



VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING AS A LIFE JACKET

Cedefop's work on VET supporting social inclusion of young NEETs

Young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) are absent both from the labour market and the education sector, thus [facing a high risk of professional, digital and social exclusion](#). Analyses of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic show that, in spite of EU countries' bold response to this crisis protecting jobs, businesses and livelihoods, yet again, young people were hardest hit by its effects. This is why young NEETs have continued to be a top policy priority at national and EU levels.

The concept of NEETs as an individual risk group (e.g. compared to early leavers from education or long-term unemployed adults) emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, which had a [devastating effect on young people's employment in the EU](#). The concept has allowed policy-makers and practitioners to tackle the effects of progressive marginalisation and prolonged inactivity of young people in a more targeted way.

YOUNG NEETs: WHO ARE THEY?

In the EU, young people with no or low qualifications are, on average, three times more likely to be NEETs than those with tertiary education; and twice as likely as those with secondary education. Other factors also play a role: living in a household with low income, being raised by a single parent, living in a rural area, being born in a country outside the EU, or having a disability. Young NEETs often suffer from poverty, social exclusion, insecurity, or health problems ⁽¹⁾.

Beyond personal circumstances, labour market failures and mismatches often disproportionately affect young people. The results of a [2020 large-scale research project in Greece](#), funded by the European Economic Area, illustrate the dire employment situation of young Greeks: [15.9% were unemployed and actively looking](#)

[for a job, compared to 6.3% of their peers in the EU as a whole](#) ⁽²⁾. The large number of young unemployed in Greece includes many well-qualified young people. Perceiving vocational education and training (VET) as a potential route to a job, many of them are willing to attend a training programme, provided it will help them (re)enter the labour market.

VET TO EMPOWER YOUNG PEOPLE

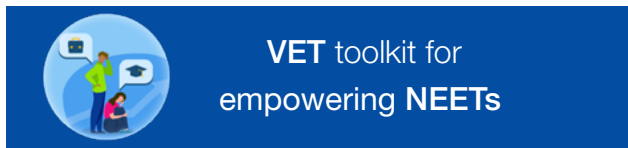
In line with the principles of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), VET, offering young people practical opportunities to obtain skills and acquire a qualification, is a powerful shield against marginalisation. According to the [2021 Council Resolution on a European education area by 2030](#), we are witnessing an increase in labour market needs for a different mix of skills and qualifications.

Being closely tied to the labour market, VET can react swiftly to skill needs as they emerge. For example, to keep pace with the digitalisation of the European economy, VET is incorporating a range of digital skills, responding both to occupation-specific and transversal skill needs. It is also central to policies supporting young NEETs, such as outreach, personalised guidance, and assessment and validation of their existing formal and informal skills. It is the role of policy-makers to ensure VET's labour market relevance and so help unlock its inclusive potential. VET programmes, with their practical component, can help young people acquire entrepreneurship skills and ease their transition to work. Ultimately, [they can provide young people with skills harnessing their employability and fostering their inclusion in society](#).

⁽¹⁾ [2021 Education and training statistics explained](#), Eurostat.

⁽²⁾ Broken down by gender, this corresponds to 14.6% of men and 17.4% of women aged 20-34 for Greece, compared to 6.8% of men and 5.8% of women of that age for the EU as a whole.

BOX 1. Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEET



Inspired by successful VET practices across Europe, the interactive [Cedefop VET toolkit for empowering NEETs](#) is designed to help policy-makers, practitioners and learning providers in charge of young NEETs address the specific needs of different groups (*) and reintegrate them into education or training and the labour market. The toolkit can be used to:

- design, implement and evaluate interventions to support young NEETs;
- foster mutual learning between policy-makers and practitioners;
- support decision-making processes through the development of action plans inspired by the toolkit's resources.

Follow the toolkit's latest developments on



(*) Groups defined by Cedefop in cooperation with Eurofound.

Source: Cedefop.

BOX 2. EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE: CLICK-ACTIVATE SKILLS FOR EMPLOYABILITY

[CLICK-Activate skills for employability](#) is a regionally and locally implemented Portuguese project promoting the labour market (re)integration of young NEETs (among other vulnerable groups). Project staff act as coaches and mentors of beneficiaries, and as mediators between them and public bodies or potential employers; this creates commitment and personal bonds between all partners, which, in turn, helps:

- foster beneficiaries' professional re- or upskilling;
- develop beneficiaries' soft skills, e.g. communication;
- increase participants' self-esteem and awareness of what it takes to find and keep a job;
- above all, build positive attitudes.

Source: Cedefop.

[Cedefop's toolkit for empowering NEETs](#) proposes a wealth of examples of good practice, tools, statistics and other resources. By applying different filters, users can search for specific solutions to their particular needs. For example, they can look for good practices in other countries, based on different interventions addressing different categories of NEETs. The three approaches fostering change at system level are:

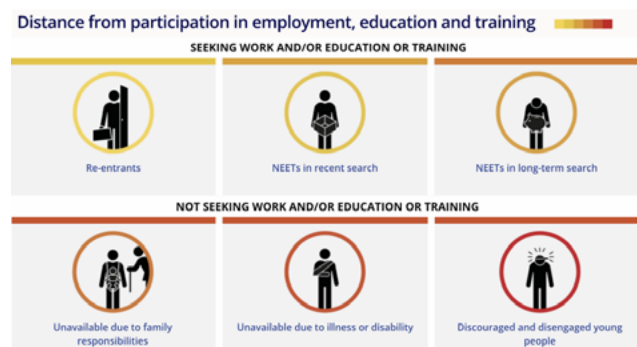
- [flexible and permeable education and training systems](#) enable learners to move within and

across education, training and employment. They support NEETs in making the most of their skills and talents, according to their interests and aptitudes;

- [easing transitions into work](#) responds to a major NEET concern. Work-based learning can help NEETs to move rapidly into work, within the company where the learning takes place, as in an apprenticeship, or in another company, given that work-related and social VET skills usually improve their employability ⁽⁹⁾;
- [skills development](#) is another crucial intervention approach. VET programmes, including apprenticeship, not only offer young people practical, hands-on learning options but also pave the way to easier labour market access and/or tertiary education. The [first Cedefop VET opinion survey](#) found that 87% of VET graduates are happy with the work-related skills they acquired, compared to 62% of general education graduates. The survey also showed that 60% of VET participants found a long-term job within 1 month of finishing their studies.

PROFILES OF YOUNG NEETs

Different groups of NEETs have different profiles and needs. To understand better their socio-psychological characteristics and to support the customisation of VET programmes addressed to them, Cedefop, together with Eurofound, has drawn up a list of different profiles. These were devised on the basis of the young persons' distance from their last participation in employment, education or training. In Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs these profiles are divided into young NEETs who seek work and/or education or training and those who do not.



The first category is subdivided into three profiles requiring different support: young people (re)entering the labour market, those who have been looking for a job for less than a year, and those who have been

⁽⁹⁾ Better availability of such learning options is one of the key objectives of the Youth Guarantee. Improving the quality of such measures is central to the [New Skills Agenda for Europe](#) and the [European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships](#).

trying to find a job for more than a year. The second category, which covers young people outside the labour force, is also divided into three profiles requiring different measures: those unavailable due to family responsibilities, those who have an illness or disability, and the discouraged who have given up searching for work or further training. The toolkit offers examples of [successful intervention approaches](#) addressing all of these profiles.

REACHING OUT TO NEETs

'Linda is a young NEET. She has attended various training and language courses, but is not registered as unemployed. For more than a year, she has looked for a job matching her skills and qualifications or a VET course she would be eligible to participate in.' (Toolkit)

[Outreach](#) is one of the intervention approaches presented in Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs, and that is what Linda needs. Only about half of Europe's NEETs are registered with public employment services. Many are unknown to social services and hard to reach. This is why outreach workers often contact young people near where they gather (schools, community organisations, youth or sports clubs, or on the street) and through organisations young people trust (e.g. youth centres, NGOs). First contacts can be established by peer-to-peer outreach workers, such as on social media. Outreach activities should ideally start as soon as possible after NEETs leave education, training or employment. The longer young NEETs remain outside the system, the harder it is to re-engage them. NEETs like Linda often face multiple challenges and it is vital to tailor the outreach approach to their needs.

BOX 3. EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE: THE 400+ FUTURE PROJECT, GERMANY

[400+Future](#) is a long-standing flagship programme of the city of Stuttgart (Germany) supporting young NEETs. It offers a low-threshold entry point for young people with little education who are hard to reach. Most have had negative experiences trying to enter the labour market. The main aim is to provide them with a job matching their personal needs and possibilities (full-time or flexible part-time, in a wide range of occupational fields).

The project tackles the specific barriers each participant must overcome. Different modules provide the possibility of personal development, vocational training, counselling and support for the transition to work, or further education. Remuneration of EUR 400 is paid per participant.

Source: [Cedefop](#).

NEETs AT THE HEART OF EUROPEAN POLICY

One of the most emblematic measures supporting young people at risk is the [Youth Guarantee](#). It was first launched in 2013 to help ensure that all young people aged 15 to 24 receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or traineeship within a period of 4 months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed; 7 years later, the EU had 1.7 million fewer NEETs. Youth unemployment had dropped to a record low of 14.9% by February 2020, just a month before lockdown measures were taken across Europe in response to the outbreak of the pandemic. By the end of the same year, youth unemployment had risen to 17.1%.

The Youth Guarantee's [transformative effect](#) on the one hand, and the adverse effects of the pandemic on young people on the other, have led Member States and the EU to [reinforce the Youth Guarantee](#), broadening the target group to include young people aged 15 to 29 ⁽⁴⁾. This policy decision is in line with Cedefop research on [empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways](#). If not supported in time, young NEETs face the risk of becoming adult NEETs, which entails the risk of prolonged professional and social exclusion.

BOX 4. EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE: AN INTEGRATED NETWORK FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE PROVINCE OF VICENZA

In Italy, the implementation of the first phase of the Youth Guarantee turned out to be quite challenging, as it was very hard to identify and contact the young NEETs, the intended beneficiaries of the scheme. This is why an [Integrated network for young people in the Province of Vicenza](#) was put in place. It consists of public and private organisations that cooperate to activate disadvantaged young NEETs, helping them benefit from social and employment services.

Source: [Cedefop](#).

EARLY LEAVERS FROM EDUCATION AND NEETs: SIMILAR, YET DIFFERENT

The role of VET in preventing and counteracting early leaving has been at the core of Cedefop's research for many years. Cedefop has shown that VET can play a crucial role in retaining learners at risk in education and training, and in reintegrating early leavers

⁽⁴⁾ Some countries with high youth unemployment, including among higher education graduates, had already raised the target group age bracket earlier. The 2020 Youth Guarantee followed suit.

back into the education system and offering them a qualification (*Leaving education early: putting VET centre stage, Volume I and Volume II*, 2016).

Cedefop has also developed a [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#). Similar to the different profiles of NEETs described above, this toolkit differentiates between learners at risk of early leaving and young people who have dropped out of education. It analyses their different needs and proposes a range of intervention approaches that can contribute to preventing and/or tackling early leaving through VET. [Developing employability skills, flexible education and training systems, inclusive work-based learning environments](#) and [second-chance measures](#) are some of them. The interactive [reflection tool](#) included in the kit allows policy-makers to assess how inclusive their (regional or national) VET systems are and to take action to prevent early leaving.

THE WAY FORWARD: HOLISTIC APPROACHES

A [low education level](#) is the most crucial risk factor pushing young people into inactivity and social exclusion. Research undertaken in France, on the basis of the PIAAC survey, has shown that in OECD countries, [skills and qualifications, even basic ones, can manifestly prevent young people from becoming NEETs](#). It can also be concluded that policy-makers and authorities, by reducing the number of early leavers from education, can contribute to preventing the far greater social challenge and cost of needing to provide for the social reintegration of young NEETs.

Education and VET alone usually do not cover the needs of such young people. Instead, [a multidisciplinary approach and active social policies are needed](#). For some young NEETs, a targeted [intervention approach focusing on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#) can make a difference. Modern [learner-centred teaching methods](#) can help change NEETs' negative perceptions about education and motivate them to take on and eventually complete a VET programme.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for most learning contexts from primary to tertiary education, including VET in both school and work-based settings. Teaching methods and practices have radically changed in the past 2 years, [requiring teachers and trainers to update and upgrade their digital skills](#). During the pandemic, young people in the EU were the first to lose their jobs and apprenticeship placements. [Financial insecurity and a range of mental health problems have also disproportionately affected the young](#), reinforcing the economic, digital and social inequalities many NEETs were already

grappling with.

Comprehensive, data-driven [learning support systems](#), offering [guidance](#) and outreach activities, [validation of non-formal and informal learning](#), and [financial and non-financial incentives](#), provide effective answers to the multiple problems young NEETs face in today's globalised and competitive knowledge societies. Such comprehensive learning support systems are informed by [skills and labour market intelligence](#) and can tailor support measures to the needs of both individuals and local labour markets ⁽⁹⁾.

Indicatively, for the [2022 European Year of Youth](#), the European Commission has flagged more than 300 measures put forward by Member States under the [NextGenerationEU](#) funding umbrella, whose main aim is to support children and the young. Many of these measures focus on accessibility and inclusiveness of education and training, while others cover employment support for the young: all will help alleviate the difficult situation of young people who are not in employment, education or training.

⁽⁹⁾ See Cedefop's 2021 working paper on [guidance practitioners' professionalism](#) and [briefing note](#) on the same topic, as well as the work of the [Lifelong Learning Platform](#).



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