

YOUNG PEOPLE ENTERING THE LABOUR MARKET: OBSTACLES AND WAYS OF COPING

Margarita Kazjulja, Eve-Liis Roosmaa
Tallinn University

Introduction

Young people across Europe are experiencing increasing labour market exclusion either in terms of unemployment periods (Müller and Gangl 2003) or non-participation in employment, education or training (so-called NEET youth, i.e. youth Not in Education, Employment, or Training) (NEETs ... 2012). Even after finding a job, young people could often find themselves in a fragile situation, manifesting, for example, in temporary employment contracts or in precarious jobs (unstable jobs ranking lower in the hierarchy of positions) (Baranowska and Gebel 2010). At the same time, the inclusion of youth in the labour market varies by country (Saar et al. 2008).

Youth represent one of the main risk groups in the labour market, especially at times of economic recession. Thus, their labour market prospects worsened significantly in 2008–2009 (Verick 2009; Eichhorst et al. 2010; Choudhry et al. 2012). Researchers have found that, in comparison with other age groups, young people are subject to disproportionately high labour market risks: loss of a job, an extended unemployment period, an increasing rate of employee turnover, and a growing number of precarious jobs (Verick 2009; O'Higgins 2010; Scarpetta et al. 2010).

Several studies have confirmed that the acquired level of education affects the labour market situation of young people (Ashenfelter and Ham 1979; Mincer 1991; Riddell and Song 2011). Similarly, the results of a recent comparative analysis of European countries indicate that young people with basic education who graduated up to five years ago are the most vulnerable in this regard: compared to others, this group has a greater share of NEET youth and the highest unemployment rate (incl. the long-term unemployment rate) (Rockicka et al. 2015). Education was also found to be the main factor that improved the opportunities of entering the labour market if the highest level of education was obtained up to five years ago.

Youth unemployment and being a NEET youth may, in turn, increase young people's general social exclusion (economic situation, overall well-being, health, autonomy, etc.) and this puts the functioning of society as a whole at risk. According to the analyses of the panel data of OECD countries, birth cohorts that have experienced a high unemployment rate at a young age are more frequently unemployed in later life as well (Kawaguchi and Murao 2014). On the one hand, this is partially due to their poorer financial opportunities; on the other hand, it is more difficult to collect so-called human capital (education, training, work experience, etc.) while being unemployed. Thus, it is of critical importance that the labour market opportunities of young people are improved, especially in a situation where the working-age population and thereby the number of employed persons is in decline as well.

The first part of the article provides an overview of the labour market situation of youth in Estonia and changes in the situation in 2003–2015 compared to the European Union (EU) average. The second part presents a case-by-case overview of interviews carried out with young people entering the labour market. The interviews were conducted under the leadership of the Institute of International Social Studies (IISS) of Tallinn University in the framework of the Horizon 2020 project "Social Exclusion of Youth in Europe: Cumulative Disadvantage, Coping Strategies, Effective Policies and Transfer" (EXCEPT)^a.

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Trends in youth unemployment in 2003–2015

According to the European Union Labour Force Survey 2014, the average unemployment rate of persons aged 15–29 is more than twice as high as in the age group 30–59 – the EU average rates are 18.9% and 8.7%, respectively.

In 2003–2015, the youth unemployment rate was much more volatile in Estonia than in the EU on average. During the last financial crisis, the youth unemployment rate in Estonia was one of the highest ones in the EU, reaching 24.6% in 2010 (EU average: 16.6%) (Figure 1, p. 122). According to the EU Labour Force Survey, that year, the unemployment rate of young people was higher than in Estonia only in Lithuania, Latvia and Spain (approximately 30%) and the youth unemployment rate was the lowest in Norway, the Netherlands and Austria (below 10%).

However, Estonia's situation improved quickly and already by 2011 the youth unemployment rate had dropped to the level of 2003. According to the most recent data, Estonia's indicator is one of the lowest ones in Europe. In 2015, it was almost at the pre-crisis level, i.e. 8.9% or approximately two times lower than the EU average. In the period observed, the youth unemployment rate in Estonia was the lowest (7.2%) in 2007. Since then, the unemployment rate has not dropped to that level again.

The age group 15–29 is relatively large and thus diverse, and that is why the unemployment rate has been broken down by five-year groups in order to give a better overview of the situation in Estonia. Figure 1 (p. 122) clearly indicates that during the entire period under observation, the unemployment rate has been the highest in the youngest age group, i.e. among persons aged 15–19, who have mostly acquired basic education by that age or, in some cases, vocational secondary education or general secondary education. It is difficult to find a job without education in the given field. In 2007, before the economic crisis, approximately 20% of the population aged 15–19 was looking for a job, but by 2010 unemployment had risen to almost 60% in this age group. However, similarly to the general trend, the indicator of this age group dropped significantly already the following year and in 2015 the share of young jobseekers aged 15–19 stood at 22.6%. The decline in the unemployment rate might be partially related to young people's decision to continue their educational path.

The unemployment rate in the next age group (20–24 years) is almost two times lower than in the age group 15–19. The share of the unemployed among 20–24-year-olds peaked in 2010, when about one-third of them were looking for a job and, by 2015, the share dropped to 11.6%. The oldest age group, however, has had the lowest unemployment risk but, during the crisis, it increased almost four-fold – from 4.4% in 2007 to 17.7% in 2010. By 2015, the unemployment rate of the population aged 25–29 had dropped to 6.0%, which was almost as high as the unemployment rate of the working-age population, i.e. persons aged 15–64, – 6.3%, but remained somewhat below the respective rate of people in their so-called prime working age (persons aged 25–49), whose unemployment rate stood at 5.4%. The situation can be partially explained by the fact that, in the labour market, young people compete against applicants with much more extensive work experience, and experience is often the decisive factor for an employer.

The positive trend described above is clouded by the fact that the long-term youth unemployment rate in Estonia is above the EU average. Thus, in 2013, approximately 35% of young people in Estonia had been searching for a job for at least a year, while the EU average was 31% (Rokicka et al. 2015). However, even this indicator has declined slightly compared to previous years. Nevertheless, long-term unemployment represents a significant risk factor because it reduces the probability of finding a job. Additionally, an extended job search may lead to a low self-esteem, depression and anxiety (Kokko et al. 2000).

Similarly to many other EU countries, youth unemployment in Estonia is associated with the level of education attained (Rokicka et al. 2015). This is clearly illustrated by Figure 2 (p. 123): in 2010, 43.6% of the population aged 15–29 with basic education were unemployed (EU average: 26.3%) but, starting from 2013, the Estonian indicator has been significantly lower than the EU average and less than one-fifth of the people in this education group were looking

for employment in 2015. Compared to young people with basic education, in 2010, the unemployment rate of young people with secondary education (incl. vocational secondary education) was more than 1.5 times lower – 26.9% – but still significantly above the EU average. By 2015, the unemployment rate of young people with secondary education dropped to 8.8% in Estonia. During the period in question, the unemployment rate of young people with higher education remained below 10%, peaking in 2011 and 2013. In 2015, the share of jobseekers among young people with higher education was 3.8% – almost three times smaller than in the EU on average. Thus, higher education provides youth in Estonia with a certain protection against unemployment, although the economic crisis affected young people with higher education as well.

NEET youth

In addition to the unemployment rate, another significant indicator of labour market exclusion is the share of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET youth). Thus, this indicator also comprises inactivity. Approximately one-third of the NEET youth aged 15–29 were unemployed and two-thirds were inactive in 2015. The majority of inactive youth take care of children or other family members (some of them may thus have a job), but about one-tenth of young people are inactive due to an illness or disability, and another one-tenth for other reasons (this includes those who have given up job search, i.e. the discouraged, and those performing unofficial casual jobs etc.).

The EU average share of NEET youth among the population aged 15–29 in 2004–2015 was relatively stable (Figure 3, p. 124). However, in the case of Estonia, the indicator rose remarkably in 2009 and 2010, when the share was approximately 18%. By 2015, the share of NEET youth had dropped to 12.5%, which was 2.3 percentage points below the EU average.

A more detailed comparison of age groups reveals that, during the economic crisis, the share of NEET youth rose primarily among persons aged 20–24 and 25–29. In the age group 20–24, the share of NEET youth almost doubled in 2008–2009 and was slightly above 20%. Among persons aged 25–29, the share increased 1.5 times, reaching 26%. However, in 2015, the share of NEET youth stood at approximately 15% among both 20–24- and 25–29-year-olds. Considering that 15–19-year-olds generally attend school, the share of young people not in employment, education or training is smaller in this age group in comparison to other age groups. The relevant indicator stood at 5.4% in 2015.

Similarly to unemployment, also the NEET status relates to the acquired level of education (Flisi et al. 2015; Rokicka et al. 2015). In 2013, more than a half of the basic school graduates in Estonia were NEETs when entering the labour market, whereas the relevant share among those with higher education was approximately three times smaller (Rokicka et al. 2015). The following is an account of how young people describe their situation upon entering the labour market, how strongly they perceive various difficulties at the beginning of their career and how they cope.

Young people's vision of their situation upon entering the labour market

In total, more than 300 semi-structured interviews were carried out in nine EU countries and Ukraine in the framework of the EXCEPT project. In Estonia, 53 young persons were interviewed, from November 2015 to June 2016. The sample consisted of young people aged 18–30 who had completed or discontinued their studies no more than five years ago and who, during that period, had been unemployed for at least six months or held precarious positions (part-time work, temporary employment, occasional work, incl. undeclared or non-contractual work). Additional indicators taken into account included the following: place of residence (Tallinn, Tartu, Southeastern Estonia (Valga, Võru, Põlva) and Ida-Viru county); sex; ethnic nationality; employment status (unemployed, works part-time, employment without a specified term after a period of unemployment or precarious employment); level of education (basic education, secondary education (incl. vocational education) or higher education).

The interview covered the young person's education and career path, becoming independent, health, living conditions, economic situation, social and institutional support and future prospects. The two topics discussed throughout the interview from the perspective of the interviewee's life course were well-being and coping. This article focuses on education and employment issues. The length of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 2.5 hours.

Considering that the risk of remaining unemployed and becoming a NEET youth is strongly linked to the level of education (Rokicka et al. 2015), these young people's stories, as revealed by the interviews, are presented by the level of education. Two cases have been chosen per each level of education, i.e. six stories in total. The cases represent the vision of both females and males, various levels of education within a wider group (e.g. young people with and without basic education) and different levels of coping. For the purpose of clarity, considering the small number of cases presented in the article, mothers of small children have been left out, for example, and the focus is on Tallinn and Tartu, where the chances of finding a job are the highest. The names of the young people have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

Youth with basic education as highest level of education

There were a total of 23 interviews conducted with people in this group: 5 with young people without basic education (3 males; 2 females) and 18 with young people with basic education (8 males; 10 females). 12 interviews were carried out in Tallinn and Tartu, 11 interviews in the counties of Southeastern Estonia and in Narva.

Marju, aged 27, Estonian, has basic education, is unemployed, lives in Tallinn with her mother; both of her parents have post-secondary non-tertiary education and are employed.

Marju discontinued her studies at basic school at the age of 14 when she moved to another city to live with her boyfriend. Her parents did not interfere with her decision. The relationship ended a year later and Marju returned to Tallinn. She continued her studies at the age of 16 and acquired basic education at the upper secondary school for adults at the age of 22. She plans to complete secondary education some day as well, but learning difficulties made her struggle already with basic education. Schoolmates bullied her and teachers did not think that her difficulties in reading and writing were caused by a medical problem. Marju describes some of her school mornings as follows:

"Well, I mean, I sometimes even had, on a school day, I had a fever in the morning, headache and, basically, it was like a physical response. Somehow, I got it done [finished basic school] ..."

Nevertheless, Marju is very interested in various trainings and courses, although she prefers distance learning or e-courses. Her mother has supported her financially so that she could attend various courses. Marju has not yet quite figured out the field of work she would ultimately like to work in; thus, she has attended a number of different courses (floristics, eyelash extensions, assistant manager courses, etc.).

Marju has been unemployed for ten months and she has tried to enrol on various courses through the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund. So far, she has been offered a Russian language course, which she has not completed yet.

"Err..., I wanted that accounting course, they [the Unemployment Insurance Fund] don't give it at all, they do not give courses in beauty services either. So, principally, that was it. I only got the Russian course and I also wanted the sales consultant course and whatever seemed interesting, but they do not give them, at all".

Marju took up employment at the age of 19 as a customer assistant. Her first employment relationships were short-lived, having lasted four months, which is the maximum length of the probationary period. After that, employers always found a reason not to sign the employment

contract. She suspects that her employers just took advantage of her as a young inexperienced employee.

Before her current unemployment period, Marju worked as shop assistant for three years. She found that job through a friend. After some time, the store chain ran into difficulties and some of the stores were closed down. The employer forced Marju to quit work at her own request. She contacted the Labour Inspectorate, but the process dragged on and Marju agreed to terminate the employment contract after all.

She is currently looking for a job as a customer assistant and has responded to several job offers. She believes that she will find a job soon. Marju is not interested in working abroad. In the future, she hopes to work in the beauty services industry or start her own business, but in order to do that she needs to continue her studies, as she says. On the other hand, Marju admits that it is difficult to combine work and studies:

“I do not intend to work as a customer assistant or salesperson all my life. Then again, studying something, a certain profession, it is rather expensive. If you get the usual salary, then you have to pay for stuff, so you do not have much left, and if you also want to study somewhere, then you do not have any money left. It is a vicious circle. The Unemployment Insurance Fund does not give it [courses] either, so it is quite complicated.”

Marju is coping rather well, because she lives at her mother's place, which keeps monthly expenses relatively low. She is active and eager by nature, which should be helpful in finding a job.

Daniil, aged 21, Russian, without basic education, is in undeclared employment, temporarily lives with an acquaintance (they share an apartment) in Tallinn, both of his parents have higher education and work abroad.

Daniil lived in Estonia until the 8th grade, but then moved to Spain with his father. Half a year later, he resumed his studies in the 8th grade there. After a year and a half, the father temporarily returned to Estonia, while Daniil was left on his own for a few months. Looking back at these events, he feels that this experience had the greatest impact on his life in the next few years. Without parental guidance and control, he dropped out of school right before finishing basic school. Daniil felt that education was just a piece of paper and he found working and independent life more attractive. Parents did not try to stop him. “They had enough problems without me,” he says. Thus, at the age of 16, he started working as a diving instructor at an acquaintance's company while attending school. The job was unofficial and there was no certain agreement regarding pay. He currently regrets having discontinued his studies:

“Well, I did not finish school because I was distracted by very many things and I was eager to go to work. I started working, got the money and did not want to study any more. Right now I do regret it very much because I have fewer opportunities because of that, I tried to force myself to study, but I saw the prices and the time it takes, and I understood that I could not combine work and studies.”

While living in Spain, Daniil felt like a stranger, so, at the age of 18, he moved back to Estonia, where his older brother and a few friends were waiting. He commenced undeclared employment again, performing repair works with his brother. In six months, he quit that job because he did not want to wake up early and was constantly late for work. Then, through the Internet and with help from friends, he found several job offers in construction, where he continued undeclared employment and was paid according to an oral agreement. Such instability is hard for Daniil because he constantly worries whether he will get the agreed payments. Meanwhile, he has had a few official jobs (waiter, night receptionist at a hotel, etc.), which provided greater financial security. However, as he did not see any future in those occupations, he decided to end these employment relationships after a while:

“You get the experience very quickly, but I did not see any perspective in any of these jobs, no progress, you just sat behind the desk and you’ll keep sitting there. And it does not matter if you work more or serve more people.”

Daniil says that the fear of losing a job or not finding one has been constantly present. It has been amplified by the lack of a so-called safety network because his parents have not supported him and he does not have his own place of residence. Therefore, he has been forced to take on all kinds of jobs. Ideally, Daniil wishes to work as a diving instructor, as diving has become his hobby; he would also prefer to be self-employed.

Daniil has never registered as an unemployed person. He knows that it is possible to contact the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, but since he has not heard of any positive experiences, he does not see the point of that:

“My acquaintances, friends, they went to the Unemployment Insurance Fund, said that they registered as an unemployed person. But no one has told me that they got registered and they are all right and recommend it. I heard that they go there, but there is no use. /.../ I did not rely on the Unemployment Insurance Fund and I do not wait for maybe getting an offer from them several months later, like a lottery. I do not like it that way. Not knowing is the worst thing ever.”

At the time of the interview, Daniil was no longer looking for a steady job in Estonia because he intended to return to Spain and perhaps start his own business with friends.

Young people with general secondary and vocational secondary education

In this group, a total of 21 young people participated in the survey: 17 young people with general secondary education (10 males; 7 females) and 4 with vocational secondary education (2 males and 2 females). 11 interviews took place in Tallinn and Tartu, 10 in the counties of Southeastern Estonia and in Narva.

Jelena, aged 26, Russian, stateless, has secondary education, is unemployed, lives in Tallinn with her partner; her mother has secondary education and has been unemployed for a long time, her father lives abroad.

Jelena finished upper secondary school at the age of 19. Then, she tried for two consecutive years to enter a vocational school to become a hairdresser, but she was not accepted. After finishing secondary school, she worked as a dishwasher and waitress for three years, with occasional episodes of unemployment in between. Jelena was not able to live off the waitressing wages and the dishwashing job was undeclared employment, which involved problems with timely payments. Such a situation did not have a major impact on her life, as she lived with her grandmother and received financial support from her mother. During periods of unemployment, she registered as an unemployed person, but the allowance received from the Unemployment Insurance Fund was not enough, so her mother and grandmother continued to support her.

In 2011, Jelena started studies in logistics in a vocational school via distance learning and completed a year-long course. Logistics was not her own choice; a friend invited her to study together:

“Well, it [the choice of education] was like ... she said let’s go and study transport organisation. Well, and I accepted, why not, I could go and study, see and try...”

Jelena has not worked in this field and she believes she never will because she is not sufficiently fluent in Estonian or English. Moreover, competition is tight in this field because this profession is also taught at the higher education level.

After these studies, Jelena worked in the food industry for two years. She found the job through her friend who was already working there and told her that the company was looking for new

employees. Jelena liked her colleagues and the nature of work, but she still quit because of poor working conditions:

“I left because it was tough... night shifts, always on your feet, 12-hour shifts, cold – I worked in a freezer... more cons than pros... and low pay.”

Thus, Jelena has been unemployed for the last year and a half. She is able to leave employment because she has no monetary obligations (e.g. loans) and her partner provides her with financial support and even encourages her to stay at home. This makes Jelena feel somewhat uncomfortable because she would like to have her own money. A year ago, she registered with the Unemployment Insurance Fund again. Jelena wanted to take an Estonian course, which she got after six months. She successfully completed the course, but her proficiency in Estonian is still insufficient, which is why her labour market prospects are poor. She wants to take a hairdressing course next, but this course is not available via the Unemployment Insurance Fund and she cannot afford to pay for it herself. Jelena feels that the Unemployment Insurance Fund is forcing her to accept any kind of work, but the offers mostly include shift work, which does not suit her. Jelena wishes to work from nine to five and receive a good pay, she does not have any specific requirements regarding the nature of work. She does not see the point in attending monthly consultations at the Unemployment Insurance Fund because she can search for a job on her own and she no longer receives monetary support, although health insurance is rather significant for her.

Right now, Jelena can manage financially, but she depends fully on the support of her loved ones.

Mati, aged 26, has vocational secondary education, is unemployed, lives with a couple of friends in his own apartment in Tallinn, his parents have professional secondary education and both parents are employed.

At the age of 20, Mati acquired vocational secondary education in information technology (computers and computer networks). He then continued IT studies in an institution of higher education, but did not graduate because he failed his preliminary thesis defence. He hopes to resume his studies some day, but that requires finding a new subject and supervisor for the thesis.

Mati started working while in vocational school and found a part-time job as a programmer with help from his schoolmates. He believes that, in most cases, finding a job is only possible through personal connections. The first job lasted for two years, the second one for a year. Both employment contracts were terminated by mutual agreement of the parties. In his first job, Mati had some problems with his colleagues; the relationships were not good and the working environment left something to be desired. He got on well with his superior but, in the end, he was not sure whether it was actually all right or not:

“Generally, there were no problems. And if I had any concerns or questions, I went straight to the superior; I would not deal with some middleman. /.../ Finally, when I said that I would probably like to leave the company, he said that, well, perhaps it was for the best, indeed. I do not know whether I did something [wrong] or not. So that is how I left that place by mutual agreement.”

After a few months, he started another job, also as a programmer. At some point, the work seemed to become overpowering and tasks more complicated. He cannot recall the exact events, but he himself notified the superior that he wished to quit, and his request was satisfied. Still, the company paid Mati an additional two months' salary, which made it easier to take time for searching for a new job.

Mati was unemployed for six or seven months, after which he found work (via job advertisements) as a traffic controller, courier and building caretaker. He wanted a job that would involve more mobility for a change. Mati implies that some of these employers paid undeclared wages. In the meantime, he had an accident and, after having returned to work, he had to admit that he

could not perform physical labour for health reasons. Consequently, he terminated the employment relationship and registered with the Unemployment Insurance Fund. By the time of the interview, Mati had been officially unemployed for two months. He had sent CVs to several enterprises and he had been invited to a job interview for the position of a programmer. Mati described his job-seeking process as follows:

“If they require 2 years of experience, well, I probably will not apply, because I do not have that experience and I do not have that education, I haven’t completed my diploma thesis. But if I apply for a job somewhere and have an opportunity to explain that I actually, like, have that higher education, I just have not done the diploma thesis, I have completed all subjects, they are all done, school is over. /.../ My friend has the same story, she wants to apply for a job as a car painter, but they require two years of experience everywhere ... meanwhile, you do not get that two years of experience from school, so how are you supposed to get a job at all? ... /.../ I have no practical work experience and I cannot get a job, period.”

As the acquisition of higher education has dragged on, Mati has started to doubt whether the chosen educational path is right for him.

“/.../ If I had completed the diploma thesis, well, perhaps I could get a job in IT more easily, but I do not know whether I want it any longer. Let’s say that I have so much negative experience with IT that I do not know whether I want to be there.”

Ideally, he would like to have a part-time job that would allow pairing IT-work with something more mobile, non-routine (e.g. courier work). Mati has also considered starting his own company, but he does not specify in which field. However, he mentions that the initial capital requirement could be lower. He has not considered working abroad although he finds that IT work would be more profitable in Finland, and the specific nature of the field (the universality of IT language) would allow him to work without the knowledge of a foreign language.

In terms of coping, family support is crucial for Mati because he lives in an apartment bought by his father and, from time to time, his parents provide him with financial support as well.

What speaks in Mati’s favour is his active attitude. He does not hesitate to contact enterprises to inquire whether they are recruiting. He has currently applied for several jobs and has agreed on at least one job interview.

Young people with higher education

Considering that higher education significantly reduces labour market risks, the number of interviews carried out was the smallest in this group, 9 in total: 8 of the interviewees had a Bachelor’s degree (6 females, 2 males) and one person had a Master’s degree (female); 6 interviews were carried out in Tallinn and Tartu and 3 interviews in the counties of Southeastern Estonia.

Miina, aged 23, has higher education, is unemployed, lives in Tallinn with his partner, comes from a small town in Southeastern Estonia; her mother has higher education, her father has professional secondary education and they are both employed.

Miina graduated from the science branch of an upper secondary school in the Southeastern town with a gold medal. She was convinced that she wanted to continue her studies at the university and further from home, meaning in Tallinn. She chose the field of study partly by chance, as she did not know what she wanted to study:

“/.../ [after finishing secondary school] I actually did not know at all what I wanted to do. Like, absolutely no idea. And as I had a trip planned for the time of these application rounds, I initially picked out the specialties that did not require

an interview, because I was not able to be, like, physically present, and then I looked further /.../ and then I noticed political science. /.../ [Finally] I had to, like, choose between two professions – that is, whether I should go and study law or political science. /.../ Well and then I took political science, because as far as law is concerned, I know that you have to be extremely sure that you want to study it, because it is so specific.”

Miina obtained her Bachelor’s degree at the age of 24; the studies took a while longer because she was an exchange student in Germany for a year. As an active student, she also joined the bookselling programme during her studies, which took her to the United States for one summer. Bookselling was tough, but Miina appreciates the experience highly because it taught her independence and self-discipline:

“So, until now, this is probably the most, well, like the most intense work experience, where I have learned the most, I suppose. /.../ It tested, well, I mean, it tested you in every way, like in the physical and mental sense and all. But I am very pleased that I went there. I mean, looking back, if people ask whether I want to go back there, then I think that I’d rather not, because it was, like, so hard, but at the same time I would recommend it to everyone, especially young people who are not sure what to do. Because it, like, teaches you so much, such as how to manage time and money. Well, all those small details, how to motivate yourself etc. I feel that I changed a lot during that time or so. Yeah.”

Miina is very interested in personal development and she would love to attend courses in accounting, start a business, touch-typing or photography, if they were available free of charge or at an affordable cost. As for the first two, she is primarily interested in them because she wants to establish her own enterprise one day. Miina believes that she would then have enough time for herself in order to engage in activities she likes (incl. study and travel).

During university studies, Miina had an agreement with her parents that they would support her financially and that school must come first. However, in her first year, she still ended up working unofficially at weekends in a bar at a nightclub. That job did not last long because, at some point, they no longer paid her. After that, Miina worked at a ministry for a short period of time and did an internship at an embassy. Additionally, Miina has had a project-based job in product promotion.

In summer 2015, Miina made another attempt to find professional practical training, but as there were no offers, she went to Spain to work as a babysitter. She was interested in Spanish and she had already studied it before. That experience has made her think about working in Spain, provided that she could spend, for example, half a year in Estonia.

In the autumn of 2015, Miina found part-time work as a consultant and she had this job for eight months. She found the job through a friend who was already working at the company. However, it soon became clear that the job of a salesperson did not suit her. The same company was looking for a new employee for a higher-ranking position, and Miina was also asked to submit an application. The entire process dragged on and did not make a good impression on her. Furthermore, Miina had a feeling that not everything was quite right in the management. Therefore, she decided not to accept the position offered and left the company on her own initiative.

“I presume that the company and they [management] thought that as I was young, relatively inexperienced in the labour market, they could exploit me, like in the sense that they saw that I was, like, working normally and actually, like, fit in the team, then, I do not know, it felt like they thought: “Let’s recruit a young and dumb one, she will certainly be willing and come along. /.../”

Miina has not registered with the Unemployment Insurance Fund yet, because until now she has found a job on her own. However, she is interested in health insurance, so she might soon register as an unemployed person. Her mother works at the Unemployment Insurance Fund, so Miina has consulted her when she has had questions regarding the legal aspects of her employment relationships. She finds that young people entering the labour market need to be more aware of their rights.

Thanks to her parents' support, Miina has had an opportunity to acquire diverse experience and see the world. She is very active and self-confident and does not worry about failure, thus she boldly applies for various jobs. Miina herself emphasises that she differs from other young people in terms of a significantly higher level of self-discipline.

Ott, aged 28, has higher education, is unemployed, lives in his own apartment in a small town in Southeastern Estonia; his mother has secondary education, his father has professional higher education and they are both employed.

Ott finished secondary school at the age of 19 and continued to study economy in the university because he set out to establish his own company. He received his Bachelor's degree at the age of 24. It took two years longer than the nominal period because he went to work and took an academic leave. Ott considers continuing his studies on the Master's level, but has not made any specific plans yet.

Ott wished to become independent quickly and thus started working on school holidays and at weekends already at the age of 13–14. Through acquaintances, he got a job in road construction, where he started by fulfilling simple tasks, and then gradually moved on to more complicated tasks. He had an employment contract and the company provided on-site training. Ott saved money for university studies: "And then I, like, collected money and then I could, in principle, go to the university".

Prior to the economic recession, he managed to establish his own start-up company, but he is no longer a member of the management board. However, Ott has not given up the idea of establishing his own company in the future.

"But then, in the meantime, there was the economic crisis, and tens and hundreds of other things and ... and so it was that the plans did not work out. But I have not given up on that plan yet."

After the university, Ott has worked in several positions, which he has found mostly by contacting the enterprises on his own initiative. He finds that it is more likely to find a job like that, because the competition is too tough when responding to job offers. Ott is disturbed by the fact that the applicant makes an effort by preparing a CV and motivation letter, but the majority of enterprises do not give any response to that:

"[I] have sent CVs to hundreds of enterprises. And, in principle, I have had enough already. So, if they want cover letters and motivation letters and you do all those things and then the company does not even bother to reply..."

Ott has terminated his recent employment relationships on his own initiative because the management did not take his proposals into account, which led to loss of motivation. For example, in his most recent job, he fell out with the management due to differences of opinion, and they tried to find a way to fire him. Ott filed an application with the Labour Dispute Committee, but considering that seeking recourse in court would have been too expensive, he agreed to a settlement, based on which he was paid a compensation, but he was still let go. He is not fully pleased with such an outcome:

"But, in principle, I still could not clear my name because my records show I was fired, so I am not very happy about it."

Ott is concerned about the fact that he does not have sufficient experience to get work in his field, meaning that he has to settle for something just to earn a living. He also thinks that a long, yet interrupted employment history (many short-term contracts) may become an obstacle to finding a job because it sends a danger signal to personnel managers. Ott even feels that higher education is an obstacle for him, because it has made him more selective about jobs:

“The case is that, in some sense, education is like an obstacle, too. You do not want to take just any job because you think... You think that... why on earth did I go to school then, why did I make an effort in life, you know.”

Ott has registered with the Unemployment Insurance Fund, but he is not sure whether he receives financial support. His main goal was to get health insurance. He feels like neither the Unemployment Insurance Fund nor anyone else has helped him during his period of unemployment and he thinks he can cope on his own, hoping that his savings will get him through the difficult time. Ott does not communicate frequently with his family members and has not received or asked for any support from them. He is aware of the training opportunities provided by the Unemployment Insurance Fund but, as he does not know what he would like to study, he has not looked into it yet.

Recently, Ott has started to consider changing his place of residence and possibly leaving Estonia in order to find a better job.

Conclusion

The labour market status of young people in Estonia has improved significantly during the post-recession period: in 2015, the unemployment rate of 15–29-year-olds was remarkably lower than the EU average across all education groups. Still, unemployment is twice as high among youth with basic or lower education compared to youth with secondary education. This also largely explains why the youngest age group, i.e. those aged 15–19 have an unemployment rate twice as high as that of 20–24-year-olds.

In 2015, the rate of young people not in employment, education, or training was only slightly below the EU average in Estonia. Both the results of the Estonian Labour Force Survey and the interviews carried out with young people under the EXCEPT project of the Horizon 2020 programme indicate great diversity among young people (incl. NEETs) entering the labour market. The stories told by young people reveal that, if entry into the labour market has not been smooth, it can take them a long time to find their proper place. At the same time, not all youth not in education and employment suffer from social exclusion – social support (predominantly from parents) allows them not to work, look for a better job or take their time in choosing the right occupation/profession.

A lack of professional skills is a risk factor for youth with basic education and general secondary education. The interviews revealed that they want to continue their studies, but they have either failed to get the training they want, or have trouble with combining work and studies.

According to statistics, a higher level of education provides protection against unemployment, but the stories told by young people show that it is difficult to find a suitable occupation or profession, and should it appear that they have made the wrong choice, it does not ensure a more secure labour market position. The situation seems to be more complicated for those who have chosen vocational education because academic higher education is more broad-based, which is why making a choice may seem easier (it is possible to specialise later on). An unsuccessful choice of profession is often one of the reasons for interrupted studies (Roosmaa and Reiska 2015). Perhaps consistent career counselling and a clearer presentation of the nature of occupations and fields of study (incl. work shadowing, internships, support for changing the field of study) would be of help.

The young people who were interviewed can mainly cope thanks to support from their parents and other loved ones, but many of them are able to cope also thanks to their active attitude,

manifested in a consistent and intense job search. If the job search drags on, young people may consider making compromises with regard to their job expectations, but only if going to work becomes inevitable. Young people with higher education have noticeably greater self-confidence and believe they can cope, one way or another.

The data set of the EXCEPT project survey allows future analysis of the connections between young people's labour market status and other spheres of life (health, living conditions, independence) and thus drawing conclusions regarding cumulative disadvantage – whether and how negative experience in education and the labour market affect their course of life (leaving the parental home, starting their own family, future prospects). Additionally, it allows a more detailed analysis of the role of social and institutional support in coping with labour market difficulties, and comparisons with other countries.