

Youth guarantee in everyday life and politics in the Finnish context

Introduction to a pamphlet by the Finnish Youth Research Network

Anu Gretschel, Kari Paakkunainen, Anne-Mari Souto & Leena Suurpää
(Translation: Kaisa Enticknap-Seppänen, Kielipalvelu Enticknap-Seppänen)

In a relatively short space of time the youth guarantee has achieved a strong symbolic position in public rhetoric in Finland. In addition to this, the youth guarantee provides a natural framework for political debate whether on youth in the training and job market or on wider questions concerning youth and their attitudes to society and citizenship, cross-generational solidarity, engagement and disengagement. The youth guarantee mirrors the day to day work of professionals working with youth in a variety of ways. Neither are youth researchers excluded from the discussion: society is thirsting for immediate information on the scourge of social exclusion and how to solve it. Young experts by right of experience reach the headlines with figures to narrate how society has pushed them aside and how they are coping. Therefore the youth guarantee can justifiably be examined as one of the clearest examples of youth-focused social responsibility of today – using the terms of the media society, a kind of social “brand”.

The current collection of writings was born in this complex social and cultural situation. In spring 2013 an open invitation was published by the editorial staff of the Youth Research Network to search for writers in a collection of writings known as a pamphlet. The invitation encouraged writers to think about the youth guarantee in terms of being a youth and generation related phenomenon in particular. The writers were free to choose their own point of view and they were told that the subject could be approached for example from a youth experience, institutional practice, public debate or political guidance perspective. The editors were positively surprised by a large group of enthusiastic authors: all in all 55 writers participated in this pamphlet including researchers, teachers, active citizens, political decision-makers, government administrators and professionals working with youth. In tone, the writings are intensive and they assess the youth guarantee and the discussions, practices and concepts surrounding it and search for alternatives.

This collection does not offer one single youth guarantee story. The texts place before the reader experiences, perceptions, views and fiction. These writings prove that the youth guarantee and the social exclusion that shadows it, is the dominant framework where youth and Finnish society of today and the future is being discussed. A strained relationship with the symbolic stake-out of the youth-guarantee shines through the texts. On the one hand the youth guarantee has lifted the precarious life conditions of youth into the limelight: nobody can easily avoid responsibility for this diminishing age group. This tells not only of public awareness but also of the significant economic investment in youth affairs included in the youth guarantee. On the other hand, the writings exude



the grave concern that the youth guarantee so strongly dominates the space for discussion that other youth issues (such as so called ordinary youth, and basic services) will be threatened with marginalization or that guarantee-thinking will cloud a deeper understanding of them. The writings reflect the expectations and fears associated with the youth guarantee. The pressure experienced by those working with youth seems to have grown and their job description has simultaneously expanded but is nevertheless narrower. Although the youth guarantee has created new duties, the customer relations and productivity viewpoint is apt to narrow overall ways of interacting, working and dealing with young people. The youth guarantee is also stony ground for policy makers. The eternal tense divisions of youth surround the youth guarantee such as the opposing pairs of political guidance, support and control or incentives and sanctions.

It is clear that the timing of the youth guarantee is both opportune yet complex. The contents of the texts tackle today's worrying trend of inequality in Finland and around the world. The by-nature basic questions of social exclusion and marginalization are emphasized to such a degree that they leave the exclusion discussion that so easily clutches at figures and statistics, behind. The question of unfair treatment experienced by youth is discussed in all its variety: the uncertainty and blur of life, cut-off training and working life routes, fragile relationships with the authorities, competition for resources and responsibility, lack of respect and experiences of being heard, fractures in generational dialogue, feelings of unfairness and insignificance. Many of the texts criticize the role of the youth guarantee in upholding the norm of a streamlined life-story with young people rushing to be part of working life.

The collection of writings highlights the Finnish individual-oriented ideal of equality and the tension caused by parity thinking that nonetheless emphasizes differences between groups. The texts demand a more articulated and critical political treatment of such differences by those who work within the sphere of the youth guarantee: what differences between young people and youth groups are recognized, which differences and inequalities are not mentioned? Are the consequences of well-meaning action geared at young people always positive from the viewpoint of all youth groups? The writings illuminate the relationship between age and citizenship in a variety of ways. The Eurobarometer has indicated for a considerable amount of time that age is one the most important factors in terms of experiencing social exclusion, and Finland is not a social exclusion-free zone.

The conditions for inclusion in the youth guarantee do not only revert to age limits but many other differences leading to exclusion are mentioned. The youth guarantee must also clarify its position on racism and the complex experiences of social exclusion that can be caused by intertwined geographical and cultural distance. Overall the writings challenge differentiated analyses of young people and youth. The position of youth cannot be typified as purely "institutionalized" vs "excluded from institutions". In order to touch upon the varied everyday life of young people it is necessary to overcome crass categorizations to succeed in not only analysing with sensitivity different youth groups and the differences within and between them but also supporting them: which actions hit the target, how and with which cases of "excluded" young people?

The writings confirm and also challenge the belief in institutions of Finnish society. The tough question as regards the youth guarantee should actually be, how can society and its institutions adapt to the conditions of heterogeneous youth groups instead of asking the considerably more familiar question of how do young people adapt to an institutional system. In order to illustrate this reverse point of view the writers describe for example the unpredictable and unfocused nature of the gap between school bench and working life, and demand further consideration and capability to seek alternative institutional solutions and to look elsewhere. In recent years much research has confirmed that such a precarious position in today's societies is not a fleeting problem that only affects youth. If uncertainty follows the young generation into misty adulthood, the institutional system will undergo pressure to change. The ethical frames of a society based on voluntary work and guarantees appear Janus-faced according to the collection of writings: On the one hand the youth guarantee as a series

of actions alienates and distances, on the other hand it includes and stimulates social responsibility. While describing the fragmentary nature of the lives of young people the writers also discuss the fragmentary nature and precariousness of social responsibility. Who bears the overall responsibility for youth issues? According to the writers, the progress of the idea of shared responsibility into practice is extremely painful, even when the proclamation of achieving cross-administrative cooperation is on everybody's lips.

The pamphlet is divided into four parts. The first, *Images of Youth* takes us on a winding drive through training, work and working life. The texts in this part sketch the cultural face of the image of youth reflected in the youth guarantee. Titta Tuohinen dares policy makers to stop staring at statistical commonalities to understand the demands of modern working life. Tuohinen's text inspires the question why new forms of competence possessed by youth are not reflected more strongly as employment policy innovations. According to Susanna Ågren, this will never happen while fear raises its quavering voice in policy making preventing creativity and untethered steps. Nor does Anna Puuronen believe without misgivings in the ability of adults to make decisions concerning young people and their issues. Puuronen explains that young people, as second-class citizens, have to adapt to periods of unemployment, accepting them as normal when seeking an ever-decreasing amount of training places and jobs. Work is still valued and appreciated but the image of work and finding employment definitely differs from that of previous generations.

In Juha Hirvonen's rhetorical analysis positive special treatment and market-driven employment policy are fatally combined in the youth guarantee. This results in a mind-set where youth are only thought to be fully fledged members of society when they have completed their training and are in employment. Tomi Kiilakoski takes readers to the sources of the NEET concept in Wales. He sees that the youth guarantee's successful conquest of Europe is based on a forced narrow view of exclusion (Not in Education, Employment or Training) which is easy to quantify. Elina Havu states that the youth guarantee must have suddenly become unwittingly gender and minority blind. She wonders how this could possibly happen in Finland after everything that has been done to promote equality of the sexes and minority rights.

Likewise, Lotta Haikkola lambasts the simplifying classifications of youth. Discussion concerning the exclusion of immigrants hides their individual needs and the keys to finding solutions behind vague terms: when is exclusion due to alienating practices, when, for example, to poor language skills? According to Elina Niinivaara and Mervi Suonpää, a youth guarantee putting the exclusive practices of society right is needed, starting with granting bank identification code- and identification methods to people resident in Finland for a longer period of time and continuing with not forcing people into activity by threatening them with sanctions.

Anu Gretschel and Pirjo Junttila-Vitikka find that young people will come back for guidance even when they are in employment for as long as the support to listen to their inner voice and to fight for their goals fails, and when young people train for the wrong fields of employment. Veli-Matti Ulvinen turns this set-up upside down and considers whether the youth guarantee is really a sign that society's capacity to function, employment market productivity and tax revenues are decreasing, in other words highlighting the threat that society is being excluded and losing its competitiveness in the international markets. Here, the core concern is not so much the 'exclusion' of youth and the guarantee given to youth by society in itself but how society can ensure its own capacity to function. Ulla Hyvänen and Mikko Valtonen believe in the opportunities provided by the youth guarantee, although they also desire new on-the-job learning models and point out that the apprenticeship model as it stands is too demanding for those included in the youth guarantee. We also accompany Anne-Mari Ollikainen on a ten-year unemployment tour, which introduces us to customer service, project jungles, reporting tasks, development, sitting and being trained for nothing, unfairness, and unpaid work instead of salaried employment.

The pamphlet's second and third parts consider the youth guarantee as *an area of social policy and an*



administrative action programme. Pilvi Torsti draws with insight the (government) policy curve of the youth guarantee and its unsteady progress, from her own perspective. The rainbow cooperation ideals of the guarantee project and training imperatives (belief, threats, needs, amazement) restore belief in a stable education and employment society. However, neither Torsti nor the other writers tell for how long the resources of the youth guarantee project will last and what they will cover. Liisa Winqvist relies on guidelines that originate from the information policy of the Ministry of the Economy and Employment and generates belief in the intensive development of the programme society also around the youth guarantee. The aim is to stem the tide of youth unemployment lasting more than three months so that nine out of ten young people flow into employment within the normal time frame. The threatening contexts of this local reform are recognised: decreasing job vacancies, the large-scale migration of young people to other regions, insufficient services, and a weak municipal economy. Jouko Kajanoja pauses by these municipal equations: paradoxically, the well-resourced 'Full Employment' project in Paltamo enabled local participants to learn for and gain full employment. This is possible and no-one was able to predict the social and economic costs and benefits. Finland is still unable to calculate socially or to actively provide work as the public sector does in Sweden.

Timo Harrikari seizes the irony of the sociological classics (Marx, Weber, Durkheim and then Beck) and takes them with him in the spirit of the pamphlet. Thus the aims of the youth guarantee settle into place as part of the three elements of generational policy control of late-modernity: the competition state investment - alienation dichotomy, control risk rationalism and the atmosphere of mistrust. The written questions by members of parliament analysed by Sanna Aaltonen tell of moral control concern and of the articulation of extensively differing interests of youth and parents in parliamentary discussions. Her text reflects the problems of the youth guarantee's fragmentary treatment. Instead of comprehensive discussion, people are easily driven into lobbying for a narrow point of view, where different youth groups and their specific problems may gain a disproportionate amount of attention.

Martti Siisiäinen brings to life the examination of practices considered humiliating by young people in marginal youth groups who distance themselves from the economic sense of the system and make tactical moves by exploiting the system's mobilising practices "sensibly in practice" (Bourdieu). If their precarious position is stigmatised and those in "normal employment" distance themselves even further from those who wish to avoid temporary employment as a lifestyle, the many models of social policy and marginal solidarity will become even more fragile. Terhi Halonen's everyday ethnography of a homeless youth describes above and beyond accommodation policy cares, how leaping from one pad and social circle to another and the attempt to bridge the gap between "day care work" and a real job and salary requires a flexible intelligence and a tactical understanding of all types of three-month guarantees! The essay's central narrator is a hidden relative to Tuohinen's positive, yet marginal young expert-acrobats, whose expertise is not empowered by the system.

Dan Koivulaakso and Reetta Keränen bring the rights of paid workers, achieved through struggle, into the special treatment of youth scenario and indicate that disrespect for the terms and conditions of employment insults the young. The writers show that limiting the conditions of employment seldom helps young people to become employed. According to Rauno Vanhanen, employers are prepared to have young people learn on the job if their student status and realistic market recruitment conditions in favour of the employer can be guaranteed. Antti Lindtman describes the good cooperation house of youth voluntary work where something always needs to be repaired. The employment markets are involved in the guarantee but Lindtman clearly scorns the use of cheap labour. Olli Joensuu and Hanna-Mari Manninen call for the third sector to strengthen its position and claim its right to be a partner in the youth guarantee scheme. It is not just a question of formal positions and resources for actors but of removing obstacles and changing attitudes towards learning environments and recognising acquired knowledge.

Teppo Eskelinen is breaking the limits of European austerity policy urging the state to use its

power and take responsibility for supporting full employment in Finland in the future. Savings gained by employment, the weakening of stabilisation policy specifically in youth employment and large-scale measures investing in the solidarity of youth and the long-term unemployed are the themes of Pekka Tiainen's writing. A significant increase in salary grants is a necessary part of dealing with youth and long-term unemployment, and any delay causes problems. Erkki Laukkanen enters the internal workings of the youth guarantee where promises of funding have been watered down and passed from one field of administration to another. In this analysis the long-term unemployed are left high and dry. The researcher of Siltasaarikatu trusts in the development of the education society but does not consider the raising of the school-leaving age associated with the youth guarantee reform, as a completely positive solution.

Mari Ahonen-Walker and Reetta Pietikäinen approach the youth guarantee from the position of work-shop environments and actors, pointing out the fragile perspective of the youth guarantee. Those young people in the greatest need of rehabilitation do not keep up well with the guarantee's three-month statutory time-scale; the rushed guarantee easily excludes them. With its limited resources, outreach youth work is unable to guarantee rehabilitation services. Workshop professionals write openly about the under-use of workshops while the employment office is cutting job-trials. Under the critical eye of the writers appear the employment office reform with its new division of tasks, its virtualisation of personalised guidance and the opportunities of workshop employment steam-rolled by the market ethos. Jussi Ronkainen associates the efforts of the youth guarantee with a shallow level of policy guidance. As in Matti Rimpelä's argument, Ronkainen's text supports the view that the whole youth guarantee would be made obsolete by strongly and systematically focusing on and investing in preventive services. The biggest and most durable problems in society such as cross-generation exclusion are not often caught in the net cast by a certain set of actions.

Many of the writers evaluated the plusses and minuses of central European employment models. The German model and its economic austerity policy applications in youth employment reforms are part of European imperative and drive. Anu-Hanna Anttila asks whether we are moving away from the Scandinavian tradition towards central European subsidiarity thinking. There are also experiences of special youth employment measures with a weak impact in Holland, for example the Melkert experiment which was based on a low-pay model, analysed by Paul Jonker-Hoffrén in his writing. Georg Henrik Wredén's text recounts the expansion of national youth guarantee scheme efforts to the EU parliament decision-making and structural funds level, a success story – in Europe, where it is difficult to generate unemployment statistics and common indicators.

The fourth part of the pamphlet tackles the *institutional practices and generational power relations* of the youth guarantee. On an institutional level, the confining of youth guarantee activities to education and employment seems to be turning into a form of struggle for agency. Generally, the youth guarantee is considered important: to be involved, is to be socially responsible. However the limits of the youth guarantee and its inbuilt assumption that youth live a life according to normative expectations are also apparent in the way that institutions organise themselves as implementing agents. To date the youth guarantee has been marketed and financed through the Ministry but the municipal sector has a crucial and responsible role in its implementation, as argued by Maarit Kallio-Savela and Reijo Vuorento. While municipal actors emphasise their significant role particularly as education and employment service developers, the municipal sector is nevertheless challenged to develop other meaningful services for young people. For example, Matilde Wrede-Jäntti and Jaana Lähteenmaa unravel the partly pessimistic hope of those involved in youth work and call for dialogue on the implementation of the youth guarantee spanning the borders between social and youth work.

On a wider scale, projects as outsourced welfare services and the third sector are forced to argue the significance of their case in the extreme terms of "one issue movements". Thought provoking examples of this are Yrjö Laasanen's description of how young people without a school-leaving certificate after basic education are driven beyond the guarantee's boundaries of support and Kaisa



Tuuteri's reminder that homelessness amongst youth has become more common. Meanwhile, Päivi Harinen's text travels to Finland's sparsely populated regions and asks how and on whose terms the guarantee of education will be implemented in districts without schools.

At this point we are reminded of the politics of difference and the struggle to recognise such differences as mentioned at the beginning of this introduction. Although it can be said that the youth guarantee demands and moreover sustains consideration of the comprehensive variety of youth needs so as to differentiate them all the more in the future. It is not just a question of education and employment. Many actors working with youth emphasise this variety and "the voice of youth" in an attempt to wake up both the ministries and the municipal arena, as Elina Lavikainen so aptly puts it in her writing. There is still much work to be done, but in this case the act of "shouting and being heard" is shown to have succeeded: For example Ville Heinonen writes how the competence programme for young adults will have to continue to focus on outreach work and the holistic consideration of youth life situations as well as education. Reform is also indicated if the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health receives more and better resources to implement the youth guarantee in the future. The risk of the politics of difference is that it could cause the various protagonists to compete amongst themselves, though at the present time multi professional cooperation seems to be working well in the field. The issues expressed in the writings that provoked special criticism were cross-administrative cooperation and the neglect of child protection and youth work – or the disregard for youth work and the "reinvention" of its procedures in new contexts.

The current situation is grotesque because the study of youth is being narrowed down in the struggle to a point where only one issue or one point of view is highlighted, or restricted to the customer viewpoint which is quite removed from the wider questions of citizenship, membership and engagement. Simultaneously the intrinsic value of youth becomes narrower and fades away as indicated by Anne-Mari Souto in her text that focuses on professional education environments operating according to the ethos of streamlining, Elina Pekkarinen's writing that analyses the downside of child protection and Petri Cederlöf's detailed statement on the significance of basic youth work. Generational politics is a question of power use and the partial consideration and control of youth, as in the definition of different guidance needs. In addition to the aforementioned writers, Jatta Herranen's and Aurélie Mary's texts tackle the tricky question of sluggish institutions. There is a risk that the norm-based model of youth will remain untouched, the internal activities of institutions unquestioned and for example, the unwavering belief in education will continue, while internationalisation and increasing precariousness in the employment markets will remain undefined. At the same time, alternative ways to be young, live and obtain an income are not being recognised and supported, whether in terms of acknowledging the proven value of hobbies in engaging youth as members of society, as written by Mikko Salasuo and Helena Huhta in their call for a hobby guarantee, or hence the justification for semi-professional amateurs on the periphery of working life as described by Mirja Määttä. The situation is paradoxical and the pamphlet ends with Jaana Lähteenmaa's writing which summarises perfectly the conflicting ideas of youth activation.

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