

NEETs in Norway: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

In contrast with the rest of Europe, Norway has one of the lowest proportions of young people who are outside education, employment, or training (NEET), yet many of the youth categorised as NEETs in the country often suffer more severe challenges than their European counterparts. This scoping review analyses state-of-the-art research on NEETs in Norway and has found that such studies can be divided into two separate strands, one focusing on NEETs as a social problem and the other on strategies for the re-education and re-employment of NEETs. Reflecting on this trend, we argue that this segmentation of social problems and individual solutions in research could be symptomatic of an underlying issue that may be mirrored in policymaking and practice.

Keywords

labour market; market policies; mental health; NEETs; Norway; social problems; youth

1. Introduction

In a recent comparison of labour force surveys from across the region, Statistics Norway (2022) found that Norway has one of the lowest proportions of youth in Europe who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). This is often ascribed to the country’s tripartite cooperation model, its low unemployment rate, and its labour market’s ability to absorb a young workforce with limited formal experience (Reegård, 2021). Norway is considered one of the wealthiest countries in the world, thanks to its abundance of natural resources, particularly oil and gas. The country maintains a highly skilled and well-protected workforce as well as a generous social welfare system. The Norwegian model, based on cooperation and shared responsibility/risk among employee unions, employers, and the government, prioritises strict health and safety regulations, reduced income inequality, and ambitious inclusion policies (focused on persons with physical or psychological challenges) that promote labour-market entry and retention (Andreassen & Fossetøl, 2014). As a result, unemployment has not posed significant problems to Norway in recent years;

at the beginning of 2023, the national unemployment rate was 2.9% (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, 2023). Indeed, on the contrary, there is an abiding workforce shortage and a profusion of vacancies across several sectors in the country.

Yet, an increasing number of young people find themselves outside of the labour force in Norway. Among those without higher education, the unemployment rate is 6.2% (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, 2020). To prevent an amplification of this trend, the government has targeted this issue as one of its core mission areas (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2022). Inspired by EU Missions (European Commission, 2023), their aim is to organise efforts and resources for funding initiatives, policies, and activities that address prioritised social problems (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2022). The fact that the exclusion of young people is one of two such missions launched by the Norwegian Government illustrates the severity of the situation. But how does Norway approach this social issue? Norway is traditionally classified as a state-centred, social-democratic, Nordic welfare system. Social services are to a vast extent run by the public sector, which enjoys strong support from society at large (Halvorsen & Stjernø, 2008). Researchers have argued that there is a connection between labour market policies and welfare state regimes, though these findings do not seem to be unequivocal (Holte et al., 2019; Vlandas, 2013). Active labour market policies are a set of interventions, programmes, and measures aiming to improve labour market outcomes, enhance employment opportunities, and support individuals with finding and retaining employment. What they have in common is a “turn towards activation” and a more active logic of welfare provision. Active labour market policies have become increasingly popular and more regularly pursued in Norway as an avenue for youth inclusion in the labour market (especially for young people experiencing mental or physical issues), but they do not seem to be a complete panacea.

While the imperative to include young people in work and education exists in many countries, Norway is grappling with a distinctive expression of this social problem: Though their proportion of NEETs is lower than in other countries, Norwegian NEETs suffer more severe challenges than those elsewhere. Compared with the general youth population in Norway, NEETs are six times more likely to experience depression and nine times more likely to report suffering from poor health (Statistics Norway, 2022), rates that are considerably higher than the EU and OECD average (OECD, 2018). In 2019, 25,200 individuals below the age of 25 (2.7% of the under-25 population) received a work assessment allowance, which indicates that they had reduced work capacity due to struggles with illness or injury. Among this group, those with psychiatric health concerns made up the biggest proportion at 74% (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, 2020). Additionally, the number of individuals under 30 receiving work assessment allowance grew from 22.5% to 26.5% between 2014 and 2018, and a rising number of former work assessment allowance recipients were persons with mental health issues who ended up on social benefits (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, 2020). Beyond such public statistics, there have been several studies that focus on the various characteristics of these young people, but to our knowledge, no studies have provided a comprehensive overview of the research being conducted in this area. Therefore, the research question informing this article is: How is the “problem” of NEETs in Norway approached in research?

2. Methods

This scoping review investigates the state-of-the-art of research on NEETS in Norway. Scoping reviews are useful for identifying knowledge gaps, mapping and developing better accounts of concepts, and achieving a

productive overview of the existing research and literature in a field (Munn et al., 2018). In their seminal article on the method, Arksey and O'Malley (2005, p. 23) delineate five steps for undertaking a scoping review: (a) identifying the research question, (b) identifying relevant studies, (c) selecting studies, (d) charting data, and (e) collating, summarising, and reporting results. The following subsections present these steps as conducted in our review of NEETs in Norway. As the research question was posed in Section 1, the outline below commences with the second scoping review stage.

2.1. Identifying Relevant Studies

In our search for relevant studies, we opted to comprehensively scope the field by casting a relatively wide net over three chosen databases. These databases and platforms—Oria, PubMed, and Web of Science—were selected based on their breadth, reach, and access. Our query parameters, however, were not exhaustive, as they restricted results to published studies from exclusively the last five years (2018–2022). This limit was imposed so as to focus on the most recent body of literature. For our search terms, we entered “NEET*” in the title field and “Norw*” in the all-text field, and selected “AND” between the two. Since the aim of a scoping review is to capture a comparatively narrow selection of literature (in this case, on NEETs in Norway), we established further limiting inclusion criteria: MUST contain “NEET” either in title or text and (for contextualisation) MUST contain “Norway” in title or text. These criteria were essential, since there are a comprehensive number of studies on NEETs, in general, but far fewer focused on the Norwegian context. This delimited search resulted in Oria ($n = 88$), PubMed ($n = 10$), and Web of Science ($n = 18$).

2.2. Selecting Studies

After this initial screening, materials were then excluded based on quality-oriented criteria; studies from publication channels which were ranked level zero or were unranked on the Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series, and Publishers (NRSJSP) were omitted, as were theses from bachelor's and master's degrees and reports. This process reduced the list of eligible records to Oria ($n = 14$), PubMed ($n = 6$), and Web of Science ($n = 5$).

Since databases and platforms are necessarily incomplete and imperfect, we supplemented our search by checking the bibliographies of these remaining 25 studies, identifying sources that engaged thematically with young people outside of education, employment, or training in Norway. This process identified $n = 10$ further records. Due to the relatively low amount of search results overall, we were able to manually check for duplicates as well as inclusion and exclusion criteria. Ultimately, the total number of eligible studies for our review was $N = 22$. The PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 1, based on the guidelines from Page et al. (2021), illustrates the process of study identification and selection.

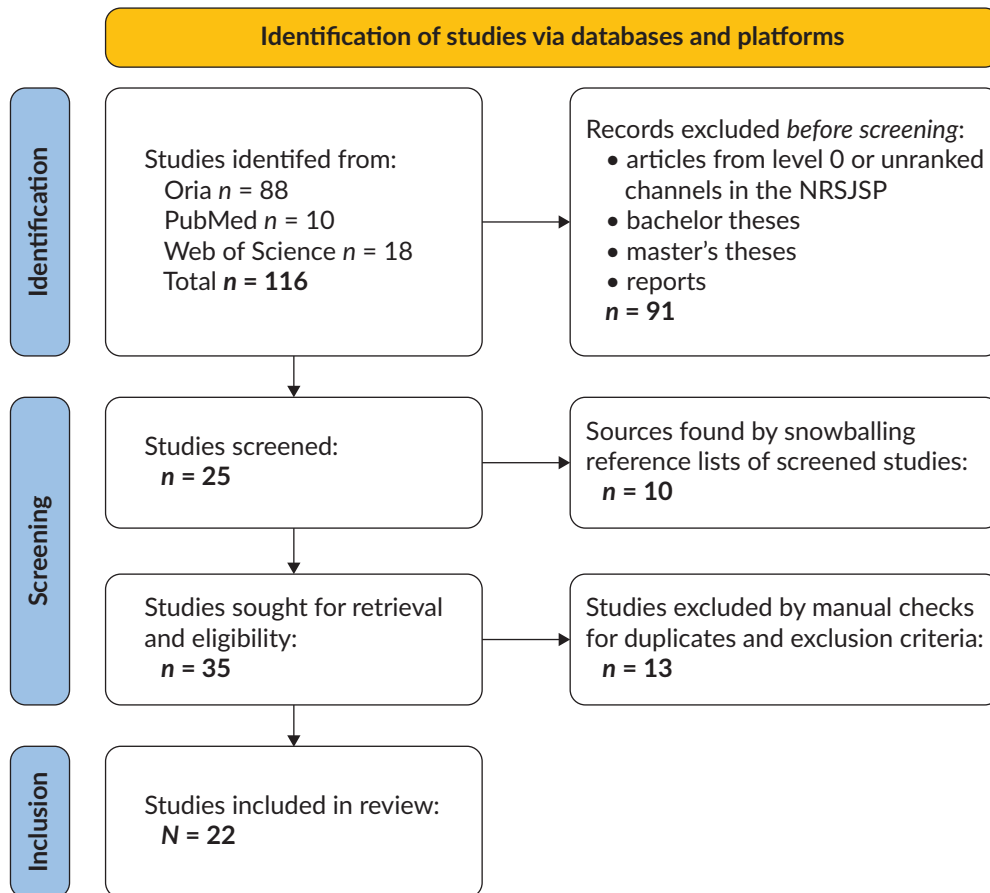


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram of study identification and selection (NEETs in Norway), based on the guidelines provided by Page et al. (2021).

2.3. Charting and Analysing Data

In line with Arksey and O'Malley's (2005, p. 26) method, based on Ritchie and Spencer (1994), this review adopts a charting approach, which consolidates and analyses qualitative data by "sifting, charting and sorting material according to key issues and themes." This was selected because, as they explain, unlike "data extraction" in a systematic review, charting aligns more closely with a narrative review that can enable a more comprehensive perspective (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005, pp. 26–27; Pawson, 2002). In our charting of eligible records, we have concentrated on themes, research design, data sampling, results, and areas of focus; for the latter category, we have further identified three subcategories: population (who are NEETs?), measures (focus on measures, measures deployed, outcome of measures), and concept (focus on the definition and application of NEET as concept). This charting process is represented in Table 1.

Table 1. Charting process.

| Study | Topic | Research design | Data sampling | Results (paraphrased from the results and conclusion sections of the articles) | Article focus | | |
|---------------------|---|-----------------|--|--|---------------|------------|---------|
| | | | | | Measure | Population | Concept |
| Ballo et al. (2022) | Can adolescent work experience protect vulnerable youth? | QT | Registry data from 2001–2014, longitudinal | Early work experience reduces the risk of NEET status. | | v | |
| Bania et al. (2022) | How do gender, class, and culture coalesce to form pathways from school to work? | QT | The Norwegian Adolescence Health Study (2003–2005) and registry data from the National Education Database | Indigenous Sámi young women have lower NEET experiences than their majority female peers. Access to and acceptance of self-employment and blue-collar work for Sámi young women has opened work opportunities to women without higher education. | | v | |
| Bania et al. (2019) | Who are the NEETs and what demographic factors characterise them among a multicultural young adult population in Northern Norway? | QT | Self-reported survey with objective registry linkage, follow-up 8–10 years later | Young people whose parents had lower educational status and those with disturbed peer relations were at greater risk of NEET status. Mental health problems and musculoskeletal pain in adolescence were associated with later NEET status. | | v | |
| Barth et al. (2019) | Do skills protect against exclusion? | QT | Data from PIAAC (individual-level sample survey that measures skills of the adult population according to literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving) | Skills appear to protect against NEET rates among young adults. Early skills seem to protect more than later skills. | | v | |
| Frøyland (2019) | What are the vital tasks and roles of frontline workers facilitating job inclusion of vulnerable youth? | QL | Cross-case analysis of data drawn from 16 Norwegian pilot projects aimed at developing social work approaches | There are four main support roles: (a) administration and securing basic needs, (b) connection and relation-building, (c) job enabling, and (d) job customisation. | v | | |

Table 1. (Cont.) Charting process.

| Study | Topic | Research design | Data sampling | Results (paraphrased from the results and conclusion sections of the articles) | Article focus | | |
|---------------------------|--|-----------------|---|--|---------------|------------|---------|
| | | | | | Measure | Population | Concept |
| Frøyland (2020) | How can we understand work inclusion of vulnerable youth? | QL | Re-analysis of interviews with employers and support-givers | There are four ways of thinking of work inclusion: work inclusion understood as (a) a placement, (b) an individual experience, (c) a product of interaction, cooperation, and support, and (d) a complex and long-lasting learning process. | v | | |
| Gjersøe and Leseth (2021) | How is time constructed and reproduced in the establishment of work relations among NEETs? | QL | Qualitative interviews with NEETs | Young adults have a range of complex experiences in which discordances between formal and informal aspects of work become visible. This should be considered in policymaking. | | v | v |
| Haugland and Stea (2022) | What is the propensity for violent experiences among NEETs? | QT | Survey; two cross-sectional studies ($N = 480$) | NEET girls are particularly vulnerable to self-directed violence and violence from others. | | v | |
| Holte et al. (2019) | How is the NEET concept treated in comparative contexts (Nordic countries vs. South Africa)? | QL | Discourse analysis | In the Nordic countries, NEETs are primarily discussed as a problem related to the fiscal sustainability of the welfare state and as a status that hinders access to social rights and independent living, while in South Africa the NEETs are discussed in relation to more fundamental issues, such as social cohesion and social stability, racial and gender inequality, weak state performance, and a dysfunctional educational system. | | | v |

Table 1. (Cont.) Charting process.

| Study | Topic | Research design | Data sampling | Results (paraphrased from the results and conclusion sections of the articles) | Article focus | | |
|-----------------------------|--|-----------------|---|---|---------------|------------|---------|
| | | | | | Measure | Population | Concept |
| Holte (2021) | How can categories of youth research and policy impact young people's lives? | QL | Interviews with one person | Access to services and benefits of the welfare state is tied to visibility related to categories such as "at-risk-youth" and "NEETs" (not the youth themselves). | | v | v |
| Juberg and Skjefstad (2019) | How are substance use disorder and youth unemployment treated in Norwegian public documents? | QL | Policy analysis | There are three predominant discourses: (a) the medicalisation discourse, (b) the stigma discourse, and (c) the social investment discourse. These all impose a grip on both the defined target group and the authorities. | | v | |
| Kristensen et al. (2021) | What is the relationship between work participation in young Norwegians and social, educational, and health-related characteristics? | QT | National registries | Individuals with low work participation in young adult life were characterised by complex social, educational, and health problems early in life. The socioeconomic gradient was stronger for women than for men. | | v | |
| Lorentzen et al. (2019) | What are the intra-Nordic variations among youth transitioning from school to work? | QT | Sequence analysis of longitudinal datasets from the respective countries | Finland, Norway, and Sweden share many of the same types of school-to-work trajectories. | | v | |
| Myhr et al. (2018) | How do medically-based disability benefits among young adults vary geographically? How do municipal socioeconomic conditions interact with the non-completion of secondary education in determining disability pension risk? | QT | Register data; random sample stratified by age, gender, and municipality of the total Norwegian sample aged 21–40 in 2010, extracted from Statistics Norway | Completing secondary education is important in the prevention of medically-based disability benefits among young adults, but the significance of the residential context and local socioeconomic environment should not be ignored. | | v | |

Table 1. (Cont.) Charting process.

| Study | Topic | Research design | Data sampling | Results (paraphrased from the results and conclusion sections of the articles) | Article focus | | |
|--------------------------|---|-----------------|---|--|---------------|------------|---------|
| | | | | | Measure | Population | Concept |
| Rasalingam et al. (2021) | What is the impact of growing up with long-term somatic health challenges on school completion, NEET status, and disability benefits? | QT | Longitudinal population data, obtained from the Norwegian Patient Registry | Compared to young adults without long-term health challenges, young adults with somatic long-term health challenges had lower odds of completing upper secondary education and higher odds of receiving disability benefits. | | v | |
| Reegård (2021) | How do welfare professionals follow up on young (potential) dropouts in vocational education? | QL | Interviews with 11 counsellors in vocational education | The welfare state's governing intentions are reshaped through counsellors' daily work. The counsellors experience dilemmas in how to prioritise their efforts. Although professionals feel a strong commitment, given the lack of resources, they also feel frustration. | v | | |
| Reiling et al. (2022) | How does the school presence of welfare counsellors affect the odds of youth remaining in school? | QT | Difference-in-difference analysis, comparing Østfold County with six other counties | The presence of welfare counsellors increased the proportion of students still "in school" Y1 by 1.8% and the proportion of students still "in school" Y2 by 1.4%. | v | | |
| Stea et al. (2019) | Do young people who are not in education, employment, or training have more health problems than their peers? | QT | Cross-sectional study | NEET girls have poorer mental health and worse self-perceived health compared to girls who are attending upper-secondary school. | | v | |
| Stuart (2020) | What are the flaws of categories, such as "early school leavers," "dropouts," and "NEETs"? | QL | Action research | Practitioners and researchers need to understand the unique contexts and lives of the people they support and need to ensure that they do not create further marginalisation by treating people as the locus of the problem. | | | v |

Table 1. (Cont.) Charting process.

| Study | Topic | Research design | Data sampling | Results (paraphrased from the results and conclusion sections of the articles) | Article focus | | |
|----------------------------|---|-----------------|---|---|---------------|------------|---------|
| | | | | | Measure | Population | Concept |
| Sveinsdottir et al. (2018) | Who are the young adults at risk of early work disability? | QT | Baseline data from participants in the SEED trial | Deeper insights into a vulnerable group, and a call for a broader focus on psychological and social factors in vocational rehabilitation efforts targeting young adults at risk of early work disability. | | v | |
| Sveinsdottir et al. (2020) | What is the effect of individual placement and support (IPS)? | QT | Randomised controlled trial | IPS shows promising results for NEETs with impaired work capability due to various health issues and social problems. The odds of gaining competitive employment are 10.39 times higher for IPS than for traditional vocational rehabilitation. | v | | |
| Vogt et al. (2020) | Are low-skilled young people increasingly useless, and are men the losers among them? | QT | Administrative data and sequence analysis | Men classified as “early school leavers” are actually “late finishers,” which means that policies have been directed at the wrong group. Female school leavers are, in fact, overrepresented among those who follow low-income trajectories. | | v | |

Notes: QL = qualitative design; QT = quantitative design.

3. Results

3.1. What Does the Literature Say About NEETs in Norway: Who Are They?

The proportion of NEETs among youth in Norway (9%) is smaller than the average (14%) in OECD countries (OECD, 2018). This factum is cited in several articles (Bania et al., 2019; Barth et al., 2019; Kristensen et al., 2021; Rasalingam et al., 2021), leading to the conclusion that the NEET rate itself is not a cause for concern. However, the distinctive characteristics of the NEET population, particularly the ways in which health-related problems prevent young people from workforce participation, are addressed by various publications. A high proportion of Norwegian NEETs receive disability benefits, and many have limited education (Kristensen et al., 2021). This is significant since skills and training play a protective role against NEET status. Barth et al. (2019), for instance, observed a significant correlation between the level of skills (measured by the PIAAC score) at the conclusion of compulsory schooling and the probability of NEET status two years later. Their findings highlight a pronounced trend wherein a substantial proportion of youth with lower skill levels discontinue their education.

As in other high-income countries, in Norway, mental and behavioural disorders are some of the key determinants of early work disability among young people; these health challenges constitute 63% of the main diagnoses for NEETs in the country, a figure that continues to rise. For young people, ages 20–29, mental illness represents the majority of this increase (Sveinsdottir et al., 2018). Female NEETs, in particular, report worse mental health and poorer self-perceived health (Stea et al., 2019). Diverse pain-related issues also appear significantly more often among young NEETs (Bania et al., 2019; Stea et al., 2019).

Another identified subgroup of NEETs in Norway is young people with long-term somatic health challenges (Rasalingam et al., 2021). These youth also have a pronounced risk of prolonged NEET status; 24% of NEETs with long-term somatic health challenges received disability benefits by the age of 21. The odds of acquiring this status for young people with neurological conditions, such as spinal muscular atrophy, spina bifida, and cerebral palsy, is especially troubling; in their recent study, Rasalingam et al. (2021) found this group to have “94 times higher odds (48 percentage points) of receiving disability pension by age 21 compared to healthy peers.”

3.1.1. Gendered and Geographical Differences

While non-completion of secondary education is a known contributor to the risk of prolonged NEET status (Myhr et al., 2018), studies have found significant differences between men and women in this area. Among young people classified as “early school leavers,” men are often overrepresented (Vogt et al., 2020), but long-term research reveals that these numbers cannot predict the gender distribution of NEET status after dropping out of school. An explanation for this disparity, posited by Vogt et al. (2020), suggests that young men who leave school prematurely and who are initially classified as NEET do not remain in this category for long; instead, they are more likely to transition into the workforce compared to young women in the same circumstances. Girls leaving school early and acquiring NEET status have worse self-perceived health and poorer mental health than girls who remain in upper secondary education (Stea et al., 2019). In studies of work participation, such mental health problems stand out as a core issue determining NEET status (Kristensen et al., 2021; Stea et al., 2019). Furthermore, the adverse impact of lower parental education levels also seems to have heightened resonance for females (Kristensen et al., 2021).

Geographically, the highest incidence of incomplete secondary education is situated in the northern part of Norway (Myhr et al., 2018). The cohort study from this region by Bania et al. (2019) found that the total proportion of young adults in the north with NEET status was 18.6%, with a greater prevalence of this status among young women (20.9%) than young men (16.9%). However, among the indigenous Sámi population in Norway, this gendered pattern diverges. Young Sámi women in Northern Norway are significantly less likely to experience NEET status (only 16.6%) than the majority of women and men across all demographics (Bania et al., 2019, 2022).

3.1.2. Contextual, Societal, and Background Factors

Though published studies delineate the well-known vulnerability of Norwegian NEETs, a growing body of research has begun to investigate the contextual, societal, and background determinants of NEET status, among them adverse childhood experiences, instances of bullying, and social and educational problems—not to mention how such educational, health, and social problems inform each other (Kristensen et al., 2021; Sveinsdottir et al., 2018). Given the nascent nature of this stream of research, there is an identified need for further studies that examine the sources of these health-related issues faced by young NEETs (Stea et al., 2019), as well as for studies that scrutinise and critique the inclination to medicalise or pathologise social problems (Juberg & Skjefstad, 2019). Even though health problems seem to play a pivotal role for young adults with NEET status, they seldom emerge as the sole or exclusive concern. Kristensen et al. (2021) therefore invite a more profound exploration into how early educational and social difficulties appear to influence vulnerable groups at risk of becoming or remaining NEETs. Geographical differences further accentuate the need to examine the interplay between local communities and individual factors (Myhr et al., 2018).

3.2. Measures Targeting NEETs in Norway

Five of the articles in this review address measures targeting NEETs in Norway (Frøyland, 2019, 2020; Reegård, 2021; Reiling et al., 2022; Sveinsdottir et al., 2020). The randomised controlled trial by Sveinsdottir et al. (2020) investigated the impact of an IPS approach, revealing its efficacy in assisting NEETs with work capacities impaired by social and health-related impediments, including groups at risk of early work disability. Furthermore, their findings demonstrated that IPS improved the extent of disability, positively influenced subjective health, mitigated feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and reduced drug use (Sveinsdottir et al., 2020). Frøyland (2019, 2020) inspected the efforts of welfare administrators facilitating the labour market integration of young adults, both by supportive measures and by forms of matchmaking between employees and employers. Their empirical data revealed the intricacies of work inclusion, underscoring the demand for a high degree of relational work when collaborating with the support side and the supply side.

Both Reegård (2021) and Reiling et al. (2022) concentrate on the influence of welfare counsellors on school dropout rates. Reegård (2021) focused specifically on counsellors working in the follow-up services of upper-secondary schools, a professional group largely unexplored by researchers. She investigates their dual role in providing both care and control, a complex and multifaceted position in which many such professionals find themselves. Tasked with maintaining lists of NEETs that they must keep updated (an administrative assignment they find unnecessary and time-consuming), these counsellors indicated a preference for direct engagement with young people, over simply counting them. The result of such

limitations is that their time and effort often become restricted to young people who are easiest to help, particularly youth who independently initiate contact. Reiling et al. (2022) studied the effects of stationing counsellors in schools instead of merely at local labour and welfare offices. These school counsellors are meant to bridge the gap between students and public support services, and they are empowered to allocate services, measures, and benefits. Their investigation discovered that the school presence of these counsellors positively influenced attendance among upper-secondary school pupils, although this effect did not extend to actual completion rates.

These select articles emphasise the importance of adopting an individualised approach to complex social problems. The measures implemented for Norwegian NEETs are oriented towards the dual support of youth and employers, as well as the necessity of comprehensive and extended follow-up procedures. In several cases, this places administrators and counsellors in a predicament characterised by constraints on time and resources. However, it has also yielded some successful results.

3.3. NEET as Concept and (Individual) Characteristic

Several of the articles under review are concerned with NEET as a concept (Gjersøe & Leseth, 2021; Holte, 2021; Holte et al., 2019; Juberg & Skjefstad, 2019; Myhr et al., 2018; Stuart, 2020). Whereas many studies focus on the risk factors responsible for NEET status, Holte (2021, p. 198) examines this concept critically, arguing that risks are “probabilistic, not deterministic, constructs: Risks relate to the aggregate outcomes for categories of people, but do not determine outcomes for individuals.” The danger of applying these aggregate predictions to individuals is exemplified in the prevailing focus on non-completion of secondary education (Myhr et al., 2018; Stuart, 2020). Labelling young people who have not finished secondary education as “dropouts” or “NEETs,” argues Stuart (2020, p. 55), has several detrimental effects:

Firstly, it defines a young person by something they have not done (i.e., not been in school), secondly, it defines young people by deficits alone such as failing school...and finally it places the entire blame of the phenomenon at the young person’s feet.

As Stuart suggests, an underlying problem is the tendency to apply the NEET classification at an individual level. Myhr et al. (2018) emphasise the danger of treating risk factors as individual risk factors since this can obscure contextual factors. The Norwegian focus on “activation” has a powerful, and not always positive, influence on the self-perceived experience of young NEETs. Gjersøe and Leseth (2021, p. 153) claim that “the political discourses of work inclusion for young adults (NEETs) tend to portray work as a means to an end for inclusion. In doing so, they fail to address the complex temporal dimension of work.”

In a similar vein, Holte (2021) demonstrates, via “Aalan’s story,” how categories formulated and deployed in policy and research impact the lives of young people. Aalan’s self-identified resources and competencies, such as social skills and “street capital,” are made invisible when encountering the requirements of welfare services.

At the level of policy, Juberg and Skjefstad (2019) delve into the ontological assumptions underpinning Norwegian policy documents. Investigating how Norwegian policy frames work opportunities for Norwegian NEETs grappling with substance use disorders, they uncover three dominant discourses: the medicalisation discourse, the stigma discourse, and the social investment discourse. The authors contend that all three

discourses may be interconnected with the “development of neoliberal society and the tendency to individualise people’s problems and to establish certain beliefs” (Juberg & Skjefstad, 2019, p. 260). The primary solution in these policies is to integrate various NEET groups into the labour market, an approach consonant with the Norwegian welfare model’s vision of labour market participation as the “primary solution for eradicating poverty and for becoming ‘the most inclusive society in the world’” (Juberg & Skjefstad, 2019, p. 260).

4. Conclusion

The research on NEETs in Norway can be divided into three thematic sub-groups. The first sub-group centres around “NEET” as a concept, encompassing its definition, its utilisation in policy documents, and its application to individuals. The second sub-group focuses on the constitution of this category: who NEETs are and what characteristics they share. More often than not, this strand of research addresses how the process of falling into this category can be understood as a social problem. The third sub-group is concerned with evaluating measures designed to advance NEETs into the labour market and to mitigate dropout rates. Only a single article from our selection targets the contingent of NEETs with somatic health problems or physical disabilities. This should not be misconstrued as an absence of measures tailored to this group; rather, it underscores the selective application of the NEET classification.

As a form of classification, NEET functions as a “spatial, temporal, or spatiotemporal segmentation of the world” (Bowker & Star, 2000, p. 10). While human nature gravitates towards classification, it is imperative to recognise that classification itself is a powerful technology. Once classifications are embedded into working infrastructures, they can become invisible, yet they do not consequently lose their power or influence (Bowker & Star, 2000). Regarding the case of NEETs in Norway, classification and concomitant policy measures seem to be intricately intertwined with the social democratic Norwegian welfare model, which, as in other Nordic countries, is characterised by comprehensive and universal services. The fact that these services are extensive, encompassing, and taxpayer-funded presupposes that the entire working-age population must contribute. The discourse on NEETs in Norway, including measures for the prevention and classification of at-risk youth, is significantly imprinted by this welfare model context (Holte et al., 2019). Yet while this is discursive, it also has real, concrete effects; the categorisation of risk factors and NEET status can influence the development of policies, measures, and everyday access to welfare services (Holte, 2021). The focus on mental health problems among young NEETs has led to increased attention to the need for support from both mental health services and labour market measures. The implemented youth-oriented active labour market policies are therefore largely directed towards assisting the individual through supportive long-term measures that enable them to be part of the workforce.

The two strands into which NEET research falls, one focused on the social problem and the other on individualised corrective measures, have arguably failed to speak to each other sufficiently or effectively. Further study of public documents may demonstrate that this same fragmentation permeates policy and practice, as “NEET” is acknowledged as a social problem, but measures aim to solve it at the individual level. Additionally, most implemented measures for NEETs seem to be oriented towards young people with mental health problems. This fixation on mental health and individual problems, a framing that figures NEET status as anomalous or pathological, could be said to camouflage or obscure larger structural issues, which prevents policymakers and practitioners from exploring more preventive or proactive initiatives. This

scoping review, however, is confined to research articles, thus further study is needed on the interplay between research, policy, and practice, especially concerning how a focus on mental health and individual problems intersects with measures and policy.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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