

Context and Implications Document for: Educating young adults to be work-ready in Ireland and the United Kingdom: A review of programmes and outcomes

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Author’s Introduction

Young adult unemployment has resounding implications for government, employment services, educational practitioners, youth workers, mental health services, youth, their families and society. Once young people leave the structured world of secondary education, they are faced with navigating complex education, employment and training pathways, sometimes with little support from families and institutions. High levels of youth unemployment across Europe indicate the difficulty of this interpersonal process, which young people precariously carry out amid a web of holes in social supports and opportunities. Our review of employability programmes that target unemployed young people in the UK and Ireland is the first critical, systematic examination of programme designs and outcomes written in the interdisciplinary field of developmental science. In the review, we move beyond broad brush education and employment outcomes, to a fine-grained evaluation of whether the programmes are helping young people develop specific psychosocial work-readiness competencies that are prioritised by employers, including job-specific skills, basic academic skills, thinking skills, social skills, personal qualities and career motivation.

Implications for Policy

The findings of our review point to several key implications for policy, and we highlight two here.

- (1) First, it was clear that most of the reviewed employability programmes were not specifically designed to support young adults’ work-readiness competencies; the very thing they were supposed to improve so young adults could adaptively move into employment or education. Rather, they took existing models of unemployment support (work placement counselling, add-on education courses, work placements)

and cobbled them together into a multifaceted programme. Ideally, future employability programmes should be through-designed to support a wide array of work-readiness competencies. They should also be evidence-based rather than historic artefacts: grounded in recent advances in occupational and developmental psychology, social work and educational research. Our review is a step in this direction.

- (2) Furthermore, many of the programme evaluations did not assess learning outcomes for the young people, i.e. whether the young people actually developed work-readiness through participating. Rather, evaluations are focused on young adults and stakeholders' programme satisfaction, and young adults' employment outcomes. Consequentially, those evaluations only tell us which aspects of the programmes were more or less easy to deliver and receive, and whether they impacted unemployment. Therefore, the evidence base on how the programmes might have been working to impact work-readiness competencies is in its infancy. Without using this evidence base to support a considered theory of change for use in programme design, policy makers and other organisations might be wasting valuable resources by implementing programmes that are far less effective than they could be.

Implications for Practice

Ideally, designers and funders of employability programmes should carefully consider how each programme component can help young adults to develop specific competencies that are valuable for an adaptive transition out of unemployment (such as critical and creative thinking, managing conflict in workplaces, valuing diversity, leadership skills, work engagement and career motivation). Although work-readiness can develop through experiential learning in the workplace, only carefully managed work placements with high quality mentoring may facilitate this. Similarly, careers counselling and education classes that round off multifaceted programmes can have unintended adverse outcomes if they are not carefully designed to impact specific qualities and skills in mind of unemployed young adults' potential vulnerabilities. Careers counsellors and educational practitioners working on employability programmes may want to establish relationships with researchers and psychological services, to ensure that each programme component is thoughtfully and effectively constructed, and that programmes as a whole, cover a broad range of psychosocial competencies. In this way, programmes will hopefully enhance young adults' life chances through a snowball of competency development and opportunity perception and uptake, rather than simply shifting them out of unemployment in the short term.

Focus Questions

- (1) How can policy makers and practitioners design employability programmes to enhance young adults' work-readiness competencies and support their longer-term development, rather than to just quickly move them out of unemployment?
- (2) What are the most important competencies that young adults might need to further develop, to help them have a successful school-to-work transition?

- (3) At what point in their life courses should young adults be targeted for work-readiness competencies training and support by local and national efforts—should this only occur after they are unemployed?
- (4) How can we further involve families, romantic partners and friends in helping unemployed young adults build the necessary skills for more adaptively managing their lives?
- (5) What are the economic implications of providing training programmes for unemployed young adults, compared with prevention programmes delivered, for example, in secondary education?