

Active Labour Market Policies and Youth Employment in European Peripheries

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Abstract

This thematic issue discusses the design, implementation, and impact of youth-oriented active labour market policies in Europe, with a particular emphasis on its peripheries. The need to address territorialised, youth-oriented active labour market policies is pressing for several reasons. For one, the whole socioeconomic paradigm is undergoing fundamental changes due to the dual transition (digital and green) that is expected to have an impact on the rural/urban divide. Moreover, at the subnational level, youth unemployment in certain regions is a more pressing problem than suggested by existing studies, which have mostly focused on the national level. This implies that closer inspection of the subnational level, in general, and the peripheral regions, in particular, will reveal more marked cross-national differences. This thematic issue offers a point of departure for the suggested territorialised approach to the study of how active labour market policies for young people are formulated and implemented, and which effects they have on their target groups.

Keywords

active labour market policies; EU; European Youth Guarantee; NEETs; public employment services; school-to-work transition; rural areas; wellbeing; youth unemployment

1. Introduction

Active labour market policies (ALMPs) aim to increase the share of the active labour force, prevent the negative consequences of unemployment, and organise on-the-ground services dedicated to the (re)integration of people in the work market (Speckesser et al., 2019; Tosun et al., 2019). For the past decade,

the EU has deployed an important set of ALMPs under the Youth Guarantee, a flagship policy initiative for tackling high levels of youth unemployment in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. Comparative research on the design and implementation of youth-oriented ALMPs has assessed the performance of different types of school-to-work regimes as well as the performance of different countries, namely their policies and institutional arrangements. A gap in the literature concerns how more peripheral regions in Europe have attempted to facilitate the school-to-work transition and stimulate youth employment (Cefalo et al., 2024). Such regions (rural, coastal, mountainous, inland, or outermost regions) are faced with specific challenges that resonate with a range of analytical concepts in political science and adjacent disciplines, such as urban-rural cleavages or responsive policymaking.

This thematic issue constitutes a platform for facilitating discussion on territorial disparities in the design and roll-out of youth-focused ALMPs across the EU, in the context of the digital and green transition. The assembled contributions originate in different parts of Europe and address myriad topics with both direct and indirect implications for youth-centred ALMPs. These include, but are not limited to, outcomes of new challenges for the deliverance of public employment services (PES), digital inequalities, and labour market integration policies or programmes.

2. Overview of the Contributions

Simões and Marta (2024) identify the challenges and possibilities of PES digitalisation in EU member states when addressing vulnerable young people. The authors contend that to seize the potential benefits of digitalisation, one must pursue digitalisation in a manner which creates trust, transforms the work processes of PES, and, more generally, applies co-design strategies for developing digital tools. Based on this mapping exercise, the authors develop a model for assessing the capacity of PES to support rural NEETs digitally.

Ribeiro et al. (2024) yield insights into how PES in Portugal, Bulgaria, and Lithuania have coped and adapted to the challenges resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors discuss the promise and perils of digitalising PES for rural young people, such as creating disparate levels of digital “literacy” or the limited digital infrastructure in rural areas.

Rocca et al. (2024) assess whether previous experience of informal work increases young people’s propensity to participate in programmes administered by PES, such as the European Youth Guarantee. Drawing on data about young people classified as NEETs in Italy, Portugal, and Spain, the authors show that the experience of working without a contract makes young people more aware and concerned about the risk of precarious employment.

Mazzocchi et al. (2024) concentrate on the subjective well-being of young people by using survey data collected in Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Specifically, the authors assess the relationship between the support NEETs receive from PES and how this affects their subjective well-being. The empirical findings reveal that support accessibility provided by PES matters for NEETs living in rural areas.

Benefitting from the EU Kids Online network, Tomczyk’s (2024) empirical analysis reveals a difference in the number of digital competences between urban and rural young people in Poland. Interestingly, the latter rate their own digital competence as lower than the former. But overall, regardless of where they live, Polish

adolescents have at least a moderate level of digital competence, and the style of using new media among rural and urban youths is similar.

The labour market integration of NEETs in peripheral regions lies at the heart of the study by Bálint et al. (2024). The authors argue that public policy and public service delivery play as much of a role as subjective factors, such as self-efficacy beliefs. Therefore, they suggest that the most effective means of support for young people in rural areas is targeted career guidance; when designed appropriately, career guidance systems can help prevent young people from becoming NEETs.

Cefalo et al. (2024) focus on school-to-work transition regimes to assess whether there exist differences between regions and to what extent these patterns change over time. The authors analyse a longitudinal set of indicators that combine regional aggregated outcomes of school-to-work transitions and regional contextual traits at NUTS 2 level. They suggest patterns of an unequal geography of youth opportunities in Europe.

Agahi et al. (2024) study the administrative structures in place in Spain for delivering ALMPs. The results suggest that both young people and local PES are negatively impacted by some centralised aspects of how youth employment policy is governed in Spain. The rigid requirements for training courses are prohibitive for young people living in rural areas especially. To overcome the flaws in the delivery system for ALMPs, young Spaniards should have a say in what would be a better institutional design.

O'Higgins and Brockie (2024) examine how characteristics of the NEET population and their associated vulnerability to social exclusion vary across different subgroups of young NEETs and how this has changed in Italy, Portugal, and Spain between 2015 and 2021. While the risks of poverty and social exclusion have remained unchanged for long-term unemployed NEETs since 2015, the vulnerability of those who are NEET due to family responsibilities—the most at-risk subgroup of young people—has become more pronounced, which warrants attention from policymakers.

The scoping review by Øydgard et al. (2024) analyses the pertinent literature on NEETs in Norway and finds that such studies can be divided into two separate strands: one focusing on NEETs as a social problem and the other on strategies for re-education and re-employment of NEETs. The authors argue that this segmentation in the academic literature could be symptomatic of an underlying issue that may be mirrored in policymaking and policy implementation.

Skučienė and Brazienė (2024) analyse how ALMPs help to integrate rural NEETs in Lithuania. The analysis reveals that the integration of rural NEETs has been challenging due to inadequate infrastructure, for example, in public transportation. In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, rural NEETS have participated even less in the Lithuanian labour market.

Ellena et al. (2024) explore the strategies used by active labour policies to reach vulnerable youths and NEETs in Italy. Three main themes emerge from the analysis: capillarity of services, digitalization, and communication. Each has its respective subthemes, which provide valuable insights into the current strategies employed to engage vulnerable NEET youths.

Drawing on survey data from 11 European countries, Tosun et al. (2024) assess the factors affecting how young adults perceive youth unemployment. The empirical analysis reveals that two factors are particularly

important for explaining young people's perception that youth unemployment is a problem: First, whether they experienced their parents being unemployed when growing up, and second, whether their friends are unemployed. The authors do not find that rurality matters, but there is an indication that the place of residence more generally matters, which they point out as a perspective for future research.

3. Conclusion

Overall, this thematic issue meets its main goal of constituting a scientific forum for inspiring new research efforts regarding the design and deployment of youth-centred ALMPs in peripheral regions. The contributions' geographic diversity and thematic range ensure that this issue will be a beacon for coming research as well as a source of inspiration for evidence policies and programme development in the context of key policy frameworks, such as the Reinforced Youth Guarantee.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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