

The Importance of a Coordinated Career Guidance System in Addressing the Rural NEETs Issue

Blanka Bálint ¹ , Balázs Telegdy ¹ , and Ede Lázár ² 

¹ Department of Social Sciences, Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania

² Department of Business Sciences, Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania

Correspondence: Blanka Bálint (balintblanka@uni.sapientia.ro)

Submitted: 28 July 2023 **Accepted:** 25 October 2023 **Published:** 31 January 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Active Labour Market Policies and Youth Employment in European Peripheries” edited by Francisco Simões (ISCTE—University Institute of Lisbon) and Jale Tosun (Heidelberg University), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i378>

Abstract

A rapidly ageing population, the dual transition, major changes in the job market, and the coronavirus and its effects amplify existing disparities (gender gap, urban-rural cleavages), posing a considerable challenge for peripheral regions. In these circumstances, the labour market integration of young people who are neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) is becoming increasingly urgent for peripheral regions such as rural areas. Various legislation, policies, and community-based interventions play a significant role in promoting integration. Still, subjective factors such as self-efficacy beliefs affect perceptions of career opportunities and can even prevent some from seizing opportunities. As a result, approaches to tackling the rural NEET issue need to focus on a long-term, sustainable solution. One could be career guidance, which helps individuals take charge of their lives and choose meaningful careers and educational paths. Consequently, our research aimed to identify the conditions in 22 European countries related to career guidance that lead to low rural NEET rates among 25–29-year-olds. Career guidance systems were explored through content analysis of country-specific reports on lifelong guidance systems and then analysed using the fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis. The research results draw attention to the importance of coordinated career guidance systems in preventing and (re)integrating NEETs, as it helps make informed, meaningful, and long-term career decisions.

Keywords

active labour market policies; career guidance; governance; NEETs; peripheral regions; rurality

1. Introduction

Career guidance (CG) is frequently used to assist the unemployed in finding employment, forming a significant part of the active labour market policies (Hooley, 2014). CG increases individuals' motivation and helps make them more employable. The literature shows that CG also allows individuals to manage career breaks and periods of caring responsibilities (Hooley, 2014). However, as Arulmani (2010) points out, subjective factors such as self-efficacy beliefs affect perceptions of career opportunities and even prevent some from seizing opportunities. This is particularly important for NEETs, an umbrella term which includes various groups of young people with different characteristics and needs. Mascherini and Ledermaier (2016) divide the NEET category into seven subgroups, including the unemployed and those unavailable due to family commitments, illness, or disability who may be looking for alternative career paths or believe there are no suitable job opportunities. In addition to the heterogeneity in activity status (unemployed/outside the labour force), there are other differences within the structure of the NEET group, such as the gender gap, the urban-rural cleavages, or the differences in educational attainment. These differences are more prominent in the 25–29 age group. Across EU countries, women are likelier to be NEET than men, and the gender gap is widest among 25–29-year-olds (Eurostat, 2023). In the EU, the share of 15–29-year-old NEETs was the lowest in cities (Eurostat, 2023). This tendency is more noticeable among the 25–29 age group, with a 2.6 percentage point difference versus just 1.7 between cities and rural areas (calculated by the authors based on Eurostat, 2023). Furthermore, educational attainment level affects the share of NEETs, which is also more pronounced among 25–29-year-olds. The NEET rate among 15–29-year-olds with low educational attainment was 13.6% (Eurostat, 2023), compared to 39.7% among 25–29-year-olds with similar educational attainment (calculated by the authors based on Eurostat, 2023).

Given its essential role in helping people of all ages and backgrounds to fulfil their potential and navigate the radically changing world of work (Cedefop et al., 2021), CG could be a possible response to the NEET challenge. These are more pronounced for young NEETs in rural areas, which require strong CG programmes to combat the adverse effects of poverty, isolation, and the lack of job prospects (Borbély-Pecze & Hutchinson, 2013). Even if the CG has a proven beneficial effect in preventing people from becoming NEET (Holman, 2014; Mann et al., 2020; OECD, 2021b), it still plays a relatively minor role in EU policymaking when addressing the school-to-work transition. For instance, the International Labour Organization does not recommend measuring CG (Corbanese & Rosas, 2017) when it proposes the measures for one of the main EU policy frameworks, the Youth Guarantee (YG), which is one of the leading programmes to overcome the causes of the NEET problem. This activity should be more important as some analysis proves that the YG only sometimes fulfils its initial goals (e.g., Cabasés Piqué et al., 2016). Still, if YG works as an encounter between the young people and the institutions, where these interactions lead to “mobilisation,” “occupation,” “intermediation,” and “demobilisation,” as Loison-Leruste et al. (2016) prove, then the combination of YG with CG could be beneficial. Nonetheless, Neagu (2022) also shows, through a systematic review of the YG in Eastern Europe, that among the many interventions within this programme, only a few were dedicated to CG—and only in a few countries. YG may be a short-term solution to young people's problems. However, in the long term, CG is essential, or as Borbély-Pecze and Hutchinson (2013, p. 5) put it: “Without lifelong guidance, the Youth Guarantee could merely provide a temporary diversion to keep young people off the streets; with lifelong guidance, it could become a springboard to a better future.”

Based on the above, the research aims to draw attention to the importance of CG both in preventing people from becoming NEET and in helping them out of that state. The research seeks to identify which conditions

of the CG system are necessary and sufficient to achieve a low NEET rate (LNR) of 25–29-year-olds in rural areas. This article contributes to the growing literature on NEET by focusing on possible solutions rather than explaining the differences or identifying the risk factors characteristic of the most relevant studies.

In CG, educational institutions play a significant role in promoting employability. Thus, coordination is essential in this area, as it has been developed to address more effectively policy problems that require action across two or more policy areas (Tosun et al., 2019). Coordination links processes within and between policy areas (Bolleyer, 2011). In this article, we argue that coordinated governance is needed in the operation of the CG system to achieve a long-term sustainable reduction in the NEET rate. This is in line with the literature, as the system of CG is also conceived in intersectoral contexts in modern policy concepts (Borbély-Pecze, 2010). In addition, Tosun (2017) makes several arguments for the importance of networked/multi-organisation governance in YG implementation.

The article starts by describing the issue of NEETs aged 25–29 in rural areas and then discusses the role of CG in addressing this issue. It then describes the characteristics of effective CG, followed by a discussion of methodological issues and the analysis results. The article finishes with conclusions.

2. Young NEETs Aged 25–29 in Rural Areas

The term NEET has undergone several changes since its inception, especially regarding the age groups it covers. The concept was first extended to 15–24-year-olds and only later included 25–29-year-olds (Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016). It is, therefore, not surprising that research about NEETs aged 25–29 is under-researched compared to 15–24-year-olds. However, this age group has, on average, a higher share of NEET young people (15.7%) than the 20–24 age group (13.3%) or the 15–19 age group (5.8%) in the EU member states (Eurostat, 2023). Despite this, unlike younger NEETs, they are generally not the main target group for active labour market policies and measures (Koller et al., 2022). This is even more pronounced in the case of rural NEETs, who constitute an under-researched group in this field (Simões et al., 2022), despite the higher prevalence of rural NEETs in most European countries (Eurostat, 2023). However, young people in rural areas face several challenges, such as family dependency or limited job opportunities (Petrescu et al., 2022). The link between rurality and higher rates of NEETs is overlooked in countries where institutional support is less effective (Simões et al., 2022), even though rural areas are more often economically disadvantaged, offering low-skilled jobs and precarious employment opportunities for young people (Almeida & Simões, 2020). Peripheral labour markets offer, on the one hand, fewer job opportunities and, on the other, a lack of job opportunities in specific sectors while at the same time providing limited access to certain forms of education (Avagianou et al., 2022). Spatiality is, therefore, an essential factor influencing youth inactivity (Avagianou et al., 2022), as rurality, over-peripheralisation, and isolation weaken the regional capacity to resist the decline in youth employment and the rise of NEETs (Kapitsinis et al., 2022). The structural constraints, the path-dependent processes, the segmentation of the labour market, and the informal practices lead to poor resilience to youth unemployment and inactivity (Kapitsinis et al., 2022). Spatiality is, therefore, an essential aspect of inequality, with young people located in different areas of poverty and privilege (Farrugia & Wood, 2017).

The concept of NEET has proved helpful in several respects (Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016). Despite its usefulness, the NEET indicator has several limitations that need to be considered in the analysis (for more

details, see Koller et al., 2022). One of the most important of these is the heterogeneity of the group, the identification of which is essential to better understand the needs of different groups and to design effective policy measures (Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016). The group's heterogeneity means that the labour market instruments typically used to tackle youth unemployment are insufficient to address the situation. Instead, approaches are needed considering the group's diversity and the heterogeneous conditions that lead to NEET status (Assmann & Broschinski, 2021). A coordinated CG system can meet these expectations. However, some critics of the NEET concept also highlight the indicator's focus on individuals and their deficits rather than on socio-economic inequalities (Koller et al., 2022). CG can also address this gap by helping individuals reach their full potential and contributing to more efficient economies and fairer societies (Cedefop et al., 2021).

3. The Role of CG in Addressing the NEET Issue

In this study, the term "career guidance" is used to refer to services and activities that aim to help individuals manage their life course and make education, training, and occupational choices that are meaningful for them, based on a definition often used in the literature (Cedefop et al., 2019).

In most countries, the school is one of the main access points for CG (Musset & Kurekova, 2018), as two types of CG activities can be distinguished. The first is career education, where students develop career management skills (CMSs) and learn about the world of work. Career education aims to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to make appropriate decisions to manage their careers (Watts, 2001). The other type of school-based activity is individual or small group career counselling, which focuses on individuals' specific career problems, providing specific information and advice on career options and choices (Musset & Kurekova, 2018). CG is more than simple access to information; it is mainly about personal and informed reflection (Covacevich et al., 2021). CG in schools is also essential because it can help overcome inequalities by reducing the difference in opportunities related to children's background and parental experiences and expectations (Musset & Kurekova, 2018). CG services can increase opportunities for disadvantaged groups by supporting access to opportunities that would otherwise not be available (Watts, 2009). CG prevents the re-emergence of disadvantage by introducing young people to alternatives they may not have considered before. This gives them self-confidence and broadens their aspirations (Musset & Kurekova, 2018).

The need to increase investment in education is stressed in several studies (e.g., Caroleo et al., 2020), highlighting the importance of acquiring work-related skills in preventing NEETs (De Luca et al., 2020). Various longitudinal studies show that investing in effective CG is likely to pay off in the long run; as school-age adolescents think about their future work, exploring and experiencing possible future jobs is associated with better employment outcomes in young adulthood. CG is also associated with better educational outcomes and has a short-term pay-off. Learners become more motivated to learn as they better link their classroom experiences with their future success in the workplace (Cedefop et al., 2021). Students who explore and experience the world of work and think about their future often experience lower unemployment and higher wages and are happier as adults in their careers (Covacevich et al., 2021). One of the outcomes of effective CG is that students are less likely to become NEET (Holman, 2014).

Quantitative (Mann et al., 2020; OECD, 2021b) and qualitative (Lőrinc et al., 2020) longitudinal studies support the importance of CG services in educational institutions in preventing NEETs. Overall, CG helps to improve

the transition between education and the labour market (Cedefop et al., 2021) and reduces the likelihood of becoming NEET.

In the past, CG policies focused on young people in school who were about to move into higher education or the labour market. Nowadays, given technological change, globalisation, an ageing population, and changing demand for skills due to the green transition, adult CG is as vital as for young people in school (OECD, 2021a). It can also be essential for rural NEETs, who, in addition to the structural constraints mentioned earlier, often come from poorer households and have lower educational and occupational capital (Simões et al., 2022). For undereducated NEETs, person-centred CG is thus important (Almeida & Simões, 2020). However, longer unemployment spells negatively affect individuals' self-efficacy and perceived barriers (Simões et al., 2017), which also underlines the importance of CG for exiting the NEET situation.

4. Characteristics of an Effective CG

There is no magic bullet for developing effective CG; good CG is about consistently doing several things that meet specific guidelines—for example, the Gatsby benchmarks (Holman, 2014), which were developed to identify what good CG looks like based on research in schools in England. Therefore, we have taken CG activities as our starting point for developing the characteristics of effective CG.

The overall goal of CG is to develop individuals' CMSs. It achieves this through activities that help people access services, resources, and experiences related to employment, further education, and training. These activities include career education, employer engagement, individual and group counselling, career information, skills assessment, psychometric testing, and developing skills for job search and self-employment (Cedefop et al., 2021). These activities can be grouped into three broad categories: career education, career counselling, and career information (OECD, 2021a; Watts, 2009). In addition to these three factors, we considered inclusivity and quality control important. Indeed, an essential feature of effective CG is to ensure that services are accessible to all those who need them (Cedefop et al., 2021). Furthermore, trained professionals and appropriate standards (i.e., quality service delivery) are essential for CG to achieve its aim. These are discussed below.

4.1. Career Education

Career education is defined as CG education that is part of the curriculum and pays attention to helping individuals develop the competencies needed to manage their careers (Watts, 2009). Career-related learning should start at a young age, as final job prospects are influenced by academic decisions made early in the school years, attitudes towards learning, and different educational experiences (Covacevich et al., 2021). Effective CG, therefore, starts in primary school, addressing learners' assumptions and expectations about work while focusing on developing the competencies expected to help young people manage their careers in adulthood (Cedefop et al., 2021; Musset & Kurekova, 2018). CG education usually includes work-based learning through work experiences, which help individuals get a more in-depth understanding of different work areas before entering the workplace (Watts, 2009). These can take different forms: work experience, job shadowing, work visits, and simulations. Meanwhile, effective CG includes the involvement of people in the world of work, as it provides young people with credible and reliable information about jobs and how this relates to their education and training choices (Musset & Kurekova, 2018). Based on this, we have defined preliminary indicators of career education (see Table 1).

4.2. Career Counselling

An essential element of CG is career counselling, which focuses on individuals' career problems. This can occur individually and in small groups (Watts, 2009). All learners should be able to talk to a career counsellor about their ideas and plans. These consultations should be available whenever a student faces a major academic or career decision (Holman, 2014). The advantages of personal counselling include that it considers individual needs and is impartial while helping students find the best direction for them (Holman, 2014).

Teachers play a prominent role in personal counselling in several ways: Firstly, they meet students more often, so they can have closer contact with them where appropriate, and secondly, they can give credible advice on careers related to the subjects they teach. Linking curricula to careers is essential for high-quality CG (Holman, 2014). There is, therefore, a consensus in the literature that good quality CG is not only the responsibility of qualified guidance professionals but also requires the involvement of all school staff and faculty (Musset & Kurekova, 2018). CG is a public good that aims to ensure equity, promote equal opportunities, and foster social inclusion (Watts, 2009). One way of doing this is through CG, which can also significantly prevent early school leaving. Therefore, programmes designed explicitly for disadvantaged youth can also be an additional indicator for career counselling (see Table 1).

4.3. Career Information

The third element of the core activities of CG services is career information. Career information includes labour market information and information on training, occupations, and career paths. Career information is available in various formats but is increasingly a web-based service (Watts, 2009). Career information should be presented through an online CG portal, which provides centralised information on jobs and training opportunities in the region or country. However, it often also provides the opportunity to assess individual preferences and personality traits, such as interests and skills (OECD, 2021a). The advantages of these portals include a one-stop shop approach, up-to-date information, and the presentation of high-quality career information, a key feature of high-quality CG services. Online portals can, therefore, be a reliable resource for CG experts (OECD, 2021a), but they can also be used by students, parents, employees, and anyone who needs CG.

In addition to career information, various skills assessments, psychometric tests, and CG services can be delivered face-to-face and through ICT tools (telephone, online chat, video conferencing, instant messaging) or a combination. Although research shows that face-to-face CG services are more effective than remote alternatives, for people living in places where face-to-face services are hard to access, remote access can help overcome distance barriers, even if the lack of appropriate equipment or digital skills is an obstacle to this option (OECD, 2021a). Another way to increase access to services is to use self-help approaches, which can sometimes replace or reduce the need for face-to-face counselling (Watts & Sultana, 2004). The lack of digital skills or tools can be a barrier. However, it is less of a problem for the young people targeted by the research, who are what generational theories call digital natives (Prensky, 2001), even if the validity of generational theories is nowadays questioned. Using different forms of technology to increase access and better meet the different needs of beneficiaries is an essential element of effective CG (Cedefop et al., 2021).

Career information and other CG-related services are available individually and through different institutions. In addition to the education system and PES, there can be an extensive range of institutions to access, for example, public and private CG centres, workplaces, trade unions, NGOs, professional bodies, and local communities (Cedefop et al., 2021). This is also important because satisfaction with the services provided by public employment services is often low (e.g., Shore & Tosun, 2019), presumably due to overburdened advisers who cannot provide personalised advice due to a lack of time and support. Private CG services can complement personalised services, even though they are often unaffordable for disadvantaged groups without subsidies. In contrast, services provided by employers or associations are often a positive source of employment opportunities (OECD, 2021a). A further indicator of access to career information is the extent to which the institutional system is available (see Table 1).

4.4. Inclusive CG

While the public perception of CG is primarily associated with young people in school, there is also a significant demand for CG among adults (OECD, 2021a). Building inclusive CG systems is critical to ensuring that all adults, including the most disadvantaged, have the support they need to make informed education, training, and occupational choices (Cedefop et al., 2021). Reaching disadvantaged adults and linking them to CG services can increase this group's labour market opportunities and training participation (OECD, 2021a). Therefore, priority attention should be given to these activities.

CG activities are less used by the groups who need them most, such as those with lower skills, women, people living in rural areas, or those working in occupations at risk of automation (OECD, 2021a). Some who do not benefit from services do not feel the need for these activities. In contrast, others are unaware of them (OECD, 2021a). Therefore, efforts to raise awareness of the importance of CG activities are of great relevance. Based on the above, Table 1 presents the indicators of inclusive CG we have identified.

4.5. Quality Check

A prerequisite for high-quality CG services is competent professionals who provide impartial, personalised advice, considering training, and labour market opportunities. To ensure this, there is a consensus in the literature that more efforts are needed to ensure that guidance professionals are adequately trained, and quality assurance mechanisms are sufficiently developed. To ensure high-quality services, qualitative standards must be set to guide CG professionals. Furthermore, there needs to be more research that can guide service providers with feedback on their activities' effectiveness (Sultana, 2003).

The conditions and the indicators can be summarised as follows (Table 1).

To summarise, there is no ideal way to organise CG, as countries face different challenges and have different institutional and cultural structures (Cedefop et al., 2021). However, effective CG systems must meet specific requirements, such as well-coordinated services and collaborative stakeholders, to ensure access to CG services for all who need them. Appropriate tools, clear standards, and qualified professionals should ensure their quality. In addition, they use different forms of technology to increase access and better meet different needs (Cedefop et al., 2021).

Table 1. The conditions and the indicators used in the analysis.

Condition	Indicators
Career education (E)	CMSs included in the school curricula from the primary education level Opportunities for young people to gather practical experience Collaboration with employers
Career counselling (C)	The opportunity for individual career counselling to students (post-primary education) Programmes designed explicitly for disadvantaged youth Teachers contribute to educational and vocational guidance
Access to career information (A)	The existence of an online national CG portal The possibility of remote delivery, services on a self-help basis CG services delivered by a variety of providers
Inclusive CG (G)	Services open to all adults Activities to reach disadvantaged groups Activities to raise awareness about the availability and usefulness of CG services
Quality check (Q)	Tertiary level training and qualifications for CG counsellors The existence of qualitative standards Monitoring activities, impact research

5. Data and Method

To answer our research question, we compared 22 European countries' CG systems with the fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) method. The analysis used fsQCA software (Ragin & Davey, 2022).

5.1. Case Selection

The unit of analysis consisted of countries belonging to the EU or EFTA member states that had a Lifelong Career Guidance Inventory on the Cedefop portal and where the Eurostat database contained data on the proportion of NEET young people aged 25–29 in rural areas. The analysis was then carried out in the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

5.2. Data Collection

The CG systems were analysed by content analysis of country reports. The content analysis was carried out with a priori codes along the indicators of the theoretical concept mentioned earlier, allowing the incorporation of in vivo codes that emerged during the research. Based on the content analysis of CG systems, we identified an additional condition: the existence/absence of a National Guidance Forum.

The guidance forum is an excellent opportunity for cooperation between the different entities involved in CG, but also for quality assurance. This is also important because, as the literature (e.g., Sultana, 2003) shows, one of the main areas for improvement of guidance is the need for inter-sectoral cooperation. At the same time, it is essential to view CG as a single system, even though it consists of several components linked to education and employment systems and the public and private sectors (Watts & Sultana, 2004).

5.3. Calibration

For the calibration process, we used the direct calibration method, where there are three qualitative anchors to structure calibration: the threshold for full membership, the threshold for full non-membership, and the cross-over point (Ragin, 2008). The direct method uses a logistic function to fit the raw data between the three qualitative anchors, so the actual anchors are at 0.95, 0.5, and 0.05 (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). The set membership scores depend on the exact location of quality anchors (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012), which were based on theoretical and empirical considerations.

For the calibration of the outcome, the Low NEET Rate (LNR), the threshold for the cross-over point, is based on the EU-level target for 2021, set at 17.3% for the 25–29 age group. Because the outcome is labelled LNR, we had to convert high values in the raw data into low fuzzy-set membership scores and vice versa.

For the conditions defined based on the theoretical considerations, three indicators showed the presence or absence of the concept. If an indicator was present, it was scored 1; if not, it was scored 0. On this basis, each condition could take a value of 0, 1, 2, or 3. A condition was met if at least two indicators were present (full set membership if all three were present) for the country, so the threshold for these conditions was set at 1.5. The full non-membership occurred when no indicator was present.

For the condition defined based on the empirical analysis, the existence of the National Guidance Forum, the thresholds are 0 = *full non-membership* and 1 = *full membership*. The latter represents a dichotomous variable as opposed to the previous fuzzy-set values. Still, if a concept is represented as a pure dichotomy, it can be integrated into a fsQCA without a problem (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

6. Results

In general, a condition is necessary if it applies to all outcomes. In the present case, a condition is necessary if an LNR cannot be achieved without it. Therefore, in the necessity analysis, only those cases should be considered that include the outcome in question (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). In this case, we expect the condition to be present in countries with a low NEET output. This also means that the analysis of necessity should start by investigating single conditions. The analysis used the consistency and coverage scores for each condition. The results showed that none of the categories of each condition were necessary to achieve the expected outcome, as the scores obtained were below the recommended level. A necessity test for configurations between individual conditions only makes sense if one or two conditions pass the necessity test (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012) and are, therefore, not necessary in our case.

As regards the sufficiency testing, we applied the truth table approach as a recommended and preferred strategy (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). The so-called truth table describes the outcome of a given set of conditions (see Table 2). The truth table is based on the empirical primary data table, but the different condition combinations are not presented case by case but aggregated. The conditions and outcome are used to label the columns of a truth table, with the rows representing the outcome for each possible combination of present and absent conditions for all cases that have that combination. Since the method uses the tools of formal logic, dichotomous values must be used in the truth table, transforming the values of the primary data table. Ones indicate the presence of conditions and the outcome, and zeros indicate absence. In fuzzy sets, a value of 1

in the outcome column (LNR in our case) indicates that the row can be considered a sufficient condition for the outcome, and 0 otherwise (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

Table 2. The truth table derived from fuzzy-set data.

Career education (E)	Career counselling (C)	Access to career information (A)	Inclusive CG (G)	Quality check (Q)	National Guidance Forum (N)	Number of countries	LNR	Raw consistency
1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
1	1	1	0	1	1	2	1	0.950
1	1	1	1	1	1	11	1	0.936
1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0.718
1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0.592
1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0.565
1	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0.521
1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0.492
0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0.477
0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0.460

The truth table shows that the first three rows linked to the outcome (LNR) value of 1 can be interpreted as sufficient for the outcome. In one configuration, all six conditions are present (third row); in another, the LNR is achieved in the absence of inclusive CG (second row), and in the third configuration, career counselling is absent in addition to the previous one. In all three configurations, the consistency is high, above 0.9, which means the empirical information does not deviate massively from the perfect subset relation. We can use an alternative measure of consistency for fuzzy sets, the PRI consistency (Ragin, 2017). In our case, it is also above the threshold of 0.8 (Ragin, 2017).

We can apply the Boolean algebra rules for a more concise and parsimonious answer. The Quine–McCluskey algorithm is used to logically minimise the various sufficient statements in the truth table (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). Based on this, it can be stated that if two truth table rows linked to the outcome differ in only one condition—that is, if the condition is present in one row and absent in the other—then this condition can be deemed logically redundant and irrelevant for producing the outcome in the presence of the other conditions involved in these rows. The two rows can then be combined into a more straightforward, sufficient combination of conditions, and the logically redundant condition can be omitted (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). We carried out the logical minimisation process using standard analyses. This is the strategy proposed by Ragin (2008). Three solutions were produced: complex, parsimonious, and intermediate. We chose to interpret the intermediate solution because “intermediate solutions strike a balance between parsimony and complexity, based on the substantive and theoretical knowledge of the investigator” (Ragin, 2008, p. 175). In order to obtain the intermediate solution, we specified our so-called directional expectations. This refers to how the conditions should theoretically contribute to the occurrence of the outcome. According to our causal model, all conditions should contribute to the outcome if it is present, as treated by the intermediate solution of the fsQCA standard analysis.

The results of the intermediate solution are shown in Table 3. Accordingly, the configuration $E * A * Q * N$ is sufficient to achieve the desired outcome. The fit parameters are appropriate: the consistency cutoff is high

at 0.935, while the solution coverage is 0.737. The latter expresses how much the total solution term covers (Ragin, 2017).

Table 3. The fsQCA results.

Model: LNR = f(E, C, A, G, Q, N)			
Frequency cutoff: 1			
Consistency cutoff: 0.935			
	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
E * A * Q * N	0.737	0.737	0.889
Solution coverage: 0.737			
Solution consistency: 0.889			

This means that the simultaneous presence of these four conditions (career education, access to career information, the quality check, and the National Guidance Forum) is sufficient to achieve a low rural NEET rate for 25–29-year-olds. The importance of these conditions for young people in rural areas and how they can contribute to reducing the NEET rate will be discussed in the following.

Career education mainly teaches CMSs through various work experiences and cooperation with schools and the business sphere. Its importance lies in developing skills; at the same time, partnerships in local communities are an excellent opportunity to gain work experience, which is essential in implementing a well-established school guidance system (Borbély-Pecze & Hutchinson, 2013). For rural pupils, learning about career opportunities in the local community and exploring what local needs they could meet if they continue their education and training is also very important (Bright, 2020). There is a consensus in the literature on the link between lower educational attainment and higher NEET rates (Caroleo et al., 2022; Rahmani & Groot, 2023), as evidenced by the statistical data presented in the introduction. The relevance of this to rural young people is critical given that rural residents have significantly lower levels of educational and career attainment, including college participation and completion rates, even though the educational outcomes of rural students are not lower than those of students from other geographical locations (Bright, 2020). CG is associated with better educational outcomes and increased learning motivation (Cedefop et al., 2021). However, it may also play a vital role in preventing early school leaving among young people in rural areas. Career education is relevant for all school students when part of the curriculum. Its additional importance lies in its systematic accessibility for all young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Musset & Kurekova, 2018). At the same time, career education can help to break down stereotypes about women’s participation in the labour market and gender bias in the STEM sector and help women reconcile their aspirations with external expectations. This, in turn, can help to reduce the significant gender gaps.

Access to career information includes a CG portal, a one-stop shop for up-to-date information on the labour market, training opportunities, occupations, and career paths. As educational and job opportunities are generally limited in rural areas, this information can help young people find training paths relevant to the realities of rural spaces. It also includes remote access CG facilities, which make these services available where they are not available locally. Access to career information is critical for young people in rural areas, as there are usually limited local learning and job opportunities. In this sense, remote opportunities greatly help overcome distance barriers (OECD, 2021a). Another element is the wide range of institutions where this

information and other CG-related services are available. A broader institutional system means they are more likely to find a CG institution locally or closer to their locality.

One of the fundamental aims of quality assurance is to improve the efficiency of service delivery (Hooley, 2014). This is determined by the staff involved in service delivery and the qualitative standards along which services are organised. This requires monitoring activities and impact assessments that provide reliable data on the effectiveness of activities. In this case, quality assurance means providing the same quality of CG services in rural and urban areas.

The existence of a National Guidance Forum is the fourth condition, which, together with the previous ones, is sufficient to achieve a low rural NEET rate. Creating the forums is a good argument for creating coherence between the different stakeholders and getting them to work together on mutual tasks. This can be very diverse, from coordinating CG strategies to more specific strategies such as developing quality assurance frameworks (Hooley, 2014). This is important for rural areas because CG can contribute to three main policy areas: the effective functioning of the labour market and the economy, the effective functioning of the education system, and the improvement of social equity (OECD, 2004).

To summarise, coordinated governance is essential for effective CG in rural areas. In addition, it is vital that young people in rural areas have access to good quality career information and that they have independent, remote access to tools to help them make the right career decisions. The pursuit of high quality should be a feature of all CG activities. These three conditions and career education are sufficient for achieving a low rural NEET rate among 25–29-year-olds. Addressing the rural NEET problem, therefore, requires a long-term perspective, with a particular emphasis on prevention. This means developing CMSs, including identifying local job opportunities and shortage occupations and acquiring work experience, which requires shared responsibility and cooperation between local stakeholders.

7. Conclusions

This article has enriched the academic discourse on NEETs by analysing those conditions of CG that lead to LNRs among rural youth aged 25–29. It has expanded our understanding of the rural NEET challenge by focusing on long-term sustainable solutions to preventing and addressing the issue.

CG is defined by the OECD (2004) as helping people to think about their interests, skills, values, and goals. It facilitates their understanding of education systems and labour markets and how these relate to their personal experiences. CG aims to teach people how to plan and make decisions about education and employment. It also organises and systematises information on educational opportunities and the labour market to facilitate decision-making (OECD, 2004). This leads to three conclusions for the target population of this study. Firstly, CG does not provide a single, standardised intervention but is personalised and, therefore, able to adequately address the needs arising from different individual characteristics in a very heterogeneous population of NEETs. Secondly, in addition to individual personal factors, CG considers the impact of external socio-economic factors, such as the precarious labour market situation in rural areas, limited educational opportunities, or even gender stereotypes. This leads to youth spaces, which is critical to understanding the geographical unevenness of NEET expansion (Avagianou et al., 2022). Finally, through career education, CG empowers young people by developing CMSs, promoting better educational or labour

market integration, and enhancing their agency to better cope with a challenging world throughout their lives.

As seen above, CG activities are linked to the education sector and other sectors, such as the labour market and the social sphere. These activities are resource-intensive and very diverse, requiring cooperation. Our main result underlines the need for a coordinated service system to achieve the proper CG.

Several dimensions of coordination can be distinguished. On the one hand, horizontal inter-sectoral coordination (Tosun et al., 2019) is important, coordinating the activities of different sectors at the national/regional level. The so-called National Guidance Forum achieves this. At the same time, at the local level, it is complemented by intra-sectoral coordination (Tosun et al., 2019) to coordinate activities, avoid overlaps, learn from each other, reach the disadvantaged, and ensure quality service delivery. Simultaneously, vertical coordination is also paramount here, as the locations for formulating and implementing employment and welfare policies are very different, requiring coordination of activities with agencies at higher levels of government. Therefore, the main challenges to coordination are mainly local. (Tosun et al., 2019).

Our analysis has pinpointed the significance of quality, coordinated CG, which can prevent young people from becoming NEET or leaving NEET and help empower them to better cope with an ever-changing world. This competence will become increasingly relevant in the future, given the substantial changes that have occurred in recent years (digitalisation, climate change, demographic change, migration, and the pandemic, to name a few). As such, our article contributes to the ongoing arguments that draw attention to the central role of CG in national policies.

Acknowledgments

This article was supported by the TRACK-IN—Public Employment Services Tracking Effectiveness in Supporting Rural NEETs. This project is funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway through the EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment. The authors thank the editors, Francisco Simões and Jale Tosun, and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful contributions. They would also like to thank the members of the Lost Millennials Consortium for their initial input.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Almeida, A. N., & Simões, F. (2020). Professional development perspectives across gender and age groups of under-qualified rural NEETs. *Journal of Community Psychology, 48*(5), 1620–1636.
- Arulmani, G. (2010). Career counselling: A mechanism to address the accumulation of disadvantage. *Australian Journal of Career Development, 19*(1), 7–12.
- Assmann, M.-L., & Broschinski, S. (2021). Mapping young NEETs across Europe: Exploring the institutional configurations promoting youth disengagement from education and employment. *Journal of Applied Youth Studies, 4*(2), 95–117.
- Avagianou, A., Kapitsinis, N., Papageorgiou, I., Strand, A. H., & Gialis, S. (2022). Being NEET in youthspheres of the EU South: A post-recession regional perspective. *Young, 30*(5), 425–454.

- Bolleyer, N. (2011). The influence of political parties on policy coordination. *Governance*, 24(3), 469–494.
- Borbély-Pecze, T. B. (2010). *Életút támogató pályorientáció* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Eötvös Lóránd University.
- Borbély-Pecze, T. B., & Hutchinson, J. (2013). *The Youth Guarantee and lifelong guidance* (ELGPN Concept Note No. 4). European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network. https://www.elgpn.eu/publications/browse-by-language/english/Borbely-Pecze_and_Hutchinson_Youth_Guarantee_concept_note_web2.pdf
- Bright, D. (2020). Place based education as a tool for rural career development. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 13(3), Article 3.
- Cabasés Piqué, M. À., Pardell Veà, A., & Strecker, T. (2016). The EU Youth Guarantee—A critical analysis of its implementation in Spain. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19, 684–704.
- Caroleo, F. E., Rocca, A., Mazzocchi, P., & Quintano, C. (2020). Being NEET in Europe before and after the economic crisis: An analysis of the micro and macro determinants. *Social Indicators Research*, 149(3), 991–1024.
- Cedefop, ETF, & European Commission. (2019). *Investing in career guidance*. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/2227>
- Cedefop, ETF, & European Commission. (2021). *Investing in career guidance: Revised edition 2021*. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/2230>
- Corbanese, V., & Rosas, G. (2017). *Indicator framework for monitoring the Youth Guarantee*. International Labour Organization. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_583524.pdf
- Covacevich, C., Mann, A., Besa, F., Diaz, J., & Santos, C. (2021). *Thinking about the future: Career readiness insights from national longitudinal surveys and from practice*. OECD.
- De Luca, G., Mazzocchi, P., Quintano, C., & Rocca, A. (2020). Going behind the high rates of NEETs in Italy and Spain: The role of early school leavers. *Social Indicators Research*, 151(1), 345–363.
- Eurostat. (2023). *Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training%23Educational_attainment_level_affects_the_share_of_NEETs
- Farrugia, D., & Wood, B. E. (2017). Youth and spatiality: Towards interdisciplinarity in youth studies. *Young*, 25(3), 209–218.
- Holman, J. (2014). *Good career guidance*. The Gatsby Charitable Foundation.
- Hooley, T. (2014). *The evidence base on lifelong guidance: A guide to key findings for effective policy and practice* (ELGPN Tools No. 3). European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network. <https://www.elgpn.eu/publications/browse-by-language/english/elgpn-tools-no-3.-the-evidence-base-on-lifelong-guidance>
- Kapitsinis, N., Poulimas, M., Emmanouil, E., & Gialis, S. (2022). Spatialities of being a young NEET in an era of turbulence: A critical account of regional resilience across the Mediterranean EU South. *Journal of Youth Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2101355>
- Koller, K., Wolter, S., Tschank, J., & Vana, I. (2022). *Transnational research report on the situation of 25+ NEETs in the EU and in beneficiary countries*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Loison-Leruste, M., Couronné, J., & Sarfati, F. (2016). *La Garantie Jeunes en action: Usages du dispositif et parcours de jeunes* (Rapport de Recherche No. 101). Centre d'Études de l'Emploi et du Travail. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/231933495.pdf>
- Lőrinc, M., Ryan, L., D'Angelo, A., & Kaye, N. (2020). De-individualising the “NEET problem”: An ecological systems analysis. *European Educational Research Journal*, 19(5), 412–427.
- Mann, A., Denis, V., & Percy, C. (2020). *Career ready? How schools can better prepare young people for working*

- life in the era of Covid-19 (OECD Education Working Paper No. 241). OECD. <https://doi.org/10.1787/19939019>
- Mascherini, M., & Ledermaier, S. (2016). *Exploring the diversity of NEETs*. Eurofound.
- Musset, P., & Kurekova, L. M. (2018). *Working it out: Career guidance and employer engagement*. OECD.
- Neagu, G. (2022). The Youth Guarantee in Eastern Europe. A systematic review. In C. Henriques & C. Viseu (Eds.), *EU cohesion policy implementation—Evaluation challenges and opportunities* (pp. 107–117). Springer.
- OECD. (2004). *Career guidance and public policy: Bridging the gap*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264105669-en>
- OECD. (2021a). *Career guidance for adults in a changing world of work*. <https://www.oecd.org/els/career-guidance-for-adults-in-a-changing-world-of-work-9a94bfad-en.htm>
- OECD. (2021b). *Getting a job: How schools can help students in the competition for employment after education* (OECD Education Policy Perspectives No. 35). <https://doi.org/10.1787/5cc2d673-en>
- Petrescu, C., Ellena, A. M., Fernandes-Jesus, M., & Marta, E. (2022). Using evidence in policies addressing rural NEETs: Common patterns and differences in various EU countries. *Youth & Society*, 54(Suppl. 2), S69–S88.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants part 1. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1–6.
- Ragin, C. C. (2008). *Redesigning social inquiry: Fuzzy sets and beyond*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ragin, C. C. (2017). *User's guide to fuzzy-set/qualitative comparative analysis*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Ragin, C. C., & Davey, S. (2022). *Fuzzy-set/qualitative comparative analysis 4.0* [Computer software]. Department of Sociology, University of California.
- Rahmani, H., & Groot, W. (2023). Risk factors of being a youth not in education, employment or training (NEET): A scoping review. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 120, Article 102198.
- Schneider, C. Q., & Wagemann, C. (2012). *Set-theoretic methods for the social sciences: A guide to qualitative comparative analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shore, J., & Tosun, J. (2019). Assessing youth labour market services: Young people's perceptions and evaluations of service delivery in Germany. *Public Policy and Administration*, 34(1), 22–41.
- Simões, F., Erdoğan, E., Muratović, M., & Sik, D. (2022). Scrutinising the exceptionalism of young rural NEETs: A bibliometric review. *Youth & Society*, 54(Suppl. 2), S8–S28.
- Simões, F., Meneses, A., Luís, R., & Drumonde, R. (2017). NEETs in a rural region of Southern Europe: Perceived self-efficacy, perceived barriers, educational expectations, and vocational expectations. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(9), 1109–1126.
- Sultana, R. G. (2003). *Review of career guidance policies in 11 acceding and candidate countries*. European Training Foundation.
- Tosun, J. (2017). Promoting youth employment through multi-organisational governance. *Public Money & Management*, 37(1), 39–46.
- Tosun, J., Hörisch, F., & Marques, P. (2019). Youth employment in Europe: Coordination as a crucial dimension. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 28(4), 350–357.
- Watts, A. G. (2001). Career education for young people: Rationale and provision in the UK and other European countries. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 1(3), 209–222.
- Watts, A. G. (2009). *The relationship of career guidance to VET*. OECD.
- Watts, A. G., & Sultana, R. G. (2004). Career guidance policies in 37 countries: Contrasts and common themes. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 4(2), 105–122.

About the Authors



Blanka Bálint (PhD) is an assistant professor at the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania. She received her PhD in Sociology at the Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary. She has also completed two master's degrees, one in Zone and Community Development and one in Mental Health. Her research interests include career guidance, NEETs, the labour market, reactance, news avoidance, and grief. Her current international research project is Lost Millennials—Transnational Research Network for Evaluation of Initiatives, targeting NEETs above 25 years of age.



Balázs Telegdy (PhD) is an assistant professor at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania. He earned his PhD in Sociology at the University of Bucharest. He teaches various sociology courses at Sapientia University. The latest project in which he is involved is called Lost Millennials, which aims to get a better understanding of the effectiveness of the policies targeting the 25–29-year-old NEET population in the participant countries.



Ede Lázár (PhD) is an associate professor at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania. He received his master's in Economics from Corvinus University of Budapest and holds a PhD in Marketing from the MATE University, Hungary. Prior to joining the academic sphere, he gained experience at the Hungarian Central Statistical Office and TNS Hungary, a market research company. His research focuses on research methodology development.