6th July 2020

It is concerning the new Programme for Government does not mention youth unemployment or a strategy to tackle it, particularly given the manner in which young people will likely be disproportionately affected by unemployment as the economy recovers from Covid-19. The new Government must build on the European Commission Youth Employment Support package to 'bridge jobs for the next generation'[1]. The package is designed to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic for young people in the labour market and the impact of a digital and green transition.

A recent report by NERI[2] analysing trends in the Irish labour market in relation to young people found that prior to Covid-19 that employment and participation rates recovered for older groups from 2008 but remained much worse for younger ones, even relative to the late nineties. In addition, the unemployment rate for those under 35 had not recovered by 2019. Almost every indicator of precarious work available showed elevated levels of precarity for younger workers relative to labour market conditions before the financial crisis. This includes part-time work, underemployment, temporary contracts and more.

It is clear that young people face a particularly challenging labour market situation. The European Commission is proposing that a minimum of €22 billion be mobilised for a Youth Employment Support package to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic for young people in the labour market and the impact of a digital and green transition. The new Government should use the strands of the Youth Employment Support Package as a guide to designing a strategy to deal with this crisis at a national level taking into account the learning from the Irish experience of implementing the Youth Guarantee after the financial crash of 2008 and the findings review of the revised Apprenticeship Scheme[3].

These strands are:

1. The EU created the Youth Guarantee in 2013 and has since built bridges to the labour market for some 24 million young people. The Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation on a Bridge to Jobs reinforces the Youth Guarantee and steps up the outreach to vulnerable young people across the EU, now covering people aged 15 - 29. The Recommendation keeps the pledge that if you sign up to the Youth Guarantee, you will receive an offer of employment, education, apprenticeship or training within four months. Bridge to Jobs will be more inclusive to avoid any forms of discrimination, with a wider outreach to more vulnerable groups, such as youth of racial and ethnic minorities, young people with disabilities, or young people living in some rural, remote or disadvantaged urban areas. It will link in with the needs of companies, providing the skills required - in particular those for the green and digital transitions - and short preparatory courses; and it will provide tailored counselling, guidance and mentoring.

2. The Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training aims to make systems more modern, attractive, flexible and fit for the digital and green economy. More agile, learner-centred vocational education and training will prepare young people for their first jobs and gives more adults opportunities to enhance or change their careers. It will help vocational education and training providers to become centres of vocational excellence, while supporting diversity and inclusiveness.

3. A renewed impetus for apprenticeships will benefit both employers and young people, adding a skilled labour force to a wide range of sectors. The European Alliance for Apprenticeships has made available more than 900,000 opportunities. The renewed Alliance will promote national coalitions, support SMEs and reinforce the involvement of social partners: trade unions and employers' organisations. The goal is to sustain the apprenticeship offers now, as apprentices we train now will be highly skilled workers in a few years' time.

4. Additional measures to support youth employment include employment and start-up incentives in the short term, and capacity building, young entrepreneur networks and inter-company training centres in the medium term.

The economic stimulus to be announced this month must be targeted to ensure that young people and areas of Ireland that were already falling behind economically do not suffer disproportionately.


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