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YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

Abstract

This research paper sublimates the main empirical findings from the research study about the Macedonian Youth Unemployment, conducted in 2016 by the authors of this paper and financed by Friedrich Ebert Foundation. For the needs of the particular research a combined methodological approach was used, i.e. quantitative and qualitative analyzes were applied. For the quantitative analysis the data was collected by face-to-face questionnaire on a sample (N=1009) consisted of young unemployed people in the country (aged between 15 and 29), while for the qualitative analysis the data was collected by two focus groups held with representatives of the NGO sector, business sector and Agencies for employment and/or recruitment. The main objective of this research paper is to investigate the key factors, which make the process of finding a job or even starting an own business difficult for the young people in Republic of Macedonia, especially when we know that the Macedonian youth

unemployment rate is very high (50%) almost double than the general unemployment rate (23,7%). The results can be considered as original and novelty also because for the first time the personal characteristics of the Macedonian unemployed young people as self-confidence, self-efficacy and work locus of control have been measured. We believe that the results might provide valuable information to the government and the relevant institutions for further policy creation and/or implementation. It is hoped that the study also contributes to better understanding of the nature of the problem regarding the youth unemployment from a scientific perspective.

Keywords: Macedonian youth unemployment, professional determination, work preferences, career maturity, personal characteristics.

Introduction

Youth unemployment has been burdening economies and generating crises around the globe. Both developed and developing countries have been faced by the challenge of creating decent and sustainable jobs for an enormous inflow of young people entering the labor market yearly. Their inability to integrate and accommodate young people in the workforce will have serious consequences on the future prosperity and development of each individual country. Youth unemployment, coupled with situations when young people are discouraged or altogether give up on searching jobs, or accept jobs under inadequate working conditions are an indisputable loss to the economy, the society and youth themselves.

The youth unemployment is a very serious problem in Republic of Macedonia as its rate for the last several years is almost double (approximately 50%) than the general unemployment rate (23,7% in this moment) according the State Statistical Office.

Lack of appropriate employment opportunities early on in professional life, i.e. at young age, oftentimes compromises future employment perspectives, leading to inappropriate work ethics and attitudes and threatening to compromise the individual's character in life. Youth

unemployment is also linked to social exclusion since difficulties in finding a job propel in young people feelings of vulnerability, marginalization and uselessness, especially if one bears in mind that people's self-value and self-esteem are expressed through roles they play when engaging in social interactions. Occupation, expressed through professional engagement, is one of the most important social roles youth play (Super, 1980).

It is highly likely that stumbling across multiple barriers while setting on the path towards (financial) independence will create feelings of frustration, stress and negative perception of the self and the surrounding environment. This is even more applicable to young people, at this delicate biological age, full of hope and excitement about the future and what it brings (Feather and O'Brien, 1987).

On the other hand, educational and professional choices are greatly determined by a range of other factors, such as: personal traits, interests, skills and preferences, family/parents, the young person's living arrangements, etc. (Kolvereid, 1996; Holland, 1997). Parents represent a major influencing factor for young people, because they have a unique relation with their children. They make their best in providing for all children's needs, they protect them and bring them up, while helping them develop their individual identity and integrity. Although every individual is entitled to his/her own professional choice, young people's financial dependency on their parents (according to FEF's Macedonian Youth Study from 2013 as many as 80% of young people aged above 18 in the Republic of Macedonia still live with their parents) infers that parents are oftentimes largely involved in their children's choices regarding work.

The Macedonian Youth Study (Topuzovska Latkovic, Borota Popovska, Serafimovska, Cekic, 2013) revealed a number of interesting research results and findings, such as data confirming that over 60% of young people over 18 believe they will have troubles finding a job; that personal and political ties rank first on the scale of factors for landing a job; that a significant share of young people prefer to be employed in public administration; and that over 50% consider or would be ready to move out of the country, mainly for reasons of employment and/or improving their financial situation.

This research paper will present not only their attitudes on education (either formal or non-formal); work/job; national measures and youth employment assistance programs in the country, but also, for the first time in Macedonia, concepts like career maturity of unemployed youth in the Republic of Macedonia (career planning, information on career opportunities and the process of undertaking real steps and measures for career development); professional determination (the ways in which young people choose their profession and career); their “dream job”, as well as the personal traits of unemployed young people, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy levels and the work locus of control.

The research uses the broadest and most commonly accepted definition of career – the continuous life-long process of progressive achievement, focused on the demand, provision and processing of information about oneself, professional and educational opportunities and the pursuit of different roles in one’s lifetime. Profession is defined as an activity that requires specialized training, knowledge, qualification and skills.

The research study about the Macedonian youth unemployment (Topuzovska Latkovikj, Borota Popovska and Starova, 2016) is financed by Friedrich Ebert Foundation - Office in Skopje.

Methodology

The research methodology of the Study was developed to suit the needs and demands of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. It relies on a combined methodological approach, i.e. data are analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively through a use of adequate procedures and techniques characteristic for the explorative, descriptive and explanatory research methods. Activities across various stages of the Study were conducted between June and October 2016. The research team designed a questionnaire for quantitative analysis, comprised of a total of 47 questions (150 variables), and divided in several thematic sections.

The sample design for the purposes of this quantitative research relied on Macedonia’s State Statistics Office official data and EUROSTAT’s definition of young unemployed people (target research population). So, even though young individuals are typically defined as persons

between 15 and 24 years of age, we have decided to raise the upper limit to 29 year-olds not only because many young individuals remain in the education process beyond 24 years of age, but primarily because they are still financially dependent and as such cannot be included in the adult category. Young people were considered unemployed if, at the time field research was carried out, they fulfilled one of the following criteria: 1) had no job; 2) were actively seeking for a job or were making concrete efforts to start own businesses; 3) expressed their availability to start working within two weeks.

The sample was designed drawing on quotas of percentage representation of economically active population – young unemployed population in the country in three age brackets (15-19; 21-24; 25-29). As far as gender, place of residence and ethnicities are concerned, the design reflected the demographic characteristics of young persons in the eight statistical regions of the Republic of Macedonia. The sample is very close to representative (N=1055 with confidence interval set at 3 and a 95% confidence level), while the response rate is 95.6% (N=1009).

Results

Professional self-determination

Choosing a profession is one of the most important moments in an individual's life. Choosing the right career is closely tied to finding a job that will be stimulating, challenging, provide for career advancement and reap good salary and benefits. Wrong profession choice might prevent an individual from adapting to professional demands and responsibilities, eventually losing the job as a result of professional dissatisfaction. Social adaptability might suffer as well.

Consequently, respondents were asked whether they thought they had chosen the right profession for themselves. The analysis has shown that 53.5% of respondents believe the chosen profession suits them perfectly, while 30.3% are still uncertain whether they had made the right profession choice. Less than one-fifth of respondents (7.2%) responded "I blew it totally profession-wise. I have entirely different

talents I could have developed"; 4.9% said "I blew it. My profession is not relevant at the labor market"; while 4.2% responded "I blew it. My profession is not for me".

The time for making profession choices coincides with passage from childhood to early adolescence. Broadly speaking, all respondents follow this pattern, with only 10.8% of respondents declaring they had chosen their profession in early childhood or during elementary school (16%). Half of respondents chose their profession early on or during secondary school - 23.6% after completing elementary school and 24.1% while attending high school, 20.3% chose their profession after completing high school, and only 1.7% while studying at University. Training influenced merely 1.6% of respondents in making profession choices.

Profession choices are influenced by multiple factors, generally subdivided in three main groups: economic, psychological and sociological. Psychological factors include interests, and abilities or levels of intelligence; the sociological encompass the individual's opinions and life style, but also issues such as values shared by the community in general; the economic, finally, refer to the economic status provided by the chosen vocation, i.e. whether that particular profession is rewarding and in demand at the labor market. Bearing in mind vocation choices are usually made in early childhood, a period when respondents are subjected to various influences, it was interesting to see who played the greatest role in influencing their profession choices.

More than half of the respondents or 55.9% said their choice was not shaped by a particular person. Parents, however, seem to have the greatest influence over profession choices (29.9% of respondents gave this answer), distantly followed by sisters/brothers (2.4%), relatives (3.4%), friends (3%) and professors (3%). Successful managers (1.6%) and politicians (0.8%) exert the least influence.

Over half of ethnic Albanian respondents (53.70%) said their parents' opinion was critical in the profession choices they made, compared to 20.80% respondents of Macedonian ethnic background. Likewise, 64.30% of ethnic Macedonian respondents declared they chose their career independently, compared to 33.60% of ethnic Albanian respondents. The Chi-square test has confirmed the statistically significant difference ($\chi^2=141.038$; $p<0.01$).

The analysis showed that young people believe that university education is detrimental for acquisition of knowledge and skills ($m=4.04$; sub-sample comprising of respondents with university degree); followed by post-graduate studies ($m=3.95$; sub-sample comprising of respondents with Master's degree and/or Ph.D.) and secondary school degree ($m=3.11$; sub-sample comprising of respondents ranging from minimum high school diploma to a Ph.D. degree). Previous work experience ranks at the fourth place ($m=3.01$; sub-sample comprising of respondents with previous work experience), while non-formal training ranks at the bottom ($m=2.9$; sub-sample comprising of respondents with experience in non-formal education).

Likelihood to make a profession switch in case no employment is found in the near future was measured on a 1 to 5 scale, whereby 1 corresponded to the negative "I disagree fully" and 5 to the positive "I fully agree". The mean was $m=2.98$. Additionally, respondents were asked whether they would accept working something else in case they couldn't land the job they desired. Data analysis showed that 43% of respondents would accept any job offered, 38.7% of respondents would accept a different career path provided they are paid more, while 18.3% would refuse a different profession altogether.

Career orientation

Bearing in mind the respondents' unemployed status, the next battery of questions tried to determine what type of work they hope to find in the future. The survey also aimed at seeing what type of (prospective) employees the respondents hoped to be, as well as what they believe characterizes them best. Respondents were also asked to share their opinion on the impact (prospective) employment would have on their quality of life.

Half of the respondents (50%) expect to work for a fixed salary. One-third (or rather 29%) would like to start up an own business, 8% would like to freelance or be self-employed working on assignment contracts, i.e. provide services to others (e.g. consultants, translators, designers, accountants, etc.), only 4% would take over and run a family business, while 3% would pursue a career in politics.

Respondents were asked to express their attitudes on a scale from 1 to 5, whereby 1 corresponded to the negative "No, not at all" and 5 to the positive "To a large degree". The mean for respondents choosing "I'd like to do things involving interaction with other people" was 4.04, followed by $m=3.72$ "I'd like to do things that require a lot of thinking and creativity", $m=3.59$ "I'd like to manage and be responsible for the performance of others", $m=3.33$ "I'd like to do artistic stuff and be allowed to express myself freely" and finally $m=3.31$ "I'd like to do things that follow a certain pattern." In terms of choosing things that require the use of physical force, the mean was $m=2.52$, showing that most respondents expressed a negative stand.

As far as preferred working positions are concerned, i.e. employment sectors most attractive to young people, the respondents hinted at an almost identical split between private sector and public administration preferences. More concretely, 40.6% of respondents said they would like to land a job in the private sector, while 39.4% said that a public administration job would meet their expectations. Inconsiderable share of respondents expressed their desire to work in the non-governmental sector (3%), international organizations (8%) or somewhere else (9%).

Job acceptance factors

Respondents were provided with a list of 20 factors and asked to choose three they consider fundamental for accepting a job. The three most frequently selected options were: income levels (57.6%); interesting and challenging job (36.4%) and feeling of self-satisfaction and life-fulfillment. In the 10-20% interval, other significant factors should be singled out, such as: job safety (18.5%), career advancement (17.7%), service to others (11.9%), community service (11.8%), being my own boss (11%). All other factors fall below the 10% threshold.

“Dream job”

In an open-ended question where all respondents were allowed to express themselves freely, it became clear that young unemployed people dream about becoming: business owners/businessmen/businesswomen (N=43), managers (N=37), directors (N=18), lawyers (N=15), bosses (N=14), professors (N=14), and doctors (N=11). All other professions appear in less than 10 cases.

“Dream job” was explained narratively in the following manner:

- “A big and successful company, with career advancement opportunities, high salary and a spacious office. I’d like to be a unit manager.”
- “A big company in Japan. Teamwork, top-notch technology, advancement opportunities.”
- “I’d like to go to work with a smile on my face.”
- “I’d like to help people from different walks of life and status in society.”
- “Help others be happy.”
- “Work in the field I was trained in.”
- “I’d like to sit in my office, work honorably and earn 60,000 Macedonian denars or 1000 euros per month.”
- “Become a millionaire.”
- “Well paid job, with all benefits.”
- “A job that will provides opportunities for professional and personal advancement, without pressure.”
- “Challenging, well-paid job”
- “Pleasant working environment and possibilities for career advancement, teamwork and a highly-regarded and valued position.”
- “A job I can excel in and show my skills and capacities, contribute to its development and advancement in a positive way.”
- “Work abroad.”

- "A job that will earn me enough money for a normal life."
- "A job making me happy."
- "Flexible working hours, good salary and career advancement opportunities."
- "Flexible working hours, no stress, high salary."

Career maturity

In terms of having a plan to overcome unemployment within 5 years, 52.5% of respondents said they have made a partial plan, 10.2% said they have a fully-elaborated plan, while 37.2% have no plan whatsoever.

Next, we tried to determine the activities pursued in view of implementing the plan. In terms of their own perception on the quality of their Curriculum vitae, the mean was set at $m=3.01$ on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Similarly, perceptions on professional barriers and ways for overcoming them measured through the statement "When I face challenges in implementing my career plan, I always develop concrete steps for overcoming problems tied to my career development" followed the same pattern with mean set at $m=3.31$.

In terms of the steps undertaken in view of implementing the plan, the following tendencies were recorded: one fourth of respondents (25%) declared they were interested in continuing their formal education (secondary, university, post-graduate); one fifth (20%) were interested in pursuing various forms of non-formal education (courses); 19% were interested in alternative career paths; 16% were interested in innovative trends in their area of interest and 11% said they were interested in the activities pursued by specialized organizations. Almost 10% responded they were not interested in any of the above.

Job search

Young people were asked to answer how they assess/perceive themselves in terms of time/effort spent in finding a job. Results show that over half of the respondents (55%) believe they are actively trying to find a job, while one-fourth of them (24%) are not trying at all. Only

9% of respondents said they regularly register with the Employment Agency of the Republic of Macedonia (AVRM), while 6% of them hope someone else will find them a job.

Research findings show that only 14% of young unemployed people regularly apply to job announcements, 45.9% have applied a few times; while as many as 40.1% of respondents have never applied to a job announcement.

From those who had applied to a job announcement, a total of N=323 were called for an interview, whereupon as many as 60.9% said they believe that the main reason for not being selected was the fact they had no one to “pull the strings”. 11.40% said they had education inappropriate for the position, 9.80% were offered, but declined the job, 8.90% said they did not possess the skills and competencies required, 6.40% blamed it on the jitters, while 2.70% believed they scored poorly on the work-related knowledge and skills test.

Respondents believe that the main reason for not finding a job are work-place shortage (34.8%) and “string-pulling” for jobs (23.6%), i.e. not knowing the right people to help them get the job (10.90%). A smaller percentage believe that it owes to lack of relevant work experience (13.50%) or inappropriate education (7.70%); 15% of respondents said that the remuneration for the job offered was low; 8.60% believe there are work opportunities at the labor market, but they lack the information, while 6.10% think there were some other reasons.

Internet is the most commonly sought source for searching job opportunities (39%), followed by heart-to-heart conversations with people who have succeeded in the field of interest (27%). A smaller percentage of respondents (17%) singled out their interest in companies/institutions/employers relevant for their career opportunities. Less than a fifth of respondents (16.3%) said they do none of the above.

Previous work experience

Asked about previous work experience (if any), 40% responded they were never employed, while only 7% of respondents said they were employed full-time on an indeterminate term contract.

Most respondents were employed temporarily as seasonal workers (27.40%), on service agreements (16.80%) or on short-term assignments (8.80%).

Barriers for starting an own business

Next in line was to determine the factors that encourage or hinder young people from starting or running an own business. The three most frequently singled-out barriers were: lack of information on the access to financial resources (35.6%), unfavorable socio-economic circumstances in the country/expectations for better business conditions (30%) and reluctance to risk-taking (27%). One-fifth (19%) of respondents admitted they don't have a business idea, 14.2% said they lack the necessary skills for running a business; 14.2% responded they lack positive business models in the country; 13.3% claimed they had no desire investing money in business; 11.4% refuse to take on business responsibilities; 6.2% said they lacked support from the family; 3.4% said they had no time because they look after family members; while 5.6% had different reasons from the ones listed above.

Awareness of unemployment-reduction measures and their rating

In order to overcome youth unemployment, the Macedonian Government launched a number of measures and policies aimed at improving conditions for decent youth employment. These measures include: (1) strengthening labor market institutions (for young people); (2) improving youth employment opportunities, primarily through active labor market policies and programs (APPT); (3) improving youth employment by implementing measures for private sector development; and (4) guaranteeing labor market social inclusion measures for deprived youth.

The purpose of this section was to evaluate the effectiveness of government employment measures in terms of how they are perceived by young unemployed people in the Republic of Macedonia. Gathered data show that almost half of respondents (47%) are only partially familiar with the measures, 34% are fully aware of them, while 19% do not know such measures exist.

Asked how they would assess the measures (on a school grading-scale from 1 to 5), respondents claiming to be partially or fully familiar with the employment measures (N=811) gave a relatively low mean value, set at $m=2.80$. Nonparametric tests do not reveal considerable statistical variance with regards to the three age brackets (15-19, 20-24, 25-29).

Furthermore, when inquired whether state-pursued policies and measures are adequate for active inclusion and encouragement of young people to partake in the labor market, 40% of respondents answered negatively, almost half (47%) believe the authorities are partially successful, while only 11.9% believe that the policies implemented are successful and driving young people to partake in the labor market.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem represents self-assessment/self-perception of personal self-worth. The self-esteem scale is a global 10-item Likert scale, using 4-item value scale format (ranging from 3 – I fully agree, 2 – I agree, 1 – I disagree, 0 – I fully disagree) measuring the positive and negative feelings about the self. The scale is uni-dimensional. Items number 2, 5, 6, 8 and 9 are coded reversely (0 – I fully agree, 1 – I agree, 2 – I disagree, 3 – I fully disagree). Individual score is commuted by adding up the values obtained for all 10 items. The theoretical range of the scale ranges between a minimum score of 0 to a maximum of 30. The higher the score, the higher the individual's self-esteem.

Internal consistency of the survey was tested by using the Cronbach alpha coefficient. Calculated at $\alpha=.787$, it can be inferred that the scale possesses a high degree of reliability, falling between the 0.72 and 0.87 reliability range, commonly accepted as satisfactory in all similar surveys around the globe.

A total of 998 respondents gave valid answers at the self-esteem scale, ranging from an individual score of 10 to a maximum of 30. With mean score of $M=22.31$ and standard deviation of $.36$, it can be concluded that young unemployed people in the Republic of Macedonia have fairly high self-esteem.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the trust in one's own ability for successfully accomplishing various tasks/problem solving/reaching goals.

The general self-efficacy scale is a 10-item Likert scale, using 4-item value scale format (ranging from 1 – Not at all true, 2 – Hardly true, 3 – Moderately true, 4 – Exactly true). Total individual score is commuted by adding up the values obtained for all 10 items. The theoretical range of the scale ranges between a minimum score of 10 to a maximum of 40. The higher the score, the higher the individual's self-efficacy is.

Internal consistency of the survey was tested by using the Cronbach alpha coefficient. Calculated at $\alpha=.893$, it can be inferred that the scale possesses a high degree of reliability, falling between the 0.76 and 0.90 reliability range, commonly accepted as satisfactory in similar surveys around the globe.

A total of 1,000 respondents gave valid answers at the self-efficacy scale, ranging from an individual score of 10 to a maximum of 40. With mean score of $M=31.97$ and standard deviation of $.98$, it can be concluded that young unemployed people in the Republic of Macedonia have fairly high self-efficacy.

Work locus of control

Work locus of control refers to the level to which people believe they have control over events/circumstances in their professional environment (at a general level, not on a concrete position).

The Work Locus of Control scale is a 16-item scale, using 6-item value scale format (ranging from 1 – disagree very much, 2 – disagree moderately, 3 – disagree slightly, 4 – agree slightly, 5 – agree moderately and 6 – agree very much) designed to measure control beliefs in work settings. Items number 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 11, 14, and 15 are coded reversely (1=6, 2=5, 3=4, 4=3, 5=2, 6=1). The scale is in positive correlation with the general locus of control ($r=.50$ to $r=.55$). Individual score is commuted by adding up the values obtained from all items. The theoretical range of the scale ranges between a minimum score of 16 to a maximum of 95, and a mean set at 56. Higher scores reflect higher external locus of control, while lower scores infer higher internal locus of control.

Internal consistency of the survey was tested by using the Cronbach alpha coefficient. Calculated at $\alpha=.707$, it can be inferred that the scale possesses a high degree of reliability, falling between the 0.57 and 0.85 reliability range, commonly accepted as satisfactory in similar surveys around the globe.

A total of 1,002 respondents gave valid answers at the work locus of control scale, ranging from an individual score of 22 to a maximum of 82. With mean score in the middle of the theoretical range set at $M=55.15$ and standard deviation of 8.73, it can be concluded that young unemployed people in the Republic of Macedonia are somewhat ambivalent.

Discussion and conclusions

High school career counseling centers for professional orientation are particularly important in this regard, since, as results confirm, high school is the period when young people make their career choices.

It is recommended that institutions providing non-formal education adapt their programs to training young unemployed people and offer comprehensive guidance for development of employability skills and capacities. Young people will thus be provided with competitive advantage in the recruitment and selection process in accordance with labor market demands.

Companies and human resources professionals should take these personal characteristics and job preferences into account both upon recruiting young candidates for employment and upon designing working positions, because there is high probability that young people would prefer remaining unemployed rather than accepting a job below their expectations. If they do accept and remain on the position, they will most likely be unsatisfied, demotivated and manifest lower performance levels and weak loyalty.

Young people obviously have dire need for financial assistance (preferably in the form of non-repayable funds), but also stimulation and development of entrepreneurial spirit and skills in a comprehensive process of development of appropriate entrepreneurial climate in the country.

Bearing in mind that young unemployed people do not discriminate against any sector, it is important that public administration/public sector institutions open up for employment of young people by planning new working positions and/or filling positions vacated pursuant to regular retirement of older employees. Formal qualifications of young people and their individual abilities relevant for the working position must be paramount in the selection process. On the other side, the private sector must gain the trust of the young people as a serious employment possibility.

Information on the measures and their availability must be stepped up, so young people from across the Republic of Macedonia can easily access them. Effects of the measures must be monitored and evaluated continuously by national authorities, even modified occasionally if need be.

Young people should be exposed to role models they can take examples by, including through public awareness campaigns championing successful youth; information disseminated by high school and university career centers on former students' career paths; or special initiatives under the patronages of business chambers and professional associations recognizing young successful professionals across various occupations and industries.

Since salary is obviously the key external motivator, employers should initially offer the realistic or, at least, the average salary paid in the profession/working position/industry. Young people might be further attracted and convinced to stay if employers provide opportunities for career advancement.

Cooperation between faculties and the business sector should continue and improve.

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