work and with little prospect of a job ahead of you. You've studied and gained an education, desperately want to work, yet are being given no chance to prove your professional worth. And the longer it goes on, the harder it is to find opportunities.

The feeling of helplessness must be overwhelming, not to mention the erosion of one's dignity and confidence.

Education Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou, recently said that "the mismatch between what our education systems are delivering and the needs of employers is resulting in a serious skills shortage and damaging the aspirations of Europe's young people and, ultimately, our future prosperity".

In Malta, we are fortunate to enjoy a state of affairs where the unemployment rate for youth is within very acceptable parameters: well below the EU average and very close to the two top European performers, Germany and Austria, while being very far away from the depressing realities of Greece and Spain, the EU's worst performers in this regard.

PN-led governments in the past have laid considerable emphasis on investment in education and the creation of jobs for youths coming on stream to join the labour force.

The range of related initiatives implemented have contributed towards keeping the spectre of youth unemployment at a relatively safe distance, at least for now.

However, we really need to resist the temptation to rest on our laurels. We need to take the necessary steps not only to safeguard these achievements but also to ready ourselves to meet the challenges of a perennially turbulent economic environment. The delivery of real and sustained improvements, in the form of a Youth Employment Strategy for Malta, will require long-term planning and collaboration between all players concerned.

First of all, our educational institutions need to have it ingrained in their DNA that they are there to open up prospects for our young people and give them an overall vision of the situation through formal, built-in synergies between the government, employers and trainers. The government needs to create environments that encourage training opportunities, develop effective labour market policies and nurture youth entrepreneurship.

Employers must work with education establishments to provide relevant careers guidance and dedicated programmes to bring young people into training and apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships offered to MCAST students have proved invaluable in facilitating the integration of these young people in the job market by providing them with the technical skills applicable to the workplace.

We cannot have hundreds of young people shut out of University because of inflexible entry requirements.

However, even here we must ensure that the door is always left open for these to continue their studies and enhance their knowledge base and flexibility. We cannot afford to have hundreds of young people pigeon-holed and shut out of University because of inflexible entry requirements.

Meanwhile, the concept of workplace training also needs to be extended to the academic world. Currently, it is only those students following certain University courses, such as medicine and law, who have the opportunity to benefit from traineeships and placements.

The government can make incentives available to employers to offer such traineeships. Similarly, students can be encouraged to participate in any such scheme by linking their experience with their academic results and/or by pegging part of the stipend to traineeship participation.

We also need to continue to broaden the horizons of our youngsters.

Participation in EU and other programmes aimed at providing students with international experience have proven to be generally popular with Maltese youth.

The EU is prepared to continue playing its part by means of initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee and more funding under the new Erasmus+ programme. Our educational institutions can further develop formal structures to encourage young people both to study and pursue traineeships or work placements abroad. I am aware there are student organisations affiliated to international bodies which also provide this service. They should receive all the support they need from the University.

Entrepreneurship needs to start with young people and from school education.

The important role of education in promoting more entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviours is now widely recognised but it is vital that we implement the stated commitment to promoting education for entrepreneurship at all levels, from primary school to University and beyond.

Although there have been initiatives in this regard, entrepreneurship education is still not a standard part of our children's education. This is a pity because research shows that students who have had access to entrepreneurial education are three to six times more likely to start a business at some point later in life than those who do not.

Building a culture in favour of entrepreneurship must also be backed by supportive measures, such as incentives, the further simplification of legislation and the streamlining of administrative requirements.

Youth unemployment is a societal time bomb. We cannot underestimate how dangerous this phenomenon could become.

Other countries have shown us what it can look like: civil unrest, persistent poverty and the undermining of economies as employers are presented with an under-skilled and inexperienced workforce, while governments struggle with the cost of higher unemployment benefits, reduced tax revenues and lower productivity.

But even if youth unemployment seems distant for us in Malta, there is no doubt that effective policies to improve the quality of our labour force will

ensure that more young people will continue to have access to better jobs, giving them a better income. And surely that should be incentive enough.

Helga Ellul is a Nationalist candidate for the MEP elections.

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What sense or purpose does it serve to have a 'youth employment strategy ' if there are clearly no jobs for them ?Far too many plans /projects /strategies exist for youth employment but not enough ,or any in most cases,affirmative and effective action .to secure jobs for them 1

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It sounds nice Peter...especially if you're a candidate for MEP.

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