POLICY BRIEF

ON YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

Policy Guidelines and Recommendations for New Social Measures on Youth Employment

Co-Designing Citizen Social Science for collective action

C᠅Act

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1. Executive Summary

This policy brief of the CoAct Research and Innovation Action #2 Youth Employment summarises the findings and recommendations originating from the co-research process with young people in employment measures in Vienna (Austria). The recommendations for policy makers focus on the "AusBildung bis 18" (Education and Training up to 18) programme, which was established in 2016. The young co-researchers demanded a more inclusive and accessible labour market for young people and that policy makers take measures to remove barriers to their educational careers in terms of discrimination, racism, and mental health issues. A key message is that young people must be involved in designing the measures and policies that affect them in order to create and design services that best support them on their path to education and employment.

2. Introduction

CoAct understands **Citizen Social Science** (CSS) as participatory research co-designed and directly driven by citizen groups sharing a social concern. CoAct has brought together and further developed methods to give citizen groups an equal 'seat at the table' through active participation in research, from the design to the interpretation of the results and their transformation into concrete actions. **Citizens act as co-researchers and are recognized as in-the-field competent experts.** Multi-stakeholder collaborations have constituted knowledge coalitions to enable the provision of socially robust scientific knowledge to promote social change.

One of the CoAct Research and Innovation (R&I) Actions took place in Vienna (Austria) and was focused on youth employment and being more specific, on how to adjust social policy measures to better support young people as they tackle obstacles to a successful educational career.

Figure 1
Citizen Social Science in Action, with citizen groups, a specific concern, and the support of the Knowledge Coalition.

3. The Need for Active Participation of NEET Youth in Education

NEET (not in employment, education, or training) has been conceptually used within European policy discussions about youth in employment since 2010, and refers to young people aged between 15 and 29. It was introduced partly in response to the global economic crisis between 2008 and 2013, when European member states experienced increased youth unemployment. Several initiatives have since been launched to support youth with NEET status and to reduce their numbers (Eurofund, 2022), with the most recent being the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan that aims to reduce the EU youth NEET rate to 9% by 2030 (European Commission, n.d.-a). Within the context of this objective, Austria made education compulsory by law for all young people until the age of 18 through the "Ausbildungspflichtgesetz" [Compulsory Training Act] in 2016. This compulsory education is coordinated and implemented through the "AusBildung bis 18" programme [Education and Training up to 18 – "E&T up to 18"] which offers a range of measures for young people to fulfil their compulsory education if they do not attend regular school or training (Sozialministeriumservice, n.d.).

E&T up to 18 targets FABA (FrüheAusbildungsAbbrecher*innen [Early Education Dropouts]), which describes those aged between 15 and 18 who have no education beyond compulsory schooling, are not currently enrolled in formal education or employed, and are not receiving a personal pension, i.e., people who are not integrated into the formal education system. Compared to NEET, FABA considers the highest level of educational attainment, making the group less heterogeneous by excluding people who, e.g., are taking voluntary breaks after completing upper secondary level education or who have dropped out of university (Bacher et al., 2014). The Austrian national share of FABA was 6.8% in 2019, but rates differ greatly by region with 12% of the eligible Vienna population holding this status (Statistik Austria, 2021). The causes for early school leaving are manifold, including socio-economic marginalisation, care work for others, mental health issues, discrimination due to migration backgrounds, or lack of support from family and within the school system (Steiner et al. 2016, pp. 85-114). E&T up to 18 aims to reduce early school drop out by providing support for young people who face challenges in the school-to-work transition. It offers diverse measures ranging from coaching and low-threshold skills training programs to attending vocational training at supra-company training sites.

Although the implementation of E&T up to 18 is accompanied by scientific research, including recommendations on how to address the causes and effects of early school leaving (Steiner et al., 2016; Steiner et al., 2019; Steiner et al., 2021), involving young people beyond merely consulting with them has been absent from the process so far. Therefore, CoAct's **R&I Action #2 on Youth Employment** aimed to involve affected youth in identifying obstacles to a successful educational career and collaboratively develop ideas about how to adjust the E&T up to 18 programme to better support them as they tackle these obstacles. Citizen Social Science (CSS) is a useful approach for designing and conducting a research process with people in vulnerable situations: It not only gives citizens an equal seat at the table when creating research data, but also when transforming research results into recommendations for policy actions. By facilitating these outcomes, CSS with young people attending E&T up to 18 measures contributes to the European Youth Goals that promote increasing young people's ability to participate and influence decision-making processes—especially in processes affecting them (European Union, 2018).

4. Research Process

The participatory research process was implemented through different formats based on social science research methods and methodology, while following the principles of co-creation and collaboration. Our approach **combines the reflection of the co-researchers' experiences, the collaborative data collection on key issues, and the analysis of both to develop demands for policy makers** (see, e.g, Wöhrer et al., 2017). In total, **180 young people** who were currently enrolled in E&T up to 18 measures participated in the co-research process for R&I Action #2.

3 Talks With Young People About Covid-19

1 Online Research Session

4 Research Project Weeks

3 Roundtables With Young People and Policy Makers

1 Special Event to Evaluate a Low Threshold Program Of E&T up to 18

2 Collaboratively Designed Social Research Tools

At times, the research process with young people was accompanied by graphic recordings and was documented in picture and video formats (see related link list in chapter 9).
 Another integral part of R&I Action #2 was the development of a Knowledge Coalition, which comprised **73 people** from policy institutions, E&T up to 18 administration, research institutions, youth organisations, facility managers, coaches, and social workers.

5. Most Important Findings from the Co-Research Process

Our co-research of R&I Action #2 collaboratively investigated three main topics: 1) **Mental health issues as a challenge** in education and the work environment; 2) **racism and discrimination** as exclusionary factors within the labour market and education; 3) **barriers experienced by young people** when seeking out continuing education or work. However, these main issues are highly intertwined and should be viewed intersectionally in recognition of how different inequalities in society work together and can lead to the exclusion of young people from the educational system. Further, recognising social exclusion and inequalities as relevant to educational pathways goes beyond acknowledging them as a source of young people dropping out of education. Rather, it demands a mandate to accompany young people in facing these challenges and to contribute to a more inclusive educational and work environment.

5.1 Addressing Barriers in Education and the Labour Market

Young people demand better and more timely information. When looking for an apprenticeship or further education, the co-researchers frequently mentioned the lack of information about professions and apprenticeships. Based on their own experiences and the interview analyses, the co-researchers summarised that young people are not sufficiently prepared for further training opportunities at school and that they lack orientation after the final compulsory school year. The coaching provided in E&T up to 18, which explores individual educational perspectives with young people, is definitely appreciated by the young people. However, they would have liked to have had access to this service earlier or more intensively during their school years. In addition, the young people often found the information on training and occupations to be confusing, or that it was not necessarily up-to-date or practice-oriented. They wanted comprehensive career information on occupations and educational paths that was understandable, clear, and practical.
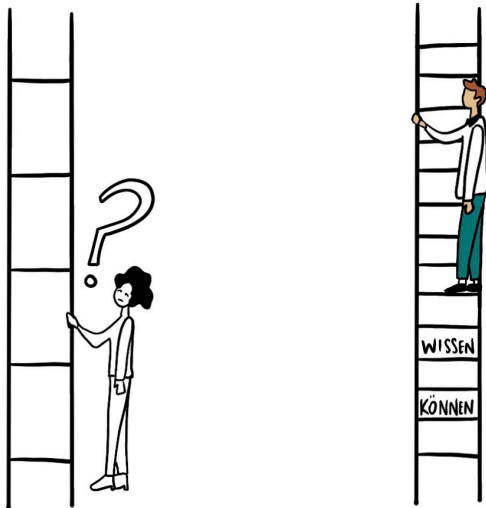
Young people demand a more inclusive labour market and more apprenticeship places. In Vienna, there is a disproportionately high discrepancy between the number of young people seeking apprenticeships and vacant placements compared to other regions in Austria. Young job seekers articulated that they felt quite pressured when thinking about their futures. This was also reflected in their experiences of employers requiring a "gap-free CV," which is difficult to achieve for E&T up to 18 participants.

An especially critical issue to the co-researchers was the inconsistency between employers' expectations and the structural factors that contributed to young people being unable inability to meet these expectations. To young people in E&T up to 18 measures, companies seem to be searching for "miracle workers" and are unwilling to take on people who require more training. This situation was accompanied by frustrating job application conditions: Job listings were often outdated and applications rarely received a response or feedback. Furthermore, many experienced discrimination over their language skills or for wearing a hijab.

The co-researchers noted a deficit orientation that pays little attention to the strengths and competencies that young job-searchers bring to the table. Although E&T up to 18 counteracts this discourse through the programme's competence-oriented approach, the general educational system differs. Young people expected companies to support them in their training, which includes companies providing recognition and attention and reassuring them that they have enough time in the company to train apprentices. These demands do not concern "special" support, e.g., for young people with learning difficulties

or mental health issues, but refer to the perspective of a broader group who feels excluded from the labour market because they do not meet its requirements.

> *Companies should invest more in training for young people. And (.) everyone should have the same opportunities. So that even if they don't have so much experience they can be accepted.* (Co-researcher R&I Action #2)

Young people fear the stigmatisation of being registered as unemployed. Since young people are paid a subsistence allowance by the Austrian Labour Market Service when taking part in E&T up to 18 measures, they experience what it means to be registered as "unemployed" as a young person. They experience this as obstructive to their career due to the narrative that being registered as unemployed makes one unsuccessful or a social "welfare scrounger." Hence young people worried about what future employers might think when they discover that someone was registered as unemployed. It is therefore important to avoid linking the self-image of participants in E&T up to 18 measures to discourses and stereotypes about unemployment.

COVID-19 and its effect on the labour market are still relevant. As our research projects with adolescents and young adults took place during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, we also discussed the conditions that young people faced while searching for apprenticeships during this period. In the case of internships, COVID-19 was especially detrimental, because internships that were in-progress were interrupted without any clear indication about when they would restart. Although the Austrian labour market has largely recovered in terms of apprenticeships in Vienna, the pandemic's effects on young people are still noticeable. This not only includes general psychological stress, but also the worries and fears that young people have experienced regarding their own future, which remain present. The situation was also reflected in the young people's demands, which characterised politicians as being responsible for creating jobs and legal security for workers. COVID-19 created major challenges for many E&T up to 18 measures and has led to a disruption in the educational pathways of young people. There is a need for resource-based crisis management that can efficiently address inequalities in learning and training opportunities and enable structural adjustments in educational settings.

Policy recommendations resulting from the co-research process

- **INCLUDE** E&T up to 18 approaches in the school system

- **INCREASE** measures that support orientation and provide individual coaching

- **TARGET GROUP-ORIENTED COMMUNICATION** of the educational landscape, professions, and the structure of E&T up to 18

- **DEVELOP** a concept for labour market relevant crises for E&T up to 18

- **MAKE** entry criteria less demanding for apprenticeships & create more available apprenticeships

- **DE-STIGMATISE** of discontinuous educational pathways as experienced by young people in E&T up to 18 measures

5.2 Addressing Racism and Discrimination

Young people see racism and discrimination as some of the main challenges regarding education and employment. The young co-researchers regularly experienced discrimination because of their ethnicity and/or skin colour, as well as their appearance, language skills, sexuality, nationality, socio-economic background, and/or disabilities. They experienced this discrimination in everyday life and through the transition period from school to work, which affected their emotional well-being along with their access to public services such as health care.

Figure 4
Racism as an exclusionary factor

Young people demand measures be taken to reduce discrimination in job application processes. In regard to the labour market, young people were afraid that they would not make progress with applying for jobs because their documents are rejected at first glance. In fact, studies show that the applicant's name alone is often decisive for the application process, with Austrian or German names and EU citizenship being preferred (Wittmann, 2012). In response, the young co-researchers proposed that a legal option to submit applications without photos and names could reduce racism as well as other forms of discrimination in the application process.

Young people need more support when experiencing discrimination and racism. The young people did not feel sufficiently supported in their experiences with discrimination and racism, and wished that they had more people to trust—who would listen to them and take their experiences of discrimination seriously. Although this affects all areas of life, their demands for support persons in school and work environments were especially strong. In this regard, further improvement is needed from the E&T up to 18 trainers and coaches in order to be more sensitive to discrimination and better support young people on their educational pathways. Young people wanted more language learning opportunities (e.g., free courses) to help them optimise their application documents and keep up with the competitive labour market. Advanced language courses should also be available to young people free of charge.

Since discrimination and racist incidents also occurred in E&T up to 18 services, the programme would benefit from a contact and complaints office to handle such cases. However, the young people generally wanted more places where they could be supported and accompanied with when they experience racist incidents, because the reporting process is often stressful and met with a lot of resistance by others.

I want to be safe! (Co-researcher R&I Action #2)

Besides formulating concrete demands for changes in the E&T up to 18 structure and the labour market, the young co-researchers suggested increasing the educational work around discrimination and demanded more solidarity within society. Some of their suggestions about spreading information about discrimination—especially racism—included training and workshops for trainers at E&T up to 18 measures, publicly displayed posters with slogans, and knowledge dissemination in (social) media.

Policy recommendations resulting from the co-research process

- Legally ensure **ANONYMOUS APPLICATION** procedures

- **COMPLAINT AND SUPPORT SERVICES** as part of the E&T up to 18 structure

- Contact persons in **PRIVATE AND PROFESSIONAL** spaces

- Expansion of societal and media **EDUCATION**

5.3 Addressing Mental Health Issues

Young people demand the de-stigmatisation of mental health issues in education and the labour market. (Mental) health emerged as a central theme in the participatory research process with young people and was consistently relevant to understanding the barriers and challenges faced by young people in education and employment throughout the research. First, during the research, many young people found it important to emphasise that being healthy is not "black and white." To them, health is a complex issue that depends on many factors like money, social affiliation, support circles, work, and family.

> *[people should know] that anyone can become mentally ill, that people with mental health issues are often labelled as weak even though they perform extremely well, they are told to pull themselves together even though they struggle so much. People have a very strange image of what is mentally healthy and mentally ill. (…) Getting well is not 'getting back to normal', 'pulling yourself together', 'going numb'* (Co-researcher R&I Action #2).

The young co-researchers were very concerned about how they and their mental health issues are treated. They often felt that they were not taken seriously in society and found that they received little consideration about their situations and conditions. Young people face many prejudices associated with mental health issues and disabilities: On the one hand, the stigmatisation of mental health issues means being told to just "get a grip" and, on the other hand, learning to be ashamed of their mental health issues. Experiences of bullying were common for young people with mental health issues and/or disabilities. Likewise, the financial or bureaucratic aspects of mental health played a role. Several co-researchers found the long waiting times for diagnoses, as well as insurance-covered therapy, to be very stressful. In addition, therapy and other treatments are associated with high costs that most young people cannot afford.

COVID-19 exacerbated the situation of young people with mental health issues. Our project results show that supporting mental health is fundamental to the successful transition between school and education/career. This became more visible and evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified a lack of routines, isolation, and uncertainty about the future—which were all factors that influenced the young people's mental conditions. Additionally, social contact restriction limited available coping strategies, while co-researchers repeatedly mentioned sleep problems and a lack of opportunities to relax and retreat because of quarantine (sometimes in a confined space), as well as a lot of online communication. E&T up to 18 trainers and coaches reported that it became increasingly difficult to support young people in dealing with their fears and concerns during the pandemic, as stability and regular communication were no longer possible.

Figure 5
Covid-19 affected young people's mental health

Young people demand better mental health support in society, school, and the workplace. The young people and policy makers we spoke to both agreed that intervention and education about mental health must begin in early childhood, and that the responsibility to educate others about it should not solely lie with those affected. Instead, a paradigm shift that moves away from the individualisation of mental health issues is needed in order to address the relation between (mental) health and structural, societal challenges and barriers.

Young people suggested including mental health issues (such as dealing with pressure and stress) into classroom curricula. They demanded more well-trained school psychologists at school and through various sustainable, long-term support services. Regarding low-threshold E&T up to 18 measures, the trainers would like to work in multidisciplinary teams that can better address the young people's different, wide-ranging needs through, e.g., social work, social care, psychological, and sexual education approaches to enable acting both reactively and preventatively.

Regarding workplaces and apprenticeships, the co-researchers displayed a strong desire for a working climate that considers the needs of adolescents and young adults; for example, a quota of "Mental Health Days," respite spaces at the workplace and more regular, transparent, and respectful staff meetings. Young people demanded that mental health challenges be proactively taken into account during the application process, that employers are knowledgeable about mental health issues, and that young people are protected from being dismissed during their employment over mental health issues and/or needs. Besides employers, the young people also advocated for the general population being better educated about the full spectrum of mental health, e.g., more information networks that show solidarity and empowerment.

Policy recommendations resulting from the co-research process

- **HEALTH CARE** and prevention from school onwards

- **MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAMS** in E&T up to 18 measures

- **MORE ACCESSIBLE** application process and better protection against dismissal for people with (mental) health issues

- **MENTAL HEALTH DAYS** and places to retreat at work

- **INCREASE** in therapy places and financial support

- **EDUCATE** employers and society about mental health

6. Participation matters

The participatory research process showed that young people participating in E&T up to 18 measures have valuable insights when it comes to education and labour market conditions. The issues raised by young service users sometimes confluence with those already addressed by policy makers (e.g., mental health as an urgent matter). However, they also bring new and complementary topics to the table, which might otherwise be overlooked and whose urgency was not necessarily recognised before (e.g., racism as a major factor in young people chances to continue their education). When it comes to communication channels and how to reach and communicate the educational landscape to young people, a participatory approach is especially advisable. The fact that citizen participation still has room for growth was reflected by the co-researchers, who repeatedly mentioned that politicians rarely notice young people and that policy makers do not consider their opinions as relevant. In order to strengthen young people's participation in educational policy debates, we believe it is necessary to understand participation as a two-way process. This means that adults—and especially decision-makers—must be willing to take young people's perspectives and experiences seriously and recognise them as equal. This requires creating (participatory) spaces that focus on young people's voices and experiences, and learning how to talk about challenges together.

7. Transferability

While E&T up to 18 is a specifically Austrian programme, many other European countries have their own training and support measures for young people not in education, training or employment (Walther 2004). Furthermore, the European Youth Guarantee (see European Commission, n.d.–b) ensures that all EU countries have to implement programs and/or measures to support young people in the search for training and employment. CoAct's recommendations that apply to European support structures for young people in transition from school to work are the following:

Level of training and support programs:

■ **A BROAD VARIETY OF MEASURES** is necessary, as young people themselves and their reasons for being unemployed are very different and diverse.

■ **INCLUDING YOUNG PEOPLE** in the design and evaluation of training measures is necessary to ensure that the measure actually matches the anticipated target group.

■ Since the young people perceived **INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT IN COACHING OR TRAINING** measures as particularly helpful, this type of service should be increased.

■ Working with young people in a **COMPETENCE-ORIENTED WAY** in all education and training services is recommended.

■ Education and training institutions should establish **EMERGENCY PLANS FOR CRISES** (e.g., COVID-19; economic crises,) that promote making necessary changes and resources available in a short timeframe.

■ Young people need **GOOD AND UP-TO-DATE CAREER COUNSELLING** at school in order to orientate themselves.

Level of broader, societal changes:

■ **MORE TOLERANCE** towards young people from trainers, job centres, and employers regarding non-linear educational paths and non-normative CVs for a more inclusive approach towards the transition from school to work.

■ **ANONYMISED APPLICATION** procedures for training sites and jobs to reduce gender and ethnicity-related discrimination.

■ **MORE SUPPORT AND INCLUSION** of young people with mental health issues: not only in education and training institutions, but also in work places and society in general.

■ Problems and challenges in transitioning from school to work should not (only) be ascribed to the young people themselves, but shall be seen as **COMPLEX ISSUES** that are shaped by societal structures and inequalities.

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9. Related Links

- More information about the CoAct project:
  www.coactproject.eu

- More information about R&I Action #2 Youth Employment:
  https://coactproject.univie.ac.at/

- Final report for stakeholders responsible for the implementation of
  E&T up to 18 measures (German):
  https://coactproject.univie.ac.at/wien-par/projektbericht-coact/

- Video documentation of the results of the co-research process
  of the research project weeks with young people from E&T up to 18 measures:
  https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw9KE2iUG74tcLab3p16ojQ

- Graphic Recording of the outcomes of the Roundtables with policy makers and young people:
  https://coactproject.univie.ac.at/wien-par/einblick-ins-projekt/roundtables/

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