



# **Recommendations on the contribution of sport to the employability of young people, including young professional sportsmen and women, and the creation of jobs in the sport and sport-related labour market.**

*Expert Group on Human Resources Development in Sport*

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## Introduction

Sport has a strong value as an educational context capable of facilitating the development of certain attributes and skills needed to achieve personal success. It can be used in a wide array of intervention programmes aimed at achieving developmental objectives, such as economic and social participation, educational attainment and health outcomes. These are just some of the objectives of so-called 'sport for development' initiatives.

Sport-based intervention programmes to facilitate upward social mobility for disadvantaged young people have been undertaken in several European countries, supported by a transnational social agenda and national and local social inclusion policies. Rather than representing stand-alone sport or youth programmes, these initiatives address the cultural, social and educational challenges young people are facing when making the transition from education and training to the labour market.

At the EU-level, the policy focus on the supply side of employability is articulated in the *Europe 2020 Growth Strategy* (2010) for 'smart, inclusive and sustainable growth'. One of Europe 2020's flagship activities is its agenda for new skills and jobs designed to assist labour market transitions. More recently, the *Youth Guarantee* and *Youth Employment Initiative* (YEI) drew lessons on how to improve the EU and national efforts on deploying national Youth Guarantee schemes.

A key focus of the employment policy is youth unemployment. Economic and social changes over the past two decades have disproportionately affected young people and made their transitions into work more fragile. Current youth unemployment rates are significantly higher than those for adults and the consequences are deemed to be damaging for European society. However, Europe has economic fault lines regarding youth employability. The Eurozone youth unemployment rate of 20% in 2015 conceals the differences between EU-member states. In 2015, Germany had a youth unemployment rate of 7%, while in Spain (48%) and Greece (50%) a larger proportion of the labour force between 15 and 24 were unemployed. The indicator on young people '*Neither in Employment, nor in Education or Training*' (NEET) provides information on young people aged 15 to 24 who meet the following two conditions: (a) they are not employed (i.e., unemployed or inactive according to the *International Labour Organisation* definition) and (b) they have not received any education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey. Once more, the NEET figures vary according to northern, southern and eastern European member states.

Social exclusion in terms of (non-)participation in employment is evident in the debate on worklessness and employability. Concepts that have emerged as a central tenet of social policies in Europe. Employment refers to actually obtaining a paid occupation, while employability covers "*an individual's chance of a job in the labour market*" (Forrier et al., 2015). It refers to "*the character or quality of being employable*", which is derived from individual characteristics and circumstances as well as broader, external factors (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Employability encompasses a complex relationship between a set of individual attributes (personal strengths in the form of knowledge, skills and attitudes), individuals' appraisals or perceived employability of the chance obtaining a paid occupation and the rather general needs of the labour market.

The present report includes a general introduction on the interaction between youth, sport and employability in the European Union and describes the most important

findings of the discussions held during the meetings of the Expert Group on Human Resources Development in Sport (XG-HR) regarding the contribution of sport to the employability of young people. It also draws from other sources (i.e., scientific literature, research and policy reports, etc.) and formulates general and specific recommendations.

## Sport and employability

### Positive support ... but limited inspiration so far

Throughout the meetings it became clear that all XG-HR members and observers fully supported the notion that sport can be an effective tool in fighting unemployment of young people. This is in line with the strong belief among policy makers and practitioners in most EU Member States that sport inherently possesses the potential to contribute to young people's individual development and to their social integration. To an increasing extent, sport is associated with a variety of personal and societal outcomes clearly exceeding the sport context. Among other things, active involvement in sport has been associated with improved life skills, moral reasoning and educational performance (Kay, 2009).

Interestingly however, when initially asked to provide recommendations and good practices regarding the use of sport as a tool to increase employability for young people, only very few of the XG-HR members and observers were able to provide examples and recommendations for further actions in which sport can be used as a means of employability of young people. It is clear that, to date, there is a lack of insight and understanding into this potential of sport. This is logic as it is a fairly new perspective from which to look at the social role of sport. It has been indicated by others that the potential value of sport as a vehicle to address employability issues among young people has received very little attention to date (Spaij et. al, 2013). In addition, information on existing initiatives that use sport as a means to increase youngsters' employability is still scarce at present.

The XG-HR members also agreed to narrow down the topic and not to include young professional sportsmen and women as target group for the discussion, nor the creation of jobs in the sport and sport-related labour market as the main target. While sport's contribution to employability relates to some extent to job creation in the sport and sport-related labour market, they are distinctly different topics. It was considered to be too difficult to describe examples and recommendations in general terms covering both aspects at the same time. In addition, there is clearly an overlap with the work of other expert groups (XG ECO - the Economic dimension). There can also be referred to the work that has been done in the context of the national and European social dialogue, particularly the Joint Opinion "*Strengthening employability in the sport and active leisure sector*" by the European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee for sport and active leisure. Among other things, the role of employers' and employees' organizations (i.e., social partners) was stressed in supporting sport organisations and their employees to improve the employability and creating sustainable jobs in the sport and sport-related labour market.

Furthermore, including young professional sportsmen and women as a specific target group would also make generalisations difficult, especially if we are dealing with using sport as a tool to fight unemployment of young people in the EU. Again these are different issues. And while there is no doubt that all of these aspects deserve further consideration, in order to get a better understanding on the contribution of sport and employability for youngsters and to deliver relevant recommendations, there was a consensus for a need to set priorities. We therefore opted for narrowing down the focus to the extent to which sport can be used as a means to help improve youngsters' employability, thereby looking at the most vulnerable groups in Europe (i.e., NEET's). This in itself is an important but already complex issue.

Furthermore, there was a need for clarification on the terms that were used. Most importantly, it is noteworthy to mention that employability is distinctly different from employment. The former relates to a person's skills, knowledge and abilities to get in, stay and progress in employment. The latter however refers to actually obtaining a paid occupation, which will largely be determined by broad external factors (e.g., the nature of the accessible local job market, employer's attitudes to particular types of individuals, household support, etc.) (Spaaij et al., 2013). In other words, this is not within the control of sport policy nor specific sport programmes and will primarily depend on the nature of the local labour market.

It is noteworthy that the High Level Group on Grassroots Sport (HLG) underlined that sport clubs, associations and fitness facilities used as educational settings, as well as participation in grassroots sports, can make a strong contribution to informal learning and development of transversal skills, such as discipline, teamwork, leadership, problem solving, etc. Additionally, voluntary and professional roles in grassroots sport are increasingly providing opportunities to develop IT, marketing, management and communications skills. Thus, grassroots sport can have a positive impact on decreasing the high numbers of (youth) unemployed by offering opportunities to develop skills and overcome skills gaps. This is in line with the Council's conclusions (May 2015) on maximising the role of grassroots sport in developing transversal skills, especially among young people, that outline the educational potential of grassroots sport. The Council emphasised the work with local structures and the support of amateur sport infrastructures to help disadvantaged youth to find their place in society. It was also indicated that grassroots sport could contribute by using its social and educational potential to promote tolerance, mutual understanding and European values.

In addition, the HLG formulated some specific recommendations such as:

- to follow up on ongoing related work in the 2014-17 EU Work Plan for Sport, notably in the Expert Group on Human Resources Development, and specifically to liaise with DG EMPL and other relevant DGs with responsibilities for skills, employability and jobs. The sport and active leisure sector cannot find solutions alone – it needs to be coordinated with other actions – such as “new skills for new jobs”;
- to develop a scientific evidence base to highlight the role of grassroots sport in informal learning and skills development at European and member state level (based on the on-going EU Study on employability of youth through sport, due to report in 2017);
- to support and encourage sport movements to take initiatives in the field of employability, skills development and informal learning (submitted by EuropeActive, Oct. 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016).

## Dealing with complexities

Merely looking at employability will however be a challenge as it was mentioned before that it encompasses a complex relationship between a set of individual attributes and the rather general needs of the labour market. Consequently, it is not surprising that there is a variety of definitions for this term (e.g., Cedefop, 2011; Dacre et al., 2007; Yorke & Knight, 2006). Two broad perspectives can be identified: the first relates to the development of technical, job-related hard skills. This perspective assumes that employability is a characteristic of individuals' sets of identifiable and measurable skills, such as academic or vocational qualifications, technical or job-specific knowledge and work experience. The second perspective emphasises softer personal qualities, attitudes and attributes. These soft skills are

viewed as including behavioural characteristics and elements of an individual's personality, values, attitudes and behaviour. These skills include such elements as team working, reliability and time/stress management, high motivation and ambition, personal presentation and dress.

Taking this complexity into consideration, we opt for a comprehensive definition as suggested by Forrier and Sels (2003). They referred to employability as "An individual's chance of a job in an internal and/or external job market". They further specified that this relates to the personal attitudes, the willingness to use and enhance employability, as well as to contextual factors to improve employability and labour market characteristics which allow individuals to use their employability in the labour market.

## **The social role of sport ... to what extent?**

The general belief is that these soft (also referred to as transferable / transversal) skills can also be acquired through sports, which can then be applied in the corporate sector, such as: cooperation (related to team spirit/working), leadership, fair play/respect for rules and others, competition handling, expectation management (e.g., when winning or losing), mentoring, stress management, etc. In other words, sport is viewed not only as an opportunity to actively engage young people in a leisure context, but also across a range of issues including education, employment and training, healthy lifestyles, community leadership and engagement.

However, parallel to this strong belief of sport's potential positive effects, there has been an equally growing awareness among social (sport) scientists that the cumulative evidence base for the social role of sport in relation to specific target groups and specific (non-sport) related objectives is relatively weak (see e.g., Coalter, 2007; Long & Sanderson, 2001). As a consequence, there is a growing awareness that more knowledge and expertise is needed to increase and optimise the social potential of sport. And although scholars have started to identify conditions under which particular outcomes are likely to occur, there remains a need for critical research and theory that identifies the processes through which sport participation can produce progressive change transcending the lives of youth (Coakley, 2011).

## **Multiple challenges**

Next to the debate on the actual social role of sport, we often see that interventions aiming to promote social inclusion or address broader social issues through the use of sport are facing multiple challenges (e.g., only relying on short term project funding; no monitoring and evaluation strategy; top-down goal setting; difficulties in finding ways to prove effectiveness; limited understanding of the target group; etc.). Furthermore, and most problematically, initiatives that have been set up in societal institutions, such as schools, labour market or career centres, health, sport organisations and youth-welfare services have been faced with challenges in reaching socially excluded young people or young people at-risk of social exclusion in the first place. For example, research has illustrated how youth programmes pursuing fixed externally defined outcomes potentially have the perverse effect of excluding those who differ most from a desired developmental trajectory or (policy-led) programme endpoint (Coussée & Roets, 2011; Tiffany, 2011). This is especially relevant if policy interventions are conceptualized on mainstream conventions and practices regarding education, employment or positive youth development, conventions and practices that are perpetuated by the same institutions (e.g., schools and career services) that exclude young people in the first place (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012).

## Many issues to address

The above shows that several challenges lie ahead with regard to understanding and using sport as a tool to increase employability of young people. We feel that it is therefore necessary to address several issues in order to get a better view on the complexity related to this topic. It is our belief that there is a need to have a clearer view on these issues first before we can start to discuss and formulate relevant policy recommendations and strategic actions.

- What can be the **actual social role of sport** with regard to fighting against unemployment of young people?
- How should we **define sport** when considering its social role? (e.g., traditional, non-traditional)
- Under what **conditions** can we expect that sport can be used as an employability tool?
- How can we **optimise non-formal and informal learning** through sport involvement?
- What type of **outcomes** can we expect when using sport as a tool to increase employability?
- Who can be considered as **crucial partners** to be included (alongside the sport sector) to deal with employability?
- Which type of **decent and sustainable jobs** can we expect to be available for underprivileged youth?
- How can we ensure that organisations **not merely focus** on meeting the targets by working with those young people more likely to demonstrate positive outcomes, thereby excluding hard to reach groups?
- How to make use of **existing models** as ECTS, Youth Guarantee, Europass and Youthpass in a policy aimed at optimising sport's contribution to employability of young people?

The discussion on these questions by the XG-HR resulted into specific findings regarding the following issues:

- **Using a broad perspective** to look at **the role and value of sport** as a youth employability tool, thereby determining its **position** within specific sport for employability programmes (e.g., 'sport', 'sport-plus' or 'plus-sport').
- Focussing primarily on the role of sport as a tool for **'soft skill' development of low-educated youth**.
- Having **realistic expectations** regarding the **extent** to which sport involvement can achieve youth employability goals.
- Clarifying **basic concepts** (i.e., target group and type of skills), but with the consensus for setting priorities (i.e., narrowing down these concepts), allowing a more focused policy and initiatives to be set up.
- Considering **alternative organisational formats, types and strategies** (e.g., 'less', 'semi' or 'mixed' organisational forms; less conventional sports,



such as street/urban sports and a more frequent use of social media) to better recruit youngsters with low educational level.

- Rethinking the **position of the traditional sport sector** (i.e., sport clubs). While some have argued that the traditional offer of club sport can provide good opportunities to retain youngsters in the long run because of better structures (compared to alternative formats), others pointed out that not all youth with an interest in sport is attracted to it. In addition, as its core business is to organise sport opportunities, there are doubts whether or not it can or should go beyond that (e.g., pursuing personal and social developmental goals of youngsters).
- Analysing **the identity and motives of the 'non-active'** as they are often disregarded.
- Determining conditions for **effective collaborative partnerships**. While there is a general belief in the need to collaborate between sectors, it is less clear how this can be stimulated and organised. Who should be involved and does what? And last - but not least - what the added value is for all of those involved?
- Understanding **non-formal learning processes**. Apart from identifying appropriate skills to be developed, it remains unclear how this can be done through sport. Among other things, this relates to necessary coaching competences, as well as understanding the role of volunteering, peer leaders and the use of role models in learning and practicing new skills that are transferable to employment.
- **Mapping, monitoring and evaluation (M&E)** of existing practices and policies. Besides getting more insight into what already exists in other EU member states, M&E work is crucial for evidencing impact, outcomes and causality. This, however, requires specific expertise.
- Working towards improved employability also needs **good contact with the employment sector** to, among other things, link sport based schemes with employment pathways and to be more adjusted to the changing needs in the labour market.
- Investigating opportunities for **youngsters' involvement** in new businesses, entrepreneurship and self-employment (e.g., fitness and outdoor recreation areas).

## General and specific recommendations

### 1. General recommendations

- 1.1. There is a need to **optimise engagement strategies** to reach the 'hard to reach' youth. This implies not only including 'non-traditional' sports next to more traditional forms (e.g., street and/or 'lifestyle' sports) and using specific communication and networking strategies (including social media), but also to optimise NEET's mobility opportunities (e.g., reductions for public transport).
- 1.2. While it is clear that the traditional **sport sector can play a role** in using sport as a means to improve youth employability, setting up **collaborative partnerships** with relevant sectors and policy domains (e.g., youth work, education, social work, employment) will be more effective.
- 1.3. In order to have good insight into the requirements that are needed to increase youth's chances of employment, **structural links** are required with the **employment sector**.
- 1.4. It is important to better understand what **type of expertise** is needed for coaches and mentors in sport who work with youngsters towards increased employability. This will have an effect on coaches training programmes.
- 1.5. There is a need to **understand NEET's (non-)involvement** in organised and non-organised sport settings to optimise engagement strategies and design effective programmes to retain youth. This also includes drop-outs of existing programmes.
- 1.6. There is a **lack of insight into underlying mechanisms and strategies** that lead to increased employability through non-formal learning in and through sport. Different aspects have to be taken into account, such as the role of coaching/mentor behaviour, the use of role modelling and peer learning and the extent to which competences can be transferred to non-sport settings.
- 1.7. More understanding is needed regarding how **competences** that are acquired through non-formal and informal learning (in and through sport) can be **validated**. Among other things, this involves **documentation, identification, assessment and certification** of key competences. In order to do so, a **cross-sectoral collaboration** and a **multi-disciplinary approach** is required. Regarding the validation of these competences, lessons can be learned from Youthpass (validation and recognition of non-formal learning experience) and the evaluation of skills and competences in the youth sector.

## 2. Specific recommendations

### European level

**2.1. The European Union should implement a policy aimed at optimising sport's contribution to employability of NEET's. It should make full use of the knowledge obtained through initiatives that have been set up to facilitate educational and employment opportunities for young people.**

*Several initiatives and programmes have been set up in recent years on a European level to facilitate educational and employment opportunities for young people in general (e.g., ECTS, Youth Guarantee, Europass; Youthpass). It is necessary to make full use of these experiences and incorporate their basic principles and insights. This integration requires collaborative action from different stakeholders involved. The EU should provide a forum for setting up this collaborative work.*

**2.2. The European Union should set up a general valorisation framework of transferable skill development through sport for NEET's.**

*Although there is a general belief that sport can provide a good avenue for (transferable) social skill development for NEET's, to date, knowledge on the identification and recognition of these skills through sport is scarce. Because of the diversity of developmental youth sport programmes in Europe, the European Union should stimulate knowledge development regarding the documentation, identification, assessment and certification of these skills. A consultation among stakeholders and experts from relevant sectors (e.g., employers, industry, education, training) familiar with validation of social skill development is therefore recommended. These insights can form the basis for setting up a general valorisation framework of transferable skill development through sport.*

**2.3. The European Union should stimulate knowledge development regarding the critical success factors of developmental sport-based practices to increased employability for NEET's.**

*As there is a lack of insight into the underlying mechanisms and strategies that lead to increased employability through non-formal learning in and through sport for NEET's, there is a need for knowledge development regarding the critical success factors of developmental sport-based practices. It can be expected that the ongoing 'Study on the contribution of sport to the employability of young people in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy' will provide some of these insights. It is also essential that this knowledge can be shared and further developed with all relevant stakeholders. European umbrella organisations and member states should therefore be actively encouraged to support and implement strategies based on these insights.*

**2.4. The European Union should stimulate the development and use of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of sport-based programmes that are set up to optimise the employability of NEET's.**

*Despite the growing interest in a number of EU member states to make use of sport as a means to optimise employability opportunities of NEET's, to date, there is a lack of insight how sport can be used efficiently and effectively in existing programmes. Consequently, there is a need to develop a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework to adequately measure outcomes of sport-based employability programmes and to identify the contribution of sport. This framework should allow the collection of data regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of sport-based programmes and could facilitate the development of specific tools to be used to measure impacts and effects.*

## National (government) level

**2.5. Governments should consider to primarily stimulate and support those organisations that are explicitly aiming to use sport as a means for increasing the employability of NEET's.**

*There is a need to raise the awareness among the sport sector and local authorities regarding sport's employability potential for NEET's. At the same time however, it is also necessary to stress the importance of having realistic expectations with regard to sport's actual contribution and the conditions under which positive outcomes can be generated. Therefore, instead of encouraging all (sport) actors for taking up this type of social responsibility, it is more advisable to primarily stimulate and support those organisations that are explicitly aiming (or willing) to use sport as a means for increasing the employability of NEET's. In addition, for this purpose it is recommended to clearly (re-)define the notion of a 'sport organisation' in terms of its specific characteristics, aims, typologies and position in relation to other structures in the leisure sector.*

**2.6. Governments should consider to link their public investments in sport-based programmes for employability opportunities for NEET's to a demand for a (social and sustainable) return on investment.**

*While governments should be encouraged to support sport-based programmes that provide opportunities for increased employability of NEET's, it is advisable that they also demand a social return for their investment. In addition, they should consider a focus on the sustainability of the supported programmes and their outcomes. However, to ensure and identify the impact of these programmes, there is a need to include opportunities for adequate monitoring and evaluation. Governments should consider to support programmes in implementing this as an essential part of their activities.*

**2.7. Governments should consider to encourage local collaborative partnerships between the sport sector and other relevant domains and structures.**

*There is a need to implement (social) youth sport policies that encourage local collaborative partnerships between the sport sector and other relevant domains and structures (e.g., youth, social organisations, employment sector and other public services) when working towards employability opportunities for NEET's. This approach can only be successful if national sport policy makers also recognise the need to collaborate with other national policy domains and determine the specific contributions and positions of each of the domains involved. It is thereby important that there is mutual recognition, which means that other sectors should also acknowledge the contribution of sport (and the sport sector) with regard to employability of NEET's. Identifying and illustrating best local practices can facilitate this recognition.*

**2.8. Governments should consider to develop more understanding of the non-formal learning processes in sport towards individual and social development of NEET's. This also includes insight into what type of expertise is needed for coaches and mentors.**

While there is a general belief that non-formal learning can play an important role in sport-based developmental programmes, there is limited knowledge as to how these processes actually take place and might lead to the acquisition of new skills that are transferable to increased employability. It is therefore advisable to look for best practices in sport and other social organisations and to share this knowledge with other interested partners, as well as to better understand what type of expertise is needed for coaches and mentors in sport-based developmental programmes for NEET's. This knowledge regarding 'social' coaching expertise should be incorporated into existing national coaching qualification schemes for sport and youth guidance.

**2.9. Governments should be aware of existing exclusionary mechanisms that prevent interested youth from becoming actively involved in sport.**

While NEET's are the primary target group for initiatives that focus on increased employability, they are often hard to reach. Therefore, it is important to better understand the reasons and barriers leading to non-participation of NEET's and how policy measures can be implemented to facilitate participation. Consequently, there is a need for specific insights into NEET's participation levels and to identify successful sport promotional policy measures. Although governments should keep in mind that they cannot expect all NEET's to be interested in sport, they should try to provide optimal accessibility for those that are.

**2.10. Governments should consider to encourage sport organisations to reflect on their social role with regard to youth participation. In addition, they should consider to emphasise the importance of providing youth volunteering and peer leadership opportunities for NEET's.**

Sport organisations that offer possibilities for volunteering and peer leadership among youth members not only help their own organisational structure (e.g., by increasing the number of volunteers, the level of professionalization of club and coaches, etc.), they might also provide opportunities for the personal and social development of these youngsters. Youth volunteering and peer leadership are generally believed to provide good opportunities for young people to experience and learn new skills. As such, organisations that make use of these strategies might be able to play a significant social role with regard to youth sport participation.

**2.11. Governments should consider to encourage the employment sector to participate in collaborative partnerships with sport and social organisations to enable a better understanding regarding the required employment skills.**

*In order to ensure increased employability for NEET's, there is an important need to work towards collaborative partnerships between sport and social organisations and the employment sector. Equally important is to encourage the employment sector to provide sufficient opportunities for NEET's to increase their employment chances and shorten the time between formation and actual employment (e.g., through job training, internship opportunities, involvement in new businesses, entrepreneurship and self-employment, etc.). Furthermore, the sector should also be encouraged to provide NEET's with decent and sustainable job opportunities.*

**2.12. Governments should consider to implement the above described recommendations on the contribution of sport to the employability of young people as formulated by the Expert Group on Human Development in Sport. They should also encourage the relevant stakeholders on national and local level to take these recommendations into serious consideration and encourage them to work towards their implementation.**