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TESIS DOCTORAL

ESCUELA INTERNACIONAL DE DOCTORADO

Programa de Doctorado en Ciencias Sociales

Education and vocational training policies for Not in Education,
Employment or Training (NEET) youth in the Mediterranean
region of the European Economic Area

Autor:

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Directoras:

Dr. D. Práxedes Muñoz Sánchez

Dr. D. Almudena Iniesta Martínez

Murcia, 25 de Septiembre de 2023



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AUTORIZACIÓN DEL DIRECTOR DE LA TESIS PARA SU PRESENTACIÓN

La Dra. D^a. Práxedes Muñoz Sánchez y la Dra. D^a. Almudena Iniesta Martínez como Directoras de la Tesis Doctoral titulada “Education and vocational training policies for Not in Education, Employment or Training youth in the Mediterranean region of the European Economic Area” realizada por D. Carlos Pesquera Alonso en el Programa de Doctorado Ciencias Sociales, **autoriza su presentación a trámite** dado que reúne las condiciones necesarias para su defensa.

Lo que firmo, para dar cumplimiento al Real Decreto 99/2011 de 28 de enero, en Oslo a 16 de Septiembre de 2016.

Dra. D^a Práxedes Muñoz Sánchez

Dra. D^a Almudena Iniesta Martínez

ABSTRACT

This article-based doctoral thesis analyses the current situation of Not in Education, Employment, in Education or Training (NEET) youth and the performance of the NEET policy in the Mediterranean European Economic Area. This dissertation compiles three articles on the Youth Guarantee, the barriers that keep vulnerable people as NEETs and the NEET identity. They guide us to conclude that (i) the Youth Guarantee is still in its infancy and thus, it needs time before we can assure its failure or success; (ii) the lack of data available misguides the key NEET policy evaluation; (iii) without tailored NEET policies, the most vulnerable NEETs do not success within the programmes developed to help them; (iv) many optimal solutions for the most vulnerable NEETs require understanding their needs, but no necessary extra financial resources; (v) the NEET rate is the main explanatory element on the emergence of a NEET identity, despite substantial cultural, social and economic differences between countries; and (vi) the NEET identity is fluent and constantly evolving, depending more on the main economic cycles' phase than on any other sociocultural variable.

KEYWORDS

Youth Guarantee;
NEET;
Women;
Migration;
Identity;
Public Policy;

RESUMEN

Esta tesis doctoral basada en artículos analiza la situación actual de los jóvenes que no estudian, ni trabajan, ni estudian ni reciben formación (nins) y el desempeño de la política dirigida a ninis en el Espacio Económico Europeo Mediterráneo. Esta tesis recopila tres artículos sobre la Garantía Juvenil, las barreras que mantienen a las personas vulnerables como ninis y la identidad de los ninis. Estos nos guían para concluir que (i) la Garantía Juvenil aún está en su infancia y, por lo tanto, necesita tiempo antes de que podamos asegurar su fracaso o éxito; (ii) la falta de datos disponibles evita la correcta la evaluación de políticas clave de ninis; (iii) sin políticas adaptadas, los ninis más vulnerables no tienen éxito en los programas desarrollados para ayudarlos; (iv) muchas soluciones óptimas para los ninis más vulnerables requieren comprender sus necesidades, pero no necesitan recursos financieros adicionales; (v) la tasa de ninis es el principal elemento explicativo del surgimiento de una identidad nini, a pesar de las importantes diferencias culturales, sociales y económicas entre países; y (vi) la identidad nini es fluida y está en constante evolución, dependiendo más de la fase de los principales ciclos económicos que de cualquier otra variable sociocultural.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Garantía Juvenil;

nini;

Mujer; Migración;

Identidad;

Política Pública;

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have usually despised the long chapters dedicated to acknowledgements. I have the impression that the authors felt they had to name each person that was someone related to them during the whole period they dedicated to write their thesis. From the person who told them about the PhD opportunity to the worker who printed it down. Thus, I will try to stay loyal to my position and limit this chapter to its minimum.

Firstly, It is required for me to mention that this research was financed through the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment. Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway are responsible for contributing to that fund and this PhD is an output of the project YOUTHShare: 'A Place for Youth in Mediterranean EEA. Resilient and Sharing Economies for NEETs'. Thus, I acknowledge the valuable contribution of this support, as well as all the members of the YOUTHShare project. Especially, I thank the people within the WP1 of the YOUTHShare project, the research team, and Anne Hege Strand, with whom I collaborated during all these years.

More importantly than anything, I want to thank my PhD advisor, who helped me survive this process. We debated a lot and sometimes discussed a bit too harshly, but I gained a new family and laughed a lot. There is no doubt that I am certain that many PhD students would like to have a relationship with their PhD advisors as the one I have.

Regarding those who supported me from outside the academic circle, I want to mention only a few names. Those are Katharina Klat, who was there during my depression, reinforced by this gigantic task; my family, who may not always know exactly how, but tried their best to be supportive and help me; Cristina Rodríguez Fuentes, who checked my first article, fulfilling her role as my

best friend; and the Esperanto community, a space where I talked and talked about my research and where I was heard with a lot of enthusiasm.

Lastly, I have to acknowledge those who contributed to my research. I meant the public workers who opened their souls during the interviews and the youth Not in Education, Employment or Training that shared with me their opinions and fears.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

COVID-19 - Coronavirus disease 2019

EEA - European Economic Area

EU - European Union

GDP - Gross Domestic Product

LFS - Labour Force Survey

NEET - Young person Not in Education, Employment, or Training

Q1 - First Quartile

YG - Youth Guarantee

I - INTRODUCTION

I - INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is focused on the situation of the Youth Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET); and in the following sections, we will present the NEET situation and the state-of-art of this issue, as well as the current status of some of the policies aiming to solve this problem. We will show the research we have done on the matter, as well as the conclusions we have reached.

The importance of this work is based on the persistence of the “prevalence of labour market vulnerability among young people” (Mascherini, 2019, p. 503). Firstly mentioned in the United Kingdom under the name *Status Zero* (Istance et al., 1994), as a tool to categorise a set of young people who did not fall under other categorization, the concept of NEET has since then not abandoned the modern advanced societies. The amount of reports, policies and research done on the topic has constantly increased; even to the point that it is not anymore a term relegated to the use of policymakers, technicians and academic researchers. Nowadays, it is an idea that is well understood by the common people, and that it has become an everyday word used in some languages (e.g. *nini* in Spanish) (Navarrete Moreno et al., 2011).

This expansion of the use of the term is linked to the fact that this kind of proof of the vulnerability of the youth has reached considerable levels in some countries. In particular, in the south European countries, the level of the NEET rates became a major challenge, especially right after the peak of the 2008 financial crisis (Carcillo & Königs, 2015). Although the current levels of the NEET situation are not those of the previous decade, the NEET problem is not a solved one (Avagianou et al., 2022), and the menace of an incoming economic crisis carries the threat of causing a new wave of high NEET rates all around the European Union (EU) and especially in the Mediterranean European Economic Area (EEA).

Nonetheless, that an issue is considerably big does not mean that any research on that topic is relevant. In that sense, there are other elements that make this doctoral thesis a pertinent one, such as the extent of the budgets dedicated to NEET policies. This remark is perfectly exemplified by the Youth Guarantee (YG), an EU flagship policy aiming to tackle the problem of youth labour precariousness (Tosun et al., 2019). Regarding that topic, the level of the expenditure is considerable. However, the problem still persists despite the many resources used during all those years, and the lessons of its implementation are

still being learned. In that regard, the novelty of the policy is a relevant characteristic that translates into the lack of experience facing different scenarios. That fact implies that there is need to be prepared for the possible situation that the policy may have to be exposed to.

Furthermore, the long term consequences of this situation have strong effects in those who experience becoming a NEET, specially in the long-term (Ralston et al., 2022). Those who are not able to leave the category, join what has been called a “lost generation” (Tamesberger & Bacher, 2020), causing the effect of hindering the general progress of the countries that suffer high NEET rates. This risk elevates the importance of tackling the NEET problem before its impact is too high and the solution may not be suitable for those who were NEETs for a long time. This peril implies that understanding the NEETs, the stakeholders and the policies developed to solve the problem are crucial for achieving the efficiency required to improve the NEET situation.

The geographical scope of this PhD proposal started with the focus on the EU south. It was not at all an original perspective. The level of the NEET rates in the southern countries of the EU are comparatively higher than in the centre or the north. However, this scope also included a different approach, a regional point of view. Most of the research done on this field assumes a national perspective, despite the relevance of including the regional perspective when analysing the youth labour market (Cefalo et al., 2020). Thanks to that approach, we are able to highlight elements that do not arise in other research.

Thanks to the multidisciplinary collaboration supported by the framework of the project that built the base for this dissertation, we were able to include a quite diverse set of tools for this doctoral thesis. We combined different disciplines such as geography, education, anthropology, psychology, political science, sociology, social work, computation and statistics. This mix between social and natural sciences allows us to cover a wide range of methodological techniques. The diversity within the group helped us in the development of research plans that included both quantitative and qualitative methods. The starting point of this multidisciplinary group guided us into a selection of research questions that is easily remarkable in the text. It pushed us into being able to get a distant photograph of the NEET situation in the countries and regions, as well as to go towards the NEETs, while trying to understand their needs, feelings, impressions, dreams and hopes.

In that sense, without losing sight of the scientific ideals, the research combines both a completely analytical approach and a more humanistic one. The

text developed in this analytical document does not only describe the current NEET situation, or looks for explanations of the challenges the NEET policy faces. It also tries to look for answers that may help the people who work directly with NEETs implementing and developing the NEET policies. The analysis produced under this PhD proposal aims to combine lessons learnt that may be implemented and to contribute to the academic knowledge expected from a doctoral thesis.

This work also deepens the current knowledge available on the field. The information revealed in the published articles are the door into a much complex illustration of the NEET situation. Although we do not develop new indicators and use well-accepted variables, we combine many of them in ways it was not done before. We started from a perspective that assumes the diversity within the NEETs and applied during the whole research process. As for the regional approach, we try not to assume homogeneity just for simplifying the analysis. Thus, we produce a much comprehensive and deeper knowledge that was previously available in the literature.

Furthermore, a key issue that makes this research unique is the way we question the idea of a NEET and the NEET stereotypes. Following the same approach of questioning the assumptions of homogeneity within the NEETs, in accordance with Mascherini and Ledermaier, (2016), Yates and Payne (2006) and many others. We do not only accept the general agreement that there are different types of NEETs and the policy should address this fact (Mascherini, 2019), we move further and question if the idea of assuming that the idea of NEET is applicable between countries. In this research, we start rejecting the idea that the same concept of NEET can be applied at the different geographical levels without taking into consideration the social discrepancies between regions and countries.

Lastly, for this doctoral thesis we include an analysis of the main NEET policy using data that is compiled or derives from the policy itself. In contrast with other research that judge the performance of the policy based on variables that are not necessary dependent on the policy, e.g. Cabasés Piqué et al. (2016) or Escudero and Mourelo (2015), we check the efficacy of the policy using the data that is directly taken into account for the policy, adding into the analysis the difficulty of understanding the limitations of the repercussions caused by this type of policy.

The first point we have to signal is that this is an **article-based doctoral thesis**, and the journals that accepted, revised and finally accepted them are all in the First Quartile (Q1) level. Those articles are:

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- Pesquera Alonso, C., Muñoz Sánchez, P., & Iniesta Martínez, A. (2021). Youth Guarantee: Looking for Explanations. *Sustainability*, 13(10), 5561, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13105561>.
 - Pesquera Alonso, C., Muñoz Sánchez, P., & Iniesta Martínez, A. (2022). Is there a uniform NEET identity in the European Union?. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 27(1), 207-220, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2022.2065922>.
 - Pesquera Alonso, C., Iniesta Martínez, A., & Muñoz Sánchez, P. (2022). Barriers That Keep Vulnerable People as NEETs. *Social Sciences*, 11(6), 253, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11060253>.

In other words, the core of this work is built on the research that has been presented and accepted by the academic community. Thus, the different sections of this document revolve around the knowledge already included in those articles. However, although it is a more prestigious way to defend a thesis, the limitations of the article format considerably restrain its content. Thus, in this text, we will try to expand the information included in the articles.

Therefore, the document is divided into ten different sections:

- I. A primordial introduction to the research and the words that will explain it.
- II. It will be followed by a section where the objectives of the whole PhD proposal will be presented. They will illustrate the reader on the direction of the research line of this scientific work.
- III. A third section aims to be justification of the selected published articles, a space that will help the reader gain the global perspective that links the different analyses and approaches included in the 3 published articles.
- IV. The set of articles which are the base of the thesis will be added in the 4th section.
- V. The conclusions of those articles will be part of the 5th section of this document.
- VI. An additional section analysing the limitations of this work and showing the main future research lines is included right after the conclusions. It will show the most logical spaces where to move right after, but not before adding constructive criticism on the barriers that hinder this research.
- VII. The 7th section will include the bibliography and the references used in this dissertation.
- VIII. A final section including the annexes will close the document.

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II - JUSTIFICATION

II - JUSTIFICATION

In this article-based doctoral thesis, we are presenting a set of articles that substantially vary in terms of their approaches and focus on the topic of the policies directed to solve the NEET issue, but this broad range is completely intentional. We understand that the concept of NEET refers to a specific category, firstly a technical solution designed to solve a very specific problem, that affects a wide spectrum of fields and is a research interest of many Social Sciences. This extensive interval of available approaches can be analysed from the point of view of the economy and its influence in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, from the perspective of social work and the needs of the vulnerable youth, from the lenses of politics and the impact of a high NEET rate in a political campaign... Many other disciplines such as Education, Anthropology, Sociology, Demography, etc. address the NEET situation trying to understand and contribute to the effort of providing useful solutions. Therefore, in this research, we tried to combine this multidisciplinary approach by adapting the methodology and perspectives to the specific research topic we focused on in each part of the production of this dissertation. We started with the starting position of Sociology, as a general tool to introduce us to a descriptive look at the NEET situation. Later, we chose a more quantitative approach and a point of view of Policy Evaluation when we produced explanatory models for the Youth Guarantee. For the parts regarding the most vulnerable NEETs and the institutional resources developed for helping them, we move into a combination of a quantitative and qualitative analysis from a Social Work perspective. Finally, we mainly use an anthropological strategy to better understand how the NEETs see themselves, their future and what they think about other NEETs.

Another aspect that we consider essential for researching this topic is taking into account the many actors involved in the NEET problem. The number and type of stakeholders who have an impact and are directly affected and working on the matter is considerable. From the politicians who vote for changes in the legislation to the young people who finish studying but do not find a job, there are trainers, parents, public workers, policy officers... Those who are exposed to the problem may not have a general perspective of the issue, not being experts on policy, not knowing the training possibilities they have available, etc. Many actors

can be considered when researching on this topic and in this text, we tried to show this variety. Although the NEETs, specially the most vulnerable ones, are always a common denominator of all the published articles, we have changed the focus from some stakeholders to other depending on the aspect our research was focused on that specific space. We have looked at the policymakers and those who develop programmes aiming to tackle the NEET situation when researching the Youth Guarantee. We moved into focusing on trainers and public workers when we checked the policies directed to vulnerable NEETs, also including their voices. And we sat down directly with NEETs when we tried to understand their ideas on what is being categorised as a NEET and the hurdles they have in front of them.

We need to signal that this PhD proposal arose from YOUTHShare, a multidisciplinary project. Thus, the work we developed was always done in direct or indirect collaboration with experts from many fields. That constant collaboration implied many synergies that lead to exploring different elements of the NEET situation. That fact influences this dissertation, as it should be seen not as a separate piece apart from the quality work done by the rest of the research in the YOUTHShare project. We have contributed to their work from brainstorming ideas to producing mathematical analysis and data, or just by giving advice or by sharing references. That communal work translates into dividing the field according to interest and skills, while knowing that other gaps in the research were covered by the studies of our colleagues. In other words, the justification for the articles included is also affected by the rest of the scientific production of the YOUTHShare project.

In regard to the specific topics of the articles, and in connection with the previous paragraph, we have to mention the *Transnational report on the impact of education and training initiatives on young NEETs* (Pesquera Alonso & Strand, 2020). The report was a deliverable of the YOUTHShare project, developed under the same framework of this PhD. It is a longer than 60.000 words document describing the NEET situation in depth in Greece, Spain, Italy and Cyprus. It is not a peer-reviewed article, which means that it was not included in this thesis under the article-based guidelines. It had to be published before this doctoral thesis, which implies that including that text in this document under another framework would hurt the required originality of this dissertation. Nonetheless, it was the introductory work for understanding the NEET problem in the EU South and Mediterranean EEA. There, we merely introduce the state-of-art on the topic

and describe the situation of the NEETs and the main variables that have an impact on the NEET rates in those countries.

Having started with a general overview of the NEET situation, we decided that the topic of the first article should focus on the main policy tackling the NEET issue in Europe, the Youth Guarantee with the article *Youth Guarantee: looking for explanations* (Pesquera Alonso et al., 2021). This topic was a meta analysis, a distant statistical check on the EU flagship policy, after observing a lack of evaluation on the Youth Guarantee. As it is described in the article, much of the literature on EU NEET policy did not focus on the result of the policy measures, but on other measures linked to other policies. This first analysis helped us understand the difficulties faced by the stakeholders from a more distant and quantitative perspective. It provided us the space to question the realities that the people dealing with this issue experience.

For the following articles, we decided to change into a more personal approach, to move from a statistical perspective to a more humanistic one. In regards to the topic, in the article *Barriers That Keep Vulnerable People as NEETs* (Pesquera Alonso et al., 2022a) the focus of the topic was understanding the views of the experts on the measures included in the NEET policy. Under the umbrella of the Youth Guarantee, we limited the extent of the most vulnerable NEETs, we approached the stakeholders working in the area and asked the NEETs on how they perceive the efficacy of the NEET policy and the different options that those measures provide them.

As a consequence of the first statistical approaches and the literature review, we accepted the importance of highlighting the diversity within the NEETs. Thus, we considered that the topic of what is the perspective of the NEETs should be included in the research. In *Is there a uniform NEET identity in the European Union?* (Pesquera Alonso et al., 2022) we ask the NEETs directly on their impressions, on how they consider their prospective opportunities, the options they have in front of them, the offers NEET policy provides them, etc. Our goal was to analyse how the mindset of the NEET may affect their opportunities. We also continued our work on the geographical disparities, contrasting countries and regions. Applying that perspective, we tried to understand the NEET situation in depth, not considering the NEET just an homogeneous conglomerate. That process helped to better illustrate how the idea of NEET is created and evolves within those who are labelled under the NEET definition.

To summarise, the collection of articles aims to provide a complete and comprehensive overview of the NEET situation, not relegating key stakeholders,

relevant data or psychological aspects of being a NEET. The article selection combines different disciplines, methodologies and research questions, so this dissertation does not omit important aspects of the NEET issue. The set of articles also combine very different methodological tools, in order to better adapt to the research topic and questions.

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III - OBJECTIVES

III - OBJECTIVES

The general objective of this thesis proposal is to analyse the situation of public policies that are currently aimed at integrating NEETs into the Mediterranean EEA. It is therefore an analysis of the impact of public policies, which divides its claims between a more academic contribution in the form of abstract knowledge and a technical contribution in the form of programmatic proposals aimed at direct action plans and implementation of training measures for NEETs. This general objective is divided into more specific objectives. In other words, we start from more general and abstract elements and move to more particular and applied dimensions, always taking into consideration also transversal elements.

In the first section we included the goal to reveal the similarities and differences of the NEETs in the different countries, with special emphasis on the characteristics of their profiles and the impact of the NEET situation in each study country. In this line, we seek to look at the most important macro elements when explaining the phenomenon in each studied country and region of the EU South (Spain, Italy, Greece and Cyprus). This can be represented by the following research questions: who are the NEETs in each study country? What do they share? What makes them unique?

Still from a macro perspective, but focused on a more specific element, we have the objective of analysing the public policy of the Youth Guarantee. Analysing this strategy at the European level will allow us to see the differences in action regarding the situation of NEETs under a similar framework in each geographical space we study. The specific objective is to know the differences between the implemented models, to compare the aggregate results. Research questions such as “Is the Youth Guarantee working?” and “How does its implementation differ in different countries?” summarise this goal.

This research also seeks to know the ins and outs of public policies aimed at NEETs. This means looking at the actions of the agents that are directly involved in developing and implementing the measures aimed at improving the situation of the NEETs. Thus, the specific objective is to know the difficulties, progress, ideas and experiences that are linked to daily action within this framework. This stage compiles research questions like “How do public workers perceive the

NEET policies they have to implement?” or “What policy problems have stakeholders signalled?”.

Another specific objective is to know the perception of the situation that people who are directly related to the problem have. In particular, we seek to understand what are the ideas regarding the state and the possible solutions the public institutions may implement. We want to collect the impression that the NEET themselves have. The type of research questions linked to this level are questions like “How is feedback collected?”, “Is feedback taken into consideration?” or “Do NEETs feel they are taken into consideration?”.

In addition, we consider that there is a multidisciplinary deficit in the field, despite being a subject studied from multiple perspectives. This proposal wants to increase knowledge via the combination of knowledge that is hidden under already collected data that has not been contrasted from all its possible angles. In addition, we seek to show the added value of the inclusion of the regions in the analysis. It is common to have the state framework as a reference (Hawley et al., 2012; Mascherini, & Ledermaier, 2016), but moving from said level to the regional one allows, through a comparative study (Guzmán-León, 2016), to resolve doubts both about the homogeneity of the NEET situation to find out if the patterns are common between countries. This perspective can be better understood when trying to answer research questions such as “Do central and peripheral NEETs share the same features?” or “What makes the NEET situation more complicated in rural regions than in industrial ones?”.

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IV - ARTICLES

IV - ARTICLES



Article

Youth Guarantee: Looking for Explanations

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Abstract: Aiming to tackle the high levels of youth unemployment and rates of Not Employed, in Education, or Training (NEET), the European Union launched the flagship policy Youth Guarantee in 2013. In this article we evaluate this policy in order to reveal the lessons it can teach us and possible ways for its improvement to achieve a sustainable active labor market policy. We use the data collected through the Indicator Framework for Monitoring the Youth Guarantee to analyze the policy impact, limited to some of the countries with the highest NEET rates: those of the Mediterranean European Economic Area (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, and Spain). We used the data to create regression models for the evaluation of policy measures, spread, and achievements. In our findings we reveal the importance of time in the policy implementation, the differences and commonalities between the countries, and hidden problems in the data collection that lead to biases and misleading results. We conclude that it is too soon to judge the usefulness of the policy and recommend an improvement in the data collection process.

Keywords: Youth Guarantee; NEET; policy evaluation; European Union; Mediterranean European Economic Area



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1. Introduction

The rate of the youth Not Employed, in Education, or Training (NEET) rose in the European Union (EU) as a consequence of the financial crisis of 2008 [1]. The increase in unemployment hit the youth hard, especially in Southern Europe. Thus, it became much more difficult to find a job and many lost all hope to have a decent future. EU member states' reaction to the problem was the creation of the Youth Guarantee [2], which nowadays is the main European policy addressing the issue. Its development started in 2013 and it was implemented for the first time in 2014. Since then, it has faced very different situations: the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, both moments that had a great impact on the expectations of the youth. Within this framework, we try to answer the question of whether one should consider the Youth Guarantee a success or a failure.

By answering that question, we aim to contribute to the policy evaluation and future improvements that may lead to a sustainable NEET situation. With this article, we present a scientific analysis of the Youth Guarantee that shows hidden problems, highlights good practices, and provides policy recommendations and analytical tools for the benefit of the policy. Consequently, to answer this question of the policy's success, we firstly review what research revealed, directly and indirectly, about the Youth Guarantee. We built on the findings of other authors to better understand the context of the policy and its repercussions. We take a second step in that direction by creating some statistical tools that helped us show the achievements of the Youth Guarantee during its implementation. It clarifies how far away the policy is from solving the NEET problem. Based on all the collected knowledge and analyses, we include conclusions on what one can learn from the data, which elements

are most relevant, and which aspects should be reconsidered in order to contribute to the improvement of the Youth Guarantee.

This article's original contribution relies on its analytical approach. It is not the first analysis of the Youth Guarantee, but most of the research about the policy depends on macroeconomic data and not policy data [3,4]. Although many studies tried to judge the policy based on the general context and macroeconomic indicators, we limit our approach to direct policy results. We also add extra layers of modelization to the previous superficial use of the policy stats [5], without forgetting the general context in which the Youth Guarantee is implemented.

We also signal the relevance of including procedures to collect standardized data within this kind of policy. We confirm the thesis of previous authors and show how this can help the policy evaluation in a way that can directly lead to policy improvement [6]. However, regarding the Youth Guarantee, we reveal flaws, errors, and biases within the published datasets. This finding is crucial, because without its acknowledgement, one would assert incorrect conclusions guided by those biases and/or one could not realize that in the databases there are some cases of a relevant lack of information.

Due to the novelty of the policy, there are many gaps that new research can fill. Therefore, we decided to highlight mistakes in previous research that led to wrong conclusions. In this article we show that, in many cases, those wrong results were caused by a need to rush into conclusions. We show that part of them are a consequence of not considering the time the policy needed to be completely implemented, which translates to correctly evaluating the fitness of the Youth Guarantee.

Following this introductory section, we present the theoretical framework, where we discuss the major contributions to the analysis of the Youth Guarantee. We include the main contributions to the debate of the policy, as well as the aspects that we considered most relevant to help us evaluate its success. Right after that section, we explain the methodology we used in our research: a statistical approach based on the Youth Guarantee datasets. We show the results of its implementation in the fourth section, where we present the statistics and contrast different variables to check the policy's performance. To conclude the article, we present our findings in context with previous research results. We also highlight the added value of this text, possible ways to modify the policy based on our findings, and different options to improve the analysis to further contribute to the topic.

2. Theoretical Framework

The objective of the Youth Guarantee is to tackle the NEET problem by aiming "to ensure that all young people receive a good-quality offer of a job, apprenticeship, traineeship, or continued education within 4 months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed" [7] (p. 6). To achieve that goal, the policy assists those who join the Youth Guarantee scheme options that allow them to choose between the four options that we previously mentioned (job, apprenticeship, traineeship, and education). The mechanisms that the EU member states implemented are diverse, but many authors have already tried to assess whether one should consider the Youth Guarantee a successful policy [4,8,9]. Nonetheless, in order to be able to achieve such a goal, one should first state what is defined as success and what is considered a failure. The limits of that dichotomy depend on where the level of the goals are established. One could conclude that the policy was a success or a failure with the same results, just because one considers that they were, or were not, enough. In the case of the Youth Guarantee, the policymakers fixed its goals at the level of the total disappearance of the NEET problem. However, anybody who understands the situation knows that it is an impossible objective. Thus, those who were responsible for the policy evaluation understood that those levels were an ideal, not a reachable goal [7] (p. 16).

The most simple approach to evaluating the policy results would be a comparison between the NEET rate before and after the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. In this case, the straightforward answer is that the situation improved, but the current NEET rates

are still higher than before the 2008 financial crisis started [10]. However, this approach lacks relevant information, as it does not take into consideration other factors that may help explain the policy results.

Following a holistic approach, there are those who considered the general context. For example, Papadakis et al. [11] signaled the relevance of macroeconomic and structural factors in the employability of the youth. The authors linked the changes in the situation not so much with active labor market policies like the Youth Guarantee, but with the general economic improvement and other social factors. In the case of the Youth Guarantee, the data regarding the policy impact and the dimension of its budget [6], in comparison with the size of the labor market, support this argument. That was the case of Pesquera and Strand [12], who considered that despite the positive and/or negative aspects of the Youth Guarantee, in many cases this type of measure could not compete with the size of the labor market and the relevance of other factors. Both the available financial resources and policy measures are considerably smaller in comparison with the mechanisms that have an impact on the overall economy.

In line with that unequal situation, we find that these types of policies are usually highly limited, even before their implementation, because of the amount of resources allocated: “the potential impact of some of the national measures has been hampered by insufficient funding and the economic crisis, which has had a particularly detrimental impact on demand for youth employment” [13] (p. 65). Despite the ideal plans for the Youth Guarantee to achieve its goals, the budgets were insufficient considering the policy goals. This criticism appeared again when Cabasés i Piqué et al. [14] researched the first policy results. According to their conclusions, the lack of policy success could be explained by the fact that despite including acceptable measures to improve the NEET situation, the institutions providing the funds did not provide enough resources for those measures [2]. As a consequence, the implementation of the Youth Guarantee lacked the human resources needed to achieve the results as it was originally planned.

To achieve its goals, the policy measures should address the issues the policy aims to tackle. Nonetheless, authors such as Caliendo and Schmidl concluded that some of the measures included in the Youth Guarantee in some cases are not adequate to solve the NEET situation [15]. The authors who defended this position argued that despite its intentions, some mechanisms included in this policy are not suitable to reduce the NEET rate or to create long-term opportunities for NEETs. For example, as Marques and Hoerisch [16] remarked, the success of the measures also depends on the national skill formation systems. Meanwhile, Bratti et al. found no significant correlation between vocational training programs in the Youth guarantee and the probability of being employed [17], or signaled that basic steps, such as registration via public employment services, can hinder the policy results because of the lack of institutional trust [18].

Another aspect that researchers have stressed is the importance of the broad framework of the Youth Guarantee. The Youth Guarantee presents a guideline for countries [19], which implies that its implementation varies depending on the structure of each welfare regime [20]. This characteristic can be seen as a problem of a lack of definition or as a positive element that implies flexibility. On the one hand, it tries to provide general solutions for all of Europe despite the fact that the NEET situation is different in each country, as are the ideas of youth, work, and even the label of being a NEET. This may imply that the policy implementation depends on the national legislation and the usual way to proceed regarding the implementation of this kind of policy [21]. Nonetheless, research such as that done by Bacher et al. showed that the differences between regions regarding their situation and their economic market are considerably relevant [22]. On the other hand, that flexibility allows some countries, regions, and even localities to adapt the policy when their national policy framework allows them to do so. Cefalo et al. [23] revealed that this feature benefits youth labor market integration by implementing better adapted measures to each place. In addition, having the focus on just the countries may influence the judgment on the success of the policy, as it is usual to only consider the countries as a whole entity

without discussing the differences that may explain the disparities in the results within each country.

When considering the Youth Guarantee, another factor that has an impact on the number of NEETs is the migration within Europe. In the countries with higher NEET rates, these migration trends have surged [24]. Many NEETs emigrated in search for opportunities in European countries with lower unemployment rates, as we can see in examples such as the work done by Salamońska and Czeranowska [25]. Due to the size and barriers linked to this phenomenon, it is only a part of the whole equation, but we cannot omit the existence and effect of this process in the policy results.

However, migrants belong to the most vulnerable groups, and other researchers put their focus on analyzing how the Youth Guarantee considers and includes the most vulnerable groups in general. This was the case of Selenko and Pils [26], who showed that, despite being hit the most, in many cases the policy does not reach the most vulnerable ones or does not offer them suitable solutions. The authors asserted that the policy fails those groups in comparison to others. Thus, it does not contribute to reducing the NEET problem as much as it should. According to Selenko and Pils [26], the improvements in the NEET rate caused by the policy do not compensate for the inherent inequalities at the root of the NEET problem. Meanwhile, studies such as the one done by Hora and Sirovátka [27] identified the failures in targeting those groups and the issues of adapting the policy to the needs of the most vulnerable youth have.

In order to be able to correctly adapt any policy, data from the policy is essential. No policy evaluation is adequately done without input. In this case, the internal framework of the Youth Guarantee is a factor that helps its evaluation. The policy includes a set of indicators to be collected by the agencies that implement it. Those indicators are included in public databases to facilitate the policy evaluation [28]. This framework creates the opportunity to compare how the agents are implementing the policy, which makes it easier to highlight policy failures and helps with the detection of other possible issues. Such a tool was included to guide policymakers into modifications that can lead to the improvement of the Youth Guarantee, as it already happened [29]. Nevertheless, the usefulness of that information depends on the quality and quantity of the collected data, which is a challenge mentioned in the policy reports regarding the lack of data concerning some countries [6].

3. Materials and Methods

The approach we implemented in this article was quantitative. The policy itself includes the Indicator Framework for Monitoring the Youth Guarantee, which establishes the main policy tools for data collection for evaluation [28]. These databases are provided by the national agencies, who send the collected data to the European institutions and the EU makes them public. The European Commission published official reports [6] with the data, including policy analysis of its first years based on internal data from the Youth Guarantee and external data, collected by Eurostat, related to the economic situation.

The dataset compiles two kinds of databases. The first refers to data obtained from secondary sources and it does not refer to the data derived from the policy (i.e., macroeconomic indicators). Those data were obtained through the services of Eurostat and included in the policy reports. It mainly refers to the key variables of NEET rate, which is collected via the Labour Force Survey. The second refers to the data derived directly from the policy, whose universe coincides with the sample size. However, there are a relatively high number of missing cases, highly depending on the countries and mainly affecting the information collected after the users left the Youth Guarantee. These data consist of the responses from all who joined the program, young people between 15 and 29 years, and their situation within the Youth Guarantee, whose sociodemographic composition is included in the reports [6] but did not change substantially over time.

In this article we focus on the countries of the Mediterranean European Economic Area. We limited the scope to them because of their high NEET rates and common characteristics. Despite their shared geographic situation around the Mediterranean Sea and in the south

of Europe, we acknowledge that there are substantial differences between them. They have the same common cultural ground shared through their history but also present considerable differences. From the socio-cultural perspective, there are relevant social concepts, such as the ideas of family, work, and education, that unite the group. However, there are other aspects that separate them, such as their size or governmental structures. Their labor markets may differ, but they experienced similar economic issues in recent years (such as high unemployment rates, construction bubbles, and high debt problems) and mainly because the percentage of NEETs is constantly higher in that region than in the European Union [30].

Within our scope were also the data for the European Union as a whole, which we included in the analysis. Thus, we provide a reference for the general context regarding the NEET situation in Europe. In this case, it is represented by the EU28 and the EU average. We acknowledge that the most adequate indicator is the EU28 framework, which refers to the real level of the indicator according to the weight of the total EU28 population. However, it is not always available. Thus, we had to use the EU average in one case, an indicator that refers to the average of the EU countries that provided data.

For our analysis, firstly we presented descriptive statistics from the Youth Guarantee. They illustrate the initial goals set by the policymakers and the real level of success of the policy. We displayed the numbers from the published reports of the Youth Guarantee [6] to compare the goals and the achievements. These were measured by the main policy indicators, which were (i) NEET rate, (ii) in Youth Guarantee beyond the 4-month target, (iii) timely and positive exits, (iv) NEET coverage, and (v) positive follow-up after 6 months. NEET rate refers to the percentage of young people who are NEETs of the total youth. In Youth Guarantee beyond the 4-month target indicates the percentages of users of the Youth Guarantee who were still waiting for an offer after the deadline of 4 months. Timely and positive exits includes the percentage of exits from the program that were achieved before the deadline of 4 months and that ended positively (the users took an offer) out of the total number of exits. NEET coverage contains the information of the percentage of the NEET population that was covered by the Youth Guarantee. Finally, positive follow-up after 6 months refers to the percentage of former users of the Youth Guarantee who, 6 months after their exit from the program, were in a positive situation (i.e., they were working, training, and/or studying). We remark that for each indicator, the policy established a target, with 0% for the NEET rate and the people in the scheme beyond 4 months and 100% for the other three indicators. These targets helped the policy evaluation and are used as goals of the Youth Guarantee. However, they are only ideal, considering that the policy reports mentioned that:

“Even if these targets are theoretical and are unlikely to ever be fully achievable in practice, it is clear that the shape of the EU average results is quite different from the ideal” [7] (p. 16).

In this text we focused on explanations for the levels of those main indicators. Thus, we gave special attention to the relations between the data. We acknowledge that in the previous section we illustrated that the NEET problem is multidimensional. However, in the analysis we only considered one dimension, the policy itself. We did not deny other relations, but we aimed to focus our attention on the effects generated only through the Youth Guarantee. In order to achieve this, our main tool was the linear regression model. Particularly, we contrasted the indicators in simple models. In our models we included just one variable against another, aiming to check how they varied by country and time.

In the graphs we present each data point, i , for the dependent variable, y_i , on the vertical axis and its corresponding value for the independent variable, x_i , on the horizontal axis. For the tendency lines, we looked for estimates according to the formula of the exponential regression model:

$$y = Ae^{Bx} \quad (1)$$

The array of variables we used includes:

1. NEET rate;
2. Timely and positive exits from the Youth Guarantee;
3. Policy NEET coverage;
4. Positive exits (the percentage of exits from the Youth Guarantee that ended in the user accepting an offer from the program);
5. Percentage of subsidized offers of the total number of Youth Guarantee offers;
6. Percentage of people who, 6 months after leaving the scheme, were NEETs (out of the total number of users who provided an answer);
7. Percentage of people whose situation after 6 months of leaving the program was unknown to the Youth Guarantee; and
8. Percentage of former policy users who were in a positive situation 12 months after leaving the Youth Guarantee.

The selection of these variables enabled us to track the policy performance, the relation between policy expansion, and its success, potential biases in the datasets, and the effect time had on the policy.

4. Results

In Figures 1 and 2 we compare the situation between the key indicators collected in 2014 and those presented in the last report (for all of 2017). The only exception is the 2014 follow-up indicator, which was not available because it would refer to a previous period when the policy did not exist yet. In the figures we saw that the NEET rate for people aged 15–29 preceding the implementation of the Youth Guarantee in the EU was 15.3% in 2014, whereas its value in 2017 was 13.4%. That type of improvement was experienced in every studied country during that period (5.4% in Greece, 4.3% in Spain, 2.1% in Italy, and 1.9% in Cyprus). However, and following the multifactor analysis, this amelioration should not be directly interpreted as a direct consequence of the Youth Guarantee. As previously mentioned, there are many elements that influence the actual NEET rate. The NEET coverage increased in all the study cases from 2014 to 2017 (53.8% in Spain, 15.5% in Greece, 11.2% in Italy, and 5% for the EU28) with the exception of Cyprus, where it decreased to 9.2%. The opposite happened to timely and positive exits, which only increased in Cyprus (6.1%) while decreasing in Spain (71%), Italy (36%), Greece (10.5%), and the EU28 (7.8%). Lastly, regarding the objective of not having users in the YG waiting longer than four months worsened in all study countries, from 20.5% in Greece to 72% in Italy. In summary, in general, the policy results were considerably far from its goals.

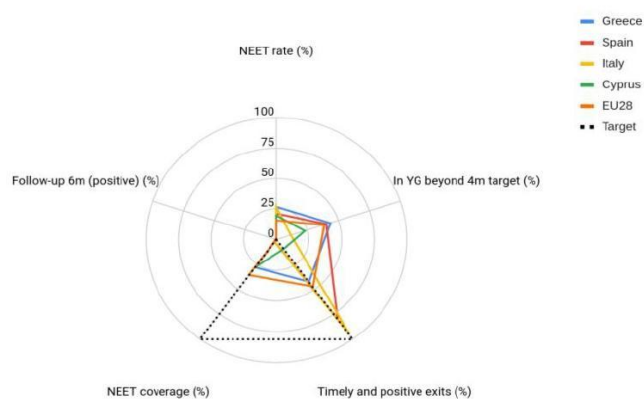


Figure 1. Youth Guarantee key indicators and NEET rate (2014).

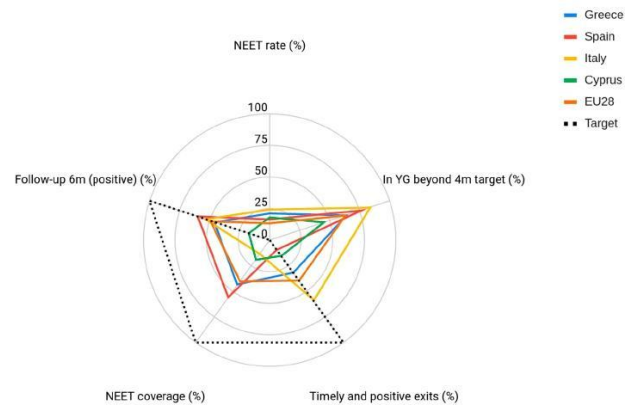


Figure 2. Youth Guarantee key indicators and NEET rate (2017).

Nevertheless, we consider that presenting the indicators in the previous descriptive way did not add much extra value to the statistics. The value of the numbers was relevant, but it did not contribute to understanding the reasons behind that situation.

Therefore, in Figure 3 we present the correlation between two of the main indicators: the NEET rate and the YG indicator of timely and positive exits. The NEET rate indicator contained the information of the main objective of the policy and the indicator of timely and positive exits provided information on the policy performance. As such, we modelled how the policy performance might influence the NEET rate in Figure 3, where we show that the indicators were positively related for Greece, Spain, Italy, and EU28. This means that when the number of timely and positive exits increased, the NEET rate increased. Only in the case of Cyprus did we see the opposite trend, that the NEET rate decreased when the number of timely and positive exits increased. However, the R^2 value for Cyprus was very small (0.106), which means that the changes in timely and positive exits could only explain a small part of the changes in the NEET rate. Meanwhile, the R^2 value was considerably strong in the cases of Italy (0.845), EU28 (0.932), and Spain (0.956), and moderate in the case of Greece (0.539).

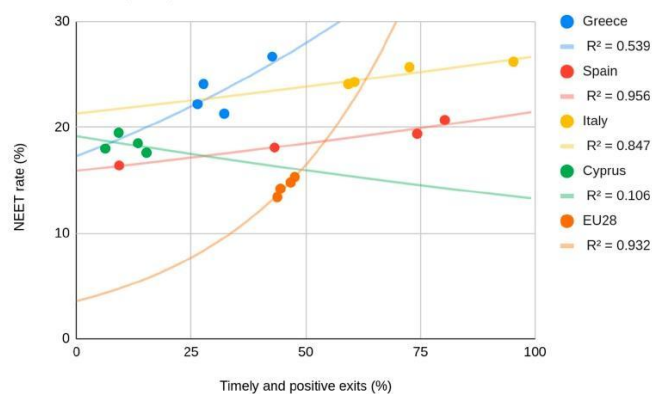


Figure 3. Relation between NEET rate and timely and positive exits.

In the previous figure we show an apparent contradiction, which emerged from the simplification of the model. In Figure 3 we explain a complex problem (the NEET rate changed) by just one indicator of performance. In other words, we did not include its context. Implementing a policy is a process influenced by internal factors (its range, dissemination, resources, etc.) and many external factors (social structure, political culture, etc.) [31]. In this case, in the previous figure we did not consider the dissemination of the policy itself. Despite the fact that the Youth Guarantee is the biggest strategy tackling the NEET problem in Europe, it did not reach every NEET in the studied countries, as the descriptive statistics revealed.

However, we decided to check the relation between the spread of the Youth Guarantee and its performance in Figure 4, because we hypothesized that the shown effect of timely and positive exits on the NEET rate derived from the spread of the policy and its efficiency. In the chart we show the relation between the NEET coverage and the YG's timely and positive exits. In this case, there was a negative tendency in every case. This means that when the NEET coverage increased, the percentage of timely and positive exits decreased. Regarding the explanatory value shown by the R^2 , it revealed an impressive correlation for Italy (0.983), Spain (0.92), and EU28 (0.89). In the case of Cyprus (0.593) and Greece (0.556), the R^2 value was more moderate. This highlights that one of the policy issues is linked to its size. In other words, the policy performance worsened when more NEETs were reached.

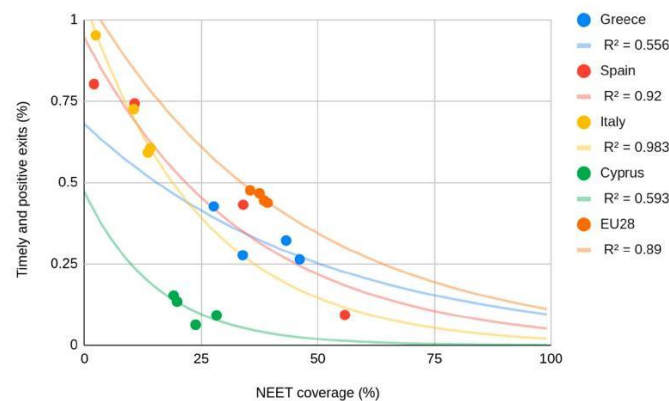


Figure 4. Relation between timely and positive exits and NEET coverage.

An option within the Youth Guarantee is the possibility to subsidize some or all of the offers included in the policy. As well as with other options of the policy, checking the data revealed that there were substantial differences between countries regarding the use of those subsidies. In Figure 5, we checked the contribution of this mechanism by contrasting the percentage of positive exits and the percentage of subsidized positive offers in each study country and for the EU average. In Figure 5 we show that there was a positive trend between the variables for Greece and Spain and a negative trend for Cyprus, Italy, and the EU average. We also reveal that the value of the R^2 , the coefficient of determination, was almost non-existent for Cyprus (0.066) and very small for Spain (0.157) and Greece (0.312). Meanwhile, the Italy (0.443) and EU (0.59) averages presented higher R^2 values. Therefore, we can conclude that the option of subsidizing offers had almost no effect on the performance of the Youth Guarantee, and if it had some, it was mainly negative.

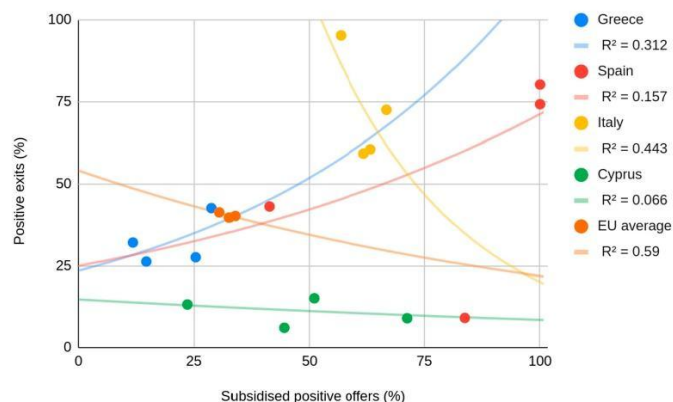


Figure 5. Relation between positive exits and subsidized positive offers.

Regarding the Youth Guarantee, there are some issues concerning the quality of its evaluation. The missing cases made evident the possibility of biases in the provided data. As signaled in the policy reports [6], there are big differences between the countries and the percentage of people reached, and who gave feedback after leaving the Youth Guarantee. This data consisted of the responses of former users of the Youth Guarantee 6, 12, and 18 months after leaving the program. They reported whether they were in a positive (employment, apprenticeship, traineeship, or education) or in a negative (unemployed or inactive) situation. In the database, we can see that some countries did not collect this information and some only collected these data for the “after six months” period. In addition, in many cases the former users were counted as “unknown,” due to the lack of information regarding their situation. This lack of information may have produced a selection bias.

In order to check this issue, in Figure 6 we contrasted the relation between the proportion of people in a negative situation after six months from the known answers and the percentage of unknown cases. In Figure 6 we show a negative correlation for every year. This means that the proportion of people in a negative situation was lower where the percentage of unknown cases was higher. Although the curves follow similar patterns, the R^2 -values ranged from 0.457 in 2015, to 0.787 in 2016 and 0.624 in 2017. This confirms our fear that there was a selection bias regarding the collection of the follow-up data. This means that the chance of a positive outcome from the reported cases was higher if there were more missing cases in the database.

One can leave the Youth Guarantee in a timely and positive manner, but after some time that young person can go back to the starting position of being a NEET. In other words, a user of the Youth Guarantee may not achieve the objective of not being a NEET even after a success within the framework of the program. The follow-up indicators aimed to provide a picture of the long-term success of the policy.

Thus, in Figure 7, we contrasted the timely and positive exits of a given year with the percentage of former users in a positive situation 12 months after. In the chart we show a positive correlation between the variables for every year. In fact, these trends became more and more positive year after year. In other words, the more timely and positive exits there were, the higher the probability was for the former users of the Youth Guarantee to be in a positive situation 12 months after leaving the program. However, the explanatory strengths of the determination coefficients (0.425 for 2014, 0.518 for 2015, and 0.387 in 2016) varied considerably and were not particularly strong. Although they showed that part of

the success may be explained by the policy's good performance, it implies that there were other factors that influenced the policy results.

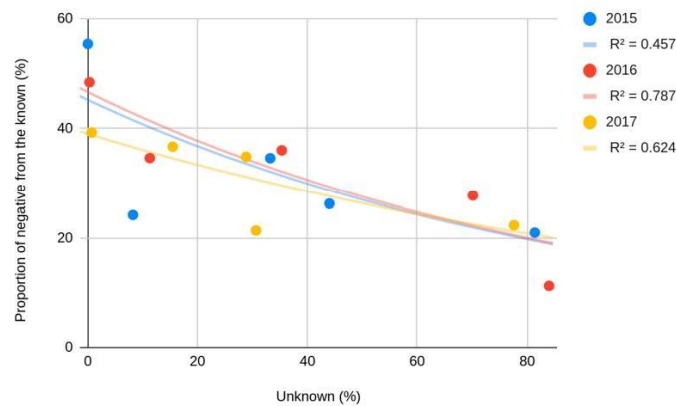


Figure 6. Relation between the percentage of negative/positive answers and unknown exits.

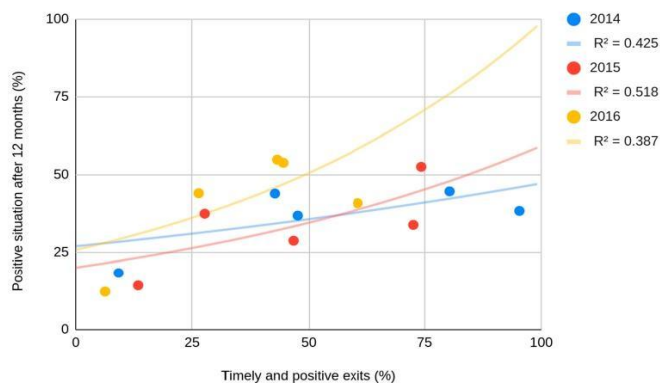


Figure 7. Relation between positive situation after 12 months and timely and positive exits.

5. Conclusions

We started this paper trying to answer the question of whether the Youth Guarantee should be considered a success or a failure, from the perspective of a sustainable policy framework, and asserting the importance of policy evaluation and data analysis to respond to that question. Our goal was to provide that knowledge to researchers and policymakers to contribute to the policy.

From the analysis of the literature, firstly we remarked on the research gap and later we highlighted the lack of confidence in the policy tools and effects [12,14,32]. We also showed that the NEET problem is still an important issue in the EU, especially in the studied countries (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, and Spain). Despite the improvements, in comparison with the initial implementation period of the Youth Guarantee, the NEET rate

in countries of the Mediterranean European Economic Area is still high. Therefore, one could simply have considered the policy, not having achieved its goal, as a failure.

However, we showed that the NEET situation is improving. In our findings we also included data revealing the importance of time regarding the policy achievements. We showed that if the importance of time is not taken into account to obtain a more robust overview, the policy evaluation leads to wrong conclusions. In the findings we also revealed that measures such as subsidizing offers did not contribute to a better policy performance. Finally, regarding the policy data, we highlighted that databases are biased and that in some cases the amount of missing cases/unknown responses is considerably high, which limits the quality of any analysis. We revealed that there is a tendency to collect the most positive feedback, which implies that some failures may be undetectable using the collected information.

Highlighting the importance of time is essential, because in the case of the Youth Guarantee, it is a big new strategy for the European Union with a modest framework, in comparison with the power and actions of the national governments and the general economy. This means that the institutions that implement the policy needed time to adapt to the new situation and learn how to work with the Youth Guarantee. Therefore, we know that it would be a mistake trying to answer the original research question considering only the first period of the policy implementation.

The finding of the subsidized offers clarifies that some measures included in the policy are not fulfilling their goals. That type of analysis and results is useful for policymakers and the subsequent knowledge can be used to improve the policy and make it more sustainable.

Finding biases in the databases and highlighting the issues of the high percentage of missing cases can benefit policymakers and researchers alike. Policymakers can use this information to solve the actual problems regarding the data collection and be aware of considering the data as completely reliable while using them to improve the Youth Guarantee. Researchers may learn from those remarks and reach better policy evaluations thanks to them.

Based on the literature review, we advise for a more tailored approach to the Youth Guarantee. As Rodríguez Soler and Verd [22] argued, this approach is lacking in the Youth Guarantee and it has proven useful in similar policies. It aligns with the findings regarding the measure of subsidizing offers, as it proves that some aspects that could work in theory do not necessarily apply in the field. Therefore, a more tailored approach for the Youth Guarantee can provide the flexibility that compensates for those limitations.

As a response to the identified data issues, we argue in favor of policy evaluation. We consider that this article is an example of the positive effects of having a framework for policy data collection but also revealed that the data collection is not perfectly implemented. Thus, we demand an improvement in the methodology applied in the data collection, especially in those countries where the percentage of missing cases/unknown answers is higher.

Finally, we want to go back to what we consider the main lesson from our analysis: Time is essential. We understand that the policy should not be judged without comprehending the influence of its context. The Youth Guarantee, as with many policies, is limited by external and internal factors (such as the moment of time when the policy is implemented, the size of its budget, the status of the general economy, etc.). Those elements may narrow the possibility of achieving a sustainable policy. Thus, authors such as Tosun et al. [32] argued that the Youth Guarantee aims to solve the NEET problem but may not have the tools to succeed. They commented that further research may provide an answer to that issue and we conclude that part of that is due to the time needed to be successful. A new strategy aiming at all NEETs, such as the Youth Guarantee, needs time for those it wants to reach to become aware of it. It needs time to face the fact that people may know of it but think that it would not necessarily help them achieve the goal of leaving the NEET label behind, it needs time to surpass the lack of trust in the institutions implementing the policy, and it needs time to explain how it works. Therefore, we recommend that researchers and

policymakers provide the needed time before rushing into conclusions about the success or failure of the policy and that that time be efficiently used to improve and implement the policy.

Finally, this text is also an example of the lack of analysis included in the policy evaluation. Considering that the reports that evaluated the Youth Guarantee [6] only included descriptive analysis, we showed that the models we developed for this article, although not very complex, as they only contrasted two variables at the same time, is a considerable step forward. As a consequence, we support the inclusion of this kind of analysis in future evaluations of the policy. For further research we encourage the use of even more complex models than ours, because those models could help researchers and policymakers to understand the multifaceted relationship between economy, education, and NEET policy. In other words, the models presented in this article contribute to a new, interesting, and better evaluation of the Youth Guarantee, but there is space for improvement. Therefore, we advocate for the amelioration of them to enhance the policy analysis and its scope.

For those aspects, we started the article showing that we did not rush to judge the policy. We do not deny that the Youth Guarantee is far from its goals, but they are utopian and the problem is not an easy task to solve in just a couple of years. We have shown that there are reasons to believe that there is a lot of space for improvement and, in line with what we already wrote, time will tell if we should consider the Youth Guarantee a success or a failure.

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Article

Barriers That Keep Vulnerable People as NEETs

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Abstract: The rates of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) in the Mediterranean European Economic Area (MED EEA) are high. Hence, the European Union and national governments have developed and implemented different policies aimed to tackle the NEET situation. In this article, we try to identify and understand the most relevant barriers that keep vulnerable people as NEETs. We focused on youth as being at the highest risk of becoming NEETs: migrant women aged 25–29. By using semi-structured interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders and NEETs in the Spanish region of Murcia, we collected their views on and experiences with different programs and strategies. We conclude that this group is exposed to additional barriers due to the intersectionality of their characteristics. There are structural and contextual aspects, such as motherhood, a lack of social networks, or not knowing the language, which NEET policies do not address. We highlight the need of (i) improving the adaptiveness of relevant policies by being tailored to specific problems NEETs face, (ii) expanding the focus of NEET policies, and (iii) including the regional perspective in NEET policy design. In our comprehensive approach, we stress that the NEET policy alone cannot solve the NEET problem.

Keywords: NEET; Mediterranean European Economic Area; youth guarantee; woman; migrant; public policy



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1. Introduction

In the Mediterranean European Economic Area (MED EEA), the rate of young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEETs) increased after the hit of the 2008 financial crisis (Boot et al. 2016). Although these levels have started to decrease in the area since the peak of that crisis, the recovery process was still ongoing when the COVID-19 pandemic stopped it (Eurostat 2022). Recent years have seen the implementation of a series of EU programs aiming for the employability of the younger segments of the population. The success of those programs is still debatable: part of this improvement may be a consequence of the policies implemented in the European Union, but their efficiency is questioned due to their limited success (Focacci 2020). This paper aims at understanding the issues of those measures by analyzing the barriers that keep young people as NEETs, with a focus on one of the most vulnerable groups, migrant women aged 25–29.

After reviewing the research on NEET policy, we identified the special impact that it has on the most vulnerable groups. In order to identify the most relevant hurdles and understand how they are affecting the NEET situation, we performed a preliminary study with secondary quantitative data. This introduced us to the general context, and helped us to identify the characteristics of the most vulnerable people within the NEET category. We later applied a qualitative approach by interviewing both stakeholders who were working on the NEET policy, and NEETs themselves. In this article, we present our findings, and propose including perspectives that also consider other policies and add more adaptability

to the existing NEET policies. Our goals are to contribute to the academic knowledge of the topic, as well as to help the development and improvement of current NEET policies.

Most of the research on NEETs is focused on the national level. However, we argue that the regional level should be considered. Regarding the NEET situation in the MED EEA, [Pesquera Alonso and Strand \(2020\)](#) show that there are substantial similarities between regions from different countries that share similar characteristics, despite the existing discrepancies at the national level. [Cefalo et al. \(2020\)](#) also argue in favor of a place-sensitive approach regarding NEET policies. Thus, this article is one of the first covering the MED EEA from the regional comparative perspective. There are studies which are based on the Mediterranean area, but they usually focus on the national level, and also try to contrast the area with other geographical spaces—sometimes, however, the countries included are too diverse to allow an acceptable comparison between countries and regions ([Boot et al. 2016](#)).

Another gap this article tries to cover regards the most vulnerable NEETs. There are studies considering this group ([Robson 2008](#)), but they lack a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Some research focuses on specific characteristics ([Gökşen and Öker 2017](#); [Maguire 2018](#)), but these studies are narrow to only a small set of characteristics, and none include a whole set of the most relevant barriers that influence the most vulnerable NEETs. In our research, we combine these characteristics to understand how their interactions create hurdles that have a special impact on the most vulnerable groups.

After this introduction, we present a literature review, where we discuss the contributions to the debate and other researchers' findings regarding the barriers that keep vulnerable people as NEETs. It is followed by a presentation of the applied quantitative approach and qualitative methodology for this article. The paper continues with a section covering the most relevant findings. Finally, we discuss the implications of those findings, and propose some recommendations to alleviate the NEET situation for the most vulnerable people.

2. Theoretical Background

Although the term NEET is relatively new, there are many policies focused on NEETs ([Williamson 2002](#)), and many researchers have already highlighted the importance of these policies to reduce the NEET rate. Following that argument, many countries, as well as the European Union, opted to develop NEET policies to solve the situation ([Eurofound 2012b](#)). Although these types of policies may include funds and different mechanisms, as well as strategies focused on reducing the NEET rate, they do not prevent the criticism about resource efficiency regarding their main tools which aim to solve the NEET situation ([Rodríguez Soler and Verd 2018](#)). Another highlighted point in this discussion is the range of policies that have an impact on improving the NEET situation. Authors such as [Carcillo and Königs \(2015\)](#) argue that there are policies, which are not NEET policies (e.g., social benefits or special education programs), that are important for the improvement of the NEET situation, especially when one considers the most vulnerable groups. In this context, the authors also remarked that differences in NEET rates are also influenced by different contextual factors, such as the national economic situation.

In the European framework, the main NEET policy is the Youth Guarantee, developed after a 2013 European Council Recommendation. Immediately after its implementation started in the second quarter of 2014, there were authors who claimed that it lacked the level of resources needed to achieve its own recommendations ([Escudero and López Mourelo 2015](#)), that to achieve its goals, it should address other factors that were causing the NEET situation ([Pastore 2015](#)), and that it could provoke negative side effects ([Cabasés Piqué et al. 2016](#)). After several years of implementation, there is no clear conclusion concerning this policy. Many authors present findings that reveal that the policy is partially working ([Focacci 2020](#)), but it is still far away from achieving its goals. Others wrote about the adjustments that it experienced ([Kraatz 2017](#)), and the time and changes it needed to adapt to each context ([Milana and Vatrella 2020](#)).

Research shows that the wider the range of people under a policy, the more difficult it is to adapt the policy to the profiles of the different subgroups (Lahera 2004)—and that more diversified social spending increases the probability of success of people in need (Cuadrado Roura et al. 2017). Hence, many, such as Eurofound (2012a) in its reports on NEETs, support the thesis that the more tailored to the target group a policy is, the higher the probability of its success will be. In order to achieve this ideal of an efficient tailored policy, authors such as Mascherini (2017) highlighted the value of public policy evaluation. The author showed that, regarding the NEET policy, the evaluation process helps to improve the flexibility and adaptability required to successfully achieve the needs of the diverse target group.

In line with the intersectionality indicated by Gökşen and Öker (2017), women show a higher risk of not achieving labor integration when their age increases, or when the focus is solely on migrants. Other authors have remarked that women show greater participation in education, especially during adolescence, but less employability when they enter the labor market (Vancea and Utzet 2018), which is linked to different ideas concerning the role of women in society. Women may have a greater propensity to assume household duties, which translates into a factor that influences the disparity in NEET rates (Maguire 2018). Due to the age group, an important role that influences women and can become a barrier is motherhood. Studies for European countries with different levels of gender equality and NEET rates, such as Finland (Saloniemi et al. 2020) or Hungary (Szabó 2018), included the factor of care status in closing this gender gap. Despite the different approaches and reasons behind the policies existing in each country, the benefits, offered in the form of financial aid or maternity leave, favor that more women than men choose to care for their offspring. As a consequence, some women are left out of the labor and training markets.

Regarding the characteristic of coming from another country, the first barrier that migrants face is related to how the concept of a migrant is socially understood (Brahic and Lallement 2020). Due to this social idea, being labelled as such may bear negative implications, even for those who were born in the country, but descend from people who were not. Being a migrant has real measurable effects—for example, on average, a lower educational level is reached (Borgna 2016). They may face extra barriers, such as not being fluent speakers of the local language or experiencing difficulties obtaining official recognition for their educational certifications, which results in ‘disqualification’ (Gökşen and Öker 2017). These are elements of vulnerability that, as highlighted by Gökşen and Öker, are reflected in the higher NEET rate for migrants. Another factor that affects them is the community in which they live. Living concentrated in residential areas or so-called ghettos can facilitate comfort in the case of language difficulties, by surrounding themselves with people who speak the same language. However, it is also linked to issues in educational and work integration. Checa Olmos et al. (2018) pointed out that certain dynamics of migrant labor integration caused these difficulties, and they can be transmitted over generations. These authors focused on the primary sector, since it is a space with a high relative percentage of migrant population. They showed that these levels of participation in the sector can be explained by the reduction of barriers such as language, unskilled manual work, the high irregularity of contracts, the physical burden of work, etc.

There is also research signaling barriers that are not exclusive to NEET policies, and do not only affect the most vulnerable people. For example, the motivation of both users and the key informants that implement public policy, especially if the demotivation of public workers reaches high levels, is a relevant factor (de Simone et al. 2018). In the case of NEETs and more vulnerable groups, this motivational aspect may be related to low expectations. They can derive from a lack of confidence in their future, thinking that the economy is performing in a worse way, or that the solutions provided by the institutions are not useful, etc. (Cabasés Piqué et al. 2017). In particular, the migrant population may carry extra considerations (i.e., not knowing the institutions, being afraid of incompatibilities with other aid, or being in an irregular situation), as well as the social pressure and expectations regarding being older or a woman (Maguire 2018). Other difficulties may be related to the

dissemination of programs (Cabasés Piqué et al. 2017), which implies that institutions need to inform and convince the target group to participate in the policy.

3. Methodology

The term NEET refers to people with vastly different risks of entering and leaving the category. In particular, the youth at a greater risk are those who share key characteristics that expose them to the worst consequences (Robson 2008). As we described in the previous section, the academic literature identifies one subgroup as especially vulnerable: migrant women aged 25–29 (OECD 2016; Pesquera Alonso and Strand 2020). Therefore, we checked first that it was also a fact in the MED EEA countries. Figure 1 corroborates that the characteristics of migrant women aged 25–29 constituted risk factors in the countries of the MED EEA during the research period. It shows that those who shared these characteristics had a higher risk of being a NEET than a random young person. Before the 2008 financial crisis began, the likelihood of being a NEET for the people with the selected characteristics in comparison with the rest of the youth was at its peak in the MED EEA countries, with the exception of Spain. Figure 1 shows that the situation changed after the crisis hit. However, it bounced after the worst part of the crisis, and this trend continued until the end of the study period.

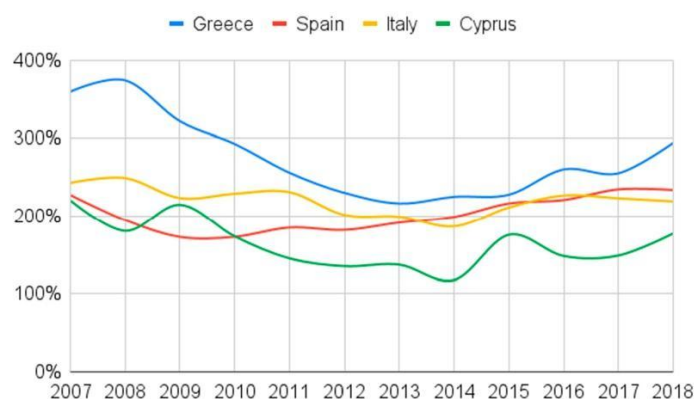


Figure 1. Likelihood of being a NEET.

Secondly, in order to better understand the barriers that keep vulnerable people as NEETs, we analyzed the perceptions of key stakeholders whose work was related to this topic, as well as the perspectives of NEETs. To achieve this, we limited the research to the case study of the region of Murcia as a representative region of the MED EEA countries. We prioritized including the regional perspective. Thus, we chose the region of Murcia as a Mediterranean region which has experienced flows of migration, and presents a high NEET rate (Eurostat 2022). We also consider that its economic structure and development presented the region of Murcia as a good representative for the general context of the study countries.

We verified that, due to the strong delimitation of the target group (migrant female NEETs aged 25–29), the target group represents a minority among minorities. In the first quarter of 2022, 85,642 people fell within the description in Spain, 4175 of whom were in the region of Murcia (INE 2022a). Due to the reduced size of the population, there were no stakeholders whose work focused only on migrant female NEETs aged 25–29. Another challenge was that the characteristics of the target group usually imply linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and economic limitations. This entails access and communication

difficulties, both for the investigation itself and to find stakeholders from whom we sought to collect information. Thus, we selected a snowball sampling, due to the characteristics with which we dealt (McKenzie and Mistiaen 2007).

Under these restrictions, for the stakeholders, we established the objective of reaching both those who were responsible for choosing the public policies that affect our target group and those who implemented them. While we gathered the contacts, we interacted with unions, business groups, public institutions, social services, non-governmental associations, employment experts, training companies, and other social partners. Regarding the stakeholders, we compiled 26 in-depth interviews in 6 archetypes. Those archetypes were put into the following categories: public employment Agencies (A), public employment policies Coordinators (C), Non-Governmental Organizations focused on assistance to immigrants (NGOs), managers of Professional Organizations (PO), Work Counsellors (WC), and Trainers (T). The interviewees represented different perspectives: some help migrants specifically (e.g., NGOs), while others work with vulnerable people. In some cases, even approaching certain types of key informants may imply losing the characteristic of being a NEET (i.e., by participating in training or work). Regarding the NEETs, we collected the data through two different methods. The first consisted of 44 face-to-face interviews, with questionnaires consisting of closed and open questions. The second method referred to data collection via a focus group.

Regarding the stakeholders, we carried out interviews during the second week of April 2019, from the last week of September of 2019 to the beginning of December 2019, the second week of July 2021, and the first week October 2021. For the NEETs, we carried out the interviews during the second week of April 2019, and the focus groups on January 21st, 2021. While the interviews took place in the field, the focus group was performed online. The duration of the interviews and the focus group varied between 35 and 87 min. The interviews with the stakeholders followed the semi-structured interview methodology (Valles 2007). We had a script with categories and topics (See Appendix A), and the stakeholders could further discuss according to their experience and knowledge. In line with the logic of the snowball methodology, we included, adjusted, or removed some questions after the interviews, following the stakeholders' experience. This allowed us to collect the key informants' opinions, thanks to the added adaptability of the method (Valles 2007). The interviews with the NEETs consisted of two parts. The first part refers to a structured questionnaire that we are not using in this research. The second part consists of a set of open questions (See Appendix B) that follows the same logic as the previously mentioned methodology for the stakeholders. The methodology for the discussion group (Lobe et al. 2020) follows the recommendations for an online format, since it took place under the limitations of the COVID-19 lockdowns (See Appendix C). In the discussion group, six NEETs participated in the video conversation.

Understandably, each NEET can only provide their personal perspective, but the stakeholders find themselves in another situation. Thus, we remark that the stakeholders may present biases caused by their positions; the public employment Agency interviewees had the most institutional role. We interviewed people with primarily technical responsibilities, but even within the anonymous space of an interview, the political component of their position might influence the interviewees. The public employment policy Coordinators have access to a greater diversity of young people. However, the direct interaction with NEETs affects one's perception of them. The NGOs are the closest to the target group, but the moral principles guiding the entities might affect the perspective of the statements provided. Their link with migrants and institutional dependence should be considered. The Professional Associations are limited by the professional space. The Work Counsellors know the difficulties experienced by those who seek integration help first-hand. It is the position goal, and the reason behind the application for the job—that human perspective may bring one closer to the particular case, but risks forgetting the biases. The Trainers, although dealing with people directly, do not know a lot about the personal experiences of the people they train. They hardly had access to an analysis of the overall situation beyond

what they could extrapolate from the characteristics and their changes in the composition of the groups that attend their courses.

We divided the topics included in the interviews into three different categories: (i) inequality structural factors, (ii) social, economic, and institutional context, and (iii) NEET public policy implementation. Some of those topics are common for all categories (concepts of migrants and NEETs; cultural differences and stereotypes), some are included in two categories (homologation and overqualification lacked in the implementation category; tailored policies in the structural category), and the rest belong to just one of the three categories. Thus, regarding inequality social factors, we sorted the responses in the topics of Social structure, Inequalities in access, Family and motherhood, Work–life balance, Social networks, and Language. The topics related to the social, economic, and institutional context were Institutional trust and knowledge, Integration plans, Primary sector, Social values and expectations, Personal motivation, and Mobility. Finally, in relation to the NEET policy implementation, we divided the contributions from the interviewees in the topics of Youth Guarantee, Dissemination and mediators, European funds, Market feedback, Technical problems, and Work motivation.

4. Findings

The first topic, included in all the categories mentioned in the previous section, regards the concept of a migrant. We confirmed the impact of being labelled as a migrant in our research.

“The impact of being a migrant is huge. There is a lack of help and a lot of difficulties. You don't receive support and you suffer a lot of discrimination”. (NEET)

In some cases, descendants of migrants who were born and grew up in the country are labelled as migrants.

“There are many [migrants] born in Spain”. (WC)

This labelling of people is linked to how each society perceives migrants, as well as to expectations regarding work, education, social ties, etc. The ideas connected to what it is to be a migrant could imply a barrier that can hinder the aimed integration for NEETs. Some of these ideas arise from cultural differences. Both the shock that those differences may produce and the negative reaction to them may complicate market integration by limiting the approach of migrants towards the available solutions. Some of these ideas are linked to the migrants' understanding and expectations regarding work and education.

“There are not many migrants on the Youth Guarantee list. They sign up for employment offices, because they are looking for a job. They do not think about training”. (A)

In that sense, it is highly relevant to understand the usual situation of many of the most vulnerable NEETs, because, due to their situation, they do not see that they have many options available.

“We have to do anything to survive”. (NEET)

In other cases, those ideas are linked to other cultural aspects, such as religion or traditions.

“One of the things that closes many doors is the veil [used by Muslim women]”. (WC)

Sometimes, these ideas become stereotypes, and they may influence job opportunities considerably. This is more evident regarding migration. The stereotypes may limit the opportunities NEETs have to find a job.

“People prefer to hire people from East Europe [. . .] before migrants from other countries. If there are no South Americans, they prefer to hire a person of colour. And if there is no person of colour, then they already hire a Moroccan person. If there are no Moroccans [. . .] Algerians, the last are Algerians”. (T)

"Thus, I would only be able to get manual job positions. In the job market, I have experienced discrimination. People do not trust you. They think that maybe you are a bad person". (NEET)

This issue is also visible when the gender perspective is considered. A job may not be offered to the NEETs because the companies do not expect them to be qualified for the position.

"Because I am a woman, nobody would hire me for some jobs [...] a woman can work cleaning and caring while men wouldn't be hired. It depends on the kind of job". (NEET)

Once established, these stereotypes create structural elements that may generate inequalities for those who share the characteristics of our target group. In particular, we found that the interviewees understand that the success of the integration process depends on the social structure, as well as the opportunities it offers. Nevertheless, in some cases, the opportunities our target group finds are not fit to provide real integration.

"Traditionally, work was the way out of the situation of exclusion. Today, it is not real. Therefore, they, who choose very low-skilled jobs, continue to be affected by this situation". (NGO)

"It is that if you work and you still have to depend on your parents, that is ... you have to live with your parents... And only to cover expenses. That is like working when you were 16. I don't think you can consider yourself an independent adult in this situation". (NEET)

Due to the characteristics of our target group, being able to find work that gives them the option to integrate is especially relevant. However, they do suffer from inequality in access. They have comparative disadvantages for cultural and educational reasons; hence they do not have all the options that a random person from outside the studied category may have.

"Surely outsiders will always have a disadvantage. That's obvious. If we want to accept it or not. A person who comes from another country, who does not know the language well, does not understand the culture, ... it is always going to be at a disadvantage". (NEET)

In more extreme cases, the stakeholders highlighted those who arrived in the country without a basic educational level, which limits their opportunities.

"Many do not finish school. They have no studies. Basically, what they are asking for now, [...] one of the requirements for all positions is the school certificate". (WC)

Furthermore, due to their characteristics and the situation they are embedded in, they suffer inequalities in access because they do not know how or have the tools to join the options available.

"I think there are a lot of female immigrants who do not attend these programs. Some come on their own initiative, others because they are forced because they receive basic income and the other percentage ... I do not know. And there is another part that the husband may not let her". (PO)

"It is difficult because of the lack of support and resources". (NEET)

In the case of women, these structural factors may also manifest through ideas of family and motherhood. These ideas may become life goals and responsibilities that disproportionately hinder women's future in the labor market—for example, opting for solutions that are not compatible with having a job.

"Many of the women we had in Youth Guarantee were young women with dependent children". (A)

"[Muslim women] don't take the kids to day care". (WC)

We have seen that it is an effect that goes hand-in-hand with work-life balance measures, but cultural and religious aspects also influence work-life balance. We have seen

that there are barriers related to the options that are offered to them, because they are not adapted to their social, cultural, and family needs.

"Yes, [women aged 25–29] come when they are invited to be informed about the courses and the training opportunities. However, after that, because of their schedules, they cannot sign up". (A)

"We take into account the work–life balance needs that they may have, either using public resources, orienting them towards the use of those public resources, or we, if this is not possible, create parallel spaces for it". (NGO)

Thus, the inclusion of work–life balance measures in any NEET policy is the key in allowing them success. In other words, this policy should address life plans if they want to achieve the goals regarding vulnerable people. It is especially relevant regarding migrants, because some do not consider that they have finished their migration journey, although they may be forced to stay in the country where they first entered.

"For many, Spain is a stop on a path, not where they want to stay". (WC)

"I would have no problem emigrating to another place. In fact, Germany seems like a good place to go". (NEET)

Here, many come to value social networks and support from trusted people. Without social networks, people do not have the basic tools needed to advance within the framework of any NEET policy. Many use those contacts to gain their first jobs, to learn the language, to know how to receive support, etc.

"I just arrived in this country and the lack of network connections is important". (NEET)

"The final destination for most of the migrants is not Spain. Their goal is mainly in France, in countries of central Europe. [...] There are their social networks, which are the social networks they need for support and coverage". (NGO)

In fact, learning the language is generally the first step towards achieving labor integration. Without the language, it is virtually impossible to reach integration. We have seen that it is sometimes difficult to join these courses, especially for women who have children.

"First learning Spanish. Without learning Spanish, there is no possibility of joining the labour market". (NGO)

"Local people will always have preference. Always. Especially in unskilled jobs. People who know the language go after". (NEET)

"There are no flexible schedules for these women [with kids] to go to learn Spanish". (WC)

In some cases, in addition to the language difficulties, our target group does not receive recognition for the education they have attained. The host country may not accept their documents, and the homologation process may last years or cannot be achieved. This barrier generates cases of overqualification and a waste of human resources. Guided by the need to gain any salary, in many cases migrants with higher education find themselves performing low-skilled labor.

"I can talk about cases of a Venezuelan lawyer, who has to join high school here right now". (NGO)

"I have met people from Africa and South America. From South America, usually women, who have higher degrees and are training as vegetable handlers and maybe they studied law". (PO)

"Nobody wants you because you have no papers, so you just have to wait. For me it is like starting from zero again. It is as if all my previous studies and training are gone". (NEET)

In fact, education policies are a key factor for achieving integration. An unfavorable access to education puts the target group at a greater risk of being a NEET, and hence it is a

barrier that our target group faces. Nonetheless, the NEETs do not always agree on their views on education. Some want to believe in it, and some think that education is not going to provide them better solutions for their situation.

"My experience has been satisfactory. I found that this kind of education is very useful because it helps to find a job in the sector you want to have a position in". (NEET)

"People, when they finish studying, are not ready for the market". (NEET)

Meanwhile, the key informants consider that the vulnerable people are in a disadvantaged position regarding education. They think that the problem should be addressed beforehand, since the NEET policies try to solve it when the damage is already done.

"Public schools should not be the only ones who accept immigrant children". (NGO)

"Basic training, what the basic educational system should provide, is key". (WC)

This shows that in order for vulnerable people to achieve integration, finding a job is not enough. Thus, stakeholders highlight the importance of integration plans for policy success. Those plans are a compilation of different types of policies. However, NEET policies may not consider their interaction with other policies. This also concerns policies such as urban development or neighborhood policies. Regarding this matter, the interviewees highlighted how important those policies are. When asked, they focused on the topics related to other policies, even if they were not directly related to NEET policies.

"We cannot put all the groups that we label as vulnerable in the same place [neighbourhood]". (NGO)

This lack of coordination between policies is counterproductive in generating institutional trust, and it is a kind of trust that those in our target group tend to lack. Some may believe that by joining a program, they may lose benefits or their status in the country. Many may even fear being deported from the country, while others simply do not think that institutions are going to help them to achieve anything.

"[. . .] She comes to the [YG's] first session, you explain to her what it is for and that she comes and tells you that she is not interested at all if you call her, because she works very well with web pages and social networks and others things for job searching, and that this [YG] is a waste of time". (C)

"I have always worked finding work on my own and not through agencies, they have always wasted my time". (NEET)

Even if they trust the institutions, sometimes the problem is how the administration works and its complexity. Migrants especially may lack institutional knowledge. Some do not know how to join programs or receive aid, or they think they do not have the right to receive some help while they are receiving support from a different program.

"One of the main problems of Youth Guarantee is the recruitment of young people, especially young people who are away from any institution, are the most difficult to reach". (A)

"Often there is a lack of knowledge about the existing resources". (C)

All of the aforementioned difficulties, along with the needs that they have, have pushed many into the first sector. However, it is not an advantage, but a disadvantage, for our target group. The stakeholders have made clear that opting for that path implies hard physical work and precarious conditions. It seems to be an acceptable option only for those who have no other option.

"People who get into agriculture stay in agriculture because there is no way out. [. . .] Everybody [in agriculture] has been working without a contract". (T)

"Someone tells me that there is something for a day or a week and I do it. It does not matter what it is: gardener, walking dogs, construction . . . They are mainly physical jobs. Those are the options that I have as an illegal migrant". (NEET)

Thus, the primary sector does not facilitate integration, nor does it attract young people. NEETs only see those kinds of jobs as badly paid and hard options.

"The young people themselves have no interest in agriculture either". (T)

"[You are only going to be accepted] if you are coming to work in the fields for thirty euros a day. Then perfect, with open arms". (NEET)

This view of the primary sector coincides with the social values and expectations people have regarding job opportunities in that part of the economy. The stakeholders advised that, in order to alleviate the NEET problem, one should focus on those social values and expectations, especially on elements that are not directly related to the NEET situation, but do have a clear impact on it.

"I believe it is very important to work with them [migrant NEET women]: education in values, breaking down stigmas, recognizing the worth of women, all those things". (WC)

To overcome the barriers created by those values and expectations, we must consider the personal motivation that drives the target group members. In some cases, the individual component is clear, and is defined by the interest people have. When someone is really motivated, it can be an immensely helpful way to achieve success within NEET programs.

"This kind of scheme provides you an opportunity to increase your knowledge. It allowed me to choose things that better fit my profile, more specific things which were more coherent with my motivation and interests". (NEET)

"They have a lot of interest and they try hard. People who woke up at 5 AM stayed active in my courses until 10 PM. You see that they are interested in the courses and in training". (PO)

However, when the individual cases are grouped together, patterns emerge, and one can see the relevance of the policies, context, social structure, etc. For example, the improvement of the general economic situation increased people's motivation. Many started to believe that, after a period without opportunities, they became more positive about finding a job.

"Now there is a change in motivation and we also see that in the data". (A)

"I say, on a theoretical level I have high expectations. The world is beautiful". (NEET)

However, the effect that COVID-19 had in this trend was considerable, mainly reducing the improved expectations that NEETs have just prior the start of the pandemic.

"Every day I wake up waiting for the news to say something, but there was never anything". (NEET)

"I think the situation is not going to change much. I am positive, but I don't know". (NEET)

According to the key informants, this personal motivation helps the programs to succeed and increase the opportunities of the people who join the schemes.

"However, with those who commit and come, in fact, you can move forward with them". (C)

Another element that has similarities with motivation is mobility. Mobility depends on the personal circumstances, but there are social patterns—for example, the social expectations to find a job nearby, or the willingness to move away to work. The training and job opportunities that NEET policies may offer can be provided in different places, and many young people are reluctant to leave their surroundings.

"There is still some difficulty in leaving the closest environment". (A)

"Of course, they do not consider going outside the town. Don't forget that I'm talking about places like Molina del Segura, which is 5 kilometres away". (C)

The previous quotes refer to NEETs in general. Nevertheless, the characteristics of our target group are an advantage regarding mobility. In general, it appears that they are less reluctant to move, since migrants usually overcome this difficulty to a greater extent due to their previous experiences moving from one place to another.

"Because they already emigrate, they have that mobility predisposition and do not have ties to specific people". (T)

"As a migrant, I wouldn't have the problem of moving again, even if I have to move to another country". (NEET)

As we mentioned, tailored policies add flexibility to NEET policies. They increase efficiency by providing more adequate solutions to vulnerable people when it is better for them. By adjusting the provided solutions to the individual needs, the policy approaches the real needs of the target group. Thus, the probability to provide an optimal solution is higher. In the interviews, the stakeholders recognized the importance of this approach to achieve better results.

"To identify what are the capacities, potentialities and, above all, the weaknesses that one has in his/her personal and training environment". (NGO)

"Sometimes there are external circumstances [. . .] You are working with a person who has other problems. Sometimes it is not their time". (WC)

In comparison, the NEETs have a more personal approach, as their individual experience does not provide them with a more holistic perspective. Even so, they are also aware of the importance of tailored policies.

"[Talking about experiences with tailored policies] Yes, it really is very practical. Because it teaches you to create a business. Not a company. To open a store. Something that can really feed you. If you do it right, you put in hours and such... You earn a salary and more". (NEET)

Providing more personalized solutions is something that the Youth Guarantee aims to do. Due to the novelty of the policy, it initially had to deal with important difficulties, which did not help the NEETs. Its context changed, and so too did the policy which needed to be adapted based on the first field experience. Thus, it entered an adaptation process in the countries and regions where it was implemented. The key informants recalled this experience, and remarked that it is still an ongoing process.

"When it started there were many problems, the registration issue was especially problematic. This discouraged many young people from approaching the Youth Guarantee". (A)

"However, after 5 years, there is still the negative connotation that it is a program for people with practically no qualifications. People with qualifications do not easily attend". (C)

One of the difficulties the Youth Guarantee, as with any NEET policy, faces is dissemination. Not knowing the existence of a policy that aims to help is a clear barrier. Therefore, the interviewees considered it to be a key element. Time is needed to spread the word. Many strategies are used to achieve dissemination, but, sometimes, that information does not reach the target audience.

"Then you have to go out with a bow to catch them. It is not a matter of the first year, we are observing this for three years". (C)

"There are many people who do not know that these resources exist. They are not promoting it as much as they should". (WC)

One element that may help to solve dissemination issues is the use of mediators. The stakeholders agreed that mediators and personal interaction are particularly important in carrying out a more effective dissemination. These are key figures connected to the target group, and mediators can inform and convince our target group to make use of these resources.

"They do not know the available resources and that is also very important. That's the reason why they need to repeat it again, for mediators". (WC)

"The most effective is word of mouth". (NGO)

From the perspective of the NEETs, the mediators' function is not only dissemination, but also to certify the credibility of the policy. This is because the real issue is the aforementioned problem of lack of institutional trust.

"But those things [offers from institutions] ... they seem like garbage opportunities to me". (NEET)

"They [employment agencies] don't help you". (NEET)

Another relevant aspect of the implementation of NEET policies is how they are funded, as well as whether those funds are used correctly. As previously-mentioned authors have remarked, the stakeholders criticized the misuse of some European funds. One element that the interviewees highlighted in particular was the negative effect of rewarding the participation in some training courses. This option may work as a short-term solution, but it becomes a wasted resource in the long-term, and, in some cases, it does not even work to attract people to the programs.

"If a person in need is going to earn €900 a month in a project that lasts a year, maybe they train even if they don't like it". (A)

"It happens. We have courses that, although trainees get paid, nobody participates". (C)

In order to avoid these types of errors, institutions have tools to help them to adapt the programs. A common tool is the inclusion of market feedback. This tool aims to help them know the needs of the market. Thus, the businesses' role in searching solutions for the NEET situation is usually included. It is usually considered a win-win strategy, since it helps the market needs, includes labor and training offers that may result in labor integration, and it is perceived as useful by the recipients.

"Every year we collect information from entrepreneurs from relevant sectors to see where the training trends are going. With that information, we organise the courses". (A)

"It's good, because there you have something like a job, which is like between work and an internship. But it is paid. Then it gives you the possibility to live in the country where you are going to do that job. And it is also a job that is related to your interest and what you want to do in your life". (NEET)

There are other elements that aim to improve the policy and decrease the barriers that may constitute problems for the NEET policies. The experience with the policy is one of them, since there can be technical problems. During the interviews, the stakeholders signaled some of the problems, which implicitly revealed the importance of adding adaptability to the policies.

"We need a tool [common national database]. We work in a globalised world, we have e-government ... It is sad that we use sticks and stones". (C)

The last element that can become a barrier is the motivation of those implementing the policies. The output of the policy does not simply become a number for them: it also affects the key informants. In some cases, depending on how the process takes form, it produces a loss of motivation. We found that the stakeholders really want the policy to succeed, and for the NEET rate to decrease. However, the results they see and what they experience do not always contribute to maintaining that motivation.

"Honestly, after so many years of fighting so much, I don't see the effort it takes, I don't see the results it should bring". (C)

"If these things [NEET policies] don't change, the situation will continue to be the same". (WC)

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In the analysis above, we discussed some of the most relevant barriers keeping vulnerable people as NEETs. As such, the stakeholders pointed out that, when establishing a public policy that tackles the NEET problem (even more if we take our target group of migrant NEET women aged 25–29 into account), one should not focus solely upon the

training and working options, but one should also consider structural issues and the social and economic context, in line with the remarks of O'Reilly et al. (2018). This perspective highlights that the target group is complex and affected by many diverse aspects, as the NEETs themselves confirmed.

We identified overcoming the linguistic barrier as the most basic priority to start the integration process (García Juan 2015). Both key informants and NEETs agreed that this difficulty is the one that limits the employment options of the group members the most. However, those who arrive in the host country speaking the same tongue do not suffer from this problem. For example, most of the migrants from Latin America who arrived in Murcia were already fluent in Spanish, the local language.

We also identified work-life balance as a relevant factor. One could link the target group with the idea of mother and caregiver, especially considering that we focus on the age group of 25–29 years, when migrant women present high pregnancy rates (INE 2022b). Thus, the availability of the target group is disrupted when the training and job offers are not compatible with their schedules. Regarding that topic, in accordance with the research and recommendations of Molloy and Potter (2015), it is essential to include flexibility for their work-life balance. However, this work-life balance problem is not unique to motherhood and care. The schedules are usually not adapted to cultural and religious customs of minorities rooted in some members of our target group. For example, for female Muslim migrants, respecting the month of Ramadan may not be possible. This shows the importance of considering the NEET's identities (Pesquera Alonso et al. 2022), and this type of issue makes it difficult to combine identity with labor market integration.

We presented research showing that some social policies generate situations that are difficult to alleviate afterwards with training policies. In particular, the stakeholders agree that a housing policy that prevents the consolidation of so-called ghettos (Sim et al. 2003) will help to avoid creating spaces where following generations reproduce the same patterns of poverty. This connection between policies ratifies what we, as in Valtonen (2016), showed: achieving labor integration largely depends on previous social integration. Therefore, public policies that facilitate social integration, allowing interactions between people from different strata, are essential, so that subsequent generations do not remain in the same situation as the migrant population. These elements have an effect on fulfilling the basic needs of the NEETs, and this research shows that fulfilling basic needs motivates NEETs more than the desire for personal self-realization. Thus, public policies that act on social aspects can create a space which is more likely to boost the desire to end being a NEET.

Regarding the issue of mediation, it is an essential factor, both to know the needs of the target group, and to publicize programs (della Noce et al. 2002). In many cases, dissemination is performed through word of mouth. According to the information we collected, the entities that work with migrants, women, and/or young people spread the message better than official institutions, but worse than community figures. This group of NEETs scarcely trust established institutions, and these entities and community figures help to avoid that problem, and are useful when translating ideas, from the general objectives of the programs to the specific needs of the people. This perspective is also shared by Simões et al. (2022), whose research highlights the importance of setting emotional bonds with the community as a way to improve the inclusion of NEETs.

Thus, the findings revealed that the policy should move from having a general perspective of the NEETs and their situation to providing more flexible solutions. We showed that the actual framework for NEET policies in the European Union, the Youth Guarantee, adds some flexibility when it is properly combined with the market. However, not all authors support this idea. For example, (Cabasés Piqué et al. 2016, 2017), see this process from a more pessimistic perspective: "Demand-side policies should then stop to promote precarious jobs, focusing instead on the creation of quality employment" (Cabasés Piqué et al. 2016, p. 699), although it produces key synergies with companies. In this case, the remark of (Cabasés Piqué et al. 2016, 2017) should not be forgotten, because, due to the

economic vulnerability of this group, its members priorities work integration rather than motivation or interest.

The primary sector may seem to be a suitable option to provide jobs for our target group, since there is always demand for workers. In that sense, the work of [Baselice et al. \(2021\)](#) confirms that assertion. They highlighted the opportunities that this sector may offer to NEETs is important. Another factor that has an impact in this option is mobility, which is linked to that type of work, because the sector is strongly connected with jobs outside of cities. Thus, in the case of migrants, due to their roots, they are usually more likely to overcome this difficulty. However, the demand for workers is constant, since work in agriculture is considered to be harder and less remunerated than in other parts of the economy, making the sector less attractive. The hardness and difficulties mentioned here are evident for both stakeholders and NEETs, as [Simões](#) also noted in his research on NEETs ([Simões 2018](#)). In other words, the entrance barriers are low, especially for migrants, because the precariousness is high. Thus, although it may serve to reduce the number of people in the target group, under the current conditions, it is probably not an integration opportunity. We consider it important to remark that the main policy in that sector, the Common Agriculture Policy aims to rejuvenate the countryside, mitigate climate change, etc., and it depends on the EU level, which provides community funds. Therefore, we consider it essential to link the primary sector with direct employment, but also with rural development, especially because there are many successful programs with this focus ([Hoffmann and Hoffmann 2018](#); [Simões 2018](#)). It means that these hurdles are surpassed if the policies connect issues, such as maintaining the environment or rural tourism. To achieve this, collaboration with involved stakeholders and reinforcement of the associative fabric is as important as direct labor integration. Despite the mentioned difficulties, the positive aspect is that it is a space ready to receive this group.

The findings of our research, as well as the relevant literature, point to the fact that there are many barriers that keep vulnerable people as NEETs that do not fall under the scope of NEET policies ([Molloy and Potter 2015](#); [O'Reilly et al. 2018](#); [Focacci 2020](#)). Thus, to achieve the goals of those policies, they should be combined with other policies that include social measures, language training, the collaboration of social companies, and cultural integration, etc. If not, there is a risk of not meeting the desired objectives at the cost of continuing to waste talent, work, and public financial resources. Furthermore, the policies should be tailored to add the needed adaptability to achieve their goals. This means that the policies should be nearer to the individual, which goes hand-in-hand with including the regional and local perspective to the policies. However, as we mentioned above, the interviews revealed many structural factors. We divided them into the topics of Concept of migrants, Cultural differences and stereotypes, Homologation and overqualification, Social structure, Inequalities in access, Family and motherhood, Work–life balance, Social networks, and Language. They condense some of the most important barriers our target group faces, and can be combined with technical problems regarding the implementation of the NEET policies. Nonetheless, these policies aim to tackle only a narrow issue in comparison with the general economic and social framework. Thus, as the stakeholders realized and the NEETs confirmed, NEET policies can alleviate the situation, but cannot solve the problem if the structural factors are not addressed.

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Appendix A

Script of the questions for the stakeholders divided by topics:

- The importance of the social economy in the integration of NEETs;
 - Does this business contribute to training and offering jobs?
 - How do they provide feedback to the public institutions and trainers?
 - Is it perceived as a relevant factor?
 - Knowing that it is very important in the first sector, how well do they integrate NEETs?
- The role of the primary sector as a training and labour integration space;
 - Is it a sector that asks for jobs?
 - How is it socially considered from the NEETs' perspective?
 - What kind of conditions are offered?
 - What is the importance of the rural essence of the 1st sector in NEETs integration?
- The effects and importance of European funding on the programs aimed at young, unemployed and migrant people;
 - Have they increased?
 - Do the EU funding decide which programs are implemented or do they depend more from the national/regional/local level?
 - Is it efficiently distributed and implemented?
 - Is it enough?
- On the types of entry profiles (more common and more and less successful);
 - Do people come from different sectors?
 - What are the kind of successful jobs people get into?
 - Are there people from one sector that directly do not apply into training programs?
- On the perceived success of NEET public policy;
 - Do people trust the training programs?
 - Do NEETs enter some programs because of direct profits (paid training programs) instead of looking for the training itself?
 - Does the Administration implement this policy believing it is going to be successful or does it look for the short term money input?
- On the participants' motivation before, during and after participating in the various programs;
 - Do NEETs believe they are going to get a new job after the training?
 - Do they enter the programs without nothing if it is worthy?
 - Do they leave the programs before they finish?
- On the changes on the former educational/labour paths of the trainees;
 - Do they decide what labour path to follow or is it decided by the programs or the economy?
 - Are people reluctant to move from one sector to another, to enter a training program of a different sector?
 - Do they successfully reorient their paths?
 - What are the different perceptions of the NEETs depending on their educational background?

- On the effective feedback mechanisms included in the programs and how they work;
 - Where does the feedback come from?
 - Is it considered into the policy?
 - Is the policy flexible enough to take it into account?
- On the approaches (bottom-up or a top-down) of the implementation follow related to NEET programs;
 - Does the design come from a more governmental perspective or from the NEETs themselves?
 - Do the different sectors have a say into the policy?
 - how have the training programs been modified over time and geographically in the region;
 - Do the training programs adapt to the economical changes?
 - Are they too stable compared to the changes in technology?
 - Do they follow a common national education and training plan or a more regional/local one?
- On the incorporation of direct economic aid in the programs;
 - Does direct economic aid destroy the motivation of the people?
 - Does the topic become irrelevant when people only join because of economic aid?
- On the dissemination of the information of the different programs;
 - Are there different spread methods depending on gender and nationality?
 - How important are websites compared to mouth to ear?
 - Do businesses help to spread the word?
- On the stratification of the programs and on the profiles of the applicants;
 - Is there diversity in the programs?
 - Do the NEETs divide themselves depending on the kind of training?
 - Do migrants enter into different kinds of training than nationals?
- On the interaction between institutions, companies, associations, trainers and individuals;
 - how responsible/independent are the companies/state in terms of the training/employment offers;
 - Can companies influence the administration to offer special training courses?
 - Do the companies invest in training or do they wait for the government to do that?
 - Can the national government decide or does the EU decide?
- On differences between immigrant and native profiles;
 - Do nationals and migrants have different backgrounds and how does it influence their probabilities to be NEETs and integrate into the labour market?
 - Are nationals ready to work in the 1st sector?
 - How geographical mobility helps migrants to move to more rural areas?

Appendix B

Open questions included in the questionnaire for the NEETs:

- Please describe briefly your experiences in the course of your education.
- Please describe briefly your experiences from training schemes, beyond formal education, you may have participated.
- Why are you currently not employed?
- If you are not seeking employment, education or training, what is the reason? Please describe briefly the situation.
- If you are seeking employment, what is making it hard for you to find a job? Please describe the difficulties/prospects in finding a job in your local labour market.

- When you were younger, what did you want to do upon growing up? Please describe your aspirations and dreams.
- So now you are older. Do you still have the same aspirations/goals? Are you planning to seek/find a job in another local labour market than the one you currently live in? Please define in which local labour market (of your country of residence or abroad) you wish to migrate.
- What do you think is missing to encourage you to take further training/school and/or seek employment? (focus on state employment policies).
- What is the impact of being a woman on your educational and working life? Please describe briefly your experiences and specific real situations/incidents.
- What is the impact of being a migrant/refugee on your educational and working life? Please describe briefly your experiences and specific real situations/incidents.
- Please describe briefly the ways in which you are making a living.
- Please describe briefly the opportunities and obstacles that youth in your city/locality is faced with when trying to gain access into the labour market. Do you see any difference or resemblance to the capital city? (If the participant lives in the capital city, then the NEET should speak about the opportunities and obstacles of the capital in relation to the periphery).

Appendix C

Script of the questions for the focus group with NEETs divided into topics

- Individual/social responsibility:
 - In general, why do you think there are so many young people who neither study nor work? Is it more because of the people or is it because of the general situation? Why?
 - Do you identify as NEETs? Why?
 - How do you think society perceives you (failed, lazy, opportunistic, unlucky, ...)? Why?
 - In your opinion, which are the reasons for being in this situation of not having a job or being in training?
 - Do you think it's your fault? Why?
 - Do you think that the economic situation is to blame? Why?
 - Have you previously looked for work and found nothing? Why do you think it was unsuccessful? How long have you been in that situation?
 - Under which conditions would you accept a job (the level of salary, close to home, the type of work, etc.)? Do you think you ask for too much? Do you think that there are hardly any jobs with those conditions? Why?
 - If your situation were different (you had more or less resources, your families could not support you, you were more or less young, etc.), do you think you would be in the same situation? Why?
 - If your social/economic situation were different (the economy was as before the crisis), do you think you would be in the same situation? Why?
- Expectations:
 - How has COVID-19 affected your expectations? Why?
 - Do you think you will find a job soon? Why?
 - Do you think you will find stable work? Why?
 - Do you think that the general situation of the economy will improve, worsen or be more or less the same? Why?
 - Do you think that your particular situation will improve, worsen or be more or less the same? Why?
- Policies:
 - Do you think that programs aimed at people in your situation work? Why?

- Have you participated in a similar program before? If so, was it helpful? Do you see this project differently?
- Why did you join this project? Has it met your expectations? How?
- Do you think that these programs favour social inclusion?
- Do you think it will be useful to you? Why?
- Do you trust the employment agencies to find a job? Why?
- Do you think these programs should focus on gender? And as for where do people come from (whether they are migrants or not)? And should they consider the personal situation of each person?
- What do you think should be done to improve your situation?

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Is there a uniform NEET identity in the European Union?

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ABSTRACT

During the last decade, the policy efforts aiming to tackle the NEET situation (young people who neither study nor work) have increased dramatically in the European Union. Meanwhile, many studies challenged those policies, showing how they failed due to lack of understanding the NEETs. Thus, we analyse the factors that influence the appearance, modification and elimination of a NEET identity. The results reveal the presence of a shared NEET identity in the countries with high NEET rates, despite the considerable differences in the countries' and NEETs' characteristics. The NEET rate stands out as the key factor influencing the NEET identity, showing that this identity depends more on economic cycles than on the specific country or its culture.

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Introduction

The acronym NEET refers to a young person *Not in Education, Employment, or Training*, which is a label established for decades in the scientific literature and in public youth policies (Mascherini, 2019). Since its appearance, the category's limits and the concept's use, both in society in general and particularly in public policies that seek to tackle the problem, changed over time. However, those uses are not the same. Therefore, it is important to signal that, although the concept may be useful at the academic and technical levels, it also carries different social connotations (Instituto de la Juventud de España, 2011); in some cases it has become some kind of insult and in others a label of survival. Understanding that depending on the context, the use of the label can be unproductive, in this research we restrict the concept to its technical definition and are really careful when using it outside the academic environment.

Applying that concept, Institutions and governments have been developing NEET public policies until they became key policies, like the Youth Guarantee being an European Union (EU) policy flagship (Escudero & Mourelo, 2015). That entails the need to solve the classification of NEETs, because it is an issue that has resulted in multiple criticisms linking the conceptualization of NEETs and lack of policy success (Liszka & Walawender, 2018; Tamesberger & Bacher, 2014; Yates & Payne, 2006).

The first step to solve how to catalogue NEETs is to know their characteristics. However, the concept has evolved and expanded (regarding its criteria and use). Thus, authors such as Maguire emphasize that 'NEET has become a "catch all" definition for young people who have failed to make successful transitions' (Maguire, 2015, p. 534). Nonetheless, this does not deny that there are shared aspects, mainly highlighted in what the acronym reveals and the idea of youth to which it refers.

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Therefore, some opt for an operational definition that allows them to work on the concept easily, in order to analyse its incidence and that of any policy on the subject (Escudero & Mourelo, 2015; Eurofound, 2012) while others highlight the difficulty of finding people who fit the description of NEETs when trying to carry out a more humane approach (Holte, 2018).

While a definition may be useful to carry out macro analyses of public policies, research confirms that adapted NEET policies are necessary to avoid their failure (Erdogan et al., 2021). It implies that cataloguing NEETs should be more exhaustive than using the definition derived from just the acronym. Therefore, we focus on the main characteristics of NEETs in the EU, as a first step to understand the NEET diversity. More specifically, we seek to understand how these characteristics affect the NEETs and how they feel and see themselves.

Therefore, the general objective of this research is to understand NEET identity, if it exists, how it varies and what is the common and different between the different EU countries. That follows the work of Thornham and Gómez Cruz (2018), who show that NEETs are more than a number and how their identity plays a crucial role in the cataloguing process. As secondary objectives, we seek to understand the perception of usefulness and trust in the institutions that implement public policies on NEETs, as well as the perception of their effectiveness. We also wonder about the effects that the COVID19 pandemic may have had on NEET's expectations. Those objectives should work as a tool for policymakers and technicians who are focused on NEET policies.

To answer these questions, we combine quantitative and qualitative research. We carry out a quantitative analysis of secondary data that allows us to highlight the main characteristics of the NEETs and their differences between countries. Once we portray a picture of NEETs in the EU, we implement a qualitative approach using primary data collected through in-depth interviews, focus groups and field notes.

To conclude, we reveal the importance of the NEET characteristics in the process of generating a common NEET identity. We highlight how this common identity spreads across the EU, reveal the key elements of the identity modification process and forecast its future according to the observed data. Furthermore, we produce knowledge that can contribute to the improvement of current and future NEET policies.

Theoretical framework

Youth is the vital stage in which a person changes from the inherent dependence of childhood to the responsibility of adulthood (Furlong, 2009). Thus Gramsci (2014) defined it as a state of crisis. For the Italian, the old seeks to maintain the status quo, while the young seeks to undermine it. This gives rise to conflict and *crisis of authority* and *crisis of hegemony*. Even functionalist authors such as Parsons (1942) speak of concepts such as *Youth culture* as opposition to adult life, both in its aims of hedonism in the face of adult responsibility and in dealing with a process of resistance to parental roles.

Building on these contributions after more than half a century, Feixa Pàmpols (2020) takes up this perspective of youth and crisis by defining youth as a period of instability, rupture and innovation. Feixa Pàmpols aims to show that rupture is constant. Building on many elements introduced by classical theories, Feixa defends that youth constantly disappears to be replaced instantly by the next generation.

However, this process can be seriously altered. This is what Feixa Pàmpols, Planas Lladó and Soler Masó (Planas-Lladó et al., 2014) highlight when they apply their theory to the NEET problem. It leads them to wonder if innovation is really possible, considering that access to the tools and resources necessary to carry out such an innovative process is diminished.

Delving into the youth topic with the focus on NEETs, research such as that by Addabbo et al. (2017) focuses on gender as an important element to understand the issue. The authors show the highest risk for women to be NEETs in southern Europe. However, this inequality depends on the country cluster, being altered in multiple countries (Eurofound, 2016). For their part, Pesquera and

Strand (2020) verify this variability in terms of gender and add the factor of age groups to illustrate the increased risk that is generated when both factors are combined. This approach in age groups is also taken by Caroleo et al. (2020), demonstrating the relevance of dividing NEETs into two age cohorts by showing that the youngest cohort (19–24 years) is framed in a stage of transition towards the so-called adult stage. On the other hand, authors such as De Luca et al. (2020) analyse the group of NEETs under the magnifying glass of the level of attained education. The authors see the group as young people who for one reason or another have not finished compulsory education and leave the educational system without the accreditations required to find a job. Despite this, authors such as Strecker et al. (2021) oppose this categorization, arguing that it leads to the low success rate of public policies aimed at NEETs. The authors highlight the error of considering the NEETs as a homogeneous group exclusively composed of early leavers, showing that the group is a very heterogeneous one in regard to educational level. This means that, if the attained education is not a unifying and unison factor of the group (Rambla & Scandurra, 2021), many policies treat young people with substantially different profiles as a homogeneous group, which reopens the debate on if there is a sufficiently homogeneous NEET identity.

Despite the critics De Luca, Mazzochi, Quintano and Rocca (2020) received, these authors highlight the relevance of the mobility that derives from the NEET situation as well as Roberts (2011), who retrieves Bynner et al. (2002) 'fast and slow lanes to adulthood' to advance on that, on how obtaining resources through the labour market, their social mobility and transition to employment (i.e. to the adult stage) are severely limited. Roberts focused on how this affects the identity of young people. Thus, without the ability to modify their environment, the NEETs' identity is limited to a great extent.

Contrasting youth and adulthood, Jongbloed and Giret (2021) argue that they connect via entering the world of work. In that regard, training is the passage between one world and the other. This inexorably moves the crisis that defines the youth to the dichotomy between employed and unemployed. A similar reason was behind the first appearance of the NEET concept, as the researchers lacked a category for those between youth and adulthood; education and work (Mascherini, 2019).

This conflict regarding identity is clear to authors such as Roberts (2011), who highlights the importance of work as a determinant of identity. The NEETs react to the system and, therefore, to what it represents. This generates a distrust that influences their identity. For this reason, they show a reinforced detachment from politics, even to a greater extent than it is present among young people in general (Eurofound, 2012).

These visions of the youth, as an element of conflict that every generation experiences (Feixa Pàmpol, 2020) and the identity of the NEETs linked to work, are rekindled under the umbrella of the common criticisms of the capitalist system as an always repeating cycle. Offe (2018) produced a framework that denounces the conflict between the different actors that coexist in the current Welfare States. If we focus on the case of the NEETs, under that framework, the said categorization of these young people appears as a by-product of the systems' contradictions, which implies that it follows the evolution of constant economic cycles. Thus, in accordance with Offe's theory, the NEETs' phenomenon would be another consequence of the current social structure, the current capitalist system. In other words, NEETs' identity adapts more to the inherent ups and downs of the system than to the intrinsic characteristics of each individual NEET in particular: both NEET rates and NEETs' identity are a consequence of the structural struggles within the Welfare State.

Continuing the focus on the Welfare State, under the approach of Esping-Andersen and Myles (2009), we can analyse NEETs as a conjunction of processes occurring due to what each type of Welfare State prioritizes. Robson (2010) delves into this approach, showing that under the model of the Welfare State of Southern Europe, social and family networks are the main pillars for NEETs, while the reality of the NEET problem under other welfare regimes is substantially different. However, Kotroyannos et al. (2015) signalled that in those countries, in general, NEETs do not feel excluded,

despite meeting the criteria to be considered as such and receiving support measures from the State. Therefore, under this perspective, the NEETS' characteristics would not be as relevant as the consequences caused by the structural elements of the Welfare State.

The last approach to the theorization of the identity of the NEETs leads us to take a step back and proceed to a meta-theoretical analysis. Studies such as *Exploring the diversity of NEETs* (Eurofound, 2016), which underlines the problem of calling such a diverse group only *NEETs*. Eurofound proposes the division of NEETs into 7 subgroups based on very different characteristics (Re-entrants, Short-term unemployed, Long-term unemployed, Illness/disability, Family responsibilities, Discouraged and Other NEETs) for their correct treatment. Also Yates and Payne (2006) mention this problem of using one label for the whole group. In this way, dissonances between the identity seen by the NEETs and how the society sees them are revealed.

Methodology

Considering the study object of this research, the identity of the NEETs of the European Union, we opted for a combined use of both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Therefore, we follow Holte's line, accepting that 'research designs will need to translate the NEET category into categories that resonate better with everyday speech' (Holte, 2018, p. 12) but understanding that 'such an approach must remain sensitive to the fact that NEET is a category of population statistics' (Holte, 2018, p. 12). In the same way, with regard to the sources of the information, we divide the data for this research into two distinct groups, separated by the different methodologies: The first concerns secondary sources, to which we will apply a quantitative approach, while primary sources, that will be analysed according to a qualitative methodology, belong to the second group of data.

The initial approach to the reality of the identity of the NEETs is carried out with quantitative techniques. In order to achieve this, we apply a statistical methodology through databases obtained through standardized surveys provided by the national offices of the EUROSTAT network of the European Union (Eurostat, 2021). Following this, aiming to investigate in depth the issue of the identity of NEETs, we apply qualitative techniques to the information collected directly from us (Valles, 2000). For this second step, we limit the number of countries selected to represent the total. Thus, taking into account that our main interest is to study NEETs, we give more space in our selection to countries with high NEET rates, but at the same time we do not forget about the wide spectrum of these percentages. As a result we selected 5 countries: Italy, Greece, Spain, Cyprus and Germany.

Deepening in the implemented quantitative techniques, we present descriptive statistics that help us to show a photograph of the socio-demographic composition of the NEETs in the selected countries. This presentation serves as an introduction that visualizes relevant differences in the typology of NEETs between the different study countries. Its aim is not to start the debate on how the NEETs understand their own identity, but to show the general qualities that characterizes the group in each country. The main indicator used is the NEET rate, the percentage of young people who are NEETs. After showing that indicator, we present the same NEET rate but divided by gender, age groups and attained educational level, each one in a different table.

Once the NEETs in each country have been described according to the aforementioned quantifiable characteristics, we give rise to the contributions of qualitative techniques. The techniques applied in this case are adapted to the two groups with which we have worked: relevant stakeholders who work with public policies aimed at improving the situation of NEETs and young people who can be categorized as NEETs.

Data on relevant stakeholders come from in-depth interviews (Foddy, 1994) and field notes (Emerson et al., 2011). The interviews were carried out in different periods between April 2019 and October 2021 in the selected countries, they included a total of 27 stakeholders who work on measures and policies directed towards NEETs. Field notes are limited to the study countries and were collected between April 2019 and March 2021.

The field notes also include NEETs. Nonetheless, the main technique we applied to get closer to their perspectives was that of the discussion group (Valles, 2000). More particularly, given the global conditions at the time of data collection, we had to adapt the discussion group technique to the online status (videoconference; Lobe et al., 2020). In this case, we held 5 discussion groups, one for each study country, in an official language of the country. A total of 23 young people participated in the discussion groups and these groups took place between January 21 and 18 March 2021.

We divide the structure of the applied methodologies into three blocks on responsibility, expectations and public policies. In the first, we focus on perceived social and individual responsibility, which refers to how the NEETs blame themselves/their society for their situation. It also includes knowing what their personal context is and what they consider to be the social context. For the second block for expectations, the focus is on the hopes and vision for the future of NEETs and how such expectations have evolved, which affects them and how the personal expectations of NEETs differ, or not, from those they have for society as a whole. In the last section, on public policies, our interest is to show how NEETs understand and value public policies, if they are aware of them, if they believe that they influence, if they perceive that participating in them is useful, if they make use of them, etc. .

Finally, we mention that, both through quantitative and qualitative techniques, we collected information related to the general theme of the NEETs, but not directly related to NEETs' identity. For this reason, in the following section we focus exclusively on the contributions that we consider most relevant within the subject matter that this article constraints. In other words, we prioritize the most direct quotes of those who provide the collected information, but it is only a synthesis of all of the contributions of the NEETs and stakeholders. Thus, to indicate the source of the citations, we will use the initials of the techniques (I for the Interviews and FG for the Focus Groups) followed by the identification according to the country where it was carried out.

The average NEET

The first step to understand the NEETs' identity is to see their distribution and the characteristics that we already denote as most relevant. For this purpose, we use the NEET rates, shown in Table 1. This table shows that the percentage for the whole youth, and divided by sex, varies considerably between countries. Among the data, it stands out that in general women suffer this problem more than men, but it is not an homogeneous process. In the different countries of the EU, arranged in Table 1, there are cases of equality in the percentages according to sex (e.g. Spain with 17,3% men and women), with a great difference to the detriment of women (e.g. Bulgaria with 14,9% men and 21,6% women) and even the opposite situation, where the aforementioned gender dynamic is reversed (e.g. Luxembourg with 8,8% men vs 6,6% women).

Table 2 shows the comparison of NEET rates by age cohort. The table shows that, in general terms for the EU countries, as age increases the NEET rate increases. However, as in Table 1, this process does not occur in every country. The most common change is seen among the oldest age groups (20–24 and 25–29 years) in cases such as Lithuania (17,5% in 20–24 years vs 17,1% in 25–29 years). We also see some more exceptional cases, such as in Malta, where the youngest group (15–19 years) had a higher NEET rate than the middle group (9,3% versus 9,2%).

The third key characteristic that contributes to the understanding of the NEETs' identity is their educational attainment, presented in Table 3. The table shows the percentages of NEETs by the maximum educational attainment level, according to the ISCED 2011 system (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). The data reveals the great diversity with respect to the attained education of NEETs. For example, countries like Greece or Latvia, where the lowest percentage of NEETs is among those who have just attained the lowest tier of educational level (8,3% and 7,9% respectively), while in countries such as Bulgaria or Germany it is among those who have completed tertiary education (11,8% and 5,1% respectively).

Table 1. Percentage of NEETs by sex (2020).

Countries	Total	Males	Females
EU27	13,7	12,2	15,4
Belgium	12	11,7	12,4
Bulgaria	18,1	14,9	21,6
Czechia	11	4,7	17,6
Denmark	10,2	9,9	10,5
Germany	8,6	7,8	9,5
Estonia	11,2	8,6	14
Ireland	14,2	13,8	14,5
Greece	18,7	17,8	19,7
Spain	17,3	17,3	17,3
France	14	13,2	14,9
Croatia	14,6	13,3	16
Italy	23,3	21,4	25,4
Cyprus	15,3	14,2	16,3
Latvia	11,9	11,3	12,6
Lithuania	13	13,6	12,4
Luxembourg	7,7	8,8	6,6
Hungary	14,7	10	19,7
Malta	9,5	8,5	10,5
Netherlands	5,7	5,4	6
Austria	9,5	9,4	9,6
Poland	12,9	8,7	17,3
Portugal	11	11	11,1
Romania	16,6	11,4	22,1
Slovenia	9,2	7,8	10,9
Slovakia	15,2	10,4	20,2
Finland	10,3	10	10,5
Sweden	7,2	6,9	7,6

Source: Eurostat (2021)

Understanding NEETs

Firstly, we remind that this analysis is carried out under the framework of the three categories mentioned in the methodology: responsibility, expectations and public policies. But, before proceeding with them, we start focusing on the article's main topic: the feeling of belonging, the NEET identity per se. We have found that in all countries, in line with the clash between the academic and social definition of *NEET* (Lunsing, 2007; Yates & Payne, 2006), the barrier between what a NEET is and what not is blurred. Young people who stop being NEETs during short periods, due to sporadic jobs or training, do not necessarily stop considering themselves NEETs. Likewise, some who are NEETs avoid defining themselves as such, highlighting other aspects of their identity.

"I am working in a Telepizza from where I get less than half the minimum wage. [...] And I consider myself a NEET."
(FG Spain)

On the other hand, there is a feeling of community, not insofar as they feel that they belong to a community to which they adhere with pride or dedication, but because they understand that they are not alone in their situation. This happens both locally and internationally, despite distances and cultural differences. However, we found the first contrast between countries with high and low NEET rates, where such sentiment is not present.

"The same for everyone. I think everyone. We are in the same boat. Aren't we?" (FG Cyprus)

The latter is seriously linked to the first section of responsibility, in particular to individual responsibility. In the case of countries with low NEET rates, the feeling of individual responsibility, or that their situation depends on a personal decision, is greater.

"All the people who fall into this category, they do it whether they do something on their own or work on the farm themselves or something." (FG Germany)

Table 2. Percentage of NEETs by age cohort (2020).

Countries	15–19 years	20–24 years	25–29 years
EU27	6,3	15,7	18,6
Belgium	5,1	13,1	17,1
Bulgaria	9,7	19,3	24,1
Czechia	2,7	10,5	17,5
Denmark	4	10,6	15
Germany	5,2	9,1	11
Estonia	4	13,7	14,9
Ireland	9,3	14,9	18,7
Greece	7,8	19,5	28,9
Spain	7,9	20	23,7
France	6,1	17,4	19,7
Croatia	9,1	15,1	19,2
Italy	11,1	26,6	31,5
Cyprus	8,9	19	16,4
Latvia	2	12,6	19,5
Lithuania	2,8	17,5	17,1
Luxembourg	2,4	10,3	9,4
Hungary	6,8	16,3	19,6
Malta	9,2	9,4	9,7
Netherlands	2,3	6,6	8
Austria	4,6	10,9	11,9
Poland	2	14,7	19,4
Portugal	3,7	14,3	15
Romania	10,1	19,4	20,2
Slovenia	3,4	11,5	12
Slovakia	5,3	15,5	22
Finland	4,2	14,1	11,9
Sweden	3,2	9,7	8,5

Source: Eurostat (2021)

Meanwhile the NEETs in countries with high NEET rates, despite showing clear differences in the countries' characteristics, NEETs share a kind of contradiction in terms of individual responsibility. This is expressed through the acceptance, partly, of the guilt of being in this situation; either because they could have chosen other paths, trained more, accepted jobs that were not related to their training, etc., or because they understand that they do not have the tools to change their situation.

"Maybe it's also a matter of promoting yourself, apart from the rest, the unemployment and the lack of jobs." (FG Greece)

The context of their personal situations¹ is considerably different, which does not prevent a shared idea about their possibilities to change it, the paths that exist before them. In countries where the NEET rate is high, NEETs feel that society in general perceived the group negatively, but that it is a sentiment that has changed and/or is changing. This influences their own identity, but it does not eliminate the conflict between feeling like a failure and understanding that it is not their fault.

"That they have been calling us big babies. That we want to stay at home pampered, up to 30 years. For 30 years I have been trying to leave home." (FG Italy)

"So it's not the guy's fault if we can't find a job, or if we can't find ... It's no one's fault." (FG Spain)

Despite the substantial differences between the economic levels of NEETs, there is a clear acceptance of the importance of having the means to support themselves while being NEETs. Those who are in a situation of greater vulnerability are those who suffer the most from this problem, placing themselves in a limbo between being and not being NEETs, by not escaping from no-contract jobs (often even only one hour long).

"You see, I work in undeclared jobs, that is, I have no insurance, and this is a great hassle of part-time employment." (FG Greece)

Table 3. Percentage of NEETs according to maximum educational attainment level (2020).

Countries	Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education (levels 0–2)	Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (levels 3 and 4)	Tertiary education (5–8)	No response
EU27	15	14,1	10,7	:
Belgium	15,1	12,3	7,8	:
Bulgaria	23,1	16,1	11,8	:
Czechia	9,6	11,8	11,5	:
Denmark	11,3	8,8	10,1	:
Germany	12,5	6,8	5,1	:
Estonia	8,9	14,5	8	:
Ireland	13,3	16,6	10,9	:
Greece	8,3	21	28,6	:
Spain	21,1	13,5	15,8	:
France	15,8	15,3	10,1	:
Croatia	7,4	17,3	16,6	:
Italy	21,8	25,4	20,7	:
Cyprus	12,8	17,8	14,5	:
Latvia	7,9	14	14,5	:
Lithuania	9,7	17,4	9,3	:
Luxembourg	7,1	8,6	7,4	:
Hungary	16,9	14,1	11,4	:
Malta	22,6	7,3	4,3	:
Netherlands	7,1	5,4	3,4	37,7
Austria	12,7	9,7	5,4	:
Poland	9,1	16,7	9,4	:
Portugal	10,1	11,9	10,7	:
Romania	20,6	15,4	8,2	:
Slovenia	8	10,7	7,3	:
Slovakia	15,3	15,9	13,2	:
Finland	10,1	11,7	6,1	:
Sweden	7,5	8,3	4,6	:

Source: Eurostat (2021)

In low NEET rate countries, the family mainly exercises the function of providing protection to those who are in the situation of being NEETs, while in the other countries that function is mainly exercised by the state, in line with what Esping-Andersen and Myles (2009) argued. The impact that this has on the NEET identity is clear, since it induces pressure on the youth identity via feelings of burden and guilt.

"I am surviving. I have had to return to my parents' house after four years" (FG Spain)

That pressure is also intertwined with the options that are considered to escape the NEET category. For this reason, many are waiting to find something related to the previous training/education they have received, something to which the family unit supports. Also, not everyone is willing to accept unskilled jobs or help in family businesses. On the other hand, those who do accept such jobs usually continue to consider themselves NEETs, even though they do not fit under the NEET label anymore.

"What I really want to do is not to lose the long term perspective. There are several qualifications. I have time to get them." (FG Italy)

Something that unites the groups in countries with a high NEET rate are contradictory expectations. It is common to see NEETs asserting both that everything is going to be better (i.e. that they are following the right path), and that the situation is not going to improve.

"I'm on the way to achieving my dreams, but I just have slowed down. How fast I'm doing it, but I'm doing it. Regarding my friends, when I tell people or my parents or my friends and everything, they just lose it with this situation." (FG Cyprus)

This is valid both from the point of view of their individual paths and those of society at large, especially as it relates to the impact of the COVID19 pandemic.

"I don't know when this [COVID] thing will end, and this thing is making me nervous and making me lose even the hopes that I had until some time ago." (FG Italy)

However, this message does not appear among young people in countries with a lower NEET rate. The NEETs there feel that they can escape the NEET category if they want or need to.

"It is easy to start working here in Germany, it is easy to start earning money" (FG Germany)

Nonetheless, the disruption of COVID19 also modified these ideas and impressions in countries where the NEET rate is low. It made the situation of being a NEET much more usual and easier to understand by those who are and when it is perceived by those who are not NEETs.

"I think it changed massively because of Corona and now it is much normal and it is not so bad" (FG Germany)

Deepening these expectations to a greater extent, we see that among the countries with high NEET rates, there is a common message of instability and precariousness in the future. On the contrary, where the pressure on youth in this regard is low, we do not come across this message.

"Temporary contracts, in my opinion. Now and in the future. There are and will be few fixed jobs, let's say, steady jobs. Unless you own a business." (FG Italy)

These ideas undoubtedly influence their identity, adapting their life plans to such expectations, postponing decisions that have a direct influence on their situations. We highlight both those of economic security and those of the construction of a new family nucleus or postponing moving to a home outside the parents'.

"I, like many people here, think that this is the moment when I would have to start a family. at 29 years-old? I don't know the others. 24? 25? Nobody. Nobody does it." (FG Spain)

With regard to the family section and the creation of a new family nucleus, the direct relationship with gender is revealed. Thus, we find another contradiction: they say they perceive gender differences in society, but they do not perceive them among the risk of being NEETs.

"Actually, no. There are opportunities for women, there are opportunities for men. Not that I see that as an obstacle." (FG Spain)

At the same time, they are aware that young women who want to have children are exposed to a greater probability of being NEETs and of not being able to escape the category.

"Namely, that women who choose to start a family and . . . possibly have stayed off the market for two or three years then find it very difficult to reenter." (FG Greece)

According to the NEETs, regarding the different public policies directed at them, we again come across the division between countries with high and low NEET rates, regardless of the characteristics of the NEETs. The young people who suffer the most lack knowledge about the public policies directed at them. They do not have the information about the existing options that they could use and do not show interest in learning about them.

"The only thing is that not many people know about these programs. So it will be more beneficial to help people get to know these programs and trust the process of the program. And then, many people are gonna get into them." (FG Cyprus)

This situation is driven by a lack of confidence that those policies could be useful.

"Obviously the policies implemented, at least for this issue, are deplorable! They're all wrong! Basic issues are not taken into account" (FG Greece)

This is strongly opposed to those who live in societies in a better situation with respect to the NEET rate.

"I've really met people who do this job as mediators . . . they really want people to find their calling." (FG Germany)

In countries with a high NEET rate, this mistrust seems to be deeply ingrained. Especially noteworthy is the rejection of public employment services as institutions that can help them. However, in low NEET rate countries, NEETs perceive those services as reliable for finding employment or training.

"They do not help when you are over thirty years old. I am still 27, but personally I have always worked finding work on my own and not through agencies, they have always wasted my time." (FG Spain)

In contrast, NEETs place their hope in their contacts and social networks. However, it is also linked to the negative thought of fearing that they do not have options to achieve success if they do not know someone who will facilitate them job offers.

"Most likely in many interviews or many questions that I have asked in certain jobs I have not been called because I did not have the right push, the recommendation. It is that." (FG Italy)

We also see this distrust in the administration among those who implement this type of public policy. This dynamic again is common between countries with high NEET, regardless of inequalities in terms of the characteristics of NEETs.

"We can have an impact, but the root of the problem is not what we tackle. They come to us when all the previous steps didn't work. If we do not fix that, we will always be late." (I 26 - Spain)

This indicates that not only the perception of these workers confirms the speeches of the young people, but also adds an uneasiness for the long-term solution of the problem. In other words, the expectation of long-term success is questioned by both NEETs and experts working to solve this problem.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, based on the contributions of authors like Gramsci, Feixa Pàmpols and many others, we characterized youth as a time of crisis and conflict. The data we introduced confirmed that characterization, even despite the disparity within the NEETs and the agglutinative use of the NEET label. Our generalist approach between countries, based on quantitative data, confirmed the mentioned disparity between the average NEET in the EU. Considering that the data includes indicators related to key characteristics in the formation of identity (sex, age, education), this approach highlights the problem of using the concept *NEET* to agglutinate all of them in the EU, and shows the difficulty of theorizing about the existence of a generalized NEETs' identity in the different study countries.

Building on the data, the qualitative methodology reveals that other social and cultural factors overcome the barriers illustrated by the quantitative characterization. In this sense, the NEET rate in each country plays the most important role. Parallel to Feixa Pàmpols' (2020) characterization of the youth as a crisis, finding oneself as a NEET (a characteristic that hinders the integration process) generates a dynamic of identity creation in line with the crisis of knowing oneself as a NEET. Thus, the young people in this situation tend to identify with the common label *NEET*, despite the differences in terms of educational levels, gender and/or age. The NEET identity appears as a process of integration, as a reaction within a dynamic of disintegration, facilitated by the strength of a process that relies on knowing that the group is relatively large.

We have partly focused on the effect of COVID on the NEET identity, especially regarding their expectations. Thus, we found that, although this has had an impact on the topic, the effect of COVID on this issue is small. Insofar, its impact is temporary and no relevant consequences are revealed on the NEET identity generation processes.

The data bring to light that where the NEET rate is low, NEETs a NEET identity does not emerge. Meanwhile, where it is high, despite factual differences, a similar NEET identity arises. Our work shows that the perception of the NEET group's size by young people is crucial for the NEET identity as

it generates awareness of being a NEET. Then, that awareness leads to the acceptance of the dependence on the social process against their free will; which is the aspect that most affects the generation of the NEET identity.

However, NEETs are full of contradictions. In the same way Offe (2018) shows the contradictions of the different actors within the Welfare State, NEETs emulate them through their struggle between knowing that they are outside of social structures and wanting to be within them. Fears and hopes of NEETs clash, forming a conflict between desire and scepticism. Their identities are in a constant conflict between a dreamed and expected future and a bleak one: ideal expectations versus negative experiences. Hope is lost in the face of the impotence of not being able to carry it out (Simões et al., 2021), which becomes part of their identity in constant crisis.

This internal conflict is revealed by a general feeling of detachment (Eurofund, 2012). In line with previous research (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2018), we confirm that the lack of trust affects what NEETs see as optimal or probable in order to modify their personal and group situations. Hand in hand with the arguments regarding the relevance of the relative number of NEETs, their identity is influenced by a lack of motivation, seeing that the chances of escaping their situation are limited and they do not depend on them, because it is a social process. Although this detachment is not expressed exclusively in political terms (Alfieri et al., 2015), it influences the NEET identity trend to mistrust the structures of the Welfare State and this process directly influences the effectiveness of the Welfare State possibilities, in regard to achieving positive results.

This youth crisis becomes an identity crisis when it is interrelated with the lack of integration in the labour market. This key element of identity in today's society involves defining NEETs as non-productive, because they do not have a job or are not training for a job; a criticism highlighted by Yates and Payne (2006). Thus, this identity clash generates anomie in a line similar to that mentioned by Durkheim (1987) in the nineteenth century. The youth in this situation lack a framework that provides them useful guidelines that could help them know how to proceed when facing the future that awaits them. NEETs live the experience of not being able to feel like adults, in the sense of not being able to escape the stage of youth, a space between dependence on others and personal independence. Even those who should not formally be included in the category of NEETs, because they are sporadically employed in temporary jobs, are defined by precariousness. Therefore, their identity is enclosed within a categorization of *not entirely adults*.

The importance of the structures available, according to the typology of the Welfare State, is revealed following that topic of independence and adulthood. There is a dissonance between the states where much of the responsibility falls on family networks and those where the institutions of the state assume that responsibility. Thus, the process of system perpetuation is revealed, in which families are the pillar for the NEETs where the state is not strong enough (Ciccarelli & Fabrizi, 2017) and where it is not strong because there are a high number of NEETs. And as there are a lot of NEETs, there is no trust in the institutions of the Welfare State. This spiral is reinforced by the effect of pressure and/or influence of families by which they press the youth to find a future in better sectors and higher employment positions than their parents reached. It is what Ciccarelli and Fabrizi call 'wait and see' (2017, p. 35), and it generates an increase in the NEET rates when the demand is greater than the job supply.

The consequence of the previous paragraph is that the system ends up perpetuating itself, and this goes hand in hand with the forecast that we obtain from this investigation: there is no substantial change in the NEET identity. With this assertion, we do not deny the fact that an identity has been generated among the NEETs, which has fluctuated considerably between the different periods of economic boom and crisis. What we highlight is that the NEET identity depends more on the relative number of NEETs than on other factors. It means that this problem is a structural problem, one that is not tackled acceptably, which is a very important factor to consider when developing NEET policies. The causes behind that problem are not demolished by public policies, because they aim at the surface of the issue, and not to the pillars that are the source of the problem (Pemberton, 2008). Therefore, we predict that the NEET identity will change again. The variations in

identity, their awareness as NEETs, the reduction of feeling guilty NEETs have (for understanding that it is a social process rather than an individual one), etc. Those elements are generated more by changes in the NEET rate than by effects derived from an inherent change. Thus, in line with the cyclical tendencies of the capitalist Welfare State system, we argue that the NEET identity will return to a situation similar to that of previous boom periods, when the relative number of NEETs is reduced due to the improvement in the economic situation. Recovering again the contributions of Offe (2018), despite the conflict of interest, if the contradictions are not addressed, if the bases of the problem are not solved, all changes will be superficial and both the NEET identity and NEET problem will fluctuate following the usual systemic cycles. Therefore, the NEET identity will return to the state it was before the outbreak of the last or penultimate crisis, but it will also return to the current state after the collapse and return to a new (but similar) situation, a similar crisis.

Note

1. In order to achieve coherent diversity, the groups consisted of NEETs whose key characteristics vary considerably.

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V - CONCLUSIONS

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What the articles compiled under the framework of this dissertation show is that the NEET problem has a very complex nature. The many aspects that influence the NEET situation are highlighted in the academic literature, which focuses on labour markets (Mussida & Sciulli, 2018), education (De Luca et al., 2020), minorities (Zuccotti & O'Reilly, 2019), mental health (Tanton et al., 2021) and as well as many other topics. It shows that very different approaches may be selected, revealing the complexity of the NEET issue.

That feature is exacerbated by a fact we have revealed, that the NEET concept is constantly evolving. We have shown that there is a continuation in the process that the term experiences. The idea of what is a NEET is being redefined by scientists, stakeholders, the society in general and the NEETs in particular. Although it may not vary completely, the relationship between the NEETs and their identities as NEETs causes a shock when they try to define their own relationship with the term but also to move away from the category. This struggle impacts both the identities of the NEETs and the societal values linked to the concept. In that sense, the size of the group is a key element for explaining the relevance of this process. We conclude that when the NEET rates are higher (the risk of becoming a NEET is bigger and the possibilities to leave the category are smaller), the label becomes a tool for providing answers to the youth in such a situation and even a political tool to highlight the suffer to which the NEETs are exposed.

In relation to the size, we remark the cyclical nature of the economic system, which opens the door to a constant process of redefinition of the NEET identity. We show the relevance that cyclical nature has on the perceptions of the NEET the members of the society have. It implies that this cycle of the NEET identity also impacts the stakeholders who make, develop and implement the NEET policies. In other words, we highlight how this dependency on the economic cycles impacts the exposure to the NEET problem, and its relevance, in regard to those who have limited time, attention and financial resources, but have to tackle the NEET situation. It means that we should not forget that the social idea of the problem also influences those who have to find solutions to that issue.

Another set of conclusions to which we arrived is the importance of taking into account the many levels of the NEET situation. The median NEET varies according to many different variables, showing the high diversity and heterogeneity within the group (Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016). We have contributed to showing this diversity while remarking variables that are not always being considered. We have considered both the individual and the societal characteristics of the NEETs. For example, we have stressed how important it is to move from a national approach to a regional one. In the articles on which this PhD is built on, we have shown that the geographical spaces are diverse and their characteristics have an impact on the kind of NEETs in that space. For example, not being the capital but a peripheral region increases the risk of highly educated youth to become NEETs. Thus, the NEET policies should take those differences between spaces into consideration, if they aim to achieve success.

Nonetheless, it is a considerable challenge to achieve success if the necessary data is not available. In this dissertation, we have signalled some cases of data collection problems and the limitations that they imply on producing reliable conclusions. We have shown and concluded that the lack of data can lead to a false scenario of the NEET situation, causing the impression that some measures are optimal, despite the fact that they are not in accordance with the reality of the NEET problem.

Those are lessons that normally are learnt by experiencing and seeing the progress of the NEET policy implementation. Therefore, another ingredient to that recipe for success is time. Our research revealed that time and the novelty of the Youth Guarantee can explain the limitation of the positive results of the NEET policies. In that sense, the years and the collaboration between agencies have produced improvements in the Youth Guarantee, but also the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the NEET rates implies that there has been a new opportunity to learn lessons for the future of the NEET policy. One of those lessons we highlighted is the not efficient use of monetary incentives, but also that offering more training is not always the solution. We have show that sometimes the NEETs require council more than any other thing, that those who are overqualified may not profit from training but for other resources or that in the case of the most vulnerable groups, the issue may lie on rethinking the kind of measures and offers included in the NEET policies. However, in this dissertation we also highlight the strong limitations of those policies. We pointed out that the high dependency on other public policies, related to the labour market, education, culture or the economic cycles, implies limited impact of the NEET policies. That

assertion translates into accepting that the goals defined for the NEET policies are not always achievable, as they do not provide the necessary tools.

One of the main conclusions of this doctoral thesis is according to the relevance of implementing tailored NEET policies. The flexibility required derives from the diversity of the group. We have used data to show many of the substantial differences between NEETs in regards to education, gender, citizenship and many other variables. That diversity implies that the needs of the NEET are also diverse. Hence, the solutions that the NEET policies provide should be tailored, if it was to offer adequate solutions to the NEETs.

That is especially important when the focus is on the most vulnerable groups, as we have argued in the published articles. We revealed that sometimes the unique situation of some of the most vulnerable groups imply that their needs are not covered just by increasing the budgets, but by providing opportunities adapted to their skills, timetables and cultures.

This focus on tailored policies is relevant not only at the individual level, but also again at the regional one. The data included in this doctoral thesis shows that some peripheral regions share more in common with other peripheral regions of other countries than with regions from their own country. From that fact, we conclude that the tailored policies approach should also be considered at European, national and regional levels. Adding that flexibility to the policies would imply increasing the chances the NEETs have to leave the NEET category. In that sense, we remark the lack of that tailored perspective in the main EU NEET policy, the Youth Guarantee. Despite those differences between countries, similarities between region and diversity within the NEETs, the options included in the programme does not take into consideration enough the need for adapting its offers to a diverse set of young people.

One of the last conclusions of this dissertation is the emphasis on the need for better policy evaluation for the improvement of the NEET policy. The results of this document reveal the limitations of policy evaluation of the Youth Guarantee, while we show the benefits of a much deeper analysis. We have shown that at the beginning of the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, the EU and the state members were interested in following the progress of the policy. However, the lack of public interest on the topic and the emergence of other topics (Tamesberger & Bacher, 2021) reduced or even eliminated that interest on NEET policy evaluation. Nonetheless, we also strongly advocated for the

improvement of that policy evaluation. We accepted that our analysis of the Youth Guarantee was limited, as it was an initial approach to the policy evaluation. It was enough to produce direct evidence of the usefulness of some measures of the policy, due to the limited implementation period. Therefore, we include in our conclusions that much more developed policy evaluation is crucial. Implementing simple descriptive analysis is not enough for reaching the roots of the deficiencies in the policy implementation; and discovering those issues are pillars for improving the NEET policy. Thus, we advocate for future research on the topic, where we can include more complex data analysis with more cases for the latest years.

Finally, we want to close this dissertation with a conclusion derived from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the research we have already included this element, but the data available still does not allow us to implement a deep long-term analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the NEET situation. Our interest is not so much in the direct effects of the quarantine and similar measures, but on the lessons learnt from those experiences. We understand that in a cyclical economic system such as ours (Offe, 2018), there is still a big risk that a new crisis will restart all the results previously achieved. The dependency on other aspects that are not included in the NEET policies, the lack of policy evaluation, the loss of interest on the topic, etc. are factors that highlight the danger that the current youth is exposed to. If this research aims to achieve something, is to stand up for preventing that more youth find themselves as NEETs. In particular, we support learning from the lessons of the past, preparing the NEET policies and being ready for the impact of future crises. In other words, we hope that the results, analysis and good practices shown in this doctoral thesis contribute to avoid a preventable increase in the NEET rates.

VI – LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH LINES

VI –LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH LINES

After having presented the core of this dissertation, we want to close it with a reflection on the weakness that limited this doctoral thesis and the research paths that lay open for their exploration right after the completion of this PhD process. Thus, in this section we will signal the elements that limited any advancements we planned before and later we will introduce the questions that remain unanswered and motivate us in the quest of trying to respond to them.

The most relevant factor that limited our research is data. Any kind of scientific research needs quality data as any baker needs flour. In that sense, it is not a unique challenge. The lack of data not only affects our research, but also the policy evaluation previously mentioned in other sections of this doctoral thesis. The key NEET policy studied in this dissertation, the flagship EU policy of the Youth Guarantee, has suffered from this issue and it has been highlighted by many stakeholders since its beginning and it had to adapt the policy and its tool in order to ensure the data availability.

Nonetheless, there is more data than the data of the Youth Guarantee. As the office whose goal is exactly to provide that data, we gained access to the most relevant quantitative data thanks to the Eurostat. The main source for the data referring to NEET indicators is provided by the Labour Force Survey (LFS), whose goal is to cover the population in general. Considering that the youth already represent a minority in societies with inverted population pyramids, that the NEETs are a minority within that minority, the data availability has also affected the extrapolation limits of the available databases. Even more when we consider our special interest in peripheral regions and most vulnerable groups, which are composed of minorities. Those facts have limited the type of analysis we aim to implement through secondary databases, but also have limited the possibilities for reaching people firsthand. The difficulties to reach vulnerable populations added to the fact that we were considerably restricting our universe.

Another crucial limiting factor is the core of this dissertation: Social Sciences. In our fields, we cannot separate the study object, the NEETs, from the society where they live. It implies that we cannot check if our hypotheses are correct by implementing experiments where we can control the remaining variables. In the results, conclusions and discussions we are always accepting the

limitations of not controlling the economy, the politics, the external factors... and thus, not being able to remove crucial factors that have a great impact on the NEET policies that we are studying. In some cases those variables (such as the economic growth, job creation, the impact of a crisis...) have a much greater potential to influence the result of a NEET policy than all the NEET policy tools together.

As we previously said, the novelty of the Youth Guarantee is a key aspect when considering its performance, and that fact has a great impact on our work. After appearing in 2015, the policy was modified on different occasions, was implemented in different ways due to a lack of common understanding of the policy, etc. This transitory period from its first steps to mature are part of any big policy. Although understandable, it implies that the object of study was considerably different in phases that were not distant in time. The process of the implementation, the options available, the urgency, the data produced by the policy mechanism... All of them are factors that made it difficult to obtain solid conclusions from the data.

In the different articles we mentioned that the study countries are similar and converge when considering some social, historical, cultural and geographical indicators. Nevertheless, it does not mean that they are the same. We have been analysing countries that have considerable discrepancies, and having different frameworks for the different countries make it impossible to assert some conclusion or to adequately compare similar institutions. In that sense, crucial elements on the matter, such as the educational system, are so dissimilar but at the same time so relevant for understanding the possibilities of the NEET policies that they considerably limit the scope of the results of these types of analyses.

Lastly, we include the small influence of many NEET policies. The NEET situation is a very complex one that depends on the general economy, the political system, culture, societal values, the educational system and many other factors. However, those elements are not defined by the NEET policies. NEET policies do not dispose of tools and resources that may compensate for an international financial crisis or how the people in one country understand the value of education. It may have an impact on the aforementioned factors, but it is still a limited solution for a complex problem. Thus, the study object's dependency on other social and political processes is a relevant limitation to any research done on the matter.

Moving on and looking at the prospective future, we firstly highlight the plan already mentioned in the article *Youth Guarantee: looking for explanations*

(Pesquera Alonso et al., 2021), where we mentioned the plans of repeating the same analysis in a time when there is more data available, when the novelty factor of the policy is not as big as it was. We want to check if our hypothesis was correct and to look at the progress of the policy, in case we can find good practices and errors that could be repaired.

The youth are categorised as NEETs based on their educational and labour status. In that sense, we have focused more on the educational factor. We would like to continue that path and explore the differences in average education attainment by the NEETs and the rest of the youth. In a submitted article, derived from the PhD research but that could not be included in this doctoral thesis due to time limitations, we studied the profiles of the NEET in the different study countries and how they differ. That analysis illustrates the contradictions of using the same term “NEET” both for people with different profiles and for countries with considerable differences between the average NEET. The direct lesson of this approach is understanding that including general policy packages and guidelines for the whole EU may be counterproductive. It happens because the tools and solutions offered may not be coherent with the real NEET situation, where the deviation from the average is too high for grouping all the NEETs in the EU under one label.

One research line that we already opened in our articles is connected to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the NEET situation. We are interested in the long-term effects of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the NEET policies. This crisis caused by the quarantines and similar measures was relatively short in time but at the same time gave the opportunity to the NEET policies to check its adaptability to a new economic crisis. Thus, we are interested in what lessons were taught and learnt from policymakers, trainers, public workers, NEETs and other stakeholders from the sudden rebound of the NEET rates, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic measures.

Although we do not dream of a future where we are exposed to a crisis that causes an increase in NEET rates, it is hardly inevitable. Thus, we would like to continue monitoring the NEET situation and the NEET policies. Therefore, in a more distant time perspective, we will be able to check how the system reacts to a more prolonged crisis than the one caused by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We want to be ready to check the resilience of the NEET policies and fast enough to produce scientific results that can be applied to the policy implementation, thus, reducing the negative effects of that future crisis.

VII - REFERENCES

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VIII - ANNEXES

VIII – ANNEXES:

JOURNALS WHERE THE ARTICLES ARE PUBLISHED

1. Pesquera Alonso, C., Muñoz Sánchez, P., & Iniesta Martínez, A. (2021). Youth Guarantee: Looking for Explanations. *Sustainability*, 13(10), 5561, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13105561>.
 - a. Name: Sustainability
 - b. ISSN: 20711050
 - c. Homepage: <https://www.mdpi.com/journal/sustainability>
 - d. SJR 2021: 0.664
 - e. CiteScore Scopus 2021: 5.0
 - f. Category: Social Sciences, Geography, Planning and Development 99/747 (86th percentile)
2. Pesquera Alonso, C., Iniesta Martínez, A., & Muñoz Sánchez, P. (2022). Barriers That Keep Vulnerable People as NEETs. *Social Sciences*, 11(6), 253, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11060253>.
 - a. Name: Social Sciences
 - b. ISSN: 20760760
 - c. Homepage: <https://www.mdpi.com/journal/socsci>
 - d. SJR 2021: 0.438
 - e. CiteScore Scopus 2021: 3.4
 - f. Category: Social Sciences, General Social Sciences 50/264 (81st percentile)
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 - a. Name: International Journal of Adolescence and Youth
 - b. ISSN: 02673843
 - c. Homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rady20>
 - d. SJR 2021: 0.853
 - e. CiteScore Scopus 2021: 4.8
 - f. Category: Social Sciences, Health (social science) 40/323 (87th percentile)