# The EU and the regulation of young people's work transitions

## Individuation, governance and quality

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Working Paper 2025.02

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Cite this publication: Steiert M. (2025) The EU and the regulation of young people's work transitions: individuation, governance and quality, Working Paper 2025.02, ETUI.

Brussels, 2025

Print: ETUI Printshop, Brussels

D/2025/10.574/14
ISSN 1994-4446 (print version)
ISSN 1994-4454 (electronic version)

The ETUI is co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the ETUI. Neither the European Union nor the ETUI can be held responsible for them.

# Contents

## Abstract

Since the sovereign debt crisis, the European Union has focused on regulating young people's transitions to work. Today, an EU governance infrastructure for work transitions is centred on the reinforced European Youth Guarantee. Sociologists view youth as a transition marked by milestones of social inclusion such as building independent social lives and transitioning from education to work.

This study analyses how young people's work transitions are regulated in the EU via three research objectives: *contextualisation; assessment and critique;* and *transformation*. First, I contextualise how national and EU labour regulation 'individuated' young people's transitions. By individuation, I refer to placing the primary responsibility for work transitions on young individuals and reducing the role of public institutions and the social partners to provide skill-building opportunities. This regulatory approach reinforces young people's already increased risks of entering adverse life trajectories and intensifies the broader trends of welfare demutualisation and labour flexibilisation. Second, I assess and critique the current EU governance infrastructure for work transitions. This novel governance model improves policy coordination, but individuation remains embedded in it. Third, I argue that work transitions should be regulated to ensure quality in young people's access to work and quality in their work. Access to work should not be pitted against work quality. I therefore propose guiding principles for regulators and practical ideas for integrating these principles into the EU governance infrastructure. These practical ideas include compelling EU labour law regulating work transitions, the development of convincing EU regulation of traineeships or innovative uses of EU funding.

**Acknowledgements**
I would like to thank Kalina Arabadjieva and Wouter Zwysen for the opportunity to reflect on young workers and their transitions to work in this study and for their continuous support in the drafting process. My profound gratitude goes to Lucien Carré, Ben Carver, Susi Forderer, Aikaterini Orfanidi and two anonymous reviewers for repeatedly challenging and much improving this study.

# Introduction

Since the sovereign debt crisis, the European Union (EU) has focused on regulating young people's transitions to work (work transitions), recognising their importance in the broader transition from childhood to adulthood. Sociologists view youth as a transition marked by milestones of social inclusion such as building independent social lives or transitioning into work (Galland 2017; Chevalier 2018). Today, the EU has developed a governance infrastructure for work transitions centred on the reinforced European Youth Guarantee (REYG) (Council of the European Union 2020c). Previous research has examined specific aspects of EU youth policy, like EU youth employment policy in the sovereign debt crisis,[1] internship regulation,[2] the REYG,[3] and young-age discrimination under Directive 2000/78/EC,[4] this study, however, offers the first comprehensive analysis of how EU regulation governs young people's work transitions and, thus, their social inclusion.

The analysis pursues three objectives: *contextualising* the regulation of work transitions; *assessing and critiquing* their current regulation in the EU; and *transforming* this regulation. First, the context provided sets the stage for the assessment, critique and transformation. I explain how both national and EU labour regulation have 'individuated' transitions, particularly up to the 2010s. By individuation, I refer to placing the primary responsibility for work transitions on young individuals, thereby over-responsibilising transitioning young people and reducing the role of public institutions and the social partners to providing skill-building opportunities. Individuation leaves young people to navigate their transitions alone. It reinforces risks of entering adverse life trajectories and intensifies the broader trends of welfare demutualisation, labour flexibilisation and the fragmentation of work that have shaped policymaking since the 1980s.[5] Individuation should further be taken seriously in contemporary debates on social investment welfare states in Europe that combine lifelong learning, life-course transitions and inclusive safety nets as individuation directly affects social inclusion processes (European Commission 2024c, Hemerijck et al. 2023).

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**1.** Chabanet 2014; Poulou 2014; Votinius 2014, 2018; Papadopoulos 2016; Lafleur and Stanek 2017; Kougias 2019.
**2.** Rosin 2016; Stewart et al. 2021; Helme 2024.
**3.** Bussi and Geyer 2013; Escudero and López Mourelo 2015; Pastore 2015; Cabasés Piqué et al. 2016; Dingeldey et al. 2019; Tosun et. al 2019; Cabasés Piqué and Úbeda 2021; Ferrera et. al 2023.
**4.** Sargeant 2013; Belavusau and Henrard 2019; Blackham 2019; Steiert 2024b.
**5.** Mutualisation shifts risks 'either away from individual workers so that the risks or risk-costs are borne by, or shared with, an entity or set of entities or a community (mutualisation) or back towards the individual worker (demutualisation)' (Countouris and Freedland 2013: 7; Freedland and Countouris 2011).

Second, I assess and critique the current EU governance infrastructure for work transitions (Section 2). This novel governance model improves policy coordination by combining binding and non-binding EU standards with mechanisms for their domestic translation, introduces quality objectives for work transitions and shifts away from the austerity-driven individuation that treated young people as adjustment variables. Yet individuation remains embedded in this system. For instance, the infrastructure still risks reducing work transitions to skills alone and certain EU instruments, such as the ban on youth discrimination, preserve individuation.

Third, I seek to transform the regulation of work transitions. Transitions should be regulated to ensure quality in young people's access to work and quality in their work. By quality in access to work, I mean fostering a sustainable attachment to the world of work instead of one based on access to work regardless of its type. Quality of work refers to regulation that promotes decent work. This call for transformation is also justified by broader reflections beyond young people's personal development and social justice. For young people to be a force of creative transformation in today's ecological and social emergencies, they must have decent and clear pathways of social inclusion.[6] This argument unfolds in two steps: first, I propose guiding principles as a regulatory alternative to individuation (Section 3); second, I offer practical ideas for integrating these principles into the EU governance infrastructure (Section 4).

**6.** See for example the link between the UN Sustainable Development Goals and Youth at https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/youth

# 1. Context. Youth and individuation in work transitions

This section first underscores the legal elusiveness of defining youth and proposes a sociological understanding of it. Youth is a transition from childhood to adulthood that unfolds heterogeneously but includes shared risks. My study uses this sociologic understanding to dissect how work transitions are regulated in the EU and to ground the principles for their transformation. Based on this understanding, I show and reject how labour regulation in the EU has individuated young people's work transitions.

## 1.1 Youth as transitions to social inclusion

Youth employment and work transitions are complex and lack a unified legal definition. While the minimum employment age sets a lower age limit to prevent child labour (Council of the European Union 1994; ILO 1999), defining youth remains contested. Should an upper age limit define who is a young worker? Are all young workers *workers*? Sociological research offers a more nuanced perspective, viewing youth as a transitional life stage rather than a fixed age range (Lee 2014). During this transition from childhood to adulthood, a person engages with milestones of social inclusion like entering work (Chevalier 2018; Galland 2017). Engaging with these milestones more frequently than other age groups also means a comparatively more frequent exposure to risks of marginalisation and entering adverse life trajectories.

Young people moreover navigate increasingly fragmented environments as they transition to adulthood. Youth today is characterised by a lengthening of the time spent in this life stage; the desynchronisation of milestones; and reversibility, with individuals revisiting milestones (Walther 2006). While some young people predictably move to adulthood, others seek self-set goals, yo-yo between work, unemployment and training, or experience difficult life events (Walther and Plug 2006). Youth is a dual transition: it is heterogeneous, as individuals engage differently with social inclusion, yet includes risks, particularly in securing sustainable, quality work.

The predictable, structured and early work transition of the post-war period (Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 49; Roberts 1968; Vogt 2018) has indeed split into a multiplicity of work transitions (Chevalier 2018; Walther and Plug 2006). Consider the persistence of youth unemployment since the 1970s (Eurostat 2024e), and the increased length of time spent in education and training, partly as evasive strategy to unemployment (OECD 1984: 23-24; Soro-Bonmatí 2001:

2-6, Chapter 1 - Stylised Facts). Young workers are more likely to be employed in temporary and part-time work relations (Eurostat 2024c, 2024d), often involuntarily (Eurostat 2019, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). Youth employment is also associated with work relations that purport to combine work and training, such as traineeships and apprenticeships. Young workers are overrepresented in platform work and the wider gig economy (Brancati Urzì et al. 2020; Piasna et al. 2022). In addition, they enter into work relations which are often not classified as work, such as au pairs (Council of Europe 1969), civic service arrangements at national and EU level[7] or work experience schemes for employment policy (Freedland et al. 2007; Stewart et al. 2018, 2021).

In summary, the effective regulation of work transitions must reconcile the dual imperatives of supporting diverse personal development and addressing the shared risks that being young brings about. Section 3 builds on these imperatives to propose a regulatory approach that aims at quality work transitions as an alternative to the individuation strategy discussed in the following subsection.

## 1.2 Individuation of work transitions

The regulation of work transitions in the EU has increasingly neglected the balance between personal development and shared risks, particularly prior to the 2010s. While risk mutualisation has been historically lower for young workers, as evidenced by their persistent challenge in accessing social protection (Chevalier 2018; Fabris and Nardo 2024), the regulatory approach of the past decades has individuated young people's work transitions, placing disproportionate emphasis on individual responsibility for social inclusion since the late 1980s. This trend aligns with, and intensifies for young workers, the broader phenomena of labour deregulation, the fissuring or fragmentation of work and demutualisation, whereby collective risk-sharing is weakened and emphasis placed on individual responsibility for social inclusion (Countouris and Freedland 2013: 7; Freedland and Countouris 2011).[8] For example, individual responsibilisation was key to both neoliberal and 'left' third way politics in the 1990s and 2000s (Giddens 1998). The argument is not that all types of youth employment are the same. Different types of work can serve different purposes, such as training or personal flexibility, provided they ensure quality work and the necessary means for social inclusion. For example, well-structured apprenticeships should combine trade-specific training with respect for labour rights. Voluntary part-time work can accommodate subsistence income and personal flexibility.

Individuation, however, leaves young people to navigate their transitions alone, reducing public institutions and social partners' role to providing skill-building opportunities. This exacerbates existing challenges, as young people already face

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**7.** For example, the German Bundesfreiwilligendienst (Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2021). See also the critique of European civic service by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC 2022).

**8.** These phenomena fit into the broader 'neoliberal' turn. For a historical perspective on this in Europe, see Andry (2022), in particular 'Epilogue: The Road Taken'.

difficulties accessing social insurance and other safety nets during their transitions. Consequently, young people must rely on informal networks, particularly their families, risking the reinforcement of inequalities in cultural, social and economic capital. For young workers, individuation also contradicts those key aspects of transitional labour market theory (Rogowski 2016; Schmid 2017; Steiert 2024c) which accompanied the EU's 2000s concept of flexicurity (Council of the European Union 2007). Flexicurity aimed to balance labour market flexibility, particularly for entry-level workers, with expanded security mechanisms during transitions, notably between employment. However, its overemphasis on flexibilisation, coupled with individuation, left young workers disproportionately exposed to risks in the labour market and to inadequate safety nets (Madsen et al. 2013).

Individuation hence reinforces young workers' already more frequent risks of being marginalised and of entering adverse life trajectories and ultimately precariousness.[9] It also relies on ageist assumptions about how young people's economic activities differ from what is recognised as work elsewhere, contrasting with a truly individualised approach that would accommodate the personal needs of each young person in their transition.[10]

## 1.3 Individuation in practice. Uncertain paths to work, exclusion and employability

This subsection examines two key mechanisms of individuation: the fragmentation of young people's work transitions that conceals intelligible paths into work; and the reliance on exclusion as a regulatory starting point, particularly via the concept of employability.

The preceding discussion highlighted that youth transitions, including work transitions, are heavily fragmented. It also underlined that the transition to adulthood is a period of social inclusion, in whose turbulent times young workers

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**9.** Precariousness is a contested term that can arise in different ways across the various dimensions of a person's social citizenship. Standing argues that people can be considered to belong to a 'precariat' by being excluded from some or all of the crucial forms of 'labour-related security': labour market security (e.g. adequate income-earning opportunities); employment security (e.g. dismissal rules); job security (e.g. finding one's niche in employment and possible upward mobility); work security (e.g. protection against accidents and illness at work); skill reproduction security (e.g. opportunity to gain and use skills); income security; and representation security (e.g. collective organisation). A common feature deriving from these exclusions seems to be a lack of perspective in life planning and social inclusion. Of course, each person can be excluded differently and to different extents, showcasing that precariousness is both a process and operates to different degrees. See Standing (2011, Chapter 1 – The Precariat, in particular p. 17). Individuation leaves young people at greater risk of such exclusion or even operates it itself.

**10.** The English word individuation refers to 'the act of making a person or thing different or particular in some way' (Cambridge Dictionary 2024). Conversely, individualisation refers to preparing or making something suitable for individual people; that is, the idea of accommodation.

more frequently risk entering adverse life trajectories. However fragmentation does not yet equate to individuation. Individuation arises when young people are disproportionately responsibilised with navigating an increasingly opaque labour market lacking clear pathways to work.

This opaqueness, however, has been a defining feature of EU employment policy since the late 1980s and persists, to some extent, within the current EU governance infrastructure for work transitions discussed in Section 2. EU employment policy has promoted the flexibilisation of work and the setting up of schemes that seek to provide temporary work experience to the unemployed or new entrants (European Council 1997). While EU employment policy is in principle non-binding on Member States, its objectives have been mirrored by flexibilisation at domestic level (European Commission 1998: 30-33). Flexible work arrangements and work experience schemes, however, have frequently failed to establish coherent pathways to decent work. For instance, work experience schemes can inadequately articulate training and work or impose work obligations (Dermine 2020; Papadopoulos and Jones 2023). This lack of clear pathways to decent work disproportionately affects young people, leading to the rise of 'aspirational work' – unpaid or low-paid roles considered to be undertaken primarily to gain work experience rather than income (Adams 2022). Employers increasingly expect such work as a prerequisite for employment and this encompasses unpaid traineeships, on-demand work, agency or platform work. This type of fragmentation leaves young people alone in navigating from the margins to the core of a labour market that is opaque.

A second device of individuation is exclusion, which often acts as the starting point of the regulation of work transitions. The narrative flows that young people's work is structurally different from the work of others and should therefore be excluded from access to labour regulation in whole or in part. This exclusion reinforces individuation as it is up to the person to justify their right to labour regulation. To name but a few alleged justifications, it is underscored that young workers require onboarding or lack skills (as does everyone who starts a new job) or are simultaneously engaged in training – arguments often advanced to justify the lack of labour rights in traineeships[11] and even more abusively in some apprenticeships.[12] On-demand or short fixed-term work for young people, including their exclusion from labour rights, are eagerly justified in that these workers also engage in training, perform only limited hours or work just for a short duration.[13]

The rise of employability as a regulatory objective since the 1980s has intensified individuation through exclusion, including within EU regulation. Employability shifts the responsibility to individuals to acquire the skills and networks necessary for employment, with upskilling emerging as a related concept in the mid-2010s

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**11.** For an overview of the different exclusions faced by trainees in the EU, see European Commission (2024d: 111–140).

**12.** See the Greek special apprenticeship contract that only entitled the apprentice to occupational health and safety regulation and which violated the European Social Charter (European Committee of Social Rights 2012: paras. 36-41).

**13.** These examples have, at times, been successfully developed under EU law: C-357/89 *Raulin*; C-432/14 O.

(Council of the European Union 2016, in particular Rec. 29). Employability has redefined young people's work as, in principle, fundamentally distinct from 'real' work. Their work constitutes 'work experience' only (Steiert 2024c). Young workers are seen as engaging in economic activity primarily to build capacity for future paid work rather than as legitimate workers in the present. The provision of opportunities for skill-building is the only type of safety net considered necessary for young people.

This narrative, mainstreamed domestically and via EU initiatives like the European Employment Strategy (EES), has promoted work experience schemes, traineeships and other aspirational work (European Commission 1998; European Council 1997). During the sovereign debt crisis, the deregulation of youth employment devised at EU level was imposed on financially assisted Member States under the guise of employability (Votinius 2014, 2018). Measures such as sub-minimum wages for young people, exclusions from dismissal protection, including the over-extension of probationary periods (up to two years), the introduction of unregulated work experience schemes and new, flexible yet also deregulated work relations for young workers, or atomised collective bargaining, shifted the risks of transition to young people and pushed individuation to its limits (Clauwaert and Schömann 2012; España 2011, 2012; European Committee of Social Rights 2012, 2017: paras. 207-208; Greece 2010 Art 74(8); Suárez Corujo 2014; Tiraboschi 2012).

These examples underline how widespread individuation is in the regulation of work transitions in the EU. This approach undermines young workers' work intensity, job security, bargaining power and accrual of work-related rights, which can lead to in-work poverty, social exclusion and, ultimately, precariousness (Eurostat 2025a, 2025b; Furlong and Cartmel 2007: 43; Ratti and Garcia-Muñoz 2022). The sovereign debt crisis has shown how individuation can push many young people into precariousness. The argument is not for a single path into work or exclusive institutional responsibility for social inclusion. Young people's transitions remain heterogeneous. Yet effective regulation must balance personal development and shared risks, offering young workers multiple yet intelligible pathways to quality work transitions. Individuation as a regulatory framework is failing to address these needs. The following sections critically evaluate the EU's work transition infrastructure in this light.

# 2. Assessment and critique. An EU governance infrastructure for work transitions

This second section assesses and critiques both the first iteration of the current EU governance infrastructure for work transitions (Section 2.1) and then its second (Section 2.2). This infrastructure was set up in response to the sovereign debt crisis. It combines binding and non-binding EU standards with mechanisms for their domestic translation, introduces quality objectives for work transitions and shifts away from austerity-driven individuation. Yet individuation persists, particularly in an employability narrative. EU labour law is yet to be effective in regulating for quality work transitions and certain EU instruments, such as the prevention of age discrimination and the Fixed-Term Work Directive 1999/70/EC (FTWD), preserve individuation as analysed in Section 2.3 (Council of the European Union 1999, 2000a).

The following two paragraphs describe the governance infrastructure on a general level in contrast to the other governance models of EU social policy. Its two iterations are illustrated in Figure 1 (2013-2019) and Figure 2 (from 2019) below. The infrastructure consists of the reinforced European Youth Guarantee, which sets quality standards for the regulation of work transitions (Council of the European Union 2020c). The surrounding recommendations provide quality frameworks for traineeships, apprenticeships and vocational education and training (VET) (Council of the European Union 2014, 2018, 2020b). Financial incentives and conditionalities and the European Semester act as translation mechanisms into domestic regulation. As discussed in Section 2.2, EU labour law has been integrated in the infrastructure by addressing some of the risks to work transitions that emerged from or after the sovereign debt crisis such as probationary periods, work predictability, sub-minimum wages for young people and platform work (European Parliament and Council 2019 Article 8, 2022, 2024). Like physical infrastructures, this infrastructure standardises how young workers experience their work transitions and mediates how the different levels of regulators – its 'users', such as the EU, its Member States, social partners and youth organisations – engage with transitions (Kingsbury 2019; Star 1999).[14]

**14.** The idea of an infrastructure is borrowed from science and technology scholarship. For example, Star (1999) understands infrastructures as being embedded into other social arrangements, being also transparent (not having to be reinvented for each use); having reach (extending beyond a single event); learned as part of membership (its users learn how to mobilise the infrastructure); linked with existing conventions of practice; embodying standards; building on an installed base (i.e. existing practices); becoming visible upon breakdown; and emerging in modular increments, not all at once or globally. Many of these characteristics fit with the EU governance infrastructure for work transitions.

The infrastructure differs from other governance models in EU social policy by the way in which it merges the construction of common standards, the use of financial incentives, conditionalities and the European Semester.[15] Sections 2.1 and 2.2 explore these characteristics in greater detail. Unlike the open method of coordination that involved the setting of common EU social policy standards, for example in the EES, but lacked compelling translation mechanisms (Ashiagbor 2005; Dawson 2011), the infrastructure centres around the instruments of its translation into domestic, regional and local regulation. Unlike the Semester's policy monitoring, known for its power to transform budgetary stability into retrenchment in terms of social and labour rights (Costamagna 2020; Dawson 2018; Dermine 2022a), the infrastructure integrates social objectives into the Semester alongside the budgetary considerations and prior to the drafting of the country-specific recommendations (CSRs).[16] Unlike planning in the context of NextGenerationEU (Dermine 2024), standardisation precedes the planning of funding disbursement.

## 2.1 The infrastructure's first iteration (2013-2019). Focus on governance over quality

The governance infrastructure's first iteration, illustrated in Figure 1 below, dates to the adoption of the 2013 European Youth Guarantee (EYG) in response to youth unemployment in the sovereign debt crisis (Council of the European Union 2013). The EYG, adopted by the Council, was the infrastructure's guiding principle coordinating where and how work transitions were to be regulated in the EU's multi-level regulatory system. Social partners were intended to be involved at all stages of the EYG's realisation.

Beyond governance, the EYG sought to provide, albeit non-binding, standards for the EU and domestic regulation of work transitions. For example, its main objective was a quality standard for youth employment policy. Young people aged under 25 should receive a 'good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education' (Council of the European Union 2013 Recommendation 1). The focus of regulation also shifted from reducing wage labour costs, like through sub-minimum wages for young people, to non-wage labour costs and to wage and recruitment subsidies. These standards were further specified by two, albeit again non-binding, Recommendations establishing quality frameworks for traineeships and apprenticeships in 2014 and 2018 (Council of the European Union 2014, 2018). The traineeship framework provided standards

**15.** A first, albeit differently directed contextualisation of this governance model is contained in Ferrera et al. (2023).

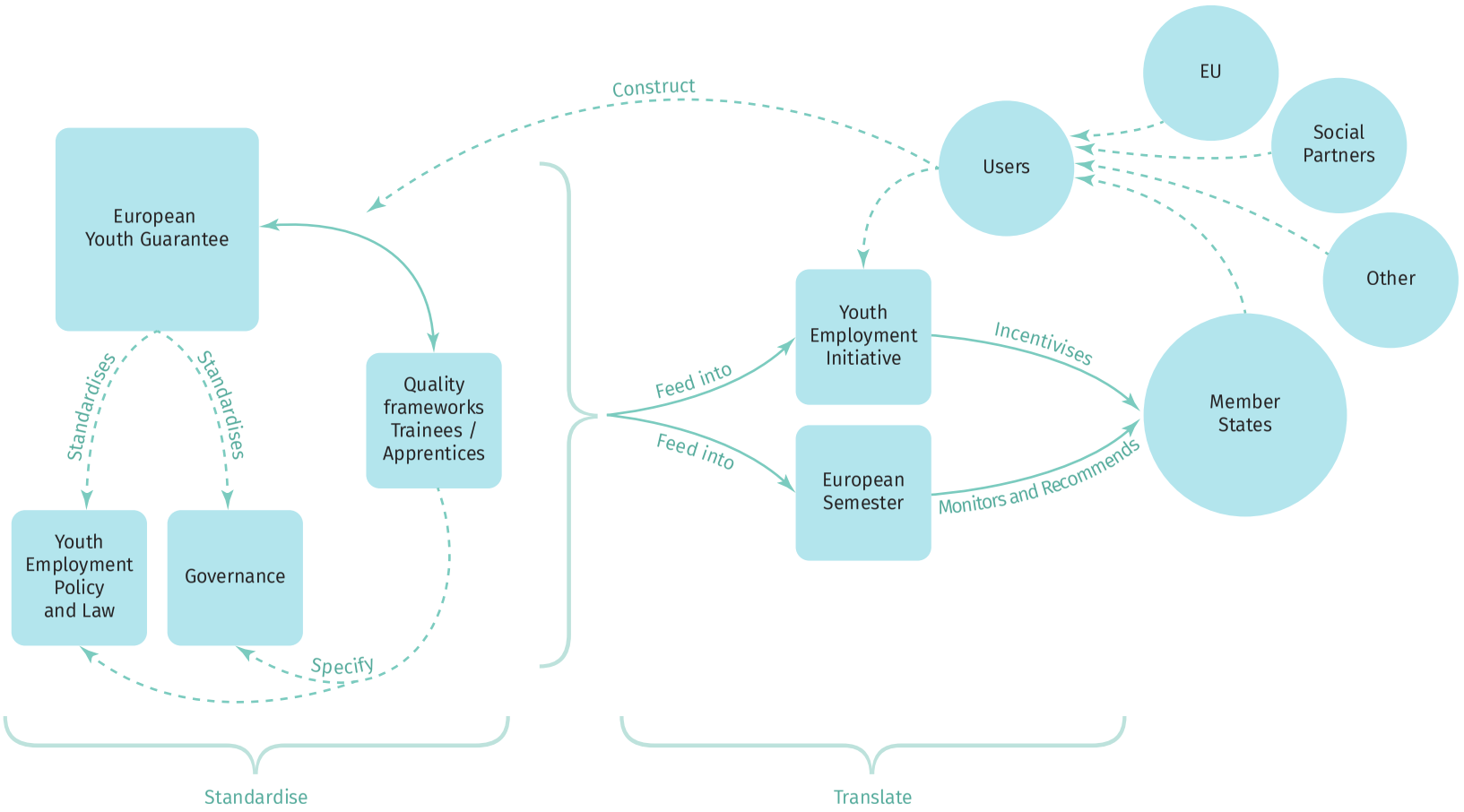
**16.** The CSRs, proposed by the Commission and adopted by the Council, recommend policy measures to the Member States. They are adopted on the basis of Arts 121(2) (economic policy) and 148(4) TFEU (employment policy); Art 5(2) Council Regulation 1466/97/EC on the strengthening of the surveillance of budgetary positions and the surveillance and coordination of economic polices; and, where applicable, Art 6(1) Regulation 1176/2011 on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances. Their impact, and possible coercive mechanisms, depend on the legal basis, see Dermine (2022b): 69-70.

for 'open-market traineeships' directly contracted with an employer, such as the conclusion of written agreements, respect for trainees' labour rights and a reasonable duration of, in principle, less than six months. The apprenticeship framework included similar standards, but also emphasised pay or compensation and access to social protection. Together, the standards fed into two mechanisms for their translation into domestic regulation: the European Semester and Youth Employment Initiative (YEI). The Semester translated the infrastructure's standards into its annual economic policy monitoring by the Commission and the Council. The YEI was a financial facility of 6.4 billion euros, later increased to 8.8 billion, that financed and incentivised youth employment policies in EU regions with high or rapidly rising youth unemployment (European Parliament and Council 2013 Article 16).

This infrastructure renovated governance methods in the field of work transitions and, more broadly, EU social policy. In a first perspective, it adjusted our understanding of the Semester because it introduced social considerations about work transitions prior to the elaboration of the CSRs and in parallel to the Semester's objective of budgetary stability. For example, concerns over 'brain drain' (Hasselbalch 2019; Steiert 2024a) – that is, young workers relocating to prosperous areas, depriving economically struggling regions of the workforce needed for economic recovery – were therefore recognised by the Semester from 2015 to 2022 (Council of the European Union 2015 Guideline 7, 2020a, 2022). In a second perspective, the EU provided additional fiscal space for policy experimentation via the YEI, especially in regions that had been hit hard by the crisis. However, the non-binding nature of standardisation led to considerable regulatory divergence and only some quality improvements in practice (European Commission 2016). Trade unions, for example, had requested binding regulation with regard to traineeships (European Commission 2013).

Substantively, this first infrastructure marked partial progress towards quality transitions. It placed youth employment policy, the regulation of open-market traineeships and apprenticeships under a quality objective. It also shifted away from austerity, such as on wage costs. Yet individuation also remained embedded. Crisis deregulation had just been carried out, as discussed above. Crucial quality standards, such as traineeship pay or social protection, were not established. The infrastructure also remained anchored in a logic of employability. Traineeships were defined as a 'limited period of work practice […] with a view to improving employability and facilitating transition to regular employment' (Council of the European Union 2014 Recital 27). The apprenticeship framework aimed 'to increase the employability and personal development of apprentices' (Council of the European Union 2018 Recital 26). This first iteration was focused more on the renovation of governance mechanisms than on reining in individuation and promoting quality transitions.

Figure 1 **First EU governance infrastructure for work transitions (2013-2019)**




Source: author's own elaboration.

## 2.2 The infrastructure's second iteration (from 2019). Translation mechanisms and a further move away from individuation

The second EU governance infrastructure for work transitions, as illustrated in Figure 2 below, built on the first in the wake of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and Covid-19 (European Parliament et al. 2017). It relies on the reinforced European Youth Guarantee and the continuing quality frameworks for traineeships and apprenticeships, complemented by a quality framework for VET, EU labour law, EU funding under the ESF+ and the NextGenerationEU Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) (European Parliament and Council 2021a, Article 3(f)) and the European Semester. It strengthens the translation mechanisms, via funding conditionality and EU labour law, that directly re-regulate young people's work relations, such as probationary periods, sub-minimum wages or on-demand and platform work (European Parliament and Council 2019, 2022, 2024). Its substance has moved further away from individuation, although certain elements of EU social policy still preserve it.

In terms of governance, the REYG and the various quality frameworks continue to be streamlined into the Semester (Council of the European Union 2020c Recommendation 30-31) and RRF funding has acted as a translation incentive similar to the YEI. For example, its funding has encouraged Spain to reregulate its fragmented labour market, in particular for young workers.[17] Meanwhile, both Spain and Italy have used this funding to address the 'brain drain' (Espana 2021 Components 16 and 17; Repubblica Italiana 2021 Component M4C2).

The ESF+, however, contains a considerable strengthening of the translation mechanisms through a spending conditionality on youth employment, as underlined in Figure 2 below (European Parliament and Council 2021b Article 7(6)). In principle, each Member State must devote an 'appropriate share' of the ESF+ financial resources received under shared management to youth employment policy. Shared management covers almost all ESF+ funds.[18] If the rate of young people aged 15-29 neither in employment, education or training (NEET) was above the EU average between 2017 and 2019, Member States must even allocate over 12.5% of these ESF+ funds to youth employment policy. Member States do still propose how to spend these funds (European Parliament and Council 2021c Articles 8 and 10-14), but they are obliged to invest in youth employment. Even so, this conditionality currently finds a questionable limit in the Commission's institutional practice. The latter accepts very different levels of appropriate spending on youth employment, ranging from no spending at all

**17.** Spain narrowed the number and conditions of available fixed-term contracts to promote permanent employment and sought to strengthen collective, in particular sectoral, agreements (Aranguiz 2022).

**18.** 87.3 billion of the ESF+'s 2021-2027 financial envelope of nearly 88 billion euros are administered under shared management (European Parliament and Council 2021b Article 5).

to substantial spending, often unrelated to the NEET rate in the Member State concerned.[19]

A second strengthening in the translation mechanisms is the binding regulation of key aspects of young people's work relations through EU labour law: the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive 2019/1152/EC (TPWD) regulates probationary periods and on-demand work; the Adequate Minimum Wages Directive 2022/2041/EU (AMWD) sets a framework for sub-minimum wages for the young; and the Platform Work Directive 2024/2381/EU (PWD) governs the gig economy in which young workers are overrepresented (European Parliament and Council 2019, 2022, 2024). Their standards must be transposed by the Member States.

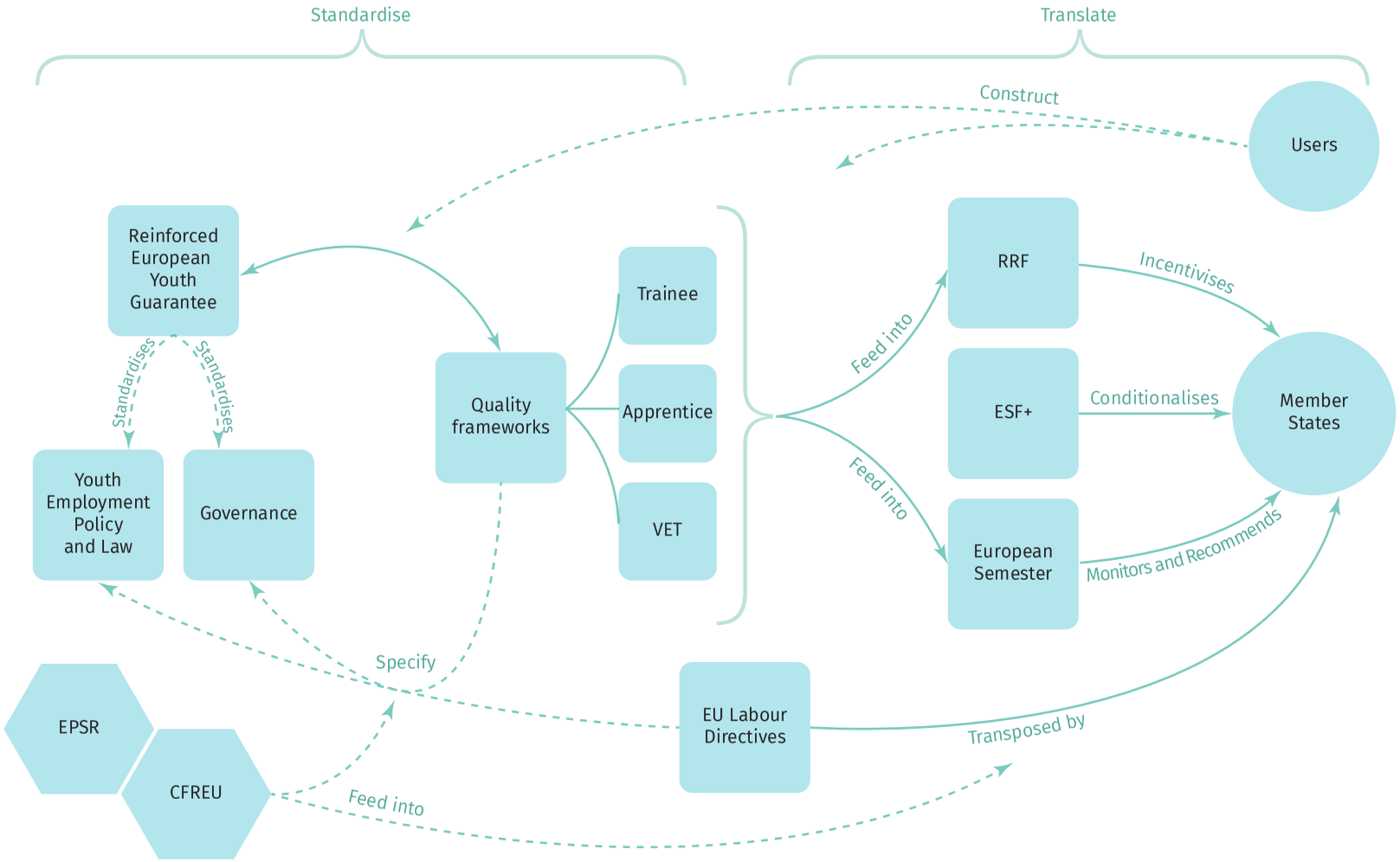
In terms of substance, the infrastructure has been placed under a clearer yet not absolute quality objective. Albeit still non-binding, the list of 'employment incentives' aligned with the REYG aims at 'sustainable' labour market integration, while youth employment should be regulated to foster equality, the right to fair working conditions, access to social protection and training, reasonable probation periods and the prohibition of abusive atypical contracts (Council of the European Union 2020c). These objectives are closely inspired by the EPSR and the social rights contained in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR) (European Parliament and Council 2019 Recital 1, 2021c Art 15 and Annex III, 2022 Recital 3). If these objectives are effectively implemented, the infrastructure does contain the potential to address risks to the quality of work transitions.

More specifically, the TPWD and the AMWD extend their scope to a hybrid definition of work that takes into account the EU Court of Justice's (CJEU) case law (Bednarowicz 2019; Georgiou 2022). This may allow more young workers to be included under these instruments' scope and thereby reduce the risk of exclusion from EU labour law itself. In many yet not all cases, as discussed below, the CJEU has been more inclusive in terms of worker status than domestic labour law, such as for certain traineeships, apprenticeships and on-call work *(C-66/85 Lawrie-Blum; C-3/90 Bernini; C-357/89 Raulin; C-109/04 Karl Robert Kranemann; C-229/14 Balkaya*). The TPWD moreover limits the length of probationary periods to six months in principle as a direct response to the crisis and regulates work predictability, parallel employment and on-demand work (European Parliament and Council 2019 Arts 8-13). Meanwhile, the AMWD sets a non-discriminatory framework for reduced minimum wages, such as sub-minimum wages for young workers (European Parliament and Council 2022 Art 6), and the PWD regulates platform work, including an employment presumption (European Parliament and Council 2024 Art 5).

Individuation is, however, still not ruled out. EU youth employment policy stays focused on young NEET people (i.e. those who are considered particularly vulnerable to social exclusion) but the EU's focus should not overshadow that work

**19.** See the Partnership Agreements at: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/partnership-agreements-eu-funds-2021-2027_en, accessed 22 March 2023.

Figure 2 **Second EU governance infrastructure for work transitions (from 2019)**




Source: author's own elaboration.

transitions also contain risks for those that already have a link to work. Neither should it conceal that even 'good quality offers' of education, apprenticeship or traineeship are not a long-term alternative to quality work with a view to social inclusion.

Furthermore, the binding minimum standards established by EU labour law must still prove effective in regulating for quality transitions. The AMWD may even be annulled by the CJEU if it follows the non-binding opinion of Advocate General Emiliou delivered in case C-19/23 brought by Denmark against the European Parliament and the Council and set to be decided in 2025 (Advocate General Emiliou 2025). Following Emiliou would run counter to a respectful, not only historically inspired, reading of EU competence (Brameshuber 2025; Countouris 2025; ETUC2025; Kilpatrick and Steiert 2025). It should also be said that, while being sometimes rather underestimated in its extent (Helme 2024: 690–691), the CJEU's emphasis on work having to be 'genuine and effective' keeps question marks over the inclusiveness of work status for young workers and, therefore, on the inclusiveness of the most recent EU labour directives. This concerns, but is not limited to, trainees engaged in educational curricula,[20] young fixed-term workers,[21] not only where engaged during their education holidays,[22] and those engaged in work experience schemes as part of employment policy.[23] The decision in C-197/86 *Brown* also shows that the CJEU may limit EU rights for young workers even where they are considered workers, such as for a trainee who had worked for over eight months.

Certain components of EU labour regulation discussed in Section 2.3 have preserved individuation, while political momentum matters in how the governance infrastructure will be shaped in the future, such as whether and, if so, how ambitiously the EU will adopt a directive on traineeships (European Commission 2024a; ETUC Youth Committee 2024; Helme 2024; Pinto and European Youth Forum 2024; Steiert 2024d).

## 2.3 EU labour regulation that preserves individuation

This subsection identifies examples of where EU labour regulation preserves individuation. On one hand, the interpretation of the prohibition of age

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**20.** C-66/85 *Lawrie-Blum* and C-197/86 *Brown* considered trainees, at times working only very limited hours, as workers under the EU free movement of workers. C-3/90 *Bernini*, however, allowed national courts to assess whether a trainee engaged in the context of occupational training had 'completed a sufficient number of hours in order to familiarize [themselves] with [their] work' (C-3/90 *Bernini*, para. 16; Rosin 2017).

**21.** See Clause 2(2) FTWD and the exclusion of trainees and work experience schemes explored below.

**22.** The scope of the Employment Equality Directive 2000/78/EC is not defined by the EU concept of work (Council of the European Union 2000b; Steiert 2022). In C-432/14 O, the CJEU nonetheless used this concept to question the entitlement of a young worker to equal treatment based on age (C-432/14 O, paras 24-26).

**23.** This greater inclusiveness does not apply to all CJEU decisions. Limits were set in C-197/86 *Brown*, C-3/90 *Bernini* and C-432/14 O.

discrimination under the Employment Equality Directive 2000/78/EC Art 21 CFR and the Fixed-Term Work Directive 1999/70/EC risk excluding young workers. On the other, the participation of young people in the EU regulatory process and the enforcement of their existing EU rights are not sufficiently considered in the governance infrastructure and thereby struggle to rein in individuation.

EU labour law has preserved individuation up to now. For example, the Court of Justice has accepted a broad justification of youth discrimination that considers the deregulation of young people's work relations as legitimate employment policy. In principle, age-based discrimination is prohibited under Directive 2000/78/EC with only an exception allowing for its justification as employment policy.[24] The few cases on youth discrimination that have arrived at the CJEU, however, have allowed the justification of sub-minimum wages for young workers (C-88/08 *Hütter*); excluded a young person working fixed-term during their university holidays from equal treatment and questioned their worker status; and considered that a zero-hours contract reserved to those aged under 25 can be justified as an appropriate employment policy for young people 'particularly vulnerable to a risk of social exclusion' (C-143/16 *Abercrombie & Fitch* para. 35; C-432/14 O; Steiert 2024b). This interpretational choice is not mandated by the text of the law which, in principle, prohibits age discrimination.[25] This choice renders ineffective the current prohibition of discrimination against young people and leaves them excluded from this equal treatment guarantee.

The FTWD's interpretation equally builds on individuation. Despite an exception, the Member States and the CJEU have understood the FTWD's Clause 2(2) as a default option, allowing domestic regulators to exclude initial vocational training relationships, apprenticeships and work experience schemes integrated in employment policy from the transposition of the EU rules on fixed-term work.[26] Young workers can also fall through the FTWD's substantive gaps: it is easy to imagine how the many ageist understandings of their work serve as objective reasons for differential treatment; while first fixed-term work relations, highly relevant to young workers, are not regulated even though scholars initially argued otherwise (C-326/19 *Chercheurs Universitaires*, para. 52; Joined Cases C-362, 363/13 and 407/13, *Fiamingo, Zappalà and Others*, para. 57; Vigneau 1999: 88-96). Similar patterns of individuation persist in the regulation of temporary

**24.** Young people seeking their first employment in another Member State through a work experience scheme offered by this Member State in the context of employment policy were held not to come under the free movement of workers unless they were already exercising their mobility rights (C-278/94 *Commission v Belgium*, para. 40).

**25.** Art 6(1) Directive 2000/78/EC allows the justification of differential treatment based on age as employment policy. Yet this provision still includes an exception that should be understood narrowly.

**26.** From 2006 to 2008, thirteen Member States used this exclusion (European Commission 2006, 2008). The CJEU understands it as a discretionary power of domestic regulators (C-157/11 *Sibilio*, para. 55),

agency and part-time work.[27] Moreover, EU labour law broadly ignores Art 32 CFR, which provides a fundamental right for young workers to have working conditions appropriate to their age and to be protected against economic exploitation and work likely to harm their safety, health, personal development and education. A number of authors have sought to limit this never substantively-interpreted provision to those aged under 18 (Meyer and Bernsdorff 2014; Stalford and Ferreira 2021). Yet its drafting history, constitutional context (Steiert 2024e: 239-250) and EPSR principle 4(b) on youth employment indicate that Art 32 should apply without age limit. An assessment of whether youth employment leads to economic exploitation or harms personal development is diametrically opposed to individuation: it allows envisaging young people as having a right to support for their social inclusion.

Crucial vectors of social inclusion are moreover effective societal participation and access to remedies to remove existing injustices. Individuation, instead, atomises those that seek a sustainable attachment to quality work. Participation and enforcement are not central enough to the governance infrastructure to rein in the preserved degree of individuation in the face of young people's underrepresentation in regulatory processes (OECD 2021; Tapia and Turner 2018; Vandaele 2012, 2019). EU social policy, for example, has included an instrument for stronger youth participation since 2002 – the open method of coordination on youth (youth OMC). This elaborates a multi-annual youth strategy with youth representatives but is kept separate from the regulation of work transitions. For instance, the current EU Youth Strategy is accompanied by European Youth Goals (Council of the European Union and representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council 2018). Although these goals emphasise decent and fair working conditions for young workers, the youth OMC has been increasingly limited to the work of professionals who provide guidance to young people (Council of the European Union and representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council 2020).

Young people also face considerable barriers in access to rights enforcement, caused by their lack of time spent in work and the gaps in their knowledge of labour rights (Blackham 2019, 2021). These enforcement barriers are underscored by the comparatively few cases on youth compared to old-age discrimination that have reached the CJEU (Steiert 2024e: 233) and in that the 30-year-old Council Directive 94/33/EC on the prohibition of child labour and the protection

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**27.** Article 2 of the Part-Time Work Directive (PTWD) allows domestic regulators to exclude casual work wholly or partly from the transposition of the EU regulation of part-time work. The PTWD's principle of non-discrimination might require justifying the exclusion. Casual work can cover, for example, seasonal work during training holidays or work accompanying studies (Ales et al. 2018: 874; C-313/02 *Wippel*, paras 38-40; C-486/08 *Zentralbetriebsrat der Landeskrankenhäuser Tirols*, paras 36-47; Riesenhuber 2021: 576; Viethen 2002). Article 1(3) of the Temporary Agency Work Directive (TAWD) permits domestic regulators to exclude 'employment contracts or relationships concluded under a specific public or publicly supported vocational training, integration or retraining programme' from the transposition of the EU regulation of temporary agency work. In 2014, seven Member States used this exception (European Commission 2014: 4). PTWD and TAWD also operate along similar equal treatment principles (to the exception of TAWD's hypothetical comparator); see Ratti and Garcia-Muñoz (2022).

of children and adolescent workers has never been substantively interpreted.[28] The absence of participation and enforcement alike are leaving young people to navigate their transitions by themselves.

To conclude, the EU has established a governance infrastructure for work transitions that seeks to translate common EU standards into domestic regulation. This focus on translation has the potential to enhance policy coherence across the Member States while leaving space to adapt EU standards to local realities and the specific risks faced by young workers. Nevertheless, the infrastructure does not conclusively rein in individuation for quality work transitions.

**28.** Only two non-substantive infringement proceedings have been brought, both in the late 1990s: C-47/99 *Commission v Luxembourg*; C-45/99 *Commission v France*.

# 3. Transformation in theory. Principles for regulating for quality work transitions

This section argues that, as an alternative to individuation that empowers young workers, work transitions should be regulated to ensure quality in young people's access to work and quality in their work. Young people can reimagine our world where they have decent paths into society. I propose a set of principles that can guide all levels and types of regulators towards quality transitions. The principles, designed in contrast to individuation and with the aim of social inclusion via quality work in mind, encompass: inclusion as a starting point for regulation (Section 3.1); the effective, responsive and decent regulation of work transitions (Section 3.2); youth participation (Section 3.3); and effective rights enforcement (Section 3.4). The principles are not equally relevant to all types of youth employment given the heterogeneity of work transitions. Yet they illustrate how the different risks to work transitions can be addressed in a comprehensive regulatory strategy that puts the quality of work transitions front and centre to their regulation. What matters is not whether these principles are exhaustive or enforceable, but that they showcase the dimensions of where and, if so, how individuation can be reined in. The principles may also be beneficial to thinking about labour regulation for quality work and social inclusion more broadly.

## 3.1 An inclusive starting point for work transitions

Exclusion frequently underpins the regulation of work transitions, contributing to individuation and possibly to precariousness as underscored in Section 1.2. The narrative is that young people's work is structurally different from the work of others and should therefore be excluded from labour rights. Examples are the lack of regulation of traineeships or work experience schemes, or young workers' exclusions from protections against age discrimination or from the FTWD. Even apprenticeship systems have already set in place exclusions from the very minimum standards of labour law (European Committee of Social Rights 2012, Complaint No. 66/2011). It is, however, highly questionable why the work of young workers should be presumed as work experience and therefore excluded from labour regulation in principle.[29] It is this exclusionary, ageist and structurally discriminatory narrative that this study criticises as a root cause of individuation (López López 2021).

**29.** Similarly on traineeships (Helme 2024: 699-701; Paz-Fuchs 2021).

Regulators can instead start from inclusion. When developing new regulatory instruments or assessing existing instruments for youth employment, their reasoning can start from the presumption that young people who engage in economic activity should, in principle, have access to the same labour rights as others. This starting point would remove the structurally discriminatory narrative that young people's work is different and less valuable. It would also shift the power balance in work transitions. Regulators would – at least – have to provide legitimate reasons for why specific, possibly more flexible or no regulation of a given work relation is needed. The employment presumption in the PWD shows in principle that labour regulation can start from inclusion.

Moreover, reasoning in terms of inclusion does not rule out the adoption of specific regulatory regimes where they are justified by a legitimate purpose. Work transitions are intrinsically heterogeneous and the dual imperatives of personal development and shared risks mandate some flexibility for regulators. For instance, a well-designed apprenticeship balances training and decent work via specific regulation. In cases that are suitably justified and necessary, regulators can and should accommodate labour regulation to the needs of the young workers concerned while nonetheless reasoning by inclusion.

On a final note, inclusion alone does not suffice to regulate for quality work transitions as it lacks a minimum standard for decent work. The FTWD's gaps exemplify how equal treatment can fail to ensure decent work. Another example is the single contract, advanced to renovate labour regulation in the 2000s (European Commission 2010: 15). This contract should have provided all new entrants with the same rights, with further labour rights accruing over time. It could be understood as an inclusionary initiative. The accrual of rights was, instead, often read as an invitation to remove existing labour rights for newcomers given the absence of minimum standards. For example, Italy tried to create a single entry point for young workers via apprenticeship contracts during the sovereign debt crisis. Yet this reform reduced apprenticeships' training aspect, transforming them further into poorly regulated work, such as through the temporary removal of training requirements and an increase in the ratio of apprentices per skilled worker (Checchi and Leonardi 2015; Tiraboschi 2012). Similarly, France earlier excluded whole groups of young workers, such as all those aged under 26, from the transposition of EU labour rights on information and consultation as an employment measure (C-385/05 *Confédération Générale du Travail and others*).

## 3.2 Effective, responsive and decent regulation of work transitions by public institutions and social partners

For a growing number of young people, the path to work is winding. In this context, public institutions and social partners hold a responsibility to regulate work

transitions effectively[30] and responsively.[31] To address the risks inherent to work transitions, to complete the inclusionary principle discussed above and to avoid individual over-responsibilisation, these regulators should root their regulatory initiatives in a minimum standard that ensures decent work transitions, including decent work and safety nets. Only such a minimum standard can ensure that effective and responsive regulation leads to quality transitions. Public institutions and social partners therefore need to switch from thinking about 'opportunities' towards an effective, responsive and decent regulation for quality transitions. In practice, this responsibility to regulate will manifest differently depending on the heterogeneous risks faced by young workers in each work relation.

Effective, responsive and decent regulation of work transitions should unfold across two levels. First, the discussion of individuation underlines that work transitions have been marked by a withdrawal of public institutions and the social partners. Both left young workers to deal with their transitions on their own. Effective and responsive regulation should thus imply the establishment of an overarching regulatory framework that identifies, adapts to and remedies the risks faced by transitioning young workers and coordinates regulatory efforts in the field. Second, effective and responsive risk identification and mitigation implies the need to adjust this overarching regulatory framework to young people's work relations and their specific risks. This process must be guided by a minimum standard that guarantees decent work transitions for decent social inclusion if an alternative regulatory strategy to individuation is to be established. This standard should aim at sustainable attachment to decent work but must also encompass decent safety nets where young people need them in their transitions, including where they seek to develop new ideas of work and life. In the end, work transitions are a process of social inclusion that should allow everyone to live a decent and creative life in both the short and the long term.

The EU governance infrastructure discussed in this study has marked some progress in line with this conceptualisation of the effective, responsive and decent regulation of work transitions. For example, it has established an overarching regulatory framework and EU labour law has now started specifically to re-regulate aspects of crisis deregulation that threw some young people into precarious work; a traineeships directive could arguably foster this trend. The right to fair working conditions (Art 31 CFR) or young workers' right to protection against economic exploitation and harmful work (Art 32 CFR) could be used to anchor a standard of decent work in this infrastructure. Yet the previous sections have also illustrated that the infrastructure still lacks effectiveness and preserves individuation. Moreover, the primary focus on NEET should not overshadow the challenges faced

**30.** The call for effective regulation is inspired by the European Social Charter. The European Committee of Social Rights assesses whether signatory states take legal and practical action to give full effect to the rights recognised (Council of Europe 2018: 40-41).

**31.** The idea of responsive regulation is borrowed from scholarship on new governance in the EU and democratic experimentalism. The law should be able to adjust to the exclusions and risks it produces. Yet responsiveness, reflexiveness and experimentalism often lack a normative vision. This is why I underline the need for decent/quality work transitions. Otherwise, responsiveness can be (ab)used to justify regulatory restraint or deregulation (Ashiagbor 2015).

by young workers that already have a link to work, such as trainees, on-demand workers or those trapped between fixed-term contracts and in involuntary part-time relationships. For these young workers, the governance infrastructure is still more weakly developed, as much as specific regulation remains limited to a narrow and not yet interpreted set of EU directives.

## 3.3 Participation in the regulatory process

The participation of young people in the regulatory process is another key principle for the quality regulation of work transitions. Individuation operates by the removal of risk-sharing. Such a regulatory strategy is facilitated by young people remaining underrepresented in both representative democracy and many social partner organisations (europeOECD 2021; Tapia and Turner 2018; Vandaele 2012, 2019). In other words, where young people are not empowered to participate both individually and collectively, their interests in quality transitions are easily concealed and they struggle to transform our world creatively.

Strengthening young people's participation in labour regulation is also justified by good governance. Whether or not integrated into work, young people have first-hand experience of the current risks inherent in work transitions. Their participation can enable effective, responsive and decent regulation by identifying the risks that should be addressed. In addition, youth participation can promote young people's agency and personal development, reducing the risk of public and collective regulators acting paternalistically (Stalford and Ferreira 2021). To ensure that youth participation is effective and has an impact, it is necessary to organise young people's interests at aggregate societal level. Individual participation can further individuation where participation is represented as yet another responsibility.

Young people's regulatory participation can be strengthened in multiple and complementary ways, such as in representative democracy, social partnership, civil society organisations and deliberative democracy mechanisms substantively owned by civil society. First, many European representative democracies have recently engaged with the question of lowering the voting age, for instance to 16 years to promote youth participation (Deutscher Bundestag 2022; UNICEF and Démocratie Ouverte 2024). Second, trade unions have increasingly developed dedicated youth committees which are a promising path towards greater youth participation in labour regulation. Some Scandinavian trade unions, for example, possess developed and well-funded youth structures at all levels (Vandaele 2013). Yet such structures may struggle to reach young workers effectively or otherwise suffer from the general decline in trade union membership and the considerable differences in young people's collective participation across and within Member States (Vandaele 2013, 2019).

Third, the EU governance infrastructure can be specifically complemented by levers for greater youth participation. While the former includes some, limited dimensions of social partner participation (Council of the European Union 2020c Recommendations 11 and 21), the youth OMC is a lever for the participation of

young people that currently tends to be separated from the infrastructure. In addition, the EU is experimenting with deliberative democracy mechanisms, such as dialogues with randomly selected citizens. In the 2021-2022 Conference on the Future of Europe and the 2022 European Year of Youth, issues important to young people, including work, were highlighted (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022 Proposal 47 – European Youth Issues). These instruments can all improve youth participation in the governance infrastructure if well-designed, effective and complementary to each other.

## 3.4 Enforcement of young workers' rights

Young workers also face challenges in labour rights enforcement due to the myriad of work relations they engage in and often uncertain status under labour law; frequent changes in labour market status; reduced bargaining power; dependency on an employer; or the time to build awareness for rights entitlement. Enforcement in work transitions depends on complementary tools (Lörcher et al. 2022): first, intelligible paths into work strengthen young people's bargaining power and rights awareness; second, it matters to establish effective and parallel enforcement avenues for young workers. Individual enforcement can do little but strengthen individuation where it is the only avenue available. Effective support by worker representatives and administrative inspectorates should complement the individual route, given young people's own enforcement challenges. Trade unions can play a highly productive role – they can develop structures to advise on individual enforcement and representation, and to highlight labour rights concerns with the competent authorities. It is essential to think about these structures' effects on young workers.

In conclusion, as with all regulatory initiatives, democratic processes must decide on economic regulation. Nevertheless, the four guiding principles highlighted in this section promote quality work transitions as an alternative to individuation.

# 4. Transformation in practice. Ideas for promoting quality work transitions within the EU governance infrastructure

The key argument of this study is that work transitions can be regulated to support the quality of young people's access to work and the quality of their work. There is no need to pit access to work against the sustainability of labour market attachment and decent work. To this end, the previous section identified four guiding principles that can be mobilised at EU and other levels: inclusion; effective, responsive and decent regulation; youth participation; and enforcement. This section offers three ideas for translating these principles within the EU's existing governance infrastructure. I discuss how EU labour law can address the risks associated with work transitions (Section 4.1), then underline the need to rethink EU employment policy coordination in the context of work transitions (Section 4.2), before finally reflecting on innovative uses of EU funding for youth employment policy (Section 4.3).

## 4.1 EU labour law and the risks of work transitions

EU labour law, one regulatory level at which individuation operates, has a key role to play in respectively remedying or fuelling the risks that arise with individuation. Section 2.3 exemplified this by showing how the ban on discrimination against young people and the EU's regulation of non-standard work have preserved individuation. This subsection shows the opportunities for EU labour law to regulate work transitions more effectively, responsively and decently.

Revisions of the interpretation of the prohibition of youth discrimination and the EU regulation of non-standard work, as criticised in Section 2.3, are first steps to EU action for quality transitions. It is necessary to close the gaps identified, stop comprehending young people's work as exceptional, less valuable and a means of flexibilisation, and regulate youth employment specifically where closing the gaps is not sufficient to deliver for quality transitions. Moreover, even the TPWD, AMWD and PWD's novel rules offer room for review and reflection if assessed in the light of quality work transitions. The TPWD's rules on probation and on-demand work, the AMWD on minimum wage variations and the PWD contain manifold limits that can be interpreted in ways that foster individuation. For example, probationary periods are limited in duration, but exceptions can be made. The AMWD does not rule out sub-minimum wages for young people and has still to survive its annulment challenge. The PWD is a fresh instrument still to be interpreted. Effective, responsive and decent regulation will mean first transposing and then reviewing these instruments with the objective of quality work transitions in mind.

The next critical juncture upon which the use of EU social policy competence will be evaluated with regard to work transitions are traineeships, following significant societal and judicial advocacy (European Committee of Social Rights 2022, Complaint No. 150/2017; ETUC 2022). In 2024, the European Commission proposed a directive to 'improv[e] and enforce[e] working conditions of trainees and combat[] regular employment relationships disguised as traineeships' (European Commission 2024a; Helme 2024; Steiert 2024d). The proposal includes an equal treatment guarantee in terms of working conditions for trainees deemed workers and is designed as an enforcement instrument. For example, national labour inspectorates are to be strengthened and Member States must ensure that workers' representatives can represent trainees judicially with regard to their EU labour rights. The proposal links the shortages in traineeship quality to enforcement barriers, a strategy rightfully criticised for overlooking the risks unique to traineeships (ETUC Youth Committee 2024; Pinto and European Youth Forum 2024).

While the proposal's emphasis on equality and enforcement marks some progress, it exhibits structural flaws concerning quality work transitions. First, it fails to provide a comprehensive and inclusive definition of traineeships.[32] Some Member States and employer organisations advocate limiting the directive to open-market traineeships (Agence Europe 2024; BusinessEurope 2024; Council of the European Union 2024b). However, the effectiveness of the traineeship framework in terms of regulatory coherence and quality improvements was undermined by its limitation to open-market traineeships (Section 2.1). The proposal's scope also depends on the unsettled, hybrid scope of EU labour law, discussed in Section 2.2, which creates legal uncertainty for young workers until the CJEU steps in. Even if its scope is not further narrowed, the proposal's indeterminacy may perpetuate individuation by extending equal treatment only to certain trainees.

Second, the question must be one of whether the focus on equal treatment and enforcement places trainees in a better position to engage in decent work relations. If trainees are classified as workers and equal treatment is effectively enforced, the most egregious practice of fully unpaid traineeships could be eliminated, as remuneration is a core component of working conditions. It is difficult to imagine a reason which suitably justifies no pay at all where trainees engage in a type of economic activity, no matter how limited. However, so-called objective reasons – such as tasks, responsibilities or learning intensity (European Commission 2024a Art 3) – may allow domestic regulators and employers to justify lowered pay or deviations from equal treatment on working conditions, a threat already

**32.** The proposal's Art 2 defines a traineeship as a 'limited period of work practice which includes a significant learning and training component, undertaken to gain practical and professional experience with a view to improving employability and facilitating transition to a regular employment relationship or accessing a profession'. Yet it understands a trainee as 'any person undertaking a traineeship who has an employment contract or employment relationship as defined by the law, collective agreements or practice in force in every Member State with consideration to the case law of the Court of Justice'.

exemplified by the FTWD and the youth discrimination prohibition.[33] Moreover, equal treatment applies only to comparable entry-level workers and an explicit standard for decent working conditions is absent. Decency standards can arguably be derived from the CFR's rights to fair and decent working conditions (Art 31) and young people's regulatory protection (Art 32). Both latter rights are, however, unfortunately referenced only in the proposal's explanatory memorandum. Regarding enforcement, while worker representatives in some Member States can already represent trainees (Ver.di 2023; Ver.di Jugend 2025), this often depends on prior trade union membership or the union's statutes. The proposal could therefore have value if understood as effectively placing Member States under a duty to foster trainee representation (European Commission 2024a Art 8).

Third, the proposal establishes neither sufficient new trainee rights nor binding quality standards. It is mainly limited to an obligation to define excessively long/successive traineeships and to an indirect employment presumption, via criteria to be assessed by the enforcement authorities, as to whether a traineeship constitutes disguised regular employment (European Commission 2024a Art 5). Yet it neglects many risks specific to traineeships that can fall under Article 153 TFEU as working conditions. Key issues such as minimum standards for fair remuneration or, at least, the existence of pay regardless of its level,[34] written agreements, learning arrangements, traineeship recognition and social protection all remain unregulated. These standards are deferred to a revision of the traineeship quality framework (European Commission 2024b), despite its failure to improve traineeship decency coherently (European Commission 2024d).

Effective regulation of quality work transitions requires robust standards. The critique of both the existing instruments and the current proposal on traineeships highlights opportunities for EU labour law to regulate more effectively, responsively and decently by establishing such robust standards for quality work transitions that address the risks faced by transitioning young workers.

## 4.2 The need to rethink EU employment policy for young workers

From the 2000s up until the sovereign debt crisis, the EU promoted geographical mobility as its strategy to address youth unemployment (European Commission 2010). While youth unemployment still plagues European labour markets, this strategy has been criticised for encouraging 'brain drain', as intra-EU migrants during this period were predominantly young and skilled (Lafleur and Stanek 2017). Critics argue that free movement policies facilitate this. In response, the EU integrated youth mobility into its governance infrastructure alongside youth

**33.** The Hungarian Council Presidency in late 2024 sought to adopt a much-weakened traineeships directive. In contrast, the Italian Parliament is calling for minimum standards for trainees' labour rights and a more concrete definition of disguised traineeships (Council of the European Union 2024a, 2024b).

**34.** Art 153(5) TFEU excludes pay from EU competence, but earlier case law and the AMWD seem to comprehend this exclusion as relating to the setting of pay levels (Advocate General Emiliou 2025; Brameshuber 2025; Kilpatrick and Steiert 2025).

employment policy and EU labour law. As underlined above, the European Semester has recognised 'brain drain' as a challenge from 2015 to 2022, with Spain and Italy using RRF funding to address it. A cohesive strategy balancing young people's geographical mobility with the employment prospects of those who remain in their home regions – geographical *immobility* – and a coordinated promotion of employment opportunities are nonetheless lacking.

There is a pressing need to rethink EU employment policy for young workers. While free movement of workers benefits some individuals by expanding labour market access, it is insufficient for creating a cohesive internal labour market and achieving the EU's full employment objective. Specifically, relying on geographical mobility as a youth employment policy tool can fail to ensure quality access to work (Steiert 2024a). Geographical mobility can undermine social inclusion, labour rights and learning opportunities, despite benefiting some workers. For instance, mobile workers often face skills mismatches and experience downward social mobility (Recchi 2015: 72). The 'brain drain' critique also reveals tensions between national and EU interests in using free movement as a youth employment strategy. Labour shortages exacerbate conflicting Member State interests, with some seeking to repatriate and others aiming to attract foreign talent.

These findings clearly illustrate the need to rethink EU employment policy for young workers, particularly as regards EU employment policy's neglect of geographical immobility. EU policy must, instead, be turned to address the risks faced by mobile young learners and workers while embracing immobility as its counterpart. This entails empowering young people to pursue mobility as a personal choice while developing the EU's capacity further to promote sustainable attachments to decent work. For instance, crisis deregulation has often made mobility a necessity rather than a choice.

Due to the distribution of competences and in particular their narrow interpretation in practice, EU employment policy is however largely limited to coordinating – and often restricting – domestic policy choices rather than innovating for quality work. The REYG's legal basis, also placed in Article 149 TFEU as an employment policy incentive measure, offers a potential legal stepping stone to EU innovation for geographical mobility and immobility in work transitions.[35] Previously, it seemed impossible to mobilise this legal basis for policy experimentation (Council of the European Union 2013; European Commission 2012; Garben 2019). Now, it provides an opportunity to rethink employment policy creatively, balancing prospects abroad and at home. It could enable the EU to develop innovative mechanisms in youth employment policy, including pilot projects, beyond the EU funds discussed in the next section. More practical ideas are, however, needed to develop EU policies which will provide credible employment policy for quality work transitions.

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**35.** Art 149 TFEU allows Parliament and the Council to 'adopt incentive measures designed to encourage cooperation between Member States and to support their action in the field of employment through initiatives aimed at developing exchanges of information and best practices, providing comparative analysis and advice as well as promoting innovative approaches and evaluating experiences, in particular by recourse to pilot projects. […].'

## 4.3 EU funding as a tool for innovation in work transitions

The governance infrastructure's use of EU funding as an incentive structure and conditionality offers another promising avenue for innovation in switching from individuation to quality work transitions. Under Article 7(6) of Regulation 2021/1057/EU, Member States must allocate an appropriate share of ESF+ funding received under shared management 'to targeted actions and structural reforms to support youth employment, vocational education and training, in particular apprenticeships, and the transition from school to work […]'. Similarly, policies for the next generation are to be flagged under the RRF. These funds provide fiscal space for innovative employment, education and training policies, as demonstrated by Spain's use of RRF funds to reregulate its fragmented labour market in particular for young workers (Aranguiz 2022).

EU funds could also address participation and the enforcement gaps for young people. Youth structures within trade unions, at times under-resourced (Vandaele 2019), are critical for mobilising young workers and advocating their interests. Increased use of EU funding to strengthen these structures or other youth organisations could enhance participation, provided organisational autonomy is respected. For example, the Commission's 2023 strategy to strengthen social dialogue recognises the importance of the unionisation of young people (European Commission 2023: 2, 14). Funding must also account for varying levels of social dialogue and civil society development across Member States, ensuring that weaker systems can absorb resources to promote youth unionisation and organisation, and prevent further divergence.

Another interesting idea to enhance participation and enforce labour rights is to incorporate training on these rights into the education system and into vocational programmes. Young workers, especially those entering the workforce, often lack awareness of their rights, hindering their ability to mobilise. Early integration of labour rights training into educational and vocational training curricula can help bridge this gap, strengthening young workers' bargaining power. This training could be further supported by trade unions offering programmes tailored to young workers' education, training and early work arrangements. Additionally, broadening awareness of workers' rights through early education can have long-term benefits for all workers. To avoid over-responsibilising young workers, training should be complemented by other measures to strengthen participation and enforcement, such as the development of youth structures for participation in labour regulation or support by worker representatives and administrative authorities in enforcement processes. Training and participation initiatives must also be tailored to local contexts and the varying risks faced by transitioning young workers. Otherwise, training can serve as another device of individuation.

Although education and vocational training fall to a considerable extent within Member State competence (Arts 165-166 TFEU), there is little to prevent EU funding through the ESF+ from being used to support domestic labour rights training, assist trade unions in delivering such training or foster policy innovation for quality work transitions. This funding can also be employed to develop

complementary participation and enforcement mechanisms. In a most radical reimagination, EU funding could be understood to allow for providing safety mechanisms for transitioning young workers' social inclusion or, at least, the financing of such mechanisms. The SURE instrument allowed the EU to fund domestic short-time work schemes during the Covid-19 pandemic (Council of the European Union 2020d), the YEI financed domestic youth employment measures, and debates continue on a European unemployment reinsurance scheme (Andor 2022; Corti and Huguenot-Noël 2024).

For funding to be a true source of innovation, youth employment conditionalities must be framed more coherently than is currently the case under the ESF+: the Commission does not require all Member States to invest in youth employment. To promote policy innovation for quality work transitions, the next revision of EU funding in 2027 should provide greater specificity on the policy measures that can be funded, make spending conditionalities more compelling in terms of amounts and objectives, and explicitly link to an objective of sustainable attachment to quality work. Even under Articles 165-166 TFEU, the EU may support certain incentive measures and/or other actions that promote policy innovation in youth employment policy. This encompasses youth participation structures or training on labour rights, for example to develop exchanges on issues common to Member States' education systems or, more straightforwardly, to improve initial vocational training. While political resistance may arise, EU youth employment conditionalities offer scope for innovation and creativity in the promotion of quality work transitions.

# Conclusion. EU governance infrastructures and quality work transitions

This study identifies an EU governance infrastructure for young people's work transitions which comprises the reinforced European Youth Guarantee; quality frameworks for traineeships, apprenticeships and VET; EU labour law; the European Semester; and the EU structural funds. It represents a complex, yet innovative, system of binding and non-binding standards paired with translation mechanisms. Additionally, it streamlines social considerations into the EU's economic governance. Nonetheless, the infrastructure has yet to promote cohesive labour regulation for quality work transitions and, in some areas, it perpetuates work transitions' individuation. The EU's social policy competences, however, present an opportunity to establish higher standards for decent youth employment. Failing to use these competences neglects the responsibility of public institutions and social partners to regulate for quality transitions. The current discussion on a traineeship directive, for example, risks over-narrowing its scope while binding quality standards are missing.

The study further highlights individuation as a key risk to work transitions. It over-responsibilises young people for their transitions, masks the roles of public institutions and the social partners in ensuring quality transitions and exacerbates young workers' already more frequent risks of being marginalised, entering adverse life trajectories and, ultimately, precariousness. Individuation exposes the route through which neoliberal, and third-way politics and the flexicurity-based social policies that have relied on these produce inequality and injustice for the young generation. It does not suffice to provide skill-building opportunities to young people, but regulation is needed for quality transitions. Individuation should also be taken seriously in the contemporary debate on European welfare states based on social investment (European Commission 2024c). Social investment aims at 'enhanc[ing] people's capabilities and opportunities in knowledge-based labour markets' and therefore considers investment in lifelong learning, life-course transitions and inclusive safety nets as complementary (Hemerijck et al. 2023). Yet individuation is still preserved in the EU regulation of work transitions, even though the governance infrastructure discussed in this study follows many of the tenets of social investment theory.

The quality of work transitions depends on sustainable access to work and decent work. Four guiding principles for regulators at all levels are therefore suggested in this study: a starting point of inclusiveness; effective, responsive and decent regulation of transitions; youth participation; and effective rights enforcement. I then provide three ideas for translating these principles within the current EU governance infrastructure: EU labour law to regulate for decent youth employment;

a strong EU employment policy for work transitions; and innovative uses of EU funding. These ideas will meet political resistance but are designed to fall rather clearly into EU competence. Beyond them, it may be worthwhile to review what the EU, together with domestic regulators, can do to strengthen the safety nets available to transitioning young people, as was slowly started with a reference to social protection in the apprenticeship quality framework or the 2023 Council Recommendation on adequate minimum income (Council of the European Union 2023). Young people's work transitions need a creative and radical reimagination of what the EU and its domestic counterparts can and should do as regards their quality. Only then can the young generation be collectively empowered to become the force of creative transformation we need in the contemporary ecological and social emergencies (Barraclough et al. 2021; Larocque 2023).

Finally, this study serves as an initial step in legal research on young people's work transitions. It opens the door to exploring other relevant issues, such as the intersection of youth and other characteristics in terms of precarious work, unemployment and social exclusion. Specific topics, such as socioeconomic inclusion and the increased risks of marginalisation faced by young women and migrants, warrant further exploration. Comparative analysis beyond the EU is also necessary. Such research can provide the necessary further ideas for regulating for quality work transitions through EU and domestic regulatory frameworks.

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D/2025/10.574/14
ISSN 1994-4446 (print version)
ISSN 1994-4454 (electronic version)

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