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EDITORIAL

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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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ARTICLE

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Public Employment Services and Vulnerable Youth in the EU: The Case of Rural NEETs

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic created unprecedented pressure to accelerate public employment services (PES) digitalisation across Europe. In fact, there is now a considerable amount of funding dedicated to that goal in broadband policy packages, such as the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism. This pressure for digitalizing PES presumes that its benefits outweigh the existing risks, regardless of citizens' singularities, such as vulnerable young people going through the school-to-work transition. Bearing that in mind, and following a bioecological model framework, our article addresses two main goals. Firstly, based on a targeted literature review, we detail the challenges and possibilities posed by PES digitalisation for vulnerable young people in EU countries, which have been widely overlooked in the literature. We specifically argue that despite several practical advantages (e.g., releasing staff from time-consuming administrative tasks), PES digitalisation will only be beneficial for vulnerable young people if three interrelated challenges are taken into account: nurturing trust in institutions and digital tools, supporting digital transformation of PES institutional organization, and adopting a co-design lens for PES digitalisation. Secondly, using a knowledge integration approach, we describe a model for assessing PES capacity to digitally support rural young people not in employment, education, or training to enter the labour market. We conclude that the overemphasis on the expected advances of overall PES digitalisation must be followed by thoughtful consideration of PES digitalisation processes to ensure EU social inclusion targets for the younger generations.

Keywords

digitalisation; EU; NEET; public employment services; rurality; school to work transition; young people

1. Introduction

Becoming a worker has turned into a longer and growingly uncertain process. These key features of the current school-to-work transition (STWT) were first depicted in seminal works in the 2000s (e.g., Walther, 2006) and have been confirmed by some of the most up-to-date scholarship in the field (e.g., Cuzzocrea, 2020; Pastore et al., 2021). Such trends were initially labelled by Walther (2006) as "yo-yo transitions." Later, Savickas (2012) added the concept of "dejobbing" to highlight that stable, predictable, and decent career pathways are harder to establish in the 21st century, from an early age. More recently, Cuzzocrea (2020) coined the term "pinball youth" to describe those experiencing STWT non-linearity in the form of constant movements between different employment and training statuses.

The burden of longer and more uncertain STWT lies mainly on the shoulders of the most vulnerable young people who are often in and out of the not in employment, education, or training (NEET) condition, such as women, low-qualified people, or migrants (Mascherini, 2019). STWT barriers faced by these groups are often tangible, such as the lack of financial resources to access tertiary education. Lower educational capital (Simões et al., 2022), language issues (in the case of non-native speakers; Reinke & Goller, 2022; Walsh, 2020), or social dispositions (e.g., traditional beliefs about men and women's skills and professional development; Simões et al., 2022) are only a few of STWT non-tangible barriers further affecting these young people's professional pathways. The manifestation of these barriers varies across territories and is particularly more intense in rural regions compared to (sub)urban areas (Simões et al., 2022). Territorial disparities in the STWT are well illustrated by the fact that, in 2022, the share of NEETs was higher in rural areas (12.60%) than in cities (10.90%). Importantly, this difference was more remarkable in Southern (e.g., Greece) and Eastern European countries (e.g., Romania)—by 10 to 20% points (Eurostat, 2023). Thus, NEET gaps based on the degree of urbanisation constitute one of the structural features of EU countries depicting longer and more complex STWT processes.

Recently, the literature has also been underlining the fact that STWT is increasingly happening outside the public employment services (PES) support framework, particularly in the case of the most vulnerable young people in Europe and most specifically in EU countries (Cuzzocrea, 2020). Three major arguments justify this trend. Firstly, PES service delivery—from outreach to job placement—is often mismatched with vulnerable young people's skills, needs, and expectations (Shore & Tosun, 2019; Simões & Brito do Rio, 2020). This problem has several layers, including inadequate outreach strategies that are poorly coordinated with community-based organisations (Smoter, 2022), a lack of PES staff autonomy to adjust European (or national) level programmes to local job market constraints (Shore & Tosun, 2019), or training and job offers that fail to combine rising economic sectors with young people's professional expectations (Simões & Brito do Rio, 2020). Secondly, in many EU countries (e.g., Italy), PES is being centralised or dismantled, especially in the most remote areas (Bello & Cuzzocrea, 2018). Thirdly, informal sources of support, including family, friends, or neighbours are turning into main resources for job searching (Bello & Cuzzocrea, 2018) particularly in EU rural areas (Simões et al., 2022). This creates a paradox at the policy level: PES risks becoming obsolete for those who should benefit the most from their resources. Moreover, as vulnerable young people drift away from PES support and become harder to engage with, PES officers end up giving preference to individuals who are relatively close to the labour market, a practice known as "creaming" (Bonoli & Liechti, 2018).

One of the responses to prevent the potential irrelevance of PES in the EU is the digitalisation of service delivery. By PES digitalisation we mean the adoption of digital (or electronic) service channels (European Union, n.d.) powered by different technologies from web platforms to artificial intelligence (Desiere & Struyven, 2020) to provide services to end-users, across all job search stages (from out-reach to job placement). The acceleration of PES digitalisation demanded by policymakers is, however, driven by an overarching, misleading belief that e-tools suffice to prevent young citizens' disengagement from institutions. Our article is, at first, a theoretical effort to systematize risks and opportunities associated with PES digitalisation for vulnerable young people in the STWT. We list and discuss the leading challenges and opportunities of PES digitalisation for vulnerable younger generations in the EU context using an ecological lens—the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Then, we apply our ecological approach by proposing an assessment model of PES support for rural NEETs.

1.1. The Bioecological Model

The bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) aims at reading and understanding which factors and processes can impact people's personal development by considering the environments they are involved in, whether these environments are more proximal or more distant. At the heart of the model, we find the person, considered in terms of individual dispositions, resources, and environmental demands (Brown & Sumner, 2019). Starting from the person (individual level), the model develops into a progression of concentric circles that represent the systems impacting the individual. These are the microsystem (relationships between an individual and others—their social networks, such as family or peers); the mesosystem (the organisations that directly impact a person's life); the exosystem (environments in which an individual does not have direct participation, but, nevertheless, impacts them, such as the working environment of a young person's parents); and the macrosystem (values, public policies and laws, and cultural norms). These systems mutually influence each other and are operationally considered as levels of analysis. For our purposes, the use of the bioecological model has two important advantages. Firstly, it provides an appropriate grid to respond to complex, "wicked" social problems, i.e., those that intersect multiple policy domains, do not conform to linear solutions, and require inter-institutional trust and collaboration to achieve efficient on-the-ground responses (Christensen, 2015). The impact of PES digitalisation on vulnerable young people is a good example of such problems. Secondly, the bioecological model does the groundwork for the use of a comprehensive measurement of variables in interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research and provides data upon which to develop adequate interventions and policies (Logsdon & Gennaro, 2005; Scales, 1991). Figure 1 summarises the bioecological model:

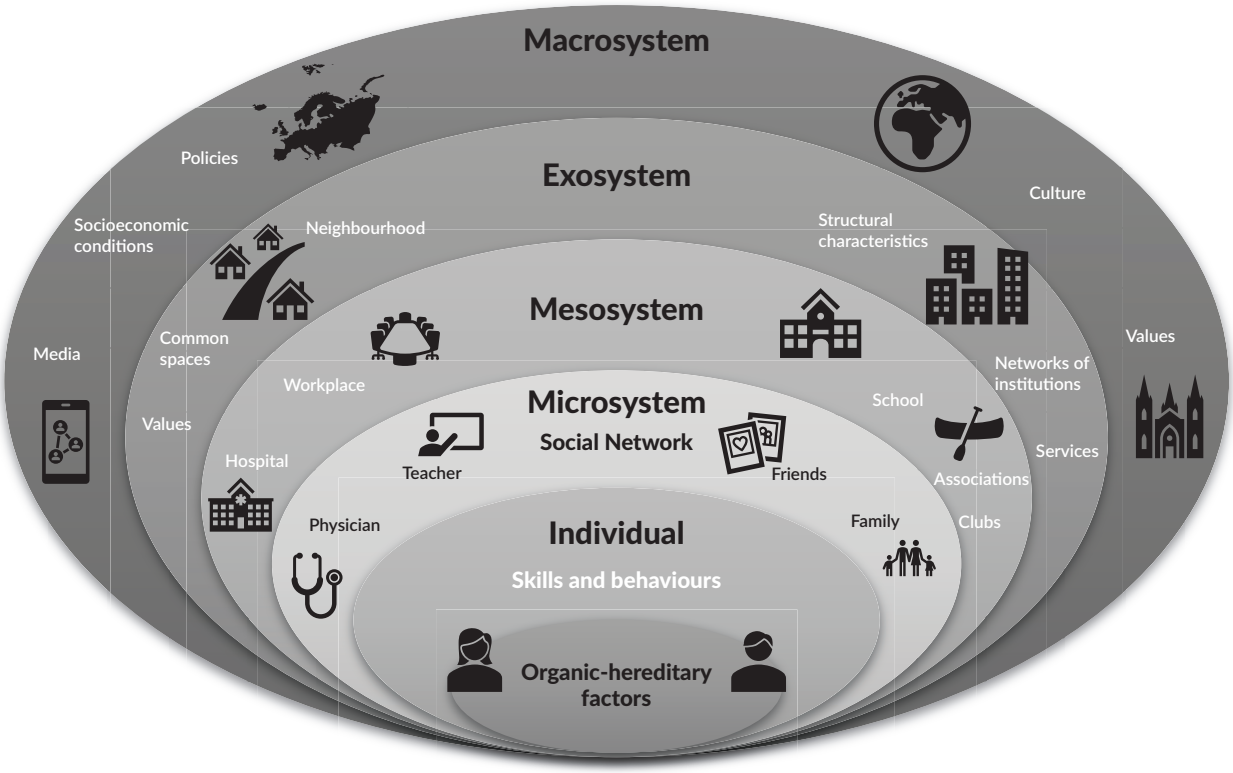

Figure 1. The bioecological model. Source: Adapted from Santinello et al. (2009).

2. Methodological Note

Our methodological approach combined a targeted literature review with a knowledge integration approach. We conducted a targeted literature review to address our first research question: How is PES digitalisation in EU countries integrating existing opportunities and challenges for targeting vulnerable young people going through the STWT? A targeted or non-systematic literature review is an informative, rather than wide-ranging, review of the literature on a topic. This type of literature review is appropriate to develop an in-depth analysis of a specific research question, to develop a theoretical or methodological argument or to locate patterns and trends that will support further research efforts. Given its exploratory nature, a non-targeted literature review may or may not follow a research protocol (Gough et al., 2012; Huelin et al., 2015).

We kept our targeted review open, with only three guidelines: (a) include all articles published after the year 2000; (b) include both scientific and policy reports; and (c) consider different disciplinary approaches to the topic (such as those stemming from e-government, public administration, and social sciences literature).

Our second research question was the following: How are those same opportunities and challenges arising from PES digitalisation being addressed in the case of rural NEETs? To tackle this research question, we combined the targeted review analysis with the results stemming from the project TRACK-IN (PES tracking effectiveness in supporting rural NEETs). This project aims to assess the effectiveness of different PES support models (predominantly digital, face-to-face, or mixed) in rural NEETs' employability outcomes. This combination of data requires a knowledge integration approach, meaning the process of synthesizing

multiple knowledge models or knowledge streams into a common model (representation; Linn, 2006). Knowledge integration is commonly needed in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research initiatives addressing complex social problems. This ensures that relevant scientific outputs and outcomes can be further exploited in scientific (Rosa et al., 2021) and policy arenas (Kuhmonen & Kuhmonen, 2015). In this case, our approach required the intersection between existing, dispersed knowledge points organised through a narrative literature approach and the empirical findings of a research project focussing on a specific group of vulnerable young people.

3. Opportunities and Challenges of PES Digitalisation for Vulnerable Young People

In the following subsections, we present three interrelated arguments supporting our position for a more thoughtful consideration of PES digitalisation aiming at vulnerable young people. Each of these arguments constitutes a specific challenge for the appropriate digitalisation of PES in the context of the STWT situated at specific levels of the bioecological model. We depart from core conceptual definitions which are key to understanding our central argument. Then, we present the opportunities for young people stemming from PES digitalization, before detailing what we see as the unforeseen challenges stated in the heading of each subsection.

3.1. Individual and Microsystem Levels: PES Digitalisation Aiming at Vulnerable Young People Is not Aiming Enough at Raising Trust in Institutions and Digital Tools

At the more concentric layers of the bioecological model—the individual and the microsystem levels—we argue that PES digitalization is ignoring the dimensions of trust in institutions and digital tools. Trust is understood as the perception that an agent will help achieve an individual's goals in a situation characterised by uncertainty and vulnerability (Lee & See, 2004). Trust requires, therefore, two elements: accepting vulnerability and benevolent expectations regarding the intentions/behaviour of another (Fledderus et al., 2014). While blind trust can be naive or risky, some degree of trust is a building block for state institutions to migrate from obsolete, bureaucratic governance models, oriented by supervision and control, to new public governance models led by cooperation between citizens and public organisations (Fledderus et al., 2014; Wilson & Mergel, 2022). Trust is, thus, a lubricant enabling societies to function (Arrow, 1975; Putnam, 1993). Moreover, trust reduces uncertainty, and facilitates decentralisation and adaptive behaviour (Lee & See, 2004), while improving public services efficiency (Christensen et al., 2020). In addition, trust produces intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes. The former lies in the improvement of citizens' personal well-being or quality of life and the second lies in the fact that it enables transactions to occur (between persons, network partners, and organizations) with much lower costs than in the case of relationships dominated by mistrust. Finally, trust acts as a basis for stabilizing the expectations of the parties involved (Nooteboom, 2005).

PES digitalisation has been brought forward as a powerful leeway to improve several mechanisms to increase young people's trust. To begin with, outreach to target groups such as NEETs can become more effective, particularly in more remote areas where available PES services are shrinking (International Labour Organization, 2021; Santos-Brien, 2018). Moreover, the use of digital tools has the potential to update language modes and add relevant communication channels (e.g., social media) used more purposefully with young people (from reaching out to job-finding support; Santos-Brien, 2018).

The practical advantages of PES digitalisation for targeting young people are not enough to secure trust at two different levels: institutional trust and trust in automation by young people. Regarding institutional trust, major international surveys, such as the OECD Trust Survey have shown that about half of the citizens trust public services. There is, however, evidence that trust in public institutions varies by type of service (OECD, 2021) and is lower among younger, less educated, and more deprived citizens (Haerpfer et al., 2022). Nevertheless, vulnerable young people's trust in PES across the EU is an irrelevant topic in the literature. There are only a few works indirectly showing how NEETs (e.g., Simões & Brito do Rio, 2020) tend to mistrust these services, as part of a process of generalised institutional disengagement (Cuzzocrea, 2020). The existing alternatives to PES for vulnerable young people are mainly their informal personal networks at the microsystem level of the bioecological model, which often lock them in cycles of precarious, insecure, and low-paid jobs, hampering their access to decent employment (Almeida & Simões, 2020).

Engaging vulnerable young people with PES must account for trust in digitalisation as well. Hoff and Bashir (2015) propose trust in digitalisation as a tridimensional concept encompassing dispositional trust, seen as the individual's overall inclination to trust digitalisation regardless of contexts or specific systems; situational trust, which refers to the variability of trust across contexts; and learned trust, corresponding to an operator's evaluations of a system based on past interactions. All dimensions of trust in digitalisation are challenged by vulnerable young people's skills and access to automated tools in the PES context. Indeed, the share of slow adopters of digital tools in relation to PES is disproportionately higher among vulnerable groups (e.g., migrants, low-skilled, and rural young people; International Labour Organization, 2021). The slow adherence to digital tools by these groups is largely fuelled by digital inequalities affecting the formation of trust in automation (e.g., Pérez-Morote et al., 2020). The levels of dispositional trust in automation among most vulnerable young people are explained by low levels of basic digital skills, in terms of finding, evaluating, using, sharing, and creating content using computers or smartphones (Ebbers et al., 2016). This blocks young people's ability to interact successfully with automated systems, to build their situational trust and, therefore, to accumulate positive experiences leading to learned trust. Concomitantly, institutions fail to explore the most appropriate digital channels to increase these interactions (Ebbers et al., 2016) or to find the right balance between analogue and digital support leading to trustworthy service deliverance in specific domains, such as STWT (International Labour Organization, 2021; Santos-Brien, 2018). Therefore, we must be suspicious of the overwhelming claims that young people are, by definition, more willing to adopt automated solutions in the context of e-government. There are works showing that young people are more inclined to adopt automated solutions (e.g., Zheng & Schachter, 2017), however, other reports claim the opposite (e.g., Pérez-Morote et al., 2020), meaning that the picture is much more nuanced and mediated by the conditions to trust in public services automation.

3.2. Mesosystemic and Exosystemic Levels: Limited Incorporation of a Digital Transformation Perspective in PES Service Delivery for Supporting the School-To-Work Transition

Despite e-government or public services digitalisation literature recommendations, at the intermediate levels of the bioecological model, the proposed efforts for PES digitalization have seldom been driven by a digital transformation stance (Eom & Lee, 2022; European Union, n.d.). Digital transformation corresponds to an iterative shift of public service delivery driven by the adoption of digital solutions covering artefacts, work processes, and core values (Eom & Lee, 2022). In the case of PES, this means integrating a digital transformation view from outreach to job placement, while allowing young people to shape service delivery.

The digital transformation concept enables us to understand if PES digitalisation significantly changes service delivery models for young people in the STWT. Service delivery models depict how a public service typically organises public encounters, meaning the purposive interaction between citizens and public officials as they communicate to transact matters of some mutual interest (Goodsell, 1981). In the STWT process, these interactions comprise information exchange, counselling, or issues of control or constraint (e.g., unemployment benefits monitoring) tailored by organisational channels, artefacts, and processes (Andersson et al., 2022; Lindgren et al., 2019).

At the service provision level, PES digitalisation efforts have often stressed undeniable efficiency gains, by reducing operative or administrative costs (International Labour Organization, 2021; Santos-Brien, 2018), releasing staff from administrative tasks and, thus, minimizing the time they spend in responding to routine questions, while increasing their availability to be face-to-face with those in greater need (International Labour Organization, 2021). In addition, it is expected that PES digitalisation will be able, in the future, to prevent biases in decision-making stemming from staff intervention. However, that depends on more reliable databases and sources, which in the short-term seems to be unattainable, as well as on an optimal combination of analogue and digital interactions with vulnerable young people (Desiere & Struyven, 2020).

For a long time, public encounters were organised according to a provider-centric model of service delivery. From this bureaucratic, administrative view, the citizens' emotional, cognitive, sensorial, and behavioural experiences when engaging with public services were determined in a unidirectional way by public organisations (Fledderus et al., 2014; Trischler & Trischler, 2021). This vision has been shifting over the past 20 years to more complex conceptualisations involving bidirectional or multidirectional interactions in public encounters. The user-centred perspective envisages that the citizens' experience of public service delivery must be seen as subjective, context-specific, and phenomenologically determined, representing an outcome of their service provision process. Consequently, the service provider responds to multiple stimuli, some of them beyond its control to form citizens' experiences of public encounters (Trischler & Trischler, 2021).

Decades ago, when the provider-centric perspective was the undisputed service delivery model, public encounters were analogue. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s—the PC era—and with the arrival of Web 1.0, public encounters have increasingly blended analogue and digital interactions along multiple media and channels, across different settings, including in PES (Andersson et al., 2022). Current hybrid public encounters across public services domains are believed to accelerate the adoption of person-centric or service ecosystem perspectives, including in PES. From a bioecological perspective, this means a significant shift from PES detached from young people's direct intervention happening at the exosystem level to direct involvement with service provision, which is a more proximal type of interaction taking place at the so-called mesosystem level. It is, however, uncertain—to say the least—how the listed operational advantages of PES digitalization lead to a more fundamental change, a desired digital transformative perspective that inspires renovated service delivery models which are closer to and tailored to young people's needs. Moreover, there is a risk of generalising the roll-out of recently developed profiling tools powered by artificial intelligence. Profiling tools are very appealing, as they can increase the speedy delivery of services while providing new insights and predictive data about job seekers (Desiere & Struyven, 2020). However, these tools are still far from replacing the benefits of co-developed, user-centred approaches, mainly because they reinforce existing patterns of discrimination, fail to match job seekers with the most adequate programs and, ultimately, propagate standardized views of citizens based solely on their behaviours and attitudes (Sztandar-Sztanderska & Zielińska, 2020).

In a nutshell, information is still missing on if, how, and how much PES digital transformation is driving an explicit agenda to change service delivery models or if it constitutes an implicit principle that is randomly incorporated by PES officers and agencies. Such knowledge is key to understanding the effects of PES digitalisation on vulnerable young people, particularly when taking into account the spreading of powerful profiling tools which are not as sound as they seem.

3.3. Macrosystemic Level: Absence of a Co-Creation Paradigm for Digitally Transforming PES for Vulnerable Young People in the School-To-Work Transition

The lack of an appropriate collaborative methodology involving all stakeholders hampers vulnerable young people's trust in institutions (Fledderus, 2015; Fledderus et al., 2014) and digital solutions (Jalonen et al., 2021; Mulvale et al., 2018), slowing down PES digital transformation for better supporting STWT (Santos-Brien, 2018). Co-creation is a route to address these gaps by engaging multiple stakeholders—from vulnerable young people to decision-makers—in jointly creating public service value, meaning the intended outcomes delivered by a given service (Jalonen et al., 2021; Trischler & Trischler, 2021). Co-creation constitutes, therefore, a shift in PES culture and values and young people's representation from users or consumers of public services to citizens, fully embodied by duties and rights, including the right to contribute to the development of new institutional responses (Jalonen et al., 2021). Thus, co-creation allows for a change in the conditions of the bioecological model's macrosystem level.

The political and financial macrosystemic conditions seem to favour the spread of co-created PES digitalisation models. The recent health restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic have led to an unprecedented demand for PES digitalisation across European countries (International Labour Organization, 2021). Subsequently, considerable investments have been announced to speed up PES digitalisation in the upcoming years. A good example of this is the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism put together by the EU to respond to the negative social and economic effects of the Covid-19 crisis. Several national plans approved under this mechanism propose the roll-out of significant funding for PES digitalisation in countries such as Greece, Italy, and Spain (Simões, 2022). For instance, the Italian plan includes €200 million for the reform of PES, including digitalisation priorities such as improving the interoperability of PES at regional and national levels or improving the structure and content of online channels to interact with citizens (Government of Italy, 2021). The Greek plan seeks for a more comprehensive reform of PES, with the creation of a new authority, the Hellenic Manpower Employment Organisation. This broad reform encompasses specific measures for improving the effectiveness of the support offered to young people's transition to the labour market, including the generalisation of PES digital tools (Government of Greece, 2021).

A leading techno-optimism perspective emphasises the immediate gains through PES digitalisation at all levels for vulnerable young people and is supported by a considerable financial envelope. However, beyond these short-term advantages, the opportunity to fully transform PES identities using a co-creation approach involving multiple actors and, most importantly, young people, seems to be missing from EU policy and financial instruments. Thus, what exactly are PES missing for not following a co-creation lens for service development? Co-creation enables the adoption of a strengths-based approach to service design. Instead of interpreting young people's experiences according to norms and practices set by adults, co-creative design efforts focus on their strengths, resources, and opportunities, without ignoring risks and challenges

(Lindgren et al., 2019). Moreover, co-creation conveys a powerful, unusual message: Vulnerable young people can have some degree of control over their own lives and decisions, instead of being driven by fate or luck (Fledderus et al., 2014; Jalonen et al., 2021). In the end, co-creation addresses the very limited implementation of participatory methodologies in designing digitally transformed public institutions (Desiere et al., 2019), including in the PES domain (European Union, n.d.). In sum, digital co-creation has outstanding potential for increasing citizens' intentions to participate in co-design processes, facilitating direct interactions between stakeholders, improving decision-making and power sharing, or helping to find the right balance between analogue and digital tools delivery (Jalonen et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there have been very few attempts (e.g., Jalonen et al., 2021) to test the potential benefits of services digital co-creation with vulnerable young people. This caveat is justified by multiple barriers. These include inadequate co-creation activities that mirror formal decision-making processes or that end up seeking experiences that only confirm the status quo (Jalonen et al., 2021), rigid design protocols following linear steps (Mulvale et al., 2018), or ignoring the power differentials across the co-creation process, particularly in the case of PES, where job seekers are expected to conform to certain rules (Fledderus, 2015).

4. Applying a Model of PES Digitalisation Challenges and Opportunities to Rural NEETs

We believe that the balance between challenges and opportunities in PES digitalisation for young people can be better captured by focusing on an illustrative example. Figure 2 synthesises that sort of interaction for rural NEETs, from a bioecological perspective, adding the specific, relevant factors by the different layers of

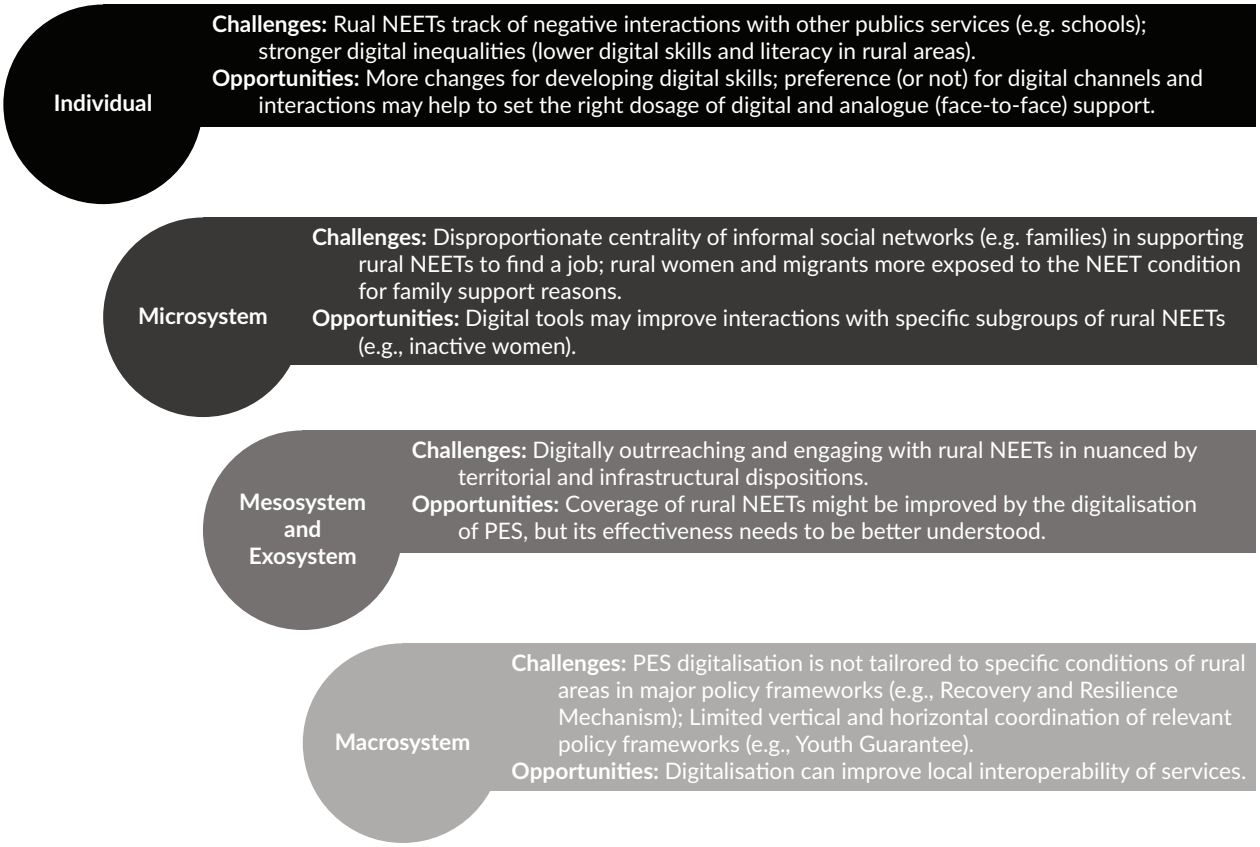

Figure 2. Key factors for effective PES digitalisation for rural NEETs from a bioecological perspective.

this model that must be accounted for. The presented model inspired by the bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is, therefore, relevant to inspire future assessment of PES delivery effectiveness, contributing to informing policies and governance at different levels.

At the individual level, which covers personal characteristics, fostering rural NEETs' trust in PES must be a major tenet of the successful digitalisation of these services. In the countryside, there are specific nuances shaping trust in public institutions. Overall, younger generations are raised in communities tightly connected by very strong informal ties. Thus, their personal decisions and behaviours, including those associated with training and employment, are often driven by dominant, collectivistic beliefs. According to these beliefs, institutions are frequently seen as outsiders and their support raises scepticism (Simões et al., 2022). Moreover, many vulnerable young people in these communities, particularly rural NEETs, have a record of negative interactions with other public institutions due to school failure or compulsory monitoring by welfare services (e.g., child protection committees; Simões & Brito do Rio, 2020). Adding to this, rural young people show limited digital skills and literacy (Neagu et al., 2021), especially when compared with their urban counterparts (Tomczyk, 2024). All these specific individual challenges posed to digital interactions from PES with rural NEETs can be tempered by other individual features, such as enhanced opportunities for younger generations to interact and learn digital skills or even their preference for digital means for establishing first contact with services. Nevertheless, this trend is not uniform. Indeed, evidence from Poland shows that young people in rural areas use internet services less frequently compared to young people living in urban areas (Tomczyk, 2024). As some policy reports have previously shown (e.g., International Labour Organization, 2021), these discrepancies in the use of digital tools flag that attuning to the individual features of rural NEETs is more a matter of the dosage of digital and analogue support used in service delivery rather than a question of using digital tools or not. In other words, looking for the right blend between digital and analogue support in PES may constitute, therefore, an opportunity for delivering person-centred services at the individual level.

At the exosystem level, it is important to state that such informal ties (parents, peers) have a disproportionate centrality in supporting rural NEETs in finding a job. Indeed, there is evidence that support provided by these sources is more relevant in territories where there is a shortage of institutional support for the STWT, such as rural areas, in countries such as Italy (Cuzzocrea, 2020). Moreover, these relationships also play a pivotal part in strengthening important psychological dimensions of, for instance, Portuguese rural NEETs' employability, such as self-efficacy (Simões et al., 2017) or hope (in terms of personal agency and setting goals; Simões, 2023). The existent risk here is a generational perpetuation of precariousness and low-quality jobs, as many of the most relevant social ties from rural NEETs already come from disadvantaged backgrounds. These effects might also intersect with gender, with larger shares of young women in rural areas, often with a migrant background, fitting into the inactive NEETs' profiles, compared to urban areas, mostly to undertake care duties within families (O'Higgins & Brockie, 2024). Interestingly, at least one report shows that inactive rural NEETs during the pandemic acknowledged a greater increase in hope levels due to PES support, compared to unemployed rural NEETs (Simões, 2023). This result might imply that digital tools can, in part, play a role in tailoring service delivery to subgroups of rural NEETs who are more constrained in the transition to the labour market by strong social ties or family duties, such as inactive women or migrants.

At the mesosystem and exosystem levels, PES digitalisation poses several challenges regarding how public encounters in rural areas might be shaped by digitalisation, starting with access to services. Access to PES is

deemed essential by rural NEETs, being associated with proxy measures of employability, such as satisfaction with life (Mazzochi et al., 2024). Here, it is important to highlight that access to PES in rural areas is an issue from early on, in the process of supporting the transition to the labour market, when services try to reach and engage with young people, as evidenced in Poland (Smoter, 2022). Digitalisation may further complicate the initial approaches to rural NEETs, as services might confuse greater coverage, which is indeed an add-on of using a digital approach in PES, with engaging and enrolling rural NEETs in counselling, job matching, and/or training activities. Moreover, digital coverage of PES will differ from region to region, based on the existing infrastructure (e.g., Wi-Fi quality) as well as on access to good quality digital equipment. These specific features demand more nuanced approaches to the issues of coverage of, outreaching to, and engaging with rural NEETs, including (a) outreaching programmes blending PES and the third sector efforts (Smoter, 2022), (b) balanced use of digital and analogue support (International Labour Organization, 2021), or (c) tailoring approaches to different profiles of vulnerable groups (e.g., migrants; European Commission, 2019). Altogether, these lines of development will uphold a true digital transformation of PES in rural areas, one that elevates service delivery from an old-fashioned bureaucratic approach to a service ecosystem person-centred perspective (Trischler & Trischler, 2021). This also means that from a bioecological perspective, rural NEETs' interactions with PES will occur more often at the mesosystem level, where individuals are engaged with a given service, than at the exosystem, where services affect personal lives without direct interactions.

At the macrosystem level, there are specific governance and policy issues which may influence the effectiveness of PES digitalisation for rural NEETs. Major policy instruments, such as the national plans under the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism include important reforms and investments dedicated to the digitalisation of PES in countries with high rural NEETs rates (e.g., Greece). However, these reforms and investments are not being territorialised, meaning that PES digitalisation is not being tailored according to the needs and features of different EU regions, including rural ones (Simões, 2022). Moreover, guidelines for PES digitalisation must be streamed into the major EU active labour market policies' framework, such as the Youth Guarantee and coordinated with the respective national plans. This type of vertical coordination is still far from being achieved (Shore & Tosun, 2019), not to mention horizontal coordination between different branches of public governance that intersect with the transition to the labour market (e.g., education, welfare, etc.). Still, digitalisation policies may contribute to a more purposive (horizontal) interoperability of public services and shape more effective interventions at the local level, although this raises concerns regarding personal data protection.

5. Conclusions

Public policies and services must adapt to the growing complexity of STWT, to avoid inefficiencies or irrelevance. PES illustrate well the mismatch between service provision and citizens' needs. The digitalisation of services, particularly from PES, may constitute one of the pathways to respond to young people's job market inclusion needs, thus, counteracting their growing withdrawal from institutional support (Cuzzocrea, 2020). By adopting a bioecological lens, we have discussed how PES digitalisation encompasses challenges and opportunities at the individual, organisational, and structural (meaning policies and culture) levels that need to be properly addressed and balanced At the individual and microsystemic levels, nurturing young people's trust in PES and digital tools is an important building block for PES transition to fully digitalised services. Simply relying on the belief that younger generations are more inclined to use digital tools and channels (e.g., social media) than older people as if they were all ready for digitalised PES, is only wishful

thinking. While young people do make greater use of digital tools and channels when approaching PES, it is also clear that the most vulnerable young people face greater constraints, such as stable Wi-Fi connections or show lower digital literacy (International Labour Organization, 2021), particularly in rural areas (Tomczyk, 2024). At the organisational level, encompassing the exosystemic and mesosystemic layers of the bioecological model, it is important to notice how PES digitalisation has the potential to release staff from administrative, time-consuming tasks and improve their availability for those needing more attention. However, freeing up staff from bureaucratic duties must come with guarantees that services will not simply be downsized; that the quality of public encounters is improved by finding the proper balance between digital and face-to-face interactions (Desiere et al., 2019); and that the staff is prepared to deal in greater depth with the complex social and psychological needs of vulnerable people (European Commission, 2019). All of these requirements are particularly significant in rural areas, where PES are at perennial risk of being shut down and staff call for greater autonomy to adjust service provision to rural young people's needs (Shore & Tosun, 2019). At the macrosystemic level, a new culture of co-creation is needed to ensure PES digitalisation design and delivery reflect young people's participation and views. Only such an approach will leverage the current outstanding EU political ambitions and financial investments being channelled through instruments such as the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism with a sound PES digitalisation that meets social inclusion requirements (Jalonen et al., 2021). Moreover, in the case of rural NEETs' STWT, it is fundamental that important EU policy frameworks, such as the reinforced Youth Guarantee and the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism, define more targeted active labour market policies, including those involving PES digitalisation, for rural areas. That is not the case in Southern countries showing stronger urban/rural asymmetries in labour market integration (Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021; Simões, 2022).

In sum, an excessive techno-optimism on PES digitalisation improved efficacy and results proclaimed by political discourses must be tempered with a more thoughtful consideration of the processes leading to greater and more appropriate coverage of these services for vulnerable groups of young people, while avoiding important, negative side-effects (e.g., institutional mistrust). Only this approach, based on an ecological consideration of multiple interfering factors on PES digitalisation will ensure EU social inclusion targets.

This position article is an exploratory effort with inherent limitations. We followed a targeted literature review approach, which is appropriate for proposing new theoretical and research advances. However, targeted literature reviews are more prone to self-selection bias. Moreover, we have not discussed how PES digitalisation affects different processes (e.g., reach-out) or staff tasks (e.g., providing information) when addressing vulnerable young people. Although these lines of inquiry were outside this article's scope, it is important that future reports offer a more nuanced discussion on how PES digitalisation affects distinct levels of service provision.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, decisions were undertaken by Jale Tosun (Heidelberg University).

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Public Employment Services' Responses to the Pandemic: Examples from Portugal, Bulgaria, and Lithuania

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic provoked critical changes to welfare in Europe, requiring the dematerialisation of programmes and services while relying mainly on remote support. This study aims to present insights into how European public employment services have coped and adapted to the pandemic challenges, particularly regarding the digitalisation and delivery of services to young people in rural areas. It focuses on three case studies from distinct European regions: Portugal, Bulgaria, and Lithuania. It is based on an exploratory survey of public employment services national offices and qualitative data collected from public employment services offices in rural settings. It highlights the advantages and dangers of the adoption of digitalisation processes, namely considering literacy and accessibility in diverse contexts. It concludes that despite cultural and regional differences, all three countries evidenced an acceleration in service provision due to digitalisation and were capable of adjusting their practices to remote delivery. However, rural areas faced delays due to poor infrastructure, and after the pandemic, public employment privileged on-site delivery, since it is considered more effective in the training and counselling of young people.

Keywords

Bulgaria; Covid-19; digitalisation; Lithuania; Portugal; public employment services

1. Introduction

The pandemic caused upheavals in all sectors and affected the life prospects of many people. The consequences of Covid-19 reflected painfully on young people as well, confronting them with new challenges, including the increased risk of dropping out of school, long-term unemployment, marginalisation, and social exclusion (Dunajeva et al., 2021; International Labour Organization, 2020b). Many young people ceased to be engaged in education, employment, and training and fell into the category of not in employment, education, and training (NEETs), with the proportion of NEETs within the 15–29-year-old age group rising to 13.9% in 2020 in the EU, although the rise of this indicator was followed by a decrease to 11.7 percentual points in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023).

During the pandemic, digitalisation was often the only solution to secure the delivery of basic social services, such as education, employment, or health support (International Labour Organization, 2020b). This brought a sudden acceleration of remotisation and automation of services that caught the relevant offices and their clients unprepared. Particularly for education, differences in infrastructure, literacy, and access to a good network often dictated the success or failure in following online courses (Flores et al., 2022). Recent research highlighted that regional factors negatively impact the quality of life and opportunities of young people (Brazienė, 2021; Mujčinović et al., 2021; Simões et al., 2020). Digitalisation can be seen as an opportunity for young people in rural areas, as it enhances their remote employment and education prospects (Neagu et al., 2021; Raileanu Szeles & Simionescu, 2022). Considering this, the need to improve policies that promote inclusive employment and education for NEET youth has increased (Paabort et al., 2023). The dematerialisation of public employment services (PES) has been proposed as a process to modernise social welfare services (OECD, 2022), particularly for young people, with applications for Youth Guarantee schemes being made solely online (Walsh, 2020). However, if such a transition is to be successful, one must pay attention to socio-economic differences that shape the rural/urban divide (Kerras et al., 2022), in order to ensure none of the population is excluded.

This study aims to offer insight into how PES have coped and adapted to the pandemic challenges, particularly examining the delivery of services and support to youth located in rural areas. It focuses on three national case studies from distinct European regions: Portugal, Bulgaria, and Lithuania. It is based on an exploratory survey of national PES offices and qualitative data collected from public employment offices in rural settings. Finally, it highlights the advantages and dangers in the adoption of digitalisation processes, namely considering literacy and accessibility in diverse contexts.

2. The Pandemic and the Accelerated Digitalisation of Labour Markets

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, PES made considerable modifications to its services and operations. Many of these modifications involved investments in IT infrastructure to allow PES to cope with rising customer numbers and ensure service continuity in the face of constraints on in-person service provision (Peters, 2022). Changes in training and job-search support and counselling delivery modalities were notably frequent across nations during this period. As of 2022, most PES used digital processes, such as online registration via applications, interfaces, or platforms, phone support for customers who could not use online channels, distance counselling services, or online training via platforms. Such changes increased efficiency and effectiveness and freed up human resources (Directorate General for Employment, Social

Affairs and Inclusion, 2023). Furthermore, PES in 69 countries across all regions can now provide basic services online, such as information on available openings and customer registration for job matching. One-third of these nations' PES are now providing AI-powered solutions for job searchers and employers (International Labour Organization, 2022). Hence, digital technology has been a strong instrument for extending employment service coverage, especially in low- and middle-income nations, helping to improve the internal operations of employment services.

However, some authors highlight the exclusion caused by the digital divide, due to deficient infrastructure, lack of access to equipment, poor literacy, or even mistrust (International Telecommunication Union, 2022; Pirhonen et al., 2020; Rückert et al., 2020). In his amplification theory, Toyama (2015) suggested that technology is not "transformative" or disruptive, but rather a magnifier of existing institutional forces, including current social, economic and political dynamics. This highlights the necessity of ensuring no one is excluded when advancing these changes. The delivery of services through technology-based channels has remained low for women as single parents, migrants, refugees, displaced workers, minorities, and indigenous people in half of the assessed PES (International Labour Organization, 2020a). In the case of NEET youth, not all have equal access to digital services and technologies. NEETs from low-income or marginalised communities may face barriers to accessing technology due to affordability or limited digital literacy.

Digitalisation can be understood as the dematerialisation of services but goes well beyond that. A recent literature review concerning digitalisation and the delivery of active labour market policies (ALMPs; Scarano & Colfer, 2022) distinguished between two technological domains: remotisation and automation. The authors clarify that remotisation refers to the process or practice of conducting work or business activities remotely, implementing internet-based service elements at a geographical distance from the target groups. For PES, remotisation refers to the possibility of creating alternatives to physical interactions between caseworkers and customers by means of digital layers that direct customers towards online services (Scarano & Colfer, 2022, p. 101). Automation refers to recent advancements in data and analytics allowing for the generation of knowledge and intelligence from data to support decision-making. For PES, this primarily refers to the implementation of data-driven optimisation tools that are designed to anticipate customers' needs and suggest potential treatments and courses of action to caseworkers (Scarano & Colfer, 2022). According to the OECD (2022), digitalisation can encompass almost all PES operations and services, covering applications and user interfaces for better services for job seekers and employers, such as self-service tools for job/employee searches, tools for mapping skills, and providing career services and chatbots to facilitate information sharing and counselling. Beyond that, it can also provide more efficiency in defining jobseeker profiles, matching offers to candidates or automating administrative tasks. In Scarano and Colfer's (2022, p. 106) study, employment assistance was identified as the type of active labour market policy most sensitive to digitalisation and indicated that career guidance was closer to remotisation while profiling and matching were closer to automation. But while both remotisation and automation processes are currently in place in PES, they do not move at the same pace in all countries, nor with the same degree of implementation.

Meanwhile, digitalisation is also impacting labour markets, raising new challenges for workers and employers. Warhurst and Hint (2019, p. 1) list three aspects of digitalisation that change work: digitally-enabled machines with artificial intelligence (AI); digitalisation of processes that offer enhanced possibilities for the processing, storage, and communication of information; and the use of digital networks to coordinate economic transactions through platform-based algorithms. These changes are projected to have three

effects on labour markets and behaviours. The first effect concerns the ways in which technological innovation, such as automation, machine learning, and AI systems, may or may not shape work (Berg et al., 2018; West, 2018). It is stated, more specifically, that digital technologies are being used consciously and instrumentally to influence work and employment relations, such as through online platforms (Frey & Osborne, 2017). Secondly, digitalisation has increased the growth of jobs in the service and information industries, while also slowing that growth in the manufacturing and sourcing of material products (OECD, 2019a, 2019b). Third, as fewer work contracts provide a standard employment relationship, there has been an increase in the number of unstable types of employment. As previously stated, regardless of one's unique experience with precarious employment or present circumstances, these new changes have introduced an element of insecurity with severe health concerns (e.g., Fernández-Macías et al., 2023). They have wide repercussions and have implications not only for duties in the workplace but also for how and where individuals are employed. Although these advances do not yet appear to have increased joblessness, they may be related to a rise in underemployment.

Considering these debates, this article analyses the effects of the digital transition on PES and their clients in the aftermath of the pandemic, as well as the impacts of the policy measures that have been implemented in three European countries: Portugal, Bulgaria, and Lithuania. We explore the endurance of the pandemic effect through the analysis of these three case studies with diverse geographical and cultural profiles, shedding light on the advantages and disadvantages of the adoption of technology by PES while taking into account local contexts.

3. Methodology

The data presented in this article is part of the project Track-In: Public Employment Services Tracking Effectiveness to Support Rural NEETs (ID No. 2020–1–0011) funded by EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment, the aim of which is to deliver an evaluation model of the effectiveness of PES. Results from the collaborative work developed within the WP2—Rural PES tracking programs, mapping, and validation are intended to map and validate the most replicable programme of each PES tracking support type in improving rural NEETs' employability. WP2 has members from six different countries: Portugal, Spain, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, and Italy.

One of the axes of the methodological strategy comprised a screening phase to map the structures of implementation of employment services through a PES survey addressed to national and regional heads of PES. More specifically, the aim was to collect information on how PES are organised, their target groups, the available measures and programmes addressed to NEETs, and how the performance of these programmes is measured.

To guarantee comparability between different countries and standardise PES' definitions and terms, the survey was based on some reference surveys also used to research PES, namely those conducted by the World Association of Public Employment Services, the International Labour Organization, and the European Network of Public Employment Services.

The survey included questions about PES institutional structure and services addressed to NEETs, encompassing the following dimensions: (a) PES services' institutional structure, (b) portfolio of PES'

activities and services, (c) PES services and measures in the context of the Youth Guarantee implementation, (d) reaching out to NEETs, (e) assessing the needs of NEET young people, (f) post-placement support provided to young people, (g) PES response to the Covid-19 crisis, (h) assessment and monitoring, and (i) strategic flexibility.

The online version of the survey was added to the Qualtrics platform and disseminated through the national PES in four countries. It was not possible to apply the questionnaire in Italy and Spain due to the delays in the PES protocol agreements. Data was collected between December 2022 and February 2023. In total, 157 valid responses were collected: Bulgaria ($n = 71$), Portugal ($n = 50$); Lithuania ($n = 31$), and Estonia ($n = 5$). Given the low size of the sample, Estonia was not included in the analysis.

Taking into account the disproportionate sample size in each country, data analysis will be presented as independent case studies and not as a direct comparative statistical analysis. The data has been treated and analysed in SPSS. As a complement to the quantitative exploratory data, all teams have conducted PES case studies in rural areas in their own countries. The case studies comprised documental analysis, interviews with PES technicians and directors and focus groups with NEET youth. Some of this data is presented here, triangulating data collection strategies for better comprehension of national contexts.

For the purpose of this article, we selected the survey dimension concerned with PES response to the Covid-19 crisis, the aim of which is to provide an understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on the introduction and implementation of PES strategies or reforms. This particular dimension was based on the European Network of Public Employment Services survey on PES capacity (Peters, 2022), which comprises a set of questions related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on PES services.

The survey covered categories related to communication/interaction with the public, either through greater digitalisation of services or diversification of interaction channels (channels used). It also covered categories related to the measures and services provided by the PES or other bodies, whose aim is to facilitate the integration of unemployed and other job seekers in the labour market (ALMPs and client services) and procedures (rapid service and support; internal procedures/processes). Finally, it covered categories related to income support, such as redundancy measures and short-term work, to support firms that experienced economic difficulties, allowing them to temporarily reduce the number of working hours or give support to the employees that receive income support from the state for the hours not worked. In the period of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, most of the European states adopted these types of schemes, allowing the partial suspension of the employment contract or, in some cases, the temporary redundancy, which allows a full suspension of the employment contract. Another important response during the pandemic crisis was income provision, allowing out-of-work income maintenance and support. The aim was to understand whether the pandemic accelerated (speeded up) or boosted their introduction (initiated) or on the contrary, it postponed (introduction postponed) or delayed their implementation (introduction delayed) of such measures.

4. Cross Country Overview

An initial and general review of the data in the following table allows us to see that the support services for NEETs were not particularly affected by the constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Supporting this

conclusion is the fact that only five indicators have averages below three, which indicate delays or postponements in the implementation of the measures in question.

Among these figures are income provisions for Portugal (2.79) and Bulgaria (2.84), followed by redundancy measures and short-term work (2.86) reflecting a negative impact (see Table 1). Finally, in Lithuania, there were delays or postponements in ALMPs and customer services (2.57) and redundancy measures and short-term work (2.78). Among all of the measures, the digitalisation of services (4.25) had the highest implementation, which was boosted as a result of the pandemic. In turn, the pandemic also had the greatest impact on income provision (2.92). This last aspect presented the greatest implementation difficulties among the three countries, to the extent that both Portugal and Bulgaria have averages that indicate a negative impact.

Table 1. PES areas affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

	Portugal	Bulgaria	Lithuania
Digital(isation) services	4.08	3.68	4.25
Channels used	3.88	3.50	4.05
ALMPs and customer services	3.46	3.08	2.57
Income provision	2.79	2.84	3.05
Redundancy measures, short-term work	4.27	2.86	2.78
Rapid service and support	3.68	3.79	3.16
Internal procedures/processes	3.91	3.80	3.11
Other	4.00	3.17	3.00
	$n = 50$	$n = 71$	$n = 31$

We will now proceed to the individual analysis of each country case, followed by a mixed analysis, comprising a qualitative analysis of the interviews with PES technicians and directors, a documental analysis of official and institutional reports, and a quantitative analysis of PES survey data.

4.1. The Portuguese Case

In 2022, Portugal was in 15th place (score 50.8) in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) with slow progress—Compared to the previous year it only moved up one place and is still below the EU average score of 52.3 (European Commission, 2023c). In the range of indicators that comprise this index, Portugal has a lower performance in connectivity (score of 51.6), far below the European average (score of 59.9). Despite the investment and increase in coverage in the last decades, resulting in an increase in households with an internet connection, there are still some territorial disparities and inequalities, with very limited coverage in rural and remote areas.

In the other three dimensions, Portugal is aligned with the EU average. In the human capital dimension, Portugal matches the EU average, although there is still significant room for improvement, with 55% of the population having at least basic digital skills (European Commission, 2023c).

Regarding the integration of digital technology in business activities, Portugal scores 37.6 (EU average score of 36.1)), with a significant increase—five steps in the ranking—when compared with the 2021 performance

(European Commission, 2023c) revealing the impact of Covid-19 on the digitalisation process of these services (European Commission, 2023c). Finally, in the digital public services dimension, Portugal scores 67.9 (EU average score of 67.3), standing out from the European average in terms of pre-filled forms (score of 76 for Portugal and 64 for the EU) and digital public services for citizens (score of 79 for Portugal and 75 for the EU).

During the last few decades, Portugal invested in the digitalisation of services, with the implementation of the Simplex programme in 2006 being a highlight in this process. The aim of this programme was to simplify the administrative procedures and empower the relationship between citizens and the state, with many of the measures involving the mediation of this relationship through the digitalisation of certain services. Since 2020, Portugal has been implementing the Action Plan for the Digital Transition prepared by the Ministry of Economy and Digital Transition. This measure aims to digitalise the 25 public services most used by citizens and companies, ensuring simplification and online access to digital public services for all citizens. The projects Emprego + Digital 2025 and Upskill are two main measures to requalify and train workers, company managers, and citizens in general in digital technologies. Portugal's Action Plan for the Digital Transition will be reinforced by the Recovery and Resilience Plan aiming to meet the goals of the 2030 EU Path to the Digital Decade. The aim is to improve population skills, expand connectivity, and support the public and private sectors in the process of technological adaptation and digitalisation. Considering Portugal's digital gap, the strategy of digital transition needs to be accompanied by investment in the training of people and service workers, otherwise there is a risk of leaving many people behind who are unable to keep up with the digitalisation of services and benefit from the potential of this offer.

Meanwhile, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns accelerated the digitalisation trend of the service sector, especially that of PES, which plays a critical role in providing young people with employment and training opportunities. The transition from an in-person to a digital approach brought not only the adoption of digital tools and technology operations but significant changes to the delivery models of training and job-search support, as well as counselling. Most PES organisations developed digital platforms, websites, and apps to deliver digital services, leading to significant opportunities to provide essential services, especially for the unemployed (International Labour Organization, 2022; OECD, 2021). This also increased the potential role that employment services can play through remote services, especially in rural areas, by reaching a higher number of vulnerable people, improving the quality of employment in the formal economy, and promoting the formalisation of the informal economy.

In the post-pandemic period, digital service delivery and in-person contact have become a permanent feature of PES across Europe. OECD countries are harnessing digitalisation to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of PES in connecting people with good-quality jobs, besides monitoring and evaluating the performance of the digital tools. Moreover, the full integration of the European Skills, Competences and Occupations classification into the PES IT system is being implemented to improve the identification and addressing of skill deficits among job seekers.

The data gathered by our survey reveals the impact of Covid-19 on the digitalisation process. Although there is some overrepresentation of the centres in the central region, it is important to point out that only three cases reported by the respondents mentioned the existence of constraints in the pandemic context (delaying the implementation or introduction of digitalisation measures), two of which were in the central region and

the other in the Alentejo. Hence, the data shows how COVID-19 has accelerated the process of digitalisation of services (Table 2).

Table 2. Impact of digitalisation on the Portuguese PES: Results by region.

	NUTS 2 regions				
	North	Centre	Lisbon Metropolitan Area	Alentejo	Total
Delayed implementation	0	2	0	0	2
Delayed introduction	0	0	0	1	1
Not affected	4	2	3	0	9
Initiated	0	2	1	1	4
Accelerated	0	10	5	5	20
Total	4	16	9	7	36

From interviews with PES caseworkers, we can grasp how steep the adaptation curve was for the services, and how peer learning was crucial. The caseworkers were not used to working remotely on the dissemination of training or rights and duties for subsidised applicants or other types of programmes:

> We always did it face-to-face and, from the moment we stayed at home, we had, like everybody else, to adapt to the new technological means. So, it was almost overnight: Now they're going to have Teams training tomorrow and from now on they'll start doing things like that. And, okay, and we even started doing it in pairs, but it was a bit complicated. For those who already know how to work remotely, it was easy; for those who started working like that and had to do a session, we did it in pairs. (PES worker from the Algarve headquarters)

While some of the changes remained after the pandemic, presential contact needed to be reinstated:

> Everything has been dematerialised; everything that was possible. A lot of it remains. There has been a step backwards. There are a few things, especially in relation to customer service. As I was saying, our work is with people. Nothing replaces these conversations, not even at a distance. It is not the same. It was difficult to reengage in presential consultations. The post-pandemic and the return were highly regulated, but it was essential. Of course, during the pandemic, certain situations were eased. We stopped making calls; we did not call people in; we presented them directly at the workplaces. We never stopped; the institute never closed its doors. (PES director, Central Region)

The impact of the pandemic has made the skill gap in Portugal more evident and has directly impacted the digitalisation process. Digital training is recognised as a key element in the economic and personal development of Portugal as it aims at digital citizenship. There is not only a shortage of digitally competent PES workers, but also a shortage of digital literacy. Lower internet subscription rates among rural citizens are also evident, where these citizens are constrained by geographic and socio-economic issues, among other vulnerabilities. These factors can be an obstacle to the successful implementation of digital measures, increasing the risk of poverty and social exclusion for low-skilled and vulnerable citizens, especially young

people. In this sense, digital skills gaps have been prioritised by governments and business leaders across various regions and industries.

4.2. The Bulgarian Case

In 2022, Bulgaria ranked 26th on the DESI, with a score of 37.7, far below the EU average score of 52.3 (European Commission, 2023a). Considering digital skills, less than one-third of the population has at least basic proficiency (31%), significantly lower than the EU average (54%) and far from the 80% target defined by Digital Compass to be reached in 2030. Bulgaria has its worst performance in the integration of digital technology (score of 15.5), below the EU average (score of 36.1). However, Bulgaria is closest to the EU average in the connectivity dimension, scoring 50.7 compared to the EU score of 59.9 (European Commission, 2023a). In 2020, Bulgaria's Broadband Plan update was launched, aiming to improve the country's connectivity indicators as a basis to develop more diversified and complete digital services (The Republic of Bulgaria Council of Ministers, 2020).

Concerning the digitalisation of public services, Bulgaria (score of 51.9) is also below the EU average (score of 67.3) facing challenges in developing digital public services for citizens and using pre-filled online forms to access public services (European Commission, 2023a). Despite this trend, some efforts have been developed in the past years, for example, with the update of the National Strategy for e-Government in 2021. Also significant is the investment from Bulgaria's Recovery and Resilience Plan which has digital transition as one of its goals and foresees the development of measures to boost e-government and digital public services in several areas, including employment, through investment in the Modernisation of the Employment Agency (European Commission, 2023a).

The digital and green transition and the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic also have led to significant structural change in the labour market and in the services provided by the Employment Institute in Bulgaria. Among the main priorities of the national employment policy in the country are increasing the scope, efficiency, and quality of employment services, and the implementation of new services, including digital ones:

> People searching for a job can access job listings, apply for unemployment benefits, and receive career counselling remotely. We started to use virtual job fairs and webinars to connect unemployed people with employers. And this was a very useful online service. (Director of the Labour Office, Razlog)

During the pandemic, the services provided by PES in Bulgaria were directed to support both employees and employers. With employees, PES offices worked on listing vacancies on the PES online job board, including e-labour offices, referring candidates to employers, offering employment mediation, and organising job fairs. With employers, PES were working to publish information on issues such as support for dismissed employees to register with the employment agency, employers' obligations for mass layoffs (including the timing and structure of consultations), information on the Covid-19 job-retention scheme, and information on hiring foreign workers.

The data gathered by the PES survey shows that PES in Bulgaria were not negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, with few respondents pointing out the delay of services and measure implementation and introduction. In most cases, the pandemic accelerated ($n = 12$) or initiated ($n = 6$) the implementation of

measures (Table 3). Due to the overrepresentation of the Southwest Region (representing 88% of the sample), it is not viable to make a regional comparison.

Table 3. Impact of digitalisation on the Bulgarian PES: Results by region.

	NUTS 2 regions			
	Central-North Region	Southwest Region	Central-South Region	Total
Delayed implementation	0	1	0	1
Delayed introduction	0	4	0	4
Not impacted	0	12	0	12
Initiated	0	6	0	6
Accelerated	2	7	2	11
Total	2	30	2	34

Interviews with PES personnel further confirm this data. PES officers worked continuously:

> During the pandemic we did not stop working, work was outsourced to other offices, there were also teams that served people at the entrance of the labour office. Some of the services were also done digitally. Applications from employers could be submitted through the agency's website. Most of the contact was made over the phone. During this period, the electronic registration service also arose. In my opinion, we coped well with the situation and the innovations in the work process. Digital services' innovations, such as electronic registration, have remained so far. (Director of the National Employment Agency, Blagoevgrad and Kyustendil Region)

> We had a few problems with customer service, perhaps related to people's fear of not going to the right desk. But the problem was solved by enabling people to register using an identification code and submit documents through the electronic service system….The service for the unemployed was carried out for the most part by phone, but we also kept the service on site, which was taken to the ground floor of the building….With the young people, however, we responded and had Zoom meetings. The activity and the connection between us—young people and employers—never stopped. (Case manager, National Employment Agency, Blagoevgrad and Kyustendil District)

The high number of young NEETs in the country continues to be a challenge, and actions to identify and reach them will intensify and expand. According to the National Strategy for Employment 2021–2030 (Bulgarian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2021), reaching every single rural NEET youth in Bulgaria will be a priority, and efforts to identify and reach these youth will intensify and expand. This will include intensive use of digital tools and social media, as well as the development/creation of a registry where these young people will be listed. The purpose of this procedure will be to identify their profile and appropriate measures and actions that can be taken to reach them, via their place of residence, and help to activate them.

In their work, youth and Roma mediators and all specialists involved in activities for identifying, reaching, and activating inactive young people, will be able to use the practical handbook for reaching and activating NEETs. They will continue to be encouraged to use available e-services, and to be involved in creating new ones.

During the pandemic, PES collaborated with other government agencies, employers' organisations, and trade unions to coordinate efforts. This cooperation ensured a more comprehensive approach to addressing the challenges in the labour market:

> It's very important to note that the specific measures and their implementation may have evolved over time as the pandemic situation changed; for that reason, it was very helpful for us as experts to collaborate with other institutions. We adapted the services we provide to meet the emerging needs of persons searching for a job and employers while complying with public health guidelines. (Director of the Labour Office, Razlog)

In the post-Covid-19 period, Bulgaria faces the challenge of continuing the trend of accelerating digitalisation that the pandemic seems to have driven. One of the biggest challenges will be to overcome territorial contrasts, particularly between urban areas and rural and more remote areas. The Bulgarian government has recently invested in the digital transition process, reinforced by the resilience plan, but this investment needs to be continued for Bulgaria to come closer to the EU average in the various indicators that map the digital transition, namely connectivity, digital skills, and public digital services.

4.3. The Lithuanian Case

In 2022, Lithuania ranked 14th in the DESI, with a score of 52.7 (European Commission, 2023b), being the only country of the three case studies that reached a score above the EU average score of 52.3. Considering the four index dimensions, Lithuania performs worse in human capital and connectivity.

Regarding literacy, despite being below the EU average, it has a good performance with almost half of the population (49%) with at least basic digital skills. Lithuania has implemented several programmes to improve digital skills across diverse institutions and populations, from the digital training of children and young people in schools to the upskilling and reskilling of public and private sector workers (European Commission, 2023b).

Considering infrastructure, although Lithuania has a coverage above the EU average in households (78% in Lithuania and 50% in the EU), the country ranks low in connectivity (49.4 in Lithuania against 59.9 in the EU). The Lithuanian National Broadband Plan 2021–2027 (Ministry of Economy and Innovation of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021) aims to increase and improve coverage throughout the territory with particular emphasis on rural and more remote areas where coverage is more deficient.

In terms of the integration of digital technology, Lithuania is in line with the EU average but where it has its best performance is in digital public services, far above the EU average (score 81.8 in Lithuania and 67.3 in the EU). E-government users, pre-filled online forms, and digital public services for citizens and businesses are all above the EU average. Many of these achievements arise because of the investment made in the digital transition, highlighting, among others, the GovTech sandbox and Lithuania's 2030 National Progress Strategy (European Commission, 2023b; Ministry of Economy and Innovation of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021). Lithuania also benefits from the Recovery and Resilience Plan where 20% of the budget is allocated to digital transition.

Despite all of these technological developments, the pandemic has exposed some weaknesses in Lithuania's digital and technological transition process. The Covid-19 lockdown significantly affected the youth

unemployment rate, especially among young people aged between 18 to 35 years old. It increased in Lithuania more than the average in the EU-27 (Eurostat, 2023). The pandemic created significant challenges for NEETs in general, which have been amplified for rural NEETs, such as the availability of reliable internet and technology infrastructures that provide remote access to learning, training, and job opportunities. This can further widen the already existing digital divide between rural and urban areas. Another challenge is the lack of public transportation in rural areas, which can limit NEETs' ability to avail of job opportunities and training programmes that may be available in nearby locations (OECD, 2021). Indeed, the pandemic highlighted the pre-existing inequalities and challenges that rural NEETs face, and policymakers and community leaders need to prioritise addressing these issues to ensure equal access to education, employment, and training opportunities. Despite the development of services, problems in terms of connectivity and digital skills for some segments of the population pose extra challenges, especially at the territorial level. This was particularly visible during the pandemic.

In this pandemic context, PES had to adapt their procedures and avail of distance and digital environments regarding NEETs. Lithuania's situation of support services for NEETs was not particularly affected by the constraints imposed by the pandemic. Instead, in most cases the pandemic has initiated or accelerated the process of digitalisation of services (Table 4).

Table 4. Impact of digitalisation on the Lithuanian PES: Results by region.

	NUTS 2 regions		
	Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos Regions (central and western)	Sostinės Region (capital)	Total
Delayed implementation	1	0	1
Not affected	3	0	3
Initiated	2	3	5
Accelerated	7	2	9
Total	13	5	18

As a consequence of Covid-19, most services were provided online, by phone or e-mail. The youth were constantly informed about events, the promotion of entrepreneurship, and motivational and voluntary activities. They could acquire skills in training sessions organised by the social partners. Youth centre specialists and partners organised educational and motivational seminars online.

However, some young people have been excluded from this process, particularly the most vulnerable, including NEETs. If unable to use technologies and benefit from these digital services, they could suffer even greater social exclusion and further social inequalities.

Some interviewees reflected on these concerns. Caseworkers stated:

> The Covid-19 pandemic made work more digital, taking protective measures was still needed when meeting, but a lot of it happened remotely. There were no more newcomers during Covid because it was just too hard to connect with new people online. (Caseworker, PES, Alytus County)

> People can write to me at any time if they have questions. They can write via SMS, via Facebook, they have Wi-Fi. Due to Covid, they communicated all day. I could communicate with all of them at once via messenger. Covid has shown that it is possible to communicate with an established connection, but in-person conversations are necessary to establish a new connection. (Caseworker, PES, Elektrėnai County)

As we have seen, Lithuania's performance in digitalisation is more advanced when compared with Bulgaria and Portugal. This is mainly due to the development of the dematerialisation of public services, including PES, which has been further boosted by the pandemic. However, despite the investments made by the Lithuanian government, especially with Lithuania's 2030 National Progress Strategy, this process of digitalising public services is not accompanied by the same pace of development regarding citizens' digital skills and the extension of connectivity throughout the territory. Indeed, in this last dimension, Lithuania's performance is below the European average and that of Portugal and Bulgaria.

5. Conclusion

Our findings have confirmed the main results highlighted by large-scale surveys conducted by the OECD and the European Public Employment Services Network. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, PES implemented several reforms in customer services to address the emerging needs arising from the pandemic. Even in rural areas, where issues of connectivity and literacy are more prominent, digitalisation processes took place in order to continue service delivery. This holds true for all countries in the case studies. However, remotisation of services is still the more prevalent trend in all three cases presented when compared with automation, perhaps because even PES personnel need increased training and better AI development to adopt automation tools in tasks such as profiling and signalling. Hence, efforts should be made to support the digitalisation process by focusing not only on infrastructure but also on enhancing the digital capabilities of human resources, who faced a steep learning curve during the pandemic. Ensuring digital inclusion for PES workers, particularly in terms of accessibility, connectivity, and digital literacy, is also a key consideration in the digitalisation of PES.

On a regional level, it is possible to take the cases of Portugal, Bulgaria, and Lithuania as examples of the pandemic effect on labour market policies, considering other Southwestern, Eastern, and Baltic countries. As in Bulgaria, the Romanian PES implemented simplified procedures for delivering the necessary documents either by post or by e-mail to validate unemployment claims and to pay unemployment benefits. In addition, a specialised call centre was set up, providing all necessary information to potential beneficiaries of the newly introduced measures. In general, those PES that closed their offices or restricted face-to-face meetings and replaced them with remote communication channels had to change their rules. The Spanish situation resembles the Portuguese one, both in the acceleration of digitalisation following the onset of the pandemic and the subsequent remission of these processes as the pandemic receded. This was due, in no small part, to the challenges associated with implementing digital programmes in contexts where no such precedent existed, especially in rural areas. Finally, compared with Lithuania, youth unemployment also increased in Estonia, but there was no need to create new labour market measures aimed at young people, as they already existed. Even so, the pandemic resulted in more online counselling and submission of e-documents, solutions that have been progressing ever since.

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the digitalisation process but also impeded progress in other areas of reform, such as income provisions, active labour policies, and redundancy measures, as evidenced in our survey results. These reforms experienced delays or suspensions and were postponed to a later date in all three countries. On the other hand, as soon as lockdowns were over, PES services fought for on-site service delivery again. In their view, there is no substitute for direct human contact, particularly in services that rely so much on support and contextual information. Also, some caseworkers felt that most vulnerable clients face further issues with digital literacy and can therefore be harder to reach from a distance. Hence, it is possible to affirm that the limits of digitalisation should be considered when adopting it in the context of welfare services. For instance, considering education provision, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of online training models, including distance learning (which encompasses more than just online teaching), considering the quality of the training provided. Individualisation, which is sometimes highlighted as the main advantage of digital learning, may not be suitable for diverse young profiles, since distance learning requires increased autonomy and motivation. Further, there is an impact on interpersonal relationships due to the reliance on computer-mediated online interaction for individual career plans. Therefore, a blended approach, combining both online and in-person elements, is recommended.

To conclude, in all three cases, the recent experience generated as a result of the pandemic remains relevant, especially since some of the practices implemented during this period remain in place, such as remote counselling and online registration. However, considering the digital divide, there is a need to better equip both PES and citizens to fully benefit from this transition, particularly in rural areas, where infrastructure and access to the internet is still very deficient. In all cases, it was clear that, despite recent public investment, there is still a lot to be done for connectivity in rural and more remote areas. Poor network coverage hinders the access of young people living in these areas to digitalised employment services, further reinforcing their already vulnerable situation and deepening inequalities of access to employment and education. Further, digitalisation tools and AI models should develop more inclusive features that cater for individual differences in literacy, thereby enhancing employability prospects for all.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Subjective Well-Being of NEETs and Employability: A Study of Non-Urban Youths in Spain, Italy, and Portugal

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Abstract

Subjective well-being is of paramount importance when support is offered to young individuals seeking employment and social inclusion in general. The present study looks at different dimensions of youth well-being and the growing demands for skills to enable labour market integration. Based on survey data, this article examines the relationships between the role of public employment services in providing support and their impact on the subjective well-being of youth. Specifically, 1,275 not in education, employment, or training (NEET) rural youths from Italy, Portugal, and Spain participated in the survey. Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, the current study sets up a model which includes different factors at the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-system levels. The results show that non-urban NEETs' subjective well-being is associated positively with public employment services availability, while the relationship with public employment services interaction and public employment services support is non-significant. A positive and significant relationship emerged also with self-efficacy and social support. Some recommendations for policymakers are discussed.

Keywords
European Union; Italy; NEETs; non-urban youths; Portugal; public employment services; Spain; well-being

1. Introduction

Life satisfaction, which refers to the cognitive component of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1999; Pavot et al., 1991) is associated with various aspects of young people's lives, such as their educational and employment situation (Easterlin, 2006; Jongbloed & Giret, 2022; Schulenberg et al., 2004). Specifically, higher life satisfaction predicts a stronger belief in the role of education for one's future, leading to greater engagement in an educational path (Lewis et al., 2011) and, in turn, is predicted by employment stability and job security (Khattab & Fenton, 2009). However, the relationship between job uncertainty, unemployment, and life satisfaction is influenced by one's sense of control over life and social relationships. This is particularly relevant for young people who are neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET; de Almeida & Simões, 2020; Mawn et al., 2017), as they are more likely to experience poverty and social exclusion (Eurostat, 2018b).

The present article explores how different individual and social environment factors contribute to the life satisfaction of NEETs and the relationship between their subjective well-being and the support provided by public employment services (PES) to facilitate NEETs' access to the labour market. The current empirical analysis specifically addresses "rural" (or non-urban) NEETS, as this constitutes a neglected sub-group of both rural youths and NEETs overall (Eurostat, 2020).

Several studies (see, among others, Mascherini, 2019) have stressed the need to consider the NEETs' area of residence when addressing the groups' heterogeneity. According to the Eurostat (2020) definition, the NEETs' cluster can be partitioned into three categories taking into account population density: NEETs living in rural areas, suburbs, or cities. Eurostat data shows that these different NEET clusters present very different characteristics. In fact, it is well established that living in rural areas often implies some disadvantages, such as more difficult access to services, public transport, limited recruitment opportunities, and a lack of choice and information (Sadler et al., 2015). Young people living in rural areas see educational opportunities and recreational facilities as insufficient and feel they have fewer opportunities to go to university (Simões et al., 2023). Among others, Carling and Schewel (2017) contend that rural NEETs are more affected by involuntary immobility, as they might want to leave rural areas but lack the resources to do so. For these reasons, the condition of NEETs residing in rural (non-urban) areas is associated with multiple aspects of vulnerability, often overlooked in the literature. In this situation of fragility, the presence of support at different levels constitutes a protective factor and impacts the quality of life. Accordingly, given that young people from non-urban areas face increased vulnerability (Simões et al., 2017), and since policy measures do not seem to be able to overcome the mismatch between the agricultural sector's human needs and rural NEETs' employment needs, this study also attempts to analyse the specific features connected to their employability and the support they receive from PES. In general, PES connects job seekers with employers and disseminates various active labour market policies. Smoter (2022) offered an overview of the PES practices aimed at rural NEETs in Poland and highlighted several difficulties in reaching a significant share of these young NEETs. The current article draws upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model (see also Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which emphasises the role of contextual factors in mediating an

individual's developmental trajectory. Bronfenbrenner defined well-being as a positive state that is acquired through the simultaneous and equal satisfaction of material and psychological needs which are placed at five levels: individual (i.e., organic-hereditary factors, skills, and lifestyle), micro (i.e., closest life contexts and people with whom a person has direct contact), meso (i.e., the combination of several interconnected microsystems), eso (i.e., contexts that influence people's lives, although they are not directly in contact with them), and, finally, macro (i.e., the cultural, value, legislative, and media system). Specifically, the literature argues that NEETs' self-assessment and perceptions of their life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1999) need to be understood by considering different factors at the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-system levels, encompassing individual experiences and socio-structural contexts. Accordingly, this study aims to gain a better understanding of NEETs' life satisfaction by examining the specific contributions of individual and microlevel factors, such as *self-efficacy* and *social support*, as well as contextual and social factors, such as *perceived interaction with PES*, *perceived PES availability*, and *perceived PES support*.

The present study focuses on Southern welfare states (Ferrera, 1996), in particular Spain, Italy, and Portugal, which share characteristics and can form a cluster for analysis in the literature on welfare states and social policy. Although there may be differences in specific social policies (León & Pavolini, 2014), Southern European countries share the challenge of reducing youth unemployment and NEET youth rates. Moreover, these countries configure what has been characterised as the "Mediterranean model" of transition to adulthood. This is characterised by young people staying longer with their family and the presence of a "strong" family, which values parental networks and the care of all its members in challenging situations (e.g., the elderly when ill but also young people without employment; Barbagli et al., 2003; Reher, 1998).

2. NEET Status and Youth Life Satisfaction: A Bioecological Model Framework

NEETs specifically refer to young people aged between 15 and 34 years who are excluded from employment, education, or training (Ose & Jensen, 2017). As a highly heterogeneous group, this category needs to be disaggregated to provide suitable policy responses for all young people (Mascherini, 2018). To date, research has not provided a comprehensive, transnational framework to understand the profile, trajectories, and (in)formal support systems of these youths in rural areas (White, 2012). Over the past few years, the literature on NEET youths has increased. However, studies and evidence are still lacking regarding the specific situations NEET youths face in rural areas (Simões et al., 2023) and more specifically on the impact that PES have in these areas.

Research suggests that the life satisfaction of NEET youth may depend on the perceived support (formal or informal) in their employability (Smoter, 2022). Life satisfaction, defined as an individual's cognitive evaluation of the overall quality of life (Diener et al., 1999; Pavot et al., 1991; Proctor et al., 2017), is a central indicator of positive functioning among young people (Suldo et al., 2006) and a component of subjective well-being. Prior reports have shown that poorer well-being in general is linked with youth unemployment (De Witte, 1993; Reneflot & Evensen, 2014) and with lower life satisfaction in particular (Layard, 2005). This is even more evident for vulnerable unemployed young people, such as NEETs (Ellena et al., 2021; Jongbloed & Giret, 2022). Such findings call for a more comprehensive view of NEETs' outcomes. Policymakers seem to recognise life satisfaction as a crucial individual outcome across all stages of the life cycle, including early adulthood (Knies, 2011). However, this seems to be less the case with the school-to-work transition. This gap requires a wider research perspective usually labelled as the "beyond the

GDP" approach, combining the usual trade-offs of economic growth measured in terms of young people's employment or employability with skills and capabilities development, as well as with well-being dimensions such as life satisfaction (United Nations, 2021).

Life satisfaction is a multidetermined outcome. Indeed, life satisfaction is influenced by factors such as age, family situation, social relationships and friendship networks (Kasprzak, 2011), educational level (Ben-Shlomo et al., 2022), employment situation (Khattab & Fenton, 2009), and the ability to navigate the challenges of early adulthood (Melin, 2003). This means that life satisfaction outcomes are shaped by factors situated at multiple levels of social reality. Adopting a multilevel or systemic perspective seems, therefore, a more appropriate conceptual approach to capture the nuances and driving forces behind NEETs' life satisfaction.

The bioecological model may provide a relevant grid to understand in-depth life satisfaction determinants. The central assumption of this theoretical framework is that personal development results from permanent interactions between protective and risk factors occurring at five interdependent ecological levels concurring with an individual's positive development and well-being (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

The *individual level* comprises the person's demographic and temperamental characteristics, including their activities, social roles, and skills, which altogether create a personal model of meaning attribution. To fill in this layer of the bioecological model, we considered self-efficacy in our model. Self-efficacy is defined as the personal belief that one can be successful by generating the desired outcomes for a determined task (Bandura et al., 2001). Self-efficacy is an important psychological correlate of overall and vulnerable young adults' school-to-work transition trajectories. Indeed, vulnerable young adults' access to the labour market, as in the case of NEETs, is affected by lower educational qualifications and recurrent and longer unemployment spells, leading altogether to lower perceived self-efficacy (Mortimer et al., 2016). In the long run, more negative self-efficacy beliefs can be detrimental to employment prospects, hampering their expectations towards finding more qualified and better-paid jobs (de Almeida & Simões, 2020) while increasing stress levels associated with professional development (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). Importantly, positive self-efficacy improves life satisfaction perceptions among adolescents (Marcionietti & Rossier, 2021) and young adults (Zeng et al., 2022), indirectly improving other employability measures, such as career adaptability (Marcionietti & Rossier, 2021).

The *microsystem level* covers the subjective experiences stemming from specific relationships with family, friends, work peers, or teachers and the connections between these different sources of support. One good measure of the quality of these experiences is social support, understood as social resources and perceived as being available or provided to a person by formal and informal relationships (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010). Social support is important in the transition to labour, particularly in the case of young people in greater need. To overcome the challenges of entering the labour market, young NEETs tend to rely more on informal social support from family and friends (te Riele, 2010). Under these circumstances, social support seems to play a key role in compensating for the low quality of institutional support (de Almeida & Simões, 2020; Simões et al., 2017). Importantly, this trend highlights how NEETs' feelings of lack of competence are influenced by broader socio-structural macro-contexts (Lőrinc et al., 2019), emphasising the impact that exosystemic forces can have on their opportunities, choices and well-being (Bynner & Parsons, 2002). Research also indicates a positive association between social relationships and friendship networks and the life satisfaction of young adults (e.g., Khattab & Fenton, 2009)

The *mesosystem level* refers to the multiple organisational contexts, such as the workplace, school, clubs or associations, or specific services, while the *exosystem level* corresponds to tangible resources (e.g., infrastructures, common spaces, or services) and wide informal networks and their places, such as neighbourhoods. PES support overlaps features of both the mesosystem and the exosystem level. PES are specific public services in the community, but they also unlock access to tangible resources, such as additional services (e.g., training), with their role, therefore, being comprehensive. PES are pivotal in tackling labour market inequalities (Broschinski & Assmann, 2020; Phan-Thuy et al., 2001), especially among the most disadvantaged labour market groups. However, the effect of PES support on multiple dimensions of young people in a situation of vulnerability remains uncovered beyond the GDP perspective. We do know that young people's perceptions based on their interaction and experiences with these services tend to be negative (Shore & Tosun, 2019), which in turn are associated with non-compliance, early withdrawal, or non-take-up (Van Parys & Struyven, 2013). All this can undermine young people's (re)entry into the labour market (Van Parys & Struyven, 2013), which in the long run is detrimental to young people's well-being.

Finally, the *macrosystem* refers to cultural and institutional dispositions, including a pattern of ideologies, beliefs, values, or governance forms that, to different degrees, are settled at the regional, national and international levels (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). This level of the bioecological model is addressed here by focusing on a selection of Southern European countries: Portugal, Spain, and Italy. These countries share among them a series of cultural and institutional features, as described by Walther (2006). From the institutional standpoint, the support for labour market integration in these countries is similar, meaning that young people are expected to fulfil some sort of status regarding work, education, or training. The employment sector is closed, with high levels of informality and active labour market policies that display low efficiency (Bello & Cuzzocrea, 2018). Education is non-selective, but training struggles with coverage problems despite notable improvements over the past decade (Garcia et al., 2023). From the cultural point of view, the limited institutional support is compensated by the culturally significant roles of informal networks and families, which is symptomatic of an unclear vision of young people's status in society and the role of the state in that regard (Walther, 2006)

3. Methodology

According to Lee et al. (2005), quality of life can be considered a multi-dimensional concept encompassing a number of constructs that can be treated as latent variables using questionnaires containing items as observed (or manifest) variables. Structural equation modelling (SEM) is suitable to explain multiple statistical relationships in models involving latent constructs. Specifically, the SEM-PLS (partial least squares) has been widely used across social science disciplines (see, among others, Akter et al., 2013; Benghasheer & Saub, 2020; Duong et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2005; Thien, 2020), in studies using different methodologies (Dash & Paul, 2021; Hair et al., 2019). Accordingly, we have adopted the SEM-PLS to investigate life satisfaction and associated variables. This methodology involves several latent constructs representing different dimensions of the phenomenon to be measured (Lauro et al., 2018; Tenenhaus et al., 2005).

The data used in this article were collected through the research survey Public Employment Services Tracking Effectiveness in Supporting Rural NEETS, carried out from November 2022 to January 2023 via a computer-assisted web interviewing technique. Various challenges were encountered in accessing the target group. The participants were mainly selected using the information available at PES from Bulgaria, Estonia,

Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, and Spain. Participants in the survey received a mobile phone link to the online questionnaire (managed by the Qualtrics platform) via a short message. The survey included 4,277 respondents from the above-mentioned six countries, of which 2,258 were retained as they met the inclusion criteria, namely being NEET as defined by the Eurostat (25 to 29 years old) and living in rural areas and towns with an urbanisation level 2 or 3 (classification DEGURBA; Eurostat, 2018a).

The large share of NEETs in Spain and the better organisation of the PES structure in the country possibly explain the large predominance of Spanish respondents in the survey (1,739). Participants from Italy and Portugal were also included (141 and 281 respondents, respectively). However, in Bulgaria, Estonia, and Lithuania, there were less than 100 eligible participants per country (25, 20, and 52 respondents in that order), being therefore excluded from subsequent analyses. This decision aimed to mitigate the wide amplitude in the number of participants from each country, while at the same time grouping a selection of Southern European countries which are rather homogeneous due to a series of cultural and institutional features identified in the introduction.

The 2,161 respondents from the above-mentioned three countries presented many missing observations, and the number of fully observed respondents that were retained in the final sample was 1,275 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents by age and gender (absolute and relative frequencies).

Age	Gender			Total
	Female	Male	Other	
25	144 (59.02%)	98 (40.16%)	2 (0.82%)	244 (19.14%)
26	150 (64.66%)	80 (34.48%)	2 (0.86%)	232 (18.20%)
27	25 (56.82%)	19 (43.18%)	–	44 (3.45%)
28	165 (61.34%)	101 (37.55%)	3 (1.12%)	269 (21.1%)
29	290 (59.67%)	193 (39.71%)	3 (0.62%)	486 (38.12%)
Total	774 (60.71%)	491 (38.51%)	10 (0.78%)	1,275

The treatment of missing data represents a widely debated theme in the scientific literature (Enders, 2022). Concerning the SEM-PLS, Newman (2014) highlighted that this technique's main source of bias is, precisely, missing data. This problem is often handled through deletion methods, which reduce the sample size available for the analysis. This latter approach decreases variation in the data while missing data might be associated with groups of respondents who share some characteristics that might significantly influence the strength of relationships among variables. In contrast, missing data imputation methods replace data elements through various algorithms, leading to no reduction in sample size. Several procedures to handle missing data are available. In general, Hair et al. (2021) underlined that in case of less than 5% values missing for each indicator, missing value techniques (such as mean replacement, expectation-maximisation algorithm, and nearest neighbour) could be used. As stated above, incomplete observations with missing entries have been excluded from the statistical analysis, since they exceed the above-mentioned threshold.

Prevalent literature suggests two main approaches to estimating the SEM parameters. The SEM-PLS has been proposed as a component-based estimation procedure different from the classical covariance-based LISREL-type approach. The SEM-PLS maximises the explained variance of the endogenous latent variable(s) and refers to a system of matrix equations based on a specific path diagram describing the relationships

among the dimensions (Cataldo et al., 2021; Quintano & Mazzocchi, 2020; Quintano et al., 2020). The procedure can be described as a system of ordinary least squares regressions that can be performed to calculate the measurement and structural models (Hair et al., 2021). The path diagram shown in Figure 1 visually represents the relationships for a set of factors concerning life satisfaction. A brief description of the constructs is presented next. The model considers one endogenous variable, life satisfaction, to be estimated based on five latent, exogenous, determinants. The following determinants of life satisfaction were included:

- Self-efficacy: A set of attitudes helpful in solving complex problems and/or achieving specific goals, managing unexpected events, etc.
- PES interaction: Perceived level of services provided by PES and of employees' competencies.
- PES availability: Perceived level of availability shown by PES employees to provide support, recognise NEETs' skills, understand the problems, etc.
- PES support: Approaches of PES employees to obtain information on employment programmes, job opportunities, and future plans and applications.
- Social support: Features connected to satisfaction with friends, time spent with family and relatives, etc.

Each latent block includes a different number of manifest variables (items), as presented in Figure 1. Throughout the suggested model, the authors intend to verify whether there is a relationship between life satisfaction and its indicators. The list of variables included in each block of indicators is reported in Table A1 of the Supplementary File.

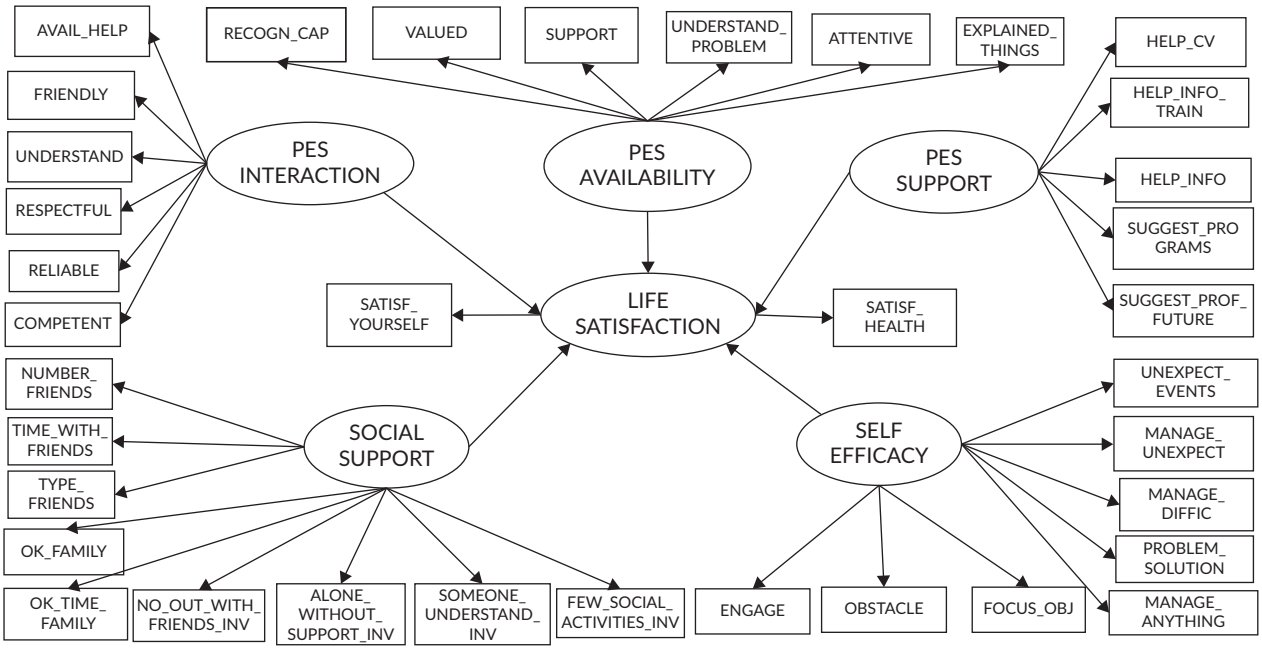

Figure 1. Path diagram.

4. Data Analysis

The respondents rated their level of agreement on different indicators related to the well-being aspects that could impact the life satisfaction of young NEETs. The question statements are answered on a five-point Likert-type scale. Depending on the question, the following options were given to the respondents: 1 = *completely disagree*, 5 = *completely agree*. Statistical SEM-PLS approach was applied to the study. In particular, this causal model was used to establish and evaluate the dependency relationship between the variables and to analyse how different dimensions of support were related to NEETs' life satisfaction.

In general, in SEM-PLS, the indicators must have the same direction compared to the other indicators of the measurement model (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016). Accordingly, it is important to underline that, in the current analysis, some items required a transformation of their original scale. An example refers to items which measure "lack of support" rather than "support" (and vice versa), for instance, no_out_with_friends (social support). Therefore, these indicators have been inverted, changing their sign and their original name (plus "_INV"). In addition to no_out_with_friends, alone_without_support, someone_understand, and few_social_activities also needed their scale inverted. See, among others, Mehmetoglu and Venturini (2021) for an extensive discussion on rescale procedures.

Each socialisation concept emphasises a certain influencing factor. Thus, according to some views, personality formation is the result of interaction with the environment. Social exclusion and loss of belonging lead to identity crises, personality changes, and feelings of rejection and isolation, which create conditions for the individual to internalise an idea of themselves as an inferior subject. Interactions with significant others who are available in case of need help form a sense of basic security. Social support can have various dimensions of social relationships with significant others (family, friends, and teachers).

Compared to the entire set of indicators available in the questionnaire that defines the whole model, several indicators—and latent constructs—were removed since they presented no significant loadings or showed low consistency with the model focussed on in the current work. For instance, the education indicator—which is a significant aspect of personal development (as well as a major field for the gaining of knowledge and skills, as well as for the socialisation process)—presented no significant loadings and was thus removed from the model. In fact, SEM-PLS literature suggests considering the cross-loadings to evaluate if the connected latent variables significantly explain the different blocks, and some of them, such as education, did not reach a sufficiently significant value to be kept. Different latent constructs, such as obstacles (main difficulties that prevent people from getting a job), employment skills (abilities that can help people to find a good job), digital skills (the overall experience of using the Internet and the contribution of this experience to getting a job opportunity), frustration and lack of trust (indicators of feeling inadequate and not very confident in society), together with individual aspects (characteristics of the place where people live, leisure, relatives, etc.) have been removed (even if potentially analysable for specific insights) to ensure consistency in the model and focus on the most relevant aspects of the current analysis.

A PLS path model diagnosis begins with assessing the unidimensionality of reflective blocks of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2019). In PLS-PM (path modelling), there are three main indices to check unidimensionality: (a) Cronbach's alpha, (b) Dillon-Goldstein's rho, and (c) the first eigenvalue. Table 2 presents the corresponding results. These measures confirm that the model assumptions seem to be

appropriate and that the outer model is well specified (Quintano & Mazzocchi, 2020; Tenenhaus et al., 2005).

Table 2. Block unidimensionality for the model latent variables.

Latent variable	Dimensions	Cronbach's alpha	Dillon-Goldstein's rho	First eigenvalue	Second eigenvalue
Self-efficacy	8	0.890	0.913	4.555	0.797
Pes interaction	6	0.936	0.949	4.549	0.462
Pes availability	6	0.941	0.953	4.638	0.445
Pes support	5	0.924	0.943	3.839	0.457
Social support	9	0.806	0.854	3.613	1.525
Life satisfaction	2	0.632	0.844	1.462	0.538

Table 3 reports the main indices indicating the overall model quality: the R^2 coefficient and the communality and redundancy indices. The R^2 coefficient shows that the explanatory latent variables (LVs) correctly predict the endogenous LV and the values of the communality and redundancy indices are appreciably higher for all blocks. In Table 3, the goodness of fit index is also reported, showing an absolute value of 0.501 and a relative value of 0.386, which reflect a medium quality of the constructs.

Table 3. Overall model quality.

Latent variable	Type	R^2	Communalities (Average Variance Extracted)	Redundancies	Dillon-Goldstein's rho	Absolute goodness of fit index	Relative goodness of fit index
Self-efficacy	Exogenous		0.569		0.913		
Pes interaction	Exogenous		0.757		0.949		
Pes availability	Exogenous		0.772		0.953		
Pes support	Exogenous		0.766		0.942		
Social support	Exogenous		0.398		0.913		
Life satisfaction	Endogenous	0.401	0.728	0.246	0.843	0.501	0.386

The outer estimations shown in the Supplementary File (Table A2) include the cross-loadings, which are all positive and statistically significant. As for the inner estimation, Table 4 shows the path coefficients, which take on positive and negative values. Only three coefficients are statistically significant, having positive bootstrap confidential intervals: self-efficacy, PES availability, and social support.

Finally, we can summarise the results based on the path diagram model, identifying several variables significantly correlated with life satisfaction. When the standard SEM-PLS approach is performed, analysing the path coefficients, it appears that life satisfaction depends on its latent variables expressing the equation in the following form:

$$\text{Life satisfaction} = +2.254\ \text{SELF} - 0.055\ \text{PSIN} + 0.106\ \text{PSAV} + 0.007\ \text{PSSU} + 0.439\ \text{SCSU}$$

Table 4. Inner estimation of path coefficient and standard error for the model latent variables.

Latent variable	Path coefficient	Standard error
Self-efficacy (SELF)	0.254*	0.024
PES interaction (PSIN)	–0.055	0.038
PES availability (PSAV)	0.106*	0.042
PES support (PSSU)	0.007	0.031
Social support (SCSU)	0.439*	0.024

Note: * The coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study's aim was to investigate how different individual and social environment factors contribute to the life satisfaction of the NEET youth and their enrolment in PES for labour market integration. Our primary aim was to find out to what extent NEET youths' family, PES, and wider community interaction patterns can be reflected in their labour market integration, and how different support measures might be associated with young people's subjective well-being.

Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model (see also Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), we set up a model attempting to cover different factors at the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-system levels. We examined the specific contributions of individual factors, such as self-efficacy and microsystem level factors, such as social support, as well as contextual and social factors (meso- and eso-systems): perceived interaction with PES, perceived PES availability, and perceived PES support.

Looking at the path coefficients, it appears that life satisfaction significantly depends on latent variables: self-efficacy, PES availability, and social support. These latent constructs have positive and statistically significant loadings. We observed the most substantial relationship between life satisfaction and social support, which refers to satisfaction with the different domains in one's life (e.g., interaction with friends, time spent with family, etc.). Therefore, higher satisfaction with the different aspects of one's life leads to an expected outcome of higher overall life satisfaction. This significant relationship supports previous research article results, which argued that social relationships and friendship networks influence life satisfaction (Kasprzak, 2011). Higher self-efficacy, which implies a set of attitudes that help NEETs with solving complex problems, achieving specific goals, and managing unexpected events, also leads to higher life satisfaction.

It is also interesting that while there is a positive relationship between life satisfaction and PES availability (referring to the perceived level of availability shown by PES employees to give support, recognise NEET youth abilities, and understand their problems), there is no statistically significant relationship with PES interaction (referring to the perceived level of services provided by PES and employees' competences) and PES support (referring to PES employees' attempts to get information on employment programs, job opportunities, and future plans). In fact, two coefficients—PES interaction and PES support—do not offer clear evidence of their impact on life satisfaction. Therefore, it seems that the perceived supportiveness of the PES employees is the most critical component of PES services contributing to young people's life satisfaction. In conclusion, overall, our model provides broad support to our assumption that multiple factors across different levels of the social

environment affect NEETs' life satisfaction and their enrolment in PES for labour market integration. However, certain limitations apply to our study and there are further areas to research.

As for the limitations, first of all, it is important to bear in mind that due to the difficulty in accessing the target group, we had to employ non-probability sampling techniques, which left us with limited opportunities to expand our findings to the broader group of NEETs. Furthermore, the sample sizes in participating countries varied greatly, making it even more hazardous to draw broad conclusions. Second, due to very small sample sizes in some participating countries, we could not perform any country comparisons, despite the realisation that the socio-economic circumstances of both NEETs and PES are likely to vary a lot in different countries. However, the study has value as one of the first attempts to map what individual and social factors are related to non-urban life satisfaction and well-being, and how this is connected to the labour market integration of NEETs enrolled in PES. This study refers to the full set of data, by assuming a relative homogeneity that might result in incorrect conclusions. Accordingly, future research might consider (observed and unobserved) heterogeneity in the model. Furthermore, the development of both the interaction effects (which refer to the influence that an additional variable might have on the relationship between an independent and a dependent variable) and moderating effects (implying the involvement of a variable as a moderator, which can change the strength of the relationship between two constructs in the model) were beyond the aim of this article. They are, however, the potential subject of future research. Supplementary considerations might originate from the possible causal relationships among additional manifest variables (and/or different constructs), which can also have an impact on life satisfaction. For instance, research into potential relationships between life satisfaction and employment skills is desirable. In fact, as previous findings suggest, the cognitive component of subjective well-being should be associated with young people's educational and employment situation (e.g., Ben-Shlomo et al., 2022; Easterlin, 2006; Jongbloed & Giret, 2022; Khattab & Fenton, 2009; Schulenberg et al., 2004). As mentioned above, future research agenda could also encompass the implementation and development of this model for each country involved in the analysis, to investigate the differences between them.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors.

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NEETs and Youth Guarantee Registration: Examining the Link to Past Undeclared Work

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Abstract

A myriad of factors influence young people's vulnerability and the likelihood of becoming NEET. Moreover, the share of young NEETs in European countries is very high. Institutional and governmental initiatives aiming to promote the inclusion of young people in the labour market are of paramount importance. However, the socio-economic conditions and the level of vulnerability alongside other socio-demographic characteristics are likely to influence the extent to which young people ultimately engage with such programmes. The current study ascertains whether previous experience of informal work increases young people's propensity to participate in programmes offered by public employment services, such as the Youth Guarantee Programme. Indeed, we hypothesise that the experience of working without a contract makes young people more aware and concerned about the risk of remaining trapped in a spiral of vulnerable jobs. To test this, we used data from a survey of 4,273 NEETs and focused on Italy, Portugal, and Spain. The study's findings contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between past experience in the informal economy and engagement with the Youth Guarantee. Besides contributing to the literature, the study can also contribute to policy making and practitioners' assessment of the relative efficacy of Youth Guarantee initiatives among different subgroups of young NEET and tailor the interventions accordingly.

In other words, the outcomes of this study should signal to governments that greater efforts should be made to implement initiatives reaching out to young people, as well as acting to reduce the precariousness in job contracts, which negatively impacts their quality of life.

Keywords
informal work; Italy; NEETs; Portugal; public employment services; Spain; youth;Youth Guarantee

1. Introduction

Although unemployment has fallen considerably since the pandemic in many European countries, the share of young people not in employment, nor in education or training (the NEET rate) is still high, especially in Mediterranean countries (Eurostat, 2023). The causes of young people's higher vulnerability are manifold (Caroleo et al., 2020; Pastore, 2015), including the lack of work experience, and translate into limited job opportunities and access to welfare benefits. To those who do find a job, usually, the work conditions are worse compared to those of older individuals (Pastore, 2023, p. 1; Shehu & Nilsson, 2014, p. iii; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2003, p. 3). This is also because they lack experience in the labour market, which makes it more difficult to select the best job opportunities. Therefore, younger people have a higher probability of entering the job market via the informal economy, as a means of rapidly gaining the experience and the skills typically required from employees. According to the International Labour Organization's (2023b, p. 13) definition, informal employment "refers to working arrangements that are de facto or de jure not subject to national labour legislation, income taxation, or entitlement to social protection or certain other employment benefits (e.g., advance notice of dismissal, severance pay, paid annual or sick leave, and so on)." The informal economy is a complex reality and involves many types of activities, workers, and firms, such as subsistence activities, illegal activities, and legal activities with evasion from formal regulation. For the purposes of this article, we will refer to informal employment as jobs not regulated by formal contracts, following the definition provided by Ohnsorge and Yu (2022).

In some Eastern and Mediterranean countries, the prevalence of informal work is still high in comparison to Northern and Central European countries (Hazans, 2011). This might be partially explained by companies' deciding to escape the bureaucratic burden and the high costs of formality (de Soto, 1989; Ohnsorge & Yu, 2022). Sometimes, however, this is also the result of low-paid workers wanting to increase their income in the short term (Anselmo et al., 2020; Jütting & de Laiglesia, 2009).

Accepting work without a contract might imply a lack of trust in institutions, as it means waiving social security and other recognised worker rights. The strong link between the NEET condition and the lack of trust in institutions is well established in the economic literature (Alfieri et al., 2005; Caroleo et al., 2020). Building trust in institutions is essential for the legitimacy of governance institutions and a functioning democratic system.

Among the institutional and governmental initiatives aiming to promote the inclusion of young people in the labour market, while addressing the specific problem of young people in a NEET situation, the Youth Guarantee (YG) is certainly one of the most important programmes at the European level. Introduced in 2014 in all the EU countries with a regional youth unemployment rate higher than 25%, it consists of a set of active labour market policies aiming to support young people in finding a job or to offer training and other

related services to improve their skills (Escudero & López Mourelo, 2017). YG aims to offer a smoother transition from school to work, to support labour market integration, and to make sure that no young person is left behind. The scheme should ensure that all young people under the age of 25 receive a quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within four months of losing a job or leaving formal education. The YG initiatives extend to young people with past experience of informal employment or, more generally, to those with low-quality jobs searching for decent job opportunities. Indeed, these young people might show a higher proclivity to engage with YG, as they are likely more aware of the difficulties of overcoming a spiral of vulnerable jobs. The deployment of active labour market policies, specifically under the YG, has been significant in recent years. Even so, their implementation has not proceeded at the same pace across EU countries (Cabasés Piqué et al., 2016; Escudero & López Mourelo, 2017). Specifically, the number of policies and instruments has been increasing to a greater extent in some countries than others, further widening the gap between the most advanced countries and the less so within the EU (Pesquera Alonso et al., 2021).

Previous studies assessing the efficacy of youth active labour market policies have observed positive results in some countries, such as Sweden and Norway (Carling & Larsson, 2005; Hall & Liljeberg, 2011), and for specific groups of young people in Italy (O'Higgins & Pica, 2020). In particular, the contribution from O'Higgins and Pica (2020) found that the YG in Italy significantly increased temporary hires, primarily of young women. However, Effie et al. (2023) highlighted that the disparities and outcomes of the YG are not solely due to institutional or operational misapplications but are also influenced by regional economic conditions, and more specifically the status of welfare state regimes (Tosun et al., 2019). Nordic countries have typically developed more instruments than post-communist and Southern countries (Walther, 2006).

In any case, despite all the other reforms and active labour market policies, the YG is among those focussing specifically on young people with the aim of supporting them in finding a job. This includes education, training, and job opportunities and is the only one coordinated at the EU level (Caliendo & Schmidl, 2016).

In this article, we hypothesise that having previous work experience without a contract followed by unemployment may induce young people to ask for help from institutions (Simões et al., 2022). Accordingly, we expect young people in such a condition to be more motivated to engage with and register for the YG offered by public employment services (PES).

Since 2014, more than 3.5 million young people have registered in the YG each year and accepted an offer (European Parliament, 2023). Many of the efficacy assessments of the YG included young people under the age of 25, as the first YG programmes in some countries only targeted 16–24-year-olds. However, in 2020, to tackle the effects of the socio-economic crisis stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Commission developed a new programme: the Reinforced YG, which aimed to reach all young people under the age of 30. This new programme also reinforced the adoption of tailored and individualised approaches, providing young people with the appropriate levels of guidance (European Commission, 2023). Thus, with the new framework of the Reinforced YG (European Union, 2020) and the extension of the YG to 25–29-year-olds, there is the need to further examine the impact of such interventions on these older youth and explore possible differences between age groups. Furthermore, the assessments carried out to date have taken into account whether registered young people have found a job or participated in any intervention offered by PES (see Cabasés Piqué et al., 2016; Escudero & López Mourelo, 2017; Pesquera

Alonso et al., 2021). However, there are no up-to-date studies that are aware of providing evidence on the specific characteristics of youth who are more likely to enrol in the YG programme, specifically regarding a previous working experience within the informal economy. Our study thus aims to address this gap and test the hypothesis that prior NEET involvement in the informal economy is associated with a higher propensity to join *ad hoc* programmes, such as those under the YG.

2. Data

Data for the analysis was gathered through a survey realised within the activities of the EEA Grant project TRACK-IN—Public Employment Services Tracking Effectiveness in Supporting Rural NEETs. The project started in 2021 and involved Bulgaria, Estonia, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, and Spain. The survey was conducted between November 2022 and January 2023. Although the target population was initially represented only by rural NEETs aged between 25 and 29 years old, it was subsequently extended to include young people living in urban areas of the same age. The questionnaire administration was organised with the help of the PES and through social networks. It involved, therefore, mainly those registered with the PES. The questionnaire was administrated through the internet using Qualtrics software. Before starting with the survey, respondents gave their consent to the treatment of the data provided. The anonymisation of the responses was ensured by the project statistical team conducting the survey. Personal information useful in the identification of the respondents was removed from the dataset and replaced by a progressive number.

In total, 4,273 NEETs participated. Almost all of them were registered with the PES (96%), but those registered for the YG were only 39% of the whole sample, without significant differences between rural and non-rural NEETs. The majority of them (81%) were from Spain, 12% from Portugal, 4% from Italy, and the remaining 3% from other countries (Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Estonia). Due to the low share of respondents from Bulgaria, Estonia, and Lithuania, we decided to focus our analysis only on the Mediterranean countries of Italy, Spain, and Portugal, more homogeneous regarding the labour market characteristics and welfare regimes. The countries included in the analysis all had a significant share of NEETs and people working in the informal economy. According to Eurostat (2023), in 2022 the EU-27 share of NEETs was 11.7%. In Spain, it was 12.7% and in Portugal 8.4%, while in Italy it reached 19.0%, the highest rate after Romania, with 19.8%. As for the share of the informal economy, according to the International Labour Organization (2023a), in 2021 (the most recent information), in Italy this proportion was 11.2%, in Portugal 9.7%, and in Spain 6.2%. From our sample, the share of respondents declaring they had worked in the past without a contract was 9% among all young people with previous job experience. However, there were relevant differences between the countries, as this share was 23.5% in Italy, 8.5% in Spain, and 6.6% in Portugal. In contrast, the percentage in other countries was notably lower. For example, in Germany, it stood at 3.8%, and in Sweden it was even lower at 3.2%. Considering all the NEETs in the sample, 90% had previous job experience. We decided to focus on these young people in the NEET condition who had worked in the past to compare those who worked without a contract with those who worked with one (temporary or indefinite). In the questionnaire, we explicitly asked for previous job experience as an employee, but without a contract. For more than six out of 10 respondents, their previous job experience ended less than six months before the interview and only in 24% of the cases did it end more than one year before. As for qualifications, 54% occupied a worker position, 12% were clerks, 17% were managers of professionals, and only 17% declared "other qualification." The comparison concerned their attitude when deciding to register for the

YG programme. The aspect we wanted to assess was whether the experience of working without a contract increased the perceived importance of the programmes implemented to help young people find a job.

The variables introduced in the model expected to be connected to the propensity to work without a contract were gender, level of education (low: 0–2 ISCED levels, medium: 3–4 ISCED levels, high: 5–8 ISCED levels; Schneider, 2021); mother's level of education (with the same classification as for the respondent), father's professional qualifications (high: manager or professional; not high: otherwise; OECD & International Labour Organization, 2019), degree of urbanisation of the place of residence (urban area or non-urban area, i.e., town or rural, according to the Eurostat, 2018; Goujon et al., 2021), cohabitants (living alone or with others), migration background, the specific reason for being a NEET (unemployed, caregiver, for health reasons), the families' economic condition, and the country of residence. We chose Italy as the reference category, as it was the country with the highest share of young people working without a contract (International Labour Organization, 2023c, for 2021 data).

3. Methodology

In order to verify if a relationship exists between work experience without a contract and the decision to participate in the YG programme, propensity score analysis was used. Propensity score analysis is commonly applied in medical studies and in other areas where the aim is to compare two subgroups of individuals, where one receives a specific treatment, while the other does not (Li, 2013). The objective is to determine if the different outcomes observed between the two groups were due to the fact that only one received the treatment or due to different characteristics between the two groups. In recent years, this technique has expanded and is used across various topics, including the gender gap in the labour market and assessing the effectiveness of labour market policies (Meara et al., 2020; Rocca et al., 2022). One of the main advantages of this technique stems from its semi-parametric nature. Even if it is based on logistic regression, compared to the traditional regression models it offers several advantages to control for confounding variables in observational studies, given that it estimates the treatment effect while considering confounders and treatment assignment relationships (Kahlert et al., 2017). There are no limits on the number of events, making this technique applicable in scenarios with many confounding factors or a limited number of outcomes.

In our study, we employed propensity score analysis to estimate the effect of working without a contract on registration for the YG. The treatment variable was identified as the condition of having worked without a contract. The sample was divided into two groups: respondents who had worked without a contract and respondents who had worked with a contract. The technique involves selecting a control group from the untreated group with similar characteristics to those in the treated group. The method thus estimates the counterfactual distribution, aiming to understand what would happen if the non-treated group had received the treatment. In the first phase, through a logit model, we estimated the probability of having worked without a contract as conditional to a number of personal characteristics (w):

$$Pr(\text{no contract} \mid h(w)) = \exp(h(w)'\gamma)/[1 + \exp(h(w)'\gamma)] \quad (1)$$

where $h(w)$ is a linear function, w is the vector of covariates affecting the probability of receiving the treatment, and γ is a coefficient vector.

In the second phase, the matching algorithm compared people in the treatment group with people not included in the treatment group, but whose other variables indicated a high likelihood of being in the treatment group. Next, we determined if a significant statistical difference occurred in the outcome variable (registration for the YG) between the groups of those with and without a contract sharing the same observed characteristics.

For this purpose, the technique estimated a linear model for the outcome Y on a set of covariates X and the residuals from the binary model (previously estimated) describing the treatment.

Let t denote the random treatment process so that t^i is the treatment received by the i^{th} individual, $t = 1$ is the treatment level, and $t = 0$ is the control level (those who did not receive the treatment). The treatment assignment process is:

$$t = 1 \quad \text{if } w_i'\gamma + \eta_i > 0, \quad 0 \text{ otherwise}$$

where η_i is an unobservable error term unrelated to X and w.

Successively, we estimated the outcome Y as conditional to several covariates supposed to influence it, including the error component of the previous model. This allowed us to calculate the following two measures:

$$\text{ATE} = E(Y_{1i} - Y_{0i}) \tag{2}$$

$$\text{ATET} = E(Y_{1i} - Y_{0i} \mid t = 1) \tag{3}$$

The average treatment effect (ATE) is the difference in the expected outcome between the treated and untreated groups and represents the average effect of the treatment in the sample.

The average treatment effect for the treated (ATET) measures the difference between the treated group's average outcome and the control group's average theoretical outcome in the hypothesis that the latter received the treatment. In other words, the latter is the outcome for respondents who have worked with a contract with the same characteristics as those with no contract, in the hypothesis that they would not have one. It is, therefore, the part of ATE based only on the participants observed in the control group that remains unexplained and, therefore, due to unobservable characteristics (Oberman et al., 2021).

Consequently, the ATET/ATE ratio measures the part of the difference in the outcome between the treated and the untreated groups. This is not due to the observable characteristics but only to the effect of being in the treated or in the untreated group. In our case, it represents the part of the gap in the share of those registered for the YG not due to the observable characteristics but only to the effect of being in the treated or untreated group (having worked with or without a contract).

Matching approaches are well-equipped to deal with heterogeneity issues (Meara et al., 2020). Compared to parametric approaches, they rely on less restrictive assumptions, which do not tend to overestimate the component of the gap due to individuals' characteristics (Ñopo, 2008) and overcome the heterogeneity of the groups compared (Oberman et al., 2021).

According to Ho et al. (2007) and Rosenbaum and Rubin (1985), through the propensity score, it is also possible to verify the unbalance in the distribution of the outcome variable between the treated and the untreated

groups, controlling for all the observable characteristics. To compare the extent of balancing between the samples of the treated and untreated, the statistical measure allowing for verifying the differences in the compared samples is:

$$\text{Standardised percentage bias} = \frac{\overline{Y}_{\text{treated}} - \overline{Y}_{\text{control}}}{\sqrt{\frac{\sigma^2_{\text{treated}} + \sigma^2_{\text{control}}}{2}}} \times 100$$

Unlike the *t*-tests and other statistical hypothesis tests, this difference is not influenced by sample size and is a standardised measure. It is useful and increasingly applied to compare balance in baseline covariates between treated and untreated participants in the propensity-score matched sample.

4. Results

Among those declaring previous work experience, 9% stated they had worked without a contract, 27% with an indefinite contract, and 64% with a temporary contract.

The results show that, in line with our prediction, the share of those who register for the YG increases as the level of precariousness related to past working conditions increases. Overall, 39.0% of those who have worked in the past declared they had registered for the YG, but among those who worked without a contract, this share reached 46.8%. It is only 28.1%, however, among those who have worked with an indefinite contract, and 42.5% for a temporary contract (Table 1).

As to the relationship between working without a contract and other potential covariates, the results show this is associated with a low personal level of education: 24.0% of these individuals are low educated, while in the whole sample, the equivalent share is 20.6%. Interestingly, and concerning parental background, those who have worked in the past without a contract are more likely to have a father with a high professional qualification (15.6% against an overall share of 13.8%). As for the degree of urbanisation, no relevant differences as to the type of contract were found between individuals living in urban and rural areas.

These preliminary results justify the application of the propensity score technique, which is useful to verify if and to what extent the evidence of different outcomes observed in the two groups is attributable to different personal characteristics or instead to the treatment condition (for examples of propensity score applications, see Meara et al., 2020; Ñopo, 2008; Rocca et al., 2022). Therefore, the treatment is, in this case, identified in the experience of having worked without (treated group) or with (untreated group) a contract. The outcome is the decision to register for the YG programme or not.

The logit model for the propensity to work without a contract is reported in Table 2. Results show that living in Portugal or Spain is associated with a lower likelihood of working without a contract. However, being in a condition of "pure" NEET status, in other words, when the reason for being NEET is not linked to health problems or care needs, is associated with a higher likelihood of having worked without a contract. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the propensity scores among the treated and untreated groups, after controlling for the observed factors (variables introduced in the logit model). The results confirm that the likelihood of having registered for the YG is significantly higher among those who indicate they have worked without a contract (see Table 3).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variables	Type of contract in the previous job			Total
	Indefinite	Temporary	No contract	
Registration for the YG programme				
No	71.9	57.5	53.2	61.0
Yes	28.1	42.5	46.8	39.0
Gender				
Male	44.7	39.6	43.8	41.4
Female	55.3	60.4	56.2	58.6
Level of education				
Low	18.9	20.9	24.0	20.6
Medium	40.8	35.4	31.8	36.5
High	40.4	43.7	44.2	42.9
Mother's level of education (ref. tertiary education)				
Low	56.6	59.4	57.8	58.5
Medium	28.8	27.6	29.5	28.1
High	14.6	13.0	12.7	13.4
Father's professional qualification				
Low	85.1	84.4	84.4	86.2
High	14.9	13.0	15.6	13.8
Degree of urbanisation of the place of residence (0 = *urban*, 1 = *town and rural*)				
Rural	48.3	50.1	50.2	49.6
Urban	51.7	49.9	49.8	50.4
Living alone	2.6	2.4	2.5	2.5
Migration background (0 = *born in the host country*, 1 = *abroad*)	23.9	18.2	24.7	20.3
Country of residence (ref. Italy)				
Portugal	14.5	8.9	7.8	10.4
Spain	82.3	88.5	83.4	86.4
Italy	3.2	2.6	8.9	3.3
Specific reason for being NEET				
Pure NEET (declaring simply not working or studying)	79.6	78.6	74.7	78.5
Caregiver or no paid work	17.0	18.8	22.4	18.6
For health reasons	3.4	2.7	2.9	2.9
Living in bad economic conditions*	78.9	75.9	76.7	76.8

Notes: * indicates economic deprivation; it is equal to 1 in the case of the respondent declaring a level 3 or 4 on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a lot*) for the difficulties related to at least one of the options (to pay the mortgage, to face an unexpected expense of 500 euros or equivalent, to pay for a one week holiday in a year).

Table 2. Logistic regression model.

Having worked without a contract	Coeff.	*SE*	*z*	*P* > |*z*|	95% CI	
Gender (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*)	0.449	0.284	1.58	0.11	−0.107	1.006
Level of education (ref. tertiary education)						
Low	0.260	0.358	0.73	0.47	−0.442	0.963
Medium	−0.181	0.301	−0.60	0.55	−0.771	0.409
Mother's level of education (ref. tertiary education)						
Low	0.016	0.398	0.04	0.97	−0.765	0.796
Medium	−0.203	0.403	−0.50	0.61	−0.992	0.586
Father's professional qualifications (ref. low)	0.516	0.365	1.41	0.16	−0.200	1.232
Degree of urbanisation of the place of residence (0 = *urban*, 1 = *town and rural*)	0.011	0.261	0.04	0.97	−0.500	0.523
Living alone (1 = *alone*, 0 = *with other people*)	0.450	0.712	0.63	0.53	−0.946	1.845
Migration background (0 = *born in the host country*, 1 = *abroad*)	0.438	0.299	1.46	0.14	−0.148	1.025
Country of residence (ref. Italy)						
Portugal	−2.085	0.496	−4.20	0.00	−3.057	−1.113
Spain	−2.091	0.434	−4.82	0.00	−2.942	−1.240
Specific reason for being NEET (ref. caregiver or no-paid work)						
Pure NEET (declaring simply not working or studying)	0.605	0.342	1.77	0.08	−0.065	1.275
For health reasons	0.155	1.084	0.14	0.89	−1.970	2.280
Familiar economic condition (0 = *medium-high*, 1 = *low*)	−0.110	0.319	−0.35	0.729	−0.735	0.514
Constant	−1.529	0.665	−2.30	0.02	−2.831	−0.226
Pseudo R^2	0.06					
LR chi^2(15)	29.40					
N	1,071					

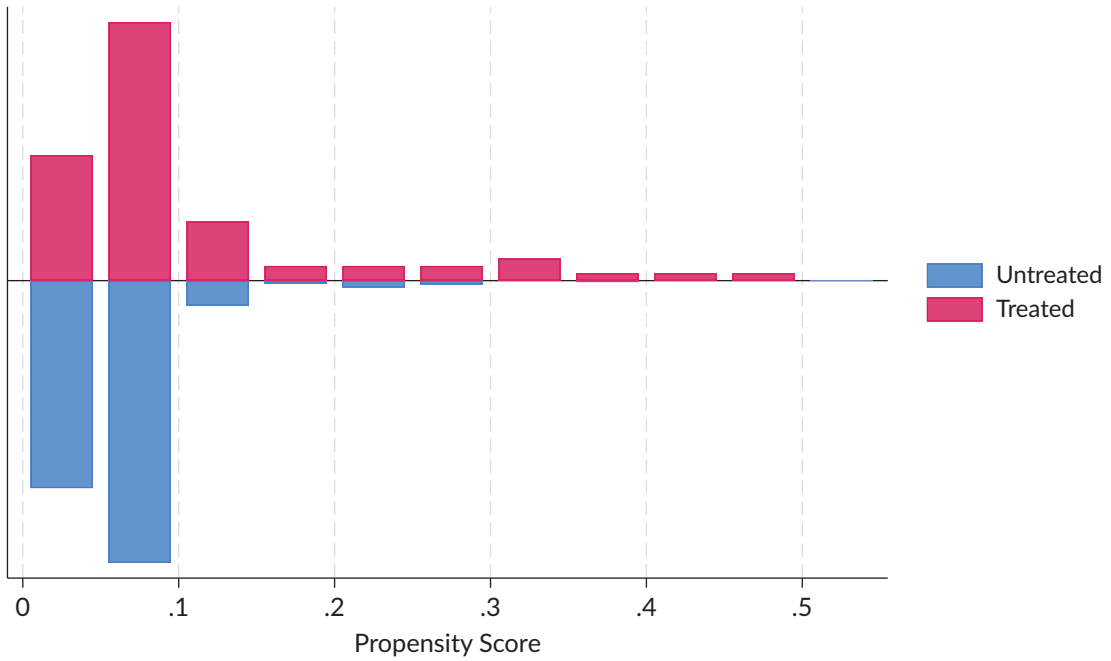

Figure 1. Mirrored histogram showing the propensity score distribution and overlapping samples in the treatment.

Table 3. Propensity scores' results of having worked without a contract for having registered for the YG.

	AI robust					
YG	Coeff.	*SE*	*z*	*P* > |*z*|	95% CI	
ATE Worked without a contract (Yes vs. no)	0.215	0.084	2.55	0.011	0.050	0.381
ATET Worked without a contract (Yes vs. no)	0.163	0.076	2.14	0.032	0.014	0.313

Table 3 reports the ATE and the ATET scores. The first one is 0.215 and represents the difference in the probabilities of registering for the YG between those who have worked without and with a contract. Very high, 0.16, is the ATET. It indicates the difference in the probability of registering for the YG between the treated and the untreated if they received the treatment. This means that the two groups have identical observed characteristics and differ only in the treatment received or not.

Therefore, the ratio between the ATET and the ATE shows the part of the difference in the proportion of those registered for the YG due only to the effect of being in the treated or untreated group (having worked with or without a contract). It is 0.758, indicating a substantially different behaviour between those who have worked with and without a contract in the decision to register for the YG.

Finally, Figure 2 shows the standardised percentage bias for the variables analysed between the treated and untreated groups (Austin, 2009). This graph presents the extent of covariate imbalance regarding standardised percentage differences.

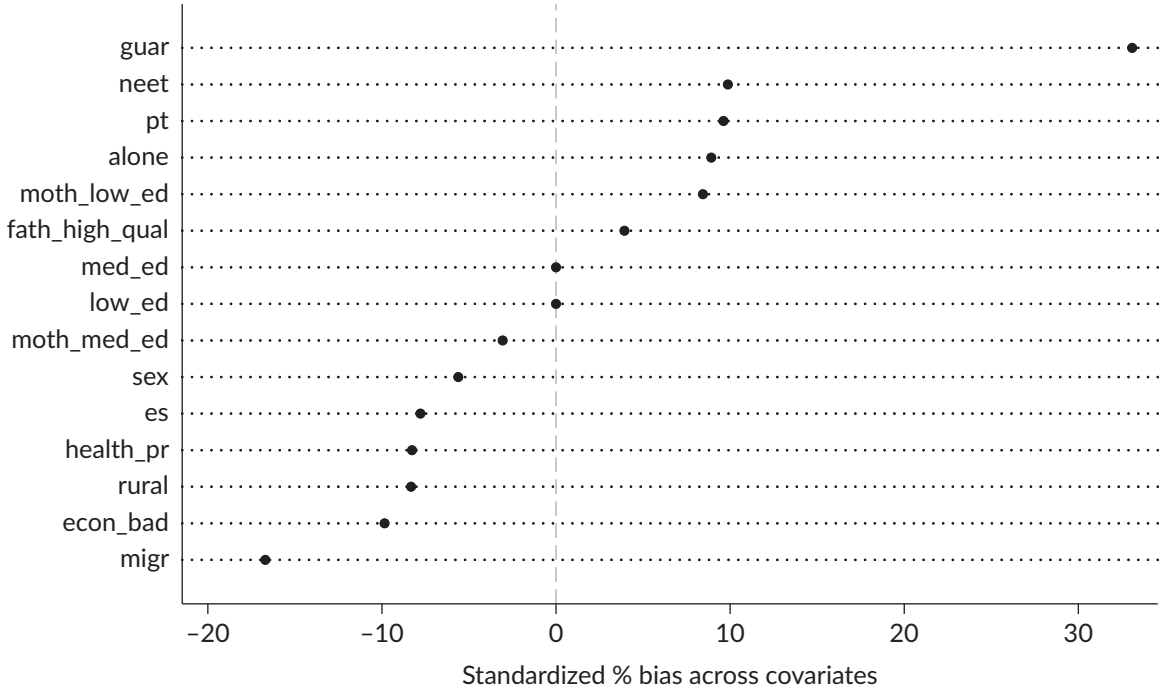

Figure 2. Standardised percentage bias across covariates.

In this figure, the variables are all dichotomous; 1 is associated with the following conditions:

- guar: YG registration;
- neet: Not in employment, education, or training when the motivation is not linked to health problems or care needs;
- pt: Living in Portugal;
- alone: For respondents living alone;
- moth_low_ed: Mother with a 0–2 ISCED level of education;
- fath_high_qual: Father with a high professional qualification;
- med_ed: 3–4 ISCED personal level of education;
- low_ed: 0–2 ISCED personal level of education;
- moth_med_ed: Mother with a 3–4 ISCED level of education;
- sex: Female;
- es: Living in Spain;
- health_pr: Health problems as a specific cause of being a NEET;
- rural: Living in a rural area;
- econ_bad: Having at least one condition of economic deprivation as shown in the note under Table 1;
- migr: Having a migration background.

It highlights a significant unbalance in the sample for the decision of registering for the YG between the two groups, even confirmed by the pstest, whose *p*-value is 0.044.

5. Discussion

The present study focuses on young people in NEET conditions living in Spain, Portugal, and Italy, aged between 25 and 29 years old, and aims to examine if the experience of having worked without a contract increases the likelihood of registering for YG programmes. The study also examines and controls for the role of a set of socio-demographic characteristics that might be associated with the experience of having worked with a contract (e. g. level of education). The analysis was carried out through a propensity score methodology.

The first important finding is that about one-tenth of the young people participating in our study reported having worked without a contract. The descriptive analysis shows that this experience has a higher incidence among young people with an immigration background (24.7% vs. 20.3%) and lower education level (24.0% vs. 20.6%). These results are in line with previous empirical studies (e.g., Hazans, 2011; McDowell et al., 2009). The diffusion of this phenomenon could be even higher, considering the low propensity of people to declare it.

To better understand these findings, it is important to consider the country where the participant was residing and the respective welfare conditions. Indeed, Spain, Portugal, and Italy are all Mediterranean countries, with a sub-protective welfare regime, characterised by scarce active labour market policies, a higher-than-average practice to work without a formal contract, and underdeveloped institutional support, including that provided by PES. The registration rates of young people in PES are low in these countries and the channels young people more frequently use to find a job are still the informal ones, such as friends and relatives (Buligescu et al., 2022; Pastore, 2015). In this challenging context, the YG promised and offered an unprecedented opportunity in terms of access to services and job opportunities.

Furthermore, and confirming the main hypothesis of the study, our findings show that young people who have been previously engaged in informal work are more likely to register for the YG programmes offered by PES. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine and confirm the relationship between young NEET involvement in the informal economy and their participation in the YG. As proposed before, this relationship possibly reflects a greater willingness in young people who are informally employed to acquire work-related skills and/or want to avoid being in a precarious and insecure situation again in the future, worse off compared to workers covered by a formal contract and with access to social security mechanisms (OECD & International Labour Organization, 2019).

It is important to note that this relationship was observed while controlling for a set of relevant socio-demographic characteristics. Some of these socio-demographic variables were indeed associated with the experience of having worked without a contract, having a lower level of education, being a woman, and having an immigration background (Baganha, 1998; Deidda et al., 2015; Williams & Horodnic, 2017).

To underline the robustness of our study findings, the analysis was reproduced considering as a treatment group those who worked without a contract and with a temporary one, in opposition to those who worked with a permanent contract. Results are not reported here for the sake of brevity but are fully in line with our main findings.

In addition, we also found that an experience of working without a contract was significantly associated with being in what is defined as a "pure" NEET, meaning someone who is in such a condition for reasons that do not include taking care of others in the family or health problems. This finding does not demonstrate that the decision to work without a contract mainly connects to those whose NEET status is only due to the unavailability of jobs, which is in line with few contributions in literature on this topic (see, for example, Jütting & de Laiglesia, 2009; Williams et al., 2015). Conversely, when the reasons for the NEET status are connected to the provision of care or poor health status, people are less likely to work without a contract.

For this reason, it has been suggested that the policy-making and programmes targeting young NEET people must navigate between European, national, regional, and local levels to determine what policies work with a particular target group under specific circumstances (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Hudson et al., 2019; Paabort & Beilmann, 2021; Petrescu et al., 2022; Sergi et al., 2018).

Although our results are relevant to the literature and can inform policymaking, a number of limitations need to be mentioned. Firstly, the participants were not selected based on a probabilistic procedure and presented an unbalanced distribution by country, namely a higher share of young people from Spain. Secondly, we did not control for the time that passed since the reported experience of working without a contract and the decision to register for YG. Future studies should consider larger and more representative samples and consider a wide range of European countries in order to determine the generability of our findings across different national support systems and structures. Furthermore, future surveys should include questions that allow a more fine-grained characterisation of young people's work experience in the informal economy, namely concerning the duration and the time between this experience and the decision to register for YG. Finally, our analysis would greatly benefit from a qualitative inquiry, to understand in depth young people's motivations to work without a contract and to register for YG programmes. Indeed, the motivations for working within the informal economy can vary widely, encompassing different employment situations—namely, in terms of exploitation and degree of vulnerability—such as being an employee, employer, own-account worker, or contributing family worker. It is evident that the propensity to register for programmes such as YG might change depending on these different motivations.

In conclusion, we can say that the success of the YG programme has been recently studied from different angles. For example, Pesquera Alonso et al. (2021) addressed the question of whether the YG should be regarded as a success or a failure within the context of a sustainable policy framework. They emphasised the importance of a proper evaluation to adequately inform policymaking, which is advantageous for both researchers and policymakers.

Labour precarity, characterised by temporary and unstable employment, is a significant concern, and it might condition the YG's impact. Our study showed that when the NEET status is not the result of familial caregiving responsibilities or personal health-related issues, young workers with a past experience of working without a contract are indeed more likely to engage with PES and the YG in particular. The study also compared those who have worked without a contract or with a temporary contract with those who have had a permanent contract. The results confirmed that experiencing a situation of precariousness increases the propensity to register for the YG. These results underscore an important point, namely that initiatives like the YG are essential for young people, as they might involve not only financial support but also an opportunity to build a more sustainable, stable, and certain future from an employment standpoint.

These findings should signal to governments that greater efforts should be made to implement similar initiatives reaching out to young people, as well as acting to reduce the precariousness in job contracts, which negatively impacts their quality of life. Further progress along this line of research could involve verifying the typologies of NEETs without work experience who decided to apply for the YG and compare them with those who did not.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Digital Transformation and Digital Competences of Urban and Rural Polish Youths

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Abstract

This article explores the level of digital competence of young people in Poland, with the indirect aim being to show the differences in the level of digital competence for adolescents living in rural and urban areas. The research covered a sample of 985 respondents, from 11–18 years old, from Poland. The research was carried out within the EU Kids Online network. The survey tool related to the assessment of digital competences covered issues of installation of software on mobile devices, configuration of internet access as pertains to confidential information, information security awareness, management of information downloaded from the internet, configuration of social networks, e-shopping, verification of costs related to the use of additional software, advanced information search, checking the reliability of information, and editing online content. Descriptive statistics, k-means cluster analysis, one-way analysis of variance (non-parametric test), and correlations were used to show the differences between rural and urban adolescents in the indicated areas. The collected data offer several postulates for education and education policy, being not only diagnostic but also implementational. Based on the analysis of the data, it was noted that: (a) Eleven areas related to basic digital competence strongly differentiate between urban and rural young people; (b) rural young people rate their own digital competence lower than urban young people do; (c) a small percentage of young people from both rural and urban areas have low digital competence; (d) one well-developed area of key competence does not always co-occur with another well-developed area; and (e) the style of using new media among rural and urban young people is similar.

Keywords

digital competences; digital skills; Poland; rural; urban; youth

1. Introduction

The development of young people's digital competences is an area that media educators and social and educational policy makers are particularly interested in. The ability to use information and communication technologies (ICT) efficiently is not only important in everyday life (for learning, entertainment, and leisure activities, to name but a few), but is the basis for the formation of professional competences—a critical element for an increasingly digital world. Basic digital competences (as one of the key skills) shaped in the formal, non-formal, and informal education system constitute a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that allow the use of elementary e-services typical of e-citizens and provide a basis for building professional digital competences (Hämäläinen et al., 2021; Pettersson, 2018). Only with the possession of basic digital competences can more advanced skills, like those of use in the contemporary labour market, be acquired (Bejaković & Mrnjavac, 2020). Any person lacking basic digital competences will be unable to participate to the full degree in the information society that has grown up around us in recent decades. For the problem of underdeveloped or undeveloped digital competences to be solved, it is important to first analyse the level of ICT proficiency, so that differences between members of the population can be understood and stereotypes associated with the lack of digital competences can be removed.

This article focuses on basic digital competences and the style of use of new media by young people from rural and urban areas. This is an area that is changing dynamically with the development of the information society, the emergence of new e-services, and the digital transformation of young people's selected life activities. This article is an attempt to fill the empirical gap related to the diagnosis of the level of digital competences, which are differentiated by the place of residence. This empirical gap is particularly visible in diagnoses representing the Visegrad countries (with particular emphasis on Poland).

2. Theoretical Framework

Digital competences in this study are more than the simple skills related to processing information and operating software, as they also refer to digital security (e.g., checking the authenticity of information or securing one's own data online). Given the dynamic development of e-services and the emergence of new e-threats, it is important to be aware that the basic theoretical framework of digital competences is constantly evolving (Eger et al., 2020; Ziemba, 2019). When analysing digital competences, it is also important to be aware that ICT literacy belongs to a group of key competences that further include mother tongue and foreign language skills, mathematical skills, entrepreneurship, and cultural and civic participation, among others (Halász & Michel, 2011; Van Laar et al., 2017). Given this fact, it appears that the lack of digital competences may be one of the factors leading to selected groups becoming disadvantaged and, in the case of young people (Haddon et al., 2020; Mascheroni et al., 2020), preventing them from taking full advantage of the opportunities offered by the modern information society and the increasingly digitalised labour market.

In this study, digital competences are measured and defined according to the EU Kids Online European research network (Pyżalski et al., 2019). The theoretical framework of the variable digital competence adopted the following indicators: saving pictures from the internet, changing privacy settings, checking whether information is true, selecting keywords for searching, knowing how to select information to share, deleting people from contact lists, creating and publishing music and video on the web, editing content

downloaded from the internet, installing applications on a mobile device, checking the cost of using software, and shopping with a mobile device. When analysing the set of indicators, the different purposes of young people's use of ICT emerge, such as information retrieval and processing, e-safety, creative use of the capabilities of ICT, entertainment, and participation in the e-commerce sector. The theoretical framework of EU Kids thus covers a set of typical internet-mediated activities. The theoretical framework relating to digital competences is treated here in a utilitarian way—oriented towards practical activities and linked to activities that are not only undertaken by young people but also by other age groups (hence, leading to the possibility of comparing data between different generations of ICT users).

It should also be noted that the concept of digital competence has multiple definitions that depend on the purpose of the research (Leahy & Wilson, 2014), the group studied (Cirilli & Nicolini, 2019), the location of the research (Richardson & Bissell, 2019), or the educational policy needs (Helsper & Van Deursen, 2015). The multiplicity of models defining the concept of digital competences is, on the one hand, a richness (Iordache et al., 2017), while, on the other hand, it can lead to problems in choosing the right set of indicators to define the concept under analysis. In this article, the EU Kids model has been chosen for several reasons. Firstly, it is a set of indicators that is relevant to the current stage of development of the information society. Secondly, the model is used across almost all of Europe. Of course, the model is not exhaustive in its definition of digital competence indicators, so it is important to be aware that there are also other indicators beyond the EU Kids diagnostic tools.

In seeking to understand not only the changing theoretical framework of the concept of digital competence but also the indicators of this concept as they relate to young people, it is necessary to outline the broader social context related to the use of new media in this age group. Firstly, digital competence is now one of the primary educational and socialisation environments for the generation of digital natives (Anderson & McCabe, 2012; Shin & Lwin, 2017). New media, with a particular focus on social networks and instant messaging, are some of the primary "places" of activity for young people. In the space of new media, communication skills are shaped, behavioural patterns are acquired, and the learning process takes place (Schmeichel et al., 2018). Of course, this process has both positive and negative sides (with the latter taking the form of e-risks; Tomczyk & Potyrała, 2021). The second element of why handling new media, and thus having digital competences, is important for adolescents is the aspect related to achieving the educational goals set out in the core curriculum of formal education, as well as other important skills for a given developmental stage (e.g., social skills). In this case, it should be clearly emphasised that relevant digital skills are the starting point for the process of self-education, as well as the construction of knowledge that might also come from the offline world. The validity of such an assumption has been confirmed not only by the experiences and events of recent years, in which the e-learning crisis proved to be a time of verification of digital competences of both students and adults (teachers and parents) but also by the requirements of the labour market, in which digital competences for many professions are leading or are a skill supporting the performance of other "analogue activities."

When analysing young people's style of new media use, many studies claim that ICTs are mainly used for communication and entertainment purposes (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2018; Ponte & Simões, 2008; Velicu & Marinescu, 2019). The leading activity of young people is therefore related to contact with peers and the obtaining of information prepared by peers or the business sector. In the analyzed reports, it is clear that regardless of the country, young people are predominantly consumers of digital content rather than creators. Such a state of affairs results in this group being perceived, on the one hand, as very active users of online

services, while, on the other hand, the level of advanced digital competences relating to the creative use of ICT is less developed than they are for the straightforward consumption of digital content. The presented research results make it necessary to discuss the real level of digital competences among young people, which goes beyond simple consumption of digital content and communication via social network sites and instant messaging. In addition, there is a need to consider the real level of preparation of young people for the increasingly digital labour market.

Considering the close relationship between the labour market and digital competences, it should be made clear that the ability to use ICT proficiently and the issue of preparation for a profession exist in a close relationship. The research that has been conducted shows that adolescents' basic digital competences are the foundation for building other more advanced skills needed in the labour market (e.g., programming, operation of mechatronic devices, operation of specialised software, and e-business skills, etc.; Eynon & Geniets, 2016; Fernández-de-Castro et al., 2023; Pawluczuk et al., 2019). This means that without properly formed basic digital skills there is great difficulty in preparing professionals for digitally-mediated work. Therefore, when developing a didactic framework of operational objectives for digital competences, special attention should be paid to activities that are beyond the typical communication skills of young people and the ludic use of new media.

The assumptions presented previously, which are related to the importance of digital competences (in the context of formal and non-formal education), are evident in the strategic documents of the European Commission. Important documents include:

(a) A Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027: sets out to promote a high-performance digital education system (priority 1) and the enhancement of digital skills and competences for digital transformation (priority 2). In both areas, digital competences in society are the starting point for other activities related to the broader quality of life. The concept to be implemented places particular emphasis on the digital competences of school-centred stakeholders (European Commission, 2020a);
(b) Bridge to Jobs—Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee: pays particular attention to the digital transition, which requires the formation of basic digital competences among adolescents, as well as the adaptation of training and formal education in line with the directions of the information society and the need for education that takes into account IT trends (European Commission, 2020b);
(c) A Europe Fit for the Digital Age: emphasises that digital skills are key to achieving sound civilisational development. It points out that digital skills should become a priority for the education of highly skilled digital professionals supporting business transformation (Alberti et al., 2022).

These strategy documents clearly show that digital skills are becoming one of the priorities of the EU. Poland, as with other countries in the EU structure, uses strategic documents to define the directions of changes related to shaping digital competences. Taking into account the documents mentioned above, to which programmes financing the development of proficiency in the use of ICT are connected, several key national documents should also be mentioned. The first of these are the *core curricula* (prepared by the Ministry in charge of education) for formal education. For example, documents such as the core curriculum for education set out in the decree of the Minister of National Education of 30 January 2018, as well as the core curriculum for general education set out in the decree of the Polish Minister of National Education of 14 February 2017, provide detailed guidelines related to the development of digital competences, with

these being implemented in compulsory IT classes (also referred to as computer classes at earlier stages). These documents set out the set of skills and knowledge that a student completing a given educational threshold should possess. Taking into consideration the data presented in the empirical part, it should be emphasised that the *core curricula* are much broader and thus define the notion of digital competence among adolescents much more precisely than, for example, the EU Kids Online theoretical framework used in this study. In addition to formal education, attention should also be paid to some documents prepared by the Polish Ministry of Digitalisation, which establishes the directions for the development of the information society, including documents such as the Act on Supporting the Development of Digital Competences of Students and Teachers of 7 July 2023 and the Project of the Polish Educational Network.

The strategic documents previously listed consider the digital competences of young people to be a driving force for the modernisation of enterprises and the creation of innovations in the economic sector. Therefore, a diagnosis of digital competences is an indispensable starting point for mapping the level of change for this key competence and allows for the subsequent creation of intervention programmes and pedagogical innovations aimed at increasing knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to basic and advanced forms of ICT use.

The remainder of this article seeks to fill the gap in the differentiation of digital competences among rural and urban youth in Poland. In addition, the article shows the style of ICT use among young people from the perspective of differentiation due to place of residence. The article is part of the research attributed to the opportunity paradigm of media pedagogy (Pyżalski, 2017), in which new digital technologies are a pro-development factor, and is consistent with the aforementioned EU development directions.

A review of the research relating to young people's digital competences yields a great deal of information about the specifics of how young people function in an increasingly digitalised world in comparison to other groups (e.g., those in middle or late adulthood). Differences in ICT proficiency and usage style are often analysed in the context of sociodemographic variables such as gender, age, or place of residence (Cabello-Hutt et al., 2018; De Coninck & d'Haenens, 2023). The issue of the place of residence also resounds in some studies as a variable that differentiates significantly the level of digital competence of young people (Foong, 2018; Oyedemi & Mogano, 2018). However, studies showing differences in ICT proficiency and style of use by place of residence are not conducted in all countries, thus preventing a full diagnosis of patterns in this area from taking on a global perspective. Therefore, there is a need to include in research models a variable identifying similarities and differences by place of residence. It should be added that in many countries (e.g., Poland) there is an empirical gap in this area, which does not allow us to fully understand whether the place of residence in an increasingly global and homogenous information society differentiates the level of digital competences of young people in a real (including statistically significant) way.

3. Methodology

3.1. Purpose and Scope of the Study

The research aims to diagnose the level of digital competence and style of new media use among young people in Poland. This is connected with a secondary analysis of data from the EU Kids Online project enabling the presentation of differences and similarities in the style of ICT use by place of residence. The subject of the research is the responses provided by the young people who were surveyed. The research was defined by the

following questions:

RQ1: To what extent does place of residence differentiate basic digital competences among young people?

RQ2: What percentage of young people have low levels of digital competence in rural and urban areas?

RQ3: What is the correlation between the rates of basic digital competence among young people in rural and urban areas?

RQ4: What are the similarities and differences in styles of internet use among young people living in urban and rural areas?

3.2. Research Tool

This article uses data from the EU Kids Online tool 2018 edition (Pyżalski et al., 2019.) This research used an extensive battery of tests covering both behaviours assigned to the risk paradigm and the opportunity paradigm of media pedagogy. Due to the research questions posed regarding digital competence and volume constraints, the following set of variables was selected:

(a) *Basic digital competences*: consisting of 11 items (c_QE1_oy) covering typical activities performed by current e-service users. These items form an elementary set of indicators for contemporary e-citizens. The response scale for this variable took the form of 1 (*none of a given skill*) to 5 (*a very high level of skill in a given area*). Responses for this variable could also take the form of *hard to say* and *prefer not to answer*. The internal consistency of the variable basic digital competence was Cronbach's alpha = 0.892;
(b) *Internet activity in the last month*: made up of 15 items (c_QC3) describing the frequency of typical activities related to functioning in the information society. The items cover issues related to searching for information, learning, chatting, using social networks, entertainment, and shopping. Responses for this variable ranged from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*almost all the time*). Higher values indicated a higher frequency of use of e-services. The internal consistency for the online activity variable was Cronbach's alpha = 0.795;
(c) *Frequency of ICT use at school* (op_QC5): consisted of 9 items relating to activities such as preparing presentations, creating text, creating graphics, learning with specialised software, doing group work using new media, communicating via the internet, communicating with teachers using the internet, and posting material on the internet. The internal consistency of the variable was Cronbach's alpha = 0.806.

3.3. Research Procedure

The research was conducted in 2018 by a team led by professor Jacek Pyżalski from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland). The author of the present study was a member of the Polish team responsible for data collection and the development of analytical reports (Pyżalski et al., 2019). The research was collected from a random sample across Poland using a Polish-language survey instrument that was equivalent to the English-language version (Smahel et al., 2020). The data refer to results from the

pre-pandemic period. The study refers to a secondary analysis of foundational data. Due to the research objectives set, only three variables related to the key competence of ICT literacy were included in the analysis. The secondary analysis goes beyond the descriptive statistics included in the main report (Pyżalski et al., 2019). The in-depth analysis makes it possible to see correlations that have not been sufficiently highlighted so far (e.g., differences in digital competence by place of residence). The secondary analysis of the data included 857 records, these being the responses of young people in the age range of 11–18 years old (*Mean* = 14.39, *SD* = 2.06). The collated data includes 46% of boys and 54% of girls. The selection of the age sample between 11 and 18 is due to developmental thresholds. The indicated age range is the time of adolescence, which is characterised by increased socialisation, and the formation of key competences both online and offline. The selection of the sample was also motivated by the issue of having access to data from the EU Kids Online research network.

4. Results

The one-way analysis of variance that was conducted clearly shows that place of residence is a significant factor in differentiating the level of self-assessed digital competences in the 11 areas that were extracted from the EU Kids Online research model in Poland. For all activities related to basic ICT activities, i.e., saving pictures from the internet, changing privacy settings, checking if the information is true, choosing keywords for searches, selecting information to share, deleting people from a contact list, creating and publishing music and videos on the internet, editing content downloaded from the internet, installing applications on a mobile device, checking the cost of using software, and shopping via mobile devices, young people living in rural areas declare themselves to be less competent. The answers in the diagram below are on a scale from 1 (*no skill in the indicated area*) to 5 (*very high skill*).

Using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test, it was noted that all 11 elements of basic digital competences identified in the research model are statistically significantly differentiated by place of residence. In addition, it should be stressed that issues related to searching for and downloading information from the internet, in both groups, are at a higher level of self-assessment than activities related to, for example, editing materials downloaded from the internet or creating and sharing multimedia materials on the internet. Thus, the consumption of digital content in both groups is an activity rated higher in terms of self-rated digital competence than activities requiring more advanced skills. For a detailed overview, see Table 1.

During the analysis of the data, attention was also drawn to the issue of the relationship between the metric age of the respondents and the self-evaluation of their own digital competences. For the data analysed, a linear increase in the level of digital competences was noted in most cases. This is due to the natural process associated with formal as well as non-formal education, in which ICT proficiency increases with metric age. The detailed relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.

Using cluster analysis with the k-means method, it was noted that the low level of self-assessment of digital competence in rural areas (Cluster 1—blue) concerns 14.28% of the respondents, while in urban areas it concerns 15.66% (Cluster 3—green). In both groups, similar patterns emerge in relation to low levels of digital competence, which only apply to a selected (non-rural) number of young people. In the case of young people from urban areas, the cluster is slightly more diverse in terms of passive use of new media than among their peers from rural areas. This means that Cluster 3 (urban area), despite its own low rating of

Table 1. Basic digital competences and place of residence.

	Group	*Mean*	*SD*	*SE*	*W*	*p*
CQE1a_oy: Saving pictures from the internet	Rural	3.701	1.548	0.176	22,306.000	<0.001
	Urban	4.396	1.145	0.041		
CQE1b_oy: Changing privacy settings	Rural	3.605	1.558	0.179	21,269.500	<0.001
	Urban	4.347	1.170	0.042		
CQE1c_oy: Checking whether the information is true	Rural	3.105	1.475	0.169	20,745.000	<0.001
	Urban	3.805	1.243	0.045		
CQE1d_oy: Selecting keywords for searching	Rural	3.178	1.456	0.170	18,133.000	<0.001
	Urban	3.997	1.183	0.043		
CQE1e_oy: Knowing how to select information to share	Rural	4.096	1.345	0.157	22,879.500	0.002
	Urban	4.565	0.907	0.033		
CQE1f_oy: Deleting people from contact lists	Rural	4.284	1.380	0.160	24,894.000	0.026
	Urban	4.692	0.821	0.030		
CQE1g_oy: Creating and publishing music and films on the web	Rural	3.162	1.526	0.177	20,994.000	<0.001
	Urban	3.798	1.377	0.050		
CQE1h_oy: Editing content downloaded from the internet	Rural	2.352	1.559	0.185	18,798.000	<0.001
	Urban	3.131	1.552	0.057		
CQE1i_oy: Installing applications on a mobile device	Rural	4.329	1.258	0.144	24,387.000	0.001
	Urban	4.696	0.839	0.031		
CQE1j_oy: Checking the cost of using software	Rural	3.403	1.580	0.186	20,257.500	<0.001
	Urban	4.102	1.260	0.046		
CQE1k_oy: Shopping with a mobile device	Rural	3.500	1.553	0.178	22,086.500	<0.001
	Urban	4.103	1.305	0.048		

digital skills in terms of editing and creating digital content, is slightly better at assessing its own skills in terms of activities, such as the ability to share digital information, operating selected social media functions, or installing software on smartphones. The group of young people from rural areas (Cluster 1) is more homogeneous. Within both groups, there is also an intermediate group (Cluster 2—red), which is characterised by varying levels of digital competence. This is the dominant group in both urban and rural areas. What is common is that in both rural and urban areas, self-evaluation in terms of "editing content downloaded from the internet" is rated very low in Cluster 2. This means that this group is a consumer of digital content rather than a group focused on actively processing available data. A detailed depiction of the three elementary clusters is shown in Figure 2.

Young people from rural and urban areas are similar in terms of the co-occurrence of self-reported digital competence. Convergence is evident in all aspects as evidenced by the Spearman's Rho correlation coefficient results (presented in Figure 3). A high self-assessment of skills in one area is not the same as a high assessment of ICT handling in another area. This means that young people who actively retrieve information from the internet will not necessarily be active creators at the same time. This relationship is analogous in both groups and confirms that the notion of digital competence is a complex construct that needs to be analysed in detail in the context of very precisely distinguished indicators (both skills and knowledge). The data collected also clearly suggest that when using the term digital competences, it is necessary to clearly define which skills or knowledge are being referred to.

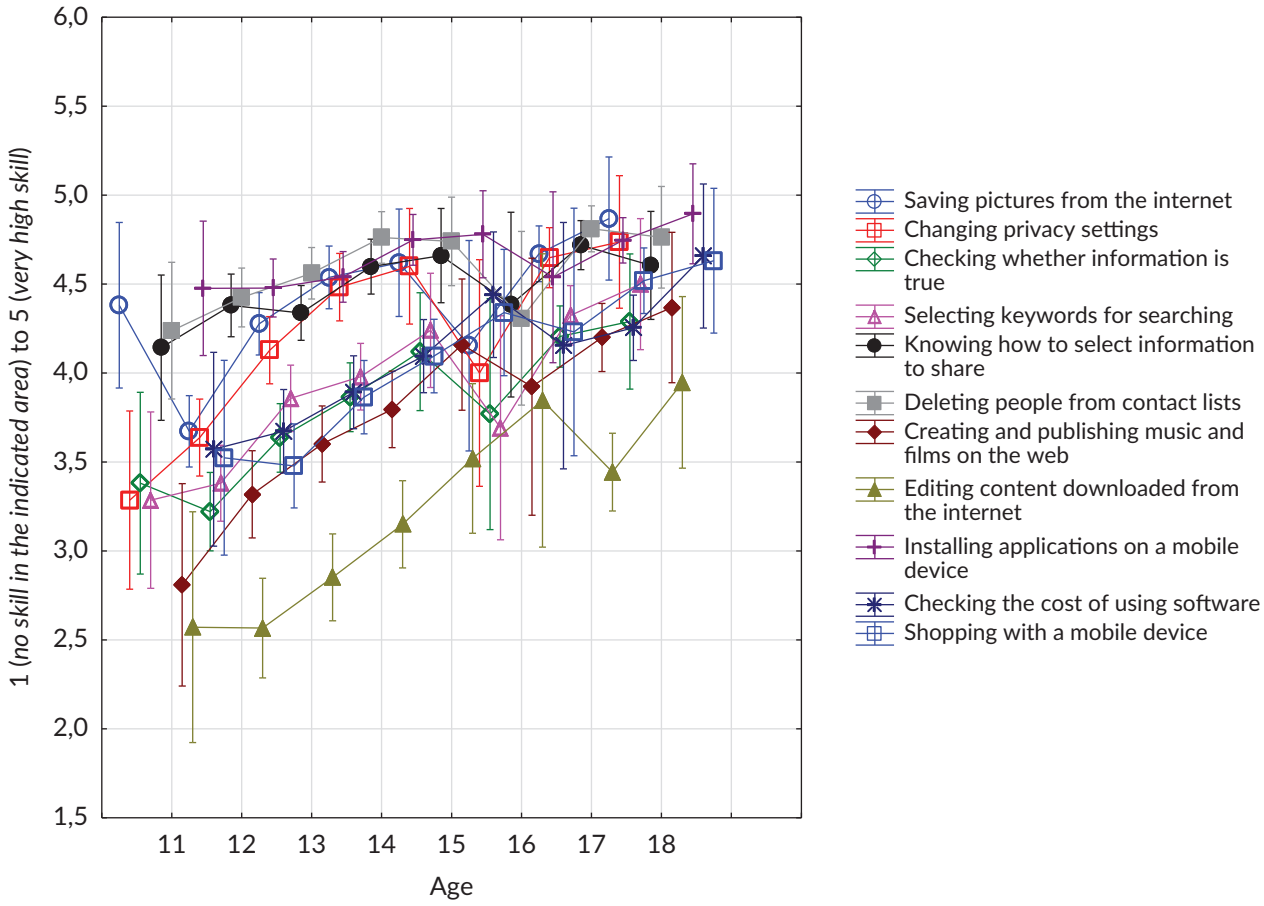

Figure 1. Level of digital competences and metric age.

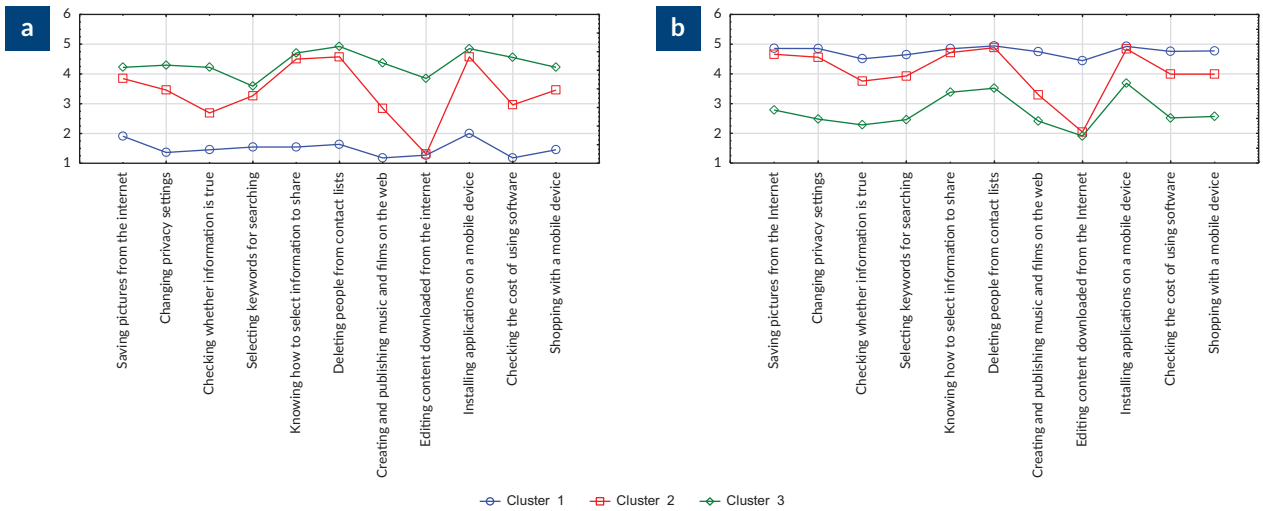

Figure 2. Cluster analysis by k-means: (a) levels of digital competence among rural students; (b) levels of digital competence among urban students.

Figure 3. Co-occurrence of self-assessment of digital competence: (a) young people rural and (b) young people urban. Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

In terms of the frequency of internet use for different purposes over the last month, differences were also observed between young people living in urban and rural areas. In most cases, young people from rural areas use some of the e-services less frequently. In one case (C_QC3j), it was noted that young people from rural areas were more active, though this item concerned playing computer games alone. However, the difference was not statistically significant. A graphical summary of differences and similarities is shown in Figure 4, while detailed statistical characteristics can be found in Table 2.

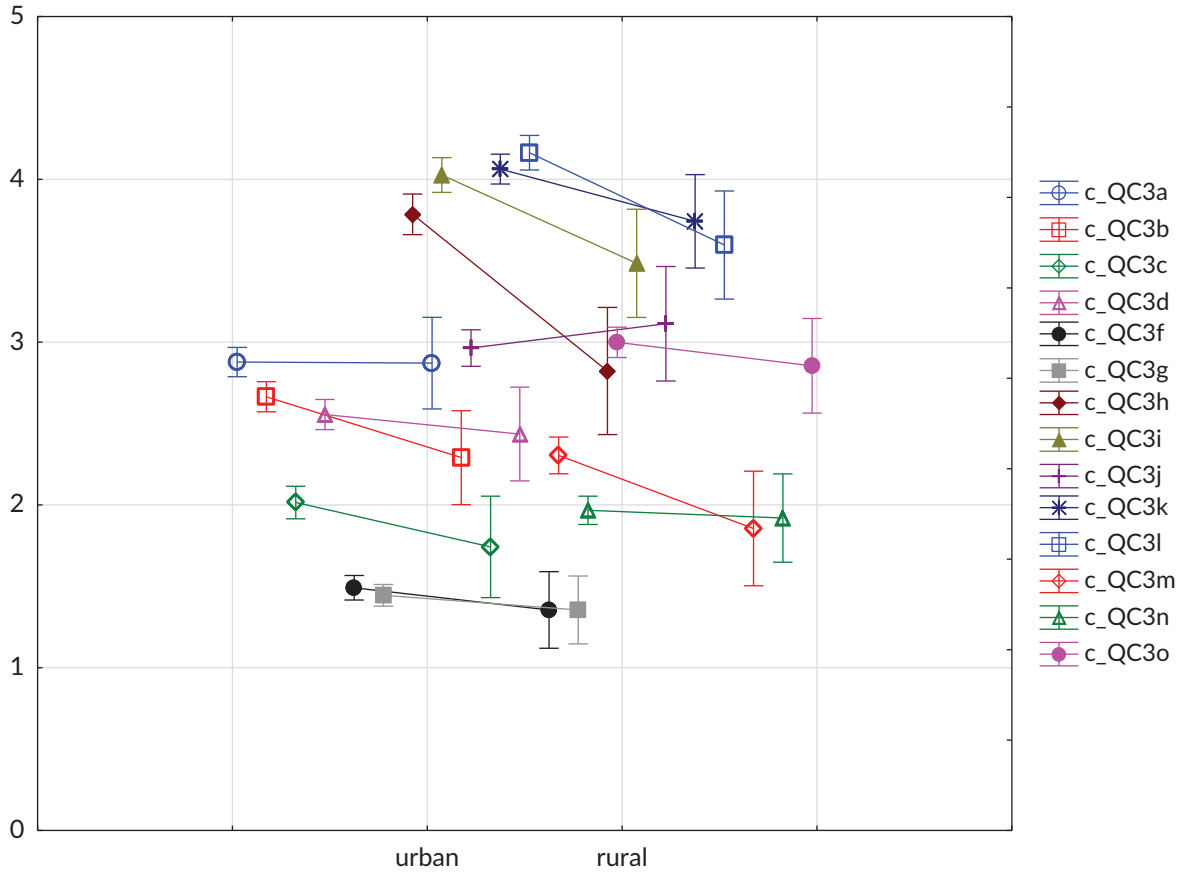

Figure 4. Internet use style and place of residence.

The frequency of use of typical e-services, in contrast to the assessment of one's own digital competence, does not differentiate between young people living in rural and urban areas in each range. Only in a few cases is there a statistically significant difference. For example, young people living in urban areas are much more likely to use the internet for learning at school, use social networks more intensively, communicate with family or friends via online services, watch films (though here there is only a small degree of difference), and listen to music online. Differences therefore only exist in a few areas that can be characterised as communication and entertainment. Details of the analysis using the Mann-Whitney non-parametric test can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. E-service use style and place of residence.

	Group	*Mean*	*SD*	*SE*	*W*	*p*
c_QC3a: I have been looking for information on job/learning opportunities	Rural	2.960	1.202	0.139	27,621.500	0.636
	Urban	2.933	1.149	0.043		
c_QC3b: I used the internet to study at school	Rural	2.395	1.255	0.144	23,155.000	0.009
	Urban	2.693	1.175	0.043		
c_QC3c: I used the internet to talk to people from other countries	Rural	1.811	1.279	0.149	24,864.000	0.093
	Urban	2.019	1.277	0.046		
c_QC3d: Looked up national and international information on the internet	Rural	2.532	1.294	0.147	27,829.000	0.684
	Urban	2.577	1.162	0.043		
c_QC3e: Joined a campaign/protest or signed an online petition	Rural	1.351	0.985	0.115	27,873.500	0.940
	Urban	1.249	0.646	0.024		
c_QC3f: Discussed social or political issues online with others	Rural	1.468	1.021	0.116	28,268.000	0.644
	Urban	1.475	0.932	0.034		
c_QC3g: Made my own video or music and shared it online	Rural	1.419	0.907	0.105	26,484.000	0.325
	Urban	1.475	0.885	0.032		
c_QC3h: I visited a social networking site	Rural	2.892	1.610	0.187	19,318.500	<0.001
	Urban	3.807	1.581	0.057		
c_QC3i: I communicated with family or friends	Rural	3.587	1.367	0.158	23,018.500	0.006
	Urban	4.044	1.337	0.049		
c_QC3j: Played/played online games (alone)	Rural	3.213	1.417	0.164	31,276.500	0.161
	Urban	2.955	1.422	0.052		
c_QC3k: I have watched/listened to videos	Rural	3.816	1.208	0.139	25,059.500	0.048
	Urban	4.096	1.139	0.041		
c_QC3l: Listened to music online	Rural	3.747	1.453	0.168	23,691.000	0.016
	Urban	4.179	1.323	0.048		
c_QC3m: I have participated in an online group where people share their interests/hobbies	Rural	2.053	1.451	0.168	24,859.500	0.067
	Urban	2.313	1.453	0.053		
c_QC3n: I have searched for health information that I or someone I know needs	Rural	1.933	1.189	0.137	26,282.500	0.434
	Urban	1.968	1.090	0.040		
c_QC3o: I was looking for something to buy or information on how much something costs	Rural	2.761	1.325	0.157	23,286.500	0.061
	Urban	2.996	1.188	0.043		

5. Discussion

The data collected suggest that the level of basic digital competences of young people from rural areas is slightly lower than that of their peers from urban areas. This situation may be conditioned by several factors, including those relating to the quality of education in rural areas, real-life needs that are met by new media, or attitudes towards new media. The assessment of basic digital competences may also result from a general difference in self-assessment of all key competences among young people differentiated by place of residence (Irvin et al., 2012; Rychen & Salganik, 2003).

Variation in self-assessment of ICT skills is evident in all the areas mentioned. However, when conducting research into the assessment of digital competence of rural and urban young people, it is important to look for areas where there may be an opposite trend to that shown in the study. It would also be worthwhile to measure this competence closely, taking into account mediating variables such as the profile of the institutions

where students study, the quality of the equipment in computer labs, and the type of education directed at teachers. Arguably, the level of digital competence is, as research from other countries and continents shows (Tomczyk & Sunday Oyelere, 2019), not only variable by place of residence but according by other variables. The issue of differences in the level of digital competence by place of residence may also arise from offline lifestyles that differentiate ICT proficiency. Thus, the characteristics of peer relationships, not to mention the level of digital competence of those in the home environment, may have a significant impact on the issues analysed in RQ1 (Uzuegbunam, 2022). Existing differences are also explained by the level of digitisation of the living environment and the level of parental wealth, which influences the purchase of IT equipment (Tran et al., 2020).

Interesting data emerge from the cluster analysis. There is a cluster of young people in both groups who require support in basic digital competences. The data collected, based on self-assessment, clearly show that this is a collective of up to several percent. Such data should not come as a surprise, as even among the younger generations there is a group of people who do not always feel confident in using ICT. Their digital competence is limited to typical communication and information retrieval activities, while slightly more advanced activities are beyond their skill level. These data support the finding that respondents are not a homogeneous collective and not all of them are highly effective when using ICT (Judd, 2018; Koutropoulos, 2011). The grouping of respondents clearly suggests that young people are a non-homogeneous collective when we consider indicators characterising their level of digital competence and their style of new media use by place of residence. Therefore, the present results confirm that both digital competence and other key competences differentiate this group (Pagani et al., 2016). In analysing the level of any of the key skills, it is important to be aware that there are groups with varying levels of proficiency in ICT use. Treating all young people as individuals with a high level of digital literacy can lead to the generation of so-called positive stereotypes that are not supported by reality.

Analysing the results from RQ3, there is a convergence with other studies related to the co-occurrence of digital competence indicators. As Polish reports (Tomczyk, 2019, 2020) show, a high level of digital competence in one area does not automatically mean that a person will have a high level in other areas. When defining digital competence, it should be borne in mind that the concept of digital skills is strongly internally heterogeneous. The concept of digital competence is a rich set of indicators that characterise the performance of many activities and the operation of a large range of software and hardware.

Referring to RQ4, only in a few areas is the style of ICT use differentiated by place of residence (e.g., listening to music, communicating with friends, frequency of ICT use at school). It appears that the typical digital-global teenager has more similarities than differences. Nevertheless, there are minor differences that require the integration of sociological theories (e.g., modernisation, socio-cultural activities, etc.) with media pedagogy knowledge to understand why certain areas of ICT use in daily life among urban and rural adolescents differ. Analysis of the data in Table 2 also makes it clear that society is homogeneous between the two groups analysed. For example, senior citizens tend to be less active in the new media space and their activity is limited to typical e-services (e.g., e-mail, reading news, etc.). Younger age groups, on the other hand, also have many converging characteristics in terms of the style of use of new technologies. For example, the homogeneity of this group is expressed in the use of the same e-services (e.g., Instagram), increasing screen time, and preferring communication and entertainment services over creative use of the possibilities of cyberspace.

6. Methodological Limitations and New Research Directions

The presented results are an attempt to diagnose digital competences among young people. The methodology used allows for a quick evaluation of one of the key competences necessary to function in today's society, which has become highly computerised. However, the adopted research strategy, used in more than 30 European countries as part of EU Kids Online (Smahel et al., 2020), has some limitations. The first is the diagnosis of digital competences using self-assessment. The lack of use of standardised tests, e.g., European Computer Skills Certificate, may lead to under- or over-estimation of ICT proficiency. Such a condition may result in the Dunning-Kruger effect (Dunning, 2011). Therefore, the use of real-world measurement of digital competences in the form of knowledge and skills tests is advocated in future studies. A methodology based on real-life task solving is much more time-consuming and requires access to ICT software and hardware, which may increase the cost of the survey, but, nevertheless, would show digital competences in a more relevant way.

The data presented are from 2018. Over the last few years, the information society, including the level of digital competence, has been transformed. In the context of young people (though not only young people), the time of the Covid-19 pandemic was of great importance, with the crisis of e-learning (Toto & Limone, 2021; Walter & Pyżalski, 2022) changing the style of use of new media, thus strengthening the digital competences of young people in many areas. Therefore, the present data should only be considered through the prism of historical data.

Nevertheless, the presented research results represent one of the few samples in Poland to show the digital competences of young people differentiated according to their place of residence. This means that there is an empirical gap (especially referring to post-Covid changes, which are a milestone in digitisation) related to the area of real measurement of digital competences in rural and urban areas. In addition, new research directions should take into account the rapidly changing space of school, family, and working life, which is increasingly digitised through, for example, new e-services based on AI (Donoso et al., 2020; Omer, 2023; Su & Yang, 2023). Digital transformation therefore forces a redefinition of the theoretical framework of digital competences and how they are measured.

7. Conclusions

Research on the level of digital competence among adolescents in a rapidly changing socio-technical reality has become a necessity (Guillén-Gámez et al., 2020; Linde-Valenzuela et al., 2022). In recent years, there has been an exponential development of various e-services favouring communication, entertainment, and shopping. Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 pandemic was also a milestone, one which highlighted the weaknesses and strengths of digitisation (Tomczyk, 2021). The rapid development of the information society, the increasing digitisation of school spaces, be they educational or professional, and free-time spaces all force a reflection on the real and effective use of the opportunities offered by ICT. Such a reflection is realised both through the modification of formal and non-formal education programmes and, above all, the diagnosis of digital competences. The collected data clearly show that the diagnosis makes it possible to detect differences between the level of digital competences among young people from rural and urban areas.

The diagnosis of the real level of digital competences becomes an indispensable element not only for learning about the specific functioning of selected groups in the information society, but to draw attention to the preparation of appropriate support programmes. This article becomes another voice in the discussion on the need to diagnose digital competences, which are the key at the macro level to increasing the innovativeness of the economy, while at the micro level to enabling young people to develop effectively.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Territorial Configurations of School-To-Work Outcomes in Europe

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Abstract

Comparative research on school-to-work transitions mainly focused on country differences, examining the variation in institutional design and its impact on shaping youth labour market outcomes. The field has been dominated by a sort of methodological nationalism assuming nation states as homogeneous objects of comparison, while the territorial variations in youth transitions among sub-national territories have been less explored, notwithstanding their potential impact on life chances. In this article, we look at the outcomes of transitions in EU regions, comparing regional configurations of school-to-work transitions and their change over time. Is it possible to identify differences among groups of regions? To what extent do these patterns change over time? In order to answer these questions, we construct and analyse a longitudinal and systematic set of indicators that combine regional aggregated outcomes of transitions from education to work and regional contextual traits at the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics level 2 for the period 2007–2019. We perform two cluster analyses to describe regional differences and trends over time. The findings provide novel insights into the characteristics and patterns of an unequal geography of youth opportunities in Europe.

Keywords

education; labour market integration; school-to-work transition; spatial disparities; youth

1. Introduction

Since its comparative turn (Raffe, 2014), research on school-to-work transitions (STWTs) has mainly focused on country differences and has been dominated by a sort of methodological nationalism assuming nation states as homogeneous objects of comparison (Ciccia & Javornik, 2019; Scandurra et al., 2020). Territorial

variations in processes and outcomes of STWTs have been less explored. In contrast, the debate on spatial disparities highlights the relevance of territorial differences for life chances (Iammarino et al., 2018). Moreover, studies carried out at the sub-national level on skills ecosystems look at the way skills arrangements are enacted at the local level, where territorial traits mediate the effects of national institutional settings (Capsada-Munsech & Valiente, 2020; Dalziel, 2015). This body of research claims that contextual socio-economic conditions in subnational territories are still vastly unexplored by systematic comparative and longitudinal studies while they contribute substantially to differentiated outcomes and regional opportunity structures (Hodgson & Spours, 2013). On a similar note, scholars have identified significant regional differences in STWT outcomes within countries that go mostly unnoticed within the literature on STWT, calling for further exploration of variation and patterns of youth labour market integration at the subnational level (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2019; Scandurra et al., 2021a).

As a systematic comparative overview of STWT outcomes in subnational territories is still missing, in this article, we compare configurations of STWT outcomes in EU regions in the last 15 years, looking at educational attainment, employment integration outcomes, contextual characteristics, and their changes over time. Is it possible to identify differences among groups of regions? To what extent do these patterns change over time? The descriptive nature of the article is theoretically driven, i.e., it stems from scholarly research identifying the territorial dimension as an underexplored issue in studies on youth and STWT and considering regions as contexts of opportunities for youth (Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021; Roberts, 2009). More generally, our approach also aligns with contributions in economic geography and spatial disparities that call for the identification of common traits and trends among groups of regions with respect to various aspects of economic and social development (Diemer et al., 2022; Dijkstra, 2022).

We construct a set of indicators that combine regional contextual characteristics and outcomes of transitions from education to work. Our analysis also considers variations over time, especially in the presence of critical junctures that have strongly impacted youth labour market integration, such as the Great Recession. We restrict our view to regional outcomes and socio-economic contextual traits, given the multiple difficulties in systematically accounting for subnational institutional settings (Ciccia & Javornik, 2019). This approach has two fundamental advantages over previous frameworks in the study of STWT. Firstly, by looking at regional outcomes, it overcomes the "methodological nationalism" that often prevails in comparative STWT research. Second, we do not focus on the general effects of drivers on transition outcomes; rather, in complementary terms, we provide a thorough description of groups and patterns that allow us to depict a differentiated geography of opportunities for youth in EU territories. From a perspective of territorial governance, the results support claims for considering mechanisms of territorial sensitivity in the design and implementation of policies affecting youth.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 justifies the need for a territorial approach to STWT, paving the basis; Section 3 focuses on the identification of regions as contexts of opportunities for youth. Section 4 details the methodological strategy applied, in particular, the clustering approach that stems from the aim of identifying groups of regions and their trajectories over time. Section 5 presents the result of our analysis, describing the clusters on levels and trajectories. In the discussion, we combine the classifications proposed and discuss their significance for policy-making.

2. A Territorial Approach to STWT

The transition from school to work is influenced by the way in which individual, institutional, and structural factors relate to one another, producing aggregate STWT patterns that may vary within and across countries and time (de Lange et al., 2014; Müller, 2005; Raffe, 2014; Walther, 2017; Wolbers, 2007). Comparative research on STWT investigates how these patterns differ across countries and are affected by institutions such as the education and welfare systems and structural or contextual conditions related to labour market, economic, and demographic dynamics (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2019; O'Reilly et al., 2015; Scandurra & Alberio, 2021).

Comparative research on STWT has generally emphasised variation across countries while underestimating territorial differences in transition patterns and overlooking variations below the national level (Ciccia & Javornik, 2019; Greer et al., 2015; Raffe, 2014; Simões, 2022). A composite body of literature has recently responded to this criticism and directed attention towards the territorial dimension of STWT and skill formation (Capsada-Munsech & Valiente, 2020; Scandurra et al., 2021a) arguing that regional and local contexts can enable (or hinder) specific opportunity structures for young people (Roberts, 2009), due to the interactions between (a) multi-level governance arrangements, and (b) the persistence of spatial disparities in a variety of domains, ranging from economic development to demographic, employment, and educational outcomes (Cefalo & Scandurra, 2023).

Within multi-level governance arrangements, the devolution of competencies to subnational levels (regions, cities, and localities) and central coordination coexist in complex combinations (Kazepov, 2010). As policies move through this multi-layered process, significant intra-country variation is produced in policy outputs and outcomes. Education and skills agendas are commonly drawn at the national level. However, their enactment usually takes place at the regional and local level, within local socioeconomic contexts, which are likely to differ within and across countries (Dalziel, 2015; Garritzmann et al., 2021). The renewed increasing spread of territorial disparities has, therefore, drawn attention to regional contexts as a source of internal heterogeneity in European states. A combination of globalisation and technological change prompted the reshuffling of the positions of subnational territories in the global space, leading to new spatial disparities reinforcing (or consolidating) already existing ones (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) and a new geography of jobs (Iammarino et al., 2018). Local contexts mediate the relationship between the national institutional setting and its effects on the supply and demand of skills in each region. Thus, the outcomes of the education systems and youth labour markets can be highly heterogeneous at the local scale, creating distinct subnational trajectories (Daigneault et al., 2021; Keating, 2021). Along this line, scholars claim that education and training provisions are enacted across regions with very different employment opportunities and labour market demands. This creates local skills ecosystems (Capsada-Munsech & Valiente, 2020; Dalziel, 2015; Finegold & Soskice, 1988) that Buchanan et al. (2017) defined as clusters of high, intermediate, or low-level competencies in a particular region. At the heart of the skills ecosystem approach is an attempt to propose a multi-factorial frame of analysis that includes skill demand and usage as well as supply, tailored to their specific context. According to this analytical framework, policy interventions should address the range of contextual factors that shape skill formation and youth opportunities within a particular ecosystem (Hodgson & Spours, 2013).

The complex framework of the ecosystem model is highly useful for analysing local contexts. However, it is limited in comparing a large number of regions across countries (for an exception, although not systematic,

see Capsada-Munsech & Valiente, 2020). Conversely, human geography and spatial economics often use regions as units of analysis to account for subnational variation in comparative terms and highlight how regional characteristics of labour markets or socio-demographic conditions are associated with several regional aggregated outcomes, such as employment growth, social exclusion, and even political discontent (Dijkstra et al., 2020). In their long-term analysis of regional development, Rosés and Wolf (2018) found a growing disconnection between EU regions, with the emergence of islands of prosperity out of sync with their hinterland. The authors observe that the pattern of regional inequality over the last 110 years followed a U-shape, with convergence until the 1980s and divergence as well as geographical reconcentration after that. Subnational territories appear, to some extent, separate from the overall national performance as actors capable of endogenous development, leading to the consideration of regions and localities as production systems rather than as simply locations of production (Keating, 2021).

3. Regional Contexts of Opportunities for Youth

Building on the relevance of spatial disparities in producing differentiated social outcomes, a growing body of research analyses various aggregated outcomes at the regional level, as well as the interaction with multiple contextual traits related to the economic structure and socio-demographic characteristics of the territory. The consideration of regions as contexts of opportunities and the focus on subnational territories leads to the identification of differentiated geographies of jobs and opportunities that do not necessarily overlap with national borders (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Iammarino et al., 2018). The systematic comparison of regions as units of analysis has also gained ground in recent STWT analysis, challenging the predominant national focus of comparative STWT research (Raffe, 2014). Scandurra et al. (2021b) show that several labour market indicators, such as youth employment and unemployment, display significant within-country variation, which cannot be explained solely by country-level analysis. Further empirical evidence using regions as units of analysis also shows significant variations in regional youth unemployment, NEET (Not in Employment, Education, and Training), and youth employment rates (Bruno et al., 2014; Cefalo et al., 2020).

When looking at regional drivers of youth employment, this literature connects cross-country investigations on youth labour markets (de Lange et al., 2014; Tomić, 2018) with studies on regional characteristics and spatial disparities as contextual factors potentially affecting STWT outcomes. As a general trend, regional structural heterogeneity seems to play a role in the development of STWT outcomes. Along this line, Scandurra et al. (2021b) find that regional youth labour market integration is affected by the regional demand for work, pointing to possible effects of sectoral specialisation (Sforzi & Amin, 2018). As for demographic trends, the size of the youth population defines the potential labour supply of the region. It is affected by skill- and age-selective migration with large regional variation (Prenzel & Iammarino, 2021). Regions with migration outflows may, for instance, display reduced competition for labour market access (Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021). However, emigration risks exacerbating brain-drain dynamics, possibly leading to labour and skill shortages in the long term.

In terms of empirical strategies, some studies partially depart from the identification and testing of drivers of integration, pointing towards differences among groups of regions and differentiated developments over time as promising directions of research. According to Diemer et al. (2022), regions cluster into groups with similar trajectories and levels of economic development, sectoral composition, innovation, and demography. These factors help explain outcomes of economic change, prosperity, and lack thereof. Interestingly, in the

authors' view, regional development traps demand attention in a forward-looking fashion so that analyses that shed light on trajectories of groups over time can allow policymakers to design effective preventive policies rather than being confined to ex-post remedial policies. Cefalo and Scandurra (2021) look at trajectories of regions grouped according to GDP quintiles; they observe only a slight convergence of patterns of youth labour market integration over time and suggest that once certain regional patterns and trends in youth employment are established, they tend to persist despite external economic factors. The pronounced spatial differences mirror the traits of an unequal and path-dependent geography of opportunities for young people, with diverging life chances and employment accessibility. Dynamic regions are more adaptable to change and better equipped for generating youth employment opportunities. Conversely, the trajectory of several peripheral regions from Southern European regions severely affected by the crisis did not show any significant sign of catch-up with better-off regions over the last 15 years (Scandurra et al., 2020). The persistent lack of employment opportunities might fuel the discontent of young people with weak labour market prospects trapped in lagging regions.

Along the lines presented in this literature review, in this article, we share the consideration of EU regions as contexts of opportunities, and we acknowledge the need for a systematic comparative approach to describe subnational variation in STWT outcomes and contexts over time.

4. Methodology and Data

Empirically, we focus on the systematic comparison of aggregated transition patterns (Raffe, 2008) at the regional level (Scandurra et al., 2021a). We use regions as units to explore the heterogeneity of STWT outcomes by means of cluster analysis. We selected a core number of variables based on the theory-driven model of STWT outcomes that we draw from the reviewed research on STWTs and spatial disparities. For the operationalisation and data elaboration, we relied on comparable regional measures of educational and labour market outcomes in combination with contextual characteristics of local socio-economic systems.

In STWT research, an overarching amount of research established the strong linkages and interaction between education and employment outcomes. The level of education plays a major role in shaping youth access to the labour market (Müller, 2005). Education qualifications provide differential returns in the labour market, so education and skill levels in a territory are crucial factors in determining youth opportunities. Educational qualifications are strongly and positively associated with youth integration into the labour market. Higher-educated young people tend to experience faster transitions; conversely, low-educated adults without an upper-secondary degree bear a particularly high risk of labour market marginalisation, although the extent of their advantages and disadvantages varies considerably across countries (Gesthuizen et al., 2011; O'Reilly et al., 2015). Countries largely differ in the composition of educational qualifications and labour market outcomes by level of education (Müller, 2005), institutional settings, and aggregate structural conditions (as contexts) that affect STWT (Müller & Gangl, 2003; Raffe, 2008). For this reason, in our analysis, we include indicators on youth educational attainment by International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level and youth employment rates by ISCED level to explore cross-regional combinations of educational and employment outcomes. As for contextual regional traits, we aim to account for basic structural indicators related to the general state of the economy, regional specialisation, and population trends (Dijkstra, 2022; Prenzel & Iammarino, 2021; Rosés & Wolf, 2018; Scandurra et al., 2021b). Therefore, we resort to the literature on economic geography and spatial disparities, using regional GDP and

population size as general traits of the regional context. We also complement them with an indicator of regional specialisation and knowledge economy. Specifically, we use the share of scientists and engineers in the active population as a proxy of the occupational stock of persons employed in science and technology occupations (see, for instance, Eurostat, 2023).

For classification purposes, we restrict our view to regional outcomes of transitions and socio-economic contextual traits. The scarce availability of comparable information on subnational institutional settings is unfortunately well recognised and hampers the possibility of large-*N* comparative analysis: measures of institutional differentiation at the regional level are not systematic in terms of cases and time range, or they run risks of compensation effects and excessive generalisation (Ciccia & Javornik, 2019). In the conclusive section, we will return to the interaction between the regional contexts of opportunities identified and institutional settings.

A unique dataset was compiled using a macro panel of all European regions between 2007 and 2019. Regional data were retrieved from EUROSTAT, the statistical office of the EU, which aggregates information from different sources at the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) levels 1 and 2 for a range of educational, social, and economic indicators. Specifically, regional indicators on educational attainment and employment outcomes are calculated from the EU Labour Force Survey; regional contextual traits are derived from the regional accounts developed by the European System of Accounts. The NUTS classification is a hierarchical system for dividing countries into statistically homogeneous subnational territories. We use NUTS 2 as our preferred level of aggregation to describe the geography of youth opportunities, as previous research singled out significant spatial disparities in social, economic, and employment outcomes among EU territories at the regional NUTS 2 level, with significant impacts on life chances (Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021; Scandurra et al., 2021b). In our analysis, we consider variation across space and over time in STWT (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2019), classifying regions according to (a) average levels and (b) rates of change across the period considered. The period of our data (2007–2019) covers a period of post-recession and economic growth in Europe. Our set of variables, for which descriptive statistics are reported in the annexe, includes three dimensions:

- Educational attainment: educational attainment of youth 25–34, distinguishing among qualifications at ISCED 0–2 (low educated with no more than a lower secondary qualification); ISCED 3–4 (medium educated with upper secondary qualification); and ISCED 5–8 (highly educated with tertiary qualification).
- Labour market outcomes: employment rate of youth 20–34 by educational qualifications (ISCED 0–2, ISCED 3–4, ISCED 5–8); NEET rate (share of young people aged 15–29 that are neither in employment nor in education or training) as a measure of labour market exclusion.
- Socio-economic contextual conditions: GDP per capita in purchasing power standard; Scientists and engineers in the active population; population aged 20–64.

In what follows, we process the data according to a three-step sequence. The first segment of the empirical strategy provides brief descriptive statistics about the variation of selected indicators of STWT outcomes. The second segment applies multidimensional clustering of EU regions with regard to STWT outcomes and contextual socioeconomic characteristics. We cluster EU regions according to specific criteria, giving priority to (a) levels of the selected indicators of outcomes and regional contextual traits and (b) their relative change

over time. We perform two cluster analyses, the first on the moving average and the second on the relative rate of change of the above indicators. The third segment of the article discusses common patterns of variation over time and space through cross-tabulation.

For each cluster analysis, the details of the variables used can be found in the Supplementary File, along with the respective variable's univariate statistics. For the first cluster analysis, we derived a simple moving average by computing the mean of data points for each variable over 18 years, considering a three-year interval. We replaced missing values with data from the nearest available year. For the second cluster analysis, we calculated the relative rate of change over the whole period by dividing the difference between the final (2019) and initial (2007) values of each variable by its initial value. In cases where atypical outliers were present (with deviations exceeding 10% from the level of the nearest year), we partially corrected for them by using the average of the two closest years. All indicators in the cluster analysis were mix max normalised ranging between 0 and 1, raw variables are reported in the Supplementary File. NEET rate was changed in sign to match the cardinality of the other proxies.

Clustering methods must be used with the awareness that results are affected by the data under analysis; this includes the overall number of observations, the number and type of variables, the distribution of observation along the various dimensions under analysis, and missing data. In each passage of clustering, we make transparent decisions, from the choice of the number of clusters to the identification of the indicators to be used in clustering the groups of co-occurrences. While the process of progressive reduction of multiple categories produces some loss of information, it makes it possible to single out common features that would otherwise not be observable and to use them for policy analysis. In the grouping of regions obtained, it is possible to highlight the common elements of homogeneity within groups of regions (Pagliacci et al., 2020).

Both *K*-means and *K*-medians clustering techniques were applied, assigning a random seed. However, we report only the results from the *K*-medians cluster analysis, although the results are consistent between the two solutions. We used the Euclidean distance as the measure of dissimilarity and ran the clustering algorithm for a total of 100,000 iterations, assigning each observation individually to one of the groups. *K*-medians is a non-hierarchical grouping technique: data are divided into *k* partitions, or clusters, where each partition represents a cluster. The division process follows an algorithm that assigns each element to the group with the closest (median) centre so that objects within the same group are as similar as possible (high intra-class similarity). In contrast, objects from different groups are as dissimilar as possible (low inter-class similarity). The cluster analysis with the *k*-medians method will thus produce *k* different clusters with the greatest possible distinction. *K* represents the number of groups specified by the analyst; the decision on *k* is often ad hoc and depends on prior knowledge, assumptions, and practical experience (Salas-Velasco, 2023; Steinley, 2006).

The decision to opt for four clusters is based upon a range of methods and tests, reported in the Supplementary File. To determine the optimal number of clusters, we employed four different methodologies to ensure the robustness of our choices. First, we computed the Calinski pseudo-*F* statistic, searching for an inflexion point that indicates an ideal number of clusters. Furthermore, we visualised the centroids in relation to the first two discriminant functions, which collectively accounted for more than 55% of the total variance. We also calculated the within-group sum of squares to evaluate the compactness of data points within each cluster. Lastly, we conducted a model-based cluster analysis by computing the

Bayesian Information Criteria. All four methods converged on a four-cluster solution for both analyses conducted, with the analysis performed using the "mclust" package in *R*. The choice of four clusters allows us to single out significant aggregations of regions in terms of relevant analytical dimensions and a combination of time—and level—variation. This approach allows us to combine the two four-cluster classifications, providing an interpretation that considers both developments over time and across regions. Additional clusters would have led to an excessive number of aggregations, hampering the possibility of interpretation connected to our analytical frame. Our reference framework considers widely used indicators of STWT outcomes in national and regional analysis, in conjunction with broad contextual indicators that proxy the main socio-economic traits of the regions.

5. Empirical Results

Using regions as units of analysis allows us to identify and explore variations below the country level. Table 1 presents the percentage of variance components explained by the state, year, and regional levels of a subset of STWT proxies and regional characteristics. Notably, the table reveals significant regional variation, accounting for approximately 40% of the variance in each of the chosen proxies. This finding is consistent with prior research that underscores the significance of analysing the contextual opportunity structures for youth (Raffe, 2014; Scandurra et al., 2021a). The granularity in the distribution of regional transition patterns is also confirmed by visual inspection of Figure A10 in the Supplementary File. As general trends, we can observe an overall increase in tertiary qualifications among youth between 2007 and 2019, and a decrease in the share of medium and low-educated youth. Employment outcomes slightly deteriorate across educational levels, although the strongest decrease is displayed for low-qualified youth. The preliminary overview provided by Table 1 and Figure A10 justifies further investigation of differences and trajectories among EU regions.

Table 2 and Figure 1 show the results of the cluster analysis based on the moving average of STWT outcomes and contextual indicators between 2007 and 2019. The table provides normalised means of the indicators by cluster, allowing one to identify the most distinctive characteristics of a cluster that distinguish it from the other clusters and the overall averages. Four clusters have been identified: (a) low skills equilibrium, (b) strong knowledge economy, (c) strong labour market integration, and (d) unequal opportunities and risks.

The first cluster, *low skills equilibrium* (a), includes 69 regions that display—on average—a skewed distribution of educational attainment, as the shares of low educated are above average, and the highly qualified are below average. Employment opportunities and youth participation in the labour market are markedly low, as

Table 1. Variance decomposition of selected variables.

	Between State	Between Year	Within State
NEET rate: 15–29	58.90	2.22	38.88
Share of ISCED 5–8: 25–34	50.38	8.60	41.02
Employment rate ISCED 3–4: 20–34	50.20	4.50	45.30
Employment rate ISCED 5–8: 20–34	58.95	1.58	39.48
Scientists and engineers share: active population	47.50	14.15	38.35

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Eurostat (2023).

Table 2. Indicators moving average by clusters, 2007–2019.

Groups	ED. ISCED 0–2	ED. ISCED 3–4	ED. ISCED 5–8	EMP. ISCED 0–2	EMP. ISCED 3–4	EMP. ISCED 5–8	NEET	SCIEN. & ENG.	GDP	POPUL.
1. Low skills equilibrium	0.239	0.480	0.283	0.514	0.685	0.759	–0.214	0.976	0.029	1.035
2. Strong knowledge economy	0.150	0.409	0.441	0.602	0.788	0.869	–0.119	0.102	0.060	1.415
3. Strong labor market integration	0.122	0.600	0.279	0.552	0.848	0.886	–0.095	0.102	0.049	0.993
4. Unequal opportunities and risks	0.188	0.424	0.388	0.633	0.810	0.888	–0.127	0.962	0.069	1.037
Total	0.175	0.481	0.345	0.569	0.777	0.844	–0.142	0.100	0.049	1.135

Notes: ED. = Education; EMP. = Employment; SCIEN. & ENG. = Scientists and engineers on the active population; POPUL. = Population 20–64. Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Eurostat (2023).

displayed by high NEET rates and, conversely, low employment rates by all qualification levels. Low levels of regional GDP and below-average development of knowledge-intensive sectors complete this low-skill equilibrium group, mostly composed of regions from Southern and Southern/Eastern Europe. Interestingly, the main economic centres of these countries are not part of the first group.

The second cluster, *strong knowledge economy* (b), is composed of 76 regions with very high levels of tertiary education qualifications, which translates into positive labour market outcomes, especially for highly educated youth and those with below-average NEET levels. This group displays favourable contextual conditions regarding knowledge-intensive sectors and regional GDP levels; these regions are also attractive and highly populated. This group is geographically variegated, although it includes a few regions from Central Europe. Dynamic regions, capitals, and metropolitan areas tend to cluster in this group (for instance, Madrid, Paris, Bratislava, Bucharest, Lombardy).

The third cluster, *strong labour market integration* (c), includes 63 regions characterised by very high levels of upper secondary education and strong integration for the medium-qualified youth. The share of low and highly educated is comparatively low, and job opportunities are low for the low qualified, favouring instead medium and high qualifications, resulting in very low NEET levels. The economic conditions are slightly less favourable than those of Group 2, with the share of scientists and engineers being above average and the GDP levels being average. The geographic core of this group, characterised by strong youth integration, is in Central Europe (Austria and Germany), with additional regions from Northern and Eastern Europe.

The fourth cluster, *unequal opportunities and risks* (d), is slightly residual, being the less numerous (44 regions) and more geographically concentrated: it mostly describes the traits of UK regions (apart from London), with a few other regions, such as Portugal and Romania. The group displays mostly close-to-average values in terms of educational qualifications. The economy provides high employment opportunities for young people, and

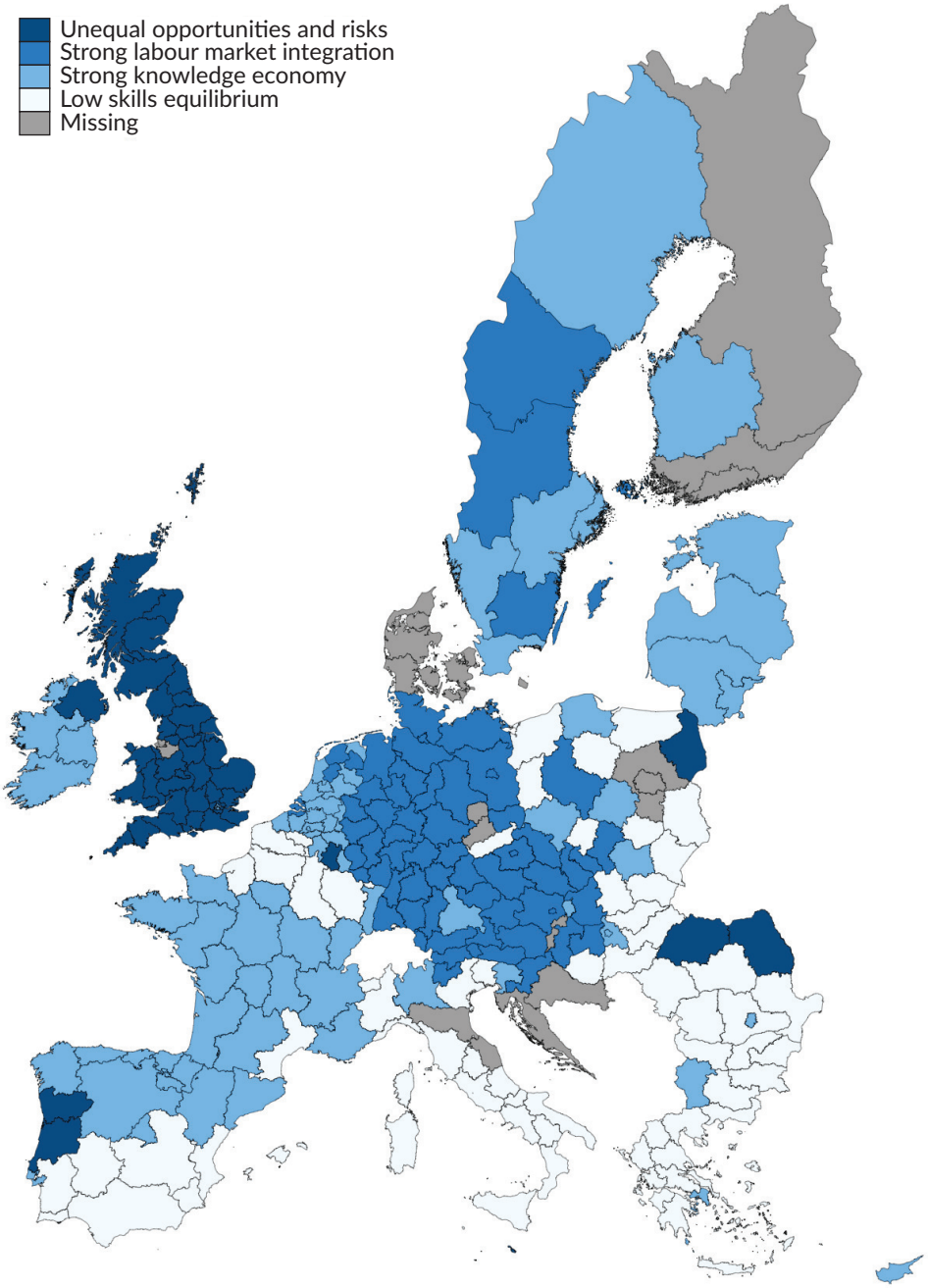

Figure 1. Groups of regions according to their moving average 2007–2019. Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Eurostat (2023).

especially for the tertiary educated. However, NEET rates are higher than in Groups 2 and 3, signalling that some young people may encounter difficulties in accessing the labour market more than others. The regional welfare is very high, although the development of knowledge-intensive sectors is below average.

Table 3 and Figure 2 show the results of the cluster analysis based on the relative rate of change of STWT outcomes and contextual indicators between 2007 and 2019. The average trajectories identify a decrease in the share of low and upper-secondary educational attainment and a deterioration of employment

Table 3. Indicators relative rate of change by clusters, 2007–2019.

Groups	ED. ISCED 0–2	ED. ISCED 3–4	ED. ISCED 5–8	EMP. ISCED 0–2	EMP. ISCED 3–4	EMP. ISCED –8	NEET	SCIEN. & ENG.	GDP	POPUL.
1. Strongly improving youth integration	–0.066	–0.146	0.521	0.187	0.023	0.075	–0.253	0.657	0.032	–0.002
2. Human capital and knowledge-intensive growth	–0.243	–0.073	0.543	0.052	–0.013	0.029	–0.136	1.505	0.014	0.001
3. Low human capital and development trapped	–0.206	0.020	0.149	–0.138	–0.042	–0.066	0.052	0.374	0.017	–0.001
4. Declining and growing unequal	–0.307	–0.068	0.466	–0.186	–0.051	–0.067	0.252	0.750	0.015	–0.002
Total	–0.195	–0.072	0.425	–0.006	–0.017	–0.002	–0.038	0.803	0.021	–0.001

Notes: ED. = Education; EMP. = Employment; SCIEN. & ENG. = Scientists and engineers on the active population; POPUL. = Population 20–64. Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Eurostat (2023).

opportunities for youth across all educational levels after 2007, although less pronounced for the highly qualified. Four clusters can be identified: (a) strongly improving youth integration, (b) human capital and knowledge-intensive growth, (c) low human capital and trapped development, and (d) declining and growing unequal.

The first cluster, *strongly improving youth integration* (a), is composed of 79 regions showing a strong trend towards increasing higher education qualifications as the maximum level of education among youth in combination with a pronounced decrease in upper secondary attainment and a slow decrease in those who are low educated. Regional GDP grew at a highly sustained pace with respect to the other groups, although with below-average growth in knowledge-intensive sectors, and the population decreased, owed in some regions to ageing and migration outflows of the active population (mostly in Eastern regions). These regions are effective in providing job opportunities for youth, being, in particular, the only group with growing employment rates for medium-qualified youth and reducing the share of young people outside the education and labour market systems. Regarding outcomes from the labour market, integration grew for all levels of qualification, and the share of NEET decreased strongly. These regions are mostly located in Central and Eastern Europe. Accessing the EU (2004/2007) had a positive impact on the overall economic and youth integration performance of the Eastern regions.

The second cluster, *human capital and knowledge-intensive growth* (b), includes 62 regions that displayed strong gains in tertiary education qualifications vis-à-vis shrinking shares of medium and low-educated youths. Conditions in the labour market generally improved, except for those who are medium qualified.

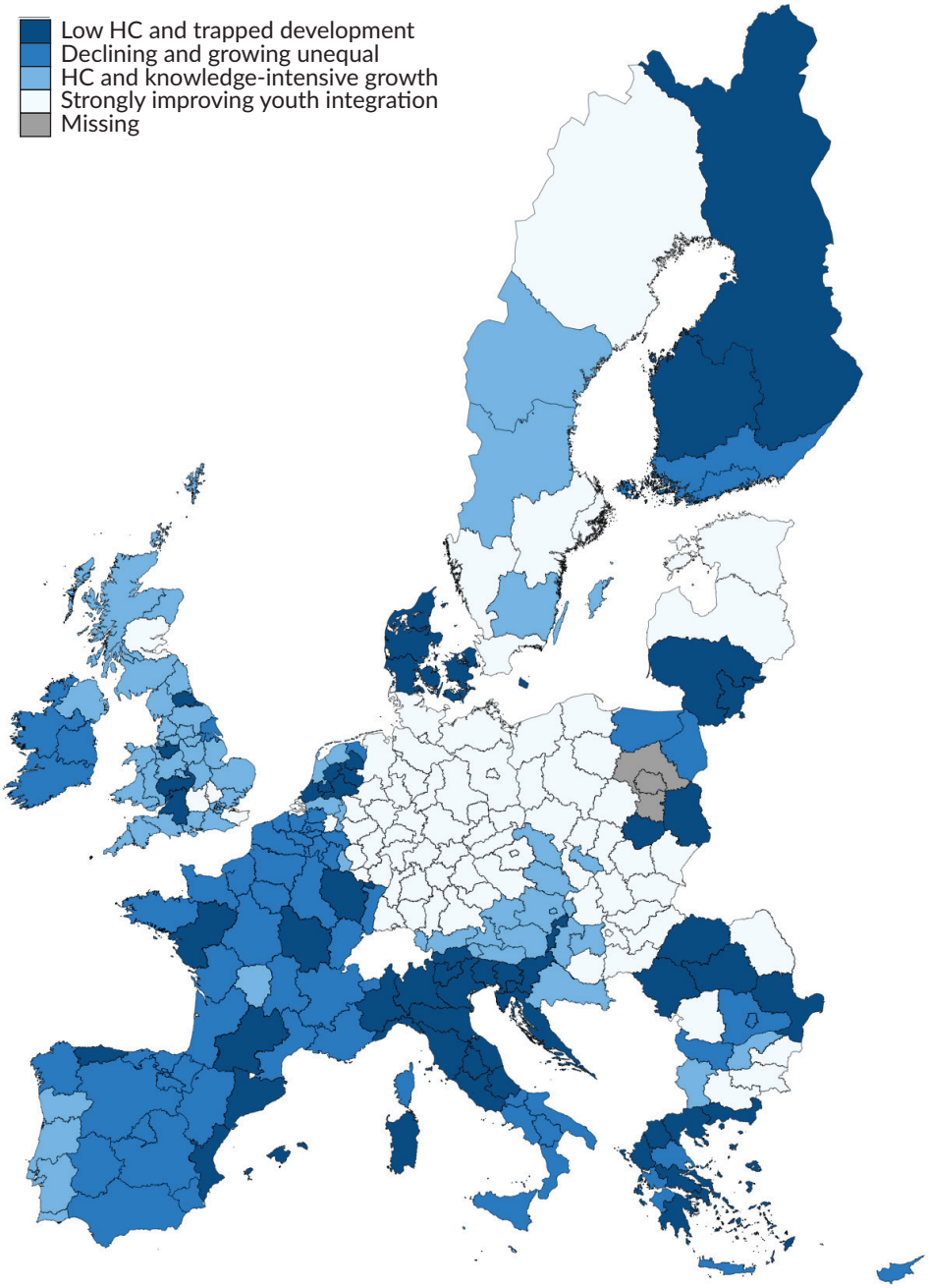

Figure 2. Groups of regions according to their relative rate of change 2007–2019. Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Eurostat (2023).

These regions are attractive territories, with population growth and a strong trend towards a knowledge economy, although the growth of regional welfare was below average in the period considered. Regions of the second group are mostly located in the UK and Austria but also include regions from Portugal, Sweden, and Eastern Europe.

The third cluster, *low human capital and trapped development* (c), is composed of 61 regions that experienced a moderate expansion of educational qualifications but a low pace of growth for higher qualifications.

Employment conditions deteriorated for all qualification levels, and the share of those excluded from the labour market grew. This group shows signs of a "development trap," i.e., a below-average regional welfare growth and scarce signs of improved productivity and innovation in the economy, coupled with a slight population loss. These regions are mostly located in Spain, France, and the South of Italy. Irrespective of their levels of youth integration, they show signs of stagnation, as human capital grows slowly and the local economy is not dynamic, lacking the necessary infrastructural conditions for innovation.

The cluster *declining and growing unequal* (d) includes 50 regions that managed to increase educational levels vis-à-vis a strong shrinkage of low-educated youth over the period. However, the economic crisis strongly impacted youth opportunities in the labour market. As a sign of the diffused difficulties facing youth in the transition from school to work after 2007, we observe pronounced NEET increases and employment rates decreases, vastly above average for all educational levels. The regional economy grew at a slow pace, although there are signs that knowledge-intensive sectors are being developed. Finally, the regional population shrank due to population ageing and out-migration flows, especially in the Greek and Eastern regions. This group is composed of regions located mostly in Southern Europe but also collects trajectories of regions from Central, Northern, and Eastern Europe.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, we explored the subnational dynamics of STWT outcomes. We focused on European regions (NUTS 2) as case units, looking at patterns of change and averages of groups of regions between 2007 and 2019. The inclusion of education attainment and employment rates by educational level, together with socio-economic conditions, provides an overarching picture of the geography of youth opportunities in EU regions. We detected four groups of regions with similar averages across the period considered and four groups of regions with similar trajectories of change over time.

In Table 4, we perform a simple cross-tabulation of the clusters based on the moving average and the relative rate of change, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of regional patterns. The table shows that out of the 73 regions with strong levels of youth labour market integration (Cluster 3 Moving Average), only six went through a deteriorating pattern in the last 13 years. This suggests that the majority of the regions in which youth were strongly integrated into the labour market did not experience drastic changes in their employment patterns. In contrast, most low-skill equilibrium territories (Cluster 1 Moving Average) maintained their low skills path of (under)development. However, it is worth noting that 19 out of the 79 regions included in this category showed a pattern of change towards improving trends in youth integration and STWT. This is the case of several Eastern European territories which have benefited from EU access and new market openings, as well as from out-migration of young people, which could have slightly eased the competition for jobs. Interestingly, the table indicates a more diverse pattern for regions with a strong knowledge economy (Cluster 2 Moving Average). These regions, which typically rely on knowledge-intensive sectors, have generally witnessed a worsening of their development pattern in terms of employment outcomes. This suggests that even regions with a focus on knowledge-based industries and services have not been immune to challenges in the labour market and were strongly hit by the Great Recession and its aftermath. A significant share of these regions shows a worrying risk of being trapped in a trajectory of stagnating development (Diemer et al., 2022) and struggling youth labour market integration.

Table 4. Crosstabulation clusters of regions based on relative rate of change and on moving average (2007–2019).

		Moving Average Clusters			
		1. Low skills equilibrium	2. Strong knowledge economy	3. Strong labour market integration	4. Unequal opportunities and risks
Relative Rate of Change Clusters	1. Strongly improving youth integration	16	17	41	5
	2. Human capital and knowledge-intensive growth	3	11	16	32
	3. Low human capital and development trapped	24	33	1	3
	4. Declining and growing unequal	26	15	5	4

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Eurostat (2023).

Overall, the findings highlight the presence of high path dependency patterns, indicating a strong tendency to continue along their established trajectories that resulted in significant divergence in human capital and youth regional employment outcomes across the EU. The persistence of these patterns underscores the need for targeted interventions and policies to address the underlying causes of the territorial divide and promote more inclusive and balanced employment opportunities for youth across all EU regions.

The findings align with the existing body of literature showing the persistent nature of youth regional employment outcomes over time, supporting the notion that these outcomes exhibit a high degree of inertia, even during the post-recession period of the late 2000s, as Scandurra et al. (2021a, 2021b) showed. This suggests that once certain regional patterns and trends in youth employment are established, they tend to persist despite external economic factors. It is crucial to continue monitoring and analysing the dynamics of youth employment patterns to inform policy decisions and ensure that interventions are effective in breaking the cycle of persistent youth unemployment and fostering improved prospects for youth within EU territories.

Despite this general dynamic, it is also important to note that a few changes have been observed. Some Mediterranean territories combine deteriorating youth labour market opportunities with an increasing upward trend in the supply of human capital. The observed changes in these territories may be attributed to various factors, such as the decreasing cost-benefit opportunities for investing in education. Positive trends in youth integration can also be observed in several Eastern EU regions after 2007.

Our findings should be interpreted carefully due to some limitations. In fact, the article considers aggregate regional outcomes based on available comparable data. Socio-economic differences of access within social groups are considered by education level, but were unable to consider the intersectionality of such differences and further cumulative disadvantages. Further, institutional differentiations were not included in the analysis, a point that future research should consider when trying to unpack the complex mechanisms that connect multi-level institutions and territorial contexts (Kazepov & Cefalo, 2022; Rodríguez-Pose, 2020). Although we are aware of the importance of specific institutional determinants and related policies addressing STWTs,

our main focus was to single out the variation of STWT outcomes within regional socio-economic contexts. We consider this article part of a research agenda aiming to investigate the regional dimension of STWTs by looking at the variations in outcomes and the impact of institutional and socio-economic conditions of different welfare mixes. Further empirical studies should advance in explaining and unpacking these complex territorial dynamics considering institutional indicators.

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight the relevance of contextual factors that underlie the observed patterns of STWT. These factors bear significant policy implications, particularly as regions with more favourable economic configurations may have a greater capacity to benefit from national education and labour market policies. On the other hand, this could point to the risk of territorial effects magnifying the combined consequences of disadvantages for low-skilled youth in deprived regions (Cefalo & Scandurra, 2023; Fusaro & Scandurra, 2023). The existence of pockets of exclusion within lagging regions poses specific challenges for social policy and European cohesion. It is imperative to prevent the spread of spatial inequalities, as this represents a significant challenge for the European social model. Efforts should be directed towards developing targeted policies and interventions that promote equal opportunities and mitigate the negative consequences faced by disadvantaged youth in these regions.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

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

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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.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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The Impact of Multilevel Governmental Policy on Rural Catalonia: Voices From the Grassroots

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Abstract

One decade on from the launch of the European Youth Guarantee Initiative, there is still limited research into its efficacy in rural areas. In Spain, a country with significant urban-rural disparity, the complexity of the governmental structure across the country has made investigations into the effectiveness of youth employment strategies less common as compared with other European states. Our study analyses the meso-level structure of the Spanish government and how the Public Employment Services (PES) factor into the overall process of disseminating active labour market policies across the country. The study is based in the autonomous community of Catalonia and includes a case study in the region of Lleida. Through open-ended interviews with members at different levels of the local PES, including the director and various other staff, as well as with local policymakers, youth workers in local organisations, and the youth themselves, we aim to shed light on how the Youth Guarantee is being implemented on the ground. This will take into account the structural constraints, needs, and challenges under the new law as expressed by the various stakeholders. The results indicate that both youth and local PES are negatively impacted by some centralised aspects of employment policy, such as the stringent requirements for training courses that prove prohibitive for rural areas, as well as the urban-centric design of training courses. Further, the youth collectively express a strong desire for their voice to find expression in the design of active labour market policies.

Keywords

halfway federal state; multilevel governance; rural NEET youth; rural policy framework; Spanish youth unemployment; top-down government; urban-rural disparity; urban-rural gap

1. Introduction

Addressing the deep-seated problems related to youth unemployment has gradually become a focal point in EU policy since its inception almost three decades ago. These issues, among other related factors, primarily led to the development of the "not in employment or education" (NEET) status typology (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999), which represented a step forward in remedying these problems but also posed a significant risk: that of reducing youth to a single category of stakeholders with similar life circumstances (Furlong, 2006). The Youth Guarantee was launched in 2013 as the definitive European-wide strategy to address youth unemployment-related issues. It stipulated that member countries must provide good quality employment or training options to NEET youth within four months of their becoming unemployed. The Guarantee itself, first put forward by the European Commission through the 22 April 2013 Council Recommendation, follows the same norm among EU policies of this kind; a soft law that provides a channel for funding, in this case chiefly through the European Social Fund and the Youth Employment Initiative, but with little guidance over how these policies are implemented, leaving member states in a position where they must design their own measures to achieve the intended goals. Therefore, its lack of legal binding has led it to be criticised for not being incisive enough, since it primarily relied on the political will of each member state to be effectively put in place (Morales-Ortega, 2013). While it yielded some overall positive results and signified yet another step forward, the Guarantee has also been criticised widely for its overall shortcomings, not least in the Spanish context (Rodriguez & Ramos, 2016; Strecker et al., 2021).

The Spanish case, however, is unique within the EU. The country has been among the highest in unemployment and NEET rates across the EU for years, a factor bolstered by the economic crisis of 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019 (Agahi & Prieto-Flores, 2022). Further, Spain has led the EU in rates of temporary, short-term employment contracts. In the late 1980s, pre-EU discussions led Spain to focus strongly on tourism in their economic development approach. This factor is a key contributor to Spain's history of temporary and precarious employment, dating back to the inception of the EU, since these contracts have been commonly used by private companies to meet the demand for seasonal workers during peak tourist season to the detriment of the labour market in Spain. This element distinguishes the Spanish labour market from that of other EU countries. While this type of contract is present in other countries, Spain holds the highest rate in the EU, which in 2021 was at 25% compared to the EU average of 14%. This poses a challenge to young people, works against their training prospects (Adecco Group Institute, 2022), and represents a failure on the part of the Youth Guarantee, since many of the jobs available through it were temporary, leading to poor job stability (Hernández-Bejarano, 2022). It should, however, be noted that this situation is improving with an increase in permanent employment as of the start of 2022 (Adecco Group Institute, 2022). Nonetheless, this is one of the key factors that led to the implementation of the Youth Guarantee in Spain being described as haphazard, poorly defined, and not matched to the labour market (Rodriguez & Ramos, 2016).

The implementation of the Guarantee in Spain suffered from inadequate coordination between regional and local Public Employment Services (PES; Rodriguez & Ramos, 2016). Looking deeper into this problematic structure, the role of the European Commission in Spanish youth employment policymaking is, of course, significant, as with all member states. The additional layers of the Spanish system, however, which include the national government, the governments of each of the 17 autonomous communities of Spain, the local governments, and several other centralised national institutions result in an extensive vertically-oriented

government whose structure, along with the various charges at each level, can be regarded as complex and nuanced, resulting in a high degree of institutional incoherence (P. A. Hall & Soskice, 2001). While each autonomous community has the authority to design its own programs for employment and training, the Youth Guarantee and the funding associated with it are still the chief driving force behind the employment endeavour of Spain as a whole, for which the central government is responsible. Further, while the role of PES within each member state has typically been central to achieving the goals of the Guarantee in their respective contexts (Hall et al., 2014), within Spain this responsibility lies instead with the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy, a division of the Spanish national government, leaving the PES of Spain in a role that is much less central to the Guarantee than in other EU countries. This has led to Spain typically being excluded from research (Doyle et al., 2015; Trein & Tosun, 2019), despite the Spanish case having great relevance to the study of the Youth Guarantee at large due to its higher-than-average NEET rate, significant rural–urban disparity, and leading levels of temporary contracts.

The 2020 reinforced Youth Guarantee includes among its measures the need for states with particularly high unemployment levels (which include Spain) to acquire more knowledge about the young people the Guarantee is designed to serve and their inherent heterogeneity (Council of the European Union, 2020) since the young NEET group comprises a whole range of different individuals with different life circumstances and reasons for being inactive. It is therefore imperative that Spain comes to understand this category better. Among the most significant, and perhaps the most neglected, of these groups of NEETs are those who live in rural areas, a condition that scholars also appear to neglect (Simões et al., 2021). Rural NEETs are more likely to become NEETs than their urban counterparts; in the past decade, the rural NEET rate has almost always been higher than that of any other area in Spain by population density. According to 2021 data, the NEET rate in rural areas was 1.5% higher than in Spanish urban areas (Figure 1).

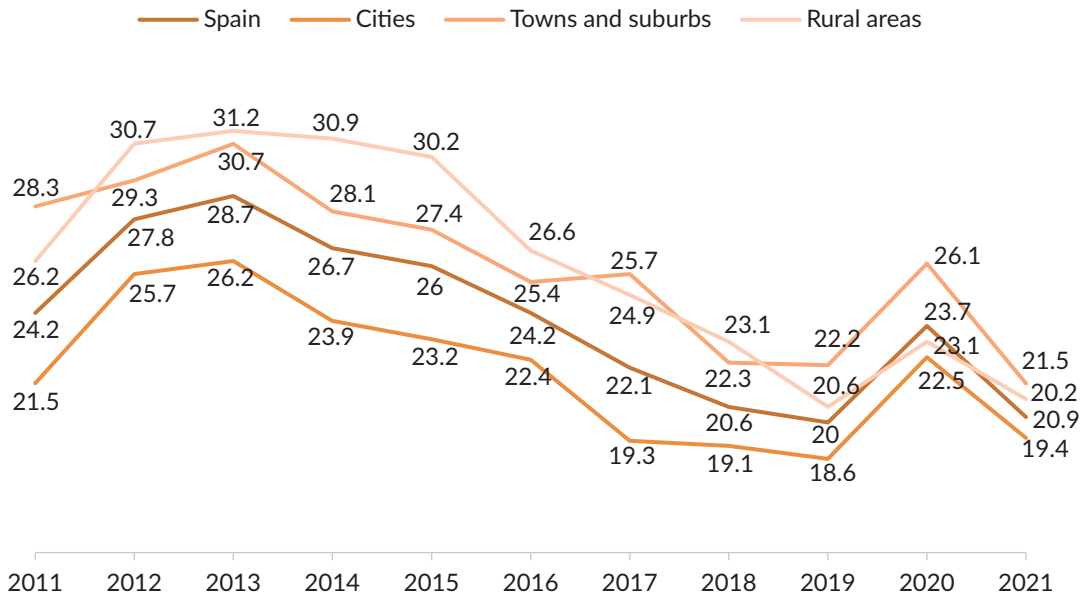

Figure 1. NEET rate in Spain (25–29 years) by degree of urbanisation for the years 2011–2021. Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

In this connection, the interaction of the Youth Guarantee with the Spanish governmental framework is not understood in Spain as well as in other EU member states. This is especially true when taking into account

those youth who live in less densely populated areas and are therefore subject to the vulnerabilities inherent in rural spaces.

This article therefore aims to shed light on some of these issues that contribute to the elevated NEET rates in Spain, with a particular focus on rural areas. We aim to explore, first, how the structure of the Spanish government either contributes to or detracts from the process of integration of these youth into the labour market and how the Youth Guarantee is finding expression in rural areas. We will attempt to gauge the effectiveness of active labour market policies used in these less densely populated parts and hypothesise that the function of this policy domain in Spanish law does not help rural youth to exit NEET status. In the following section, we will describe the history and structure of the Spanish government.

2. The Spanish Governance System

Following the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1977, the Spanish constitution implemented the following year directly put in motion a process of governmental decentralisation, which resulted in the transition of Spain to a halfway federal state, in contrast to other EU member countries. Initially, 22 competences were delegated to each of the 17 autonomous communities Spain is comprised of, a process that kept gathering momentum in the years immediately following these changes. Most of these competences pertain to environment-specific domains, such as city planning, housing, railways, roads, and agriculture. However, employment policy is one of the competences that remain firmly within the jurisdiction of the central government, "without prejudice to its implementation by the institutions of the autonomous communities" (Constitutión Española, 1978, Art. 149). Further, over the last decade, the EU's implementation of soft law to improve youth employment outcomes across its member states has led to a reversal in this process in Spain within the policy domain of youth employment, most surely stimulated by the Youth Guarantee in 2013. Accordingly, through the lens of youth employment policy, stirrings of a process of recentralisation are visible within Spain, a process which appears, at least in part, to result from the top-down design of the Youth Guarantee. The subsequent European Commission Council Recommendations also provide impetus to this process (Agahi et al., 2023), resulting in a unidirectional flow of information from the upper levels of the government, and leaving the actors at the grassroots with very little control over localised solutions.

Classifying Spain by its governmental structure is, accordingly, not straightforward. We take as a basis of this Scholten et al.'s (2018) typology, which asserts that all state governments are either (a) centralist, where national and local governments are organised in a top-down manner, (b) localist, where the local governments are given the authority to design and tailor policies at their level, essentially making this system bottom-up, (c) multilevel, which involves vertical interaction between government actors, or (d) decoupled, which is characterised by the absence of joint policy coordination (Scholten et al., 2018). Spain does not fit distinctly within any of these categories, instead exhibiting various characteristics of these different types of governments (with the exception of the localist model, of which no instance is visible).

Multilevel governance is perhaps the best way to visualise the governance structure in Spain due to its vertical nature, the complexity of which none of Scholten et al.'s (2018) other models encompass. The term itself we first coined by Gary Marks in 1992, who conceptualised it to explain the function of member states under the EU. Although the full definition has been the subject of debate (see Tortola, 2017), Marks' original definition is most appropriate here, since he described "a movement of EU policy involving continuous

negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers—supranational, national, regional and local" (Marks, 1993, p. 392), much like the structure that has materialised in Spain. Yet, in practise, these processes may not be as synchronised and harmonised as the multilevel model would suggest. An example of this, we present an instance of policymaking from the last five years in Spain, to illustrate the pattern of how policymaking in this domain functions in Spain: The Spanish government implemented a central Directive in 2021 (Ministry of Labour, Migration and Social Security, 2021) in response to a European Commission Council Recommendation, tightening various restrictions on training course requirements across Spain and implying significant change in how training courses are implemented on the ground at local levels (Council of the European Union, 2018). This had a direct effect on the ability of training centres across the country to carry out courses due to the more stringent requirements and caused the functioning of some courses in rural areas to cease, directly impacting the efficacy of the youth guarantee process nationwide. Accordingly, not only did this new policy perpetuate the urban-rural gap, but it also widened it, despite the clear Eurostat figures showing the dire situation in terms of education and employment opportunities for rural youth. A series of events such as this renders the multilevel dimension of the government somewhat obsolete and implies the operationalisation of a centralised, top-down structure "in action," since all autonomous communities were obligated to implement these same restrictions. Further, the strong focus of the Spanish economy on tourism is yet another factor to consider here. While this approach has been successful and has economically benefitted various service sectors in Spain, it has also been detrimental to many regions in other areas related to, for example, job creation, which placed many of these regions in a low position in the EU ranking relating to human capital and employment (Guisan & Aguayo, 2007). This is another instance of the top-down, centralist model, since what originated as a centralised priority resulted in a set of circumstances that has transcended and permeated other priorities since the inception of the EU. Thus, despite the various diverse dynamics seen in Spanish governance resembling multilevel governance, we suggest this centralist, top-down governance type as the primary model in operation within the policy domain of youth employment in Spain.

Top-down models have classically been criticised since they emerge from the perspective of the decision-makers and, accordingly, fail to involve other actors and stakeholders in the shaping of policies, approaches, and strategies (see Barrett & Fudge, 1981; Elmore, 1978). Within the policy domain of youth employment, it is clear by the same token that this model fails to take into account the voices of youth in policy formation. Sabatier (1986) also pointed out that the use of a top-down model is commonly criticised for being ineffective within a situation that is more complex and has an entire range of moving parts, a category within which the Spanish government could distinctly be placed. Yet, in criticising the top-down approach, it is important not to "romanticise" the grassroots movement (Smith, 2008) which also has its issues, including what is often a critical lack of capacity of local institutions to facilitate the changes necessary (Carr, 2002) and a fundamental lack of resources at these levels (Cleaver, 2001). In contrast, this bottom-up structure, or Scholten et al.'s (2018) localist model, would allow the voice of youth to take on a more pivotal role in policy formation, it implies a vast and complex change across government.

In summary, a survey of the history and the structure of the Spanish government presents it as primarily centralised and top-down-oriented within the policy domain of youth employment; by extension, the voices of those at the grassroots appear to be absent from the relevant policy debates. It follows that adopting these individuals' perspectives will provide insight into how the policies are falling short, and how they may be shaped to develop in a positive manner. Through this research, we seek to gain insight into the

experiences of key stakeholders on the ground in rural areas, which are the areas typically most neglected and most profoundly affected by centralist, top-down governance. These same areas are also characterised by lower infrastructure, the youth residing there often have limited options for employment and training (De Hoyos & Green, 2011), and the number of job offers, as well as available training centres and courses for youth, are significantly lower when compared to urban areas (Agahi et al., 2023). We investigate this reality taking chiefly into account the various social, economic, and political facets that feed into the employment trajectories of young people, putting them in contrast to the aims of the Youth Guarantee at the highest levels of government, to understand what occurs in between these two levels and to assess the effectiveness of the governance that occurs to this end.

3. Methodology

The region of Catalonia is one of the 17 autonomous communities of Spain and ranks among the highest in Schakel's (2018) Regional Authority Index. By this token, we expect Catalonia to serve as a strong example of the interplay between the regional and national governments. The region itself has four provinces. Of these, Lleida is the largest of the four by area, but also the least populated, making it the most rural by population density, with a value of 36.3 inhab/km^2 (IDESCAT, 2022), well below the OECD (2016) definition of rural, which is below 150 inhab/km^2. Within this province, the two counties of Pallars Jussà and Pallars Sobirà were selected for the study. These two counties are among the biggest in Catalonia, occupying 1,343 and 1,378 km^2 respectively, while also being among the least populated with around 13,500 and 7,200 inhabitants, making them the third-least and the very least densely populated regions within Catalonia, with values of 9.8 and 5.2 inhab/km^2 respectively (IDESCAT, 2022). The rurality of these counties made them ideal for this study and, accordingly, it was felt that they would provide the best platform possible for bringing to light the relevant challenges encountered in rural areas. Further, the population density of Lleida is similar to that of the other Spanish autonomous communities considered to be rural, such as Aragon, Extremadura, and Castilla y Leon, which have a population density of 28, 26, and 25 inhab/km^2 respectively (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2021), and since the governments of these autonomous communities share the same basic relationship with the central government, we anticipate results that will largely be indicative of the situation across wider rural Spain.

The first location that was visited was the capital municipality of one of the counties, where the headquarters of the local PES and many of the NGOs involved in education and training in the county are found. The city has a population of 6,000 inhabitants. The municipality, while being the capital, has a relatively low population, with a population density of 19 inhab/km^2. The second was the capital of the other county selected for the study, with a population of 2,000 and a population density of 20 inhab/km^2.

A total of 15 open-ended interviews and three focus groups were conducted with various stakeholders. In total, 12 youth and nine workers were involved in the interviews.

The interviews took place with the director of a local SOC office (the PES in Catalonia), two technicians within SOC headquarters, two technicians from supramunicipal authorities, two from the main NGO working in the field of youth employment, two from a private business providing training under the Youth Guarantee, and finally twelve youth themselves. All of the youth were between 23 and 29 years old. No youth outside of this age group participated in the study. All youths were registered in the PES databases and five were what we could identify as NEET. One of them had children (see Table 1).

Table 1. Details of participants.

	Youth	PES staff	Total
Participants	12	9	21
Male	6	2	8
Female	6	7	13
Age (average)	26	N/A	
Migrant status	2	N/A	
Working at the moment	7	N/A	
Primary education	1	N/A	
Secondary education	3	N/A	
Tertiary education	8	N/A	

Within the group of youth, five of them were interviewed in person and the remaining seven were interviewed online. The online interviews were conducted because some of the youth were put in contact with the research team after the final field visit had concluded. Youths were found with the help of PES, which was contacted directly for assistance. The themes in the script pertained to personal status, their perspective on the availability of jobs, training courses, transportation and housing in the area, whether they would like to stay or leave, their perception of PES and their programs and services, how PES could improve and the levels of employment in their region, the youths relationship and connection with PES, their participation in training courses, and about their previous work experience. The interviews were carried out following the ethical procedures of the Track-IN project, which were approved by the ethics board of ISCTE, Lisbon, Portugal, the leading partner of the project, prior to commencing the interviews.

The research team, which included a senior researcher and two junior researchers, visited the area twice in one year and held online meetings before and in between the two visits. The senior researcher was responsible for coordinating the field visits, which involved correspondence with the PES in the target areas, arranging the visits, conducting the interviews, and processing the data. The junior researchers were part of the field visits and interviews, with each one attending one of the research trips, and were responsible for transcribing, organising, analysing, and processing the data. The objectives of the primary visit were to become familiar with the main actors on the ground and conduct a first round of interviews. This visit helped strengthen the relationship and collaboration between PES officers and the local network of technicians who support the implementation of Active Labour Market policies at the grassroots. Some of them collaborate with youth workers or are placed in youth offices. Thus, when the team returned to the area seven months later for a second visit, it was easier for the team to reach NEET youth and interview new technicians. The two visits were deemed to be sufficient since the body of data collected was more than adequate and provided substantial information on the research theme.

The collected interviews were subsequently transcribed, translated, manually coded by theme, and classified accordingly for review. Finally, a selection of the most significant quotes was made totalling around 19,000 words, and was classified again into one of four categories based on whether the comments were made by a youth or a worker and based on whether the content related to perceived challenges or opportunities among the various themes. Following this, a smaller selection was identified through investigator

triangulation (Archibald, 2016; Denzin, 1970) among the three researchers to identify the most focused number of quotes that fit most appropriately within the specific scope of the research area.

Sourcing a representative sample to participate presented a challenge to the project, since collaboration with PES on this project led to contact with youths who were registered with PES, most of whom had university undergraduate degrees or higher at the time contact was made. This tends to happen because power relationships are embedded in the natural social network that informants and technicians have on the ground (Noy, 2008) so they have more difficulties with outreach when seeking NEET youth without higher education. Further, this trend may be more pronounced when conducting fieldwork with hard-to-reach populations. This was somewhat contrary to what was intended by design, since the aim was that the study would feature as many youths with a primary level of education as possible; this was most representative of rural Catalonia since, as is well established, youth in rural areas typically have a lower level of education compared to their urban peers (Eurostat, 2023). Throughout the process, and in communication with PES, different strategies were implemented. Despite the efforts made, however, circumventing this issue altogether proved to be not feasible within the resource constraints of the project.

4. Results

Through the means described above, our aim with this process of data collection was threefold. First, we sought to understand the attitude of youths regarding the current state of affairs for education and training in rural Catalonia. Second, we sought to learn about their thoughts, perspectives, and experiences regarding governance and the way their situation has been managed by those who have control over it. Finally, to we tried to develop an understanding of how these stakeholders felt their education and employment situation could improve. Ultimately, analysis of the qualitative data shed light on the consequences of the operationalisation of top-down government in Spanish rural areas. Evidenced by the data is the profound impact of the Spanish governance style, not just on the rural youth of Catalonia, but also on the PES of these same localities; evidently, the negative effects are experienced at both levels. In this section, we divide the results into three categories based on the above objectives.

4.1. Youth Attitudes Towards PES and Available Opportunities

The main issue raised by the youth in this regard was their lack of awareness of the services offered by PES, which highlights issues with the channels they use for communication under the current system:

> I found out about the employment service because I was unemployed and to claim benefits you had to sign up, that's how I knew it existed. (Youth, Pallars, female, 23)

In the case of the following quote, the youth points out that, under the current structure, he doesn't feel as though PES are successful in relaying information to him as a youth, but he also expresses that he feels that their services are not useful to him:

> I must say that the information does not reach me through the SOC but through the 80 Studies' Center [an NGO]. You sign up for the SOC because you have to sign up, but what happens? (Youth, Pallars, male, 29)

These comments reflect the lack of capacity for local PES in rural areas to meet the demands of youths, indicating that these offices must reach a higher level of development to respond to the needs of local youth.

Another theme that commonly appeared, specifically in the interviews with rural youth, pertained to the negative connotations many of the young people have regarding the tourism industry in Spain. Specifically, they expressed their perception of the negative effects of tourism on their local economies, which youths also perceive as influencing their employment and educational situations. This is not unexpected since the history of tourism in Spain—and its associated negative impact on certain facets of the Spanish economy—are well-documented (see Guisan & Aguayo, 2007; Martinez, 2002):

> The investment in tourism that only leads to a precarious and temporary situation for young people could be changed, putting them in other sectors that provide non-temporary work. (Youth, Pallars, male, 25)

4.2. Insights on Governance

Above all, the theme that recurred most prominently in the interviews among both PES officials and youth was a perceived lack of power and influence over the employment and educational outcomes of the youth. While the lack of a suitable platform upon which youth could feed information upwards was another common theme, PES also expressed facing the same challenge about the upward flow of information from PES to the national government:

> There is only dialogue with the high central charges of the SOC if you insist. During this year [2023] was the transition to territorial meetings. Contribute the ideas you have about what? Of projects? The discussion will take place halfway through the territorial consultation tables. (Director of a local PES office, Pallars, male)

Despite the halfway federal structure of the Spanish government, which in theory decentralises policy operations related to youth employment as much as possible, the following excerpt from an interview evokes an image of Spain more in-line with Scholten et al.'s (2018) definition of top-down, centralised governance, a mode where local governments have virtually no role in agenda-setting and policy formation:

> The strategy is thought from the decision-making levels of the employment service and local SOC officers have no decision-making power over what has been decided. (Director of a local PES office, Pallars, male)

The dependence that employment and training courses at the local level have on EU funding is yet another issue attributable to the top-down model in operation in this context. The multilevel nature of the Spanish government has resulted in a state of perpetual transition, where the government entities and bodies are frequently changing into new ones with slightly different mandates with the underlying aim of progressing the government into a better functioning system. Since the Spanish approach to employment policy also allows autonomous communities to create new training programs (following the central set of restrictions mentioned above), new training courses are initiated constantly across the country. This necessitates all local PES offices to provide the relevant paperwork each time to meet the administrative requirements for receiving

EU funding. This creates severe issues within PES offices in rural areas, since there are limited staff who are already carrying out an excess of other tasks to keep their offices functional. This process and the issues that stem from it was a theme raised more than once by the same director:

> European funds are suffocating the entities and the SOC can request the same original official documentation three years in a row because the auditing entity changes. There is no administrative muscle to back it up. It is done by the same technicians who serve young people, organise festivals, the employment officer is dedicated to the justifications and sometimes they have been robbed of money for a bill that has not been returned or for a young person who was considered not to be registered youth. (Director of a local PES office, Pallars, male)

The lack of agency the youth have, as well as the local and regional PES, in policy design and implementation in the employment and education arena appears counterintuitive in that these bodies have access to the most valid, culturally relevant, and current information about the realities of their areas of jurisdiction. Access to this valuable information appears inconsequential, however, since the local PES are afforded very little capacity to use it as an input for refining the approach:

> They regulate, we execute, follow up, and evaluate, but we don't have the capacity to regulate in the first instance and that is what kills us. (Previous SOC coordinator, female)

Analysis of the interview material in its totality brought into focus a key element underpinning most of the comments, which was a shared recognition on the part of many of the youth and also PES workers that the current trajectory of Spanish policy is contrary to what is required for positive change, that the related issues are deep-rooted, and, accordingly, that the required changes are profound. In this connection, the following quote highlights the recognition of a SOC worker that the local institutions lack the immediate capacity to implement a bottom-up model and conveys her view of the role that politics plays in this area of policy:

> Sometimes you see that each department takes out a different summon….If I take all this money I propose only one solution for the whole territory…but of course, I don't know to what extent the administrations are sufficiently mature to be able to carry out a proposal that solves the real problems because, in the end, it's a political bet, not a technical one, because we don't decide. (SOC technician, Pallars, female)

This comment resonates with some of those previously mentioned, along with the theme of lack of resources, manpower, and general capacity these local institutions have. The SOC technician indicates these profound changes to the local institutions to facilitate their maturity as a primary prerequisite to implementing any ideal solution to solve the main problems. Further, they also suggest that the nature of policymaking severely limits the solving of the manifold problems related to youth employment, since political agendas will typically serve as the primary driving force behind how the relevant decisions are made.

4.3. Areas for Improvement

The youth in particular also articulated several instances where they envisioned opportunity and potential emerging from the existing systems, such as the evolution of the current operationalisation of training course

design into a more participatory format. The general view of the youth, as conveyed through the interviews, indicated that if rural PES were given the authority and capacity to operate in a more decentralised manner, they could use this autonomy to take advantage of the strengths inherent to rural areas, such as the strong networks that exist in these locales as well as the natural resources that can stimulate employment and training, and draw on these strengths to assist youth to advance on their career paths. Further, they expressed that if they are given a platform to voice their experiences, views, concerns, and feedback, this will gradually shape the employment and educational reality of rural areas to the needs of these young people:

> The most participative model is the key because it is easy to weave a network between the people here; perhaps it is a way to make it more horizontal, so that everyone is part of it. I imagine it as more participatory, that you can end up deciding what is happening in the territory and which training offers you will end up having. (Youth, Pallars, female, 23)

Another youth described an instance in their locality where a more democratic approach was taken in deciding how a set of activities was implemented on one particular occasion. Although such a system is not applied to training courses in this region, it provided this youth with a window into the potential benefits of the successful functioning of such a system:

> They had a list of topics and they made a form and you answered what you were most interested in and the ones that got the most votes were the ones that were done and of course you can see that what you are going to do is of interest. (Youth, Pallars, female, 25)

5. Conclusions

In this article, we set out to analyse the functioning of employment policy in rural Spain, through an analysis of the history of these policies, an inspection of the governmental structure, and by capturing the voices of the various stakeholders related to employment and training outcomes in rural Catalonia. Through these means, we aimed to shed light on the effect of recent changes in the governmental structure, in Spain, on these outcomes and provide an outlook on how the current implementation of the Youth Guarantee may be impacting rural youth "on the ground." The research revealed that the input from these stakeholders is very much in line with common criticisms of top-down government models in the wider literature. At face value, the decentralised governance structure of the autonomous communities should result in a more horizontal format for how the youth guarantee is disseminated in Spain. The findings portray a more vertical reality that, in effect, appears to be conducive to rural-urban disparity.

It has already been established that how the Youth Guarantee is designed can lend itself to socio-spatial inequalities in the Spanish context (Emmanouil et al., 2023). The results of this article suggest that the recentralisation process on a national level across Spain may accelerate this phenomenon. The issues stemming from these processes are significantly felt by youth and local PES, and the characteristics of rural areas only magnify these issues. The most recent directives pertaining to youth employment occurred at the national level and apply all across Spain (Ministry of Labour, Migration and Social Security, 2019), meaning that despite the slight differences in levels of autonomy of these 17 communities of Spain, the new restrictions are in force nationwide. Since Catalonia is one of the autonomous communities in Spain that has the highest degree of regional authority (Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021), the experiences of youth in Catalonia

can likely be shared across wider rural Spain, indicating that the validity of these results could be extrapolated nationwide.

Analysis of literature and documentation, along with the interview material, suggests that the central government is the major responsible for the lack of employment and educational options in rural Spain. The perspectives of PES workers reflect that the new national framework—and to an even greater degree, the local government—severely restricts the autonomous communities in effecting the necessary change, rendering them both partially obsolete. Within the rural context, these institutions struggle to put to task effectively the functions with which they are charged.

Rural PES feel as though their resources are severely limited, that they are overworked, and that despite all the tasks they are responsible for related to the upkeep of the services they offer, they still have very limited power or influence to help local youth. Designing new programs that effectively fill a niche in the job markets does not appear to them as a realistic possibility due to the constraints that recent policy changes have placed on them, and the government format lacks a platform for feedback to be issued upwards, which leaves little agency for them to effect changes of any kind.

Finally, rural youth expressed a lack of awareness of, and lack of confidence in, PES and their services. They also expressed that they are not given a voice and felt that their voice is important for policy evolution to lead to an improvement in their situations. The tourism industry is, according to the youths, directly interfering with their prospects. They do not perceive that they are presented with solutions that will function for them in their cultural context and, accordingly, recognise the promise that lies in a more horizontal, participatory system.

The recent policy movements at the European level, however, bring promise in this area. The Spanish government announced in 2021 its Youth Guarantee Plus Resolution for 2021–2027, in which they stipulate the promotion of "the development of a community of horizontal and vertical cooperation" for the different administrations and bodies involved in active labour market policies (Ministry of Labour, Migration and Social Security, 2021). This new resolution carries the potential that employment policy will be less constraining in rural areas. However, we cannot expect that any attempt to integrate a more bottom-up approach will come quickly, since institutional change occurs gradually in the vast majority of instances (Easterly, 2008).

Our findings also resonate with other rural studies across the EU; a study from 2022 indicated that in Portugal, Italy, and Romania no measures had been developed specifically for rural NEETs under the Youth Guarantee, implying a distinct absence of this group from the policy debate (Petrescu et al., 2022). In Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, however, development initiatives that distinctly target rural NEET youth from the local level have shown promise, but have also highlighted further the need to address the issues typical among youth in these areas (Kvieskienė et al., 2021).

Going forward, it would be important for future research to elaborate on how policy in Spain can continue to evolve for it to be shaped by the views of youth. Specifically, research could aim at capturing the voices of national PES to gather their perspectives and experiences on the rural dimension, as this could certainly provide more insight into the contrast between how the policies are envisioned and how they take form on the ground. It also seems pertinent for research to focus on the distinguishing features of top-down and bottom-up models through, for example, rural case studies, which could place the research from this article in a more

distinct context but could also elaborate further on the rural-urban debate at large. For policymakers, since the active labour market policies in Spain evidently fail to take into consideration rural areas, it seems clear that these measures must be adapted to allow rural courses to function, perhaps by modifying the requirements and making them less constrictive to rural areas. Further, policies must facilitate the provision of local offices with additional resources, also commensurate with the exigencies brought on by any policy adaptations made, in order to provide a smooth and efficient transition to this end. Finally, it appears crucial for policymakers to include the voices of youth and local PES in the policy debate; engaging them in a dialogical process that evolves in conjunction with the situation on the ground could ensure policymakers are provided with the most faithful reflection of the reality as it evolves.

Within Spain, bringing these factors to the centre of the relevant discourses is essential for researchers, politicians, and policymakers if the lofty goals of the Youth Guarantee are to be met in every intended sense.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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The Youth Guarantee, Vulnerability, and Social Exclusion Among NEETs in Southern Europe

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Abstract

Young people neither in employment, education, or training (NEETs) are particularly vulnerable to social and economic exclusion. Indeed, recognition of this fact was a key motivating factor underlying the development of the Youth Guarantee. This article uses data from the EU Labour Force Survey and EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions to examine how the characteristics of the NEET population and their associated vulnerability to social exclusion vary across different sub-groups of young NEETs and how this has changed in Italy, Portugal, and Spain since 2015. The analysis focuses on the determinants of NEET status, youth vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion, and also examines the propensity of young NEETs to engage with public employment services in order to assess the extent to which young people most at risk of social exclusion are within the purview of the Youth Guarantee's activities. The article highlights how the composition and vulnerability of young NEETs have altered between 2015 and 2021. While the risks of poverty and social exclusion of long-term unemployed NEETs have remained unchanged since 2015, the vulnerability of the most at-risk subgroup of young people, those who are NEET due to family responsibilities, has become more pronounced. Moreover, the engagement with public employment services of the most at-risk NEET sub-groups has remained persistently low. The findings suggest that greater efforts are needed to remove the obstacles to labour market re-integration faced by the most vulnerable groups within the purview of the programme and, above all, young women with family responsibilities.

Keywords

family responsibilities; NEET; social exclusion; Youth Guarantee; youth labour markets; youth unemployment

1. Introduction

The launch of the Youth Guarantee (YG) in 2013, under which EU member states committed to providing young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) with quality educational, training, and employment opportunities (Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013, 2013) considerably broadened the scope of youth employment policy. Its focus on the NEET population explicitly targeted all young people who were not employed or studying, not just those amongst them who were actively seeking work. Initially covering young people aged 15–24, in 2020, all EU countries further committed to the implementation of a reinforced YG to support young NEETs under 30 in this group (Council Recommendation of 30 October 2020, 2020). The YG was based on the explicit aim to prevent the long-term social exclusion of young people, resting on the recognition that many young people who are not actively seeking work are at greater risk of social exclusion than many who are.

Young NEETs are a highly heterogeneous group, with extremely diverse characteristics and differing needs in terms of supporting their successful integration into the labour market. Recognition of this diversity is an important element in designing appropriate interventions and has also led to the concept itself being criticised as a basis for intervention (Furlong, 2006). The diversity of NEETs also applies to their vulnerability to social and economic exclusion, which is likely to vary, not just across "types" of NEET but also over time and space. Acknowledging the diversity of NEET youth, this article examines the relationship between NEET status, vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion, and interactions with public employment services (PES) through which the YG's interventions are accessed.

The article examines trends and characteristics of young NEETs in Italy, Spain, and Portugal from 2015 to 2021. Using data from the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS), it disaggregates the NEET population into the seven subgroups proposed by Eurofound and analyses the changing relationship between different forms of NEET and individual characteristics. Cross-sectional EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) data is used to identify the subgroups of young NEETs most at risk, using the Eurostat concept of "at risk of poverty and social exclusion" (AROPE) as the basis of analysis of youth vulnerability. Descriptive statistics are complemented by probit and multinomial logit models to explore how youth vulnerability associated with different subgroups of NEET evolved over time in the three countries. Throughout the time period considered, the YG was in operation and the article also examines the extent to which different subgroups of NEET youth vary in their interaction with PES, through which the YG was accessible to young people. Again, descriptive statistics and probit models explore the degree to which vulnerable groups of NEET youth have been accessing the mechanism delivering the YG from 2015 to 2021.

The three countries examined here—Italy, Spain, and Portugal—have all been identified as belonging to the Mediterranean/sub-protective school-to-work transition regime (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2018; Pohl & Walther, 2007). Youth labour markets in these countries have traditionally been characterised by age-based dualism with a relatively lengthy school-to-work transition, high rates of youth unemployment and NEET, along with a high degree of labour market precarity and temporary employment amongst the young. In fact, in 2013 when the YG was established, NEET rates for 15–29-year-olds in Italy, Portugal, and Spain stood at 26.0%, 16.4%, and 22.5% respectively, all above the EU27 average of 16.1% (Eurostat, 2023).

Between 2013 and 2019, following the introduction of the YG, two clear shifts occurred in NEET rates in EU countries as a whole. First, NEET rates fell significantly, by 3.5 percentage points (p.p.) on average. Second,

this reduction was entirely attributable to a reduction in youth unemployment, and the share of young people who were NEET and outside the labour market remained unchanged at 7.8%. The three countries considered in this study broadly conform to this pattern. NEET rates in all three countries decreased more than the EU average, albeit to varying extents. In Portugal and Spain, NEET rates fell by over 7 p.p. while in Italy, at 3.8 p.p., the fall was closer to the EU27 average. The cross-country differences in the share of the youth population accounted for by NEETs who were outside the labour force are substantial, while changes over time were relatively modest. Over the period, in Italy, the share fell by 1.0 p.p. (from 15.0 to 14.0%) and in Portugal by 0.9 p.p. (from 5.3 to 4.4%), while in Spain the share increased slightly from 5.9 to 6.2% (Eurostat, 2023). Despite increases witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic, by 2022 all three countries had managed to reduce NEET rates among 15–29-year-olds to below their 2019 rates. At this time only Italy had a NEET rate which, at 19.0%, was significantly above the EU27 average of 11.7% (Eurostat, 2023).

This does not imply that the YG caused these falls in youth unemployment, and hence NEET rates, but it also does not contradict the notion that the YG may have contributed. A plot of the ratio of NEET rates amongst 15–29-year-olds—the target age group of the YG in the three countries under consideration—to the NEET rates of 30–34-year-olds who did not directly benefit from the programme, illustrates the relative strength of the downward time trend for 15–29-year-olds (Figure 1). On average, between 2013 and 2022 the NEET rates of this age group decreased proportionately more than the NEET rates of 30–34-year-olds did. This was especially true of the three Southern European countries under study, but a more moderate downward trend is also visible for the EU as a whole. This is a simplistic comparison which certainly does not demonstrate a causal link between the implementation of the YG and falling NEET rates, but it is consistent with it. Of more relevance to what follows, however, is the fact observed above that falling NEET rates were entirely attributable to reductions in youth unemployment and not to any reduction in the numbers of young NEETs who were outside the labour force who, as we shall demonstrate, have become increasingly vulnerable to social exclusion relative to young unemployed NEETs.

The purpose of this article is not to undertake an impact evaluation of the YG and it does not attempt to assess the direct effect of the YG on youth NEET rates. Rather, the article uses the time frame of implementation of the YG as context for drawing together the changing nature of youth NEET populations and the degree to which the most vulnerable young people are falling within the purview of policy responses, over this period where young NEETs have become a policy priority of EU member states.

Restricting attention to the period and countries under study, between 2015 and 2021 NEET rates decreased in all three countries: by 2.6 p.p. in Italy, 3.7 in Portugal, and 4.6 in Spain. For Italy and Portugal but not for Spain, these reductions were slightly larger than the corresponding falls in the NEET rates of 30–34-year-olds which were 2.0, 2.1, and 5.2 p.p. respectively. As already observed, these reductions in NEET rates were driven primarily by significant reductions in youth unemployment, while the number of young NEETs who were outside the labour force remained relatively constant.

The analysis presented here first confirms that, for all three countries under study, and in line with the findings in the wider literature, the probability of being NEET increases with age, falls with educational attainment, and is higher amongst migrants than amongst native-born young people. Moreover, the differences in the probability of being NEET between less and more educated young people widened between 2015 and 2021 in Italy and Portugal.

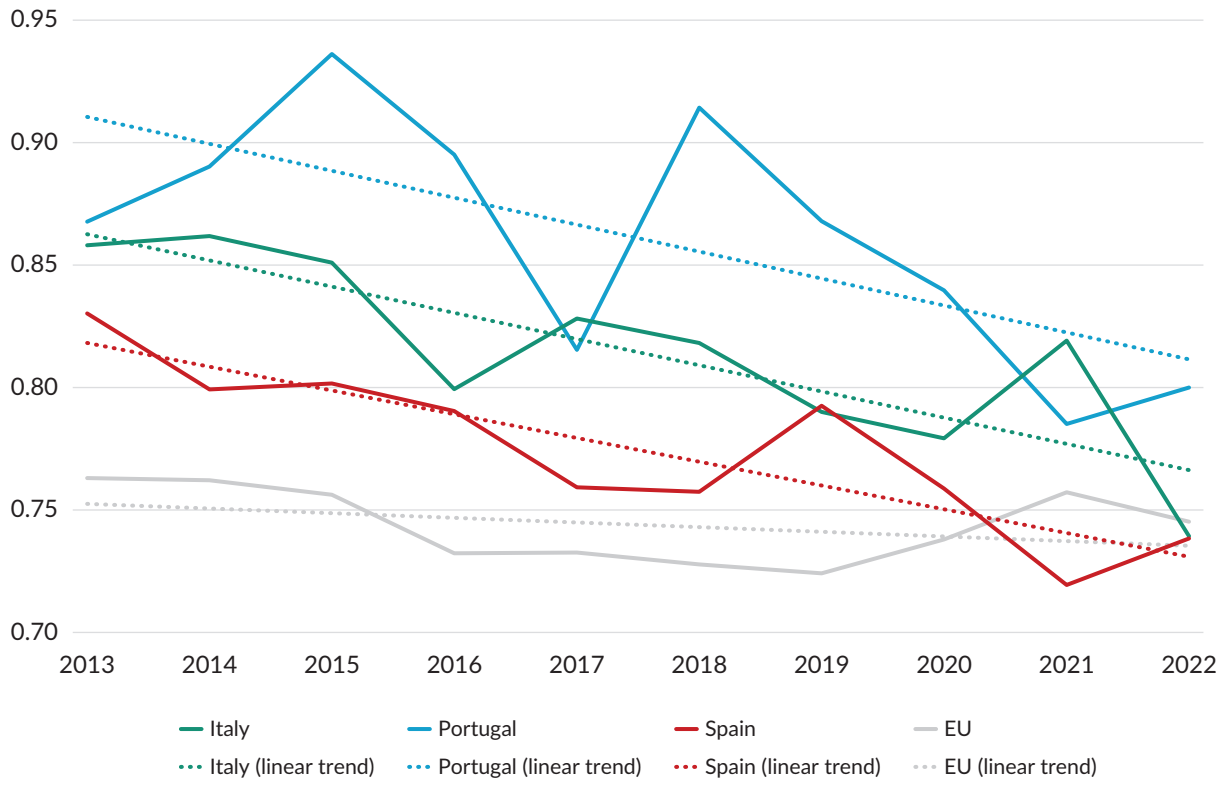

Figure 1. Ratio of NEET rates of 15–29-year-olds to the NEET rates of 30–34-year-olds in the EU, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, between 2013 and 2022. Source: Calculated from NEET rates reported in the Eurostat (2023) database.

The analysis of the risk of poverty and social exclusion associated with different forms of NEET highlights that, while there is some cross-country variation, vulnerability to social exclusion is most pronounced in all three countries among young NEETs due to family responsibilities, who tend to be young women. Significant vulnerability, albeit to varying degrees, is also observable amongst the long-term unemployed and discouraged NEETs, as well as amongst young NEETs due to illness or disability. Over the lifetime of the YG, vulnerability has become more polarised and the relative disadvantage associated with being NEET due to family responsibilities increased. In contrast, the reduction in long-term unemployment, above all in Portugal and Spain, has been accompanied by a reduction in the vulnerability associated with it.

The registration rates of young NEETs with PES declined between 2015 and 2021 in Italy, Portugal, and Spain. There is, however, substantial variation in PES registration rates, both across NEET subgroups and across the three countries. PES registration is more likely among the unemployed, and being NEET due to family responsibilities, illness or disability, as well as other reasons is associated with a much lower probability of being registered. As registration with PES is the means through which young people can access the offering of the YG, the analysis suggests that more attention is needed to facilitate the access of young people in the most vulnerable subgroups of NEET to the support of the YG.

With countries currently revising their Youth Employment Strategies, following the extension of the YG in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is an opportune time to better understand how the NEET population has changed under the YG, who are the young people not engaging with the YG's offering, and which young

NEETs remain most vulnerable today. Further investigation is clearly needed. Cross-sectional datasets are limited in their ability to capture such dynamic and variable situations as NEET status and social exclusion, and longitudinal analysis of how diverse young NEETs experience vulnerability and engage in available interventions under the YG would shed further insight. However, it is evident from the analysis presented in this article that greater efforts are required to remove obstacles to educational and labour market participation of young people who are most vulnerable and furthest from it.

2. Theoretical Background

The share of young people who are not in employment, education, or training—the NEET rate—is straightforwardly defined by its title, comprising all young people aged 15–29 who are not working and not studying or in training. This includes the unemployed (excluding those who are also in education) plus all young people outside the labour market as traditionally defined, who are also not studying or in training (O'Higgins et al., 2023). The NEET rate is increasingly used as a proxy for the state of youth labour markets (Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016). The concept has gained considerable traction in recent years, offering an internationally comparable indicator that captures a more diverse picture than the youth unemployment rate, reflecting different situations of young people both inside and outside the labour market (Furlong, 2006; Holte et al., 2019).

A recurring theme in discussions of the NEET concept regards the heterogeneity of the population it captures (Furlong, 2006; Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016; O'Higgins et al., 2023). A prominent critique of the NEET concept is the merging of distinct groups of youth (Ralston et al., 2022). Young NEETs are by definition what they are *not* (Yates & Payne, 2006), and the population captured by its wide net is characterised by different barriers to engaging in the labour market. Diverse conditions, from local labour market demand to an individual's health to their household caring responsibilities, determine the extent to which education and employment opportunities are accessible to young people (Furlong, 2006). Identifying the varied conditions that lead to NEET status for this heterogeneous group of young people is a crucial step in developing appropriate policy interventions (MacDonald, 2011).

Responding to the recognition that the NEET concept's utility in policy requires a nuanced understanding of the factors underpinning it, the concept has been disaggregated. Mascherini and Ledermaier (2016) propose a seven-fold subcategorisation of the NEET population. This comprises three types of NEET who are actively participating in the labour market and four who are not. NEETs in the labour force include the short-term unemployed, the long-term unemployed, and re-entrants. NEETs outside the labour force are further categorised into discouraged workers, young people who are NEET due to family responsibilities, young people who are NEET due to illness/disability, and a final residual category of youth who are NEET due to other reasons (Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016).

A key policy-relevant characteristic of NEET status is its duration dependence; being NEET today increases the likelihood of being NEET tomorrow (O'Higgins et al., 2023). Indeed, one of the explicit motivations underlying the development of the YG was to prevent the scarring of young people's longer-term prospects associated with long periods spent outside employment or education (Ralston et al., 2022). This concern with the long-term social exclusion of young people has been expressed in the initial formulation of the YG which was to ensure that "all young people…receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued

education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education" (Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013, 2013).

Taken together, these considerations suggest that young NEETs are vulnerable to the adverse long-term social and economic effects of their current labour market status, and, at the same time, the degree of vulnerability to poverty and exclusion is likely to vary according to the subgroup of NEET (Mussida & Sciulli, 2023). In this context, a disaggregated approach to the NEET population is not only important to understanding the many drivers of NEET status, but also the varied degrees of vulnerability associated with it (MacDonald, 2011).

Moreover, although social exclusion can be a nebulous concept, it is very clearly a dynamic one (Atkinson & Hills, 1998). A number of analyses have emphasised the complex interrelation between poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion over time (e.g., Gallie et al., 2003). This has led naturally to the analysis of the trajectories of young people's experiences in and out of the labour market using longitudinal data in order to provide a more complete understanding of such dynamics (e.g., Berigel et al., 2023; Berloffa et al., 2018). The number of young people who are NEET (and who belong to any specific NEET sub-group) at any one time is the net outcome of inflows to and outflows from that state prior to that point in time. Analysing transitions between states can be an effective way of better understanding these dynamics. In this way, a more complete understanding of the nature of the relationships between social isolation, poverty, and labour market marginalisation as they evolve over individuals' lifetimes is possible.

The ambition here, however, is more modest and the focus slightly different. One implication of the persistence and mutual reinforcement of the drivers of vulnerability and social exclusion concerns the importance of early experiences for outcomes later in life. On this basis, we confine our attention to cross-sectional analyses and examine how the vulnerability associated with specific individual characteristics and states of being vary over time and space. Although this means we cannot study transitions, it does allow us to make use of much larger datasets and thus be more precise about the specific characteristics which are the focus of investigation. Our starting point is the hypothesis that vulnerability to exclusion is not just attributable in an immutable way to broadly identifiable groups within the NEET category but may also vary with the economic and institutional environment. Related recent work has drawn attention to the importance of sub-national regional variations in youth labour market outcomes (Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021; Scandurra et al., 2021). Here we apply cross-sectional methods to examine commonalities and differences in vulnerability observable amongst the different subgroups of young NEETs and how these have evolved over time in three countries which share some important institutional characteristics. We take as given the self-reinforcing nature of young people's status and examine the extent to which different sub-groups of NEET are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and how, during the lifetime of the YG to date, this has evolved.

3. Data and Methodology

The analysis presented here uses cross-sectional micro-data from both the EU-LFS and the EU-SILC in order to shed light on the relationship between NEET subgroups, youth vulnerability, and registration of young people with the PES in Italy, Portugal, and Spain focusing on the period between 2015 and 2021. The data presented are weighted estimates reflecting the total population of the three countries included in the analysis. We explore the issues econometrically with binary probit and multinomial logit models. The results of the

probit models are presented as marginal effects and the results of the multinomial logit model as average marginal effects.

Four relationships are explored through descriptive statistics and simple econometric models. In particular:

- Probit models of the relationship between individual characteristics and the probability of young people being NEET;
- Multinomial logit models of the relationship between individual characteristics and NEET subgroup membership amongst young NEETs;
- Probit models of the relationship between NEET subgroup membership and individual vulnerability;
- Probit models of the relationship between NEET subgroup membership and registration with the PES.

In each case, the results of separate estimations are reported for each country and relevant time period. The purpose of the analysis is to identify associations between the phenomena of interest, rather than to unequivocally identify causality in these relationships. The variations over time, space, and individual characteristics which emerge allow policy-relevant inferences to be drawn on the nature of these relationships.

Young people include those aged 15–29 (inclusive) which corresponds to the target group of the YG in these countries. Young NEETs are defined as specified above and are further categorised into subgroups using the approach proposed by Eurofound (Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016). In addition to NEET and its subgroups, the analysis includes a basic set of explanatory variables that have been found to be important determinants of NEET and which are also routinely collected by PES when young people register for the YG, specifically, sex, age, educational attainment, urban/rural location, and country of birth. Educational attainment is harmonised across countries using the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Descriptive statistics of the youth population and their characteristics as reflected by the EU-LFS and EU-SILC samples used in the analysis are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Vulnerability is identified using the Eurostat (2022a) AROPE indicator which is based on three criteria. The three dimensions comprise individuals who (a) live in households with low disposable income, (b) are experiencing severe material and social deprivation, and/or (c) live in households with a very low work intensity. Experiencing at least one of these dimensions of AROPE means that a young person is considered at risk of poverty or social exclusion. One important limitation of the EU-SILC data is that it does not allow the separate identification of discouraged workers who wish to work but have given up looking for it. Discouraged NEETs are subsumed into either short-term or long-term unemployment, dependent on the duration of their current period of not being in employment.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of EU-LFS data.

EU-LFS	Italy			Portugal			Spain		
	2015	2019	2021	2015	2019	2021	2015	2019	2021
Youth sample size	79,982	74,250	66,396	24,076	21,055	17,550	15,501	13,394	13,366
Youth characteristics (weighted percentage of youth population)									
In education	45.9	46.1	46.0	47.3	45.2	50.2	47.5	47.9	50.2
In employment	28.7	31.9	31.2	39.5	45.7	40.3	33.7	37.8	35.6
NEET	25.4	22.0	22.8	13.2	9.2	9.5	18.8	14.3	14.2
Short-term unemployed	3.5	3.1	2.7	4.2	2.8	2.8	5.6	4.6	5.3
Long-term unemployed	6.6	4.4	4.1	4.2	1.8	2.0	7.0	2.6	2.7
Reentrants	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.7	1.2	0.4
Discouraged	3.9	2.8	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.4
NEET due to family responsibilities	3.3	3.3	3.0	0.8	1.1	0.5	2.1	2.3	0.8
NEET due to illness/disability	0.8	1.0	1.0	1.1	0.9	1.3	1.3	1.8	1.7
NEET due to other reasons	6.7	6.9	10.3	1.8	1.5	2.2	1.5	1.7	3.0
Location									
Urban	75.8	76.5	84.2	75.0	77.9	75.3	73.7	87.8	88.1
Rural	24.2	23.5	15.8	25.0	22.1	24.7	26.3	12.2	11.9
Sex									
Male	51.1	51.7	51.5	50.5	50.5	50.7	51.3	51.4	50.7
Female	48.9	48.3	48.5	49.5	49.5	49.3	48.7	48.6	49.3
Age group									
15–19	31.2	31.9	32.3	33.5	33.5	32.5	31.4	34.5	34.0
20–24	33.4	32.9	33.2	32.9	33.2	34.3	31.7	31.2	32.3
25–29	35.4	35.2	34.5	33.7	33.3	33.2	36.8	34.3	33.7
Education level									
ISCED 0–2	41.5	40.2	40.0	44.3	37.6	30.6	43.2	38.1	39.7
ISCED 3–4	47.2	46.6	45.8	37.6	42.2	42.8	32.2	34.8	34.0
ISCED 5–8	11.4	13.2	14.2	18.1	20.2	26.6	24.6	27.2	26.3
Place of birth									
Born in the country	87.6	88.6	89.1	92.3	91.9	95.3	83.6	83.2	81.7
Born outside the country	12.5	11.5	10.9	7.7	8.1	4.7	16.4	16.8	18.3

Notes: When young people are both in employment and education, they are considered in the "in employment" category in accordance with the standard International Labour Organization approach to labour market indicators; similarly, NEETs exclude young people who are both unemployed and in education or training. Source: Calculated on weighted EU-LFS data for 2015, 2019, and 2021 (Eurostat, 2022b).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of EU-SILC data.

EU-SILC	Italy		Portugal		Spain	
	2015	2021	2015	2021	2015	2021
Youth sample size	5,672	4,021	3,012	3,559	4,607	6,881
Youth characteristics (weighted percentage of youth population)						
In education	34.7	36.2	40.2	41.7	44.1	45.8
In employment	31.9	33.6	41.6	46.1	32.6	37.8
NEET	33.5	30.1	18.2	12.2	23.3	16.4
Short-term unemployed	4.3	3.3	5.2	5.2	7.4	5.3
Long-term unemployed	12.8	9.8	9.0	4.5	12.9	6.3
NEET due to family responsibilities	6.4	3.0	0.9	0.3	0.8	1.5
NEET due to illness/disability	0.6	0.8	0.6	1.1	0.7	0.6
NEET due to other reasons	9.4	13.2	2.4	1.1	1.5	2.7
Location						
Urban	81.3	83.0	75.2	77.9	72.3	88.9
Rural	18.7	17.0	24.8	22.1	27.7	11.1
Sex						
Male	51.2	51.8	50.4	50.5	50.8	51.0
Female	48.8	48.2	49.6	49.5	49.2	49.0
Age group						
15–19	26.5	27.6	28.1	27.9	26.8	29.3
20–24	35.6	35.7	35.5	36.6	36.0	35.9
25–29	37.9	36.7	36.4	35.5	37.2	34.9
Education level						
ISCED 0–2	29.9	31.3	44.4	26.6	42.5	29.5
ISCED 3–4	53.5	51.2	38.0	47.3	33.6	38.6
ISCED 5–8	16.6	17.5	17.6	26.2	23.9	31.9
Place of birth						
Born in the country	88.8	89.1	91.9	93.8	85.2	82.3
Born outside the country	11.2	10.9	8.1	6.2	14.8	17.7

Source: Calculated on weighted EU-SILC data for 2015 and 2021 (Eurostat, 2022c).

4. Characteristics and Determinants of NEET Status

Factors associated with being NEET are summarised in a binary probit model where NEET = 1 (Table 3). We report the results separately by country, for three years (2015, 2019, and 2021). The probit models allow us to summarise the factors associated with NEET status and how these vary across time and country.

The main differences across individual characteristics concern age and educational attainment. Previous work has consistently found that the probability of being NEET increases with age and decreases with educational attainment, especially in high-income countries (e.g., O'Higgins et al., 2023). Also here, NEET rates (conditional on educational attainment) increase with age; however, it is worth observing that the

disparity between younger and older age groups has decreased between 2015 and 2021. The age-related gap is greatest in Italy. Similarly, (conditional on age) NEET rates decrease with higher levels of educational attainment. In contrast to age, the relative disadvantage associated with low educational attainment has increased between 2015 and 2021 in Italy and Portugal, and, although somewhat reduced, remains relatively high also in Spain. In 2021, controlling for other characteristics, the difference in the probability of being NEET between those with only basic education compared to those with tertiary qualifications is 9 p.p. in Portugal, 14 p.p. in Spain, and 19 p.p. in Italy.

Table 3. Probability of NEET status (marginal effects): 2015, 2019, and 2021.

	Italy			Portugal			Spain		
	2015	2019	2021	2015	2019	2021	2015	2019	2021
Location									
Urban	(base)			(base)			(base)		
Rural	–0.01*	0.01*	–0.03*	0.02*	0.02*	0.01*	0.02*	0.01*	–0.01*
Sex									
Male	(base)			(base)			(base)		
Female	0.03*	0.05*	0.05*	0.03*	0.02*	0.01*	0.02*	0.02*	0.00*
Age group									
15–19	(base)			(base)			(base)		
20–24	0.24*	0.19*	0.18*	0.14*	0.11*	0.12*	0.15*	0.11*	0.13*
25–29	0.27*	0.25*	0.23*	0.14*	0.10*	0.14*	0.21*	0.15*	0.17*
Education level									
ISCED 0–2	(base)			(base)			(base)		
ISCED 3–4	–0.09*	–0.11*	–0.09*	–0.04*	–0.05*	–0.06*	–0.18*	–0.15*	–0.12*
ISCED 5–8	–0.15*	–0.17*	–0.19*	–0.06*	–0.06*	–0.09*	–0.20*	–0.17*	–0.14*
Place of birth									
Born in the country	(base)			(base)			(base)		
Born outside the country	0.06*	0.04*	0.06*	0.04*	0.03*	0.04*	0.05*	0.05*	0.07*

Notes: * Marginal effects statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. Source: Calculated on weighted EU-LFS data for 2015, 2019, and 2021 (Eurostat, 2022b).

Migrant youth (as proxied by young people born outside the country) are more likely to be NEET than native-born young people, though the marginal effects are smaller than might be expected from a simple inspection of the relative NEET rates. In 2021, the difference in NEET rates between native and foreign-born youth calculated from the EU-LFS data was 13 p.p. in Italy, 5 p.p. in Portugal, and 12 p.p. in Spain—compared to the estimated marginal effects of 6, 4, and 7 p.p. respectively. This suggests that foreign-born youth also tend to have other characteristics associated with a higher probability of being NEET. In Italy and Spain, this could be partially explained by the fact that the youth population born outside the country have much lower levels of educational attainment compared to their counterparts born in the country. For example, based on EU-LFS data, in Italy in 2021, 53.0% of young migrants had only basic education (ISCED 0–2) compared to 38.4% of native-born youth. Similarly, the corresponding shares in Spain were 46.7% and 38.1% respectively. In Portugal, however, following Covid-19 and the dramatic

changes in the migrant population it precipitated, the population of young people born outside the country did not have lower educational attainment compared to Portugal-born youth. Just 24.3% of foreign-born youth had only basic education and 31.2% had advanced educational attainment (ISCED 5–8) compared to 30.9% and 24.4% respectively among native-born young people.

5. NEET Subgroups and Their Determinants

As observed above, the reasons for being NEET are many and various. This heterogeneity has long been identified as a challenge to using the concept as a basis for effective policy intervention among vulnerable youth (Furlong, 2006). A key issue dealt with in this article concerns how this heterogeneity relates to vulnerability. As a first step, we look at the relationship between individual characteristics and the subgroups of NEETs proposed by Mascherini and Ledermaier (2016).

There are commonalities as well as differences in the trends of the relative and absolute sizes of the subgroups in the three countries (Figure 2). Between 2015 and 2021, there was a substantial fall in the number of long-term unemployed young people in all three countries; this was over 40% in Italy, over 50% in Portugal, and over 60% in Spain. In all three countries, the share of NEETs accounted for by the long-term unemployed also fell significantly. For example, in Spain, the share of NEETs accounted for by the long-term unemployed decreased from 37.3 to 18.9% over the period. This in itself should be seen as an important achievement in these countries.

The labour market shock of the Covid-19 pandemic had pronounced effects on short-term unemployment in Spain and Portugal. The number of short-term unemployed NEET in the latter country returned to its pre-pandemic level in 2021, though the legacy of Covid-19 persisted in the higher levels of short-term unemployment in Spain.

Mirroring the decrease in long-term unemployment, the number and share of young NEETs that are NEET due to other reasons have increased in all three countries. In Portugal and Spain, the short-term unemployed are the dominant subgroup of NEETs. In Italy, the residual NEET due to other reasons category had by 2021 become the largest subgroup, accounting for 45.1% of NEETs. This suggests that more investigation is needed into what underlies these “other reasons.”

A multinomial logit model of the different NEET subcategories provides further insight into the nature of the differences among subgroups of young NEETs (Table 4). The table reports the average marginal effects of different characteristics on the probability of being in each NEET subgroup (as opposed to any other NEET subgroup), relative to the base category of the explanatory variable.

Across all three countries, the probability of being in long-term unemployment increases with age. As one might expect, getting older is also associated with a higher likelihood of being NEET due to family responsibilities for young women, especially in Italy. In contrast, NEETs in the younger age group are more likely to be NEET for other reasons across all three countries, and this association is particularly pronounced among young women. While the probability of being NEET due to illness/disability increases with age in Italy and Portugal, a negative relationship is observable for young NEETs in Spain.

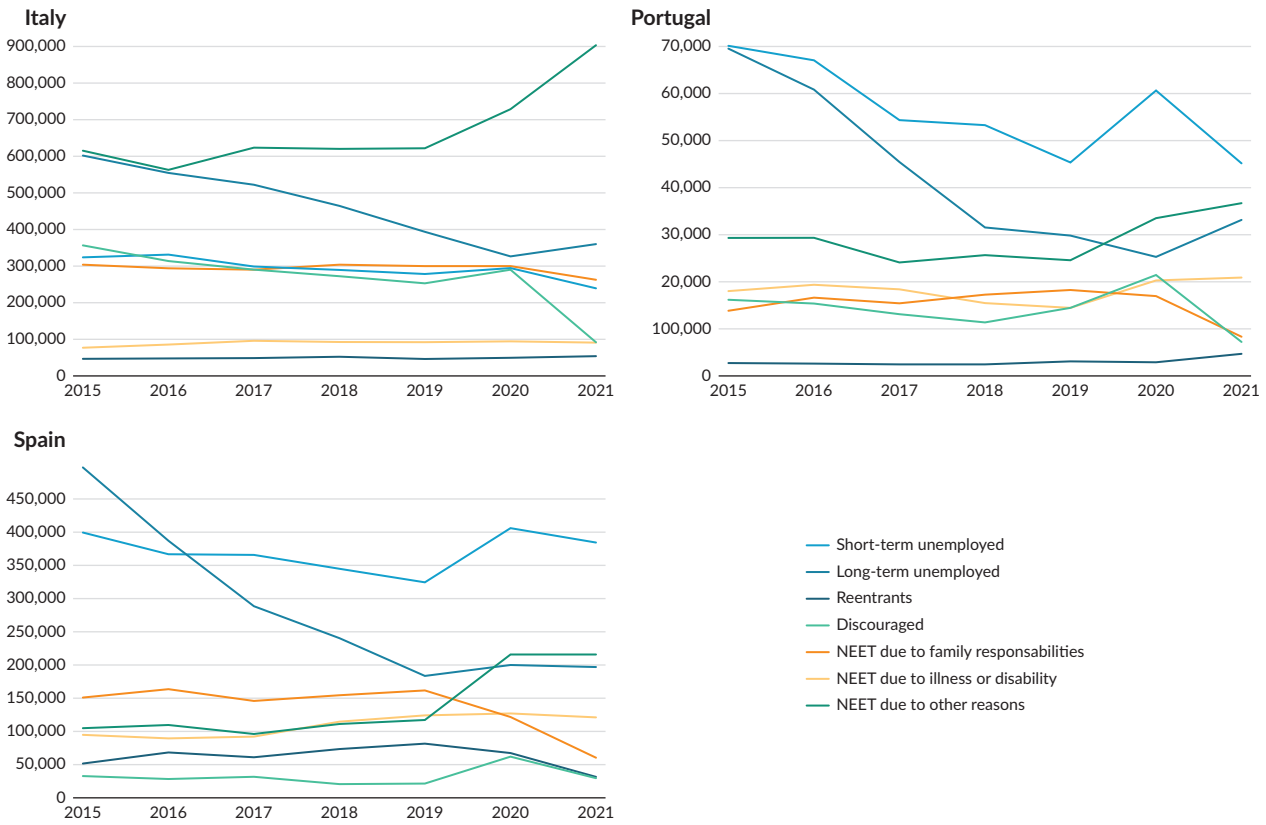

Figure 2. NEET youth by subgroup in Italy, Portugal, and Spain, 2015–2021. Source: Calculated on weighted EU-LFS data for 2015–2021 (Eurostat, 2022b).

The association between educational attainment and the NEET subgroup is also fairly consistent across countries. In all three countries, higher educational attainment is associated with a lower likelihood of being in long-term unemployment or being NEET due to illness/disability, or for young women being NEET due to family responsibilities. Conversely, in all three countries, higher educational attainment is associated with a greater probability of being in short-term unemployment.

The average marginal effect of urban/rural locations tends to be small, with a few exceptions. For example, rural young men in Spain are more likely to be in short-term unemployment compared to their urban counterparts. Young people born outside the country have much more variable associations by gender with a probability of belonging to different NEET subgroups. For young women in Portugal, migrant status is strongly associated with long-term unemployment, and for young women in Spain and Italy, it is associated with being NEET due to family responsibilities.

Table 4. Multinomial logit model of NEET subgroup membership (average marginal effects).

	Short term unemployment		Long-term unemployment		Reentrants		Discouraged		NEET due to family responsibilities		NEET due to illness/disability		NEET due to other reasons	
Italy	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Location														
Urban	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
Rural	0.01*	0.00	–0.04*	–0.03*	0.01*	0.01*	0.01*	0.01*	0.00	–0.01*	0.00	–0.01*	0.00*	0.03*
Age group														
15–19	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
20–24	0.00	0.00*	0.14*	0.14*	0.02*	0.01*	0.03*	0.02*	0.00	0.11*	0.04*	0.03*	–0.23*	–0.32*
25–29	–0.01*	–0.03*	0.18*	0.11*	0.02*	0.01*	0.07*	0.04*	0.00*	0.32*	0.05*	0.03*	–0.30*	–0.48*
Education level														
ISCED 0–2	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
ISCED 3–4	0.07*	0.05*	–0.02*	0.03*	0.01*	0.02*	0.02*	0.03*	0.00*	–0.13*	–0.05*	–0.04*	–0.03*	0.03*
ISCED 5–8	0.11*	0.13*	–0.11*	–0.04*	0.02*	0.03*	–0.03*	0.01*	–0.01*	–0.25*	–0.08*	–0.05*	0.12*	0.16*
Place of birth														
Born in the country	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
Born outside the country	0.09*	0.04*	0.01*	–0.07*	–0.01*	–0.01*	0.00	–0.03*	0.01*	0.21*	–0.01*	–0.01*	–0.09*	–0.13*

Table 4. (Cont.) Multinomial logit model of NEET subgroup membership (average marginal effects).

	Short term unemployment		Long-term unemployment		Reentrants		Discouraged		NEET due to family responsibilities		NEET due to illness/disability		NEET due to other reasons	
Portugal	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Location														
Urban	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		omitted		(base)		(base)	
Rural	–0.03*	–0.02*	0.04*	–0.06*	0.00	0.00	0.02*	0.03*		0.02*	0.00	0.00	–0.03*	0.02*
Age group														
15–19	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)				(base)		(base)	
20–24	–0.07*	–0.05*	0.16*	0.19*	–0.02*	–0.04*	0.08*	0.03*		0.05*	0.03*	–0.03*	–0.17*	–0.15*
25–29	–0.18*	–0.12*	0.14*	0.18*	–0.03*	–0.03*	0.03*	0.04*		0.11*	0.14*	0.08*	–0.10*	–0.26*
Education level														
ISCED 0–2	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)				(base)		(base)	
ISCED 3–4	0.16*	0.14*	–0.03*	0.06*	0.01*	0.03*	0.01*	0.03*		0.00	–0.19*	–0.22*	0.03*	–0.03*
ISCED 5–8	0.32	0.32*	–0.05*	–0.12*	0.02*	0.05*	–0.02*	0.01*		–0.13*	–0.24*	–0.17*	–0.02*	0.04*
Place of birth														
Born in country	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)				(base)		(base)	
Born outside country	0.02*	–0.01*	–0.01	0.24*	–0.03*	0.01*	0.00	–0.05*		–0.01*	–0.13*	–0.13*	0.14*	–0.05*

Table 4. (Cont.) Multinomial logit model of NEET subgroup membership (average marginal effects).

	Short term unemployment		Long-term unemployment		Reentrants		Discouraged		NEET due to family responsibilities		NEET due to illness/disability		NEET due to other reasons	
Spain	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Location														
Urban	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
Rural	0.10*	0.02*	–0.02*	0.00*	0.02*	0.02*	0.00*	–0.03*	–0.01*	0.01*	–0.07*	–0.05*	–0.03*	0.01*
Age group														
15–19	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
20–24	0.08*	0.18*	0.06*	0.18*	0.01*	0.00*	–0.01*	0.00*	–0.04*	0.03*	–0.05*	–0.05*	–0.05*	–0.34*
25–29	0.10*	0.06*	0.13*	0.22*	0.01*	0.00*	0.00*	0.01*	–0.04*	0.08*	–0.07*	–0.04*	–0.13*	–0.33*
Education level														
ISCED 0–2	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
ISCED 3–4	0.11*	0.10*	–0.05*	–0.10*	–0.01*	0.01*	–0.02*	0.00*	0.02*	–0.05*	0.01*	–0.03*	–0.06*	0.06*
ISCED 5–8	0.12*	0.07*	0.00*	–0.09*	0.06*	0.03*	0.01*	–0.01*	0.01*	–0.05*	–0.08*	–0.08*	–0.11*	0.13*
Place of birth														
Born in country	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
Born outside country	0.02*	–0.07*	–0.09*	–0.07*	–0.02*	–0.03*	0.01*	0.01*	–0.01*	0.14*	–0.03*	–0.06*	0.12*	0.08*

Notes: * Average marginal effects statistically significant at $p < 0.05$; the model for male NEETs in Portugal omits the NEET due to family responsibility subgroup due to its small sample size. Source: Calculated on weighted EU-LFS data for 2021 (Eurostat, 2022b).

6. Vulnerability and NEET: Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion Among NEET Subgroups

A central concern here is with the relationship between the different reasons for being NEET and vulnerability—in terms of the risk of social and economic exclusion (operationalised here using the AROPE indicator)—and how this varies across time and space. Identifying the subgroups of NEET which are most at risk is a crucial step in identifying the appropriate support mechanisms to assist young people falling into these categories. Moreover, examining how these vary together with the examination of PES registration reported in Section 6 provides some indication regarding the ability of policy interventions under the YG to mitigate risks in the three countries. In this regard, it is used to make inferences as to where greater attention is needed.

Examination of youth AROPE in 2015 and 2021 for the three countries illustrates both common features but also some significant differences between them. It is immediately evident that NEET young people are more vulnerable than non-NEETs, reaffirming the justification for focusing policy interventions on this group. All subgroups of NEET in both years and in all three countries have a larger share of members who display at least one dimension of AROPE than do young people either in education or employment (Figure 3). In 2015, the prevalence of vulnerability was relatively similar and most pronounced for young NEETs in long-term unemployment (which also incorporate a substantial portion of the discouraged who cannot be separately identified in the EU-SILC data), young people who are NEET due to family responsibilities, and, in Italy and Portugal, young people who are NEET due to illness/disability. In all three countries, by 2021, NEETs due to family responsibilities emerge as the most vulnerable subgroup, usually by some distance. In Italy and Portugal, in particular, the vulnerability attached to long-term unemployment has receded between 2015 and 2021. In Italy and Portugal, both the increase in vulnerability attached to being NEET due to family responsibilities and the reduction in vulnerability associated with being in long-term unemployment is clearly statistically significant (at $p < 0.01$) even controlling for multiple testing using a Bonferroni correction (e.g., Romano et al., 2010).

Controlling for other factors using a probit model of the probability of being AROPE in at least one dimension (Table 5), the increased vulnerability of young NEETs due to family responsibilities and, in Italy and Portugal, its worsening over time emerges even more clearly. In Italy, the estimated shift in the probability of being AROPE associated with being NEET due to family responsibilities is 36 p.p. in 2021 (compared to 18 p.p. in 2015). This increase in vulnerability is even more evident in Portugal where the marginal effect is estimated at 51 p.p. in 2021 compared to 14 p.p. in 2015, a change of 37 p.p. There is a clear picture of increasing vulnerability among young NEETs due to family responsibilities, who are primarily young women.

Findings presented in Section 3 demonstrate that less educated young people are more likely to be NEET. If NEET, they are also more likely to find themselves in long-term unemployment, NEET due to illness/disability, and, if female, to be NEET due to family responsibilities. These too are precisely the NEET subgroups which are more strongly associated with being AROPE. There are some cross-country differences in the changes visible between 2015 and 2021; in Italy and Portugal, however, there is a substantial increase in the likelihood of being vulnerable amongst young people who are NEET due to family responsibilities. In Portugal and Spain, there is also a tendency towards greater vulnerability amongst the long-term unemployed. Broadly speaking, between 2015 and 2021, there has been a tendency towards an increase in vulnerability, as measured by the AROPE indicator, amongst the already more vulnerable groups.

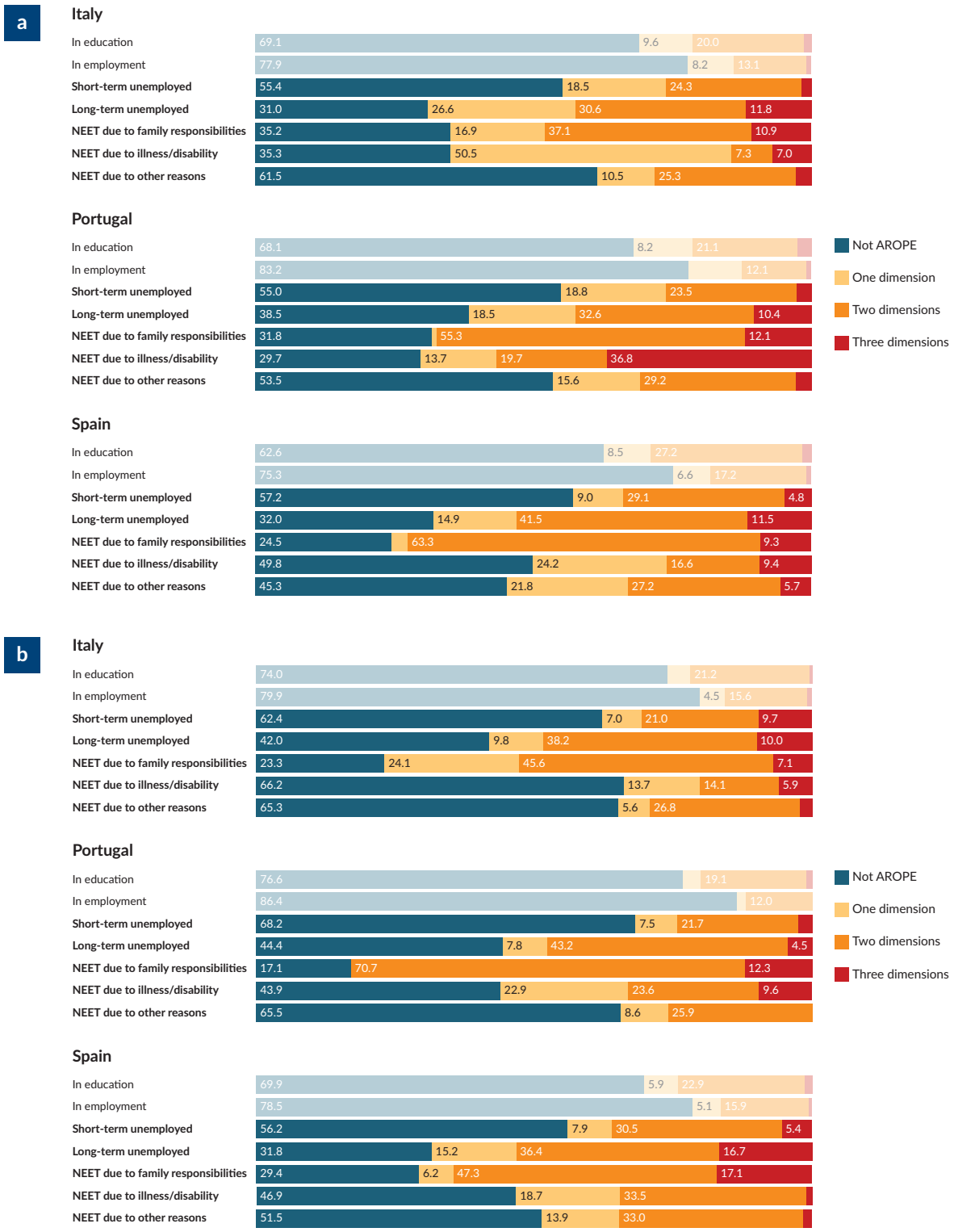

Figure 3. Share of youth AROPE by NEET subgroup: (a) 2015 and (b) 2021. Notes: It is not possible to identify discouraged workers due to the EU-SILC survey methodology, which asks respondents to self-report their employment status; as a result, a weaker definition of unemployment is used that does not check whether individuals are actively searching for, or available to, work; assuming that discouraged workers consider themselves unemployed, they will be included in the relevant unemployment group depending on how long they have been "unemployed." Source: Calculated on weighted EU-SILC data for 2015 and 2021 (Eurostat, 2022c).

Table 5. Probability of being AROPE on at least one dimension, 2015 and 2021.

	Italy				Portugal				Spain			
	2015		2021		2015		2021		2015		2021	
	with subgroups	without subgroups	with subgroups	without subgroups	with subgroups	without subgroups	with subgroups	without subgroups	with subgroups	without subgroups	with subgroups	without subgroups
NEET subgroup												
Short-term unemployed	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
Long-term unemployed	0.22*		0.17*		0.14*		0.23*		0.19*		0.21*	
NEET due to family responsibilities	0.18*		0.36*		0.14*		0.51*		0.23*		0.08*	
NEET due to illness/disability	0.09*		−0.06*		0.16*		0.14*		−0.06*		−0.02*	
NEET due to other reasons	−0.06*		−0.04*		0.02*		−0.01*		0.00		0.07*	
Gender												
Male	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
Female	0.00*	−0.01*	−0.03*	0.02*	0.02*	0.01*	−0.03*	0.00	0.03*	0.04*	−0.02*	−0.02*
Location												
Urban	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
Rural	−0.07*	−0.07*	−0.02*	−0.03*	0.02*	0.04*	0.09*	0.07*	0.04*	0.03*	−0.05*	−0.06*
Age group												
15–19	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
20–24	0.05*	0.14*	0.00	0.11*	0.03*	0.07*	−0.05*	0.01*	−0.05*	−0.02*	−0.09*	−0.08*
25–29	0.06*	0.18*	0.08*	0.23*	0.06*	0.10*	−0.15*	−0.05*	−0.14*	−0.10*	−0.06*	−0.04*
Education level												
ISCED 0–2	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
ISCED 3–4	−0.15*	−0.16*	−0.06	−0.11*	−0.16*	−0.18*	−0.17*	−0.23*	−0.23*	−0.25*	−0.08*	−0.08*
ISCED 5–8	−0.29*	−0.36*	−0.16	−0.28*	−0.23*	−0.27*	−0.22*	−0.31*	−0.35*	−0.38*	−0.26*	−0.28*
Place of birth												
Born in the country	(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)		(base)	
Born outside the country	−0.07*	−0.08*	−0.06*	−0.02*	0.24*	0.22*	0.01	0.06*	0.12*	0.15*	0.27*	0.27*

Note: * Marginal effects statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. Source: Calculated on weighted EU-SILC data for 2015 and 2021 (Eurostat, 2022c).

The association between age, lack of education, and vulnerability is also reflected in the marginal effects with and without controls for specific NEET subgroup membership. In all cases, the increased probability of being AROPE associated with being older and/or less educated is larger when controls for NEET subgroup membership are not included. This suggests that vulnerability associated with these characteristics is partially related to the NEET subgroup in which individuals with these characteristics are concentrated.

7. The Role of PES: Registration Trends and Determinants

Rates of registration with PES are an indicator of the extent to which young people are engaged with the YG. Significant differences in this are observable across the three countries. Registration rates are highest in Spain, followed by Portugal, with the lowest rates of registration with the PES recorded in Italy. In all three countries, the rate of registration of young NEETs has declined over the period 2015–2021.

In Spain and Portugal, and to a lesser extent also in Italy, higher registration rates are found among the short—and long-term unemployed, as one would expect. In Italy, a relatively small share of long-term unemployed NEETs is registered with the PES. In 2021, this stood at 35.3%, down from 53.7% in 2015. Across countries, registration rates tend to be lower among those NEET due to family responsibilities, NEET due to illness/disability, and the residual NEET due to other reasons category (Figure 4).

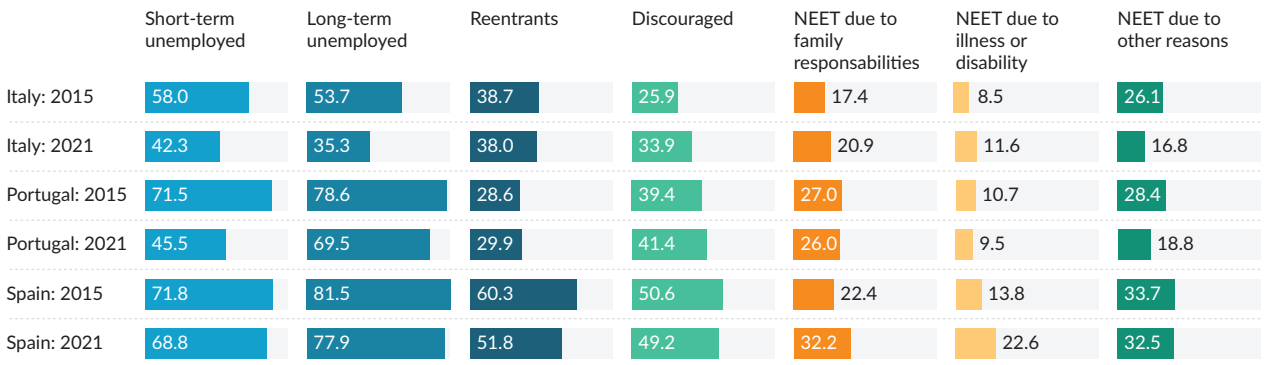

Figure 4. Rates of registration of young NEETs with the PES by NEET subgroup. Source: Calculated on weighted EU-LFS data for 2015 and 2021 (Eurostat, 2022b).

We explore the determinants of PES registration using probit models for the three countries and for the three time periods of 2015, 2019, and 2021 (Table 6). One key finding, observable also from the descriptive statistics is that consistently over time and across all three countries, the subgroups of young NEETs who are most vulnerable are those that are least likely to register with the PES. This is especially true of the discouraged, young NEETs due to family responsibilities or those who are NEET due to illness/disability. In Italy, controlling for other factors, a relatively low probability of PES registration is also evident among the other vulnerable NEET subgroup—the long-term unemployed. This divergence between short—and long-term unemployed, albeit modest, has been growing over time.

In contrast to the lower probability of PES registration emerging for vulnerable NEET subgroups, as regards individual characteristics, older and less educated NEETs who are more vulnerable to being AROPE are also

more, rather than less, likely to be registered with the PES. On the other hand, young migrants across all three countries and for all time periods are less likely to register with the PES.

Table 6. Probit model of PES registration (marginal effects).

	Italy			Portugal			Spain		
	2015	2019	2021	2015	2019	2021	2015	2019	2021
Location									
Urban	(base)			(base)			(base)		
Rural	0.04*	0.03*	0.02*	−0.04*	0.09*	0.07*	0.02*	0.09*	0.18*
NEET subgroup									
Short-term unemployed	(base)			(base)			(base)		
Long-term unemployed	−0.06*	−0.11*	−0.13*	0.06*	0.07*	0.16*	0.07*	−0.05*	0.06*
Reentrants	−0.21*	−0.08*	−0.07*	−0.43*	−0.34*	−0.18*	−0.15*	−0.19*	−0.21*
Discouraged	−0.33*	−0.20*	−0.15*	−0.32*	−0.25*	−0.12*	−0.22*	−0.41*	−0.21*
NEET due to family responsibilities	−0.39*	−0.26*	−0.27*	−0.47*	−0.33*	−0.37*	−0.50*	−0.46*	−0.38*
NEET due to illness/disability	−0.50*	−0.33*	−0.35*	−0.63*	−0.48*	−0.46*	−0.62*	−0.60*	−0.49*
NEET due to other reasons	−0.31*	−0.20*	−0.26*	−0.42*	−0.36*	−0.31*	−0.36*	−0.39*	−0.34*
Gender									
Male	(base)			(base)			(base)		
Female	−0.04*	−0.02*	−0.01*	0.06*	0.02*	0.20*	0.01*	0.08*	0.04*
Age group									
15–19	(base)			(base)			(base)		
20–24	0.11*	0.10*	0.17*	0.12*	0.14*	0.17*	0.26*	0.17*	0.15*
25–29	0.10*	0.13*	0.24*	0.19*	0.26*	0.28*	0.31*	0.34*	0.35*
Education level									
ISCED 0–2	(base)			(base)			(base)		
ISCED 3–4	0.09*	0.02*	−0.02*	0.02*	0.04*	−0.10*	−0.11*	−0.04*	−0.03*
ISCED 5–8	−0.03*	−0.10*	−0.14*	−0.02*	−0.07*	−0.20*	−0.18*	−0.09*	−0.18*
Place of birth									
Born in country	(base)			(base)			(base)		
Born outside country	−0.06*	−0.02*	−0.06*	−0.21*	−0.08*	−0.14*	−0.20*	−0.19*	−0.23*

Note: * Marginal effects statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. Source: Calculated on weighted EU-LFS data for 2015, 2019, and 2021 (Eurostat, 2022b).

8. Discussion

The analysis has examined the heterogeneity of young NEETs and how this has changed between 2015 and 2021 in the context of the implementation of the YG. The characteristics associated with NEET status and how these vary across countries are relatively stable over time. The probability of being NEET falls with individual educational attainment and increases with age. The extent to which this is true varies a little across time and space, but, for all three countries, these factors consistently have larger marginal effects than any other factor. Being born outside the country is also consistently and significantly associated with a higher likelihood of being NEET, though associated with a smaller marginal effect.

The results of the multinomial logit analysis of the association of specific individual characteristics with NEET subgroups have demonstrated that age and education are also strongly associated with belonging to specific subgroups of young NEETS: the long-term unemployed, the discouraged, young NEETs due to family responsibilities, and young NEETs due to illness/disability. These are precisely the categories of young NEETs who are more vulnerable in terms of being more susceptible to the risk of poverty or social exclusion as measured by the AROPE indicator.

Between 2015 and 2021, the number of young people in long-term unemployment fell significantly in all three countries, by just over 40% in Italy, over 50% in Portugal, and by just over 60% in Spain, whilst the share of youth who were NEET due to family responsibilities or illness/disability remained more or less unchanged. The analysis of the probability of being AROPE in at least one dimension showed that the association between vulnerability and long-term unemployment changed relatively little over the period. However, the vulnerability associated with being NEET due to family responsibilities increased substantially in Italy and Portugal, whilst remaining at a significant level also in Spain. In other words, between 2015 and 2021, long-term unemployment fell significantly as did—at least in Italy and Portugal—the vulnerability associated with it. At the same time, the prevalence of being NEET due to family responsibilities remained largely unchanged and the vulnerability associated with that status increased in Italy and Portugal.

The descriptive and econometric analysis of PES registration has shown that engagement with the PES was much less likely in Italy as a whole. More generally, PES registration is unsurprisingly much more prevalent amongst active labour force participants and especially the long-term unemployed, than among young people outside the labour market. As (especially long-term) unemployment has fallen, so too has PES registration in all three countries. To some degree, there has also been a mild increase in the tendency of discouraged and young NEETs due to family responsibilities to register between 2015 and 2021. However, this change is much less pronounced.

Perhaps the overriding finding of the analysis is that whilst the numbers and vulnerability associated with some forms of NEET have diminished over the lifetime of the YG, the vulnerability to poverty or social exclusion of others—and, above all, NEETs due to family responsibilities—has increased.

These results are of significance for the future implementation of the YG in all three countries. We have not attempted any sort of impact evaluation of the YG itself, which clearly limits the inferences that can be drawn here. Indeed, given the comprehensive nature of the YG itself and the consequent difficulties with identifying an appropriate control group uninfluenced by the implementation of the programme, rigorous

impact evaluation of the YG has proved challenging to date (O'Higgins et al., 2023), although impact evaluations that have been carried out suggest a moderate positive impact (e.g., O'Higgins & Pica, 2020). However, the greater reductions in NEET rates in Spain and Portugal may in part reflect the more effective implementation of the YG as has been suggested in other qualitative studies (e.g., Emmanouil et al., 2023; Petrescu et al., 2022). We are able to unequivocally assert, however, that the situation of NEETs outside the labour market, many of whom exhibit high vulnerability, have not seen their situation improve significantly during the lifespan of the YG to date.

9. Conclusions

The reasons that young people find themselves in NEET status are many and various. In Europe, this diversity has important implications for the design and fine-tuning of appropriate policy responses, including the implementation of the YG. This article has examined characteristics and trends in young NEETs in the three Mediterranean countries of Italy, Portugal, and Spain, where the difficulties of labour market entry encountered by young people have traditionally been relatively pronounced. In particular, the article has examined NEET heterogeneity, and how both vulnerability to poverty or social exclusion and PES registration vary across different types of young NEETs. In doing so, a number of policy-relevant findings emerge.

NEET rates have fallen significantly in the three countries during the lifetime of the YG, even more so than has been the case in the EU as a whole. One consequence is that the traditional view of these "sub-protective regime" countries as characterised by high youth unemployment (and NEET) rates is now to some extent debatable, at least in the case of Portugal and Spain. NEET rates in the former are now well below the EU average and in the latter, close to it. At the same time, the findings reported above also make clear that the share of young NEETs who are outside the labour force has increased significantly in all three countries, as has the vulnerability associated with some of their subgroups.

The examination of the relationship between the risk of poverty or social exclusion on the one hand and individual characteristics and NEET subgroups on the other makes clear two key points. Vulnerability (as measured by the AROPE indicator) is clearly—and unsurprisingly—more pronounced amongst young NEETs than it is among young workers or students but it also varies greatly across different types of young NEETs. In particular, the article has demonstrated that vulnerability is especially high amongst young people who are NEET due to family responsibilities, who are primarily young women. This group has remained substantial in size and the vulnerability associated with it has increased over time. The implication is that more needs to be done to support this group and remove the potential obstacles to labour market participation. Indeed, registration with the PES amongst this subgroup of NEET is particularly low, suggesting that many of these young people are outside the current purview of the YG.

This article has made evident the importance of directing attention to some of the more vulnerable, and less tractable, groups of young people that is naturally prompted by the shift in focus of youth employment policy going beyond just the unemployed.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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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 & Fossestøl, 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.

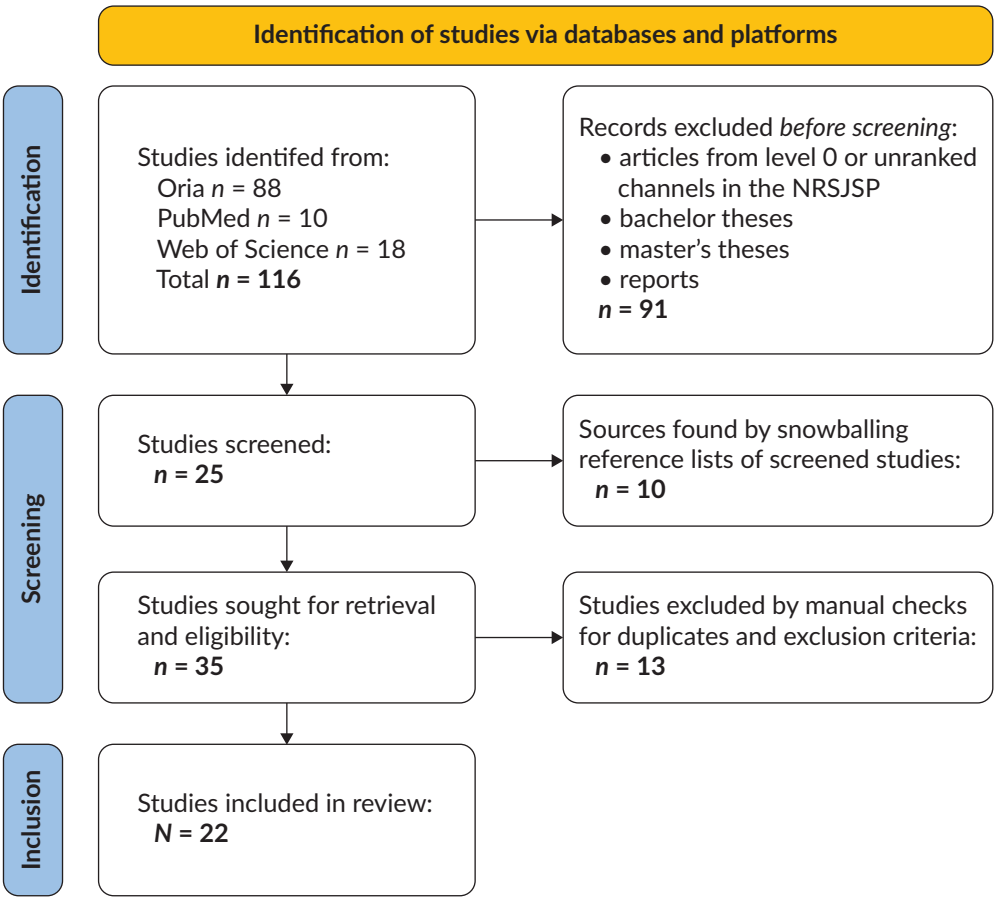

Figure 1. PRISMA diagram of study identification and selection (NEETs in Norway), based on the guidelines provided by Page et al. (2021).

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

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Active Labour Market Policies for Rural NEETs in Lithuania: A Case of Rural Municipalities

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse active labour market policy efficiency for rural young NEETs integration into the labour market in the socioeconomic context of rural municipalities in Lithuania. For the empirical analysis, the administrative data of the public employment service concerning active labour market policy measures, e.g., training and mobility support, subsidised employment, and support for establishing or adapting workplaces of 2018 and 2022, as well as Lithuanian statistics data of 2018 and 2020 are used. The socio-economic environment of rural municipalities was analysed using the economic indicators (complex index), public transport accessibility, average wage, and free vacancies indicators. The recipient's integration into employment after six months of participation in active labour market policy measures is analysed. The data revealed poor economic indicators, undeveloped public transport, lower average salaries, and a need for more vacancies in rural municipalities. The integration into employment fell significantly in two rural municipality clusters after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords

active labour market policies; Lithuania; public employment services; rural municipalities; rural NEETs

1. Introduction

The active labour market policy (ALMP) for facilitating youth transition to the labour market is emphasised in the Youth Guarantee Initiative and other youth policy documents at the EU and national levels. The European Pillar of Social Rights, among its 20 principles, includes important directions for NEET's (i.e., neither in education nor in employment or training) social inclusion, such as investing in skills and education to unlock new opportunities for all and active support for employment. The document

emphasises special attention to young people, who are more vulnerable to fluctuations in the labour market. The youth need additional support because they have fewer opportunities to enter the labour market for the first time. The reinforced Youth Guarantee guides a stable labour market integration focusing on quality employment. Traineeships or internships could facilitate young people's access to the labour market. In line with the Reinforced Youth Guarantee, the new Lithuanian Youth Guarantee action plan of 2021 aims to: (a) ensure vocational counselling in every municipality; (b) increase the attractiveness of vocational counselling; (c) collect data about inactive youth; (d) provide social, educational and psychological services; (e) provide motivational services for inactive youth; (f) create favourable conditions for voluntary activities, and (g) implement measures of ALMP.

The political agenda proves the importance of ALMP measures in supporting youth transition to employment. The effectiveness and impact of ALMP measures on youth employment are broadly discussed in the academic literature. Calmfors (1994) and Jackman (1994) defined the function of ALMPs as adjusting the structure of labour supply to demand. The limited impact of ALMP measures on youth employment was revealed by Alegre et al. (2015), Pohl and Walther (2007), and Simões et al. (2022). ALMP measures in Lithuania are analysed from a social investment perspective (Skučienė, 2021), and measure variety and development (Moskvina & Okunevičiūtė-Neverauskienė, 2011; Okunevičiūtė-Neverauskienė & Moskvina, 2010).

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought a new challenge for the Lithuanian labour market. The Lithuanian recovery and resilience plan analysis for the Lithuania pandemic has exacerbated Lithuania's labour market challenges even though specific measures were introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 (Brazienė et al., 2022). During the second wave of the pandemic, the unemployment rate mainly increased, affecting the most vulnerable part of the population: youth, lower-educated, unskilled, and those living in rural areas (Brazienė et al., 2022). Therefore, the measures envisaged in the Lithuanian recovery and resilience plan are expected to have a lasting impact on the functioning of the labour market, as well as on poverty reduction and income equality. However, the coverage of active labour market policies supporting upskilling, reskilling, and mobility has decreased overall.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought a new challenge to the Lithuanian labour market. As stated in the Lithuanian recovery and resilience plan analysis, the pandemic has exacerbated Lithuania's labour market challenges. This article aims to analyse the ALMP efficiency for rural NEET's integration into the labour market in the socioeconomic context of Lithuania's rural municipalities. There is an impressive amount of research on the role of ALMP measures in supporting youth employment in Western countries. However, the research focusing on rural NEETs in Europe's peripheries is very limited. Lithuania is an interesting case for a study because it represents a small country with huge regional disparities in terms of economic performance, infrastructure, and accessibility to services. There is also a need for a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of ALMP measures for rural NEETs. The research findings will contribute to the rural NEETs literature, particularly the type of literature analysing the ALMP measures for youth in the context of structural factors. The additional contribution will be the implications for the policy seeking to ensure the sustainability of ALMP in rural regions.

The article is organised as follows: Section 2 presents the conceptual framework; Section 3 describes the methodology; Section 4 presents data analysis; and the discussion and conclusions are presented in Section 5.

2. The Effectiveness of ALMP for Rural NEETs in Lithuania

ALMP measures intervene in the search-matching labour market process. Rogerson et al. (2005) define the matching of workers and firms getting together. Carlsson et al. (2006) characterised the matching similarly: how unemployed workers and job vacancies meet is a matching process. The ALMP functions in matching defined by Calmfors (1994): (a) it maintains the adequate aggregate supply of labour; (b) it can, through re-training, open new sectors; and (c) it can reduce the negative effect of the long-term unemployment benefits.

Later, Wapler et al. (2018) list the functions of ALMP as follows: (a) it can help adapt the qualification of the jobseekers to the requirements of vacancies; (b) it can promote the search activity of jobseekers; (c) it can serve as a substitute for regular work experience; and (d) reduce the employer's uncertainty concerning the employability of job applicants. However, Escudero (2018) stated that ALMP: (a) facilitates the matching process between the supply and demand for labour so that a given number of job seekers will be associated with fewer vacancies; (b) maintains the level of adequate labour supply by keeping the long-term unemployed tight to the labour force; (c) affects the demand for labour; and (d) boosts the productivity of the labour force.

As with every state intervention, the effectiveness of ALMP concerns the policy implementers and researchers. There are negative findings concerning the efficacy of academic debates. Alegre et al. (2015) found the limitations of the vocational qualification programme depending on the shortage of jobs and the design or implementation of a programme. Cabasés and Úbeda (2021) have a similar finding, stating that training programmes of little value are designed to justify EU investments. Measures are based on acquiring competencies and individual skills, leaving young people responsible for their precarious situation (Cabasés & Úbeda, 2021). In Bulgaria, the analysis shows a minimal range of support programmes to tackle the diverse problems and difficulties young people face (Kovacheva & Hristozova, 2022). The vulnerability of NEETs is related to low education and poverty (Mussida & Sciulli, 2023; Nestić & Tomić, 2018; Papadakis et al., 2019; Vugt et al., 2022). Nestić and Tomić (2018) found that NEETs are slightly younger, less well-educated, and more often live in rural areas. Mussida and Sciulli (2023) discovered that poverty and the NEET status are interrelated. Vugt et al. (2022) emphasise that young people with low literacy skills are more likely to be long-term NEET.

EU public policies targeting youth need to recognise the intersectionality of youth, gender, country of origin, class, and other forms of vulnerability (Rodriguez-Modroño, 2019). Not all EU policy emphasises the quality of work, job security, and social security (Lahusen et al., 2013). The insufficient mediation of institutions solving issues of NEETs was revealed by Saczyńska-Sokół (2018), who states that difficulties also arise with reaching out to this category of young people. This situation is because young NEETs remain out of the registries of public employment services (PES).

A positive evaluation of ALMP outcomes was found by Vugt et al. (2022), as countries with high levels of ALMPs are more successful in keeping young people in education or training and preventing them from long NEET spells. Wapler et al. (2018) find that more successful completions of ALMP programmes increase the search effectiveness of the participants and the total number of matches in a region. Escudero (2018) stated that the start-up incentives and the cluster of policies (job rotation, supported employment, and direct job

creation measures), aimed at the most vulnerable, show the most favourable results in reducing unemployment and increasing employment.

The impact of ALMP can be affected by various social and economic factors, including the overall economic structure and national institutional environment, domestic regulation, education system, labour market characteristics, and policy design. Despite mixed evidence on the effectiveness in different socioeconomic environments, policy measures can challenge unemployment and positively impact labour market performance (Brown & Koettl, 2012).

The measurement of the effectiveness of PES is part of the evaluation of ALMP. Cichowicz et al. (2021) stated that the effectiveness of PES is linked to the conditions in the country in which these units provide services. They used the financial and human resources of PES as inputs; the outputs are outflow from unemployment due to starting work and taking a job. Cichowicz et al. (2021) found that the employment offices included in the analysis had a significantly diversified efficiency level as they operated under certain environmental circumstances.

Koning (2009) analysed the effectiveness of the Dutch PES workers using the job placement rates of benefit recipients, the impact of these workers on the benefit denial rate of unemployment insurance and social assistance schemes, and the role of the PES in attracting and registering vacancies and found that a higher worker/client ratio at offices increases the outflow rates for short-term unemployed.

The effectiveness of ALMP measures from a social investment perspective is discussed by Bonoli (2010), who classified those measures as "strong" and "weak" investments in human capital. This author believed that a substantial investment provides education or training, while a weak one creates new jobs, job subsidies, counselling, services for getting the job, job searching programmes, benefits, and tax allowances.

At the same time, Broka and Toots (2022) analysed youth welfare citizenship using selective/inclusive dichotomy. They found that all three Baltic countries represent the inclusive type. The inclusive type is characterised by a low level of school dropout, high shares of students in vocational training and education (VET); high school enrolment rate, low youth unemployment; low NEET rate; low work poverty; high participation at youth-oriented ALMP; high youth employment rate (Broka & Toots, 2022). As for the Baltic countries, Latvia can be clearly distinguished with its focus on training initiatives. In contrast, to some extent, Lithuania and Estonia focused on employment initiatives, e.g., the My First Job scheme with apprenticeship grants, voucher systems, and wage subsidies (Broka & Toots, 2022). Tosun et al. (2017) analysed youth-oriented ALMP in the Nordic and Baltic states in 2013–2014, where they distinguished Estonia's more significant focus on human capital investment, while Latvia adopts a broad policy approach to investment in human capital, and Lithuania focuses on wage subsidies.

In many rural and remote areas, the reforms in vocational education are needed. For example, as analysed by Bettencourt et al. (2023), the VETs needed reforms in the Azores. Their study shows the importance of improving the sector's social representation; the training and negotiation forums are needed to drive stakeholders to concrete actions aligned with the integrated governance views.

Regarding the social and territorial cohesion of the Lithuanian recovery and resilience plan (its fourth pillar), there are several measures to support this, such as the revision of the minimum income system and social

benefits and additional ALMP measures—e.g., by enabling jobseekers to enhance their qualifications and competences through vocational training, higher education programmes, and providing an opportunity to learn by participating in apprenticeship programmes.

At a national level, in Lithuania, there is an increasing effort to support young people's integration into the labour market through the employment support system. The Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania (2020) aims to decrease unemployment and actively include different population groups in the labour market. Among other groups, young people and long-term unemployed are prioritized. Through higher education institutions and the private sector, it is foreseen that: "social innovations will be expanded and ensure that young people have the opportunity to work and earn and that working conditions are more flexible and responsive to individual needs" (Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020, p. 52).

The strategic documents of Lithuania (specifically, the Income Inequality Reduction 2021–2030 Programme, the Strategy for Demography, Migration and Integration Policy 2018–2030, the 2014–2020 Programme for Employment, and the Inclusive Labour Market Development Programme 2021–2030) aim to improve the employability of the young unemployed and emphasise the measures of ALMP.

The Lithuanian Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan (2014) defines the early intervention, activation, and motivation of youth and enhances youth integration in the labour market. The Republic of Lithuania (2021) intends "to ensure that all persons aged 15–29 who are not in employment, education or training receive an offer to work, continue learning (including professional training in the form of an apprenticeship), practice or an internship" (The Republic of Lithuania, 2021, p. 1).

ALMP measures are defined in the Lithuanian Employment Law (2016). Every unemployed, despite their age, is entitled to these measures. Lithuanian ALMP includes (a) training support (vocational education, apprenticeship, internship, recognition of competencies acquired through non-formal education and self-education, informal adult education, acquisition of qualifications, and competencies that create high added value); (b) mobility support; (c) supported employment (subsidised employment and subsidy for the costs of a work assistant); (d) support for establishing or adapting workplaces (subsidising job adaptations, implementation of local employment initiative projects, and support for start-ups). The effectiveness of ALMP is defined in the methodology of the Lithuanian PES (2017). The integration into the labour market, registration, and direct benefit indicators measure the effectiveness of ALMP.

3. Methodology

The empirical part of this research focuses on rural municipalities in Lithuania, where there are 60 municipalities in total. There are five main clusters of municipalities: larger cities (Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipeda, Siauliai, Panevezys, and Alytus), ring municipalities (Vilnius region, Kaunas region, Klaipeda region, Siauliai region, Panevezys region, and Alytus region), municipalities with the resort status (Neringa, Palanga, Birstonas, and Druskininkai), urbanised (Elektrenai, Sirvintai, Mazeikiai, etc.), and rural (Silute, Pagegiai, Lazdijai, Kalvarija, etc.). In total, there are 35 rural municipalities. All the municipalities are named according to their geographical location, indicating the degree of urbanisation (cities, urbanised, or rural) or special status (resort). Even though Lithuanian municipalities are among the largest in Europe and the OECD, and the average size of municipalities is approximately 47,000 inhabitants (vs. 10,250 in the OECD and 5,960 in

the EU), the size of the municipalities differs considerably. For example, as of 2023, Vilnius city municipality has 586,836 and Kaunas city has 302,875 inhabitants. For instance, some rural municipalities have very few inhabitants (Pagegiai municipality has 7,151 and Pasvalys 23,302 inhabitants). Although there are differences in the size of the municipalities, each municipality is responsible for the provision of services (education, health care, social protection, etc.).

The integration of ALMP measures recipients into the labour market is analysed in the socioeconomic context of rural municipalities. The socioeconomic environment of rural municipalities can characterise the capacities of labour market demand and mobility for searching for jobs. Two time periods, before and after pandemics (2018 and 2022), are selected for further analysis. For the evaluation of ALMP at the regional level, this research focuses only on rural municipalities. The selection of rural municipalities is based on their welfare index methodology (Vilnius Policy Analysis Institute, 2022). Out of 60, 35 municipalities were selected for further analysis. The secondary analysis of Lithuanian statistics for 2018 and 2020 was used to evaluate structural indicators, which include the average wage, the number of vacancies, and the number of unemployed youths in every municipality. These data are additionally interpreted using the meta-analysis of the municipalities index (Vilnius Policy Analysis Institute, 2022) and the data about public transport development in the municipalities (Ranceva & Uškalytė-Vitkūnienė, 2022).

For the evaluation of ALMP effectiveness, administrative data of Lithuanian PES of 2018 and 2022 are used. The data of PES includes the covers information on recipients' participation in the following measures: training support, mobility support, subsidised employment, and support for establishing or adapting workplaces. For this research, the age group of 18–29 was selected. The integration into the labour market indicator was used after six months of participation in measures. The PES data are analysed using descriptive statistics, hierarchical, and k-means cluster analysis. The hierarchical cluster analysis was used to explore the number of rural municipality clusters that have similar characteristics. The k-means cluster analysis allowed us to clarify the parameters of distinguished clusters. The clustering is based on these criteria in municipalities in 2018 and 2022: the number of young unemployed per vacancy; the number of provided ALMP measures provided per young unemployed; the average wage in the municipality ratio to the average wage in the country; and the capacity to get a job after the ALMP. The two structural indicators were selected for clustering (the number of young unemployed per vacancy and the average wage in the municipality ratio to the average wage in the country). The two PES-provided indicators (the number of ALMP measures provided per young unemployed and the capacity to get a job after the measures) are used.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Socio-Economic Characteristics of Rural Municipalities in Lithuania

The rural municipalities in Lithuania differ due to socio-economic characteristics: municipalities' welfare index, the number of inhabitants, and accessibility to services (health care, transportation, social services, etc.). The municipalities' welfare index was developed by a group of researchers from the Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis in 2017 and has five dimensions: social security, physical security, economic performance, quality of education, and demography. The economic performance index is constructed out of five indicators (net monthly salary, number of operating small and medium-sized enterprises, the number of operating economic entities, foreign direct investment per capita, and employment level in the 16–65 age cohort).

In 2018, the economic performance index (the index scores vary in a 0–10 range), in rural municipalities, was the highest in Kretinga and Taurage. The index was lower in other rural municipalities, with Zarasi scoring the lowest value of 0.2. Similar trends were observed in 2022, after the pandemic. The highest value of the economic performance index was 2.9 in Kedainiai. At the same time, the lowest value was 0.2 in Zarasai. The index value for Vilnius (the capital) was 9.6 in 2018 and 9.3 in 2022. A huge gap exists between index values in rural municipalities and the capital city. The low economic performance index in these municipalities, before and after the pandemic, shows limited public and business sector labour demand.

The public transport development level shows the possibilities for the mobility of the unemployed. Accessibility of public transport in rural municipalities of Lithuania is less than 20–40% (Ranceva & Ušpalytė-Vitkūnienė, 2022). According to Ranceva and Ušpalytė-Vitkūnienė (2022), the public transport stations in rural areas should be at most one kilometre from the urban territories. Particular attention should be paid to these municipalities with less than 20% accessibility. Among such are the Jurbarkas, Sakiai, Silute, Kazlu Ruda, and Rietavas municipalities. In rural municipalities, the public transport timetable frequency varies between 3–7 daily. Moletai, Ignalina, Zarasai, Kėdainiai, Jurbarkas, Lazdijai, Silale, Kretinga, Rietavas, Birzai, and Joniskis have each a frequency of 3.1–5 public transports per day (Ranceva & Ušpalytė-Vitkūnienė, 2022). The lowest-funded public transports are in Rietavas, Pagegiai, Pakruojis, Anyksciai, and Varena, having a funding indicator of 3 euros/ha (Ranceva & Ušpalytė-Vitkūnienė, 2022). All rural municipalities in our research are funded up to 7 euros/ha, which means the enterprises cannot cover transportation costs (Ranceva & Ušpalytė-Vitkūnienė, 2022). The accessibility limitation of public transport is another restriction for the mobility of the unemployed from rural municipalities to other locations. The public transport loss-making does not have promise for the development of the accessibility of public transport without support.

The average wage in rural municipalities is lower than the average in the country. It comprises 79.5% in 2018 and 79% in 2022 (Lithuanian Portal of Official Statistics, 2023). The lowest wages were in Zarasai (71% in 2018 and 69% in 2022), Lazdijai (73% in 2018 and 72% in 2022), Skuodas (72% in 2018 and 73% in 2022), and Varena (73% in 2018 and 72% in 2022). The low-paid vacancies are not attractive to youth and, at the same time, can create a poverty trap between the social benefits and possible wages.

4.2. Youth Unemployment Characteristics in Lithuanian Rural Municipalities

Broka and Toots (2022) characterised the Baltic states with low youth unemployment; however, the picture seems different in the Lithuanian rural municipalities. Of all the unemployed in rural regions of Lithuania, about 20% are young people, which is a high rate considering young people's life-course perspective and the sustainability of integration in the labour market in these regions.

Youth unemployment in rural municipalities ranged from 10% to 20% in 2018 and from 11% to 18% in 2022. In 2018, Pluge registered 20% of unemployment among youth, Vilkavisis, and Kretinga 19%, and Silale 18%. The share of young unemployed from all unemployed slightly increased from 2018 to 2022: The share of young and all unemployed increased from 1%, in 2018, to 4%, in 2022; nevertheless, it decreased in Akmene (17% in 2018 to 3% in 2022), Jonava (16% in 2018 to 3% in 2022), Radviliskis (16% in 2018 to 3% in 2022), Raseiniai (18% in 2018 to 4% in 2022), Skuodas (14% in 2018 to 3% in 2022), and Svencioniai (16% in 2018 to 3% in 2022). The percentage of young people out of all the unemployed slightly decreased 2% in all municipalities in 2022, which was the most notable drop in Vilkaviskis (from 15% in 2018 to 4% in 2022).

Vacancies are a structural indicator reflecting the labour market demand in rural municipalities. However, there are fewer vacancies in 2018 and 2022 than young unemployed. In 2018, Zarasi, Lazdijai, and Vilkaviskis had more than seven young unemployed per vacancy; Birzai and Kelme had more than six unemployed per vacancy; and Rokiskis, Joniskis, and Kupiskis had more than five young unemployed per vacancy. This factor increased in 2022, marking 14 people in Zarasai, 13 in Vilkaviskis, 11 in Lazdijai, and 10 in Sakiai (see Figure 1).

The share of participants in ALMP measures was significantly higher in 2018 than in 2022 (see Figure 2). The Covid-19 pandemic restrictions can be an explanation for this in the first quarter of 2022. In 2022, in the rural municipalities of Lithuania, compared to 2018, the number of training and supported employment participants dropped significantly. In the same year, compared to 2018, the share of participants in training declined more than the ones in supported employment. The participation rate fell significantly in Kelme (98%), Moletai (78%), Plunge (76%), Radviliskis (104%), Rokiskis (96%), Silute (110%), and Taurage (118%) municipalities in 2022. At the same time, the supported employment participation rate fell significantly in Kedainiai (74%), Plunge (63%), Radviliskis (64%), and Silute (74%) municipalities in 2022 (see Table 2 in the Supplementary File).

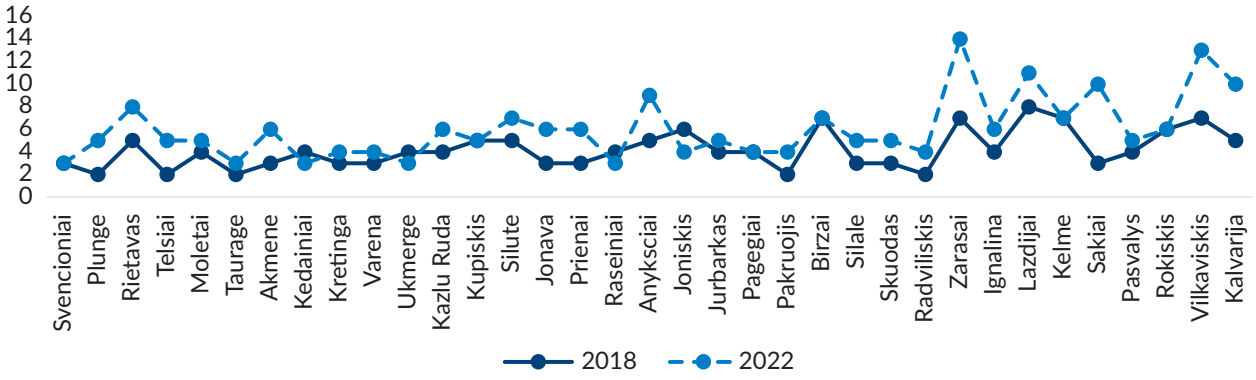

Figure 1. Young unemployed per job vacancy in PES in the Lithuanian municipalities.

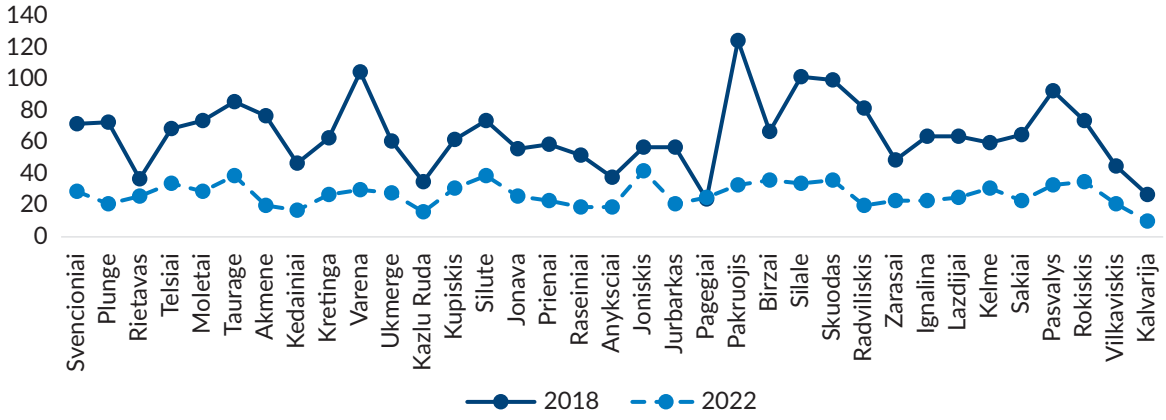

Figure 2. Percentage of ALMP participants in Lithuanian municipalities: Young unemployed (18–29 years old) in 2018 and 2022.

Investment in training is an important policy measure for inactive youth. It improves the human capital of inactive people and can ensure better prospects in the labour market over their life course. So, the reduced participation in training is a potential risk for sustainable integration in the labour market of youth in rural municipalities. The labour market needs more capacities to adapt to the changing labour demand.

The other measures that support mobility and establishing or adapting workplaces were smaller-scale measures provided for young unemployed. There was the most significant share of receivers for mobility support in Pagegiai and Silute in 2022 and in Silale and Zarasai in 2018. Both in 2018 and 2022, the smallest part was in Plunge, Radviliskis, Akmene, and Kedainiai municipalities.

There were only five cases of support for establishing or adapting workplaces in 2018. There were no subsidising job adaptation cases in rural municipalities in 2022. Implementing local employment initiatives was outside the ALMP measures in 2018. There were only eight cases in four rural municipalities (Ignalina, Kelme, Lazdijai, and Rokiskis) in 2022.

The support for business start-ups received 23 young unemployed in 2018 and 19 in 2022. In 2018, the number of young people unemployed in business start-ups was: nine in Jonava, six in Birzai, four in Anyksciai, and four in Akmene.

Hierarchical cluster analysis shows seven clusters of municipalities using classifying criteria: structural indicators were selected for clustering (the number of young unemployed per job vacancy and the average wage in the municipality ratio to the average wage in the country) and the PES-provided services indicators (the number of provided ALMP measures provided per young unemployed and the capacity to get a job after the ALMP; see Table 1 and Table 2 in the Supplementary File). K-means cluster analysis discloses the indicator differences in clusters.

The employment rate of youth after ALMP in the third and seventh clusters of rural municipalities was lower in 2022 when compared to 2018. There is a slight increase in the first and fifth clusters in 2022. The number of young unemployed per vacancy was the highest in the third, fifth, and seventh clusters. In the third cluster, low accessibility of public transport characterises Kazlu Ruda and Rietavas. The seventh cluster of municipalities has the highest average rate of young unemployed per vacancy. The significant lack of vacancies in these municipalities shows that each municipality had only one vacancy in 2018 and 2022. The Anyksciai's public transport was one of the lowest funded and the least accessible was Ignalina's (seventh cluster). Skuodas and Zarasai municipalities have the lowest part of the average wage compared to the country's average wage. Zarasai, Kalvarija, and Ignalina municipalities had the longest unemployment duration in 2016 (Daugirdas et al., 2019). Daugirdas et al.'s (2019) list of high territories excluded municipalities of Lithuania. Among them, Pagegiai was in the third cluster and Ignalina and Zarasai municipalities were in the seventh cluster.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This research aimed to evaluate the ALMP measures for inactive youth to pursue integration into employment in the socioeconomic context of rural municipalities in Lithuania. The territorial labour market capacities should be considered by analysing rural youth unemployment. The analysis of socioeconomic

Table 1. Clusters centres.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Get a job in 2022 (1)	33	52.80	7	79	42	71	18.80
Received ALMP measures in 2022 (2)	50.36	82	13.00	121.50	67	116	33.80
Ratio (1)/(2)	66	64	54	65	63	61	56
The number of young unemployed per vacancy in 2022	5.21	4.26	6.59	5.40	6.78	4.80	7.73
The share of the wage compared to the average wage in the country in 2022	78	84	80	88	76	81	74
Get a job in 2018 (3)	84.82	135	19.25	159	106.83	184.50	56.20
Received ALMP measures in 2018 (4)	134.91	210.40	26.50	208	178	291	89.40
The number of young unemployed per vacancy in 2018	3.82	3.28	4.21	2.51	5.10	3.24	4.15
Ratio (3)/(4)	63	64	73	76	60	63	63
The share of the wage compared to the average wage in the country in 2018	78	84	82	90	77	81	75
Rural municipalities in Lithuania	Svencionys Moletai Akmene Kretinga Varena Kupiskis Raseiniai Joniskis Pakruojo Lazdijai Sakiai	Plunge Kedainiai Ukmerge Radviliskis Rokiskis	Rietavas Kazlu Ruda Pagegiai Kalvarija	Telsiai Jonava	Jurbarkas Birzai Silale Kelme Pasvalys Vilkaviskis	Taurage Silute	Prienai Anyksciai Skuodas Zarasai Ignalina

indicators reveals the low economic capacities of rural municipalities and that the average wage in rural municipalities is lower than in the rest of the country. The accessibility of public transport is very limited in most rural municipalities. These conditions define low labour demand and unattractive jobs and working conditions, due to low salaries. Therefore, the mediation of ALMP measures in the job search-matching process is limited. These findings align with the research of Alegre et al. (2015) and Cabasés and Úbeda (2021), who emphasise the importance of labour market conditions for ALMP. Our contextual analysis additionally shows that labour market capacities should be analysed considering rural regions.

Broka and Toots (2022) attributed the Baltic countries (Lithuania included) as the inclusive type with low NEETs and investment in human capital. Our research on inactive rural youth shows slightly different situations regarding part of NEETs and investment in human capital. In Lithuania, the investment in the human capital of

rural NEETs decreased after the pandemic, because the number of participants in training decreased. At the same time, in some municipalities, of the inactive youth, about 20% were unemployed. These findings follow Daugirdas et al. (2019) observations that, in rural municipalities, part of the population decreased during the last two decades, due to the reduced number of children and youth and their emigration. Rural municipalities are demographically vulnerable because the population of 65 years old and older is twice as high as the youth (Daugirdas et al., 2019). Such demographic trends influence business and labour market demand capacity.

Among the ALMP measures, training support and supported employment dominated. Training is a strong investment in human capital (Bonoli, 2010) and it is very important for rural NEETs seeking to improve their life course prospects. However, the inclusion in training decreased after the pandemic. The mobility support slightly increased after the pandemic, a sign of better inactive youth inclusion in employment from rural municipalities.

We clustered the rural municipalities of Lithuania using two structural indicators and two ALMP measures indicators. Although rural municipalities in Lithuania are quite similar in economic viability, public transport accessibility, and average wage, we observe differences in the number of unemployed youth per vacancy and the employment ratio after ALMP. In 2022, two clusters had lower rates of young unemployed, due to the capacity to get them employed after participating in ALMP measures. These clusters of rural municipalities also have lower transport accessibility or a higher number of young unemployed per vacancy and a small number of registered young unemployed.

These findings do not confirm the ineffectiveness of ALMP but rather offer some responses to the research of Lahusen et al. (2013), who criticised the focus of the youth employment strategy without considering the quality of work, job security, and social security. These findings align with Daugirdas et al.'s (2019), who classified the Lithuanian rural municipalities as having a high territorial exclusion, including Vilkaviskis, Lazdijai, Varena, Ignalina, Zarasai, Moletai, Anyksciai, Kupiskis, Pagegiai, Kelme, Radviliskis, Joniskis, Pasvalys, and Birzai as such regions.

Low regional labour market demand requires attention at the national level. The short-term solutions could be social innovations with government subsidies and more investment in the human capital of rural NEETs with adequate social security support. Long-term solutions could include developing a public transport network and attracting business investment in rural municipalities.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Young People's Perceptions of Youth Unemployment: Insights From 11 European Countries

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Abstract

Youth unemployment has been an issue in European countries for many years. However, the attention paid to it by policymakers has varied over time, and there are high cross-country variations in both the size of the phenomenon, representations of it, and policy interventions. This study adds an intra-country component to the country-comparative dimension and assesses the factors affecting how young adults perceive youth unemployment. From a theoretical perspective, we postulate that the perception of youth unemployment as an issue depends on both sociotropic and egocentric evaluations. To address these research questions, we analyse data from the Cultural Pathways to Economic Self-Sufficiency (CUPESSE) dataset, which comprises responses from more than 20,000 young adults (aged 18–35) from 11 European countries (nine European Union member states together with Switzerland and Turkey). The empirical analysis is based on multilevel modelling and reveals that the problem perception varies both across countries and within them following the hypothesised pattern. The findings show that two factors are particularly important for explaining young people's perception of youth unemployment as a problem: first, whether they experienced their parents being unemployed when growing up, and second, whether their friends are unemployed.

Keywords

European Union; NEETs; rural areas; urban areas; youth unemployment

1. Introduction

Policy studies have offered several insights into the factors that initiate a policy process and shape the interactions between the participating policymakers and the resulting policy design (Howlett & Mukherjee, 2014; Howlett & Rayner, 2014). An analytical lens that has received noticeable attention in recent years is the multiple streams framework, which, inter alia, stresses the importance of problems for policymaking and alludes to the existence of constellations in which solutions look for problems (Kingdon, 2014). The direction of the relationship between problems and policymaking in the multiple streams framework deviates significantly from the classic understanding of policymaking as a process that aims to solve problems. While the classic perspective may initially appear less exciting, it does raise intriguing questions, such as whether it is only factual problems that matter for policymaking or also issues that are merely perceived as problematic. The latter is especially relevant for determining which stages of the policy process are affected not only by problems but also by the perception thereof.

In this article, we engage with the factors explaining how issues are perceived in order to prepare the ground for studies that incorporate problem perception more systematically into their analysis of policymaking and governance than is currently the case, that is, with the notable exception of the literature on political agendas (Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014). We contend that we need to improve our understanding of how exactly the relationship between the perception of problems and policymaking plays out in varied contexts so that we can better understand how issues are governed.

To this end, we concentrate on an issue that has been a problem of varied extent across the EU member states and its neighbouring states and which affects a particularly vulnerable group: youth unemployment. Typically, young people living in Southern Europe—i.e., Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain—have experienced difficulties in transitioning from education to work (Berlingieri et al., 2014). However, the financial crisis hitting Europe from 2008 onward aggravated the labour market situation of the youth not only in Southern Europe but also in European states with traditionally low unemployment rates (O'Reilly et al., 2015; Tosun et al., 2017). Youth unemployment therefore struck us as an issue that may yield valuable insights into the factors that determine whether it is perceived as problematic. Furthermore, the fact that unemployment refers to an individual state but is meaningful at the societal level qualifies it for gaining insights into whether the problem perception is driven by sociotropic evaluations, egocentric evaluations, or both. Researchers have evaluated this for perceptions of the economic performance of governments (e.g., Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2013) and of the EU (Hooghe & Marks, 2005), but less so for other types of issues.

Given our research interest, this analysis is guided by the following question: Which factors determine the problem perception of youth unemployment among young people in various European countries? To examine this, we use a dataset produced by the collaborative research project Cultural Pathways to Economic Self-Sufficiency (CUPESSE; Tosun, Arco-Tirado et al., 2019). The dataset is based on a survey administered in 11 European countries and includes measurements of how young people (aged 18–35) perceived youth unemployment in 2016. The multilevel models show that the problem perception varies both across countries and within them, with the place of residence being one of the factors explaining this variation. The analysis shows that variables capturing the egotropic dimension and the sociotropic dimension matter in explaining how young people perceive youth unemployment.

The remainder of this study unfolds as follows. We first present some background information on the issue of youth unemployment in Europe, then turn to the theoretical considerations and hypotheses that guide our analysis. Subsequently, we provide information on the database and the operationalisation of the key variables. Finally, we present and discuss our empirical findings and offer some concluding remarks.

2. Setting the Stage for the Analysis

This study strives to contribute to various literature strands but primarily to the one focusing on the governance of the school-to-work transition (STWT). In essence, the STWT is the process that occurs toward the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood when individuals make a transition from schooling to employment. These processes are shaped by numerous factors, from individual ones to macro-level factors such as the policy and institutional arrangements in place for governing the STWT; the latter tend to be path-dependent and therefore difficult to modify (Walther, 2006; Simões, Tosun, & Rocca, 2022). Smooth STWTs are typically marked by an awareness of the demands of the labour market, investment in human capital, and arrangements that facilitate the economic self-sufficiency of young people (Brzinsky-Fay, 2014). Chevalier (2016) adds to these the type of youth social citizenship (familialised vs. individualised) and youth economic citizenship (encompassing vs. selective).

The STWT has received increased attention in both academic and public debates since mounting evidence has shown that a smooth STWT is becoming the exception; the majority are characterised by individualisation, fragmentation, and delays (Arnett, 2007). The prolongment of the transition process, the uncertainty associated with it, especially for individuals belonging to vulnerable groups (Masdonati et al., 2022), and the delayed entry into the labour market can have detrimental impacts on individuals but also adversely affect society as a whole (Ralston et al., 2022). It follows that policy interventions are needed to improve the STWT and must comprise measures targeting multiple policy sectors and ones that form multi-actor networks, as these will ensure that the policy measures are properly implemented (Trein & Tosun, 2021).

Evidently, the most important experience hampering a successful STWT concerns unemployment. As documented in the literature, youth unemployment reached its peak in 2013 when the unemployment ratio for individuals aged 15 to 24 years reached about 10% as an EU average (Tosun, Hörisch, & Marques, 2019). The unemployment ratio is lower than the unemployment rate, which is more frequently reported by Eurostat and other statistical offices. However, unemployment ratios, which are the number of unemployed divided by the number of employed, unemployed, and economically inactive, are considered to provide a more accurate measure in the European context because those not searching for full-time work are included in the denominator, which reflects the situation of students (O'Reilly et al., 2015).

Figure 1 consists of bar graphs for the EU member states as of 1995 (Figure 1a) as well as those that joined the EU after 2004, alongside Switzerland and Turkey (Figure 1b). The latter two countries are included not only because they are covered by the CUPESSE dataset but also because they have close political and economic relationships with the EU. The bar graphs gauge the unemployment ratio for these 30 countries in 2006 (the first year for which data were available for all countries) and 2016 (the year in which the CUPESSE survey was fielded).

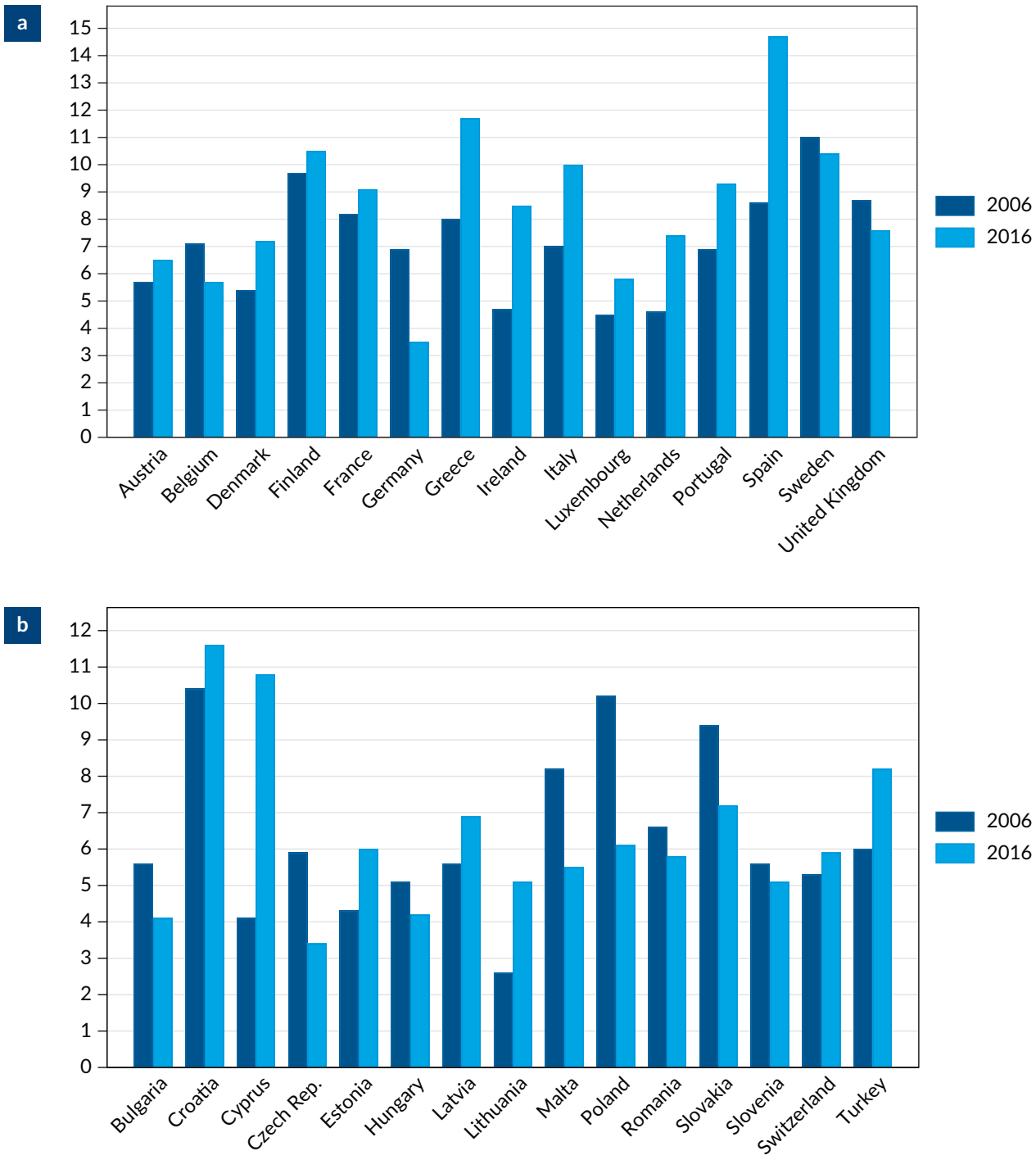

Figure 1. Youth unemployment ratios in 2006 and 2016. Source: Authors' work based on data from Eurostat (2023).

In 2008, the economic and financial crisis erupted, which had the most drastic impact on Greece, pushing the country to the verge of bankruptcy. As Figure 1 shows, the crisis also resulted in a sharp increase in youth unemployment not only in Greece (Bitzenis et al., 2013), but also in other South-European countries which had high youth unemployment ratios even before the crisis: Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, Spain, and Turkey. In fact, Spain and Cyprus are the two countries that experienced the sharpest increase in youth unemployment.

Thus, one take-away from Figure 1 is that youth unemployment increased especially in countries with high unemployment levels already.

However, youth unemployment also increased in countries where young people were not used to it, such as Denmark, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. What is more, in some countries—among them, Germany, Malta, and several Central and Eastern European countries—the level of unemployment in 2016 was lower than in 2006. Only in very few countries, such as Slovenia and Switzerland, was the difference between the unemployment ratio in 2006 and 2016 small. Poland and Germany, on the other end of the spectrum, were the countries that experienced the highest reduction in youth unemployment between 2006 and 2016.

Thus, when the CUPESSE survey was fielded in 2016, young people in (a) countries traditionally affected by unemployment experienced even higher levels of unemployment, whereas (b) those living in countries with low unemployment experienced unusually if not unprecedently high levels, while (c) others experienced more favourable labour markets for young people. In other words, the situation was highly variable between the individual countries. Consequently, it appears instructive to assess how young people in different European countries perceived youth unemployment at exactly that point in time.

3. Hypotheses

The public perception of issues is an element of several theories and empirical analyses in political science. One piece of literature that has been particularly instructive elaborates on the question of how support for or opposition to European integration is formed. Within this literature, in their influential study, Hooghe and Marks (2005) summarise three lines of reasoning on how attitudes towards the EU are formed. The first one is grounded on economic theory and postulates that individuals evaluate the economic consequences of the EU for themselves and for the groups of which they are part, which then shape their attitudes. The second line of reasoning is based on psychology and contends that individuals' social identity affects their attitudes towards the EU. The third argument put forth by the authors is that political cues mediate the effect of economic evaluations and social identity.

The main takeaway from the study by Hooghe and Marks (2005) for our research question is that the perception of an issue is determined by the perception of its consequences for both individuals (egotropic dimension) and the group of which they are part (sociotropic dimension). The distinction between egotropic and sociotropic concerns is firmly rooted in the literature on political attitudes (Watson et al., 2022) and electoral choices and how they are affected by perceptions of the economy's performance (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2013), but it is equally applicable to other phenomena where individuals can be expected to form their perception on the basis of personal or collective experience (Shehata, 2021).

Unemployment is a situation which individuals can either experience themselves or indirectly via their family, friends, or community or via reporting in the media. This makes unemployment an ideal candidate for examining whether the perception of youth unemployment as an issue depends on sociotropic, egocentric, or both types of evaluations.

The most obvious, egocentric variable shaping the perception of unemployment as a problem is that the individual concerned is affected by it, which is the relationship that our first hypothesis postulates. Research

using survey data has shown that the personal situation affects how individuals perceive welfare policies, for example (Schuck & Shore, 2019), which aligns with our focus on unemployment:

> H1a: Unemployed individuals are more likely to perceive unemployment as a problem.

In our understanding, the egocentric scope entails the young people's own situation. However, the literature has also stressed the importance of the formative years between childhood and adolescence for the development of (political) attitudes. With regard to the issue of unemployment, research has found, for example, that paternal unemployment has both short- and long-term implications for their children (Rambla & Scandurra, 2021). The evidence for enduring effects suggests that experiences gathered during the formative years may affect how individuals perceive issues (Neundorf et al., 2013). Consequently, we hypothesise that individuals who grew up with unemployed parents are (still) more likely to consider it as a problem:

> H1b: Individuals who grew up with unemployed family members are more likely to perceive unemployment as a problem.

The distinction between the collective and the personal level is not easy to make and depends on the specific research interests. In the present case, we consider having friends who are unemployed as a factor that is still very close to individuals and could affect them personally. Therefore, we treat the employment situation of the individuals' friends as belonging to the egotropic scope:

> H1c: Individuals with unemployed friends are more likely to perceive unemployment as a problem.

The sociotropic scope, as we define it, reaches beyond the personal situation or environment and refers to a higher level of aggregation, one which entails that individuals cannot observe issues directly and media information plays an important role in obtaining information (on this, see Shehata, 2021). In light of the variation in the characteristics of labour markets both at the national and sub-national levels, we contend that both levels matter for how individuals perceive problems.

Our conceptualisation of the sociotropic scope also takes into account the argument by Hooghe and Marks (2005) that evaluations of issues which result in attitudes can be subjective as well as objective. Departing from this argument, the following two hypotheses postulate the existence of a connection between subjective and objective assessments of a problem. These hypotheses differentiate between the country-level situation for forming attitudes and the subnational one. Depending on many things, such as whether the individual concerned consumes mostly news media that have country-wide or regional coverage, there could be a difference in which of the two levels is more important for perceiving unemployment as a problem:

> H2a: The higher the level of unemployment in the country in which individuals live, the higher the likelihood of them perceiving it as a problem.

> H2b: The higher the level of unemployment in the subnational entity in which individuals live, the higher the likelihood of them perceiving it as a problem.

The first two sets of hypotheses concentrate on the distinction between egotropic and sociotropic evaluations of issues as put forth by the literature on political attitudes and behaviour. The third hypothesis is motivated by the literature in political science on populism and by studies in economic and political geography. The latter is important since it makes the case that there exist "places that don't matter" (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) and that the populations of these feel disadvantaged, even if objectively they are not. Research on populism has shown that this sense of receiving little social recognition is one of the reasons why right-wing populist parties have been successful among rural populations in EU member states such as France and the Netherlands (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020).

One of the reasons why people vote for extremist parties is that they believe to perceive a problem that mainstream parties have not addressed (Havlík & Voda, 2018). Also, employment opportunities are scarcer in rural areas, which is one of the reasons why living in them results in higher migration rates (Weiss et al., 2021). It is possible, therefore, that the individuals' living circumstances shape their perception of unemployment. Put differently, individuals living in rural areas may experience more unemployment and therefore indicate it as a problem. However, as argued by the abovementioned literature, it is equally possible that individuals living in rural areas have a biased perception of unemployment due to a general sense of being left behind. In other words, it is possible that members of rural communities tend to overestimate a problem relative to the objective levels of unemployment. Both theoretical perspectives suggest that the place of residence may matter for how individuals perceive issues related to the country's socio-economic situation, which includes the question of how rampant unemployment is:

> H3: The higher the degree of ruralisation in areas in which individuals live, the higher the likelihood of them perceiving unemployment as a problem.

4. Operationalisation of the Key Variables

To test our hypotheses, we use data from the EU-funded research project CUPESSE, which was originally carried out by Tosun, Arco-Tirado et al. (2019) and now provides a publicly available dataset (see Tosun et al., 2018). The dataset offers a wide range of indicators in relation to the labour market participation of young Europeans and to related concepts such as their work values (Cemalcilar et al., 2019; Kittel et al., 2019; Kraaykamp et al., 2019; Weiss et al., 2021).

The sample on which our analysis draws includes 20,008 observations. These were collected for respondents aged between 18 and 35 years at the time of the fielding of the survey, between February and April 2016, and cover 11 European countries: Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, and the UK. The country selection reflects important dimensions of economic variation within Europe as well as variation in their political systems and (youth) welfare state arrangements. The latter in particular matters for how young people are affected by unemployment and includes STWT regimes (Chevalier, 2016; Dorsett & Lucchino, 2014; Simões, Tosun, & Rocca, 2022). The observations also comprise responses from the young people's parents, which is the most interesting feature of the CUPESSE dataset. In terms of sample size, the minimum requirement per country was 1,000 for young adult respondents and 500 for parents, with a reasonable proportion of fathers and mothers.

In nine of the 11 countries, the data were collected using an online survey (78.5% of the overall respondents), whereas in Hungary (6.5%) they were collected via computer-assisted personal interviewing and in Turkey via face-to-face interviews using paper and pencil (15.1%). Despite the different survey modes, the sampling frames were consistent. The companies carrying out the surveys were asked to provide a probability sample of individuals aged between 18 and 35 years that was representative of their employment status (employed, self-employed, unemployed, in education/training), NUTS 2 region, age group, education, and migration background/minority group membership. Even though the sampling frames are consistent, the regression models include controls for the three different survey modes used.

The outcome variable in this analysis indicates the extent to which the respondents consider youth unemployment as a major problem in their respective country of residence. Answers range on a five-point scale, from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). For a description of the outcome variable see Table A1 in the Supplementary Material. The data used for the analysis are weighted.

The first focal explanatory variable concerns the employment status of the respondents in the last month. The CUPESSE survey operationalised this variable by using a multiple-choice question, resulting in a series of dummy variables, including unemployed, self-employed, in education, doing housework, etc. The next focal explanatory variable is structured similarly to the first one but with the difference that it captures the employment status of the respondents' mother or father when they were 14 years old. The third variable captures the number of friends that the respondents indicated to be unemployed and is measured on a five-point scale ranging from *none of them* (1) to *all of them* (5).

We also included the countries' unemployment rates. Another indicator constructed to assess the status of young people is the NEET rate (Furlong, 2006; Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016; Simões, Erdoğan, et al., 2022). Both pieces of information are available for the level of the NUTS 2 regions from the Eurostat (2023) database. The data for these two variables refer to the year 2016. The date of extraction is important for them since unemployment and the share of young people being classified as NEETs are susceptible to temporal variation, as shown in Figure 1.

To test H3, we employ a variable that differentiates between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. The classification follows the approach presented by de Beer et al. (2014), who developed it in the framework of the EU-funded NEUJOBS project. For the descriptive statistics on the focal explanatory variables see Table A2 in the Supplementary Material.

Controls comprise variables gauging the respondents' socio-economic status, including their gender, age, education, marital status, having children, having caring duties, having had a paid job for more than one year in the past, being able to afford extras for oneself, self-defining as belonging to an ethnic minority, having been born abroad, employment status, personal values and subjective assessments (risk-taking/aversion, social trust, participation in voluntary associations, subjective assessment of personal health), information about parents (education, quality of relationship both with mother and father), the framework of reference (whether friends are in employment, in education, running businesses, or unemployed), survey mode (which differentiates between online, face-to-face interviews with computer-assisted personal interviews, and face-to-face interviews with paper and pencil), and regional and national contextual variables (gross domestic product per capita, in thousands and expressed in purchasing power standards). All controls are described in Table A3 in the Supplementary Material.

The empirical strategy is to estimate trilevel hierarchical models, with respondents nested in NUTS 2 regions, which are in turn nested in countries. Through this estimation approach, we ensure that we obtain unbiased standard errors. The regression models include a large number of covariates, but this poses no problem given the large number of observations, which range between 15,220 and 18,252 despite missing values. The missing values mostly result from the fact that some of the covariates include information on the respondents' parents or which had to be supplied by the parents directly. Given that information about parents is missing for almost a quarter of the sample, we run models first without and then with such controls to check the robustness of the findings. We denote the latter set of models in Table 1 (and in Table A4 in the Supplementary Material) using "PAR" for "parents" in the name of the models. In addition, we first run the models without interaction effects, then add them step by step. Table 1 shows only the effects of interest for the three sets of hypotheses and without any categorical variables.

5. Empirical Findings

In the 11 countries under study, opinions on youth unemployment vary (see Table A1 in the Supplementary Material). The countries with the highest score for strongly agreeing that youth unemployment is a major problem are the Mediterranean countries (Greece 84%, Spain 78%, Italy 68%), followed by Turkey (51%) and Hungary (50%). The corresponding figures for agreement on youth unemployment being a major problem are 78% in the UK (56% agree and 22% strongly agree), 77% in Austria (53% agree and 24% strongly agree), 65% in Germany (43% agree and 22% strongly agree), and 59% in the Czech Republic (18% agree and 41% strongly agree). A much milder agreement is to be found in Denmark (13% agree and 37% strongly agree) and Switzerland (39% agree and 12% strongly agree). The countries with a higher proportion of young people who do not regard youth unemployment as a major problem are Switzerland (29%), Denmark (24%), Czech Republic (19%), and Germany (16%). Notably, the countries where Eurostat data indicate a high rate of youth unemployment (Greece, Italy, Spain, and Turkey) are those in which the CUPESSE dataset confirms that young people perceive unemployment as a major national problem.

An empty multilevel model indicates that 21% of the total variation is located across countries, 24% is due to variations at the regional (i.e., NUTS 2) level, and the remainder is located at the individual level. This leaves a lot of explanation to be given at each of these levels and indicates that hierarchical models are adequate for testing our hypotheses (see Table A4 in the Supplementary Material).

With respect to our first set of hypotheses related to the egotropic dimension, we can only partly confirm H1a. The egotropic stance of considering unemployment as more problematic when young people are unemployed has little empirical support. The effect is not significant when not controlling for parental traits and becomes significant at $p < 0.10$ afterwards. The impact of being unemployed is not significant at $p < 0.10$, while the effect of being employed increases the odds of considering unemployment as a problem by 1.16, being significant at $p < 0.001$ in all the models. Unemployed people are likely to show a .07 increase on the five-point scale of considering unemployment as a problem. This means that unemployed individuals have a higher likelihood of considering youth unemployment as problematic by 1.75% more on the scale than employed people. This is basically null, so H1a does not hold. However, family (H1b) and friends (H1c) are relevant to young people's perceptions of unemployment.

If the respondent's father was unemployed when the respondent was aged 14, the score of perceiving youth unemployment as problematic is on average 0.24 lower than if the father was employed in the respondent's childhood. This reveals the importance of the father as a model. However, if the mother was unemployed at this time, it increases the perception of youth unemployment as being problematic by 0.12 points. In other words, the father's unemployment effect measures about a 16th of the total range on this problem perception scale, while the mother's effect is roughly two times lower. At the same time, it is noteworthy that in many of these countries (Turkey and the Southern European countries), the family model is one in which the father works and provides the main income, while the mother takes care of the family and children (Chevalier, 2016). This explains the greater influence of the father's unemployment on young people's perceptions that unemployment is a problem. These findings confirm H1b by showing that young people from families where parents have experienced unemployment are more likely to view unemployment as a problem.

The multilevel model also indicates the influence of friends' employment status on young people's perceptions of unemployment. Thus, the more unemployed friends the respondents have, the stronger their perception that youth unemployment is a major problem. This confirms H1c, indicating that young people with unemployed friends are more likely to perceive unemployment as a problem.

A one-point increase in country-level unemployment leads to a significant 0.03 increase on the four-point scale of the dependent variable, that is, 10% of the maximum variation. These results confirm H2a, indicating that the national level of unemployment strongly influences young people's perceptions of unemployment as a problem.

The subnational level is not so important here. The results show that regional unemployment has no effect on perceptions of youth unemployment as being problematic. The result is robust to adding interaction effects. This finding is plausible considering that regional-level variation is not equally high in the countries included in the analysis. Of these, Spain and especially Italy are the ones where youth unemployment has been subject to considerable cross-regional variation (Cefalo et al., 2020). Also, mass media tends to present the youth unemployment situation at the national level, not at the subnational one. Thus, the sociotropic dimension remains important for youth perceptions of unemployment, but largely at just the national level, which supports H2a but rejects H2b.

The rurality of the NUTS 2 region does not significantly influence the outcome variable. The interactions between the rurality and unemployment indicators also have no significant impact on the perceptions of youth unemployment as a problem. Although living in a rural area does influence youth unemployment (Simões, Erdoğan, et al., 2022), it does not influence a young person's perception of this phenomenon. This can also be explained by informal employment of young people in rural areas and the existence of various labour mobility programmes that can stimulate employment (Weiss et al., 2021). Furthermore, we conceptualised rurality at the regional level, not at the individual one. In other words, we know how rural a region is, but not whether the respondent lives in a more rural area. The skewed distribution locates only 10% of the respondents as living in predominantly rural regions (see Section A2 in the Supplementary Material). We conclude that the impact of a region's rurality is not significant, but we are left with the question of whether the actual location of the respondent in a rural area contributes to their assessment of youth unemployment as problematic.

Table 1. Multilevel analysis: Testing the hypotheses.

	m1	m2	m3	m4	m1PAR	m2PAR	m3PAR	m4PAR
Respondents' level								
Had a paid job for one year or more	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02
Employment status last month:								
• In paid work as an employee	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***
• Self-employed	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02
• Unemployed/ not having a job	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.07†	0.07†	0.07†	0.07†	
• In education (not paid for by employer)	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.00	−0.00	−0.00	−0.00
• Doing an internship/ in-training	−0.04	−0.04	−0.04	−0.04	−0.06	−0.06	−0.06	−0.06
• Unable to work because of health issues	−0.05	−0.05	−0.05	−0.05	−0.09	−0.09	−0.08	−0.09
• Doing civil/ military service	−0.35*	−0.35*	−0.35*	−0.35*	−0.10	−0.10	−0.10	−0.10
• On parental leave	0.11**	0.11**	0.11**	0.11**	0.15**	0.15**	0.15**	0.15**
• Doing housework, looking after children	−0.08	−0.08	−0.08	−0.08	−0.09	−0.09	−0.09	−0.09
• Other	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05
Employment situation of friends								
Employed	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01
Unemployed	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***
Running their own business	−0.03*	−0.03*	−0.03*	−0.03*	−0.04**	−0.04**	−0.04**	−0.04**
In education/ training	−0.06**	−0.05**	−0.05**	−0.06**	−0.04*	−0.04*	−0.04*	−0.04*
NUTS 2								
Regional unemployment	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01
Regional NEETs rate	0.01*	0.01†	0.01*	0.01*	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01†
Regional GDP	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	−0.00	−0.00	−0.00	−0.00
Rurality	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
• Predominantly urban								
• Intermediate	0.01	−0.04	0.02	−0.03	0.02	−0.04	0.03	−0.03
• Predominantly rural	−0.03	−0.09	−0.09	−0.08	−0.06	−0.15†	−0.14	−0.14

Table 1. (Cont.) Multilevel analysis: Testing the hypotheses.

	m1	m2	m3	m4	m1PAR	m2PAR	m3PAR	m4PAR
Country								
Country unemployment	0.01***	0.01	0.01*	0.01	0.01**	0.01	0.01*	0.00
Country NEETs rate	0.04***	0.04***	0.04***	0.03***	0.04***	0.04***	0.04***	0.04***
Country GDP per inhabitant (PPS)	0.01***	0.01**	0.01**	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***
Interactions								
Predominantly urban # Country unemployment		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00
Intermediate # Country unemployment		0.01		0.02		0.01		0.02
Predominantly rural # Country unemployment		0.01		−0.02		0.01		−0.01
Predominantly urban # Regional unemployment			0.00	0.00			0.00	0.00
Intermediate # Regional unemployment			−0.00	−0.01			−0.00	−0.01
Predominantly rural # Regional unemployment			0.01	0.02			0.01	0.02
Constant	2.95***	2.93***	2.89***	2.94***	2.80***	2.76***	2.73***	2.77***
Variance: Country	0.00	0.00	0.00***	0.00***	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Variance: Region	0.03***	0.03***	0.03***	0.03***	0.03***	0.03***	0.03***	0.03***
Variance: Residual	0.80	0.80	0.80	0.80	0.80	0.80	0.80	0.80
Controls for socio-economic status	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls for personal values	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls for parental traits	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls for survey mode	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Respondents	18,258	18,258	18,258	18,258	15,220	15,220	15,220	15,220
Regions (NUTS 2)	184	184	184	184	184	184	184	184
Countries	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11
AIC	48,080	48,079	48,079	48,073	40,285	40,282	40,283	40,278
BIC	48,166	48,164	48,165	48,159	40,369	40,366	40,367	40,362
−2LL	−24,029	−24,028	−24,028	−24,025	−20,131	−20,130	−20,131	−20,128

Notes: † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

6. Conclusions

Most young Europeans live in consolidated democracies with well-functioning and affluent economies, which give them abundant opportunities for learning and working. However, even if by international standards young people living in Europe benefit from a favourable socio-economic and political context, it does not mean that all of them experience a smooth transition from school to work. Consequently, there is still room for improving the policy instruments implemented to improve the participation of young people in the labour market. However, policymakers act in a setting in which they are faced with more problems than they can possibly address, forcing them to prioritise certain issues over others (Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014).

In this study, we put forth the assumption that policymaking requires problems to be treated as such, which involves the policymakers themselves but also the groups that will be adversely affected if no (further) policy action is taken. Against this background, we assessed which sociotropic and egocentric evaluations induce young people to perceive youth unemployment as a problem.

Our analysis showed it is predominantly the egotropic dimension which influences young people's perceptions of youth unemployment as being a problem. More precisely, we could support H1b, that young people who grew up with unemployed family members are more likely to perceive unemployment as a problem, as well as H1c, which postulated that individuals with unemployed friends are more likely to perceive unemployment as a problem. In contrast, we could not find support for H1a, which postulated that unemployed individuals are more likely to perceive unemployment as a problem. Of course, other individual factors affect this perception as well—gender, age, educational level, marital status, etc.—but the personal experience of having unemployed family members or friends is the most important factor.

With regard to the sociotropic dimension, our analysis revealed that the national level of unemployment is relevant to the perception of youth unemployment as a problem, as postulated by H2a. The influence of the national level in politics is reflected in the presentation of this issue by the media and policymakers as one of national importance. At the same time, the regional dimension of youth unemployment is relatively little observed and/or understood by the population of the countries covered by this study. Consequently, we had to reject H2b, which hypothesised that the higher the level of unemployment in the subnational entity in which individuals live, the higher the likelihood of them perceiving it as a problem. We consider this finding interesting because unemployment at the subnational level should be a more accurate indicator of the likelihood of individuals living in the region concerned experiencing unemployment given that labour markets vary across regions, which is particularly marked in Italy, for example. Nonetheless, the empirical data support the idea that the situation at the national level is more influential in shaping individuals' views.

The third hypothesis was motivated by the literature in political science on populism and by studies in economic and political geography. It postulated that the higher the degree of rurality in areas in which individuals live, the higher the likelihood of perceiving unemployment as a problem. Based on the empirical findings obtained, we had to reject H3. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that people observe problems accurately; for rural areas that tend to have higher unemployment levels, this entails increased efforts by policymakers to demonstrate that they are willing to address this issue. We consider this observation to be politically relevant because if people living in rural areas get discouraged by the labour market situation, this can aggravate their sense of marginalisation, subsequently inducing them, inter alia, to vote for populist or

extremist parties, as we have been able to observe in several European countries (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020). From this perspective, it is plausible and sensible that the EU Commission launched the Rural Pact in 2021 as part of its Long-Term Vision for EU's Rural Areas. In 2023, the corresponding Rural Pact community platform became operational, and now five community groups are working on different types of challenges rural communities face.

While the CUPESSE dataset is a valuable resource, it also comes with limitations, which have determined the scope and ambition of this study. First and foremost, the dataset does not contain any geoinformation, which would have facilitated a more compelling test of whether an individual's place of residence affects how they perceive youth unemployment. Here we could only rely on the rough distinction between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. Another limitation concerns the current employment status of the young people's parents, which was gathered only for those parents who participated in the survey. Going forward, it would be useful to replicate the analysis using a dataset that contains these two types of information. Another promising avenue for future research would be to compare the findings derived on the basis of data from 2016 with more recent data that include the period before and after the Covid-19 pandemic, which also had implications for the transition from education to the labour market (e.g., Brazienė et al., 2021). In this context, it is conceivable that attitude formation works differently when individuals and society are dealing with health-related or other crises.

Therefore, we are aware that this study can only mark the beginning of a literature that investigates in a systematic fashion how individuals form their attitudes towards issues. Nonetheless, we are positive that the empirical findings presented here as well as the discussion of the limitations that characterise this study are promising points of departure for future empirical research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

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Strategies for Engaging and Outreaching NEETs in Italy: Insights From Active Labour Policies

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Abstract

Outreaching and engaging young people who are not in education, employment, or training (i.e., NEETs) represents a significant challenge for public policies. They often belong to marginalized and disadvantaged categories and find themselves isolated with low levels of trust in the future, in their capacities of finding a job, and, above all, in institutions. Much research has emphasized how insufficient and unsuitable the strategies used so far have proved to be. However, there is a lack of clear mapping in the literature of what approaches have been suggested and addressed by the different guidelines. This study explores the strategies that a specific active labour policy uses to intercept and engage vulnerable youth and NEETs. This research employed a qualitative methodology that centres on the examination of official documents of the regional plans for the guaranteed employability of workers (Garanzia di Occupabilità dei Lavoratori). To conduct the analysis, the MAXQDA software package was utilized, and a content document analysis was implemented. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: capillarity of services, digitalization, and communication, each with its respective sub-themes. These themes provide valuable insights into the current strategies employed to engage vulnerable NEET youth, as well as other demographic categories, highlighting the potential strengths and weaknesses of these policies. The study holds the potential to contribute significantly to the development of more targeted and sustainable public policies, aiming to address the challenges faced by vulnerable NEET youth in Italy.

Keywords

active labour policy; guaranteed employability for workers; Italy; NEETs; vulnerable youth

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted societies worldwide, with Italy being one of the hardest-hit countries (Ellena, Aresi, et al., 2021). Among the vulnerable groups affected by the crisis are NEETs: young individuals who are neither working nor pursuing further education (Odoardi et al., 2022). The pandemic-induced economic downturn has resulted in widespread job losses and reduced employment opportunities (Andrei et al., 2022). NEETs, who were already struggling to find employment before the economic crisis (Sergi et al., 2018), now face even greater difficulties (Aina et al., 2021; Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021; Siza, 2022). The closure of businesses, limited job openings, and increased competition for available positions have created a highly challenging environment for these young individuals (Carta & De Philippis, 2021; Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021). At the same time, the pandemic has disrupted educational systems, leading to school and university closures, remote learning challenges, and limited access to vocational training programs (Consolazio et al., 2022; Pastore & Choudhry, 2022; Pozzoli et al., 2022). This disruption has significantly impacted NEETs (Fiaschi & Tealdi, 2022), as they often lack the necessary qualifications and skills that employers demand (Ellena, Marta, et al., 2021). The digital divide further exacerbates the situation, with disadvantaged NEETs facing difficulties accessing online education and training resources (Girelli et al., 2020; Srivastava & Agarwal, 2020). The prolonged period of uncertainty, isolation, and anxiety caused by the pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health of many young individuals, including NEETs (Fiorenzato & Cona, 2022). Feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, and increased stress levels can further impede their motivation and ability to actively seek employment or training opportunities (Ellena, Marta, et al., 2021; Parola et al., 2020). Addressing the psychological well-being of NEETs is crucial for their successful reintegration into the labour market (Jongbloed & Giret, 2022). The pandemic has magnified existing socioeconomic inequalities, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged groups, including NEETs. Those from marginalized backgrounds with limited access to resources and support networks face a greater risk of prolonged unemployment and social exclusion (Giannoni et al., 2023). These disparities must be addressed through targeted policies that promote inclusivity and equal opportunities.

2. The Engagement Challenge

Engaging NEETs in Italy poses significant challenges due to various factors such as limited skills, lack of work experience, and personal barriers (Rosina et al., 2021). One major obstacle in engaging NEETs is their limited skills and qualifications (Ellena, Marta, et al., 2021). Many NEETs lack the necessary educational credentials or vocational training to secure employment opportunities (Bynner & Parsons, 2002). Addressing this challenge requires the provision of accessible and relevant skill development programs tailored to the specific needs of NEETs (Coalter et al., 2020). Vocational training centres, apprenticeships, and internships can help bridge the skills gap and improve employability (Marzana & Poy, 2019). Furthermore, NEETs often lack practical work experience, making it challenging to compete in the job market. Employers may prefer candidates with prior experience, leaving NEETs disadvantaged (Petrescu et al., 2021). To tackle this issue, internships, job shadowing programs, and subsidized employment initiatives can be implemented to provide NEETs with valuable work experience and enhance their employability (Marzana & Poy, 2019). Moreover, many NEETs face personal and socioeconomic barriers that hinder their engagement (Mawn et al., 2017). Factors such as mental health issues, social exclusion, poverty, and unstable living conditions can significantly impact their ability to participate in education or employment programs (Ose & Jensen, 2017). Addressing these barriers requires a holistic approach that combines counselling, social support services, and financial assistance to

enable NEETs to overcome personal challenges and fully engage in opportunities (Rosina et al., 2021). In addition, NEETs often lack access to accurate information about available educational and employment opportunities (Nardi et al., 2015). They may be unaware of support programs or initiatives designed to assist them in re-entering education or finding suitable employment (Rosina et al., 2021). Improving outreach efforts and strengthening collaboration between educational institutions, employment agencies, and community organizations can help ensure that NEETs receive comprehensive and up-to-date information and guidance (Petrescu et al., 2021; Rosina et al., 2021). Finally, the lack of coordination and integration among various support systems poses a significant challenge in engaging NEETs effectively (Jessoula & Vesan, 2011). Multiple agencies and organizations are involved in assisting NEETs, but the fragmented nature of these systems can lead to duplication, inefficiency, and gaps in service delivery. Creating a more coordinated and streamlined support system through improved communication, data sharing, and collaboration can enhance engagement efforts and facilitate better outcomes (Alfieri et al., 2020).

3. Contributions From a National Research

After several years of implementing the Garanzia Giovani (Youth Guarantee) program, it has become evident that the difficulty of reaching the most vulnerable NEETs is critical (Petrescu et al., 2021). To shed light on this phenomenon, a study was conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth Policies, the Catholic University of Milan, and the Toniolo Institute (Rosina et al., 2021). The aim was to provide insights on how to build more effective proximity strategies through interviews with young NEETs, non-NEETs, and stakeholders, based on a study of four cases: Giugliano in Campania, Turin, Bari, and Genoa (Rosina et al., 2021). The results highlighted several key aspects that emerged across all the cities and target groups, with specific variations based on the territorial location (North and South) and the different perspectives of the stakeholders. Here is a summary of these aspects:

1. Network: The need to establish and strengthen a network between the municipality and associations, organizations, and entities operating on the territory was strongly emphasized;
2. Territorial presence: The network should be anchored in a territorial presence, particularly at the municipal level, to become a visible and reliable reference point for youth policies and NEET programs. This presence also acts as a coordination centre for the network, supporting engagement, monitoring the NEET phenomenon, strengthening relationships with young people, raising awareness among families and communities, and disseminating information about local opportunities;
3. Collaboration between institutions: The network should involve local authorities, the third sector, associations, social and educational services, and other relevant entities. Schools, training centres, youth associations, organizations working with immigrant communities, employment centres, and youth information services should be actively engaged in the network. The collaboration should also extend to parents, teachers, social services, young people engaged in civil service, and law enforcement agencies;
4. Role of operators/tutors: Operators involved in projects for NEETs play a crucial role that goes beyond technical expertise. They act as tutors, establishing trust-based relationships with the young people involved and offering listening skills and emotional support. Training for these operators should focus on building and maintaining strong relationships, especially in group settings;
5. Peer group as a learning and growth tool: Peer groups offer opportunities for positive effects on individuals and the group as a whole. Sharing, circularity, reflection, emotional resonance, conflict

resolution, rituals, and common goals are all elements that contribute to the positive development of participants;

6. Psychological attention: The complexity of the NEET condition, beyond the lack of job opportunities, was acknowledged by the young participants. They clearly understood the psychological and relational factors underlying their exclusion from education and employment. They emphasized the need for psychological support during this transitional phase, recognizing the importance of support in mental, familial, and social distress;
7. Diversified strategies for engagement and intervention: The research highlighted the necessity of diversifying intervention strategies. These strategies should take into account territorial differences (North and South, urban and rural) and different types of NEETs;
8. Flexibility and adaptability: Programs and policies must be flexible and adaptable to NEETs' changing needs and circumstances. The study emphasized the importance of dynamic and responsive approaches that quickly adjust to evolving situations;
9. Multi-dimensional approach: The research findings stressed the importance of adopting a multi-dimensional approach when designing interventions for NEETs. It is not sufficient to focus solely on employment or education. Instead, interventions should address various aspects of young people's lives, including social inclusion, personal development, mental well-being, and community engagement;
10. Awareness and communication: Effective communication strategies and awareness campaigns are necessary to reach and engage NEETs. Communication efforts should leverage various channels, including social media, local media outlets, educational institutions, and community networks;
11. Evaluation and continuous improvement: Ongoing evaluation and monitoring of interventions are essential to assess their effectiveness and make necessary adjustments. Regular feedback loops involving stakeholders and young people themselves can provide valuable insights for program improvement. Evaluation should not only focus on quantitative outcomes but also consider qualitative factors, such as the experiences and perceptions of NEETs.

By considering these key aspects and incorporating the findings from the study, policymakers, organizations, and stakeholders could develop more effective strategies and initiatives to address the NEET phenomenon, such as those described in the NEET Plan 2022 (Rinaldi, 2022).

4. The 2022 NEET Plan in Italy

Following the previously mentioned study, the 2022 NEET Plan was launched, which provides strategic guidelines for implementing active labour projects and policies for young people (Ministero per le Politiche Giovanili, 2022). The plan also focuses on engagement strategies. It was accompanied by an awareness campaign by the Department for Youth Policies to organize targeted territorial animation initiatives to reach, engage, and activate NEET young people. In this regard, the Department intended to promote the organization of an itinerant information tour in various parts of Italy characterized by a high vulnerability index. The tour, scheduled for the first half of 2022, visited approximately ten to twelve urban centres identified as having the highest presence of NEET young people, according to data published by the National Agency for Active Labour Policies. The truck tour spent one or two days in each municipality, stationed in areas identified with the support of individual municipalities and associations, particularly those with high school dropout rates and youth unemployment. The campaign aimed to physically approach young people by providing them with information and knowledge tools to access opportunities offered by national

and European public entities. It aimed to facilitate encounters and address one of the critical aspects identified in the public consultation held in April 2021 through the GIOVANI2030 Portal (an online platform designed to be the digital home for young people), which involved over 15,000 young people between the ages of 14 and 35. One of the challenges highlighted was the difficulty of accessing relevant information due to the fragmentation of interventions and actors in the territory. The main means of the campaign was a camper van, which had specialized personnel available to support young people in various ways, such as contacting employment centres, using new technologies for gaming and simulation, writing CVs or creating video CVs, preparing for job interviews, enrolling in subsidized training courses, participating in civil service calls, accessing opportunities provided by the Youth Guarantee program, accessing national or regional incentives and subsidies, and obtaining the *sistema pubblico di identità digitale* (SPID; public system of digital identity) to facilitate communication with public administration. The information campaign was carried out in collaboration with the National Youth Agency, which provided personnel and information on European programs such as Erasmus+, Youth in Action, and the European Solidarity Corps. The Agenzia Nazionale per le Politiche Attive del Lavoro (ANPAL; National Agency for Active Labor Policies) and the ministry of labour also contributed by providing regional contacts for program promotion.

5. The Workers' Employability Guarantee Program

The Garanzia Occupabilità dei Lavoratori (GOL; Employability Guarantee Program), also known as Guaranteed Employability for Workers, is a crucial reform action outlined in Italy's Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR; National Recovery and Resilience Plan). Its primary objective is to support individuals in their pursuit of employment by providing essential tools and measures to facilitate their entry or re-entry into the labour market and offering opportunities for retraining (Esposito & Di Carluccio, 2023; Saraceno, 2023). A central aspect of the GOL program revolves around personalized services tailored to the specific needs of everyone. By offering a more targeted and in-depth orientation, the program can comprehensively assess a person's employability and direct them toward the most suitable pathway. The GOL is designed to benefit a wide range of individuals, including those receiving social security or income support, young people, NEETs, women, persons with disabilities, individuals above the age of 55, those with very low incomes, and individuals who have been unemployed for more than six months. To access the program, interested individuals are scheduled for an in-depth induction interview with a Public Employment Services (PES) operator. During this interview, the person's professional career trajectory is reconstructed, skills are analyzed, and any objective or subjective factors that might hinder their employability are identified. Based on the employability profile determined from the interview, the individual is then directed towards one of the various paths offered by the program:

1. Occupational reinsertion: This path is suitable for individuals who possess skills relevant to the local labour market and mainly require orientation and support to secure employment;
2. Upgrading: Geared towards individuals who need to update their skills to enhance their chances of reintegrating into the local labour market;
3. Retraining: Designed for those who require a professional retraining program to adapt their skills to the evolving demands of the local labour market;
4. Work and inclusion: This path caters to individuals facing vulnerability and fragility due to unemployment and additional social or health challenges. It includes services that activate the network of territorial services, covering social and health aspects.

For individuals receiving forms of income support, such as citizenship income or unemployment benefits (Nuova Assicurazione Sociale per l'Impiego; New Employment Social Insurance), participation in the pathways is mandatory. The implementation of these pathways is carried out by the entities within the Active Employment Network. With the support of PES operators, individuals schedule their first appointments to activate the agreed-upon services at accredited private institutions or their respective PES (Acocella, 2022). For a program like GOL, reforming active labour policies and wide dissemination of information, advice, and guidance on the services offered is crucial. Access should not be just a bureaucratic step for economic benefits but a pathway to tailored services to improve employability. Employment centres must act as gateways to GOL by engaging with the community and being accessible locally. During the pandemic, distance communication tools rapidly developed, proving essential in maintaining services during movement restrictions. These digital services aim to simplify access and delivery, including automatic registration and improved contact with centre staff. For some tech-savvy users, e-services may replace in-person provision with informed consent. Physical presence remains vital for those without digital skills or specific needs. Widespread presence also helps reach difficult target populations (Acocella, 2022). Establishing "light" structures like mobile units or temporary offices through agreements with municipalities facilitates access, guidance, and consultation for vulnerable individuals. Specific targets for physical presence should be defined, aiming for at least one facility for every 40,000 inhabitants. The plan should integrate digital services and consider exceptions for specific areas (Faioli, 2023).

6. The Present Research

The goal of this work is to highlight the strategies that the regions have planned to reach the beneficiaries of the GOL active policy. Specifically, to verify if there are targeted strategies to reach individuals residing in mountainous or rural regions, with a particular focus on NEETs. GOL is implemented by the 19 Regions and two Autonomous Provinces, each of which drafts its own plan based on national guidelines. The Piano Attuativo Regionale (PAR; Regional Plans) created are then subject to approval by ANPAL. All 21 documents were meticulously analyzed to address and fulfil the specific objectives of this study. The documents were retrieved from the websites of the respective regions and autonomous provinces, with the links being cited in the references section (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano, 2022; Provincia Autonoma di Trento, 2022; Regione Abruzzo, 2022; Regione Basilicata, 2022; Regione Calabria, 2022; Regione Campania, 2022; Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2022; Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2022; Regione Lazio, 2022; Regione Liguria, 2022; Regione Lombardia, 2022; Regione Marche, 2022; Regione Molise, 2022; Regione Piemonte, 2022; Regione Puglia, 2022; Regione Autonoma della Sardegna, 2022; Regione Siciliana, 2022; Regione Toscana, 2022; Regione Umbria, 2022; Regione Autonoma Valle D'Aosta, 2022; Regione Veneto, 2022). The methodology used was a qualitative analysis of the documents implemented through the MAXQDA software package. The three authors of this article actively participated in the data analysis, engaging in the coding process, as well as defining the themes and sub-themes to ensure robust inter-judge reliability.

7. Analysis and Results

Data were analyzed following a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). During the analysis, only references to engagement and outreach issues were considered, leaving out anything that did not relate to this topic. Main themes and sub-themes were identified and are summarized in three different figures. Three

main themes emerged with consequent sub-themes, which will be described in detail in the following sub-sections.

7.1. Theme 1: Actions Concerning the Capillarity of Services

The first theme addresses all the actions the regions have planned and proposed to enhance the capillarity and distribution of services (see Figure 1).

Five sub-themes emerged from the thematic analysis related to the theme of *capillarity of services*. As illustrated in Figure 1, the primary strategy used by PES to expand their services and reach the most vulnerable and underserved areas, such as upland and rural regions, is by establishing partnerships with other public bodies such as municipalities or health departments (sub-theme of *availability of offices/resources in other public administrations*). This approach involves opening PES offices within municipal or other public offices, typically operating one day or half a day per week. This extension of PES services allows them to reach locations where establishing a full office might be complex due to logistical and economic reasons. In this sense, the Regione Piemonte and the Regione Toscana state that:

> To be able to reach even the mountainous areas or those to some extent not involved in the existing territorial networks, the Piemonte Work Agency is promoting, where possible (for example, in some valleys of the Cuneo area, in Val di Susa, in the Pinerolo area), agreements between the Employment Centers and the interested Municipalities, aimed at facilitating the use of services, including through the provision of Center operators who periodically make themselves available to provide first-level information and individual or group workshops at the same locations of the Municipalities. (Regione Piemonte, 2022, p. 37)

> The main line of action on which interventions aimed at proximity will focus relates to the establishment of desks/locations within public administrations, through which the current network of desks and services operating in Tuscany will be expanded and made more widespread. (Regione Toscana, 2022, p. 37)

Nevertheless, some Italian regions have allocated funds to open new PES offices (sub-theme of *possible new offices*) and two have invested in reopening previously disused offices (sub-theme of *restoration of PES territorial points*). In these regards, the Regione Marche (2022, p. 39) pointed out that:

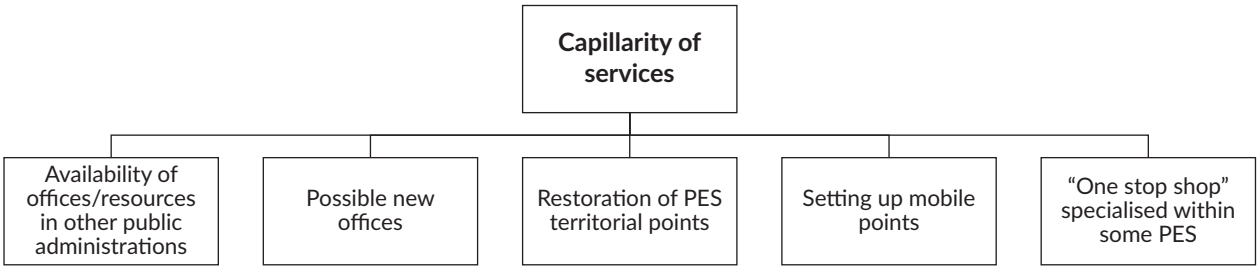

Figure 1. Actions concerning the capillarity of services.

> Currently, in relation to the territorial points, 6 are closed, mainly due to the earthquake in 2016 that rendered various facilities unusable: Matelica, Passo San Ginesio, Amandola, Montegiorgio, Porto Sant'Elpidio, San Severino Marche. To reconfirm the proximity and comprehensiveness of the services during the current year (2022), the following are planned: The restoration of some of the aforementioned territorial points.

Another strategy adopted by some regions is the use of mobile hubs (sub-theme of *setting up mobile points*), temporary units without fixed offices, which enable outreach to isolated areas and vulnerable populations, including people with disabilities as declared by the Regione Lazio and Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia:

> In order to ensure the full achievement of the target, the regional administration intends to use a series of temporary mobile desks (GOL Corner) for information and guidance on the Program (e.g., roaming campers or information points at other institutions and organizations), mainly in the Metropolitan City of Rome and in the provinces of Latina and Frosinone. (Regione Lazio, 2022, p. 70)

> Regarding the creation of mobile points, one desk will be set up in the Trieste area and one in the Pordenone area. (Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia, p. 41)

An interesting approach proposed by Puglia involves the creation of "one-stop shops" within existing PES centres (sub-theme of *one-stop shop specialized within some PES*). These centres aim to provide access to all necessary services in one location, inspired by the clear, holistic approach derived from the German experience. Regarding this creation, the Regione Puglia (2022, p. 104) planned to:

> Establish "one-stop shops" specialized in some of the locations of the regional Employment Centers. With a clear, holistic approach inspired by the German experience, the model involves centralizing services for employment, training, assistance, and support in a single location. In this regard, the region participated in a technical meeting on the model of the German employment centres organized by the Goethe Institut—Rome, on November 16, 2021. Following this meeting, there was a consensus to implement good practices aimed at offering specific target groups of users (i.e., youth, women, people with disabilities, and long-term unemployed) a range of integrated proximity services, including planning for desks related to territorial welfare within some of the Employment Centers. This would allow for the support of individuals with multi-dimensional needs while at the same time ensuring a single point of access.

7.2. Theme 2: Actions Concerning Digitalization

The second theme addresses all the actions the regions have planned and proposed to enhance the *digitalization* of services, which is helpful in terms of outreach. Five sub-themes emerged from the thematic analysis regarding the theme of digitalization, which will be illustrated below. As Figure 2 illustrates, several services are to be digitalized, with some already undergoing this process in various regions.

The situation is quite consistent, with all regions upgrading their websites to become interactive tools rather than just operational platforms. This will allow for the online execution of various operations (sub-theme of *access to online administrative matters*). Among the first, we encounter access to online documentation as

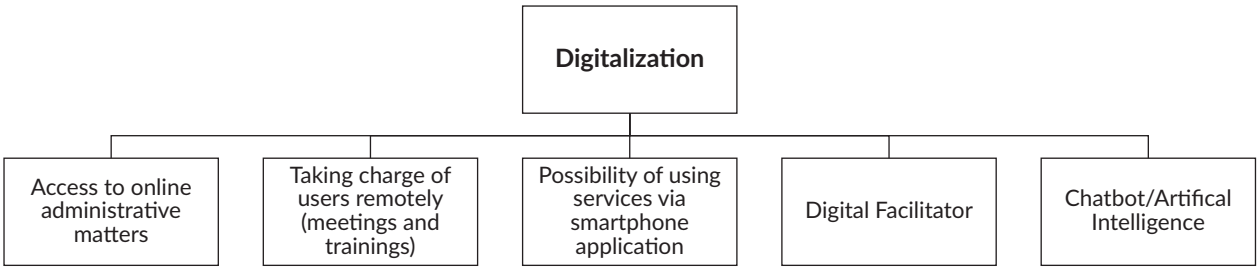

Figure 2. Actions concerning digitalization.

well as the request for certificates, ensuring that people living far from the PES will not need to visit for minor operations. At the same time, the regions declare their intention to also implement online mechanisms for demand and supply management, profile management, as well as evaluation and monitoring of activities. These newly implemented digitalized activities will allow PES operators to save time that can be devoted to more engaging activities. Regarding this theme, the Regione Campania (2022, p. 77) advanced that:

> The push towards the digitalization of services is indeed changing, even radically, the ways of managing, producing, and communicating in the world of work and public employment services in the territory. Through the management module that allows the release of certificates online, it is now possible to manage, depending on the level of certification to be achieved, the issuance of documents by the offices of the public service. In fact, the module allows the automatic generation of documents that report data possessed by the Public Administration through the Informative Work system, available directly online for the user who accesses through authentication with SPID. A booking system for appointments online for public employment services also allows citizens to view the availability of offices online and book an appointment based on the configurations of days and times made available, avoiding long waiting times and dispersion of information. The release of the Declaration of Immediate Availability (DID) online completes the process of administrative services that can be provided online, aiming to facilitate access to the Employment Centers' services in the region.

Another fundamental sub-theme of digitalization is the ability to conduct interviews, virtual meetings, and even participate in online training through the use of online video conferencing platforms (sub-theme of *taking charge of users remotely [meetings and training]*). This is particularly interesting as digitalization enables easier access to services without eliminating the human element from the equation. In fact, the human component remains, only the tool used changes. In relation to this sub-theme, the Regione Abruzzo and Regione Veneto established that:

> In order to ensure the delivery of online courses, a virtual help desk for Employment Centers will be established. To facilitate services for individuals who do not have computer equipment, it will be possible to set up a room within a new online platform with free access to the public through the Virtual Help Desk system and to offer services even in the most remote locations without the physical presence of an operator. Moreover, the new online platform will also enable the provision of services such as seminars and online training courses, in order to facilitate participation in all initiatives throughout the regional territory, trying to limit mobility constraints. (Regione Abruzzo, 2022, p. 66)

> Specifically, as a first response to new requirements, the range of digital services has expanded, offering the possibility to conduct remote sessions through major videoconferencing platforms (Skype and Google Meet), including individual meetings with PES operators, as well as intake procedures and the online signing of the Service Agreement. (Regione Veneto, 2022, p. 55)

Many regions have also optimized their websites to be accessible through smartphone applications (sub-theme of the *possibility of using services via smartphone application*). It is well-known that young people tend to use smartphones more than computers and are much more familiar with this tool. Consequently, regional authorities have planned to make all online activities accessible through a smartphone-friendly version. This can be observed through the following statements made by Provincia Autonoma di Trento and Regione Puglia:

> The delivery of employment services, harmonized with the Essential Levels of Benefits, is already partly carried out remotely in the Province of Trento through the use of digital tools. This applies to appointments with the Employment Centers as well as to services that users can independently access. It also pertains to the activities carried out by private entities accredited for work and training through SPIL (Provincial Labor System), Filemaker (Training System), and the provincial portal for employment services, including the associated App. (Provincia Autonoma di Trento, 2022, p. 40)

> The Puglia Region intends to initiate an extraordinary communication campaign about the new digital tools offered by the Regional Employment Services System, particularly regarding the use of the functionalities of the "Lavoro per Te' portal and its related app." (Regione Puglia, 2022, p. 104)

Another notable aspect is the presence of digital facilitators (sub-theme of *digital facilitator*), which some regions have implemented. These facilitators assist individuals with limited digital skills, establishing offices and co-working spaces equipped with computers and internet access. Additionally, a knowledgeable figure is available to guide people in navigating various online procedures. This is demonstrated through Regione Toscana and Regione Calabria in the way that:

> The role of the digital facilitator will be present: in total, there are about 40 operators who, via phone or in person, support users in accessing and using the "Toscana Lavoro" portal (also through assistance with the use of SPID), with an overall aim of promoting and educating citizens on the use of digital technologies, particularly those who lack adequate knowledge and skills (reducing the digital divide). (Regione Toscana, 2022, p. 39)

> To support users who require assistance, it is planned to have one or more trained operators available at service delivery points, acting as digital facilitators. Their role will be to provide assistance with the accreditation process and the utilization of services. (Regione Calabria, 2022, p. 94)

Lastly, the implementation of artificial intelligence is a prominent concern that the PES has considered. Numerous regions have planned to incorporate algorithms and chatbots to assist in delivering various services and facilitating the matching of supply and demand (sub-theme of *chatbot/artificial intelligence*). In this sense, Regione Umbria and Regione Lombardia have stated that:

> The new services created to support citizen access to Employment Centers and active labour market policies will be further implemented to support the GOL program policies. In particular, in line with what is foreseen by the GOL Program and continuing in the intent described above to offer an increasingly broad range of services for citizens, Umbria Region aims to ensure a service for citizen self-profiling with the assistance of technological tools (e.g., Chatbot) and the development of new digital content and services. (Regione Umbria, 2022, p. 34)

> In line with the expectations set forth by the GOL Program and continuing in the intention described above to offer an increasingly wide array of services for citizens, the Lombardy Region model includes the self-profiling of citizens. Users, aided by technological tools (e.g., Chatbot), will carry out their own professional demographic registration on the portal. Once validated, this will grant access to orientation support tools and the utilization of digital content. (Regione Lombardia, 2022, p. 59)

7.3. Theme 3: Actions Concerning Communication

The third theme addresses all the actions that the regions have planned and proposed to communicate all the information related to the PES policies and programs (three sub-themes emerged; see Figure 3).

Finally, Figure 3 illustrates the different actions planned by the regions to engage with their various beneficiaries. There is uniformity in the measures, with all regions planning to implement multi-plan and multi-level communication activities. The goal is to reach as many people as possible by employing diverse strategies. Firstly, similar to the Youth Guarantee initiative, leaflets and brochures will be distributed on the streets and in locations of high interest for the policy beneficiaries (sub-theme of *information products* [*flyers*, *brochures*, *posters*]). Concerning this, the Regione Marche (2022, p. 45) declared that:

> The orientational communication will be directed towards informing various target beneficiary groups and guiding them on how to access services. This includes preparing and distributing guides, handbooks, and orientation materials in print and digital formats. Additionally, there will be organization of dissemination events through webinars or live events via social networks. The service communication, being more precise, is dedicated to specific measures of the Program and to public notices that have been adopted. Furthermore, informational materials such as posters and/or brochures, possibly in digital format...or for publication on internet sites.

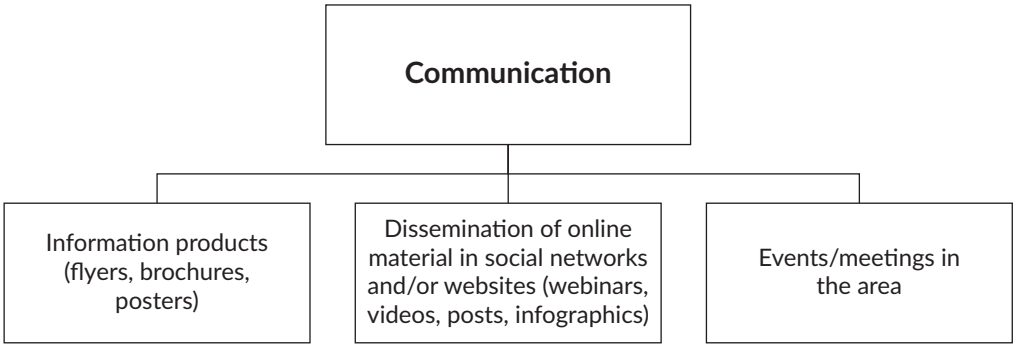

Figure 3. Actions concerning communication.

Additionally, efforts are made to bolster online presence, particularly on social networks, by creating infographics, videos, and webinars to capture people's attention. This entails using a range of platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok (sub-theme of *dissemination of online material in social networks and/or websites* [*webinars*, *videos*, *posts*, *infographics*]). For that reason, the Regione Liguria (2022, p. 61) established that:

> Considering the diverse range of recipients, the communication products will employ various media channels within the regional circuit, creating a comprehensive approach to information dissemination. This includes utilizing pages from the regional portal and the website, ensuring that essential information and updates are readily accessible. Furthermore, regional social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube will be leveraged to extend the reach and engagement, fostering a more connected and informed community. Newsletters serve as another pivotal channel, delivering curated content directly to the recipients and keeping them updated on the latest developments and opportunities. In addition to these regional media outlets, the strategy will be complemented by the use of radio spots and television segments on local broadcasters. These traditional media channels will help penetrate areas where digital reach might be limited and will cater to a broader audience, ensuring the communication is inclusive and far-reaching. This holistic communication approach reflects the commitment to ensuring that all stakeholders, regardless of their media consumption habits, are kept in the loop and actively engaged.

An innovative approach, in contrast to previous policies, involves organizing events in the community through partnerships with various stakeholders, including local communities, schools, and training institutions. The intention is to engage people through presentations, testimonials, and storytelling (sub-theme of *events/meetings in the area*). Regione Calabria (2022, p. 102) asserted that:

> The anticipated actions outlined below aim to facilitate the adherence, participation, and informed decision-making of potential beneficiaries. These include a macro-level introductory event, which serves as the official presentation of the measures, as well as micro-level presentation events where the PES introduce the GOL program.

8. Conclusions

This study initially presented the Italian situation concerning the engagement of young people, particularly NEETs, in active labour policies. Its objective was to understand how the regional implementation plans of the new GOL measure attempted to address the shortcomings of previous policies and sought to structure engagement plans for both the most vulnerable individuals and those residing in remote, mountainous, and rural areas. In general, it can be stated that significant progress has been made compared to previous policies, such as the Youth Guarantee. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the explicit reference to NEETs has all but disappeared as the active GOL policy does not have them as its exclusive target beneficiary, but rather the general population in a state of vulnerability, be it NEETs, unemployed, women in distress, extreme poverty, etc. The principal conclusions, identified by considering the range of beneficiaries and, thus, the non-exclusive targeting of NEETs, will be presented in the next paragraphs. However, the strategies were developed to be as broad, diverse, and multifaceted as possible, aiming for comprehensive

outreach. Moreover, many of these strategies were found to align with the suggestions derived from the literature analyzed, including works by Petrescu et al. (2021) and Rosina et al. (2021).

The first theme that emerged is capillarity, which appears to be of fundamental importance in reaching the most vulnerable individuals through increased services, extending even to the most remote mountainous and rural areas. The strategies for achieving this are manifold. Beyond opening new PES offices and reactivating disused ones, there is significant interest in opening desks at other public administration offices. One of the main difficulties that young people report (Rosina et al., 2021) is not clearly understanding which services correspond to which administrative centre. Consolidating all services in a single physical centre significantly helps young people understand the system, which they find very complex and thus demotivating. It also supports the provision of services, which are more effective when networked. This model is prominently featured in the Puglia region. Digitalization, on the other hand, appears to be an exceptional measure for reaching those who are furthest away. However, this digitalization is not intended to replace the human element, which would harm the relationship between the operator and the user. Instead, it aims to reach those at a distance while maintaining a human-mediated interaction, thereby fostering the construction of a relationship that is crucial for genuine and authentic user engagement. Given the widespread problem of limited digital skills, many have considered introducing digital facilitators to accompany and train people, enabling them to use the services and avoid being left behind. The use of artificial intelligence is applied in profiling areas and is not intended to replace human relationships in any way; however, it could simplify bureaucratic issues for operators, freeing up time to take better care of users. Finally, in line with the proposals of the 2022 NEET Plan, proximity strategies in communications emerge, complementing the already-known flyers and social media campaigns.

For those reasons, we can affirm that regions' strategies for outreach and engagement are moving towards making services more capillary and, hopefully, integrating them with other existing services, utilizing digitalization without losing the human component and creating proximity events for communicating activities and programs offered by the PES. However, little reference is made to the NEET category regarding specific targeting of engagement and outreach. Instead, there is a move toward more systemic enhancement.

The current research has several limitations that are important to underline. Foremost, among these, is that the documents analyzed correspond to a declaration of intent and the planning of strategies, with little currently known about how these are actually implemented. In this study, no comparisons were made between the different regions or analyses of how strategies vary depending on geographical location.

Further research will be necessary to better evaluate and monitor the actions proposed here over time and to understand how they vary from one region to another. This additional scrutiny is crucial for providing a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of the strategies and ensuring that they are being implemented as intended. Moreover, it will help in identifying any potential regional disparities in the execution of these strategies, allowing for more targeted interventions and improvements where needed.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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