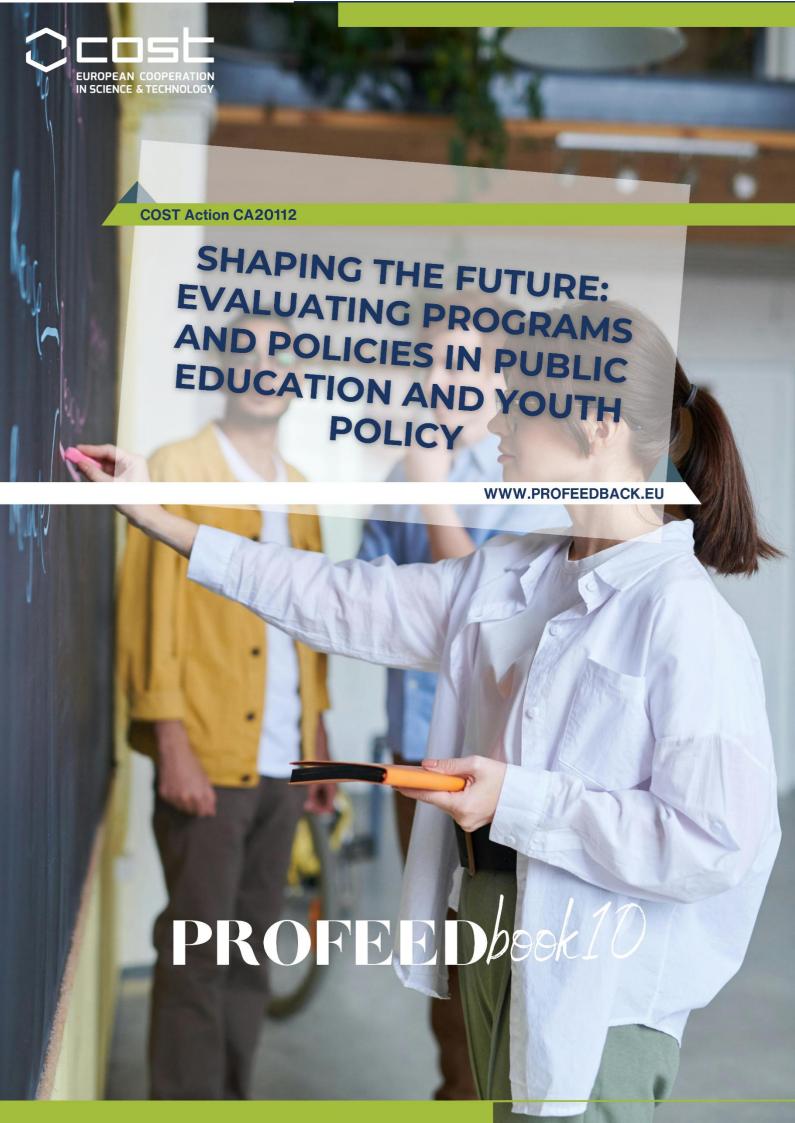


**COST Action CA20112** 

# SHAPING THE FUTURE: EVALUATING PROGRAMS AND POLICIES IN PUBLIC EDUCATION AND YOUTH POLICY

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#### ABOUT PROFEEDBACK

The COST Action PROFEEDBACK - Platform OF policy Evaluation community for improvED EU policies and Better ACKnowledgement (CA20112, MoU 052/21) 2021-2025 aims to foster the networking of the policy evaluation community at EU-level, raise awareness on the importance of evaluation policy research and improve its impact on policy-making. The Platform, following a bottom-up and open approach, **gathers** researchers and professionals from various scientific fields and sectors to present and evaluate theories, topics, tools and methods of policy evaluation. Results of the Europe-wide assessment of good practices **provides** direct and high-quality inputs for national and EU bodies responsible for policy evaluation. Policy evaluation is a key tool in understanding, developing and modernising EU policies, thus there is a growing demand for EU-wide and high-quality evaluation services.

The main challenge is the shortage of sufficient bottom-up platforms for European researchers and professionals working in policy evaluation. They have limited possibilities to discuss common problems, assess country specific practices and share their knowledge in a mutually beneficial and effective way. The PROFEEDBACK Action aims to contribute to these discussions during its four Grant Periods, 18/10/2021 - 17/10/2025 and beyond.

The PROFEEDBACK Action has three key objectives to achieve during the Action period 18/10/2021 - 17/10/2025 and beyond.



Foster networking and knowledge-exchange of the policy evaluation community at European level



Raise awareness on the importance of policy evaluation research and improve its impact on policy-making



Reinforce state-of-the-art research in the policy evaluation field and contribute to evaluation standards

#### ABOUT PROFEEDbook10

In the framework of the PROFEEDBACK Action, one conference every half-year is implemented. After each conference thematic deliverables are issued, the so called PROFEEDbooks (D4.1-D4.8). They summarise the main presentations and results of the conferences.

PROFEEDbooks support multidisciplinarity, the systematisation of different methodologies and the exact transfer of know-how for the policy evaluation community. These also serve the interests of European and national policy-makers in developing the frameworks of the next programming periods and of a common European evaluation culture.

In addition, the PROFEEDbooks enrich the literature of public policy, aiming to develop theory, knowledge, method and tool base of European evaluation policy as well as a common understanding of the current problems and challenges. PROFEEDbooks support the Action in reaching audience beyond the Action members.

The 9th PROFEEDBACK Conference focused on advancing evaluation practices in public education and youth policy across Europe. This European Research Conference brought together academics, professionals, policymakers, and evaluators to exchange knowledge, share good practices, and explore programme participatory approaches to policy and Key sessions addressed topics such as social inclusion in education, youth work for marginalised groups, the evaluation of NEET-targeted programmes, schoolto-work transitions, and the impact of policies on youth mental health and rural youth development. Workshops and panels also explored methods for assessing social innovation initiatives, integration policies in education, and strategies to prevent early school leaving, alongside the evaluation of informal and extracurricular education programmes.

The conference provided a platform for interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral dialogue, equipping participants with evidence-based tools to refine policies, improve programme effectiveness, and ensure that resources were used efficiently to promote educational equity, youth empowerment, and social cohesion.

The event took place in **Budapest, Hungary, on 18-19 June 2025**, and was organised by the **HÉTFA Research Institute** under the framework of the **COST** Action CA20112 - PROFEEDBACK.

# Youth Work and Services Supporting Inclusion of Young People



#### Introduction

In recent years, the concept of social inclusion has gained prominence as an essential component of sustainable development and democratic participation. In the context of the European Union, inclusion is not merely a moral imperative but also a strategic objective aimed at fostering social cohesion, equality, and active citizenship (European Commission, 2020; FRA, 2022; Council of the European Union, 2018). Global policy frameworks such as the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development have further embedded inclusion into international development goals, notably in objectives targeting reduced inequalities and strong institutions (United Nations, 2015). Moreover, organizations like the OECD emphasize that inclusive policies are not only socially beneficial but also crucial for maintaining economic sustainability and public trust in democratic institutions (OECD, 2018). This paper delves into the notion of inclusion from the perspective of young people in Slovakia, drawing on rich qualitative insights gathered during the 10th cycle of the European Youth Dialogue (EYD).

The EYD serves as a platform for youth across EU member states to voice their experiences, concerns, and aspirations in relation to key societal challenges. The 10th cycle, spanning from July 2023 to December 2024, focused on the theme

"Inclusive Societies" (European Youth Goal #3), with the intention of assessing and enhancing the conditions that enable all young people regardless of background or ability to participate fully in societal life.

In Slovakia, the national consultations involved 464 young participants through focus groups and 3,708 additional respondents via multilingual online surveys. The data collected highlight a spectrum of issues that hinder the full integration of youth, particularly those from marginalized communities such as the Roma, rural populations, and individuals with physical or mental disabilities. These obstacles include deep-rooted social prejudices, systemic exclusion from

education and employment, physical and communicative barriers, and a lack of institutional support.

This paper aims to analyse these challenges and present a structured overview of current support mechanisms in place to mitigate them. Furthermore, it explores policy and practice recommendations emerging from the consultations, including strategies for inclusive education, community engagement, and improved access to services. By focusing on the lived experiences and expressed needs of young people, the paper seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive policy-making and the role of youth in shaping a more equitable society.

#### **Background Of the European Youth Dialogue (Eyd)**

The European Youth Dialogue (EYD) is a flagship participatory mechanism established by the European Union to ensure that young people actively contribute to shaping policies that affect their lives. Targeting individuals aged 13 to 30, the initiative provides a structured framework through which youth can engage in democratic processes, voice their perspectives on critical societal issues, and influence both national and European-level policy agendas.

Implemented in cycles, each lasting 18 months, the EYD operates under a rotating Presidency Trio of EU member states, which jointly select a central theme and formulate guiding consultation questions. The current 10th cycle (July 2023 – December 2024), under the leadership of Spain, Belgium, and Hungary, focuses on European Youth Goal #3: Inclusive Societies, emphasizing the importance of diversity, equality, and equitable access to opportunities.

At the national level, the EYD is tailored to reflect local contexts and realities. In Slovakia, the process is coordinated by the Rada mládeže Slovenska (Slovak Youth Council), in close cooperation with a network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and youth-focused institutions. These actors are responsible for organizing consultations, training facilitators, collecting data, and disseminating findings to both policymakers and the public.

Consultations take the form of focus groups, online surveys, and other participatory activities designed to be accessible, inclusive, and reflective of Slovakia's diverse youth population. By integrating the outcomes into strategic policy documents and recommendations, the EYD ensures that the voices of

young people—especially those from marginalized or underrepresented communities—are not only heard but translated into tangible social and political change.

#### Methodology

To ensure a comprehensive and representative understanding of youth perspectives on inclusion, the 10th cycle of the European Youth Dialogue in Slovakia employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. The consultation process was designed to capture a wide spectrum of youth experiences, opinions, and insights across different social, geographic, and economic backgrounds.

At the core of the qualitative component were focus group discussions, each consisting of 8 to 10 participants, guided by a trained facilitator using a standardized consultation guide. These sessions allowed for in-depth exploration of complex and sensitive issues, such as discrimination, access to education and employment, and systemic exclusion. A total of 52 such consultations were held across Slovakia, involving 464 young people, with particular attention paid to ensuring the inclusion of marginalized groups such as Roma youth, rural youth, and youth with disabilities.

To complement the qualitative data, a quantitative survey was distributed both to consultation participants and more broadly to secondary schools across the country. The online questionnaire was made available in four language versions to ensure linguistic accessibility, and it ultimately yielded 3,708 responses. This broad data collection effort enabled cross-sectional analysis of key trends, opinions, and experiences within the youth population.

For data processing and thematic analysis, the research team utilized ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. This tool facilitated the systematic coding and categorization of focus group transcripts and open-ended survey responses, ensuring consistency and depth in the interpretation of findings. The resulting analysis provided a solid empirical foundation for identifying recurring themes, structural barriers, and opportunities for systemic improvement in youth inclusion policy and practice.

#### **Barriers To Inclusion**

Despite policy efforts at both the national and European levels to foster inclusive societies, young people in Slovakia continue to encounter significant and multifaceted barriers that hinder their full participation in public, educational, and economic life. These barriers, as identified in the consultations of the 10th cycle of the European Youth Dialogue, are both systemic and intersectional in nature—affecting marginalized youth with overlapping disadvantages related to ethnicity, geography, disability, and socioeconomic status.

One of the most pervasive barriers is systemic prejudice, rooted in long-standing stereotypes, social stigmas, and discriminatory practices. These manifest in subtle as well as overt ways—ranging from lower expectations in the classroom for Roma or disabled youth, to exclusionary behaviour in peer groups and community settings. Such prejudice is not only interpersonal but often embedded in institutional structures, including education, healthcare, and employment services, which may unconsciously replicate patterns of exclusion.

Economic hardship is another critical barrier. Many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face poverty that limits their access to basic resources—such as quality housing, nutrition, and digital connectivity. For rural youth, the scarcity of jobs, underfunded schools, and inadequate transportation infrastructure further isolate them from mainstream opportunities. The issue is particularly acute for Roma youth, who often live in segregated communities with limited access to utilities, internet, or stable income, perpetuating cycles of deprivation.

Language and communication challenges present significant obstacles, especially for young people from minority or immigrant backgrounds and those with hearing or speech impairments. These barriers affect their ability to participate in classroom discussions, access healthcare, or navigate government and social services. A lack of tailored language support or inclusive communication tools (such as sign language interpretation or simplified administrative language) frequently results in these youth being left behind.

Physical inaccessibility remains a persistent problem, particularly for youth with disabilities. Many public buildings, schools, and community centers in Slovakia lack basic features such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms. Furthermore, the absence of assistive technologies and adequate transportation

options severely restricts mobility, independence, and participation in everyday life for individuals with physical limitations. These infrastructural inadequacies are compounded by social attitudes that often pity or underestimate youth with disabilities rather than empowering them as equal members of society.

Marginalized groups encounter specific structural barriers that exacerbate their exclusion.

Roma youth often experience segregated education, either in ethnically homogeneous classrooms or in separate schools altogether. This segregation reinforces social distance and prevents intercultural interaction. Many also face discriminatory practices in healthcare, where bias from providers can result in substandard or delayed treatment.

Rural youth confront a lack of infrastructure, including poor access to healthcare services, fewer extracurricular opportunities, and limited higher education pathways. Teachers are often reluctant to work in remote areas, leading to staff shortages and reduced education quality.

Youth with disabilities not only encounter physical barriers but also face social stigmatization, isolation, and limited access to specialized support services. These young people frequently report feeling invisible or misunderstood in school and community environments, contributing to low self-esteem and disengagement.

The interplay of these barriers creates a layered disadvantage, where structural inequalities reinforce each other, making it increasingly difficult for affected youth to break the cycle of exclusion. Tackling these challenges requires a holistic and intersectional approach, addressing both immediate needs and the deeper societal norms that sustain inequality.

#### **Current Support Mechanisms**

In response to the diverse challenges faced by youth from marginalized backgrounds in Slovakia, a variety of support mechanisms have been developed at the institutional, community, and policy levels. These mechanisms, though uneven in implementation and reach, represent critical steps toward enabling more equitable access to education, employment, and social inclusion. The findings from the 10th cycle of the European Youth Dialogue illustrate a range of efforts aimed at supporting young people with limited opportunities, while also highlighting areas for further improvement.

One of the most impactful forms of support comes from inclusive school leadership. School principals and administrators who prioritize equity and inclusion play a pivotal role in shaping a positive school climate. These leaders often make deliberate efforts to recruit support staff (such as pedagogical assistants), create individual education plans for students with special needs, and foster collaboration with families and community organizations. Their commitment to inclusion sets the tone for the entire institution and enables teachers and students alike to engage in a more accepting and accommodating environment.

Equally important are inclusive teaching practices, which emphasize differentiated instruction, cultural sensitivity, and student-centred learning. Teachers who receive training in inclusive pedagogy are more likely to recognize the varied learning needs of students and adapt their methods accordingly. These educators also strive to integrate students with special educational needs (SEN) or language barriers into mainstream classrooms, ensuring they are not isolated or stigmatized. Some schools have implemented peer mentoring, cooperative learning strategies, and trauma-informed practices that further enhance the inclusivity of the educational experience.

Language support programs are another vital component, particularly for children of migrants or ethnic minorities. In some schools, language courses for non-native Slovak speakers have been introduced to facilitate smoother integration. These programs not only improve language proficiency but also enhance students' academic performance and social confidence. When paired with cultural orientation and mediation services, language instruction serves as a gateway to fuller participation in school and community life.

Outside the formal education system, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a central role in addressing the specific needs of marginalized youth. Two highly regarded initiatives include Omama, which focuses on early childhood education in Roma communities, and Teach for Slovakia, which places well-trained, motivated teachers into under-resourced schools, often in socially excluded areas. These programs help bridge gaps in early development, literacy, and educational equity by providing consistent, community-based support that complements formal schooling.

Support also extends into the employment sector, where efforts have been made to create more inclusive workplaces. Some employers in Slovakia have adopted diversity and inclusion policies, they offer remote or flexible working arrangements, and provide employee benefits such as meal vouchers or transportation subsidies. These practices are particularly important for young people with disabilities or those from rural regions who may face additional logistical challenges. Furthermore, protected workshops and social enterprises offer transitional employment opportunities for those with limited work experience or reduced work capacity.

For youth with disabilities, specialized NGOs such as the Union of the Blind and Partially Sighted of Slovakia (ÚNSS) provide tailored assistance in the form of vocational training, assistive technology, and advocacy for accessibility rights. These organizations often act as intermediaries between young people, employers, and public institutions, helping to navigate bureaucratic procedures and combat discrimination in both education and the labour market.

Support is also provided through publicly funded initiatives, such as requalification courses sponsored by labour offices, dual education programs, and career counselling services. These aim to improve youth employability and career readiness, particularly for those at risk of social exclusion.

In sum, the current support landscape in Slovakia demonstrates a multi-layered approach, encompassing educational inclusion, language access, social advocacy, and employment support. While these mechanisms provide valuable scaffolding for many young people, the consultations underscore the need for greater consistency, scale, and institutional commitment to ensure that support reaches all who need it, especially in remote or resource-poor regions.

#### Role of the youth sector

The youth sector holds a uniquely strategic and transformative role in promoting inclusion, particularly among young people facing social, economic, or physical marginalization. Youth organizations and community groups operate at the

intersection of formal institutions and grassroots realities, making them well-positioned to build trust, facilitate dialogue, and create inclusive spaces for young

people who may otherwise remain disengaged from mainstream social, political, or educational systems.

One of the primary ways youth organizations contribute to inclusion is through non-formal education and capacity-building activities. These include workshops, leadership training, community service initiatives, and intercultural learning programs that not only transfer skills but also foster empathy, social cohesion, and civic engagement. Through targeted programming, youth workers can challenge stereotypes, deconstruct prejudices, and empower marginalized individuals to see themselves as active contributors to society. For example, programs that bring together Roma and non-Roma youth to collaborate on creative projects or community service can significantly reduce mutual distrust and improve social integration.

Equally important is the sector's role in advocacy and policy influence. Youth organizations often serve as vital intermediaries between young people and policymakers, ensuring that the voices of underrepresented groups are heard in decision-making processes. By engaging in public discourse, preparing policy recommendations, and participating in advisory bodies, these organizations elevate the concerns and aspirations of disadvantaged youth. Some have also taken on watchdog roles, monitoring the implementation of inclusive policies and calling out failures in service delivery.

Another major contribution of the youth sector lies in its ability to secure and channel funding toward initiatives aimed at inclusion. Whether through European Union programs like Erasmus+, national grants, or private philanthropy, youth organizations often act as the primary implementers of projects that would otherwise lack institutional support. Importantly, these projects are frequently designed in a bottom-up manner, incorporating input from young people themselves in the planning and execution phases. This participatory approach ensures that programs are relevant, responsive, and respectful of the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

The formation of inclusive and diverse teams within youth organizations further demonstrates the sector's potential as a model for broader society. Inclusive teams—comprising individuals of different ethnicities, abilities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic backgrounds—not only enrich organizational culture but also validate the principle that diversity enhances rather than detracts

from collective effectiveness. Through equitable recruitment practices, transparent leadership development, and inclusive communication, these organizations exemplify the very values they promote.

A key determinant of success across all these domains is the attitude and professionalism of youth workers. Youth workers who demonstrate empathy, cultural sensitivity, and a strengths-based mindset are more effective in building relationships with marginalized youth. Their ability to recognize and cultivate individual talents, regardless of background, creates an environment where young people feel seen, respected, and capable of growth. Furthermore, when youth workers are well-trained in topics such as inclusive facilitation, trauma-informed care, and anti-discrimination practices, they become powerful agents of change within their communities.

Lastly, the youth sector plays a critical role in reducing stigma and enhancing participation through tailored, low-threshold programs that are accessible, flexible, and community-embedded. These may include mobile youth centres, arts-based outreach, or peer support networks that accommodate the diverse needs of excluded youth. By meeting young people "where they are," both physically and emotionally, such initiatives can gently lower the barriers to engagement and help individuals build the confidence needed to enter more formal arenas of participation—such as school councils, civic organizations, or employment settings.

In essence, the youth sector is not merely an auxiliary support system but a central pillar of inclusive society-building. When adequately resourced, professionally staffed, and meaningfully integrated into broader policy frameworks, it has the capacity to reshape social narratives, challenge systemic inequities, and unlock the potential of all young people, regardless of their starting point.

#### Conclusion

The findings presented in this paper highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of social inclusion, particularly as it pertains to young people in Slovakia. Drawing from the qualitative insights and lived experiences shared during the 10th cycle of the European Youth Dialogue, it becomes clear that inclusion is not a single policy or practice, but rather a systemic condition that depends on a broad interplay of cultural, structural, and institutional factors.

The challenges faced by marginalized youth—such as Roma communities, rural populations, and young people with disabilities—are not isolated incidents of disadvantage. Instead, they are often the cumulative outcome of intersecting barriers, including economic insecurity, systemic prejudice, inadequate infrastructure, and under-resourced education systems. These young people frequently find themselves excluded not only from educational and employment opportunities but also from full participation in civic and social life. Their exclusion represents a significant loss of human potential and undermines broader societal cohesion.

At the same time, the study reveals promising avenues of support and resilience. Initiatives led by inclusive school administrators, committed educators, innovative NGOs, and youth-led organizations demonstrate that change is not only possible but already underway. These actors play an essential role in dismantling barriers, empowering young people, and transforming exclusionary environments into spaces of opportunity and belonging. However, these efforts remain uneven and insufficiently integrated across sectors.

Achieving genuine and sustainable inclusion demands a coordinated, cross-sectoral approach. Educational institutions must prioritize inclusive pedagogy and invest in teacher training and school support teams. NGOs should be empowered to extend their outreach and deepen community engagement. Government bodies have a responsibility to provide equitable policies, adequate funding, and monitoring mechanisms that ensure accountability. The youth sector, in turn, must continue to innovate, advocate, and create safe, inclusive spaces for the most vulnerable young people.

Importantly, inclusion should not be viewed merely as the integration of marginalized groups into existing structures, but as an opportunity to reimagine those structures themselves—to design education systems, workplaces, and civic institutions that are inherently equitable, accessible, and participatory. This shift requires not only policy reform but also a transformation in mindset: a collective recognition that diversity enriches society and that every young person, regardless of background or ability, has the right and capacity to thrive.

In conclusion, while challenges persist, the insights gathered from youth themselves offer both a diagnosis of exclusion and a blueprint for inclusion. With political will, institutional commitment, and community solidarity, Slovakia—and Europe more broadly—can move closer to fulfilling the vision of a truly inclusive society where all young people are empowered to reach their full potential.

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#### YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION IN ALBANIA

#### **ABSTRACT**

Labor market in Albania is recently facing many challenges such as aging population, immigration, digitalization, etc. Among the main challenges is worth analysing youth unemployment and education. Indeed, the youth employment market in Albania showcases a complex landscape, marked by significant barriers and opportunities. Given its relatively young population, Albania confronts the essential challenge of incorporating its young people into the workforce to leverage their capabilities for economic development and social cohesion.

According to Wilson-Clark (2019), transition from school to work is fundamental for successful employment of youth.

On another note, considerable progress has been made in terms of the education system since the communist regime fell. Yet, we face many challenges like lack of crucial skills in graduating students or inequalities amongst diverse demographic groups.

The aim of this study is twofold:

- To analyse key traits of the youth labour market in Albania, such as unemployment trends, challenges, government policies
- To analyse education system and government policies with prospective strategies for progress.

Key Words: youth, employment, education, employment policies, school-work transition

#### Theoretical Framework and Discussion

Unemployment among European college graduates stood at 50.8% in North Macedonia, 44.7% in Greece, 43.5% in Italy, and 24.6% in Spain (Mainga et al. 2022). According to Marinas et al. (2021), employment opportunities in the labour

market are significantly influenced by the knowledge, skills, and competencies possessed by the job candidates.

Youth unemployment in Albania remains a pressing issue, reflecting difficulties in transitioning from education to the workforce. This poses challenges in integrating youth into the labour market, with a youth unemployment rate of 19.1% in Q4 2024 (World Bank, 2025), although there has been a decrease from 22% in Q4 2023, as shown in fig. 1 below.

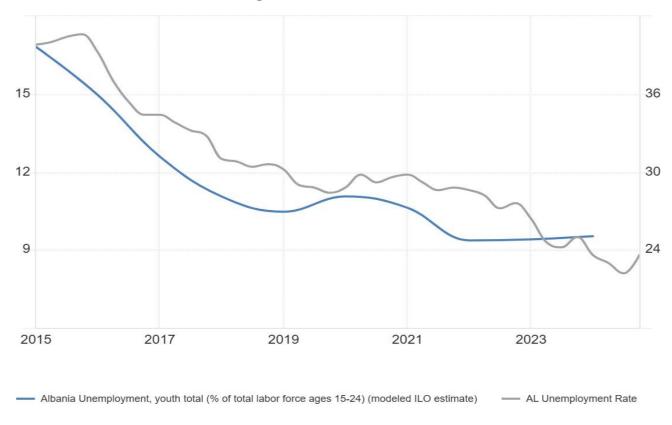


Fig. 1: Albania - Unemployment, Youth Total (% Of Total Labor Force Ages 15-24) Source: World Bank, 2025

Many young Albanians are employed in sectors such as agriculture, trade, and services. Nonetheless, there is a growing trend of employment in information technology and other emerging sectors. A disturbing fact is that many youngsters work in the informal economy, which often lacks job security, social protection, and career development opportunities.

Studies show that challenges that youth face in the labour market need attention from policy makers. The Albanian economy, while growing, still offers limited job opportunities, particularly in rural areas. The lack of diverse employment options forces many young people to seek work abroad. Statistics from INSTAT (2022) confirm that a significant number of young, educated Albanians emigrate in

search of better job prospects, leading to a loss of talent and potential within the country.

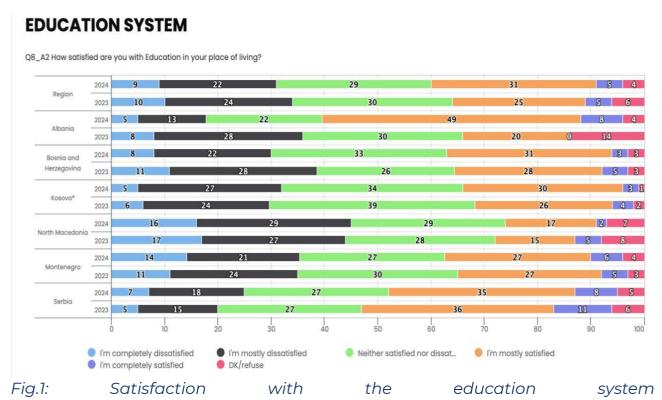
The Albanian government has implemented the National Employment and Skills Strategy (NESS) to enhance employment opportunities and skills development. The strategy focuses on improving vocational education and training (VET), promoting entrepreneurship, and fostering partnerships with the private sector (Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation 2023).

One of the critical challenges is the skills mismatch. The education system in Albania does not always align with the needs of the labour market, leading to graduates who are not adequately prepared for available jobs.

The Albanian Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, assisted by UNICEF, has implemented a crucial program aimed at shaping the advancement of science in both pre-university and higher education: the "National Education Strategy for 2021-2026." Moreover, despite low participation rates (17.7% of upper secondary students in 2021), efforts are underway to standardize VET programs. The 2017 VET Law established the National Agency for VET and Qualifications, aiming to modernize the VET system by 2023 to meet labour market needs.

Referring to INSTAT (2023) the percentage of graduated girls in the academic year 2021-2022 increased by 0.2% points compared to a year before. Furthermore, data from Balkan

Barometer (2024), Albanians are mostly satisfied with the education system (fig.1 below).



Source: Balkan Barometer (2024)

UNICEF (2020) reported that tailored interventions, including mentorship programs and flexible learning environments, have reduced dropout rates in several regions.

#### Methodology

The methodology implemented in this research involves analysing secondary data from the Institute of National Statistics (INSTAT) in Albania, along with various national and international information sources and databases, including Balkan Barometer and strategy documents of the Albanian government, to ensure data triangulation. Additionally, an interpretative framework is utilized to analyse the results and suggest recommendations.

#### Conclusion

The youth labour market in Albania is at a crossroads, facing significant challenges that require coordinated efforts from the government, private sector, and civil society. By addressing the skills mismatch, promoting entrepreneurship, and enhancing job creation in emerging sectors, Albania can unlock the potential of its youth and drive sustainable economic growth. The success of these initiatives will depend on the effective implementation of policies and the active involvement of all stakeholders in the labour market ecosystem.

Among youth policies this EU-supported program was launched in 2023 to ensure that individuals under 30 receive offers for employment, education, or training within four months of registering with employment offices. With 24.6% of Albanian youth aged 15-29 classified as NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training), the initiative has already benefited 543 young people by providing tailored support to jumpstart their careers.

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CLUSTERING ANALYSIS OF THE YOUTH GUARANTEE PROGRAM: INSIGHTS INTO NEET REDUCTION ACROSS EU MEMBER STATES

#### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the changes in the labour market conditions and youth disengagement in a selection of 34 European countries from 2014 to 2023. The period under examination is very interesting because it starts in the year when most European Union countries introduced the Youth Guarantee (YG), that is a set of active labour market measures finalized to stimulate young NEETs (Young people Not in Employment, Education, or Training) to enter into the labour market. More in particular, through cluster analysis, we identified two different sets of clusters, one for youth disengagement and the other for the general labour market conditions. Results show great disparities across European countries for youth engagement levels, labour market conditions, and different dynamics over time. However, some countries show strong improvement across time in terms of youth engagement, while others, even among the richest ones, an increase in poverty rate. The study offers experienced recommendations tailored to each cluster to strengthen YG's capacity to support youth inclusion in education and employment.

Keywords: Youth Guarantee (YG), NEET reduction, Cluster analysis, EU youth policy

#### Introduction

The Youth Guarantee Program (YG), launched by the European Union, aims to address the challenge of youth disengagement by reducing the proportion of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET). The YG programme, one of the most innovative EU programmes, is the result of the 2013 EU Council decision (2013 EU Council Recommendation), which aimed to support

the youth population considered to be the most affected by the successive socioeconomic crises that the member states have faced in the last two decades. NEETs represent one of the categories of young people considered a priority target group for this program.

Unlike other European programs, YG is differentiated by at least two aspects that give it more clarity and predictability: a "guarantee" and a clearly defined time for the intervention. (Escudero and Mourelo, 2017). These characteristics translate into the fact that young people receive a quality offer of employment, continued education, retraining, and entry into an apprenticeship or internship within four months of becoming unemployed or from the moment they no longer participate in the form of formal education. YG is also characterized by the fact that it addresses a specific age category - 15- 24-29 years old - and in the application of measures and interventions, member states have the freedom to select their methods, to build an institutional network that supports the implementation of the program, provided that they are adapted to national, regional and local conditions. Although it debuted at the same time in all EU countries, after almost a decade, the stage of achieving the objectives, the areas in which YG was applied, the socio-demographic and economic characteristics of the target group, but especially the results obtained differ not only from one country to another, from one region to another in Europe, but also from one dimension of the program to another. In this regard, EU-level reports (EC, 2018) and some studies (Pesquera et al., 2021) emphasize that better collection and analysis of information on YG results would be needed.

Our research provides an analysis of youth disengagement and its variation over time, looking at the situation since the first year of YG introduction.

We opted for a broader category of the youth population - disengaged youth - because this includes, in addition to NEETs, young people with informal occupations and the underemployed. Angel- Urdinola, Rodon and Torres (2023) believe that NEET youth "are just the tip of the iceberg of a broader and deeper problem, in which young people are involved in activities that are not conducive to the development of human capital". The same authors recommend the broader concept of disengaged youth because certain categories of young people (those in the informal economy, young people who emigrate for work, those employed in subsistence agriculture, etc.) are not included in national and

international statistics. The effect of not being included in official statistics is a negative one: these categories of young people will not be included in support programs, including YG.

Given that our objective is to contribute to the development of policies addressed to young people, we opted to include a broader category and to emphasize the fact that certain young people may be "lost" by support programs.

Also, for the relevance of the analysis, we chose to involves despite the EU-27 countries, Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, North Macedonia, Montenegro, the Republic of Serbia, and Turkey. In these countries, even to a different extent, YG was introduced later or never introduced, but other initiatives finalized to help young people were implemented in these years. In particular, North Macedonia introduced a similar reform in 2019, while the Republic of Serbia and Montenegro, in 2023 and 2024, respectively. The findings aim to inform policymakers by identifying best practices and offering evidence-based recommendations to enhance the program's impact, particularly in underperforming regions and demographic groups. This study aims to categorize EU countries based on their NEET reduction trajectories and examine how these groupings relate to the structure and contextualization of the Youth Guarantee.

### **Methods**

This study employs K-Means clustering to examine NEET-related patterns across EU member states between 2014 and 2023. The analysis is based on Eurostat data. The youth disengagement has been analysed considering the NEET rates, tertiary education attainment, and early school leaving. Employment rate of graduates after 3 years from study completion, share of involuntary temporary workers, GDP growth, number of patent applications, and share of at-risk-of-poverty population are the indicators chosen to assess the labour market conditions. The analysis has involved the mean values of these indicators in the period 2014-2023, to account for their levels and the difference in the values registered at the end and at the beginning of the period to measure their dynamics. All variables were standardized prior to analysis. The optimal number of clusters was determined as six, based on the Silhouette index. K-means non-hierarchical cluster was adopted after comparing its results with k- medians, too. This approach allows for the identification of country groups with similar profiles, enabling a comparative perspective across different contexts.

# **Findings**

Our analysis will begin by identifying the situation of disengaged youth at the European level, and the statistical methods used will allow us to group countries into different clusters.

Youth Disengagement

# Clusters I 1 PR PR PR PR RS BG TR MT

Figure 1 Cluster distribution of countries regarding youth disengaged

By calculating the mean values, we obtained the following results:

Table 1: Mean values by cluster:

		Mean Values							
Youth Disengagement	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Cluster 6			
Tertiary educational attainment	33.31%	39.33%	40.65%	51.61%	36.26%	33.04%			
Early leavers from education and training		9.19%	13.87%	7.52%	5.68%	9.27%			

NEETs	28.21%	10.16%	12.06%	9.82%	26.81%	19.22%	
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Detailing the analysis by calculating the variations 2023-2024 we obtain the following results:

Table 2 Variations 2014-2023:

		Variations 2014-2023						
Youth Disengagement	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Cluster 6		
Tertiary educational attainment	17.90	3.34%	11.77%	7.47%	11.65	5.41%		
Early leavers from education and training		-1.00	-8.07	-0.12	-7.00	-2.66		
NEET	-2.60%	-2.89	-6.03%	-2.16%	1.9	-9.09%		

When the indicators of youth disengagement are examined, we can identify six groups of countries with different educational outcomes and different levels of progress over time. Some of these groups are formed by a very limited number of countries. This is the case of group 1, which includes only Turkey, the country with the highest NEET rates and levels of educational disengagement, because it shows the lowest rate of tertiary education and the highest rate of early school leavers. However, it is even the country that registered the best improvement over time, with an increase of almost 18 percentage points in the share of tertiary education and a similar reduction for those who leave early education. Another group is composed of two other extra-EU countries, North Macedonia and Montenegro. This group shows low levels of tertiary education (36.26% on average, just 3 pps over Turkey), but even the lowest level of early school leavers (only 5.68%), but high levels of NEETs, which over time have increased by almost 2 pps. The best performers are without any doubt countries composing group 4, including the Nordic countries of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands,

and Ireland, the central countries of France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Switzerland, and more Lithuania and Cyprus. In these countries, young people with a tertiary degree are the majority (51.61%), and less than 1 out of 10 of them are in the NEET status. The trend over time for these countries registers an improvement in all the indicators. The other 3 groups, composed mainly of the remaining Central and Mediterranean countries, show a share of tertiary education lower than 40% and a very NEET rate for group 6, composed of Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia.

The ultimate objective of YG is to support young people in the process of socioprofessional integration and thereby to support their socio-economic, civic, etc. engagement. For this reason, we considered that a specific analysis of the labor market is important to understand the efficiency of the support program.

The statistical analysis followed the same aspects as in the case of disengaged youth: grouping countries into clusters (Figure 2) and calculating mean values (Table 3) and variations 2023-2024 (Table 4).

# **Labour Market**

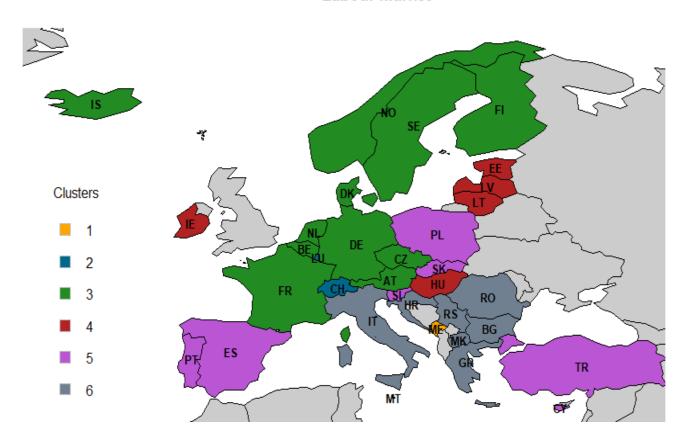


Figure 2 Cluster distribution of countries regarding labor market

Table 3 Mean values:

	Mean values						
Labor Market Conditions	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Cluster 6	
Employment rates of recent graduates	55.33%	86.61%	86.65%	82.10%	75.55%	63.96%	
Involuntary temporary employment	27.42%	2.32%	4.27%	2.12%	11.45%	8.99%	
Real GDP growth rate	3.05	0.42	1.36	3.84	2.80	3.02	
Patent applications - Per million inhabitants	1.22	720.38	240.50	50.13	28.69	14.61	
At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold and educational attainment level		25.30%	22.44	31.54%	28.86%	40.67%	

Table 4 Variations 2014-2023.:

		Variations 2014-2023						
Labor Market Conditions	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Cluster 6		
Employment rates of recent graduates	-16.42	0.55	3.89	6.78	11.06	19.01		
Involuntary temporary employment	1.9	-1.55	-3.72	-2.78	-8.17	-0.81		
Real GDP growth rate	2	-2.3	-1.22	-7.2	-0.31	0.96		
Patent applications - Per million inhabitants	0.9	-572.83	15.29	27.54	9.46	6.81		

At-risk-of-poverty rate by	17.0	7.55	2.07	-4.56	-0.5	1.16
poverty threshold and	-13.2	7.55	2.07	-4.56	-0.5	1.10
educational attainment level						

Regarding the second dimension of analysis, that is the general labor market conditions, the worst performer in Montenegro, showing very different characteristics with respect to the other countries and then constituting alone group 1. However, despite the lowest share of employment rate for recent graduates (only 55.33%) and the highest rates of involuntary temporary contracts and people at risk of poverty (27.42% and 44.41%, respectively), it shows even the best improvement overtime for all the indicators and the higher increase in the GDP growth rate (2 points). Countries composing group 6 just follow Montenegro for almost all the indicators, but show a higher decrease over time in the share of involuntary temporary work. They are: Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Italy, North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia. This group partially overlaps with group 6 in the previous analysis. The best labor market conditions are instead those for countries in groups 2, 3, and 4. In particular, Luxembourg and Switzerland compose group 2 and show the highest number of patent applications and very low levels of population at risk of poverty and involuntary temporary work. However, their trend shows the highest increase in the at-risk-of-poverty population (+7.55%). Groups 3 and 4 include Nordic and Central countries. The Mediterranean countries of Cyprus, Portugal, Spain, Slovenia, and Turkey, more Slovakia and Poland compose the remaining group 5, showing values in the middle for the majority of the indicators, but even a significant reduction in the share of at-riskof-poverty population, equal to 4.56%.

# **Discussion And Policy Implications**

YG allows for four major types of intervention: job, apprenticeship, traineeship, and education. Each program/intervention has as its ultimate goal the support of young people's socio-economic integration. The results of this study show, there is notable heterogeneity among EU member states in the effectiveness of the Youth Guarantee (YG) program, as evidenced by the clustering of countries based on youth disengagement and NEET rates associated with different socio-economic indicators. The difference in the effectiveness of the program comes not only from the way the measures are applied, but also from the differences in

the category of young people we are referring to (disengaged young people or just NEETs), or the needs of the young people to whom the program is addressed.

Also, by including in the analysis indicators that provide information on all type of dimensions of the programme -education, labor market, social support - we can see these clusters highlight the varying degrees to which national implementation strategies, digital readiness, educational attainment, and labor market structures influence the program's outcomes.

The statistical analysis used showed us that each cluster includes a different number of countries (there is also only one country per cluster), depending on the specifics of the target group and in association with the indicators included in the analysis.

Turkey, which alone forms a cluster (Cluster 1) due to its particularities regarding the youth population analyzed in this article, needs a holistic approach that addresses all the socio-economic and family problems of this population category.

Cluster 2, which includes countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and Denmark, demonstrates the most successful improvement in education level of young people. These countries not only report high internet access and tertiary education levels but also high employment rates among recent graduates—factors that align closely with core YG components. Their success suggests that a well-integrated approach—where digital tools, vocational pathways, and early intervention mechanisms are embedded into national YG strategies—can significantly enhance program effectiveness.

In these countries, especially in Germany and Austria, for example, the emphasis is on education, more precisely on the vocational system that facilitates the transition from school to work for young people. Also, atypical work - Denmark is the one that proposed flexicurity in the labor market at EU level - is a way to allow young people to access the labor market more easily and quickly. Referring only to the NEETs population, these countries (Cluster 2) are characterised by NEETs considered non-vulnerable - those who voluntarily choose to leave the education system or the labor market for a shorter or longer time. Although staying out of education and work for a long time can generate social problems, the YG program does not provide specific measures for this category of young people. In this case, the YG program should include developing programs that help young

people rediscover, identify, and (re)define their educational and occupational interests, goals, and talents.

Cluster 3, Cluster 4 and Cluster 5 have multiple similarities - low youth unemployment rate, emphasis on improving educational conditions. Data analysis also shows similarities with Cluster 3 in the sense that YG measures should be oriented towards NEETs who need support for professional integration and be supported to stay on the labor market as long as possible. Underemployed youth risk giving up jobs and becoming a vulnerable population category.

Moderate levels of internet access, employment rates, and educational outcomes suggest that their YG systems may benefit from more strategic alignment between education systems and labor markets, as well as greater investments in program outreach and personalisation.

YG in countries belonging to the third cluster becomes effective only through a specific approach, targeted at the specific needs of young people.

In contrast, Cluster 6 includes countries such as, Greece, Italy, Romania or Bulgaria, where youth disengagement (also NEET rates) remain high and digital inclusion, educational attainment, and graduate employment outcomes are relatively weak. These structural challenges likely undermine the capacity of the YG program to deliver on its promises. For instance, the lack of digital infrastructure may limit access to guidance services, while the prevalence of involuntary temporary employment and high dropout rates indicate limited success in offering sustainable pathways to work or training. These findings echo Escudero and Mourelo's (2017) assertion that the Youth Guarantee's effectiveness depends heavily on the strength of implementation networks and the availability of tailored services that reach the most vulnerable youth.

These countries (Cluster 6) are characterised by large groups of young people belonging to vulnerable socio-economic, family, etc. categories. Also, Cluster 6 includes countries where we identify all categories of NEETs and for which all four types of interventions are needed. The success and efficiency of the YG program in this category of countries lies in a holistic approach to measures aimed at young people: support to remain in the education system for as long as possible must be accompanied by professional integration measures, those that support

young people who have children in their care, etc. Unidirectional action - focused only on education, for example - is not enough.

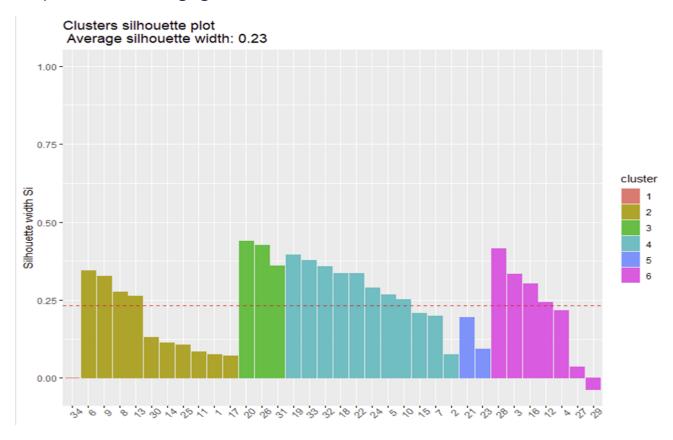
Overall, the analysis suggests that the Youth Guarantee is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Its impact is strongly mediated by contextual factors such as economic capacity, digital infrastructure, and institutional coordination. For YG to effectively reduce NEET rates across diverse national settings, it must be both adaptable and responsive to local conditions. This calls for continuous monitoring, feedback loops, and capacity-building efforts to modernise YG frameworks in line with the evolving needs of Europe's youth.

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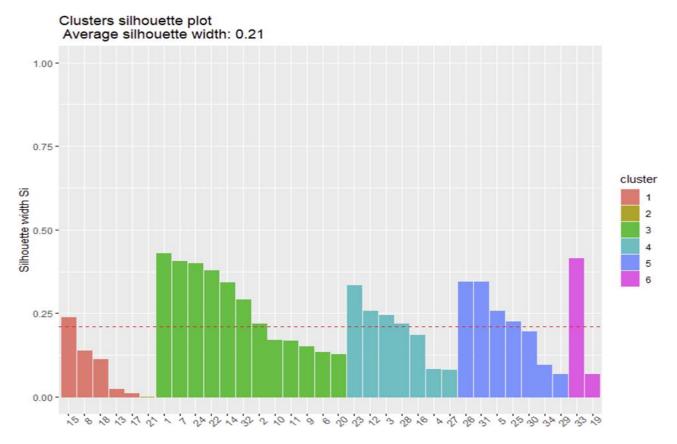
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#### **Annexes**

# Graph 1. Youth disengagement



Graph 2. Labor market conditions



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#### **EVALUATING MUNICIPAL POLICIES FOR NEET YOUTH IN GEORGIA**

#### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the effectiveness of municipal policies targeting NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth in Georgia through a participatory evaluation framework grounded in participatory governance theory. With 24% of Georgian youth aged 15-29 classified as NEET, this research employs mixedmethods approaches including document analysis across 43 municipalities, focus groups with 30 NEET youth, and stakeholder interviews to assess policy adequacy and implementation gaps. The findings reveal significant shortcomings in municipal strategies, with only 24% of municipalities having formal youth policies and minimal participatory governance approaches in policy development. The study demonstrates how participatory evaluation methods can unveil critical disconnects between policy design and youth realities, providing evidence-based recommendations for more inclusive and effective youth policies. This research contributes to European discussions on youth empowerment and participatory policy evaluation by offering practical insights for improving municipal responses to NEET challenges through enhanced democratic participation in governance processes.

Keywords: NEET youth, participatory governance, municipal policies, youth empowerment, Georgia, policy evaluation

#### Introduction

The situation of youth who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) remains a persistent social challenge across Europe, affecting millions of young people and requiring innovative policy responses at all levels of governance. In Georgia, this challenge is particularly acute, with 24% of youth aged 15-29 classified as NEET (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2024), with rates higher among women (27%) than men (21%), underscoring a gender dimension to youth exclusion and the importance of policies tailored to different experiences.

The European context of youth policy evaluation has increasingly emphasized the importance of participatory approaches that center young people's voices in policy development and assessment (Council of Europe, 2019). The European Union's commitment to youth empowerment through initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee and the European Youth Strategy demonstrates recognition that effective youth policies require meaningful youth participation in their design, implementation, and evaluation (European Commission, 2018). However, the implementation of such participatory governance approaches at the municipal level, particularly in post-Soviet contexts like Georgia, remains understudied despite municipalities' crucial role as the governance level closest to citizens.

Municipal governments occupy a unique position in addressing youth challenges through targeted programs and services, yet their capacity to effectively respond to NEET youth needs is often constrained by limited resources, inadequate data collection mechanisms, and insufficient understanding of local youth realities. The disconnect between national policy objectives and local implementation capacity represents a challenge for youth policy effectiveness, particularly in countries undergoing democratic and institutional transitions where municipal capacity for participatory governance may be limited.

This study addresses a gap in both policy evaluation literature and participatory governance practice by examining how participatory evaluation methods can enhance municipal responses to NEET youth challenges. The research is guided by the overarching question of how participatory governance principles can be operationalized through evaluation processes to reveal policy gaps and inform evidence-based improvements in municipal youth policy effectiveness. Specifically, the study seeks to assess the current state of participatory governance in municipal youth policy development, evaluate the extent to which NEET youth voices are integrated into policy processes, and demonstrate how participatory evaluation methods can strengthen democratic governance while improving policy outcomes.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on participatory governance theory, which helps explain how involving people in decision-making can make policies more effective while also boosting trust and accountability in public governance. Participatory governance

theory emerged from critiques of traditional representative democracy and technocratic policy making, emphasizing the importance of meaningful citizen engagement in public decision-making processes (Fung & Wright, 2003). This theoretical framework is particularly relevant for examining municipal youth policies, as it recognizes governance as a collaborative process involving multiple stakeholders rather than a hierarchical exercise of administrative authority.

Participatory governance theory rests on several foundational principles that directly inform this study's approach to assessing municipal youth policy effectiveness. The theory assumes that democratic legitimacy derives not only from electoral representation but also from ongoing citizen participation in policy processes that affect their lives (Dryzek, 2000). For NEET youth, who often experience political marginalization and limited voice in formal democratic institutions, participatory governance offers alternative mechanisms for democratic engagement that can enhance both policy responsiveness and youth civic development.

The inclusivity principle of participatory governance emphasizes that effective governance requires systematic inclusion of diverse stakeholder perspectives, particularly those of marginalized or underrepresented groups (Gaventa, 2004). This principle is central to understanding why municipal youth policies may fail to address NEET challenges effectively. When policy development processes exclude NEET youth voices, they lack essential knowledge about the barriers, needs, and priorities of those most affected by policy interventions.

Participatory governance theory also emphasizes the deliberative dimension of democratic participation, recognizing that quality deliberation among diverse stakeholders can improve policy outcomes by surfacing multiple perspectives, identifying unintended consequences, and generating innovative solutions (Habermas, 1996). The theory's attention to power dynamics recognizes that participatory governance operates within existing power structures that may limit the influence of marginalized voices (Cornwall, 2008). Understanding these power dynamics is essential for designing participatory processes that can challenge rather than reproduce existing inequalities.

The collaborative dimension of participatory governance recognizes that complex social challenges require coordinated responses across multiple actors and sectors (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Municipal responses to NEET challenges involve

education systems, employment services, social programs, and community organizations, suggesting that effective governance requires mechanisms for collaborative planning and implementation across these domains.

# Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach designed to capture multiple perspectives on municipal youth policy-making while adhering to participatory research principles. The methodology was structured to ensure that NEET youth voices remained central to the evaluation process, consistent with participatory governance theory's emphasis on centering marginalized perspectives.

The research design consisted of three primary components: systematic document analysis of municipal policies, focus group discussions with NEET youth, and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders including municipal representatives and civil society organizations. Document analysis involved requesting youth-related policy documents from all 63 Georgian municipalities, including youth strategies, annual program descriptions, medium-term priority plans, and evaluation reports. A total of 43 municipalities (68%) provided documentation, representing diverse geographic regions and demographic profiles across Georgia.

Focus group discussions were conducted with 30 NEET youth participants aged 18-29 recruited through snowball sampling technique. Participants represented diverse backgrounds including different ethnic groups, geographic locations, educational levels, employment histories, and gender identities. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 key stakeholders including municipal youth coordinators, civil society organization representatives, community leaders, and policy experts.

Data analysis employed iterative thematic coding procedures that allowed themes to emerge from the data while maintaining connection to theoretical frameworks. The study's limitations include potential selection bias in municipal response rates, language barriers that may have affected some participants' full engagement, and time constraints that limited follow-up data collection.

#### **Results and Analysis**

# Municipal Policy Landscape and Institutional Failures

The analysis of 43 municipal responses reveals profound inadequacies in participatory governance frameworks for youth policy development across Georgia. Only 15 municipalities (24%) have developed formal youth policy documents, with merely four explicitly addressing NEET youth as a distinct population. This institutional neglect reflects a fundamental disconnect between democratic governance principles and actual municipal practices, contradicting participatory governance theory's emphasis on inclusive decision-making processes that incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives (Fung & Wright, 2003).

The absence of participatory governance approaches is particularly evident in how municipal officials conceptualize youth policy development. One municipal representative's perspective illustrates this challenge: "I personally don't think the NEET issue is significant here. We haven't heard about such cases during our meetings or consultations... Since no one highlighted this issue, we've assumed there's no pressing need to intervene in that direction". This statement reveals both the absence of systematic needs assessment procedures and the circular logic that excludes NEET youth from policy consideration due to their lack of visibility in existing consultation processes.

This circular logic demonstrates how traditional consultation mechanisms can perpetuate rather than address marginalization, aligning with participatory governance theory's emphasis on proactive outreach to marginalized groups rather than expecting them to engage with existing institutional processes (Gaventa, 2004). By relying on participation structures that inherently exclude NEET youth, municipalities fail to identify populations most in need of support, violating the democratic right of citizens to participate in decisions that affect their lives (Cornwall, 2008).

The systematic exclusion becomes more problematic when considering that most municipalities lack adequate data collection systems for evidence-based policy development. Only three municipalities provided data on their NEET populations in response to research requests, creating fundamental barriers to responsive governance. As one civil society representative highlighted: "Municipalities should conduct their own research so that we all know exactly what young people need. That would help us tailor our efforts more precisely".

# Youth Experiences of Systematic Exclusion

NEET youth participants expressed profound feelings of exclusion that go far beyond mere lack of consultation, highlighting a deeper sense of invisibility and marginalization within local governance structures. These exclusion patterns operate at multiple levels, from information access to program design to evaluation processes, creating comprehensive barriers to democratic participation that contradict participatory governance theory's emphasis on transparency and accessibility as prerequisites for meaningful citizen engagement (Dryzek, 2000).

Information barriers represent a fundamental violation of participatory governance principles. One participant described these challenges: "Even with the Internet, it's hard to find relevant information. Municipal pages almost never post anything useful or updated, not about trainings, not about events. You have to ask friends or even friends of friends if something is happening in the municipality". This reliance on informal networks particularly disadvantages NEET youth who may lack strong social connections due to their disengagement from educational and employment structures.

The information gap creates systematic inequalities in participation opportunities, as youth with stronger social capital gain better access to governance processes while those most needing supports remain excluded. This pattern reinforces existing marginalization and contradicts democratic principles requiring equal access to civic participation opportunities, supporting participatory governance theory's recognition that exclusion of affected populations leads to policies that fail to address actual needs while perpetuating marginalization (Cornwall, 2008).

Beyond information access, youth participants described feeling unwelcome and incompetent in existing municipal consultation processes. One participant noted: "We don't have experience with meetings or policy things. It seems like you need to know a lot to participate". This perception illustrates how traditional governance approaches reinforce exclusion by failing to create accessible participation opportunities that accommodate diverse backgrounds and experiences, contradicting participatory governance theory's emphasis on addressing power imbalances through institutional design that supports meaningful participation by marginalized groups (Cornwall, 2008).

When participation opportunities did exist, youth often encountered tokenistic consultation that failed to influence actual decision-making. As one youth respondent observed: "We were invited to meetings, but it felt like they just wanted us there to say they consulted us, not to actually listen or make changes based on what we said.". This disconnect between consultation rhetoric and practice undermines both policy effectiveness and democratic legitimacy, supporting participatory governance theory's argument that effective participation requires institutional mechanisms specifically designed to enable meaningful stakeholder engagement (Fung, 2006).

# Institutional Challenges in Municipal Youth Participation

The establishment of Youth Councils represents a common municipal response to youth engagement expectations, but research revealed limitations in how these structures operate. Most Youth Councils lack clear mandates, adequate resources, or meaningful decision-making authority. One youth respondent observed: "They created a Youth Council, but it's mostly for show. We meet sometimes and they ask our opinions, but nothing really changes based on what we say". This finding illustrates how formal participatory structures can provide legitimacy without substance, creating illusions of inclusion while maintaining exclusionary practices, contradicting participatory governance theory's emphasis on institutional responsiveness as a core principle (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Compounding these structural weaknesses is widespread conceptual confusion among municipal officials regarding what constitutes authentic participation. They often mistake simply sharing information or holding cultural events for genuine youth engagement. This misunderstanding undermines efforts to implement authentic participatory approaches and highlights the need for systematic capacity-building in participatory governance methods. This supports the argument that effective participation requires a solid understanding of participatory governance principles rather than relying on ad hoc consultation approaches (Fung, 2006)

Resource constraints further limit municipal capacity for participatory approaches, as institutions lack staff with expertise in social research methods, data analysis, or evaluation techniques necessary for evidence-based policy development. This technical capacity gap means that even well-intentioned municipalities may lack tools necessary to implement participatory governance

approaches effectively, supporting the argument that institutional responsiveness requires structural and procedural changes to support meaningful participation (Gaventa, 2004).

# **Civil Society Perspectives and Coordination Challenges**

Civil society organizations working with NEET youth provide valuable insights into participation barriers while serving as intermediaries between municipalities and marginalized populations. These organizations often fill gaps in municipal capacity while advocating for more inclusive governance approaches, but their efforts remain fragmented due to coordination challenges that limit collaborative governance mechanisms.

One civil society representative emphasized the complexity of NEET youth engagement: "NEET youth are not easy to mobilize as they usually don't come to us on their own. You have to go to them. That takes time, trust, and effort". This observation highlights how effective participation requires proactive outreach strategies and sustained relationship-building rather than traditional consultation approaches that expect marginalized populations to engage with existing institutional processes, supporting participatory governance theory's recognition that meaningful inclusion requires intentional institutional design (Cornwall, 2008).

The same representative noted psychological dimensions of youth exclusion that traditional governance approaches cannot address: "NEET youth often face mental health challenges. Some have grown up in households affected by domestic violence, substance abuse, or migration-related emotional voids. These young people need psychological support as much as they need vocational training". This complexity requires sophisticated participatory approaches that recognize trauma and mental health challenges as participation barriers requiring specialized intervention.

Coordination challenges between municipalities and civil society organizations limit the effectiveness of youth engagement efforts. Another civil society representative noted: "There should be better coordination, like grouping young people by interests and creating opportunities for them to explore different paths. For example, municipalities could run free short-term internship programs". This recommendation suggests that effective participatory governance requires institutional mechanisms for collaboration across

organizations and sectors, supporting participatory governance theory's emphasis on collaborative approaches that leverage diverse stakeholder knowledge and resources (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

# **Power Dynamics and Democratic Deficits**

Analysis of stakeholder relationships reveals significant power imbalances that limit the effectiveness of existing participation opportunities while highlighting the need for more intentional attention to democratic inclusion. These power dynamics reflect broader patterns of social exclusion that participatory governance approaches must address to achieve meaningful inclusion, supporting participatory governance theory's emphasis on addressing power imbalances as fundamental to meaningful democratic participation (Cornwall, 2008).

Youth participants described feeling intimidated by formal governance processes and uncertain about their capacity to contribute meaningfully to policy discussions. This perception illustrates how traditional governance approaches can reinforce exclusion by failing to create accessible participation opportunities that accommodate diverse communication styles and confidence levels, contradicting participatory governance theory's emphasis on empowerment as ensuring that participants develop skills and knowledge necessary for effective engagement (Pearce, 2010).

Despite these barriers, youth focus group participants demonstrated sophisticated analysis of their circumstances and thoughtful recommendations for governance improvement, suggesting significant untapped capacity for meaningful participation. Their recommendations included specific suggestions for improving information access, creating accessible participation opportunities, and developing collaborative responses to employment barriers, supporting participatory governance theory's recognition that citizens possess valuable knowledge and resources that can enhance policy effectiveness when properly integrated into governance processes (Ostrom, 1996).

This contradiction between perceived incompetence and demonstrated analytical capacity suggests that exclusion results from institutional design rather than individual deficits. The research reveals how failure to address power dynamics can perpetuate exclusion even when formal participation opportunities exist, emphasizing participatory governance theory's recognition

that meaningful inclusion requires intentional institutional design supporting marginalized group participation rather than expecting them to adapt to existing structures.

#### **Discussion**

The application of participatory governance theory in this study reveals fundamental contradictions between democratic governance principles and current municipal youth policy practices in Georgia. The theoretical framework's emphasis on inclusive decision-making, meaningful stakeholder participation, and collaborative problem-solving provides a powerful lens for understanding how existing governance approaches systematically exclude NEET youth while missing opportunities for more effective policy responses.

The finding that only 24% of municipalities have formal youth strategies, with minimal youth participation in their development, illustrates how traditional administrative approaches to policy making can undermine democratic legitimacy while producing ineffective interventions. Participatory governance theory explains this phenomenon by highlighting how top-down decision-making processes reflect institutional priorities rather than citizen needs and preferences (Fung & Wright, 2003). The systematic exclusion of NEET youth from policy development ensures that resulting strategies fail to address the complex barriers and challenges they actually experience.

The profound disconnection between youth experiences and municipal policy priorities demonstrates how governance processes that exclude affected populations inevitably produce misaligned interventions. Youth participants' emphasis on employment barriers, transportation challenges, and information access problems contrasts sharply with municipal focus on recreational programming and cultural activities. This misalignment reflects participatory governance theory's prediction that policies developed without meaningful stakeholder input will fail to address actual community needs (Gaventa, 2004).

The institutional barriers to participation identified in the study illuminate how formal democratic structures may be insufficient for achieving meaningful inclusion without accompanying cultural and capacity changes. The establishment of Youth Councils that remain inactive illustrates how participatory institutions require ongoing attention to implementation processes rather than merely formal creation. Participatory governance theory emphasizes

that effective participation requires not only institutional mechanisms but also cultural shifts toward valuing citizen knowledge and collaborative decision-making (Fung, 2006).

The information access challenges revealed in the study demonstrate how transparency deficits can systematically exclude marginalized populations from governance processes. The reliance on informal networks for information about opportunities creates inequalities that contradict participatory governance principles of equal access and inclusive participation. These patterns align with theoretical insights about how seemingly neutral institutional practices can reproduce existing power imbalances rather than promoting democratic inclusion (Cornwall, 2008).

The capacity-building potential revealed through youth participants' sophisticated analysis and recommendations supports participatory governance theory's emphasis on participation as a learning process that enhances both individual and institutional capabilities (Pearce, 2010). Youth demonstrated significant analytical capacity and generated practical recommendations for governance improvement, suggesting that exclusion from governance processes represents a missed opportunity for both democratic engagement and policy enhancement.

#### **Conclusions**

This study demonstrates the significant potential of participatory governance approaches for enhancing municipal youth policy effectiveness while revealing gaps in current democratic participation mechanisms across Georgia. The research findings have implications for both governance theory and youth policy development in European contexts, particularly regarding the integration of marginalized voices into democratic decision-making processes.

The application of participatory governance theory proves particularly valuable for understanding how current municipal approaches systematically exclude NEET youth from policy processes that directly affect their lives. By examining governance structures and processes through a participatory lens, the study reveals fundamental contradictions between democratic principles and administrative practices that help explain why youth policies fail to address actual needs and barriers.

The research provides insights into the institutional, cultural, and capacity barriers that prevent meaningful youth participation in municipal governance. The identification of information access challenges, power imbalances, institutional design inadequacies, and coordination failures provides concrete targets for governance improvement while demonstrating how participatory governance theory can guide practical reform efforts.

The policy implications emerging from the study suggest specific changes needed in municipal governance approaches to youth policy development in Georgia. Municipalities need to establish formal and transparent mechanisms for ongoing meaningful youth participation in policy processes rather than limiting engagement to occasional consultations or advisory bodies. This requires both institutional design changes and capacity building for municipal staff to facilitate meaningful participatory processes.

Municipal governance structures require systematic attention to transparency and accessibility to ensure that information about policy processes and participation opportunities reaches marginalized youth populations. The study findings suggest particular attention to digital communication strategies, community outreach approaches, and partnership with grassroots organizations that have existing relationships with NEET youth.

The research emphasizes the critical importance of addressing power dynamics and structural barriers that limit youth participation capacity. Effective participatory governance requires intentional efforts to create accessible participation opportunities, provide capacity building support for youth participants, and modify institutional practices to value and integrate youth knowledge and perspectives.

The study's methodological contributions include demonstrating how participatory evaluation approaches can simultaneously assess policy effectiveness and operationalize democratic governance principles. The research design's emphasis on stakeholder dialogue, collaborative analysis, and cogeneration of recommendations illustrates how evaluation itself can serve as a mechanism for enhancing democratic participation while producing evidence for policy improvement.

Future research directions emerging from this study include longitudinal analysis of how participatory governance mechanisms affect both policy

outcomes and democratic capacity over time, comparative research examining participatory governance implementation across different European contexts, and action research approaches that involve NEET youth as governance partners throughout policy development and evaluation processes.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that meaningful youth participation in governance represents both a democratic imperative and a practical necessity for effective policy development. By centering NEET youth voices in governance processes, participatory approaches can simultaneously enhance policy responsiveness and contribute to democratic renewal while building individual and institutional capacity for ongoing collaborative governance.

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THE IMPACT OF INTERNET ADDICTION AND SOCIAL ISOLATION ON WELL-BEING AMONG YOUTH

#### **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the relationships among internet addiction, social isolation, and psychological well-being in a sample of 300 Albanian youth aged 16 to 25. Results revealed moderate levels of internet addiction and social isolation, with social isolation showing a strong and consistent negative association with psychological well-being. While internet addiction correlated negatively with well-being, it did not independently predict psychological health when accounting for social isolation. Gender differences indicated higher internet addiction scores among males. These findings highlight social isolation as a critical factor impacting youth mental health and suggest that interventions should focus on enhancing social connectedness and promoting healthier internet use. The study underscores the need for community-based strategies to mitigate isolation and foster well-being in adolescents navigating an increasingly digital environment.

Keywords: Internet addiction, social isolation, psychological well-being, adolescents, Albania.

#### Introduction

Internet addiction has emerged as a significant concern among youth, manifesting through excessive usage, withdrawal symptoms, tolerance, and the neglect of basic needs (lyer & Sharma, 2020). It has been linked to negative psychological outcomes, including heightened rates of depression, anxiety, social isolation, and sleep disturbances (Wan Abdul Ghani et al., 2019). Longitudinal research highlights that greater internet usage can reduce communication with family members, shrink social circles, and exacerbate feelings of depression and loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998). Among university students, studies reveal a negative association between internet addiction and psychological well-being, with indicators such as diminished impulse control, loneliness, depression, and social discomfort contributing to lower overall well-being (Kurt et al., 2024).

Furthermore, these patterns reflect broader social and mental health implications, such as how excessive social networking behaviors can correlate with depressive symptoms and more sedentary lifestyles among young populations (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2024).

In recent years, the integration of digital technologies into daily life has intensified, especially among adolescents and young adults, who often rely on online platforms not only for communication and entertainment but also for education and social validation (Qi & Yang, 2024). While the internet offers undeniable benefits, its overuse may create dependency-like patterns, leading to reduced face-to-face interactions, impaired emotional regulation, and an increased risk of psychological distress (Amai & Hojo, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, amplified reliance on digital devices, potentially accelerating patterns of internet addiction and deepening experiences of social isolation among youth worldwide (Vettriselvan et al., 2025). As a result, concerns about how virtual connectivity might replace or diminish authentic social bonds have become more pressing than ever (Bhikkhuni, 2025).

In the Albanian context, rapid digitalization and widespread access to smartphones and internet services have reshaped social dynamics among young people. However, national research on the psychosocial effects of internet use remains limited. Cultural factors, socioeconomic inequalities, and shifting norms around technology use may further complicate the relationship between internet behaviours and well-being. Moreover, gendered patterns of internet engagement—such as different motivations for usage, coping strategies, and levels of emotional support—may lead to varying experiences of addiction and isolation, thus warranting deeper investigation (Digennaro, 2024).

Given the pervasive nature of internet usage among young people, it is essential to understand and mitigate its potential adverse impacts on their mental health and social well-being. This study explores the influence of internet addiction and social isolation on the psychological well-being of Albanian adolescents aged 16–25. By examining these relationships, we aim to shed light on the interaction between internet use behaviours and social connectivity, as well as to identify potential gender differences in the prevalence and impact of internet addiction. This research offers insights for developing targeted interventions that can

support youth in achieving healthier internet use and stronger social ties, ultimately contributing to more resilient and connected communities.

#### Method

The research utilized a cross-sectional design, surveying 300 participants (206 females, 94 males) aged between 16 and 25 years. The sample was selected through simple random sampling, ensuring an unbiased representation of the target population. Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered from May 27 to June 9, 2024. The survey incorporated three standardized instruments. Internet Addiction Scale was used to assess the degree of internet addiction among participants, focusing on various dimensions, such as salience, excessive use, neglect of responsibilities, and social isolation stemming from internet usage. UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) evaluated participants' perceived loneliness, encompassing both emotional and social aspects of isolation. Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) measure overall mental well-being, evaluating emotional, social, and psychological dimensions of participants' mental health. Data were collected using self-administered questionnaires. Participants responded to the items on a Likert scale. The survey was administered in a controlled setting to maintain consistency across responses. Upon completion, the collected data were entered into SPSS 25 for statistical analysis. Descriptive analyses were performed, including the calculation of means, standard deviations, and the range (minimum and maximum values) for each variable. Frequency and percentage distributions were also calculated to provide an overview of the data. The independent samples t-test was utilized to assess whether there were significant differences between two independent groups (e.g., gender) with respect to psychological well-being. ANOVA was used to examine potential significant differences among multiple groups (e.g., different age groups) concerning dependent variables, such as psychological well-being and internet addiction. Pearson's correlation coefficient was employed to assess the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two continuous variables. A multiple regression model was used to examine the influence of multiple independent variables on the dependent variable. Prior to participation, all participants provided informed consent. They were assured of their anonymity, and the confidentiality of their responses was strictly maintained. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, ensuring that

participants' rights and well-being were safeguarded throughout the research process.

#### Results

This study involved 300 young participants aged between 16 and 25 years. The majority were between 19 and 22 years old (44%), followed by those aged 23–25 (35.7%) and 16–18 (20.3%). In terms of gender, 68.7% identified as female and 31.3% as male. Educationally, most participants were university students (66%), while others were in high school (23%), vocational education (6.7%), or college (4.3%). A significant 83.7% of respondents reported using the internet for work purposes.

Analysis of internet addiction levels showed a moderate average score (M = 1.62, SD = 0.80), with the highest subscale being lack of control (M = 2.19, SD = 1.16), and the lowest being neglect of social life (M = 0.78, SD = 0.84).

Social isolation was also moderate (M = 2.35, SD = 0.29), with relational connectedness (M = 2.35, SD = 0.34), social connectedness (M = 2.38, SD = 0.40), and perceived self-isolation (M = 2.34, SD = 0.39) yielding similar results.

General well-being scores were slightly above average (M = 4.10, SD = 1.02). Among its components, psychological well-being was the highest (M = 4.41, SD = 1.16), followed by emotional well-being (M = 4.27, SD = 1.25), and social well-being (M = 3.62, SD = 1.21).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Frequency Distribution of Study Variables (N = 300)

Variable	N	%	M	SD	Min	Max
Age Group						
16–18 years	61	20.3				
19–22 years	132	44.0				
23–25 years	107	35.7				
Gender						
Female	206	68.7				
Male	94	31.3				
Educational Level						
High school	69	23.0				
Vocational school	20	6.7				

College	13	4.3				
University	198	66.0				
Use Internet for Work						
Yes	251	83.7				
No	49	16.3				
Internet Addiction Dimensions	300					
Salience	300		1.58	1.02	0	5
Excessive Use	300		1.86	0.94	0	5
Neglect of Duties	300		1.55	1.07	0	5
Anticipation	300		1.73	1.19	0	5
Lack of Control	300		2.19	1.16	0	5
Neglect of Social Life	300		0.78	0.84	0	5
Total Internet Addiction	300		1.62	0.80	0	5
Social Isolation Dimensions	300					
Relational Connectedness	300		2.35	0.34	1	4
Social Connectedness	300		2.38	0.40	1	4
Perceived Isolation	300		2.34	0.39	1	4
Total Social Isolation	300		2.35	0.29	1	4
General Well-being	300					
Emotional Well-being	300		4.27	1.25	1	6
Social Well-being	300		3.62	1.21	1	6
Psychological Well-being	300		4.41	1.16	1	6
Total Well-being	300		4.10	1.02	1	6

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between overall internet addiction and social isolation (r = .308, p < .01). All internet addiction subscales (except neglect of social life) were significantly correlated with social isolation, indicating that higher internet use problems are linked to greater perceived isolation.

Additionally, general well-being showed a significant negative correlation with overall internet addiction (r = -.115, p < .05). Specific components such as salience (r = -.162, p < .01), excessive use (r = -.142, p < .05), and neglect of work (r = -.154, p < .01) also negatively correlated with well-being, suggesting that problematic internet use diminishes mental wellness.

Social isolation showed strong and consistent negative correlations with all aspects of well-being. The total score of social isolation was negatively associated with general well-being (r = -.534, p < .01), with similar patterns observed for emotional, social, and psychological well-being.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Between Social Isolation, Internet Addiction, and Wellbeing (N = 300)

Variable	Social Isolati on (r)	p- valu e	Gener al Well- being (r)	p- valu e	Emotio nal Well- being (r)	Soci al Well - bein g (r)	Psychologi cal Well- being (r)	Over all Well- bein g (r)
Salience	.308**	.000	162**	.005				
Excessive Use	.295**	.000	142*	.014				
Neglect of Work	.270**	.000	154**	.007				
Anticipati on	.219**	.000	.026	.659				
Lack of Control	.227**	.000	093	.107				
Neglect of Social Life	.094	.104	014	.815				
Internet Addiction	.308**	.000	115*	.047				
Relationa I Connecti on					348**	- .359* *	396**	- .434**
Social Connecti on					305**	- .370* *	386**	417**

		335**	-	326**	381**
			.306*		
			*		
534**	.000	428**	-	480**	-
			.450*		.534**
			*		
	534**	534** .000		.306* * 534** .000428** - .450*	.306* *534** .000428**480** .450*

Note: p < .05 (\*), p < .01 (\*\*). All tests are two-tailed.

A linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive value of internet addiction and social isolation on psychological well-being. The model was significant (F = 60.5, R<sup>2</sup> = .537, p < .001), explaining 53.7% of the variance. While internet addiction alone did not significantly predict psychological well-being ( $\beta$  = .055, p = .286), social isolation was a strong and significant negative predictor ( $\beta$  = -.551, p < .001).

Table 3: Regression Analysis Predicting Psychological Well-being from Internet Addiction and Social Isolation

Model		Unstandar	Unstandardized		t	p
		Coefficie	nts	Coefficients		
		В	Std.	Beta		
			Error			
7	(Constant)	8.580	.412		20.826	.000
	Internet	.070	.066	.055	1.068	.286
	Addiction					
	Social Isolation	-1.951	.182	551	-10.705	.000

F=60.5, R2=.537

The analysis showed a robust negative correlation between social isolation and psychological well-being, suggesting that increased isolation detrimentally affects youth mental health. In contrast, internet addiction did not independently predict well-being, indicating that its impact may be mediated by or intertwined with other psychosocial factors. Gender analysis further highlighted that males exhibit a higher propensity for internet addiction, particularly regarding social neglect and excessive use, potentially reflecting different usage patterns and

social dynamics between genders. The study explored key dimensions of internet addiction, including salience, excessive use, work neglect, anticipation, lack of control, and social life neglect. Social isolation was assessed through measures of relational connection, social ties, and perceived self-isolation. The descriptive statistics highlighted a mean internet addiction score of 1.62 (SD = 0.80) on a 0-5 scale and an average social isolation score of 2.35 (SD = 0.29) on a 1-4 scale. Regression analysis revealed that social isolation was a significant predictor of reduced psychological well-being (p < .001). Conversely, internet addiction did not show a statistically significant relationship with well-being scores (p = .286). The F-statistic of 60.5 and an R<sup>2</sup> value of .537 underscore the model's explanatory power concerning psychological well-being variance. Gender differences were examined using t-tests, revealing higher internet addiction levels among males compared to females (p < .001). Specifically, males scored higher on dimensions such as salience, excessive use, and work neglect. The differences were significant across most facets except for control loss, where no substantial gender disparity was noted (p = .762).

#### **Discussion**

The present study explored the interrelations between internet addiction, social isolation, and psychological well-being among Albanian youth aged 16 to 25. The findings provide compelling evidence that while internet addiction is moderately prevalent, it is social isolation that plays a more robust and consistent role in predicting diminished psychological well-being.

Consistent with earlier research, the average levels of internet addiction in this sample (M = 1.62, SD = 0.80) indicate moderate use, with lack of control being the most pronounced subdimension. This aligns with findings by Benedetto and colleagues (2024), who observed that internet addiction often manifests in the form of diminished self-regulation, especially among young users. Interestingly, neglect of social life scored the lowest in our sample, suggesting that despite problematic usage, many youth continue to maintain offline social ties (Cardon et al., 2009), a phenomenon also reported in studies from Southern Europe (Vejmelka, Sušac, & Rajhvajn Bulat, 2022).

The correlation analysis revealed that higher levels of internet addiction were positively associated with social isolation (r = .308, p < .01), supporting theories that excessive digital engagement may lead to withdrawal from real-world

interactions (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024). Subcomponents such as salience, excessive use, and neglect of work were significantly linked with social isolation and reduced well-being. These findings are consistent with Kalınkara and Talan (2024), who found that Turkish youth exhibiting higher digital salience and overuse were more likely to report depressive symptoms and feelings of detachment.

Notably, while internet addiction was significantly correlated with well-being (r = -.115, p < .05), it did not emerge as a significant independent predictor in regression analysis ( $\beta$  = .055, p = .286). This suggests that internet addiction alone may not directly reduce well-being, but might do so indirectly through mechanisms such as increased isolation or other co-occurring mental health issues. This resonates with Firth at al. (2024) compensatory internet use model, which posits that the context and purpose of internet use — rather than frequency alone — determine its psychological impact.

In contrast, social isolation emerged as a powerful and consistent negative predictor of well-being across emotional, social, and psychological domains. The regression model confirmed that social isolation significantly predicted reduced psychological well-being ( $\beta$  = -.551, p < .001), explaining over half the variance (R<sup>2</sup> = .537). These results corroborate global evidence that isolation, particularly perceived isolation, is a critical risk factor for youth mental health challenges (Thompson et al., 2025). Our data also showed strong negative correlations between total social isolation and overall well-being (r = -.534), highlighting that both objective disconnection and subjective loneliness are detrimental.

Gender comparisons revealed that males are at higher risk of problematic internet use, especially in domains like salience, excessive use, and work neglect. This finding supports earlier studies (Yamada et al., 2025; Sela et al., 2025), which observed that male youth are more prone to compulsive gaming and browsing behaviours, possibly due to different socialization patterns and digital preferences. Interestingly, the lack of gender difference in loss of control suggests that both genders may struggle equally with behavioural regulation, even if the types of online activity differ.

Together, these findings emphasize the primacy of social connection in adolescent and emerging adult development. While internet use is nearly ubiquitous and, in some cases, functional (e.g., 83.7% used it for work), the erosion

of relational and social connectedness appears to be the key mechanism through which well-being is undermined. These insights are especially relevant for Albania, where digital infrastructure is expanding rapidly, but youth face growing socio-economic uncertainty and migration pressures that may increase vulnerability to isolation.

# Implications of Findings

This study underlines the need for preventive and interventional strategies that prioritize social inclusion. Programs aimed at enhancing offline social engagement, fostering peer connection, and building supportive educational environments may serve as buffers against the negative psychological effects of both excessive internet use and isolation.

Given that internet addiction did not predict well-being independently, future research should consider moderation and mediation models, exploring whether variables like self-esteem, parental support, or purpose of internet use shape this relationship. Additionally, longitudinal designs would help disentangle causality, clarifying whether internet overuse leads to isolation, or vice versa.

Finally, culturally sensitive tools and frameworks are essential for capturing the unique expressions of digital behavior and social connection in Albania and similar transitional societies. Localized public health messaging and digital literacy campaigns can help mitigate risks without demonizing internet use, which remains a vital tool for learning and socializing in today's youth.

#### Conclusion

This study highlights the complex interplay between internet addiction, social isolation, and psychological well-being among young people in Albania. While moderate levels of internet addiction were evident, it was social isolation that most strongly predicted poorer psychological health. These findings suggest that interventions aimed at improving youth well-being should focus primarily on reducing social isolation and strengthening real-world social bonds. Although problematic internet use correlates with well-being decline, its effects appear to be indirect and possibly mediated by social factors. The observed gender differences further emphasize the importance of tailoring prevention efforts to address specific risks faced by males. Overall, the study contributes to a growing

body of evidence demonstrating that social connection is a critical determinant of mental health in the digital era.

#### **Limitation and Recommendation**

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inferences; longitudinal studies are needed to determine directionality between internet use, isolation, and well-being. Second, the sample, although diverse in age and education, was geographically limited to Albania, which may affect the generalizability of results to other cultural contexts. Third, reliance on self-report measures introduces potential bias, including social desirability and recall inaccuracies.

Future research should incorporate mixed-methods approaches to gain richer insights into the qualitative experience of social isolation and digital behaviors. Investigating potential mediators such as personality traits, coping styles, or offline social support can deepen understanding of why some youth are more vulnerable to internet-related problems. Intervention studies testing social skills training, digital literacy education, or community-building programs will be crucial to translate findings into effective practice.

Policy makers and educators should consider integrating social connectedness as a core component of mental health promotion programs, alongside safe and balanced internet use guidelines. Tailored strategies recognizing gender-specific patterns can improve outreach and engagement. As digital technologies continue to evolve rapidly, ongoing monitoring of youth well-being in relation to social and online behaviours remains essential.

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"AROUND CONVERSATIONS' PROJECT": CIVIC PARTICIPATION AS A STRATEGY FOR PROMOTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH

#### Introduction

We are living through a crucial moment in the history of humanity, marked by multiple crises — climate, social, digital, migratory, and inequality-related — that demand a transition towards a more sustainable reality, aligned with the systemic intelligence of the planet. This transformation is seen as Humanity's Third Great Turning, according to Deep Ecology (Macy & Johnstone, 2021). Tackling these complex challenges requires a new approach to leadership and learning, one that focuses on people's engagement, creativity, and collective decision-making, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda (Coelho Rosa et al., 2022).

Studies show that civic participation benefits not only communities but also individuals, fostering connection, reducing isolation, and encouraging personal growth. Among young people, activism is associated with a sense of belonging, ethical integrity, skills development, and purpose (Budziszewska & Głód, 2021). The theory of Positive Youth Development highlights five key dimensions: competence, confidence, connection, caring, and character — which together lead to active contribution to society (Lerner et al., 2005). Positive psychology reinforces that prosocial behaviours enhance happiness and hope (Egan et al., 2008), and sociopolitical development theory argues that civic engagement allows young people to fight for structural change (Ballard & Syme, 2016). Thus, by engaging in efforts to improve the world, young people promote not only learning but also their own well- being (Schacter & Margolin, 2019; Ludden, 2011).

In this context, non-formal education spaces and innovative methodologies gain importance, as education transcends the walls of schools and is present in all environments of social interaction.

"Around Conversations" project was created during the COVID-19 pandemic as a group intervention aimed at adolescents. It focused on preventing mental disorders through the promotion of health, resilience, and well-being, by responding to basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Coelho Rosa et al., 2022). Acting preventively, the project sought to ensure that social isolation would not lead to serious mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety (Raposa et al., 2016). This paper presents the project, its activities, and the outcomes of the intervention with young people.

# **Project Partners**

"Around Conversations" project" was developed in partnership by Between partnerships 4 development, Sigmamente – Association for Child and Youth Mental

Health Support, and Marca – Local Development Association. It was co-funded by the Directorate-General of Health through the National Mental Health Programme and took place between March 2021 and July 2022.

# **Project Objectives**

The overall objective of the project was to promote the mental health and wellbeing of young people by developing social and emotional skills that contribute to the prevention of mental health issues, the strengthening of resilience, and the capacity for collective organisation.

# The specific objectives were:

- 1. To increase the psychological well-being of young people over the course of an academic year;
- 2. To develop communication skills;
- 3. To strengthen participants' resilience.

Although the project also included the training of professionals in promoting mental health and identifying signs of psychological distress, this paper focuses exclusively on the results achieved with the young participants.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> "Around Conversations" project was co-funded by the Directorate-General of Health through the National Mental Health Programme and took place between March 2021 and July 2022

# **Target Group**

The main target group consisted of 120 students aged between 15 and 19, nominated by the participating schools.

A total of 19 education professionals from the involved school clusters also took part in the project, although this aspect is not covered in this document.

# **Citizenship Circles: Youth Intervention Methodology**

The "Citizenship Circles" methodology, developed by Between and implemented in school settings between 2018 and 2020, aims to foster participatory citizenship, democratic culture, and civic awareness. Structured around an action-research logic, it has been continuously refined based on the evaluation of previous projects, in partnership with ISCTE-IUL.

Inspired by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this approach supports collective organisation to identify needs, reflect on shared concerns, and implement actions that improve life within the community. The method uses tools from non- formal education, adopting an experiential and participatory approach.

The methodology is based on the creation of circles of up to 25 participants (children, young people, or adults), accompanied by two facilitators, preferably from the same geographic area. The sessions, lasting 90 minutes per week, include stages of diagnosing the current situation and building a shared vision for the future, using collaborative dynamics and consent-based decision-making — a process that seeks to avoid objections and ensure everyone's engagement.

# "CITIZENSHIP CIRCLES" INTERVENTION STEPS

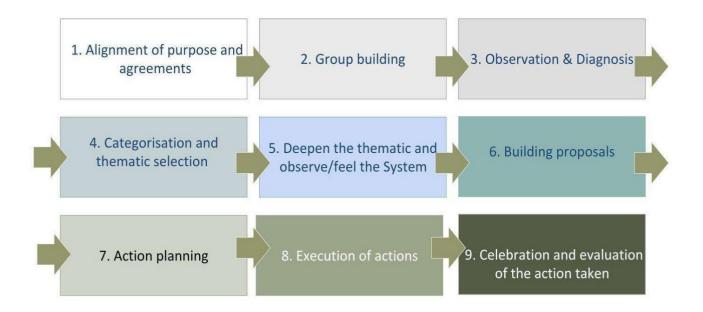


Figure 1. Stages of the Citizenship Circles Methodology

The intervention promotes skills such as active listening, empathy, critical thinking, and joint decision-making, while also encouraging individual and collective responsibility. It is grounded in the principles of sociocracy and based on the following assumptions:

- Giving people a voice;
- Promoting active listening;
- Encouraging responsibility for oneself and for the collective;
- Supporting coordinated action for the Common Good;
- Fostering critical thinking;
- Developing a sense of belonging;
- Developing a sense of agency/effectiveness;
- Supporting individual development within the group context, while simultaneously strengthening the community/collective.

Within the framework of "Around Conversations" project, the Citizenship Circles were adapted to specifically address topics related to young people's well-being and mental health. The intervention involved sessions focused on observation and diagnosis of the realities experienced by young people in their family, school,

and community contexts, as well as the co-creation of proposals to help transform those realities.

This adaptation was supported by the technical and training expertise of Sigmamente, which collaborated in the development of training and research activities, and provided technical support to professionals in the use of tools to strengthen protective factors for mental health.

# **Intervention Evaluation**

As a pilot project, monitoring and evaluation were central stages throughout the entire process. All activities were assessed with the aim of understanding the impact of the intervention on the various stakeholders involved. However, this paper focuses exclusively on the results obtained from the group of young participants.

## Data collection throughout the project included:

- Questionnaires completed by the young participants before and after the intervention;
- Observational records of session dynamics;
- Questionnaires completed by educational staff regarding their perceptions of the intervention.

Quantitative data was analysed by comparing results from the beginning and end of the project, using averages and percentages for each response parameter (on a scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree"). Qualitative data was analysed through content analysis, based on open-ended questionnaire responses and feedback collected during evaluation moments throughout the sessions. Responsibility for evaluation was held by Sigmamente.

# **Project Activities**

#### The main activities developed included:

- Weekly "Youth Circles" sessions, which used group dynamics and games as tools for consultation, debate, and action plan development, focusing on well-being, mental health, and the common good;
- Youth exchanges, promoting contact with different realities and strengthening social bonds;

- Training and capacity-building for professionals/educational staff, to ensure the sustainability and replication of the methodology;
- Development of a support manual to guide future implementations of the project.

Based on the concerns expressed by the young participants, actions were planned and implemented according to the available resources and contexts. These actions were aimed either at the young people themselves or at the wider communities they belonged to, including awareness-raising initiatives and interventions designed to promote positive change in their environments.

#### **Results**

The evaluation carried out indicates that, although the majority of young people (65%) did not voluntarily enrol in the project, by the end they expressed a high level of satisfaction with their participation. This satisfaction was evident both in the feedback shared during evaluation moments (71% reported a medium to high level of satisfaction), and in the growing engagement of the participants, as well as the average number of actions developed by each group.

It was also observed that, although the young people already demonstrated some awareness of well-being issues, there was a clear evolution in their understanding and awareness of the topic. Overall, there was a significant increase in well-being levels, with particular highlights including:

- An average 50% increase in positive responses related to the sense of selfefficacy;
- A 62% improvement in the ability to assess and understand the impact of interpersonal relationships and in problem-solving skills;
- A 91% completion rate in terms of adaptability to change;
- An average 44% increase in positive responses linked to the ability to cope with unforeseen and emotionally demanding situations, indicating enhanced resilience.

In terms of communication skills, progress was also noted, although slightly less marked, achieving 61% of the anticipated outcome in this area.

It is also worth highlighting that the professionals involved, despite the challenges faced, recognised the project's positive impact on promoting young people's mental health and well-being. They also emphasised the importance of providing spaces where young people can have an active voice and participate meaningfully in the development of solutions and in reflecting on their contexts.

# **Key Recommendations**

From its conception, the project aimed to promote young people's well-being and autonomy through a distinct approach focused on mental health promotion. The results demonstrate that it is possible to create spaces where young people find their own solutions, confirming both the relevance and innovative nature of the proposal.

Based on the project experience, the following recommendations are proposed for future implementation in similar contexts:

- Gain a deeper understanding of school environments to adapt the methodology to the local reality.
- Ensure sufficient time and appropriate spaces for implementation.
- Improve internal and external communication with schools.
- Promote voluntary participation of both young people and professionals.
- Recommend that teacher-facilitators take on the role outside of their regular teaching hours.
- Maintain a pair of facilitators (one internal and one external to the school) for each circle.
- Guarantee appropriate and stable logistical conditions.
- Strengthen facilitators' relational skills and self-care practices.
- Improve the coordination between mentoring and supervision (potentially combining both).
- Find ways to respond to different needs within the same group.
- Reinforce knowledge of and links with local support networks.

#### Conclusion

The "Around Conversations" project confirmed the importance of creating safe, inclusive, and participatory spaces where young people can explore their emotions, reflect on their context, and take part in building collective solutions. By integrating civic participation with the promotion of mental health, the

project offered a holistic approach to youth development, combining emotional, social, and political dimensions of well-being.

The results suggest that involving young people in processes of collective reflection and action not only strengthens their sense of belonging and purpose but also contributes to the development of protective factors for mental health. The observed progress in areas such as self-efficacy, resilience, adaptability, and communication reinforces the value of methodologies that promote active participation and co-responsibility.

The experience gained demonstrates that the connection between civic engagement and mental health can and should be further explored, particularly in non-formal educational settings. Investing in these types of initiatives is essential for building healthier, more engaged, and resilient generations.

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She is the founder and technical director of Between – partnerships 4 development. She has invested in developing projects that promote civic participation and individual well-being, creating opportunities for people to be heard and empowered to take on the role of facilitators in participatory spaces, through non-formal education programmes and tools.

She has a particular interest in working with young people on themes such as conscious participation, regenerative development, inclusion, mutual support, and well-being.

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# REVIEW OF THE ALCOHOL CONTROL POLICIES AND THE ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION PREFERENCES AMONG YOUTH – EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

#### Introduction and policy background

Sustainable Development Goal 3.5 focuses on strengthening the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol (UN, 2015). Reducing the health, economic and social problems related to harmful and hazardous alcohol consumption represents an integral part of the EU youth agenda. Although decreasing over the last two decades, consumption of alcohol among European youth is still high, representing an important public health issue. As confirmed by many previous research studies, high alcohol use results with poor educational and labour outcomes while also bringing higher risks of social inclusion, mental health issues and crime (Hull and Bond, 1986; Klingemann and Gmel, 2001; Paschal et al. 2009; Rehm and Rossow, 2001; Spear 2018; Dorn 2023). Therefore, adequate alcohol control policies are of great importance and represent cross-cutting issue of youth and health policies.

While the understanding and global acceptance of the harmful effects of alcohol consumption as the fifth leading risk factors for disease burden and the cause of around 2.5 million deaths annually including more than 300,000 young people between 15 and 29 years, advanced in the past few decades, alcohol still represents the only drug that is not controlled internationally by legally binding documents (WHO, 2018). The most important global documents on alcohol control are Global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol (WHO, 2010) and related Global Action Plan (GAAP) for 2022-2030, (WHO, 2024). They provide the main areas for intervention and the specific global indicators and milestones for reducing the global alcohol burden. They also provide specific recommendations to be implemented at the national level as a basis for national alcohol control policies. Youth organisations and policies aimed at reducing the alcohol consumption among youth as well as postponing the onset of alcohol consumption represent vital elements of the WHO strategic framework. As the adolescence represents a key period of behaviour change in an individual's lifetime being at the same time period when most people start drinking, the role of policy makers is particularly important when preventing and reducing alcohol consumption among this population (WHO, 2015).

Affordability and availability of alcohol products, alcohol marketing are the typical factors that influence still high alcohol prevalence among youth. Alcohol control policies including restricting access to alcohol, addressing the problem of exposure of young population to the marketing efforts of the industry and taxation policies aimed at reduction of the affordability are the key components of successful alcohol control policies. Additionally, there are many other preventive measures (raising awareness, promotion of healthy lifestyles, zero-tolerance for alcohol when driving, etc.) used to discourage alcohol consumption among youth. From the perspective of European countries, alcohol control policies have long been recognized as crucial, even prior to the adoption of the WHO Global Strategy in 2010. However, progress in developing effective legislation is still considered very slow, with several exceptions and promising practices. The European Charter on Alcohol, adopted in 1995 by the WHO Regional Office for Europe, and the 2001 Ministerial Conference on Youth and Alcohol in Sweden, highlight early efforts to prioritize youth protection. However, alcohol control policies across the EU remain highly diverse, and the weakest progress has been recorded precisely in the "best buy" policies recommended by WHO, with questionable alignment to the recommended definitions and implementation standards. Although WHO defined the alcohol control policy best buys as the effective measures that could produce even shortterm effects, almost 77% of the EU population (24 out of 27 EU countries) have written national alcohol policy (WHO EU, 2024). Alcohol control policy best-buys could be summarised as (Rehm et al. 2023):

- (1) alcohol taxation (levying an excise tax on alcoholic beverages),
- (2) minimum pricing or minimum unit pricing (MP/ MUP; setting a floor price for alcoholic beverages in general or for a certain amount of pure alcohol, respectively), and
- (3) temporal availability of alcoholic beverages (restricting the hours per day or days per week to purchase alcoholic beverages, age restrictions, reducing the number, types and locations of alcohol outlets, etc.)

Additionally, there are many other policy challenges mainly referring to the interference of the industry which has been continuously attempting to slow down adoption of strict policies and influence policy makers, as well as poor law enforcement.

The central idea of this research is to provide comparative perspective on the alcohol consumption among European youth based on the latest European Social Survey (ESS) data. Additionally, the research aims to identify what could be the main reasons of divergent alcohol prevalences and binge drinking practices, also focusing on the main elements of the effective national alcohol control policies.

The structure of the paper is organised as follows. After introductory session providing policy background and the main components of the alcohol control policy framework, second section outlines the main characteristics of alcohol consumption among European youth. Third section highlights research objectives and methodological approach. Finally, the paper concludes with discussion of the main results also providing future research directions and policy recommendations.

#### Alcohol consumption among European youth

ESS data 11th round contained several questions regarding alcohol consumption in Europe including frequency of alcohol consumption and binge drinking episodes. ESS data show diverse youth alcohol consumption patterns across 24 European countries. However, as immanent to self-reported data, these figures should be taken with a grain of salt as participants sometimes tend to underestimate the consumption levels. Figure 1 shows that alcohol prevalence among youth between 15 and 24 years is the highest in Greece and Austria. Around 53.6% and 39.8% of interviewed young people in these two countries respectively reported drinking alcohol at least once a week. The lowest figures are recorded in Lithuania and Island with 7.4% and 8.8% respectively. Never drinking practices among youth are present in Hungary where around 53.5% of youth reported never drinking alcohol.

WHO Global status report provides slightly different data per countries, while also confirming significant share of youth consuming alcohol on a regular basis (WHO 2024a). As per WHO data, the largest share of youth consuming alcohol was recorded in Ireland with almost three quarter of youth between 15 and 19 years of age classified as current drinkers, and Austria with 68.7%. Share of HED among current drinkers in that drinking age is particularly alarming showing that considerably high portion of current drinkers reported heavy drinking episodes. Figure 2. provides data on heavy drinking episodes in Europe indicating that youth in Portugal, Ireland and Poland are the most prone to heavy drinking with 62.6%, 59.7% and 59.4% shares respectively.

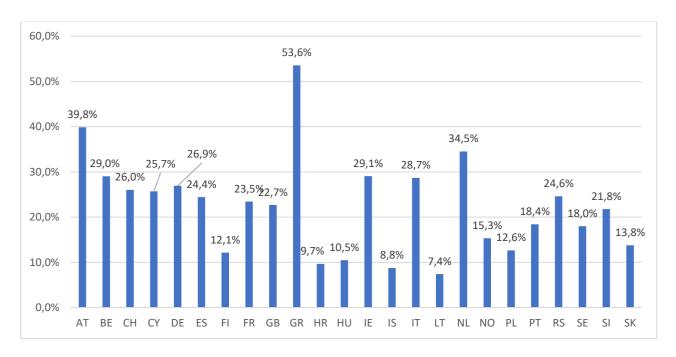


Figure 1. Share of youth (15 to 24 years old) consuming alcohol at least once a week Source: Authors' calculation based on ESS data

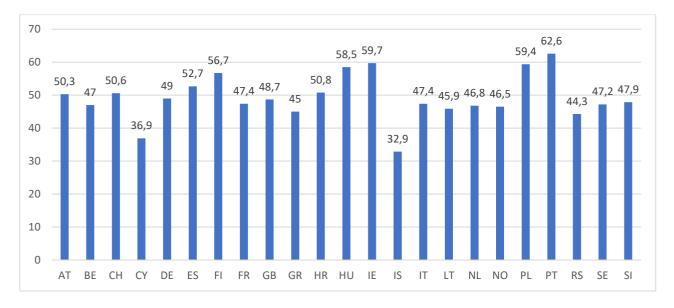


Figure 2. Share of HED among current drinkers 15-19 years Source: WHO Global status report (2024a)

National policies developed to address excessive drinking practices are present in all European countries. They could be classified as ones affecting price – price or taxation policies, and others which aim at raising awareness on the harmful effects of alcohol. Non-price policies mainly refer to different forms of health warning labels (e.g. pregnancy, underage drinking, etc.), consumer information displayed on containers, alcohol content, etc. Figure 3. Provides information on the non-price policies implemented in Europe. The strictest legislation is present in Iceland where 6 out of 7 available measures are applied.

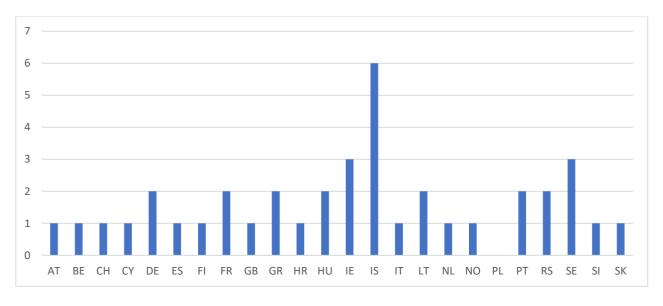


Figure 3. Number of applied non-price measures Source: WHO Global status report (2024a)

With regards to price measures, all countries apply different taxation policies which aim to reduce affordability of alcohol products. Taxation regimes refer to excises imposed on consumption of different alcoholic products. Figure 4. shows Eurostat data on price level indices adjusted for purchase power parity. As per presented data, Nordic countries are leading the strict price policy, while the alcohol products are relatively cheaper in Germany and Austria, Southern Europe – Italy and Spain, and some Eastern Europe countries – Slovakia.

	HFCE	Food	Non-alcoholic beverages	Alcoholic beverages	Tobacco
Switzerland	173.7	159.8	139.2	157.0	135.4
lceland	157.5	142.3	129.3	286.8	181.1
Denmark	145.1	121.5	134.6	128.9	129.0
Ireland	137.1	111.3	140.2	204.8	259.7
Luxembourg	134.0	125.4	120.6	104.5	84.0
Finland	124.4	110.9	127.0	213.3	156.0
Norway	124.2	128.4	141.9	232.8	214.6
Belgium	117.4	103.6	109.1	117.0	128.3
Netherlands	117.0	97.4	121.9	101.4	129.2
Sweden	114.3	106.7	106.5	146.0	102.8
France	112.2	110.9	97.7	102.8	192.
Austria	111.7	111.2	104.8	89.1	92.3
Germany	108.5	103.4	102.2	86.6	116.0
EA20	104.6	103.2	100.1	98.5	107.
Estonia	100.9	106.4	114.8	136.5	82.0
Italy	97.8	103.7	82.0	85.7	87.3
Cyprus	93.0	103.8	104.8	120.5	73.
Czechia	92.7	96.6	95.6	97.0	97.0
Spain	91.1	94.3	101.6	91.6	81.
Malta	91.0	108.4	127.1	128.9	86.
Slovenia	89.5	99.4	105.9	108.9	74.2
Portugal	86.7	102.1	116.3	113.5	87.3
Greece	85.7	102.5	112.8	154.4	72.
Slovakia	83.8	81.6	89.5	90.4	77.
Lithuania	82.1	101.6	126.9	124.5	78.
Latvia	82.0	104.2	128.1	135.6	79.4
Croatia	74.7	98.7	128.9	120.4	68.0
Hungary	73.9	98.1	104.2	98.8	83.0
Poland	67.4	81.4	92.7	99.4	61.4
Serbia	65.3	93.8	102.2	108.6	51.0
Albania	65.2	91.9	115.2	143.9	43.9
Montenegro	62.1	82.1	105.7	123.8	43.0
Romania	61.1	74.3	85.9	92.6	84.7
Bulgaria	59.2	86.8	107.8	107.4	49.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	58.0	84.9	91.9	89.5	50.4
North Macedonia	54.0	72.5	81.4	97.4	37.
Türkiye	43.4	70.8	83.1	187.3	24.
		Coefficients of v	ariation		

Figure 4. Price level indices for food, beverages and tobacco in Europe Source: Eurostat

# Research objectives and methodological approach

This research aims to assess the effectiveness of national public policies focusing on reduction of alcohol prevalence in different European countries. The main objectives could be classified as follows:

- (1) To identify main determinants of the alcoohol consumption frequency and binge drinking habits among European youth (15 to 24 years old)
- (2) To assess whether higher prices and imposed non-price control policy measures resulted in lower alcohol consumption
- (3) To assess whether healthy life style habits (eg. using tobacco) are correlated with less intensive alcohol consumption

Approach used in this paper starts from desk research analysing the alcohol control policy framework in Europe. In the next step, we provided comparative analysis of the WHO and the European Social Survey (ESS) data for the selected European countries with the aim of presenting the main trends related to alcohol consumption trends among youth including prevalence and intensity of binge drinking. Finally, we apply several methods aiming to unpack the relationship between country characteristics and alcohol control policy framework, and alcohol control policy outcomes. We applied theory-based evaluation logic and quantitative analysis including logistic regression analysis to identify which factors could be related to the excessive alcohol consumption in some of the selected countries.

We applied ordered logistic regression (generalized ordered logit model) to assess which factors could be correlated with more/less frequent alcohol consumption among youth with Y as an ordinal variables with 3 ordered categories:

 $log(P(Y>j)P(Y\leq j)) = \alpha j + x \beta j$ 

#### Where:

- $\alpha$  j\alpha\_j  $\alpha$  j = intercept (cutpoint) for category jjj
- x\mathbf{x}x = vector of independent variables
- $\beta$  j\boldsymbol{\beta}\_j  $\beta$  j = vector of coefficients for category jjj
- The model estimates the log odds of being in a higher category, meaning drinking less frequently. So positive coefficients mean lower drinking frequency (less drinking) and negative coefficients mean higher drinking frequency (more drinking).

Two models were developed to assess relationship between frequency of alcohol consumption among youth. The first on used frequency of alcohol consumption as dependent variable, while the other used frequence of binge drinking.

Model 1 - Dependent variable – Frequency of alcohol consumption among youth with 3 ordered categories:

- 1 at least once a week
- 2 less than once a week
- 3 never

Model 2 - Dependent variable – Frequency of binge drinking in the last 12 months among youth with 3 ordered categories:

- 1 at least monthly
- 2 less than monthly
- 3 never

The following independent variables were used:

- Cigarette smoking behaviour individual level (1) current and social smokers, (2) previous smokers, (3) never smokers
- Highest level of education individual level (1) Primary and lower secondary , (2) secondary, (3) Tertiary and advanced vocational
- Main activity individual level (1) paid work, (2) education (3) other
- Gender individual level binary (1) male, (2) female
- Age individual level (15-24)
- Policy stricteness country level (1) none or one non-price measure applied, (2) two measures applied, (3) three or more
- Alcohol price index country level (relative price index, adjusted for PPP)
- Unemployment rate country level (in %)

As for data sources, cigarette smoking, level of education, main activity and other socio-economic and demographic variables were extracted from ESS database – 11th ESS round (conducted in 2023). Data for youth population between 15 and 24 years in 24 European countries include 3,788 participants, out of which 3,772 provided full data on alcohol consumption. Data on alcohol control policies extracted from WHO database (WHO, 2024). Data on employment and relative prices of alcohol products extracted from Eurostat database (2023). Descriptive statistics of the sample is provided below (Tables 1 –

Table 1. Frequency of alcohol consumption

	Frequency consumption	of	alcohol		Binge dr	inking	
Frequency of alcoho consumption		Percent	Cum.		Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Weekly	894	23.7		At least monthly		39.58	39.58
Less than once a week	1,668	44.22	67.92	Less than monthly		32.56	72.14

Never	1,210	32.08	100	Never	742	27.86	100
Total	3,772	100			2,663	100	

Source: ESS 11th round

Table 2. Smoking status

Smoking status	Freq.	Percent
Current and previous smokers	882	23.35
Social smokers	546	14.45
Never smokers	2,350	62.2
Total	3,778	100

Source: ESS 11th round

Table 3. Highest level of education

Highest level of education	Percent	Cum.
Primary and lower secondary	1,419	37.62
Secondary	1,803	47.8
Tertiary and advanced vocational	550	14.58
Total	3,772	100

Source: ESS 11th round

Table 4. Main activity

Main activity	Freq.	Percent
Paid work	1,074	28.56
Education	2,208	58.72
Other	478	12.71
Total	3,760	100

Source: ESS 11th round

Table 5. Alcohol control policies applied

Policy strictness	Freq.	Percent	Number of countries
0 or 1 measure	2,262	59.71	14
2 measures	1,227	32.39	7
3 or more measures	299	7.89	3
Total	3,788	100	24

Source: ESS 11th round

#### **Research results**

Applied Generalized Ordered Logit had the following specifications:

Model 1 – assessing alcohol consumption frequency

 $\log(P(Y>j)P(Y\le j)) = \alpha j + \beta 1 \cdot \text{cgtsmok\_cat} + \beta 2 \cdot \text{gndr} + \beta 3 \cdot \text{agea} + \beta 4 \cdot \text{eisced\_cat} + \beta$ 5·mnactic\_cat+  $\beta$  6·policy\_strictness\_cat+  $\beta$  7·unempl\_rate+  $\beta$  8·alcohol\_pricecat

#### Where:

Y=alcohol\_cat∈{1,2,3}

 $j \in \{1,2\}$  corresponds to the thresholds between the ordered categories:

- j=1: contrast between "at least once a week" vs "less often or never"
- j=2: contrast between "less than once a week or more" vs "never"

and Model 2 – assessing binge drinking frequency

log(P(Y>j)P(Y≤j))=  $\alpha$  j+  $\beta$  1·cgtsmok\_cat+  $\beta$  2·gndr+  $\beta$  3·agea+  $\beta$  4·eisced\_cat+  $\beta$  5·mnactic\_cat+  $\beta$  6·policy\_strictness\_cat+  $\beta$  7·unempl\_rate+  $\beta$  8·alcohol\_pricecat

#### Where:

Y= alcoholbnge\_cat ∈{1,2,3}

 $j \in \{1,2\}$  corresponds to the thresholds between the ordered categories:

- j=1: contrast between "at least once a month" vs "never"
- j=2: contrast between "less than once a month" vs "never"

Estimations are conducted using Stata 15 software package.

Table 6. Model 1 – general information

Generalized Ordered	Logit		
Estimates		Number of obs	3,559
		Wald chi2(18)	674.27
		Prob > chi2	0.000
Log pseudolikelihood	= -		
3370.8129		Pseudo R2	0.1143

Table 7. Ordered logistic regression results – Model 1

alcohol_cat	Coef.	Std. Err.	Z	P>z	[95% Conf.	
Weekly						
cgtsmok_cat						
						0.707357
Previous smokers	0.4620653	0.125151	3.69	0.000	0.2167733	3
		0.09822				
Never smokers	1.251447	8	12.74	0.000	1.058924	1.44397
Gndr						

Female	0.6736435	0.09168 9	7.35	0.000	0.493936 6	0.853350 4
Agea	-0.0951918	0.02206	-4.31	0.000	0.138438 9	- 0.051944 8
eisced_cat						
Secondary	-0.653384	0.09522 5	-6.86	0.000	- 0.840022 4	- 0.466745 6
Tertiary and advanced vocat	-0.9792714	0.15441	-6.34	0.000	-1.28191	0.6766331
mnactic_cat						
milactic_cat					-	
Education	-0.1099974	0.091315	-1.2	0.228	0.288971 7	0.068976 9
Other	0.1026243	0.124739	0.82	0.411	0.1418587	0.3471073
policy_strictness_cat						
2 measures	0.311645	0.07984 4	3.9	0.000	0.1551544	0.4681357
3 or more measures	0.2170519	0.161883	1.34	0.18	0.1002335	0.534337 4
unempl_rate	-0.1399337	0.02346	-5.96	0.000	- 0.1859187	- 0.093948 6
alcohol_pricecat	-0.0003829	0.001108	-0.35	0.73	0.002553 6	0.001787 7
_cons	3.313155	0.48340	6.85	0.000	2.365691	4.260619
Less_than_once_a_we ek						
cgtsmok_cat						
Previous smokers	-0.1610696	0.1536	-1.05	0.294	-0.4621191	0.1399799
Never smokers	1.251447	0.09822 8	12.74	0.000	1.058924	1.44397
Gndr						0 (75)
Female	0.2880788	0.08284	3.48	0.001	0.1256998	0.450457 8
Agea	-0.1418248	0.021229	-6.68	0.000	0.1834322	0.1002174
eisced_cat						
Secondary	-0.653384	0.09522 5	-6.86	0.000	- 0.840022 4	- 0.466745 6
Tertiary and advanced vocat	-0.6649854	0.15840 6	-4.2	0.000	- 0.9754561	- 0.3545147

mnactic_cat						
Education	-0.1099974	0.091315	-1.2	0.228	- 0.288971 7	0.068976 9
Other	0.1026243	0.124739	0.82	0.411	- 0.1418587	0.3471073
policy_strictness_cat						
2 measures	0.311645	0.07984 4	3.9	0.000	0.1551544	0.4681357
3 or more measures	0.2170519	0.161883	1.34	0.18	- 0.1002335	0.534337 4
					-	
unempl_rate	-0.0044585	0.022157	-0.2	0.841	0.047885 2	0.038968 1
		0.00105			0.005385	
alcohol_pricecat	-0.0033166	6	-3.14	0.002	3	-0.001248
_cons	1.790281	0.45795 3	3.91	0.000	0.892709 5	2.687853

Findings of the applied model could be summarised as follows:

- Smoking and drinking are positively associated: people who never smoke are significantly more likely to abstain from or reduce alcohol consumption. Never smokers are much more likely to drink less frequently or abstinent if compared to current smokers
- Women are significantly more likely to drink less frequently compared to men. The difference between men and women is strongest when comparing frequent drinkers to less frequent drinkers.
- Older youth are significantly more likely to drink more frequently
- Non-price measures are effective since respondents in countries with moderately strict alcohol control measures are more likely to drink less frequently than those in countries with no/one measure.
- In countries with higher relative alcohol prices, people are less likely to drink frequently. The effect is statistically significant at higher thresholds. Higher alcohol prices appear to reduce the likelihood of drinking on a weekly basis, but they have little influence on whether people abstain entirely from alcohol.

Obtained results suggest that drinking habits are determined by both inherited and dominant cultural patterns but also result from applied policies including taxation and non-price measures.

Second model provides estimation of the binge drinking practices referring to consumption of 5 or more drinks during one drinking episode. Tables 8 and 9 provide detailed information on the applied logistic regression.

Table 8. Model 2 – general information

Generalized	Ordered	Logit	Number	of	
Estimates			obs		2,522
			Wald chi2	(15)	377.17
			Prob > chi	2	0
Log pseudolik	elihood = -251	5.5968	Pseudo R	2	0.0823

Table 9. Ordered logistic regression results – Model 2

alcoholbnge_cat	Coef.	Std. Err.	Z	P>z	[95% Conf.	
At_least_monthly						
cgtsmok_cat						
Previous smokers	0.165004	0.1202372	1.37	0.17	- 0.0706567	0.4006646
Never smokers	0.9709777	0.1072349	9.05	0.000	0.7608012	1.181154
Gndr						
Female	0.4512966	0.0814278	5.54	0.000	0.291701	0.6108922
Agea	-0.015859	0.0242955	- 0.65	0.514	0.0634772	0.0317593
eisced_cat						
Secondary	-0.5515315	0.1141067	4.83	0.000	-0.7751764	0.3278865
Tertiary and advanced vocat	-0.7631835	0.1638163	4.66	0.000	-1.084258	-0.4421095
mnactic_cat						
Education	0.0289084	0.1010671	0.29	0.775	-0.1691794	0.2269963
Other	0.0574663	0.147458	0.39	0.697	-0.231546	0.3464786
policy_strictness_cat						
2 measures	-0.1432062	0.1001582	-1.43	0.153	-0.3395127	0.0531004
3 or more measures	0.5401298	0.1847659	2.92	0.003	0.9022644	-0.1779952
unempl_rate	-0.107054	0.0237156	-4.51	0.000	-0.1535357	- 0.0605723

	-					_
alcohol_pricecat	0.0079374	0.0011482	-6.91	0.000	-0.0101879	0.0056869
_cons	2.140419	0.5208821	4.11	0.000	1.119509	3.161329
Less_than_monthly						
cgtsmok_cat						
Previous smokers	0.165004	0.1202372	1.37	0.17	- 0.0706567	0.4006646
Never smokers	0.103004	0.1202372	9.05	0.000	0.7608012	1.181154
Never Sitiokers	0.9709777	0.1072349	9.03	0.000	0.7000012	1.101134
gndr						
Female	0.4512966	0.0814278	5.54	0.000	0.291701	0.6108922
	0.00107.67	0.0055010	-	0.005	0.1010100	0.0010570
agea	-0.0710363	0.0255018	2.79	0.005	-0.1210189	-0.0210538
eisced_cat						
			-			-
Secondary	-0.5515315	0.1141067	4.83	0.000	-0.7751764	0.3278865
Tertiary and advanced vocational	-0.7631835	0.1638163	- 4.66	0.000	-1.084258	-0.4421095
Vocational	0.7031033	0.1050105	1.00	0.000	1.00 1230	0.1121033
mnactic_cat						
Education	0.0289084	0.1010671	0.29	0.775	-0.1691794	0.2269963
Other	0.0574663	0.147458	0.39	0.697	-0.231546	0.3464786
policy_strictness_cat						
2 measures	-0.1432062	0.1001582	-1.43	0.153	-0.3395127	0.0531004
3 or more measures	- 0.5401298	0.1847659	- 2.92	0.003	- 0.9022644	-0.1779952
3 of Thore measures	0.5401230	0.10+7033	2.32	0.003	0.3022044	0.1779332
	-				-	
unempl_rate	0.0360423	0.0259001	-1.39	0.164	0.0868056	0.014721
alcohol_pricecat	-0.0115015	0.0014389	- 7.99	0.000	-0.0143217	- 0.0086814
_cons	1.736842	0.5472596	3.17	0.002	0.6642324	2.809451

Results of the applied second model could be summarised as follows:

- People who have never smoked cigarettes are significantly more likely to be in higher categories of binge drinking frequency, referring to less probability of being binge drinkers
- Women are significantly more likely than men to binge drink less frequently
- Individuals with higher levels of education are significantly more likely to binge drink frequently than those with primary education only.

- Older individuals are significantly less likely to binge drink monthly vs.
   never, but there is no significant difference between more frequent binge drinkers and occasional ones
- In countries with higher relative alcohol prices, people are less likely to binge drink frequently, particularly at higher thresholds. This suggests that price policies may help reduce binge drinking, especially in the general population.

However, there are also some counterintuitive results identified. Individuals living in countries with strict alcohol-related policies are more likely to binge drink frequently. Interpretation could be that binge drinking is more determined by the cultural characteristics rather than non-price policy measures. Additionally, results revealed that individuals with higher education are more frequent heavy drinkers. This could be due to the fact that individuals with higher education on average have higher living standards, which makes alcoholic drinks more affordable to this population. Related to that, confirmed effectiveness of taxation policy could be used to discourage consumption of population with higher income.

# **Concluding remarks and policy recommendations**

In order to reduce alcohol consumption and prevent negative effects of frequent use of alcohol among youth, Governments need to understand reasons behind repeated drunkenness. Although in some countries youth start drinking at a very early age, not in all of them drinking habits remain the same in the adult period. This paper provides evidence on drinking habits among European youth population also trying to highlight the main elements which determine relationship between alcohol control policies, affordability of alcohol products, youth attitudes towards unhealthy products, and alcohol prevalence indicators.

This study provides some important findings which could be used as a basis to reconsider existing policies aimed at controlling alcohol consumption among young people. They could be summarised as follows:

- Healthy lifestyle (using smoking status as proxy) is correlated with frequent consumption and binge drinking.
- Females are likely to be frequent and binge drinkers if compared to men.
- Countries with higher unemployment rates have larger share of highly frequent alcohol consumers and binge drinkers

- Alcohol prices are positively associated with less binge drinking and highest frequency of consumption but seem not correlated with frequency of moderate drinking habits
- Stricter policy are negatively correlated with frequent consumption but seem to be positively correlated with binge drinking

In general, Governments should invest more efforts in promoting healthy lifestyles as alternative for spending free time. Imposing non-price measures and education campaigns could be very important for reducing intensity of consumption also preventing onset of drinking among youth. However, given the WHO recommendations of the "best buys" for reducing alcohol consumption, using taxes as a tool to reduce affordability of alcohol products should be more strictly applied to discourage youth start drinking and develop binge drinking habits.

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# School to Work Transition, Work or Working Conditions of Youth



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LIFELONG GUIDANCE AS A TOOL FOR EMPOWERMENT AND INCLUSION

### Introduction

Lifelong guidance is crucial for fostering social inclusion, resilience, and personal growth because it gives people the assistance they require to succeed in their studies and careers. Career counseling programs are becoming increasingly important in a world economy that is always changing to assist individuals in efficiently adapting to changing labor markets and societal expectations. Given the wide range of obstacles, people must overcome to find work, acquire new skills, and advance personally, the correct direction can help them make wise choices, take advantage of opportunities, and make significant contributions to their communities (see e.g., Ross et al., 2024). In addition to improving a person's career flexibility, this lifetime assistance guarantees they have the abilities and know-how to prosper in a world that is becoming more complicated.

Lifelong guidance is a comprehensive and dynamic approach that assists individuals in managing their career and educational paths throughout their lifetimes. According to the European Lifetime Guidance Policy Network (2015), lifetime guidance encompasses activities such as information exchange, counselling, career management, and decision-making education for individuals of all ages. In a similar vein, the Framework for Action of UNESCO promotes fair access to lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2016), especially for underrepresented populations like women, members of ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities. These frameworks' emphasis on inclusivity emphasizes how crucial it is to give everyone equal chances so that nobody is left behind in their quest for rewarding and meaningful careers.

Providing people with the skills to make wise decisions, adjust to change, and take charge of their professional paths is the goal of lifelong guiding. Savickas (2013) identifies four key components of professional flexibility: control, curiosity, concern, and confidence as a critical skill in this situation. These abilities help

people deal with challenges and changes in their jobs, which fosters resilience and long-term professional success (Savickas, 2013).

Comprehensive lifetime guiding systems are increasingly needed as economies change, particularly in nations with shifting labour markets. Different stages of lifelong guidance development and its function in tackling particular societal and economic issues are demonstrated by countries such as Finland, Kosovo, and Ireland. Nations like Kosovo are just beginning to develop such systems, and they face particular difficulties in addressing high unemployment rates, skill mismatches, and inadequate infrastructure. In contrast, Finland and Ireland have established strong guidance frameworks that support marginalized groups and encourage inclusivity. The idea of lifetime mentorship is examined in this paper, focusing on how it might improve career adaptability, promote inclusion, and close equity disparities. It illustrates the challenges emerging systems face, especially in transition economies, and the achievements of established systems by examining cases from various geographical areas. The comprehensive approach of lifelong guiding ensures that it can be applied in a range of socioeconomic situations. It facilitates skill mismatches and transitions in a rapidly evolving labour market in countries such as Ireland. It offers a means of bridging the gap between school and job, which is crucial for tackling structural unemployment and restricting youth opportunities in transitional nations like Kosovo. These many applications demonstrate how lifetime guidance systems can be modified to satisfy specific social needs.

# Methodology

This paper compares lifelong guidance systems in Finland, Ireland, and Kosovo, focusing on their development stages and unique challenges. The paper has a case study approach as we examine each country through case studies, with Finland and Ireland having established systems, and Kosovo in the early stages of development. This helps us understand how guidance supports career adaptability and inclusion. We compare the countries to identify shared challenges (e.g., unemployment) and successful practices, such as inclusivity and technology use, that Kosovo might adopt. For our research purpose, we do document, research, and policy reviews by analysing key reports and policy documents, like Ireland's Indecon Review and Kosovo's Education Strategy, to understand national frameworks and goals for lifelong guidance and European

Lifelong Guidance Policy Network to frame the practices in a global context. Finally, we assess how effective the systems are in promoting inclusion, career flexibility, and labour market alignment, offering insights into Kosovo's growth. This approach allows us to provide a clear picture of how lifelong guidance can empower individuals in different contexts.

# **Lifelong Guidance in Practice: International Examples**

In this section, we take a closer look at how lifelong guidance is put into practice in three different countries. We've chosen Finland, recognized for its exemplary practices; Ireland, which has made significant progress in developing policies; and Kosovo, a country in transition, still in the early stages of establishing its lifelong guidance policies.

### **Finland**

Finland's education system incorporates career guidance services at various points during students' academic journeys, providing a strong and personcentred approach to lifelong advising. The Finnish model places a strong emphasis on integrating advice into the larger educational framework, giving students the assistance they require from elementary school through college and beyond. Young people can receive a variety of support services, including career counselling, skills development, and social assistance, through Finland's "Ohjaamo" one-stop guidance centres, which offer a distinctive concept of integrated career and social services under one roof. This all- encompassing strategy guarantees that people are not just ready for the workforce but are also assisted in overcoming any social or personal obstacles that may come up throughout their studies and careers (OECD, 2021).

In January 2022, the Finnish National Agency for Education established a working group including basic education, upper secondary school, vocational training, one-stop guidance centers, and higher education to update the Criteria for Good Guidance (Finish National Agency for Education, 2025). Finland is known for its extensive and inclusive guiding system, which prioritizes personalized, learner-centered support, with a heavy emphasis on career education, vocational training, and transition help. The Finnish model incorporates guidance throughout the educational system and into the workplace.

Furthermore, Finland's emphasis on inclusivity is demonstrated by its initiatives to assist marginalized groups, including individuals from low-income and disabled backgrounds. Through the provision of focused services and the establishment of inclusive educational and job routes, Finland guarantees that everyone, irrespective of background, has access to the chances required for professional achievement. The high levels of educational achievement and thriving labour market in Finland are a result of the system's emphasis on resilience and adaptation.

### Ireland

Ireland has a well-organized and extensive lifelong guidance system, with well-defined structures for incorporating guidance into education and employment systems. Initiatives such as the Indecon Review of Career Guidance have concentrated on strengthening career guidance tools, encouraging inclusiveness in the workforce, and improving governance and delivery systems. Ireland's focus on career flexibility is in line with the OECD's suggestions for developing a workforce that is robust to globalization and digital change (OECD 2021). The smooth transition between education, skill development, and job prospects is made possible by Ireland's system's integration of career advice services with labour market laws. This coordinated approach ensures that individuals can access timely and relevant guidance throughout their career journey, allowing for smooth transitions between different stages of education and employment.

Ireland's National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024-2030), which prioritizes accessibility, inclusion, and adaptability, is a powerful illustration of empowerment. The framework ensures that everyone, regardless of age or background, may obtain guidance services customized to their needs to assist people in managing changes in the labour market and making informed career decisions. The nation's utilization of digital platforms, such as the online job portal, aids in expanding the availability of advisory services to remote and underprivileged locations. These digital technologies make it easier for people to stay informed and adjust to the shifting work market by giving them access to professional information, educational possibilities, and individualized coaching at any time. Ireland's strategy demonstrates how well technology may be

integrated with lifetime guiding systems, providing a template that other nations, like Kosovo, could follow.

Ireland has made tremendous progress in building its lifelong guidance system. However, it is still considered to be emerging when compared to certain leading countries like Finland or Denmark.

### Kosovo

With issues including high young unemployment, reliance on financial transfers and remittances, and a lack of infrastructure, Kosovo is still in the early phases of creating comprehensive lifetime guiding systems. To improve youth educational attainment and career prospects, these issues have highlighted the necessity of focused initiatives in the guiding sector. Aligning the curriculum with labour market demands is crucial, especially in regions with significant youth unemployment, according to the Kosovo Education Strategy 2022–2026 Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation calls for increased collaboration between the education and employment sectors.

Furthermore, guidance systems that are sensitive to cultural differences are necessary given Kosovo's diverse population, which includes ethnic minorities. Kosovo could alter its guiding systems to better reflect its socioeconomic reality by taking inspiration from the best practices of nations such as Finland and Ireland. The current fragmentation in service delivery may be addressed by a coordinated strategy for guiding services that incorporates the public, private, and non-governmental sectors. Kosovo might also use technology to increase access to advisory services, particularly in marginalized and rural areas where physical infrastructure is still a problem. Programs like online resources and mobile counselling units could close these gaps and provide vital assistance to people going through career and educational changes.

### The Role of Inclusivity

The foundation of lifelong guiding systems is inclusivity, which guarantees everyone has access to the resources and services they need to succeed, irrespective of their history or unique situation. A diverse population must be served by inclusive guidance systems, which must address the obstacles that

marginalized groups—such as those with disabilities, people living in rural areas, and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—face. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (2015) emphasize the importance of inclusive education and equitable opportunities, aligning lifelong guidance with broader global development goals.

It can be difficult to create culturally sensitive guidance systems in nations like Kosovo, where rural areas and ethnic minorities are frequently excluded. Similarly, Ireland's policies strongly emphasize inclusion by assisting groups, including those with disabilities and those who have been unemployed for a long time, in accessing specialized advisory services. To guarantee that no one is left behind in their pursuit of educational and professional prospects, such approaches demonstrate the universal application of inclusive guidance frameworks.

Although Ireland has made significant strides in developing its lifelong guidance system, including for people with disabilities, reports indicate that there is still room for improvement. According to the European Disability Forum (2023) report, Ireland has one of the lowest employment rates for people with disabilities in Europe. The 2022 census data also show significant societal disadvantages for people with disabilities in education, housing, work, and income (Cooney, Brophy, & Habib, 2024).

## Lifelong Guidance as a Tool for Empowerment and Inclusion

Lifelong guidance plays a crucial role in empowering individuals and promoting inclusive societies. It provides ongoing support for making informed educational, career, and personal decisions, thus bridging equity gaps and developing essential career management skills. This support is particularly vital in adapting to the challenges posed by dynamic labour markets and societal shifts. As highlighted by the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (2015), lifelong guidance encompasses a range of activities like counselling, information sharing, and skills development, helping individuals of all ages navigate transitions.

In regions like Kosovo, where structural unemployment and youth joblessness are prevalent, lifelong guidance is key to addressing skill mismatches and facilitating smoother transitions between education and employment (OECD, 2021). Similarly, in Finland, guidance services are deeply embedded in the education system, supporting marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities and individuals with disabilities (Savickas, 2013). By providing tailored services, lifelong

guidance systems foster inclusivity and ensure that all individuals, regardless of background, can access the opportunities needed for personal and professional success.

Moreover, digital platforms play an essential role in expanding the reach of guidance services, especially in rural and underserved areas. The integration of online tools, as seen in Ireland's career guidance initiatives, improves accessibility and ensures that more individuals benefit from these services (Indecon, 2019). Through these combined efforts, lifelong guidance helps create more equitable, adaptable, and inclusive societies.

# **Challenges in Transition Regions**

Implementing lifelong guiding systems is extremely difficult in transitional areas like Kosovo, mostly because of a lack of funding, inconsistent service delivery, and poor infrastructure. The urgent need to match educational outputs with labour market demands is underscored by Kosovo's high youth unemployment rate, which hit 48.6% in 2021 (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2021). Adopting best practices from well-established systems, including Finland's inclusive initiatives and Ireland's coordinated approach, can help Kosovo overcome these obstacles. These models provide insightful information for enhancing career counselling services and promoting improved job results.

The fragmentation of services, which makes it difficult for people to get timely and pertinent career guidance, is one of Kosovo's main problems. Inefficiencies and unsuccessful outcomes arise from a lack of cooperation between the commercial sector, employment agencies, and educational institutions. European Training Foundation (2019) asserts that improving the integration of these services is essential to closing the skills gap between what young people acquire and what employers need. A more cohesive system would improve career counselling's efficacy and accessibility, which would help people and the economy.

Furthermore, Kosovo has infrastructure issues, especially in rural areas with restricted access to digital resources. By extending the accessibility of career counselling services, technology can be extremely helpful in removing these obstacles. To increase access and support across various regions, the European Commission has underlined the significance of incorporating digital platforms into career advice systems (European Commission, 2022). Kosovo could

guarantee that people in isolated locations have access to the direction and assistance they require to properly navigate the labour market by making investments in digital infrastructure.

### Conclusion

Lifelong counselling is an essential investment in people's and societies' futures, not just a service. This paper has shown how lifelong mentoring may empower people by assisting them in navigating challenging personal, professional, and educational changes. It cultivates resilience and flexibility, which are critical traits in today's dynamic labour market, by giving people the tools they need to make educated decisions and adjust to a world that is always changing. Nations like Finland and Ireland serve as examples of how well-organized and inclusive guiding systems can change people's lives and help them prosper in the face of social difficulties, economic upheavals, and technological breakthroughs.

Adopting best practices from well-established systems is crucial for regions like Kosovo to address major issues including high young unemployment, skill mismatches, and talent migration. In addition to promoting economic growth and social inclusion, creating a comprehensive, inclusive, and flexible lifetime guiding system could close the gap between education and work. Kosovo can develop a guiding system that satisfies its socioeconomic demands by embracing technological advancements, encouraging cooperation between the public and commercial sectors, and incorporating career management skills into courses.

Ultimately, as global issues like demographic shifts, social inequity, and digital transformation continue to influence the future, the significance of lifetime guidance will only increase. In addition to being a requirement for education, investing in inclusive, accessible, and efficient guidance systems is a critical first step in creating societies that are more resilient and egalitarian. Lifelong advice will continue to be an essential tool for empowering people and making sure that no one is left behind as the world changes.

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ANALYSIS OF A POLICY INSTRUMENT FOR SCHOOL TO WORK
TRANSITION IN BULGARIA: ITS STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

### Introduction

Since the end of the 20th century, significant changes are implemented in regard to the labor market policies in Bulgaria. The focus shifts to individual deficits and employability, starting any job instead of looking for a quality one, without providing the necessary security (Krasteva, 2019). Referring to the distinctions made in literature (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Eichhorst et al, 2008; Sirovatka & Spies, 2017) of the different political decisions regarding the objectives and instruments for activating the unemployed, it can be said that the Bulgarian state has adopted "work-first approach", instead of "human development approach". The first emphasizes the obligation to accept any work regardless of its quality. The second approach emphasizes the importance of training and education, and finding suitable and satisfying work based on individuals' skills and abilities. The adopted concept implies an assessment of the success of policy instruments based on the employability. The question is rarely asked whether and to what extent the implemented measures also fulfill a social purpose and contribute to personal development and social inclusion. The question is important, because studies show that having a job does not guarantee eliminating the risk of social exclusion (Minev & Jeliazkova, 2023; Draganov, 2025). The text sets out to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of one specific measure of ALMPs - "Career Start", through the prism of its contribution to wider social issues and personal development aspects.

### Methods

This paper presents part of the author's work as a member of the Bulgarian team of project Skills2Capabilities funded by Horizon Europe, which aims to explore and understand how skills systems need to develop in order to support people in making transitions to the labour market. In particular, it is part of task 2.2: Analysis of skills development instruments, using an analytical framework developed by

Daniel Unterweger and Eva Steinheimer from 3s (Austria), presented in details in Unterweger et al (2024).

In this study we do not perform a quantitative assessment that measures net and gross effects of the programme. Here we try to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the programme in regard to wider social and human development goals using desk research on previous studies and evaluations. The overall success of the instrument is analysed through following categories:

- relevance does the instrument respond to the beneficiaries and country needs
- coherence the complementarity of the instrument with other instruments in the country
- effectiveness in achieving its objectives
- efficiency proportionality of costs to benefits
- sustainability the extent to which the net benefits of the instrument continue, or are likely to continue.

# Context and description of the programme

The "Career Start" programme has been running continuously since 2002 as part of the Bulgaria's Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP) under the management of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP). It is implemented by the Employment Agency - an executive agency under the MLSP.

Since 2013, the problem of graduate realization and inconsistencies between their acquired education and work has dramatically emerged. As a consequence, "Career Start" was included in the Action Plans of the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (NLLL) 2014–2020.

The program's primary goal is to give opportunities for unemployed youngsters who have completed higher education to get work experience, thereby facilitating their transition from education to employment. It combines on-the-job training with direct employment creation.

The programme is aimed at a specific target group — young individuals under the age of 29 who have no job experience in their speciality of finished higher education and are registered with the Employment Office. The program's operations include offering work in the public sector for a period of 9 months if the requested jobs and educational profiles match (after 2020, the period was

extended to 12 months). The programme is being implemented at national level, but the regional needs of the local labour market are also taken into account (Boyadjieva et al., 2020: 113). It is funded by the national budget.

# Results of the analysis

## Relevance of the programme

The program has a strong emphasis on accomplishing economic goals, which are primarily concerned with the labor market. Professional experience is considered as an important criterion for the inclusion of young people into the job market (National Employment Action Plan 2014). Social elements are addressed in the sense that long-term unemployment, marginalization, and social exclusion can be avoided by labor market participation. Personal development is seen as a prerequisite for economic prosperity because the "realization of various opportunities for young people to access the labour market, contributes to the achievement of social cohesion. This, in turn, is a prerequisite for achieving economic growth"<sup>2</sup>

# Coherence of the programme

The "Career Start" programme is well-coordinated with universal labour market policies and, more specifically, youth employment policies. Besides being included in the National Employment Action Plans, it is also in the National Plan for Implementation of the European Youth Guarantee 2014–2020. The design and target group of the programme has a lot in common with another measure, part of the Action Plan for Implementation of the NSLLL 2014–2020 (Jeliazkova et al., 2018: 75). This is the "Youth Employment" programme, which also offers internships to unemployed young people up to 29 years old with higher and secondary education. The goals of the "Career Start" programme additionally complement the aims of the Strategy for Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2014–2020, particularly the problem of practical training for students in a real-life working environment.

### Effectiveness of the programme

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Employment Agency, "Career Start" Programme, available at: https://www.az.government.bg/pages/programa-start-na-karierata/

"Career Start" is defined as one of the most successful programmes in the country, according to both scientific analyses (Jeliazkova, 2017; Boyadjieva et al., 2020) and ex-post assessments (Atanasov, 2017; 2019). Designed to avoid young people from being disqualified, it allows them to get practical experience in a real-life working environment in their field of study. Incorporating young individuals with modern knowledge into the public sector also helps to achieve another program goal: renewing public institutions.

Studies show that the objectives of the programme are quite relevant and that the development and realisation of the programme is embedded in the regional socio-economic context as well as local labour market needs (Boyadjieva et al., 2020: 113). In addition to easing inclusion in the labour market and eliminating the possibility of mismatch between one's profession and education, studies have found that "involvement in the programme has a broader impact on the lives of young people, due to its positive influence on their self-esteem and job satisfaction" (Boyadjieva et al., 2020: 114).

# Efficiency of the programme

"Career Start" has had the highest gross effect<sup>3</sup> among the national programmes and projects implemented as part of the ALMPs in Bulgaria (Atanasov, 2017; 2019). With reference to net impact<sup>4</sup>, the programme ranks second at 22.2% and 23.1% in 2015 and 2017, respectively. This is because young people with higher education find it relatively easy to find employment after participating in the programme and obtaining an internship (Atanasov, 2019: 84).

Evaluations of ALMPs confirm that the higher the education of participants, the higher the effects of their inclusion in such programmes (Atanasov, 2017: 71). However, despite the decrease in unemployment among young people, researchers have found that there is also a parallel decreasing trend in the number of employed people aged 15–29 (Beleva, 2021). According to Beleva, this indicates the presence of many unresolved issues concerning the transition from school to work for a large part of Bulgarian youth and the adequacy of their

<sup>4</sup> Net impact is due solely to the program in place and shows what would have actually happened in the labour market if the program had not been in place. In this way, it is proven that finding a job is precisely due to the participation of unemployed persons in the program.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Proportion of unemployed persons (or their relative share) included in a program were able to find work one year after the end of their participation in the program.

knowledge and skills. The contribution of a programme such as "Career Start" has not changed the employment trends for this age group (Beleva, 2021: 90).

# Sustainability of the programme

Although the net effect of "Career Start" is high compared to other ALMP programmes, the main problem some experts have identified is that not all young people were hired after the end of the project (Boyadjieva et al., 2020: 114). Other studies of ALMPs where programme participants have been interviewed also show that once the project ends, youth employment contracts are not renewed. One conclusion from these studies is that employers rely on employment subsidies to hire people; therefore, a positive effect is reported only as long as such programmes exist (Krasteva et al., 2018; Sirovátka, et al., 2023).

Another study (Yakova & Politov, 2023) in which interviews and surveys were conducted with representatives of public institutions and beneficiaries of the programme shows that, despite the high impact assessment and positive attitudes of participants, the programme faces problems in regard to the low interest among eligible youth and a drop in the number of potential applicants. The main reasons for this are the low monthly remuneration (close to minimum wage during the different periods), the slow application and selection procedure, and a lack of information about the programme among graduates seeking work (Yakova & Politov, 2023: 10).

However, the programme has high sustainability — both in terms of the duration of its implementation and the potential for it to be continued in the future.

### Conclusion

As stated above, the "Career Start" programme is considered a successful project among Bulgarian ALMPs. It provides young people with professional experience in the field in which they have graduated; it renews public administration with new information; and it facilitates the transition from education to the labour market for particular groups of young people. The academics described above, as well as ALMP reviews, have highlighted the programme as a best practice among labour market measures. This indicates that it has demonstrated its effectiveness and endurance in the sphere of employment and has had good effects on the labour market over a certain period of time.

One criticism of this program is that it exclusively targets young people with higher education, i.e., those that are "easy to activate", moving attention away from more vulnerable groups of low-skilled and illiterate youth (Sirovátka, et al., 2023). It should be kept in mind that, although programs directed at those with poor or no education have a low gross effect, the net effect is significantly more substantial because, in many cases, these individuals' only access to the labor market comes from the programmes included in ALMPs (Atanasov, 2015: 82).

The introduction of the programme follows a policy trend imposed since 2000 to activate and provide support for returning to the labour market (Krasteva, 2019: 108). The activating approach has resulted in a greater share of the costs being used for employment subsidies and less investments made toward training and qualification (Krasteva, 2019: 111–112). The European Commission has criticized Bulgaria's significant focus on job subsidy measures and minimal financing for training programmes (European Commission, 2016).

This initiative represents the need to boost economic growth while also meeting labour market demands, both of which are contained in lifelong learning policies. It has been judged successful in this regard because it allows participants to begin working in fields related to their completed education at organizations that require workers with such skills. To the degree that professional realization is an important aspect of and creates the conditions for personal development, the programme contributes to the social and personal development goals, primarily for its target group.

# **Acknowledgments**

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### **EVALUATION OF THE EU YOUTH DIALOGUE**

### **ABSTRACT**

The transition of young people from school to the labour market is a critical stage that has been significantly impacted by economic crises, including the 2008 recession and the COVID-19 pandemic. NEET youth, those not in education, employment, or training, represent a vulnerable group at risk of long-term unemployment and social exclusion. This study explores the experiences of NEET youth in Lithuania and Italy, focusing on how various social policies and economic structures shape their transitions. Using quantitative data from the international project "Tr@ck-IN: Public employment services tracking effectiveness to support rural NEETs," the study examines the factors that hinder NEET youth transitions in both countries. The analysis reveals that NEET rates increased significantly during the pandemic, particularly affecting young women with lower educational attainment and rural youth. In Lithuania, the NEET rate rose from 8,6 % in 2019 to 12,7 % in 2021, while in Italy, it increased from 18 % to 23,1 % during the same period. The study highlights the importance of targeted interventions, such as the Youth Guarantee Programme (YGP), to address these challenges. It also underscores the need for localized approaches to better support NEET youth in rural areas. Policy recommendations focus on improving access to education, training programs, and job placement services, particularly for vulnerable subgroups like women and long-term NEETs. The findings stress the role of public employment services and the need for tailored policies to ensure a successful school-to-work transition for NEET youth in both Lithuania and Italy.

Keywords: Not in Education, Employment or Training; NEET; School-to-Work Transition; Youth

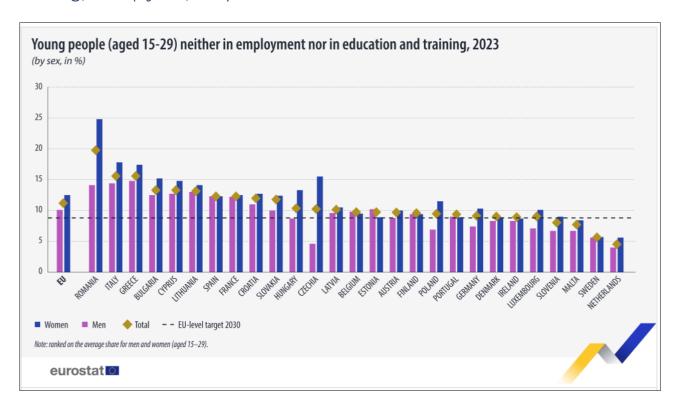
### Introduction

The transition of young people from education to the labor market has been significantly influenced by major crises such as the 2008 financial recession and the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO, 2021; Eurofound, 2021; OECD, 2021). An increasing number of young individuals are experiencing extended periods of

unemployment, unstable or short-term jobs, or complete disengagement from the labour force. The school-to-work transition is a multifaceted process shaped by both macro-level factors, such as labour market policies, wage regulations, demographic trends, and micro-level dynamics. The aim of this study is to identify the key obstacles that NEET youth face when transitioning from school to work, in order to improve their chances of success in life.

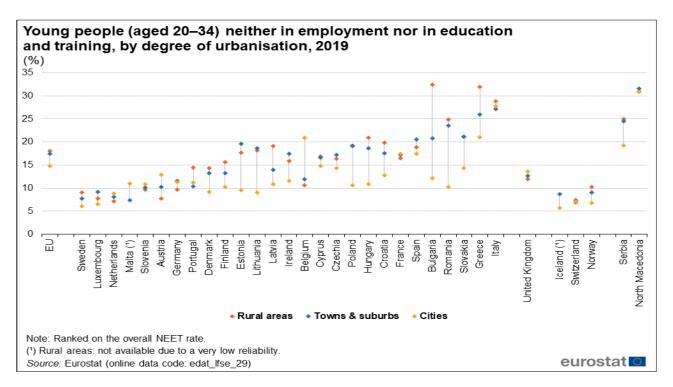
A secondary analysis of Eurostat's European Union Labour Force Survey (EU LFS) shows that the NEET rate (young people aged 15-29 who are not in employment, education, or training) in the EU stood at 10,2 % in 2019, just before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This rate rose to 11,2% in 2020 and further increased to 13,1 % in 2021. In Lithuania, the NEET rate was 8,6 % in 2019, climbed to 10, 8 % in 2020, and reached 12,7 % in 2021. Italy, however, recorded significantly higher rates: 18 % in 2019, rising to 18,9 % in 2020 and surging to 23,1 % in 2021, which is one of the highest in the EU. These figures suggest that the COVID-19 crisis had a substantial negative impact on young people's integration into the workforce, contributing to a rise in NEET rates across the EU. In welfare states, where citizens' well-being is a priority, addressing the challenges faced by NEET youth is essential, as they are a vulnerable group at increased risk of social exclusion and poverty. This research is grounded in a theoretical framework that draws on multiple academic perspectives exploring the effectiveness of youth transitions from education to employment (Gebel, 2020; Brazienė, 2020; Baranowska-Rataj et al., 2017; Brzinsky-Fay, 2013). The study aims to uncover the main barriers young NEET men and women encounter during this transition, with the goal of enhancing their long-term opportunities and life outcomes. It is also important to recognize the diversity within the NEET population. Some individuals may be temporarily disengaged, while others remain NEET for extended periods. As such, targeted policy responses and support measures must be tailored to the specific needs of each subgroup. Social participation can become an important source of social capital that strengthens society. Organizational involvement not only fosters democratic skills but also reflects a community's ability to self-organize. Research shows that unemployment reduces social activity, which can contribute to the social exclusion of NEET youth (Mascherini, 2017).

Figure 1. Young people (aged 15–29) neither in employment nor in education and training, 2023 (by sex, in %) Eurostat



Eurostat Figure 1 "Young people (aged 15–29) neither in employment nor in education and training, 2023" presents the percentage of NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) across EU countries, disaggregated by gender. As we can see, the overall NEET rate across the EU in 2023 is slightly above 11%. The horizontal dashed line indicates the EU-level target for 2030 (EU 2030 Target), set at 9 %. The highest NEET rates are in Romania, which shows the highest total NEET rate (above 23 %), with a particularly high rate among women. Italy and Greece also report high NEET levels, all significantly above the EU average. In most countries, women are more likely to be NEETs than men, which might indicate gender disparities. Romania and Bulgaria show the largest gender gap, with much higher NEET rates among women. Contrary, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Malta report the lowest total NEET rates, all below the EU target of 9 %. These countries also show relatively small gender differences. Regarding Lithuania, it has a NEET rate close to the EU average, with a slightly higher proportion of women NEETs. Italy has one of the highest NEET rates, with a significant gender gap unfavourable to women. Therefore, Figure 1 highlights persistent disparities in youth engagement across Europe, both by country and by gender. While some member states have already met the EU 2030 target, others face significant challenges, particularly in supporting young women into employment or education.

Figure 2. Young people (aged 20–34) neither in employment nor in education and training, by degree of urbanisation, 2019, % Eurostat



Eurostat Figure 2 "Young people (aged 20–34) neither in employment nor in education and training, by degree of urbanisation, 2019" demonstrates NEET rates across European countries, categorized by area of residence: rural areas, towns, suburbs, and cities. The EU average NEET rate ranges around 13–14 %, with minor variation between types of areas. In many countries, rural areas show higher NEET rates than urban or suburban areas (e.g., Bulgaria, Romania, Greece); cities tend to have lower NEET rates in countries like Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands. Some countries show little variation between urbanisation types, such as Belgium and Denmark, which indicates urban-rural disparities. Italy, Greece, and Bulgaria show the highest NEET rates overall, especially in rural and suburban areas, exceeding 25 % in some rural regions. North Macedonia and Serbia (non-EU countries shown for comparison) also show high NEET rates, particularly in rural areas. Sweden, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg report the lowest NEET rates across all urbanisation categories, consistently below 10 %. In the case of Lithuania, the rates are slightly higher in towns and suburbs compared to cities. Figure 2 shows that young people in rural areas are generally more likely to be NEET than urban NEET youth.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The transformation of society, the weakening of social ties, and the problem of personal fatigue require a systematic analysis to reveal the individual, social, and structural factors that determine the employability of NEET youth in Lithuania and Italy.

At the macro level, Transitions from School to Work (Gebel, 2020; Brazienė, 2020; Baranowska-Rataj et al., 2017; Brzinsky-Fay, 2013; etc.) In a network society, the transformation of the labour market (Castells, 1998), young people's employment prospects are shaped by broader societal transformations, such as labour market restructuring, technological advancement, and the rise of the network society. According to Manuel Castells, modern societies are increasingly defined by the flow of information through digital networks, where power is derived from the ability to access and control these flows (Castells, 2000). Those with higher digital competencies gain a competitive advantage in the labour market, while those lacking such skills face substantial barriers to stable employment (Castells, 2015; Tomczyk, 2024). The transformation of labour into an individualized process, where career success is viewed as the sole responsibility of the individual, can obscure structural inequalities that limit opportunities for certain groups, especially youth. Furthermore, labour market regulation across European countries varies significantly based on welfare state models. As Gruževskis and Brazienė (2017) note, Anglo-Saxon models prioritize labour market flexibility but also experience high levels of in-work poverty, while Continental European systems offer more regulated employment and stronger social protection. Lithuania, with characteristics of a post-Soviet transitional welfare model, contrasts with Italy's classification under the Continental or Southern European model (Ferrera, 1996), illustrating how national frameworks influence youth labour market integration.

At the meso level, social capital, the role of family, community (Bourdieu, Passeron 1990; Putnam, 1993) the concept of social capital plays a central role in shaping young people's capacity to navigate transitions from education to employment. According to Putnam (1993), social capital encompasses networks of relationships that provide individuals with access to information, support, and opportunities. In increasingly individualistic societies, such as those in contemporary Europe, the weakening of community ties has led to a decline in

social capital (Žiliukaitė, 2004). Young people often face isolation and lack supportive social networks that could guide them through job-seeking processes. Family and community support are therefore critical in providing both instrumental resources (e.g., job leads, transportation, mentorship) and emotional reassurance. Without such support, NEET youth become more vulnerable to long-term unemployment and social exclusion. As informal structures diminish, the role of formal community initiatives and youth services becomes more important in bridging this gap.

At the micro level, Individual experiences, expectations, and attitudes (Mead, 1934; Berne, 1964; Steiner, 1974; Byung-Chul Han, 2015), individual experiences, emotions, and expectations interact with structural conditions to influence employability. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2004) introduces the concept of the "achievement society," where individuals internalize the pressure to constantly optimize themselves, often at the expense of their mental and physical health. For young people, this can result in self-blame and psychological exhaustion when career goals are not met. This burden is particularly acute for NEET youth, who may be held responsible for failures that are in fact caused by systemic issues. For example, youth living in rural areas often lack adequate public transportation, limiting their access to job opportunities, a challenge wrongly interpreted as individual failure (Skučienė, Brazienė, 2024). These structural barriers are frequently disguised as personal shortcomings, further reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and detachment from the labour market. In this context, burnout, disillusionment, and lack of motivation are not purely psychological states but responses to wider socio-economic constraints.

## **Policy Analysis Background**

The transition of young people from the education system to the labour market is widely acknowledged as a vulnerable phase, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis, which highlighted the precarious position of youth in the labour market. As Gebel (2015) emphasizes, difficulties in this transition can delay other key life milestones, such as starting a family, which in turn may negatively impact demographic trends. Recognizing these risks, the Youth Guarantee Initiative (YGI), introduced by the European Commission in 2013, aims to ensure that all young people under the age of 29 receive a quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four

months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education (JRA information). Lithuania and Italy, among other EU member states, have adopted this initiative to address long-term youth unemployment and social exclusion. In Lithuania, its implementation is coordinated by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour (SADM), with services provided through local employment offices and the Youth Affairs Agency (JRA information). These measures underscore the importance of supporting youth in bridging the gap between education and employment through targeted and inclusive social policy actions. In Lithuania, the youth labour market was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to data referenced in the National Progress Plan 2021–2030, the youth unemployment rate (ages 15-29) in 2020 reached 13,4 %, marking an increase of 4, 7 % points compared to 2019 (8,7 %). This highlights that young people were among the groups most severely impacted by the pandemic's economic consequences. Prior to the crisis, the scope of active labor market policy measures had already been declining, and adult participation in learning programs remained low. The pandemic thus intensified existing challenges and underscored the need to expand labor market interventions and upskilling programs for youth (Vyšniauskienė & Krauledaitė, 2022).

Young individuals are considered a particularly vulnerable group due to their increased risk of unemployment compared to older age groups (Brazienė et al., 2021). Young individuals are widely recognized as a disadvantaged group in the labour market, especially in the context of economic instability. Following the 2008 global financial crisis, the issue of youth unemployment gained significant attention due to the disproportionate impact on this age group. Young people face multiple disadvantages such as limited work experience, insufficient education, restricted access to social protection, and greater difficulty securing financial resources. Moreover, their transitional life stage increases their exposure to labour market volatility. These factors contribute to a heightened risk of unemployment compared to older populations, reinforcing the need for targeted support measures and inclusive policy responses (JRA information). Following the Council Recommendation of April 22, 2013, further adjustments were introduced in the updated (reinforced) Recommendation of October 30, 2020. These revisions expanded the target group to include a broader range of young people and emphasized early intervention, more inclusive approaches, and stronger engagement with employers and youth organizations (Vyšniauskienė & Krauledaitė, 2022). In Lithuania, an official action plan was approved in 2021 under ministerial order, outlining specific measures to support NEET youth through coordinated services provided by employment offices and the Youth Affairs Agency (JRA information).

# Methodology

The empirical part of this paper is based on quantitative data collected from young NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) aged 18 to 35 in Lithuania (N = 132) and Italy (N = 1001). The dataset originates from the international research project "Tr@ck-IN: Public Employment Services Tracking Effectiveness to Support Rural NEETs," which aims to evaluate structural, institutional, and individual factors influencing NEET youth employability, particularly in rural areas. The survey included closed-ended questions and used a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "strongly disagree" and 5 indicated "strongly agree." The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The research design focused on assessing both structural and social determinants (e.g., place of residence, education level, community support) and individual-level factors (e.g., psychological self-efficacy, digital literacy, social satisfaction) that may influence employability outcomes. To capture these multidimensional aspects, several validated and reliable measurement scales were used: 1) Digital Skills Scale (Q62), which measured participants' ability to search for, evaluate, and use information; 2) Social Capital and Networks Scale (Q64), assessing anxiety, stress, lack of self-confidence, fear of failure in relation to employment-related tasks; 3) Social Isolation Scale (Q66), measuring satisfaction with social relationships and the presence of emotional and instrumental support from family or friends.

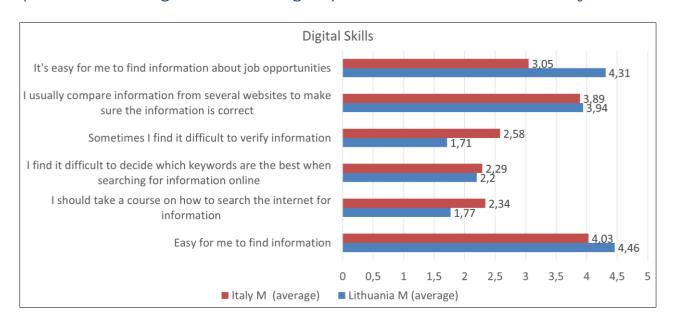
Prior to analysis, the data were cleaned and weighted using official statistics from national sources to better reflect the actual distribution of NEET youth demographics in both countries. Data preparation and analysis were conducted using SPSS and R statistical software packages. The reliability level of the study reached 95%, ensuring a high degree of confidence in the results. However, one limitation of the quantitative approach was the low accessibility and engagement of NEET youth, particularly those most excluded from institutional frameworks, resulting in a number of partially completed questionnaires.

For the data analysis, descriptive statistical methods were applied. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, percentages, and standard deviations were calculated to identify key trends within the dataset. To compare the differences between Lithuanian and Italian NEET respondents, analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were used. These allowed for the identification of statistically significant differences in key areas such as digital skills, social capital, and social isolation. Additionally, cross-tabulation and chi-square tests were applied to explore associations between categorical variables and better understand patterns across subgroups. The comparative methodology adopted in this study provides a framework for evaluating national differences and common challenges in NEET youth employability. It not only enables a cross-country analysis of structural and individual barriers but also helps identify targeted intervention points for employment services and policy planning.

# **Findings**

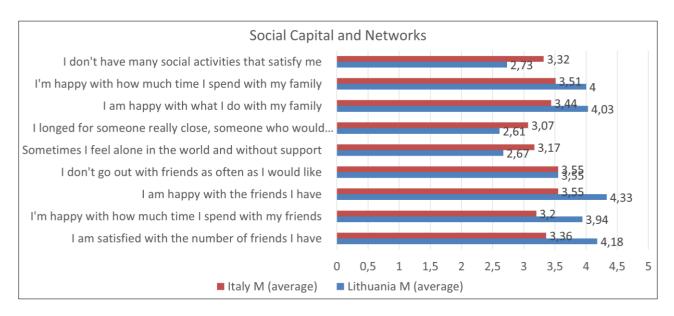
The findings of the study indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted young women, especially those residing in rural areas with limited education and minimal work experience. Similar to the situation in Lithuania, a significant proportion of NEET youth in Italy possess low levels of educational attainment. These results underscore the need for tailored policy responses that consider the specific challenges faced by various NEET subgroups. For example, young women in rural regions would benefit from more accessible vocational training opportunities and job placement support. Overall, the comparative analysis emphasizes the necessity of localized strategies to effectively tackle employability barriers among NEET youth. Policymakers must take into account the differing socio-economic realities of rural and urban settings in order to design more inclusive and impactful interventions.

Figure 3. Distribution of statistically significant differences in the responses to the question about digital skills among respondents in Lithuania and Italy



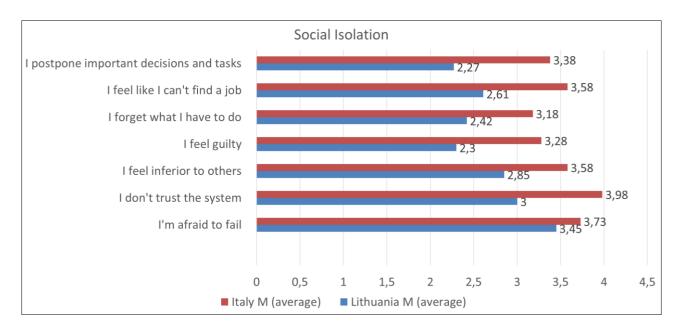
Digital Skills (Figure 3) data reveal statistically significant differences in self-perceived digital competencies between NEET youth in Lithuania and Italy. Lithuanian respondents reported a higher ability to independently search for job-related information, with an average score of 4,31 compared to 3,05 among Italian respondents. Additionally, Lithuanian participants expressed greater ease in evaluating and comparing online information, indicating stronger digital literacy overall. In contrast, Italian youth more frequently agreed with the statement suggesting the need for formal instruction on how to search for information online (Italy 2,34, Lithuania 1,77), reflecting a relative lack of confidence in their information navigation skills. These findings underscore the importance of targeted digital literacy initiatives in Italy to enhance young people's capacity to engage effectively with online resources, particularly in the context of employment and education.

Figure 4. Distribution of statistically significant differences in the responses to questions about social capital and networks among respondents in Lithuania and Italy



Social Capital and Networks (Figure 4) data reveal social capital and interpersonal networks. Lithuanian NEET youth reported higher levels of satisfaction with familiar and peer relationships compared to their Italian counterparts. Lithuanian participants demonstrated stronger agreement with positive statements regarding family engagement and friendships, with mean values often exceeding 4,0, such as for the item "I am happy with the friends I have" (Lithuania 4,33, Italy 3,55). Conversely, Italian respondents more frequently endorsed items associated with social dissatisfaction and emotional distance, including limited participation in satisfying social activities and a longing for meaningful personal connections. These findings suggest a greater support network among Lithuanian youth, which may serve as a protective factor against social exclusion and emotional distress. The data further point to a potential need for community-building and psychosocial support interventions among Italian NEET populations.

Figure 5. Distribution of statistically significant differences in the responses to the question about social isolation among respondents in Lithuania and Italy



Social Isolation (Figure 5) data demonstrate the dimension of social isolation which reveals higher levels of psychological vulnerability among Italian NEET youth compared to those in Lithuania. Italian respondents reported stronger agreement with statements reflecting emotional strain, such as "I feel like I can't find a job" and "I feel inferior to others," as well as a markedly high level of institutional mistrust (Italy 3,98; Lithuania, 3,00). These results indicate a heightened sense of alienation and decreased perceived self-efficacy among Italian participants. In contrast, Lithuanian respondents consistently reported lower levels of emotional distress, suggesting relatively greater resilience or more effective coping mechanisms. The findings highlight the critical need for policy measures in Italy that address the psychological and motivational barriers to labour market participation, particularly those aimed at restoring trust and a sense of agency among NEET youth.

### **Conclusions**

This study highlights the multifaceted barriers NEET youth face in Lithuania and Italy during their transition from education to the labour market. While both countries demonstrate rising NEET rates and vulnerabilities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, significant differences emerge in terms of digital literacy, social capital, and emotional well-being. Italian NEET youth tend to experience greater psychological distress, lower self-efficacy, and weaker support networks,

whereas Lithuanian youth display stronger digital skills and more robust interpersonal relationships.

The findings underscore the importance of localized, subgroup-specific interventions tailored to the unique socio-economic and cultural contexts of each country. In particular, young women in rural areas—characterized by limited access to education, training, and employment services—require focused support through accessible vocational pathways, psychosocial assistance, and digital upskilling.

Policy recommendations include strengthening public employment services, expanding outreach to disengaged youth, and investing in community-based support structures. Digital literacy programs and mental health support should be integral components of national youth strategies. Ultimately, a more holistic, inclusive, and differentiated policy approach is essential to reduce the risk of long-term exclusion among NEET youth and to facilitate a more equitable school-towork transition across Europe.

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# Youth Work and Services Supporting Inclusion of Young People



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**EVALUATION OF THE EU YOUTH DIALOGUE** 

The evaluation of the European Union Youth Dialogue (EUYD) was conducted by the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership at the request of the European Steering Group (ESG) for the 10<sup>th</sup> cycle, and in particular Belgium.

# Short presentation of the EU Youth Dialogue

The EU Youth Dialogue is a complex process, introduced in 2010 at the imitative of the European Commission. The goal of the dialogue is to involve young people and their opinions, on a regular basis, in the EU policy making. It is the biggest youth participation instrument of its kind. As youth participation has been a key priority of EU for more than a decade, the EU Youth Dialogue is one of the main policy instruments of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027. It is supported by the European Commission who provides funding, participates to the governance of the process and contributes to setting its priories.

The process is organised in 18 months long cycles, covering three Presidencies of the Council of the EU, therefore it is coordinated at EU level by the Trio of Presidencies, the European Commission and the European Youth Forum (YFJ), working together in the European Steering Group (ESG). The European Steering Group provides methodological support to National Working Groups (NWG) that organise consultations and other types of events and collect young peoples' opinions in all Member States. The European Commission is funding the National Working Groups and the European Steering Group through the Erasmus+programme. During each EU Youth Dialogue cycle, each Presidency organises the EU Youth Conference where young peoples' views are debated, recommendations are formulated and promoted for integration in policy documents. The EU Youth Dialogue results from the national level dialogue and the EU conference are reflected in Council Resolutions and/or Conclusions, therefore influencing future EU policies.

Since its start in 2010 until 2023, nine cycles of EU Youth Dialogue have been carried out. In 2019 the European Youth Goals were introduced as the main inspiration for establishing the EU Youth Dialogue themes. The total number of young participants in the EU Youth Dialogue cycles 6-9, in the period 2018-2023, reported by National Working Groups, exceeds 131 000.<sup>5</sup>

# Methodological note

The methodology of this review is mainly based on interviews with (i) members of the European Steering Groups for the EU Youth Dialogue cycles 6, 7 and 8, including representatives of the European Commission, the Trio of Presidencies and the European Youth Forum; (ii) members of the National Working Groups from eight countries; (iii) researchers supported the European Steering Group. The documents produced at EU level and in six selected countries within the 6<sup>th</sup>, the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> cycles (in the period 2018-2021) are also sources of data for the review. The 6<sup>th</sup>, the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> cycles of the EU Youth Dialogue have been analysed in order to focus the review on the relevance, effectiveness and impact of the process at EU level. Moreover, case studies of the process at national level in six Member States: Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Spain, and Sweden complemented the analysis of the EU level process<sup>6</sup>. The information collected through interviews was interpreted tacking into account the diversity of positions held by interviewed stakeholders and the context the EU Youth Dialogue in each cycle, as well as the complex governance system, both at EU and national level. The conclusions formulated in this review are based on converging opinions collected from all or most interviewed stakeholders. All interviews have been analysed taking into account the additional information provided by the documents.

# The main findings and conclusions of the review

#### The relevance of EUYD

In general, the information collected for the evaluation shows that the EUYD is mostly appropriate for the meaningful engagement of young people at EU level and, partially at national level. However, the selection of the specific Youth Goal(s)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The number of young people participating in each cycle was not consistently recorded before the 6<sup>th</sup> cycle.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The countries and cycles under the review focus have been selected considering their influence on the EU youth policy (for cycles), the diversity of the youth sectors (for countries) and the availability of information about them (for both).

representing the theme(s) for the dialogue in each cycle, since 2019, is determined mainly by the agenda of the countries forming the Trio of Presidencies. This aligns differently with youth needs and interests in different countries and therefore the themes of the dialogue can slightly decrease the national relevance of the EUYD.

Considering the relevance of the EUYD for the regional and local policies, the EUYD is not designed to include regional and local institutions in the dialogue. Therefore, the EUYD process has limited capacity to ensure that regional and local institutions meaningfully engage young people. Only in some countries, where youth policies are mainly the attribute of regional or local governments, the NWGs make significant efforts to add a regional dimension to the consultations to make them more relevant for young people and their participation in policy making in their country.

Overall, the EUYD is perceived as a very good opportunity provided to authorities to structure their youth engagement activities and to ensure that young people are constantly consulted. However, the EUYD is not meeting all criteria to be considered fully appropriate for meaningful youth engagement and participation. The EUYD is organised independently of learning activities about the EU, policy and decision making, civic education etc. and the lack of citizens education activities preparing the EUYD process is considered, by many stakeholders, a limitation of the process. On the other hand, although there is a concern to provide young people with feedback from decision and policy makers, this is only partly taking place and mostly during the EU Youth Conference, when only a small number of young delegates are present. The EUYD time frame does not encourage a meaningful interaction after consultations. There are only a few months available for the implementation phase and afterwards the entire process is transitioning to another theme in a new cycle and there is no time to provide young people with consistent feedback about how their opinions, expressed during the consultations, have been integrated in policies.

# The coherence of EUYD with other youth engagement initiatives

The EUYD is the largest consultation process in the EU for all ages and is the largest youth participation process organised constantly and systematically in the world. But it is not planned in coherence with other youth engagement tools at EU level and in most countries, it is not planned in coherence with other

national youth engagement activities. Moreover, the EUYD is not focusing on specific policies, but it is a large consultation on more general themes that can influence long term-policies. This affects the capacity of stakeholders to identify concrete decisions with direct impact on youth that are influenced by the EUYD.

#### The effectiveness of the EUYD

We define the effectiveness of the EUYD as the capacity of the consultation process, engaging several thousand young people in constant policy dialogue, to generate results that can be integrated into policy decisions.

The EUYD results are reflected in Council Resolutions and/or Conclusions, therefore influencing future EU policies. However, there are very few examples where the EUYD directly influenced policies of the EU. In this context, the representatives of Youth Councils and other youth organisations would like to see more tangible results of the EUYD. On the other hand, because the youth voices are integrated every year in the Council resolutions that are afterwards considered by all EU institutions when formulating other policy documents, the effectiveness of the EUYD can be assessed as high.

The YFJ, Youth Councils and other youth organisations successfully use the results of the EUYD in their advocacy, giving them more convincing arguments and legitimacy. From this perspective, the EUYD has potentially a profound effect on policies, especially at national level, where the most important competences regarding youth policies are placed. However, the majority of interviewed stakeholders are of the opinion that the effectiveness of EUYD at local level is limited, because there is too large of a gap between the general themes approached by the EUYD and the concrete competences of local authorities.

The cross-sectorial dimension of the EUYD is reflected in its themes, but it is not yet reflected by the policy decisions and the participation of responsible institutions. For example, although it has an important role in the Youth Guarantee implementation and the achievement of several Youth Goals, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) is not participating in the EUYD.

At national level, there is more variation, but it is directly determined by the level of youth mainstreaming achieved by each government and administrative system. In general, the consulted stakeholders would like to see much more influence of the EUYD on policy fields that are important to young people's lives (employment, inclusion, housing, environment and climate etc.).

The geographical coverage of the EUYD has not been an issue discussed by the ESG and there are no data on the level of participation of young people at regional level. This is not aligned with an important EU policy approach: the regional cohesion. Moreover, even when there are activities organised across the countries, due to efforts of the NWG, the level of participation of young people is rather limited in areas that are not highly urbanised or that are less served by existing youth organisations.

In general, the involved institutions at EU and national level are ensuring a good level of relevance of the EUYD and its effectiveness for the youth policies of the EU and the MS. However, the type of involved institutions is not able to support the effectiveness of the EUYD from two perspectives: policy makers from policy fields important for youth (besides the youth policy) are not involved and local authorities are not involved, although the local level is the one where young people can better learn and start participating in decision making. Moreover, the role of International Nongovernmental Youth Organisations (INGYO) is unclear for some of the EUYD stakeholders and the lack of funding affects their capacity to contribute to the EUYD by bringing into the EUYD important youth voices on relevant cross-border issues, such as youth migration, environment and climate, solidarity etc.

The set of involved institutions in the NWG vary greatly across MS and in countries where the most important youth policy competences are held by the regional authorities (or other sub-national structures, such as the lands in Germany), they are rarely involved in the EUYD, thus affecting the effectiveness of the process. From the operational point of view, the structure of the ESG has limited capacity to ensure that the institutional memory is well preserved.

# The impact of the EUYD

The value of youth participation in the EU, at all levels, is better recognized today, compared to the year when the EUYD started: 2010. The risk of tokenism or 'youthwashing' is perceived also as increased. However, more opportunities exist for youth participation, the risk of tokenism or 'youthwashing' is recognised, and some actions are taken to eliminate the risks. This represents a sign of progress. It is unclear if the EUYD contributed to increasing the number and quality of

youth engagement and youth participation opportunities offered by (or with the participation of) public institutions or if the EUYD development is the result of a larger trend of improved recognition of the value of youth participation in the EU. Most probably there is a positive feedback loop including the EUYD in this trend, at EU level and, secondary, at national level. On the other hand, the data collected shows that the same impact is not usually visible at regional and local level.

Moreover, the EUYD contributes directly to a better understanding and integration of young people's needs in the design of EU youth policies. At national, regional and local level, the impact of the EUYD depends on the advocacy of Youth Councils and youth organisations. The alignment of dialogue themes with the national and regional policy agendas is also influencing the EUYD impact.

For the young people that take part one time in a short EUYD event (online or physical), the process is often not clear enough to generate significant effects at individual level. On the other hand, participating in the EUYD has a great impact on young people that take part in several activities: the youth leaders, the young volunteers or young ambassadors, the young delegates participating in the EU Youth Conferences. In this case too there is a positive feedback loop including EUYD in the development of the sense of active (European) citizenship among European youth leaders. However, even the youth leaders, youth ambassadors and youth delegates need additional training and preparation for their participation in the EUYD and the EU Youth Conferences.

The most important factors influencing the impact of the EUYD are the political will and political priorities. Moreover, the timeframe of the EUYD, its governance structure and the capacity of stakeholders participating in the ESG and NWG can support or hinder the impact of the dialogue. The differences in the capacity of NWG and Youth Councils at national level, as well as the differences in political and administrative culture and political priorities, are influencing the impact of EUYD at national level, bringing a large range of variation among the MS. To ensure a good level of impact for the EUYD all-over Europe, the ESG should focus more on capacity building activities for the NWG.

# The evaluation of the EUYD process

The general opinion of consulted stakeholders is that the EUYD process is increasingly more inclusive. For the past four cycles the EUYD proves to be very

successful in ensuring the diversity of participants, but with large variation from one country to another. However, the socio-economic background of the participants is not monitored and, therefore, it is escaping any current analysis on the EUYD inclusiveness. In some countries, most young people participating in the EUYD activities are the ones that are already part of organisations and about 40% of young people cannot be reached because they are not participating in activities of youth organisations at all. The evaluation identified several good practices used by National Youth Councils and other organisations in order to ensure that the EUYD includes "the voice of all young people, including those with fewer opportunities and of those not organised in youth associations". These good practices include working with organisations representing the youth minority groups, working with schools, local authorities and social workers, using detached youth work techniques.

Interviewed stakeholders agree that the EUYD is not visible enough and it is not easy to understand for most of the young people involved. The EUYD communication could benefit from better coordination, coherency, and an overall strategic approach at EU level and the communication about the process at national level is very diverse. In the absence of the ESG clear coordination on communication, the activities of the NWG are heterogeneous and the level of EUYD transparency is very different in different MS, although many NWG are carrying out communication, promotion and dissemination, are translating and adapting the consultation questions etc. A European integrated and coordinated communication strategy is needed, but it should respect and accommodate the existing and established national ways of communicating.

The lack of a follow-up phase, when young people are informed on the overall results of the consultations and the decision made based on them, is one of the most important weaknesses of the EUYD, and it is also one of the hardest to resolve issues, due to the time constraints. Starting with the 8th cycle, the EUYD process has been divided into a consultation phase and an implementation phase, but the implementation activities are coming to quickly after the consultation to make the needed difference in providing young people with

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> European Commission (2019) The Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the Member States meeting within the Council establishing guidelines on the governance of the EU Youth Dialogue — European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, OJEU 2019/C 189/01

consistent feedback on how the results of the EUYD are used in policy and decision making. The implementation activities remain therefore only a structured way of informing young people about the results of the EUYD. In order to include effective follow-up in the design of the EUYD, the 18 months cycles should be planned in a different way. More connections are needed between the cycles, both in planning activities/events and conducting information and promotion activities.

The use of digital and online tools for the EUYD is considered a valuable progress and the methods used in countries that engaged several hundred or thousands of young people should be promoted as best practice for a large outreach of the EUYD. However, most consulted stakeholders agree that digital tools alone cannot cover all the needs for the meaningful youth engagement in a process as large as the EUYD. The face-to-face meetings are more suitable for the needed trust building between the young people and the policy and decision makers.

Sustainability was not a key issue of the EUYD during past cycles, and the timeframe and governance of the EUYD are not supporting the sustainability of the process, because it is not encouraging the use and capitalization of results from one cycle in the future cycles. It is difficult for the ESG to learn from previous lessons and to identify good practices and, furthermore, it is difficult for the ESG to provide guidance for the NWG in a way that will support sustainability.

The EUYD process is youth led in some countries, where the presence and active participation of authorities to the NWG is minimal, but in most cases and at European level, in the ESG, the process is co-managed by young people from youth organisations (Youth Councils, YFJ, other youth non-governmental organisations) and the public authorities. This supports both the meaningful youth engagement, and the translation of consultations results in policy decisions, by the authorities involved. However, the evaluation finds that the selection of dialogue topics is not youth led and it is a co-decision of the Trio of Presidencies and young people to a very limited extent.

Information collected for the evaluation shows that the monitoring of the EUYD improved over time, but the governance structure of the EUYD makes the monitoring of the process both very difficult and very important. At EU level, the ESG lacks a long-term institutional memory on how the entire EUYD process should be organised, mainly because there is no clear way to pass the information

from one cycle to the other. The fact that the leadership of the EUYD changes every 18 months is not encouraging monitoring as a tool supporting long-term learning, identification of good practices and lessons learned to support future decision making. The researchers developed tools to capture the results of the EUYD and to monitor the participation. However, the monitoring of the EUYD is not conducted in a way that can further inform the decisions and additional data should be collected. In addition to the indicators proposed in this report, a more structured and regular process of reflection on the previous cycle should be planned.

#### Recommendations

In order to improve the relevance, effectiveness and impact of the EUYD, and the quality of the process, a number of recommendations can be made:

- A. Concerning the activities of the European Steering Group:
  - The activities of the European Steering Group should be further clarified, by providing each new European Steering Group with a roadmap and detailed calendar of decisions to be taken.
  - The European Steering Group should provide the National Working Groups with a clear set of recommendations about how to organise the dialogue in a more meaningful and inclusive way and with a clearer guidance in the implementation stage. The recommendations should be accompanied by capacity building activities.
  - The monitoring of the EU Youth Dialogue should be improved, with additional data collected by the National Working Groups and centralised by the European Steering Group, according to the proposals included in this report.
- B. Concerning the resources for the EU Youth Dialogue
  - The National Working Groups should adapt their plans, funded by Erasmus+ grants for the EU Youth Dialogue, to the plans for each cycle, made by the European Steering Group, and applicable for all National Working Groups.
  - In general, resources should be allocated for some activities of the EU Youth
    Dialogue, including the preparation of the process by the countries in the
    Trio of Presidencies and capacity building activities for the National
    Working Groups.

- The National Working Groups should make plans and efforts to use the entire budget allocated to them through the Erasmus+ grants and to meaningfully engage as many young people as possible. The European Commission could introduce a mechanism of redistributing funds from National Working Groups that are not fully using them toward other National Working Groups.
- C. Concerning the overall organisation of the EU Youth Dialogue process
  - The 18 months cycles should be planned in a different way by the European Steering Group, to ensure better connections between the cycles and more information and promotion activities. National Working Groups should fallow the guidance and exchange information on good practices in order to ensure a better continuity of the EU Youth Dialogue from one cycle to the next.
- D. Concerning the themes for the EU Youth Dialogue and the opportunity to increase its relevance and effectiveness beyond what is now expected
  - In addition to the themes following the Youth Goals, the EU Youth Dialogue could integrate legislative documents and other issues on the Commission agenda, allowing the organisation of large consultations of young people on Regulations, Directives and Action Documents.
- E. Concerning the participants and the inclusiveness of the EUYD
  - To further increase the level of inclusiveness of the EUYD activities and the entire process, the recommendations of the evaluation of participant inclusion levels should be taken onboard by the European Steering Group and National Working Groups.
  - Embedded citizens education activities should be organised by the National Working Groups as introduction to the EU Youth Dialogue events and information/education materials should be distributed (infographics, short videos) to prepare young participants in the EU Youth Dialogue.
- F. Concerning the visibility of the EU Youth Dialogue
  - A European integrated and coordinated communication strategy about the EU Youth Dialogue is needed.
  - The National Working Groups should publish their reports and policy decisions that are using the results of the EU Youth Dialogue consultations

- should be presented to the young people in a youth friendly way, every time possible.
- A systematic review of all policy recommendations formulated within the EU Youth Dialogue should be carried out, at least starting with the 6<sup>th</sup> EU Youth Dialogue cycle, to provide young people with information on the effectiveness and impact of the dialogue.

dr. Irina Lonean, with contribution of and dr. Lieve Bradt, coordinated and edited by: Lana Pasic and in close cooperation with Jan Vanhee (upcoming BE EU Youth coordination & CDEJ member)

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# ASSESSMENT OF THE PATHWAYS OF INCLUSION OF YOUTH IN CROATIAN WELFARE STATE

#### **SHORT ABSTRACT:**

Youth are in an especially vulnerable position given the higher unemployment rates and higher chances that they will be engaged in precarious work. This paper will explore the recognition and prioritization of the youth in the strategic and policy documents and preliminary assess of the usage and effect of the EU funds on youth inclusion in the first framework. Although there are mentions in various strategies of potential targets of the welfare measures, they are rarely stated as specific vulnerable groups. In addition, there are no specific policies developed towards them, which may best be witnessed by a significant lag in the development of the National Youth program On the other hand, EU funds proved to have a relevant role for youth inclusion. One of the key aspects was the introduction of a Youth Guarantee in Croatia, which was significant in scope and had some quantifiable effects. Although there was no significant number of EUfunded programs orientated directly to the youth, youth was the eligible target group in many tenders orientated towards skills building, social services and support to integration to the labour market. EU funds we also used for specific purposes of youth inclusion for example for the NEET population. This assessment is the first step in the reflection on Croatian social policy's readiness to recognise the importance of social investment in youth as one of the priorities for developing the welfare state.

### Introduction

The Republic of Croatia, as a welfare state defined by the Constitution, has developed a hybrid social regime that contains attributes of the continental model of social insurance, the communist legacy, and recent processes of privatization, individualization, and clientelism (Dobrotić, 2016). This hybridization reflects the broader Central and Eastern European (CEE) welfare model, which is marked by institutional mixing and path-dependent reforms (Kuitto, 2016; Stambolieva, 2016). Despite these complex influences, Croatia's social spending remains relatively low, and the system is subject to persistent reform attempts

(Bežovan et al., 2019). Social programs predominantly address "old" social risks, such as pensions and unemployment, rather than investing in services, education, or programs that could foster social integration for vulnerable groups, notably youth (Babić and Baturina, 2016; Bežovan, 2019). The welfare state's reliance on passive benefits and cash transfers, as opposed to proactive social investment, underscores a structural inertia that hampers adaptation to contemporary social challenges. This context is further complicated by the ongoing tension between inherited institutional arrangements and the pressures of Europeanization and market-oriented reforms. As Croatia navigates these transitions, the question of how to effectively integrate youth into the welfare state becomes increasingly salient, especially in light of demographic shifts and the evolving needs of a diverse population.

Within the Croatian welfare landscape, certain social groups—such as veterans and pensioners—have demonstrated the capacity to mobilize and influence the allocation of social resources, while others, including the unemployed, those at risk of poverty, and especially youth, have largely been neglected in policy agendas (Dobrotić, 2016; Bežovan, 2019). Youth occupy a distinctly precarious position, facing higher unemployment rates and a greater likelihood of engagement in insecure, precarious forms of work (Matković, 2019). Southern and Eastern Europe (Pastore 2018; Tomić 2018) have usually higher youth unemployment and inactivity rates However in the last decade (2013–2023), youth employment in Croatia rose from 31% to 43%, yet this figure remains below the EU average of 49.7% in 2023 (World Bank, 2025)

The central aim of this research is to provide a preliminary assessment of policies and programs directed at youth in Croatia during the first decade following EU accession (2013–2023), with a focus on preliminary evaluating both the extent of policy recognition and the resource allocation. This neglect is particularly concerning given the broader European context, where youth are often seen as a key demographic fallowed by approximate social investment in them (Babić and Baturina, 2016, Hemerijck, (2017). The Croatian case thus raises important questions about the inclusivity and responsiveness of welfare state institutions in addressing the needs of younger generations, especially in a rapidly changing labor market and socio-political environment.

This paper employs desk research, drawing on secondary data sources including regulations, strategic documents, official reports, implementation reports, and program evaluations. The analysis is structured around two primary dimensions.

First, it offers a qualitative policy analysis, assessing the extent to which youth are recognized and prioritized within strategic and policy frameworks during the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 periods. Second, it preliminary assesses the usage and impact of EU funds—identified as the principal drivers of new social policy initiatives—on youth inclusion, with a particular focus on the first programming framework (2014–2020)1. This dual approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the policy environment and the practical outcomes of interventions targeting youth in Croatia.

# Research results- preliminary assessment

## a) Policy level

The analysis indicates that the recognition and inclusion of youth within Croatian welfare state policies remain limited and largely symbolic.

In main national policy document "Croatia 20230" young people are articulated mostly through demographic revitalization, but they are generally recognized as a vulnerable group, for example through the intention to improve the position on the labor market for women, young people and the long-term unemployed, as well as other people in a disadvantaged position.

Other strategies that have a relevance for youth are Strategy for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Republic of Croatia (2014 - 2020). National Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion for the Period 2021 – 2027, National Plan for Labour, Occupational Safety and Employment for the Period 2021 – 2027, National Plan for the Development of Social Services for the Period 2021 – 2027. While youth are mentioned in those strategies, mostly recognized that young peoples are among vulnerable groups or high-risk group. However, they are part of those strategic documents without substantial orientation towards them and they are not warranted targeted interventions.

The development of dedicated youth policies has lagged significantly, exemplified by the delayed adoption of the National Youth Program, which was finalized only in 2023 after a five-year wait. Preliminary easements of some experts give an option that it will not increase the quality of youth work in Croatia

and is inadequate by excluding minorities, such as Roma, sexual minorities and all others alto not mention specifically housing policies for youth<sup>8</sup>.

Generally, challenges related to the school-to-work transition, a critical juncture for youth, are only partially addressed by existing policy frameworks (World Bank, 2025). This policy inertia suggests a broader reluctance to move beyond traditional approaches focused on passive support, rather than proactive social investment. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive policy frameworks for youth underscores the absence of a strategic vision for their integration and empowerment. This situation is exacerbated by fragmented policy implementation and insufficient intersectoral coordination (Tomurad et al., 2023), which limit the effectiveness of existing measures and hinder the development of innovative solutions tailored to the evolving needs of young people.

#### b) EU Funds

EU funds have played a pivotal role in promoting youth inclusion in Croatia. One of the key prism through which we can look recognition of the youth are Operational Programmes Efficient Human Resources 2014-2020 (total funding for all priority areas 1,85 billion of euros); and are Efficient Human Resources 2021–2027 (total funding for all priority areas 2,27 billion of euros).

Both programmes strongly emphasize the importance of youth, but the 2021–2027 period introduces a separate priority and a broader range of measures, with a focus on digital and green skills, innovation, and an individualized approach. The allocation of funds has increased significantly in the new period, and the approach to youth is more systematic and strategically defined. In 2021-2027 period there is priority "Youth Employment" which includes two axis (Access to employment and activation measures for all and Quality and inclusive education and training systems) with 367.470.589.00 EUR allocated (EU funds plus national co-financing). Generally, measures for youth in 2021–2027 are more diverse, while in 2014–2020 they were more focused on traditional employment and education measures.

Case as needs to be specifically noted is introduction of the Youth Guarantee, which was implemented following EU recommendations and demonstrated measurable impacts. Operational Programme Efficient Human Resources 2014 –

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> <a href="https://www.srednja.hr/novosti/drzava-ima-novi-nacionalni-program-za-mlade-vecina-toga-je-copy-paste-skandalozno-i-nedopustivo/">https://www.srednja.hr/novosti/drzava-ima-novi-nacionalni-program-za-mlade-vecina-toga-je-copy-paste-skandalozno-i-nedopustivo/</a>

2020, provided its major source of funding. The available funds amount to EUR 133 million: EUR 66.36 million from the European Social Fund for the implementation of structural reforms and support systems and EUR 66.18 million from the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) (Babić and Račić, 2017). The evaluation of the Youth Employment Initiative in 2019 (19. Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2019) revealed that 57% of participants were employed or in education six months after program completion, surpassing the target value of 48%. However, some issue with the program are also recognized. There was too much focus on activation measurers (traineeship for work without employment) and much lees on improving the NEET tracking system and outreach (Munta, 2021) In addition highly educated disproportionately benefited from these activation measures (IPSOS, 2016), which introduced the creaming effect in the implementation. Generally Youth Guarantee was the primary reform which tackled position of youth at labour market, most implemented measures were active labour market policies while most other have been implemented partially and/or with delay (Babić and račić, 2024).9

Initial scan of the calls from the EU funds, show that specific calls targeting youth remain rare; instead, youth are typically included as one of several eligible groups in tenders related to skills development, social services, and labor market integration. EU funds have also been directed toward addressing the needs of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), with notable differences in program priorities and allocations between the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 periods. Some other aspects of the specific calls are recognized for example ones coming through Central State Office for Demography and Youth 10

Despite these advances, the reliance on EU funding raises questions about the sustainability and long-term impact of such interventions. The operational programme "Efficient Human Resources" illustrates the evolving priorities and allocation mechanisms across programming periods, highlighting both progress and persistent gaps. Additionally, the dependence on external funding sources

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Some of ehe experts state problems with the Youth Guarantee which are primarily related to the numerous submeasures so it will be very hard to follow their realisation in the conditions of almost completely lack

of evaluation culture (Bejaković et al, 2015)

https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/croatia/44-inclusiveprogrammes-for-young-people https://nationalpolicies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/croatia/17-funding-youth-policy-0

may undermine national ownership and the development of endogenous policy solutions, potentially limiting the transformative potential of these initiatives for youth inclusion.

#### **Discussion**

Young people in Croatia face a diverse array of challenges, with employment concerns emerging as predominant issues Gvozdanović et al., 2024.; Gvozdanović et al., 2019). This situation is further complicated by the dynamic nature of youth transitions (for example recognized in NEET population, Eurofound, 2016) and the growing diversity within the youth population, which demand flexible and innovative policy responses.

Young people in Croatia have a limited political influence (Grubišić-Čabo et al., 2023). On the other hand, Croatian welfare state demonstrates a limited capacity to articulate a forward-looking vision that addresses the evolving needs of youth (Tomurad et al., 2023). The Croatian welfare stated landscape has yet to fully embrace the concept of social investment, particularly in relation to youth (Babić and Baturina, 2016). Youth are not prioritized in welfare state development (Kovačić and Baketa, 2020), with recent policy shifts emphasizing demographic, which main example is establishment of a new Ministry for Demography. Social policy measures rarely target youth specifically, resulting in a lack of tailored support and perpetuating their vulnerability. For example only a few services can be considered available at the national level, and for certain vulnerable groups (for example, youth, families at risk, persons with disabilities, persons with mental health difficulties, members of national minorities, and refugees), not a single service meets the criteria of full avalliability (Opačić and Knezić, 2022).

Although there has been some degree of "cognitive Europeanization" (Bežovan, 2019), this process remains largely top-down, lacking meaningful adaptation to local contexts. The overreliance on EU funds for welfare state development mirrors patterns observed in other policy domains (Bežovan, 2019; Tomurad et al., 2023; Baturina and Babić, 2021). Evaluations indicate some positive effects but persistent challenges include inadequate labor market information, fragmented service delivery, and weak monitoring systems for youth (World Bank, 2025). Previous research (Baturina et al., 2020) also highlight limitation of the work of institution with vulnerable youth (NEETs). These issues underscore the need for more coherent and integrated approaches to youth policy and welfare provision. Furthermore, the lack of robust feedback mechanisms and limited stakeholder

engagement hinder the development of adaptive and responsive policy frameworks.

#### Conclusion

The Croatian case exemplifies the broader challenges faced by post-socialist welfare states in balancing external pressures for modernization with internal structural constraints and limited administrative capacities. As such, a more holistic and participatory approach is required to ensure that youth policies are both contextually relevant and sustainable in the long term. There is an ongoing question regarding the extent to which services can be tailored to the increasingly heterogeneous youth population. On the other hand it san be stated that there is a generational problem of society's neglect of young people (Kovačić and Gvozdanović, 2017)

Despite significant investments powered by EU funds, there is a risk that policy responses amount to "window dressing"—offering the appearance of action without substantive change. The sustainability of these interventions remains uncertain, highlighting the necessity for more robust, youth-centered policy frameworks that move beyond short-term solutions of only EU funded based solutions and address the structural factors shaping youth inclusion in Croatian society. Helping youths overcome barriers to work and reskill or upskill in line with future labor market needs would be an important step to achieve the country's vision and actions in this directions can help to alleviate immediate workforce gaps but would also lay the foundation for structural shifts which could improve the quality of jobs, limit migration outflows, and attract foreign talent (World Bank, 2025).

This assessment is the first step in the reflection on Croatian social policy's readiness to recognise the importance of social investment in youth as one of the priorities for developing the welfare state. Meaningful youth inclusion requires not only financial investment but also political will, institutional innovation, and a commitment to participatory governance that empowers young people as active agents in shaping their own futures.

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EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF YOUTH WORK ON EMANCIPATIVE VALUES AND DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN ESTONIA: A CASE STUDY

#### **ABSTRACT**

The European Union's expanding integration agenda presents unprecedented challenges in fostering democratic resilience among post-Soviet nations. This study examines how youth work in Estonia contributes to democratic development through the cultivation of emancipative values, utilizing Evolutionary Emancipation Theory as the theoretical framework. Through qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in Estonia's youth work sector, this research explores the mechanisms by which youth work promotes personal autonomy, gender equality, freedom of intimate choice, and freedom of voice among young people. The findings demonstrate that youth work operates as a systematic mechanism for the emancipative value formation through its intrinsic emancipative nature, characterized by voluntary participation and non-hierarchical relationships. The study reveals that youth work provides intellectual and emotional resources that complement formal education while offering unique contributions to democratic citizenship development. These insights have implications for participatory evaluation methodologies in youth policy and democratic development of programming across European contexts.

Keywords: Youth work, emancipative values, democratic development, participatory evaluation, Estonia, post-Soviet transition

#### Introduction

In an era of increasing democratic fragility across Europe, understanding the mechanisms that foster democratic resilience among young people has become paramount for policymakers and evaluators. The European Union's enlargement agenda and ongoing challenges related to democratic backsliding in several member states underscore the critical importance of developing effective policies that can cultivate democratic values and civic engagement.

Estonia's transformation from Soviet state to vibrant European democracy provides a compelling case study for understanding how democratic resilience can be systematically cultivated. The country's successful integration into European institutions demonstrates that post-authoritarian societies can develop robust democratic cultures when appropriate mechanisms are deployed to nurture emancipative values among citizens. Youth work emerges as one such mechanism, representing a form of non-formal education that operates through voluntary participation and experiential learning methodologies.

This research addresses a gap in understanding if and how youth work, and non-formal educational mechanisms contribute to value creation and democratic developments in post-authoritarian contexts. While extensive literature examines formal institutional frameworks for democratization, less attention has been paid to the non-formal processes that shape citizens' fundamental orientations toward democracy. The study employs Christian Welzel's Evolutionary Emancipation Theory (EET) to examine how youth work in Estonia contributes to the development of emancipative values that provide the cultural foundation for liberal democratic institutions.

# Theory and Its Conceptualisation

Christian Welzel's Evolutionary Emancipation Theory (EET) provides a framework for understanding the relationship between individual value development and democratic transformation. EET suggests that action resources (intellectual, connective and material resources) develop emancipative values in society, which support the promotion of Civic Entitlements (conceptualised as Liberal Democracy, the institutional guarantees of freedoms). Welzel's quantitative analysis indicates that, among the three categories of action resources, intellectual and connective resources have a stronger impact on the advancement and enhancement of emancipative values than material resources (Welzel, 2013). Within the EET, intellectual resources are closely associated with formal education (Welzel, 2013).

This study places particular emphasis on intellectual resources, which arise from educational processes and learning, and therefore, could be influenced significantly by youth work. Consequently, drawing upon EET and its conceptual framework as outlined for this research, the following theoretical framework was articulated:

Intellectual resources (encompassing knowledge, skills, and information) contribute to cultivating emancipative values (freedom of choice and equality with items of personal autonomy, gender equality, freedom of intimate choice and freedom of voice) within a society. This, in turn, fosters the establishment and strengthening of liberal democracy, which serves as an institutional framework for protecting civic rights (Welzel, 2013).

The theoretical significance of EET lies in its capacity to explain both society-level value change and macro-level democratic transitions. Unlike deterministic theories of democratization that focus primarily on structural factors such as economic development or elite bargaining, EET emphasizes the role of human agency and value transformation in driving democratic change (Welzel, 2013; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). This perspective proves particularly relevant for understanding post- Soviet transitions, where formal institutional changes often preceded substantive shifts in societal values and democratic culture.

If emancipative values grow strong in countries that are democratic, they help to prevent movements away from democracy. If emancipative values grow strong in countries that are undemocratic, they help to trigger movements towards democracy (Journal of Democracy, 2023). Research supporting EET's propositions demonstrates strong empirical correlations between educational attainment, access to information, and the development of emancipative values across diverse cultural contexts. However, most studies have focused on formal educational institutions, leaving a gap in understanding how non-formal education and youth work contribute to this value transformation process.

#### Emancipative values defined and conceptualised

Welzel (2013) defines emancipative values as values that emphasize freedom of choice and equality of opportunities. Such values signify a transition away from traditional, authority-oriented norms toward prioritizing individual liberty, personal autonomy, equality, and active participation in social and political life. According to Welzel's Evolutionary Emancipation Theory (EET), based on an examination of the World Values Survey questionnaire, there are four distinct components of emancipative orientations (See Figure 1). Specifically, freedom of choice includes personal autonomy and freedom in intimate decisions, while equality refers to gender equality and unrestricted expression in societal and

political contexts (Welzel, 2013). This conceptual framework is utilized in the analysis and interpretation of findings.

Figure 1 Four Items of Emancipative Values (Welzel, 2013)

#### Theory on youth work

Youth work, as conceptualized in European policy frameworks, encompasses structured activities and programs designed to support young people's personal and social development outside formal educational settings (Council of Europe,

**Personal Autonomy:** Emphasizing the importance of encouraging a child's independence and creativity, while placing less weight on obedience.

**Intimate Choice:** Reflecting the degree of societal acceptance toward practices such as divorce, abortion, and same-sex relationships.

**Gender Equality:** Indicating the extent of opposition to the idea that men should be given preference over women in education, employment, and political leadership roles.

**Free Voice:** Highlighting the value placed on freedom of expression, public participation in governmental decisions, and having a say in matters at work and within the community.

2017). Youth work is a creation of conditions for promoting the diverse development of young people, which enables them to be active outside their families, formal education acquired within the adult education system, and work on the basis of their free will (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2025). Unlike traditional education, youth work emphasizes voluntary participation, non-formal learning methodologies, and participatory approaches that empower young people to take active roles in their own development processes.

The democratic potential of youth work stems from its fundamental principles and methodological approaches. Participatory decision-making, peer learning, and experiential education create environments where young people can practice democratic skills while developing critical thinking capabilities (Coussée et al., 2010). These characteristics align closely with the intellectual resource development described in EET, suggesting that youth work may serve as a particularly effective mechanism for fostering emancipative values.

Youth work contributes meaningfully to holistic youth development by creating collaborative school cultures, supporting emotional and social well-being, and

encouraging active civic participation (MDPI, 2025). The participatory nature of youth work activities enables young people to experience democratic processes firsthand while developing the competencies necessary for effective civic engagement. This experiential dimension distinguishes youth work from formal civic education approaches that often rely on theoretical knowledge transmission rather than practical skill development.

The post-Soviet transition presents unique challenges for democratic development that distinguish it from other forms of democratization. Seven decades of Soviet rule created institutional legacies, cultural patterns, and socialization experiences that continue to influence political attitudes and behaviors in post-Soviet societies (Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017). These legacies include hierarchical social relationships, limited experience with voluntary association, and skepticism toward political participation, all of which complicate efforts to build democratic culture.

Estonia's transition trajectory demonstrates both the possibilities and challenges of post-Soviet democratization. The country's rapid integration into European institutions provided external anchors for democratic reform, while its relatively small size and homogeneous population facilitated consensus-building around democratic values (Lauristin & Vihalemm, 2009).

#### Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in Estonia's youth work sector. The methodological approach was selected to capture the complex, contextual nature of youth work's impact on value development while allowing for in-depth exploration of causal mechanisms and stakeholder perspectives. This approach aligns with contemporary trends in participatory evaluation methodologies that emphasize stakeholder engagement and experiential knowledge generation.

Ten key stakeholders were purposely selected to represent diverse perspectives within Estonia's youth work ecosystem. Participants included experienced youth workers from both urban and rural contexts, directors of youth centers and organizations, academic researchers specializing in youth development, representatives from national and municipal youth authorities, and leaders of youth associations. This diverse sample ensured comprehensive coverage of youth work's various dimensions and contexts within Estonia.

The selection criteria prioritized individuals with substantial experience in Estonian youth work, representing different geographic regions and organizational contexts. Urban participants provided insights into resource-rich environments with diverse programming options, while rural representatives offered perspectives on youth work implementation in contexts with limited resources and more homogeneous populations. Academic participants contributed theoretical knowledge and research-based perspectives, while practitioners provided experiential insights into daily implementation challenges and successes.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in February 2024, with each interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English and were audio-recorded with participant consent. The interview guide was developed based on EET's theoretical framework and covered four main topic areas: perceptions of youth work's impact on emancipative values, specific methods and mechanisms used in youth work practice, intellectual resources provided through youth work programs, and comparisons between youth work and formal education approaches. The interview guide included broad, openended questions, allowing respondents to articulate their views without constraint. This was followed by targeted inquiries and follow-up questions for deeper exploration. Given the varied professional backgrounds of the interviewees, the questions were adapted to each individual's context while ensuring overall consistency. Examples of open-ended questions included:

How would you describe the impact of Youth Work in Estonia/Viimsi/Tallinn on young people? In your view, does Youth Work affect the values of young people, and if so, in what ways?

Which values, specifically, are shaped by Youth Work? Does Youth Work uniquely influence certain values compared to other educational approaches? Among these values, which ones does Youth Work most prominently affect?

Moreover, if emancipative values were not explicitly or clearly addressed by respondents, a supplementary control question was introduced: To what extent do you think Youth Work influences young people's values regarding autonomy, gender equality, personal choices about divorce, abortion, and homosexuality, and the freedom to express opinions on social and political issues?

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes within the interview data. The analysis process began with familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts, followed by initial coding of relevant data segments. Codes were then organized into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined through an iterative process that involved returning to the original data to ensure themes accurately represented participant perspectives.

The analysis was guided by EET's theoretical framework, with particular attention to identifying evidence for the proposed causal sequence linking intellectual resources, emancipative values, and democratic development. However, the analysis remained open to emergent themes that extended beyond the theoretical framework, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of youth work's impact and mechanisms.

#### **Results and Analysis**

The findings from expert interviews with Estonian youth work stakeholders reveal a comprehensive system that systematically cultivates emancipative values through distinct mechanisms and intellectual resources. The analysis demonstrates that youth work in Estonia serves as a crucial complement to formal education in developing democratic citizenship, particularly through its unique approach to value formation and capacity building.

The research confirms that youth work in Estonia actively contributes to the development of all four core emancipative values identified in Welzel's framework. Personal autonomy emerges as perhaps the most fundamental value fostered through youth work practices. As the representative of the state youth agency of Estonia emphasizes, "youth work has historically centered on the young person's autonomy, self-esteem, and trust." This is operationalized through what the professor from Tallinn University describes as helping young people become "an agent of your life," where youth workers facilitate self-directed decision-making processes rather than imposing predetermined outcomes. The development of personal autonomy occurs through structured opportunities for independent choice-making within supportive environments. Youth centers provide contexts where young people can explore their interests, develop personal projects, and make decisions about their participation levels without external coercion. This autonomy-building process extends beyond simple choice

provision to include skill development in decision-making, goal-setting, and self-reflection that prepare young people for autonomous citizenship.

The development of gender equality presents a more complex picture, with variation across different contexts. While the professor from Tallinn University acknowledges that "gender equality should be discussed more in youth work" and notes that "youth workers might not be fully aware of gender-inequality issues," other respondents indicate active engagement with these topics. The umbrella-organization representative observes that "in bigger cities, there's more diversity and discussion of gender issues, but in smaller areas, it depends on the youth worker's knowledge and willingness to address these topics."

This geographic disparity reflects the decentralized nature of Estonia's youth work system while highlighting ongoing challenges in ensuring consistent value development across all contexts. Urban youth work environments benefit from greater diversity, more resources for professional development, and exposure to contemporary gender equality discourse. Rural contexts face challenges related to traditional gender role expectations and limited access to specialized training on gender-sensitive youth work practices.

Despite these challenges, successful examples demonstrate youth work's capacity to promote gender equality through inclusive programming and conscious attention to gender dynamics. Youth workers who receive appropriate training and support create environments where traditional gender stereotypes are challenged, and diverse expressions of gender identity are supported.

Freedom of intimate choice demonstrates significant progress in Estonian youth work, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ acceptance and diverse family forms. The youth center practitioner describes creating "an open environment where everyone's choices are respected," while the rural youth worker provides a concrete example of supporting a transgender youth: "we had a case where a biologically female participant wanted to be identified as male. We respected their choice and helped others understand and accept it."

This practical application of inclusive values demonstrates youth work's capacity to create safe spaces for identity exploration and expression. Young people change their behaviour to influence decisions in democratic processes and increase their involvement in the development of inclusive and peaceful societies (Council of Europe, 2016). Youth work environments that support diverse intimate

choices contribute to broader social acceptance of human diversity while helping individual young people develop secure identities.

The support for freedom of intimate choice extends beyond tolerance to active advocacy for inclusion and understanding. Youth workers facilitate educational discussions about diversity, create policies that protect minority youth, and model inclusive behaviors that influence peer relationships. This comprehensive approach helps develop not only individual acceptance but also collective commitment to inclusive democratic values.

Freedom of voice in social and political matters represents one of youth work's most distinctive contributions to democratic development. The national programme representative highlights that "youth work offers many opportunities for young people to explore and develop their voice, both locally and politically," while the respondent responsible for municipal youth policy provides a concrete example of democratic influence: "the Estonian National Youth Council and its workers... realized that the voting age was too high and wanted to have a voice in local government elections. After 10 years of advocating with politicians, the law was amended in 2015, allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote by 2017."

In general, youth participation in public policy takes place within the general framework and practice of participatory governance in Estonia (EACEA, 2020). This systematic integration of youth voice into democratic processes demonstrates how youth work contributes to both individual empowerment and institutional democratization. Youth councils, advocacy programs, and participatory governance initiatives provide concrete mechanisms for young people to influence policy decisions while developing democratic competencies.

The development of voice extends beyond formal political participation to include skills in communication, argumentation, and collective action. Youth work provides safe environments for young people to practice expressing opinions, engaging in debate, and organizing collective responses to community issues. These experiences build confidence and competency in democratic participation while fostering understanding of democratic processes and institutions.

# Unexpected finding

An important finding emerges regarding what the representative of state youth agency of Estonia identifies as "the intrinsic emancipative nature of youth work in Estonia." This represents a significant causal mechanism underlying value development. The non-hierarchical and voluntary structure of youth work creates what the professor from Tallinn University describes as an environment where "young people can explore their potential without coercion." This structural characteristic distinguishes youth work fundamentally from formal education systems that rely on authority-based relationships.

The voluntary nature of participation proves particularly significant for emancipative value development. As the youth-center practitioner explains, "youth centers are places they choose to go, not places they're forced to attend like school," creating conditions where young people can "express themselves, pursue their interests, and get guidance" without external compulsion. This voluntary engagement enables what the professor from Tallinn University characterizes as "equal partnership between the adult and the young person," fundamentally altering traditional power dynamics between adults and youth.

#### Mechanisms for the value creation

The research identifies several key mechanisms through which youth work cultivates emancipative values. Inclusive programming emerges as a foundational approach, with the representative of state youth agency of Estonia noting that "inclusivity is foundational. Youth work brings diverse groups together, those with disabilities, gender minorities, etc., to normalize differences and combat prejudice." This deliberate inclusion creates what the rural youth worker describes as "conditions for understanding" where young people encounter diverse perspectives and learn tolerance through direct experience.

Inclusive programming operates through intentional design of activities that bring together young people from different backgrounds, abilities, and identities. This exposure to diversity challenges prejudicial attitudes while building empathy and understanding. Youth workers facilitate positive interactions across differences while addressing conflicts or misunderstandings that may arise. The cumulative effect is the development of cosmopolitan orientations and outgroup trust that characterize emancipative values.

Participatory methodologies represent another crucial mechanism, particularly through youth councils and advocacy programs. These initiatives enable what

the representative of state youth agency of Estonia calls "youth-initiated projects" where "young people identify problems and propose solutions." The systematic nature of this participation, supported by Estonia's legal framework requiring youth consultation in policymaking, creates concrete opportunities for democratic engagement.

Giving young leaders opportunities to design and implement their own activities encourages their civic and political participation (IFES, 2025). Youth work's participatory methodologies extend beyond consultation to include genuine shared decision-making power. Young people participate in program planning, budget allocation decisions, and evaluation processes, experiencing democratic governance firsthand while developing the skills necessary for effective civic participation.

Reflective practice and dialogue constitute core methodological approaches to value development. The professor from Tallinn University emphasizes that "a lot of value education happens through reflective practice and conversations" using "dialogical" methods involving "informal contact and facilitated conversations." This approach enables young people to examine their own values and consider alternative perspectives through guided but non-directive processes.

The dialogical approach creates space for value exploration without indoctrination. Youth workers facilitate conversations that help young people articulate their beliefs, consider alternative viewpoints, and develop reasoned positions on social and political issues. This process develops critical thinking skills while fostering appreciation for democratic dialogue and deliberation.

The research reveals that youth work develops intellectual resources that both complement and extend beyond those provided by formal education. The representative of state youth agency of Estonia identifies "skills, knowledge, and values" as core intellectual resources, while emphasizing that values like "autonomy and responsibility are reinforced by safe environments where young people can experiment, learn from mistakes, and gain confidence."

Youth work provides knowledge through non-formal learning experiences that connect academic concepts to practical applications. Skills development occurs through project-based learning, leadership opportunities, and collaborative activities that build competencies in communication, organization, and problem-

solving. Access to information is facilitated through youth information services, technology access, and connections to diverse networks and resources.

# One more unexpected finding

A particularly significant finding concerns the development of emotional intelligence as an additional intellectual resource. This represents a contribution of youth work that extends Welzel's original framework. The professor from Tallinn University emphasizes that youth work teaches young people "how to reflect on themselves, analyze themselves, and find what's essential," developing metacognitive capabilities that enable continuous learning and adaptation.

This process of "learning to learn" represents what the same respondent describes as a "cycle of learning, teaching young people to learn continuously" that distinguishes youth work from the more static knowledge-transmission models typical of formal education. Emotional intelligence development includes self-awareness, social awareness, relationship management, and emotional regulation skills that prove essential for democratic citizenship and leadership (Fernández- Berrocal & Extremera, 2006). Several respondents independently mentioned key components of El without direct questioning. This underscores the genuine presence of these components in Youth Work, which is an intriguing and potentially significant finding for the theory.

In that context, trust emerges as a particularly significant value developed through youth work, with the respondent from Tallinn University identifying it as "something unique" where "learning starts from informal contact and building trust." This trust operates at multiple levels: interpersonal trust between youth workers and young people, social trust in community relationships, and institutional trust in democratic processes. The representative of state youth agency of Estonia connects this to broader democratic outcomes, noting that "Estonian youth trust the state more than adults, which correlates with targeted youth participation policies."

The development of trust appears particularly important in the post-Soviet context, where the lecturer from Tallinn University notes the challenge of working with "older workers who have experienced a time when it was safer to stay quiet." Youth work's emphasis on building trusting relationships helps overcome historical legacies of institutional distrust and creates foundations for democratic participation.

#### Youth work versus formal education

The analysis also reveals differences between youth work and formal education in their approaches to value development. While formal education emphasizes "grades and knowledge" with limited time for relationship building, youth work creates what the rural youth worker describes as "more collaborative" environments where "youth workers don't just give knowledge; they learn alongside young people." This collaborative approach enables what the lecturer from Tallinn University characterizes as "minimizing adult power over young people" through partnership-based relationships.

The structural differences between youth work and formal education create distinct learning environments that produce different outcomes. Formal education's hierarchical structure and assessment-driven focus limit opportunities for authentic democratic experience, while youth work's voluntary and collaborative nature provides genuine opportunities for democratic participation and value development.

The flexibility of youth work programming allows for responsive value education that addresses emerging issues and youth interests. As the national programme representative explains, "if young people have questions about LGBT or other topics, youth work provides information and activities to address these issues" based on "what young people are interested in." This responsiveness contrasts with formal education's structured curricula and enables more dynamic engagement with contemporary value conflicts and social changes.

This flexibility proves essential for addressing rapidly changing social contexts and emerging issues that affect young people's lives. Youth work can adapt quickly to address current events, social movements, and community challenges, providing relevant learning opportunities that connect to young people's lived experiences and interests.

# Youth work challenges

The research identifies challenges in youth work's value development efforts. Geographic disparities in service quality and approach create inconsistencies in emancipative value development, with rural areas facing particular challenges in addressing topics like gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. As the umbrella-

organization representative notes, "in smaller areas, it depends on the youth worker's knowledge and willingness to address these topics."

These disparities reflect broader patterns of resource distribution and professional development access in Estonia. Urban areas benefit from proximity to universities, greater diversity, and more abundant resources for specialized programming. Rural areas face challenges related to geographic isolation, limited professional development opportunities, and more conservative social environments that may resist progressive value development initiatives.

Professional development gaps among youth workers also limit effective value education. The lecturer from Tallinn University observes that "about 40 to 50 percent of our youth workers do not have formal youth work education or competency certificates" and "might not be fully aware of how their own values influence their work with young people." This lack of professional preparation can undermine systematic approaches to emancipative value development.

The capacity gaps extend beyond formal credentials to include understanding of democratic values, skill in facilitating value development processes, and awareness of how personal biases affect professional practice. Addressing these gaps requires comprehensive professional development systems that combine theoretical knowledge with practical skill development and ongoing supervision and support.

The tension between political neutrality and value education presents ongoing challenges. The lecturer from Tallinn University notes that youth workers "are afraid to get involved in politics" and often adopt the stance that "no politics in school," potentially limiting engagement with democratic participation and civic values. This reluctance to engage with political topics may constrain youth work's contribution to democratic development despite its formal mandate to promote active citizenship.

This tension reflects broader societal debates about the appropriate role of educational institutions in political socialization. Resolving this tension requires clear frameworks that distinguish between partisan political advocacy and democratic value education, along with professional development that helps youth workers navigate these complex boundaries effectively.

#### **Discussion**

The findings provide support for Evolutionary Emancipation Theory while extending its applications to non-formal educational contexts. Youth work in Estonia demonstrates how intellectual resources can be delivered through voluntary, participatory mechanisms that create optimal conditions for emancipative value development. The research reveals that the voluntary nature of youth work participation creates particularly powerful conditions for value formation, as young people choose to engage with ideas and experiences rather than having them imposed through mandatory systems.

The extension of EET to include emotional intelligence as an intellectual resource represents a theoretical contribution. Welzel's original framework emphasized cognitive resources and access to information, but this research demonstrates that emotional and social competencies also play important roles in emancipative value development. The capacity for self-reflection, empathy, and emotional regulation appears essential for developing the complex value orientations that characterize emancipative consciousness.

The finding regarding trust as a foundational element in emancipative value development offers insights for understanding democratic transitions in post-authoritarian contexts. Trust appears to operate as both a prerequisite for and outcome of emancipative value development, creating positive feedback cycles that reinforce democratic orientation. This suggests that democratic development interventions should prioritize trust-building mechanisms as foundational elements rather than secondary considerations.

Furthermore, this research demonstrates the value of stakeholder-centered evaluation approaches for understanding complex social phenomena like value development. Participatory evaluation is hands-on by nature, emphasizing purposeful use of research results for community enhancement (Journal of Extension, 2010). The use of expert interviews with diverse stakeholders provided rich insights into mechanisms and processes that might be invisible to external evaluators or quantitative measurement approaches.

The research contributes to participatory evaluation methodology by demonstrating how theoretical frameworks can guide stakeholder engagement without constraining emergent insights. The application of EET provided analytical structure while remaining open to findings that extended beyond the original theoretical boundaries. This approach offers a model for theory-informed

participatory evaluation that maintains scientific rigor while honoring stakeholder knowledge and experience.

The identification of geographic and professional development disparities through stakeholder interviews demonstrates the capacity of participatory evaluation to reveal implementation challenges that might be obscured by aggregate outcome data. This finding has important implications for policy development and resource allocation decisions that affect youth work quality and accessibility.

The research findings have implications for democratic development programming in post- authoritarian contexts. The identification of youth work's intrinsic emancipative nature suggests that programs designed to foster democratic values should prioritize structural characteristics like voluntary participation and non-hierarchical relationships rather than focusing exclusively on content delivery.

The finding that youth work provides intellectual and emotional resources that complement formal education suggests that democratic development strategies should adopt comprehensive approaches that engage multiple educational modalities. Youth work cannot substitute for formal civic education, but it offers unique contributions that enhance the overall effectiveness of democratic socialization processes.

The success of Estonian youth work in developing emancipative values provides a model for other post-Soviet nations seeking to strengthen democratic foundations. However, the research also reveals that successful implementation requires sustained investment in professional development, consistent quality standards, and attention to geographic equity in service provision.

The research has particular relevance for European Union enlargement processes and integration programming. The finding that youth work contributes to emancipative value development suggests that EU integration support should include investment in youth work systems as a mechanism for fostering European democratic values. This is particularly important for candidate countries with authoritarian legacies that require comprehensive cultural transformation alongside institutional reform.

The Estonian experience demonstrates that effective youth work systems require sustained investment, professional development infrastructure, and integration with formal educational and policy systems. Building on this foundation, EU programs that support youth work in candidate countries can play a very important role. They not only address immediate needs for youth development and civic participation but also help strengthen democracy in the long term. Additionally, by linking these programs with the European Union's Union of Skills initiative, which focuses on adult learning and skill development (Plan, R., 2018), these efforts can become even more effective. This integration creates a powerful combination that boosts youth empowerment and enhances the resilience of society as a whole.

The research also suggests that EU evaluation frameworks for democratic development programming should include indicators related to emancipative value development and youth work quality. Traditional measures of democratic progress often focus on institutional indicators while neglecting the cultural foundations that ultimately determine democratic sustainability.

#### Limitations and further research

As for limitations, this research focused exclusively on stakeholder perspectives within Estonia's youth work system, limiting insights into young people's direct experiences of value development processes. Future research should employ participatory methodologies that engage young people as co-researchers in evaluating youth work's impact on their value development and democratic engagement.

The qualitative design provided rich insights into mechanisms and processes but limited capacity for generalization across different national contexts. Comparative research examining youth work systems in multiple post-authoritarian societies would help identify universal principles and context-specific factors that influence youth work's contribution to democratic development.

The research identified emotional intelligence as an important extension to EET's intellectual resources framework, but this finding requires further theoretical development and empirical validation. Future research should examine how emotional intelligence development contributes to emancipative value formation and democratic engagement across different cultural and institutional contexts.

Longitudinal research examining the long-term outcomes of youth work participation would provide valuable insights into the durability of value development effects and their influence on adult civic engagement and democratic participation. Such research would help establish the long-term return on investment in youth work programming for democratic development.

#### **Conclusions**

This research demonstrates that youth work in Estonia operates as a systematic mechanism for developing emancipative values through distinctive approaches that complement and extend formal education. The intrinsic emancipative nature of youth work, characterized by voluntary participation and non-hierarchical relationships, creates optimal conditions for liberal democratic value formation among young people. The research confirms that youth work contributes to all four dimensions of emancipative values identified in Evolutionary Emancipation Theory while providing intellectual and emotional resources that support democratic citizenship development.

The findings reveal that youth work's contribution to democratic development occurs through multiple interconnected mechanisms including inclusive programming, participatory methodologies, reflective practice, and trust-building relationships. These mechanisms create experiences of democratic participation while developing the competencies necessary for effective civic engagement. The research extends EET by identifying emotional intelligence as an additional intellectual resource and trust as a foundational element in emancipative value development. Therefore, to conclude, the refined theoretical framework can be articulated as follows:

Intellectual and Emotional Resources (knowledge, skills, emotional intelligence, and information) develop emancipative values (personal autonomy, intimate choice, equality and freedom of voice) in society, which in turn promotes liberal democracy (institutional guarantee of civic entitlements). Additionally, as previously indicated, an unexpected result emerged regarding causal mechanisms. Therefore, it can be suggested that young people's direct experiences of youth work with its inherently emancipative character, reflected in both its methods and settings, might represent an alternative pathway for fostering emancipative values among youth, differing from the formal education mechanisms described in EET.

The study contributes to participatory evaluation methodology by demonstrating how stakeholder- centered approaches can reveal complex implementation processes and mechanisms that shape program outcomes. The identification of geographic and professional development disparities through expert interviews provides actionable insights for policy development and resource allocation decisions.

For democratic development programming, the research suggests that youth work systems require sustained investment, professional development infrastructure, and integration with formal educational and policy systems. The Estonian experience provides a model for other post-Soviet nations while highlighting the importance of addressing implementation challenges related to geographic equity and professional capacity. These critical investments and capacity-building efforts could be effectively supported through the European Union's Union of Skills initiative, which offers comprehensive frameworks aimed at enhancing both professional competencies and democratic skills across member states and candidate countries.

The research has significant implications for European Union integration and enlargement processes, suggesting that investment in youth work systems should be included in democratic development programming for candidate countries. The findings support comprehensive approaches that address both institutional and cultural dimensions of democratic transformation while emphasizing the importance of long-term investment in mechanisms that foster emancipative value development among young people.

Youth work emerges from this research as a powerful but underutilized mechanism for democratic development that deserves greater attention from researchers, policymakers, and practitioners working to strengthen democratic resilience in contemporary Europe. The Estonian experience demonstrates that systematic investment in youth work can contribute significantly to the cultural foundations necessary for sustainable democratic governance while providing immediate benefits for young people's development and well-being. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that youth work, while not a universal remedy, stands out as a purposeful and context-sensitive approach for fostering emancipative values and advancing liberal democratic principles among young

people, particularly in post-Soviet Estonia and other EU candidate countries with similar historical legacies.

Furthermore, both expert perspectives and existing research highlight youth work's particular relevance and effectiveness in societies undergoing democratic transition from authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. In such settings, where democratic institutions and civic experience are still evolving, youth work appears to fill critical gaps. This also implies its potential utility in well- established liberal democracies, especially in addressing the needs of first-generation immigrant youth coming from countries marked by undemocratic pasts, autocratic or post-totalitarian societies.

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# UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN SLOVAKIA: A CHALLENGE FOR THE SLOVAK CARE SYSTEM

#### Introduction

Overall, it can be observed that migration policy in Slovakia has not been a longterm political priority for governments, regardless of their political constellation. Despite the country's membership in the European Union for over 20 years and its relatively favourable economic development with minor fluctuations, Slovakia remains relatively closed. Slovakia is resistant to increasing diversity, fails to recognize existing diversity adequately, and does not perceive it as a potential source of development. The political discourse on migration typically revolves around depicting migration as a threat and rejecting quotas for accepting refugees. The insufficient weight and substance of migration policy likely stem from its inadequate institutional support. Among one of the most important obstacles, there is the absence of a central institution in Slovakia capable of analysing and predicting migration trends in the context of demographic changes, as well as effectively managing migration policies, particularly integration efforts (Gallo Kriglerova et al., 2021). The migration agenda is fragmented across multiple ministries. Despite its name, the Migration Office has narrowly defined powers primarily related to assessing asylum applications or other forms of international protection. No single institution comprehensively addresses migration issues.

Unaccompanied minors (UAM) occupy a marginalized position within Slovakia's migration policy. This is due to very low numbers of such children that the system manages to identify, as well as these children's lack of interest in remaining in Slovakia. For the vast majority, Slovakia is a transit country on their way to "Western Europe," typically Germany. Within state institutions, a strict system has been established for their identification and subsequent procedures aimed at providing the protection mandated by international agreements. The outbreak of war in Ukraine and the subsequent arrival of thousands of refugees have pressured both migration policy and these institutions, challenging the state's current stance towards unaccompanied minors through its institutions and procedures. However, no significant changes have been observed so far.

# Methodology

The main objective of this research was to evaluate the Slovak care system for UAM, especially those with disabilities. Our framework is based on the biopsycho-social-ecological model, which places the child at the centre and understands them as part of mutually interacting systems. The important actors are the child and its guardians, close and other daily caregivers rather than professionals or well trained and supervised paraprofessional home visitors. Professional staff, in this context, provides support to the child and their parents or caregivers in setting case management planning goals. As research has shown, family centred ecological approach strengthens families and leads to better child development outcomes (see e.g. Dunst at all, 2006). This perspective also shaped our research strategy.

Our evaluation combined desk research, interviews, and focus groups. Participants included representatives from public authorities, NGOs, social workers, guardians, and - most importantly - the children themselves. Based on statistical data, teenage girls were identified as the core target group across the project countries. However, in practice, our research included both girls and boys, including younger children. The research focused primarily on practical findings, rather than legal frameworks. A total of 18 extensive interviews were conducted for this study in May and June 2024.

A key principle throughout this study was ethical child participation, based on Child Safeguarding Protocols. Children were not treated as passive research subjects, but as active agents, contributing their own perspectives and ideas for solution to their life situations. Their voices helped us identify major systemic shortcomings - especially the lack of inclusive practices.

# **Key findings**

According to the latest available data from Eurostat (April 2025), approximately 132,600 Ukrainians in Slovakia hold temporary protection status, representing about 24 individuals per 1,000 inhabitants. This has made them the third largest ethnic minority in the country. Despite significant migratory pressure caused by the war in Ukraine, which has had a fundamentally different character compared to previous migration waves that were primarily driven by transit motives, the situation remains unchanged. Migration remains a politically marginal issue in

Slovakia. In practice, the core challenges in providing care and ensuring inclusive practice for UAM were identified at the level of terminology.

As it was mentioned above, unaccompanied minors have a marginalized position within Slovakia's migration policy. Within state institutions, a strict system has been established for their identification and subsequent procedures aimed at providing the protection mandated by international agreements. The national procedures for unaccompanied migrant children are formally established by a set of legal norms. The Slovak Republic is also obliged to comply with its commitments arising from international conventions. In this context, it is particularly important to highlight the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 22, which sets out the obligations of the State Parties with respect to a child who is considered a refugee under the applicable legal framework. In this regard, the primary concern in the case of a minor in Slovakia is their reunification with family (Kopinec, 2023).

Firstly, an unaccompanied minor is defined as a child who is not a citizen of the Slovak Republic and is present in the territory of the Slovak Republic without the accompaniment of a parent or another adult to whom the child could be entrusted for care. This definition is established by Act No. 305/2005 Coll. on Social and Legal Protection of Children and Social Guardianship and on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Acts (hereinafter referred to as the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children). Slovak legislation and the system of social and legal protection do not recognize the term "separated child", which can present practical issues, for instance, in the later identification of a child when this adult leaves the child (see more FRA, 2010).

Secondly, under Slovak law, a guardian is a representative of a person who cannot act on their own behalf with legal effect and is appointed as a representative for a specific action or proceeding (e.g., a guardian for asylum proceedings). According to the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children, the function of a guardian in relation to unaccompanied minors is performed by the authority for social and legal protection of children (§22 paragraph 1 of the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children). The court defines the scope of the guardian's rights and responsibilities to fulfil the purpose for which the guardian was appointed and to adequately protect the interests of the minor child (§61 paragraph 2 of the Family Act). The purpose of guardianship is not to replace the parent; the

guardian typically interacts with the UAM only when carrying out legal acts on behalf of the UAM.

What we see in these definitions is not only the administrative overlooking of a significant group of children who meet the criteria for the definition of a separated child, a group that, according to international conventions, is considered at risk. So, the Slovak legislation does not recognise the category of a 'separated child', which hinders adequate legal protection - a gap that is particularly critical for children arriving from Ukraine. The second fundamental problem is that the function of guardianship is reduced to a purely administrative role, with no caregiving responsibilities within its mandate. In practice, this means that caregiving for UAM is provided solely in the form of institutional care within a facility designated for this target group (currently the Centre for Families and Children in Medzilaborce)

The conditions of stay for UAM at the Centre are the same as for children with Slovak citizenship. Residence in the facility is possible until they reach adulthood, or up to the age of 25 if the UAM is pursuing education. Information about the conditions of care in this facility is known mainly from secondary data. One significant indicator of how the system functions is the number of runaways from the facility — which, according to available data, represents a serious problem. One of the reasons for the high rate of absconding is the lack of interest in remaining in Slovakia. Other reasons include unfamiliar surroundings, not knowing anyone, leaving to join family members in another EU country, distrust of state authorities, lack of a sense of security after placement in the Centre, or communication barriers (IVPR, 2017). According to the same study, runaways most often occur after 11 days, with the average length of stay before running away being 21 days. After escaping, despite being reported to the police, there is usually minimal chance of recovering the child. The same analysis revealed several problematic findings indicating the system's limitations in caring for children. For instance, runaways occur even before guardianship is established. The study also mentioned the confiscation of mobile phones as a reason for a longer stay in the facility.

The living conditions in the Center for Children and Families (Centre) are designed for unaccompanied minor to meet all their needs (e.g., leisure activities, a classroom, a prayer room, a gym, a playground, etc.), just like for Slovak children.

Each child is assigned a caregiver who creates an individual educational plan for him/her. The main issues with the functioning of Centre include insufficient financial support and the lack of regular visits by a specialized psychologist. To address these issues, the Centre closely collaborates with various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have projects to assist and support UAM (such as language courses and various leisure activities). UAM in Centre are provided with full healthcare services through public health insurance, just like children with Slovak citizenship.

The third key finding concerns the education and healthcare systems. An analysis of available data, as well as data collected during our research, showed that the education and healthcare systems are not adapted to the needs of children with disabilities. The status of unaccompanied minors does not exclude health disadvantages or risks associated with delayed development. On the contrary, separation from family, a journey marked by many dangers, experiences with traffickers, various forms of violence, and often war trauma all necessitate at least a call for a comprehensive psycho-social approach. Although the system's framework for assisting unaccompanied minors guarantees equal access to care for health disadvantages as Slovak children, Slovakia faces inadequate capacities in fully managing a child's health disadvantage. As noted in the report by the Platform for Families of Children with Disabilities, the situation of children with health disabilities and their families in Slovakia has worsened even more after the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to assistance from various institutions has become more complex in this area. Waiting lists to access services and diagnostics have grown longer, and fewer pupils were able to follow online learning than their nondisabled peers. Independent analyses confirm these concerns, showing that the government does not provide adequate support to these families:

- Only 10% of children with disabilities have access to Early Childhood Intervention services.
- Only 9,4% of children with disabilities are included in kindergartens and 12,34% of school children are diagnosed as having special needs (4th highest in the EU).
- 5,6% of Slovak children are educated in special schools (the highest educational segregation at the EU level).
- Less than half of schools' needs for special assistants were met by the government in 2022.

Even when it comes to the disability, there is problem in terminology. Slovak legislation does not have a specific definition of disability. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family on its website further defines disability as any mental, physical, temporary, long-term, or permanent disorder or handicap that prevents persons with disabilities from adapting to the normal demands of life. It can be physical, psychological, or a combination of both. Besides, in the context of education in helping professions the level of scientific terminology and methodology is considerably influenced by various viewpoints and interests of medicine, sociology, social work, psychology, patopsychology and special education (Hrozenská et al., 2013). In practice, disability is primarily viewed from a medical perspective, where the law defines a person with a disability as someone who is long-term physically or mentally disadvantaged, with a severe disability being one that involves a limitation of physical, sensory, or mental capabilities of at least 50%.

Medical assessments are carried out by physicians, and compensation matters fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family. It can also be stated that the notion persists that disability should be addressed through invalidity benefits, social allowances, and support payments. There is a lack of discussion about potential solutions, available compensatory aids, the need for barrier-free environmental adaptations, or the possibility of retraining in relation to future employment (Repková, Sedláková 2012). In the case of the groups of people with disabilities, it is possible to use several types of systems or devices that serve them in their daily lives and support their independence and autonomy. These include, for example, mobile applications and wearable technologies that allow for monitoring health and wellness (Hrozenská, 2024).

When we refocus on children with disabilities from Ukraine - who often meet the definition of a separated child - we see a system that completely fails to provide adequate and comprehensive support. In this regard, documented experiences show that the quality of services in the home country (Ukraine) was perceived as higher than in Slovakia. There are even documented cases of families returning to Ukraine due to the lack of available services in Slovakia. Currently, Slovakia completely lacks a network of MHPSS centres capable of delivering adequate and comprehensive support to children (and adults) with a migration background.

To sum up, the care system is under-resourced and uncoordinated. NGOs very often substitute for the role of the state in providing services, but without stable funding. The situation has further deteriorated following the last elections and the installation of the new government. After the withdrawal of international organisations, the situation significantly worsened, and the support infrastructure has substantially weakened. Currently, the system provides only emergency care, with almost no follow-up services in place.

Based on our findings, key limitations regarding UAMs are:

- Fragmented responsibilities across multiple ministries, coordinating body is missing in practice.
- No integration strategy for unaccompanied minors.
- Temporary protection is not a long-term integration solution, but any other strategy or measure is missing, there is no follow-up for those persons, the situation is in many aspects unpredictable.
- The specific needs of children with disabilities are not acknowledged in the system they remain invisible.

# **Implications for Evaluation**

The care system for unaccompanied minors in Slovakia urgently requires evaluation and revision, both in terms of definition and procedures. It proves to be inefficient. While Slovak authorities manage to capture a small percentage of unaccompanied minors fleeing their home countries, the system provides them with basic and necessary care (housing, clothing, food, medical treatment). However, after surviving the worst conditions, most of them embark again on a journey to "Western Europe". Unfortunately, Slovakia, despite its relatively good economic situation, is not an attractive destination for these children. Understandably, a significant factor behind this is their desire to reunite with relatives already residing in these countries. These challenges are not new; they reflect longer-term systemic tensions in Slovak social work, including the insufficiently defined relationship between social services and social work itself, as well as the historical tendency to perceive social work primarily as administrative assistance rather than as a profession with its own value base and therapeutic potential (Brnula, Vaska, 2021).

As part of our research, we attempted an evaluation of the care system for UAM with disabilities in Slovakia. Both the desk research and the subsequent

interviews revealed that this is not only a marginalised topic but also one that is insufficiently covered by data. Currently, data are fragmented across various ministries, not interconnected, and thus, for example, it is impossible to determine the level of Ukrainian children's participation in education, as they have not yet been subject to compulsory schooling requirements. We describe this unfavourable situation in Slovakia using the term 'data hell', which has since COVID-19 pandemic become a widely accepted metaphor for this state-level data dysfunction. Practice also shows that in assessing the effectiveness and quality of the system, data are virtually never considered. Likewise, the views of children and their reflections on the quality of services provided to them are not considered.

What has this project taught us about evaluating policies? Without reliable data and the inclusion of vulnerable groups, it is impossible to design policies that are sufficiently sensitive and adequate to the needs of various target groups. The recommendations we formulated in this regard primarily address the need for systematic and continuous evaluation of system processes to ensure that the system can flexibly innovate and adapt in response to changing conditions (as was the case, for example, when the war in Ukraine broke out). Our experience with involving children in the evaluation of the system - even in countries such as Slovakia where this is not common practice - shows the immense added value of participatory methods. It is not enough to speak only with service providers; it is essential to include service recipients in the evaluation as well. While this may be demanding to implement, the outcomes are extremely valuable. In conducting our research, we faced challenges such as language barriers, participant accessibility, and the high vulnerability of respondents (due to war trauma, disability, isolation, distrust, etc.). This experience with such a capacity analysis demonstrated the importance of political changes that fully reflect field realities. Equally important is consistent support and supervision for helping professionals working with vulnerable children, which has proved crucial even in digital form during crisis periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Vrťová, Vaska, 2022). A purely legal analysis is by no means sufficient - otherwise, there is a real risk of overlooking vulnerable groups.

## Conclusion

This research confirms that Slovakia's migration policy framework, despite recent pressures linked to the war in Ukraine, remains institutionally fragmented, underresourced, and politically marginalised. The position of unaccompanied minors, especially those with disabilities, highlights systemic gaps in both policy and practice. The lack of recognition of the category of a 'separated child' and the reduction of guardianship to an administrative function leave these children without adequate legal protection or comprehensive caregiving. The care system still relies predominantly on institutional care, which does not address the individual needs of highly vulnerable children, often resulting in high rates of absconding and unresolved family reunification cases.

The study also shows that the education and healthcare systems are ill-prepared to meet the specific needs of children with disabilities, with limited capacity, long waiting times, and persistent structural barriers. For children with a migration background, these gaps are even more pronounced. The absence of specialised MHPSS (mental health and psychosocial support) centres and the over-reliance on NGOs, which operate without sustainable funding, further weaken the system's ability to provide consistent and inclusive support.

The evaluation process itself revealed that relevant data are fragmented, inaccessible, and underutilised for informed decision-making. The so-called 'data hell' illustrates the state's inability to produce and share reliable information to monitor the real situation and outcomes for UAM. Crucially, the perspectives of children themselves remain largely unheard, and their lived experiences are excluded from policy evaluation and improvement processes.

In sum, our findings underscore that without a coordinated approach, solid data infrastructure, and genuine child participation, Slovakia's care system for UAM, especially those with disabilities, cannot fulfil its obligations under international conventions nor adapt to evolving crises. It is essential to strengthen institutional cooperation, develop long-term integration measures beyond temporary protection, and systematically involve children and their families in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services. A purely legal or administrative perspective is not enough: practical, field-driven innovations are required to avoid perpetuating invisibility and marginalisation of those most at risk.

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During her doctoral studies in social work at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University, she focused on youth needs research, which remains her long-term area of interest. As an external consultant, she has collaborated on numerous research and analytical projects with non-governmental organizations.

In 2016, she launched a research program under the Slovak Youth Council aimed at exploring the needs of young people. Her work primarily addresses topics such as youth participation, civic and political values of young people, leisure trends, and the measurement of quality and impact in youth work.

She currently works as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava.

# Evaluation of Educational Policies



#### Zsuzsa Blaskó

# **Independent Researcher**

THE USE OF META-ANALYSIS IN PROGRAMME EVALUATIONS. THE CASE OF THE ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME EVALUATION SUPPORT STUDY<sup>11</sup>

#### Introduction

This presentation collects the main lessons learnt from the performance of three meta- analyses in the context of the "Erasmus+ 2021-2027 interim evaluation and Erasmus+ 2014-2020 final evaluation" (from now on Erasmus+ evaluation) support study. Instead of

the main findings from these analyses, the presentation focused on the methodology, the main challenges, the solutions applied and the generic lessons learned from this exercise with the aim of delivering fruit for thought for policyand programme evaluators for identifying best analytical methods for their evaluation projects.

# **About meta-analysis**

Based on a widely referenced, early definition, coming from the area of education research, meta-analysis "... refers to the analysis of analyses. It is the statistical analysis of a large collection of analysis results from individual studies for the purpose of integrating the findings." (Glass 1976, p.3) Indeed, meta-analysis is a quantitative synthesis of quantitative research findings. In its traditional form, also called effect-size meta-analysis, it brings together and quantitatively presents findings from empirical research that estimate the effect- size of a specific treatment – let it be a programme, a policy, or a life event.

The estimate of the underlying effect size in a meta-analysis is based on a range of studies often coming from diverse settings and populations, and thus offering more credible finding compared to the individual underlying studies that necessarily refer to less diverse settings and populations. When all the preconditions are met, an estimate based on several studies is claimed to have more

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> I thank to Valeria Ansaloni, Lucian Plaumannn and Marcello Matranga for their valuable contributions to this project and to Prof. Jochen Kluve for providing expert support to the support study. I am also grateful to Luca Favero for the helpful discussions we had together when designing the meta-analyses for this study. The support study is not yet published.

statistical power than the estimates derived from the individual studies. Moreover, beside offering the "average" effect size of the treatment under investigation, meta-analyses also help to answer mediational questions, i.e. to identify social groups, conditions, modes of policy-interventions etc. that can make the treatment more or less effective. By helping policy makers (as well as academics) make sense of the often contradictory and inconclusive findings from a broad set of studies, meta-analyses are described as being increasingly used by policy makers (see e.g. Stanley 2001; Pigott and Polanin 2020; Maynard 2024).

Examples of meta-analysis come from a diverse set of policy areas – just to mention a few, randomly selected recent examples, these include energy policies (e.g. Labanderia et al. 2020), labour market policies (e.g. Card et al. 2018) as well as of course education policies (e.g. Gaffney 2021, Lynch et al. 2023). One can argue, that due to its very construction, i.e. by aiming at answering research questions related to the effects of a treatment, meta-analysis naturally offers itself as a tool to be used in programme- and policy evaluations. Still, according to our best knowledge, its application in the European policy evaluation field is so far limited. In the followings we use lessons learnt from the recent evaluation of the Erasmus+ Programme to understand the reasons for this limited usage and to identify conditions for the applicability of this analytical method in policy (and programme) evaluations.

#### Meta-analyses as part of the Erasmus+ evaluation support study

As part of the evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme, three meta-analyses were completed. Specifying the three topics for meta-analyses formed part or the request, i.e. it had to be carried out as part of the research activity. Consequently, the usual methodological steps of

(1) doing a systematic literature review to identify the underlying studies to be included in the analysis, (2) identifying and coding the estimates in the selected studies and (3) completing the meta-analysis by estimating the appropriate meta-analytic models, needed to be preceded by the identification of three research questions. These research questions had to meet two major conditions. First, they had to be relevant to measuring the effectiveness of the Erasmus+ programme and second, they had to cover a research area, where a sufficient

number of underlying studies could be retained that meet the requirements for inclusion in a meta-analyses.

A preliminary literature review combined with discussions with experts in the field led to identifying the following three research- and evaluation questions – each related to an individual level effect of Erasmus mobilities for higher education students:

- (1) does participating in an Erasmus+ higher education student mobility have an effect on educational outcomes including cognitive skills improvement and academic performance?
- (2) does participating in an Erasmus+ higher education student mobility have an effect on employment outcomes including the quality of employment and the time needed for finding a job after graduation?
- (3) does participating in an Erasmus+ higher education student mobility have an effect on "Europeanness", including the participant's European identity, positive attitudes towards Europe and the EU as well as cognitive knowledge about the European Union?

It is important to note, that each question focuses on the same particular element of the complex and rich set of actions and activities that form part of the Erasmus+ programme, namely on student mobility in higher education. Extensive literature search made it clear, that no other programme field or action could be studied with the means of the meta-analysis, as none of them has so far been studied extensively enough to produce a reasonable number of high quality, quantitative studies to form a pool for meta-analysis.

In terms of the necessary minimum number of studies required for a metaanalysis, in the literature some consensus exists that at least ten studies are needed to provide reliable results (Ahn and Kang 2018; Di Pietro 2021). In terms of study methodology, as common practice, to qualify for the inclusion in an effectsize meta-analysis, the underlying studies are expected to be based on econometric analysis.

### **Challenges and solutions**

A major challenge, identified from the beginning in the evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme, was the limited number of studies with the required qualities even within the three specific research areas selected for inclusion in the

study. This was a possible limitation acknowledged from the start of the research, and which was considered already in the research design phase. Two main strategies were applied to increase the pool of underlying studies.

First, considering the particularly limited number of studies that focus solely on Erasmus and Erasmus+ mobilities, we adjusted the research questions by including also such studies that looked at mobility-participants in a geographical setting that makes Erasmus (and Erasmus+) to be a likely funder of the mobilities (typically: mobilities from- and to Europe) as long as the study explicitly mentions Erasmus (or Erasmus+) as one possible funder of the mobilities.

Second, we followed the method of sign and significance meta-analysis, which – compared to the traditional effect-size meta-analysis – sets less strict criteria for inclusion for the underlying research to be included in the meta-analysis. The method was first introduced by Card and his colleagues in 2010 (Card et al. 2010) to synthetise studies that "...use very different dependent variables ... and very different econometric modelling strategies." (page 453). The method is based on the idea, that when deriving standardized effect sizes is not possible, then instead of estimating the size of the effect across the underlying studies, the meta-analysis can still aim at establishing the conditions that make the underlying study more (or less) likely to suggest a significantly positive-, an insignificant- or a statistically negative impact. This can be achieved through coding the sign and the significance of the estimates from the underlying studies and estimating ordered probit regressions, to establish the likelihood of getting a significant positive, an insignificant or a significant negative finding associated with various possible determinants.

Unlike Card et al. (2010), who relied solely on studies with effect-sizes being estimated, we also included studies without such an estimate that still attempted to measure the effect by making simple means-comparisons either in the form of a pre-post-test or by comparing mobility participants to non-participants. Studies based on such methods were accepted for the analysis as long as the method was clearly described, including the presentation of the sample sizes and standard errors. This way it was possible to register the significance level of the difference found and coding the sign and the significance of the effect in question. By systematically controlling in our final meta-analytic models also for the underlying research design, our analyses highlighted the effects that

applying different approaches made on the results of studies on higher education social mobilities in Europe.

Beside facing the challenge of identifying the necessary number of studies for our purposes, another specificity of our study was that by focusing on the effects of Erasmus+ higher education student mobilities, we were in fact looking at treatments with little heterogeneity both in the programme design and in its implementation. While meta-analyses often look at such variations of the programmes or policies and on the consequences of such variations on the impact achieved, our meta-analyses considered a specific programme with relatively standard design and implementation. Higher education student mobilities funder by the Erasmus+ programme are credit mobilities that last between 2 and 12 months, but typically one semester; they usually involve mobilities from one European country to another and are based on similar funding conditions. Even when some variations in these conditions exist, they were rarely considered and registered in the underlying studies. Acknowledging this potential difficulty, rather than trying to answer the research question "what type of mobility works best?", we focused on answering: "for whom and under what circumstances does mobility work best?". To do so, the codebook developed allowed for a broad range of possible moderator analyses, including by gender, sending- and receiving country, level of studies, ethnicity, migration status and socio-economic background. As it turned out however, only few of these characteristics could be systematically coded from the underlying studies.

# Findings and lessons learnt

The outcomes from three systematic reviews to answer the research- and evaluation questions justified the approach taken in this study. In two out of the three topics, the number of papers that could be included in the meta-analysis was close to the threshold of ten: 11 for employment outcomes and 10 for European values – resulting in 48 and 39 estimates respectively to be included in the final meta-analytic regressions. The specific outcome measures for each of the three topics were highly heterogenous and difficult to standardise.

Moreover, for the education outcomes topic, 10 paper out of the 19 employed means- comparisons while for European values, this was the case in 9 out of the 10 cases – making sign- and significance meta-analysis the only option to consider.

The three meta-analyses provided important benefits for the evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme as they delivered some useful contributions to answering evaluation question related to the effectiveness of the programme – although they rarely provided full answers. They pointed at some specific conditions that can make the mobilities more- or less effective regarding the various outcomes. They showed for example that time of mobility and sending country matter, but not consistently across outcomes and that selectivity of mobile students along all the three outcomes is key and needs to be better understood.

In addition, the systematic reviews served as stock-taking exercises: they identified major research- and data gaps and delivered a strong basis for follow-ups for possible updates on the topics at later times, when (hopefully) more studies will become available. The reviews also have the potential to contributing to strengthening the evaluation culture through drawing attention to the need for more systematic studies, preferably for more counterfactual designs but also for more consistent and precise reporting of study methodologies and results that was often lacking in the studies identified. Finally, the three analyses demonstrated the potentials of applying sign- and significance meta-analysis in situations when the conditions for effect size analysis are not met and showed how this method can deliver important findings despite its limitations.

As a conclusion, some generic advice can be formed for evaluators that consider applying meta-analysis as part of a programme- or policy evaluation project. In the context of ex-post evaluations, a meta-analysis is worth considering when a particularly significant, large-scale and long-standing programme (or policy) like Erasmus+ is being evaluated. Further, conducting a meta-analysis can be a valuable option in ex-ante evaluations, when there is an interest in comparing similar programmes with comparable objectives and in identifying program-characteristics associated with greater success. In both of these cases however, the chances of finding a sufficient number of good quality underlying studies will be higher if the subject is of relevance for the broader evaluation / academic community.

Nevertheless, important limitations will remain and pose additional challenges especially when relatively recent programmes or programming periods need to be evaluated in an ex- post evaluation. Crucially, the different, or even conflicting timelines of policymaking and evaluation are in the case of meta-analyses further

intensified by the timeline of academic research. As the most important source of publications for meta-analyses are academic books and journals, the timeline for academic publications further adds to the already existing challenges of affectively assessing a policy's impact in a timely manner to inform the next policy cycle.

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# **Bálint Herczeg**

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# EFFECT OF UNIVERSITIES' PROGRAMS ON THE TERTIARY DROP-OUT PROBABILITY IN HUNGARY

#### Overview

The goal of the impact assessment was to examine whether the intervention EFOP-3.4.3-16 financed by the Structural Funds managed to decrease the universities' drop-out rates in the 2014-2020 programming period. The projects of EFOP-3.4.3-16 had a wide variety of activities, and its main goal was to modernize the Hungarian higher education; so, its impact should have reached beyond decreasing the drop-out rates. The project managers at the universities think that the greatest outcomes of the projects were the help it provided for attitude changes, methodological reforms, development of digital educational materials and incentives for closer intra-institutional cooperations.

#### **Methods**

Linear probability models were estimated on paired sample of university students. Matching was executed by propensity score estimation with replacement, limiting to the common support and only using student pairs from the same universities, same faculty, field of study and study level.

## **Presentation of participants**

Building the database from the participating students was a difficult task. Identification data of the participating students wasn't collected systematically during the implementation of the projects, so identifiable students had to be searched for in progress reports, their annexes (sometimes handwritten name lists) or other administrative documents of the projects. The goal was to find students that can be traced in the central administrative database of higher education, the Information System of Higher Education (ISHE) to see how their university career ended. This was not possible in every case, thus we only managed to identify 6110 student/training pairs from 7 out of the 22 projects.

Using ISHE had the further benefit that it also contains other information about the students university careers: whether they paid tuition, got any scholarships, lived in dorms during their training, did they receive extra point during the admission process for being disadvantaged in any way etc.

The treated database was complemented with 60 172 non-treated student/training pairs from the same universities and same time periods. Data in this case also came from the ISHE.

#### Results

During the matching process it was not enough to control the entry conditions of the programs, as the activities were supposed to primary help disadvantaged students (or students coming from disadvantaged districts), and the course difficulty (same faculty, field of study, level, work schedule), because the participating students also behaved differently during their university years. A higher proportion of them received grants (hinting to better academic results) and more of them lived in dorms (easier living conditions). Therefore the events that occurred during the training period were added to calculate propensity scores for choosing the control group. Additionally, matching was limited to students from exactly the same faculty, field of study, level and work schedule. Using this paired sample, the dropout probability of those participating in the program was 9 percentage points lower than of those in the control group.

Table 1. The effect of participating in the program on the drop-out probability of the student

	1	2	3	4
Participation in the program	-0,10***	-0,10***	-0,10***	-0,09***
	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
Year of graduation		yes	yes	yes
Type of secondary education		yes	yes	yes
Field of study			yes	yes
Level of study (BA vs. MA)			yes	yes
Study method (full time vs. part time)			yes	yes
Events during study period (type of				yes
grants, foreign studies, accommodation				
in dormitory)				
Constans	0,26***	0,32	0,38	0,33
	0,00	0,16	0,16	0,12
R squared	0,01	0,06	0,09	0,41
N	7880	7880	7880	7880

Examining the effect by intervention types, we found that individual tutoring had the greatest effect (it reduced the probability of dropping out by 20 percentage points), followed by additional professional programs (16 percentage point decrease), the most common group tutoring (10 percentage point decrease) and mentoring (5 percentage point decrease). Grants and counseling had no effect.

Table 2. The effect of participating in the program on the drop-out probability of the student by type of intervention

	1	2	3	4
Type of intervention				
Individual tutoring	-0,13***	-0,13***	-0,20***	-0,20***
	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
Group tutoring	-0,14***	-0,14***	-0,10***	-0,10***
	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
Additional professional program	-0,19*	-0,21**	-0,15*	-0,16*
	0,02	0,01	0,02	0,02
Mentoring	-0,10***	-0,10***	-0,05**	-0,05**
	0,00	0,00	0,01	0,01
Counselling	0,40***	0,10**	0,09***	-0,04
	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,15
Grants	-0,13*	-0,12*	-0,08	-0,07
	0,02	0,02	0,09	0,09
Treatment in passive semester		0,53***		0,25***
		0,00		0,00
Year of graduation			yes	yes
Type of secondary education			yes	yes
Events during study period (type of			yes	yes
grants, foreign studies, accommodation				
in dormitory)				
Constant	0,26***	0,26***	0,37*	0,37*
	0,00	0,00	0,05	0,04
R squared	0,08	0,10	0,39	0,39
N	7880	7880	7880	7880

# **Concluding remarks**

It is still possible that there are still unobservable differences between treated and control students in a way that are related to the participation in the program and affect the possibility of the dropout. For example, the motivation to voluntarily participate in tutoring activities could also have affected drop-out rates. But with

the limitations of our current data, selection bias can't be further decreased at this point.

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He is the author of several educational papers based on both Hungarian and PISA assessment data. His main research question in this field is how disadvantageous status of students affects school choice, progress and early school leaving in the Hungarian school system. One example for this is the evaluation to estimate the effects of an educational program conducted by a non-governmental organization in the city of Ózd. Previously he was part of the team which evaluated the Hungarian Sure Start Program.

He participated in several other program evaluations and impact assessments on various topics: estimated the impact of the EU non-refundable support on the SMEs turnover and added value and he was co-author of an evaluation on financial assets aimed on SMEs during the COVID crises. Right now, he is the lead evaluator in two international programs – the SciLMi Erasmus+ Teacher Academy and the Horizon project STREAM-IT.



EVIDENCE-BASED SKILL MISMATCH AND JOB MISMATCH TO TRANSFORM EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS FOR INCLUSIVE ADULT LEARNING

#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines how literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills interact with job-related skill needs to shape mismatch patterns across OECD countries. The analysis is based on an open-data repository from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC 2023), which has survey data from adults aged 16 to 65 across 31 participating countries and economies. Countries with inclusive Adult Education and Training systems have lower mismatch rates. Comparative analysis across countries and economies suggests improving adult cognitive skills and establishing inclusive lifelong learning policies to reduce mismatches in evolving labour markets.

Keywords: Adult competencies, skill mismatch, employment mismatch, PIAAC.

#### Introduction

Skill and employment mismatch has become a central issue in modern labor markets. Mismatches arise when workers' skills are underused or overused, or when the type of skills used differs from those acquired. Rapid technological change and evolving job demands exacerbate this issue. OECD research (2016) links skill mismatches to individuals' cognitive capacities, such as literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving. While previous studies have explored the relationship between skills and wages (Wiederhold & Ackermann-Piek, 2014) or the demographic determinants of mismatch (Chiswick & Miller, 2009; Allen & de Grip, 2012), limited empirical work remains on how skills match with the skills needed for the job.

This paper examines how literacy, numeracy, and adaptive problem-solving skills interact with job mismatch patterns across all OECD countries. Moreover, it focuses on exploring the case of adults between 25 and 65 utilizing the open data repository PIAAC (2023). PIAAC refers to the Program for the International

Assessment of Adult Competencies Survey of Adult Skills. It is a large-scale international study that includes adults' key cognitive and workplace skills. It was developed to build upon two existing surveys, the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey (IALS) and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL). We examine how adult skills relate to skill use at work, using PIAAC data to explore skill-job market mismatches in various national contexts via utilizing the survey data on adult cognitive and workplace skills that focuse on literacy, numeracy, and adaptive problem-solving skills.

It is essential to understand: What the intergenerational trends are that impact adults' knowledge and skills development over the years. Given, school quality differences within nations, it concerns understanding the differences dominated by educational systems, and the enacted and implemented policies can lead to the reproduction of the skills and competences gained, and be apt to the sustainable reproduction of the educational outcomes. According to the adult survey findings (OECD, 2024), research indicates an increasing gap between lowskilled and high-skilled adults due to generational inequalities and access to learning opportunities, as mentioned above. Yet, there are chances that educational outcomes may produce better outcomes for all. "Lifelong learning" is one of the most emphasized phrases for adult learning, and many countries have already included a prominent place for adult training programs in their educational systems for decades. The Quality Matters OECD report (OECD, 2024) claims that the disparities can be bridged through inclusive Adult Education and Training (AET) systems. Yet, individuals who lack continuous learning opportunities face more significant risks of falling behind in the labour market and face a skills mismatch.

The current study is significant as we address the challenges above and showcase how governments increasingly focus on strengthening Adult Education and Training frameworks, fostering lifelong learning, and introducing innovative funding strategies to support continuous skills development. Some efforts aim to create a more inclusive and equitable education system that ensures that citizens find the opportunity to enhance their skills and remain competitive in a rapidly changing job market (OECD, 2024). We use empirical data to answer how the latter can be improved and produce policy recommendations at European and non-European levels.

# **Rationale and Hypothesis**

The paper relies on evidence-based data to indicate how some educational systems can become better aligned and lead to higher skill mismatches compared to lower ones. It draws on human capital theory and skill-biased technological change frameworks, which suggest that labour market outcomes are increasingly determined by the match between workers' cognitive skills and job demands. The study seeks to test the hypothesis that "higher literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills are associated with lower levels of skill mismatch in labour markets."

#### **Data and Methods**

The study uses data from the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), targeting adults aged 16 to 65 in 31 countries. The 2022-2023 dataset includes information on literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving proficiency in technology-rich environments, as well as self-reported skill use at work.

This analysis focuses on employed adults and compares countries with high (Finland, Japan, Sweden) and low (Chile, Portugal, Poland, Lithuania) proficiency scores. Key constructs include cognitive skills (Literacy, numeracy, problemsolving) and Skill Use at Work (Literacy (F2\_Q01a\_F2\_Q02c), Numeracy (F2\_Q03a\_F2\_Q03e), ICT (F2\_Q04\_F2\_Q05f). Responses are on a 5-point Rating Scale (where 1 = Never to 5 = Every day). The analysis included country rankings based on mean skill scores and conducted cross-tabulations to compare task frequency and skill use across countries.

#### **Results**

The use of foundational skills in the workplace varies across countries. Daily reading of directions and emails is most common in Finland and Sweden, while Chile and Lithuania report less frequent use of professional texts. Regarding numeracy, basic calculations are widely used in Finland and Lithuania, whereas advanced mathematics is seldom applied across all countries. Internet-based communication represents the most common ICT skill in Portugal and Chile, while programming remains the least utilized digital skill globally. Patterns of skill mismatch also vary: Japan illustrates underutilization with high proficiency but low skill use; Chile shows overutilization with low proficiency but high skill use;

and Finland demonstrates balanced alignment, with both high proficiency and high levels of skill use in the workplace.

Mismatches between skills and job demands can lead to wasted human capital, job strain, and inefficient education investments. This highlights the need for policies that align education with labor market needs, redesign jobs to better utilize skills, and implement targeted upskilling and reskilling programs.

The analysis supports the hypothesis that higher cognitive skills are linked to reduced mismatch. Countries with inclusive AET systems show better alignment between skills and job roles. Strengthening adult education policies that can address the mismatch and enhance labour market efficiency.

# **Conclusions and implications**

The study findings provide statistical evidence to support our hypothesis: "Higher literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills are associated with lower levels of skill mismatch in labor markets. The presence of a mismatch has several policy and economic implications. First of all, wasted human capital in underutilization cases leads to reduced productivity and limited innovation potential. Thus, job strain and low quality of work in overutilization contexts may lower job satisfaction and increase turnover.

The educational system matters a lot. In situations where inefficiencies in training and education systems, either the supply or demand side, is misaligned with actual labor market needs. Thus, showing a negative association between average proficiency scores and skill mismatch indicators across countries. In high-performing countries, such as Finland and Japan, where literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving proficiency levels are above

the OECD average, the reported frequency of skill use at work aligns more closely with workers' capabilities. In contrast, countries with lower proficiency levels, such as Poland,

Portugal, and Chile, data tend to report both higher levels of underuse of skills and tasks that exceed workers' competencies, reflecting a persistent mismatch in the labor market.

We suggest that better alignment between education and labor markets, particularly through vocational pathways and lifelong learning can make a difference. To that end, there is a need for job redesign to ensure skill utilization,

especially in countries with high human capital but limited occupational complexity. Finally, we recommend targeted upskilling/reskilling programs in low-proficiency contexts to prevent overutilization and ensure decent work outcomes.

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# DESPITE BEING A GIRL, SHE..." EVALUATING GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN BASIC EDUCATION IN ALBANIA

Educational inequalities remain a significant challenge in general, particularly regarding gender perspectives in basic education. Despite Albania's adoption of national strategies for gender equality, effective implementation at the classroom level remains a gap, often due to unconscious biases and a lack of specific training for educators. This study explores innovative methods to address these persistent inequalities, emphasizing the importance of participative research. By engaging teachers as active co-researchers, the research aims to examine gender perspectives in civic education within Albanian schools, focusing on how teaching practices and classroom dynamics shape students' gendered experiences. Through qualitative methods, including focus groups and participatory observations in the Elbasan district, this study seeks to discover critical insights into school inequalities, identify subtle gender biases, and contribute to practical recommendations for fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

Keywords: participative research, education, teaching practices, teachers, Albania, gender

#### Introduction

Educational inequalities, especially those linked to gender, remain a pressing issue in many educational systems worldwide (Farago et al., 2022). Despite progress in educational access, gender inequalities persist, particularly in classrooms where teaching practices and curricula often reflect and reinforce societal norms and biases (Hilliard & Liben, 2010; Kowalski, 2007). Civic education, which plays a crucial role in shaping students' understanding of democracy, rights, and social responsibilities, can either challenge or perpetuate gendered expectations (Haste, 2010). Without a gender-sensitive approach, civic education may reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting students' potential for critical thinking and perpetuating an unequal educational environment. Girls, in particular, may experience reduced levels of engagement, self-confidence, and agency in advocating for their rights, while boys may benefit from teaching

practices that implicitly favour them, reinforcing gender inequalities both in the classroom and in broader society.

Research by Heyder et al. (2017), Skelton (2007), and Espinoza & Strasser (2020) highlights how gender biases in the classroom, from curriculum content to teacher-student interactions, reinforce traditional gender norms, limiting both boys' and girls' potential. Teachers often unconsciously give more attention to male students, particularly in subjects like mathematics and science, which negatively impacts girls' self-esteem and academic performance (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). These biases create an environment that perpetuates gender stereotypes rather than fostering inclusion. Additionally, research by Martin and Huebner (2013) shows that gender stereotypes are embedded in textbooks and learning materials.

In Albania, while the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2030 has been embraced by the Ministry of Education and Sports, the practical implementation of gender mainstreaming in teaching practices and curriculum design, especially in subjects like civic education, has not been fully addressed. This paper examines how civic education programs in Albanian schools address these persistent gender inequalities through teachers' practices and classroom dynamics. Focusing on a qualitative case study in the Elbasan district, it evaluates the implementation of gender-sensitive teaching methods. By using participatory research, the study engages teachers in the evaluation process, enabling a deeper understanding of classroom dynamics and empowering educators to identify and address gender biases in their teaching methods. Gender mainstreaming in education seeks to address these disparities by integrating gender equality into all aspects of educational policy, curriculum, and practices. Key areas of focus include promoting gender-responsive education systems, which involve revising curricula to eliminate stereotypes, providing gendersensitive teacher training, and fostering inclusive learning environments.

The primary goal of this research was to investigate how gender dynamics manifested in the classroom and to foster more inclusive and equitable learning environments. The research aimed to identify the key factors that contributed to unequal participation and interaction based on gender and to develop strategies for promoting balanced participation. Moreover, the intended outcomes of this research were to transform classroom practices by addressing unconscious

gender biases and creating an environment where all students, regardless of gender, feel equally valued and empowered to participate.

#### **Literature Review**

Educational inequalities, particularly those related to gender, have been widely documented globally. Despite advancements in educational access and policies, gender inequalities persist, particularly in how boys and girls are treated within the classroom. Research consistently demonstrates that gender stereotypes and societal expectations deeply influence students' educational experiences. Studies have shown that girls often face a range of barriers that hinder their educational success, including lower expectations from teachers, limited opportunities to take leadership roles, and being disproportionately directed toward traditionally "feminine" subjects, such as languages or arts, while boys are steered toward STEM subjects or leadership roles (Leach et al., 2007; Unterhalter et al., 2014). These inequalities contribute to unequal opportunities for critical thinking, which is vital for democratic engagement and active citizenship.

The work of Heyder et al. (2017), Skelton (2007), and Espinoza & Strasser (2020) discusses how gender biases in the classroom, from curriculum content to teacher-student interactions, create an environment that reinforces traditional gender norms, limiting the potential of both boys and girls. For instance, studies have highlighted that teachers often unknowingly give more attention and encouragement to male students, while female students are frequently overlooked in subjects like mathematics and science, which can negatively affect their self-esteem and academic performance (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). These gendered practices, compounded by broader societal inequalities, result in a learning environment that perpetuates existing gender stereotypes rather than fostering a more inclusive educational experience. Research by Martin and Huebner (2013) further points to how these biases extend beyond classroom interactions and can affect the curriculum, with gender stereotypes often embedded in textbooks and learning materials.

In the context of Albania, gender inequalities in education are still present, as traditional societal values about gender roles still significantly influence students' educational experiences. While Albania has made progress in increasing access to education for both genders, there remain significant challenges, particularly in rural areas, where gender roles are more rigidly defined. The National Strategy

for Gender Equality 2021-2030 has been embraced by the Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, but the gendered aspects of teaching practices and curriculum design have not been fully addressed, especially in subjects like civic education, which have the potential to shape students' attitudes toward equality, justice, and citizenship. This context makes it crucial to explore how gender dynamics operate in the Albanian educational system, particularly within civic education, which is often seen as a transformative subject for promoting democratic values.

## The Role of Civic Education in Addressing Gender Inequality

Civic education plays a fundamental role in fostering democratic citizenship, rights awareness, and critical engagement with societal issues. As such, it holds significant potential for addressing gender inequalities by promoting the values of equality, justice, and human rights. However, if not taught inclusively and sensitively, civic education itself can inadvertently perpetuate gender stereotypes. A critical examination of civic education programs shows that they are often gender-neutral at best, failing to address the specific barriers and challenges that girls face in accessing equal opportunities in education and society. Civic education, therefore, has both the potential to perpetuate inequalities and to challenge them, depending on how it is framed and implemented (Berkowitz et al., 2005; Torney-Purta et al., 2001, Siegel-Stechlerm 2021).

Many scholars have emphasized the importance of gender-sensitive teaching in civic education, arguing that gender equity should be a central focus of any curriculum aimed at fostering democratic citizenship (Arnot, 2006). Civic education offers students the tools to critically analyze power structures, inequalities, and issues of social justice. By including gender equality as a core issue within the curriculum, civic education can foster critical thinking, helping students recognize how gender inequality operates in their lives and in broader society. Research by Yuval-Davis (2006) has shown that gender-sensitive civic education can empower girls by increasing their participation in class discussions, encouraging leadership, and building their confidence in advocating for their rights.

Participatory Research and Its Role in Addressing Educational Inequalities

Participatory research methods are particularly effective in addressing educational inequalities because they actively engage those who are most affected by these issues—such as students, teachers, and community members—in the research process. Unlike traditional research, which often views participants as subjects to be studied, participatory research empowers participants by involving them as co-researchers. This approach ensures that the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups are central to the research process and the development of potential solutions (Vaughn, L. M., & Jacquez, F., 2020).

In the context of education, participatory research has been shown to enhance the relevance and applicability of findings by focusing on the lived experiences of those in the classroom. For instance, Murray (2024) explores three main participatory research models:

Participatory Action Research (PAR), Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), and Participatory Research (PR). Each model offers unique benefits and challenges, but collectively empowers stakeholders, transforming them from subjects of research to active contributors. This methodology allows for a deeper understanding of the subtle ways in which gender biases manifest in the classroom, from the curriculum to the teacher-student interactions, and enables the development of strategies for addressing these biases inclusively and democratically.

# **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative method approach, integrating participatory research through focus groups and participatory observation. Focus groups were conducted with teachers to gain deeper insights into their teaching practices, especially their awareness and handling of gendered dynamics within the classroom. These discussions allowed teachers to reflect on how they perceive and address gender inequalities in their civic education lessons and explore challenges or biases they may face in promoting gender equality. Additionally, participatory observation in classrooms provided firsthand insight into teacher-student interactions, classroom organization, and gendered behaviours. This collaborative model ensures the research reflects the real-world classroom experiences of teachers while empowering them to identify strategies for promoting gender equality.

# **Participants and Sampling**

The study involved twenty fifth-grade teachers and their students from ten schools in the Elbasan district of Albania. The participants were selected through stratified sampling to ensure diversity across various factors such as urban versus rural location, school size, school performance, and the socio-economic background of the schools. Stratified sampling was chosen to ensure that the study captures a wide range of educational settings, as gender dynamics in education can vary significantly depending on these factors. By selecting schools from both urban and rural areas, the research acknowledges the influence that traditional societal values and gender norms may have on the educational experiences of boys and girls in different settings.

The twenty teachers were specifically chosen because they taught civic education, a subject that plays a critical role in shaping students' understanding of equality, justice, and citizenship. These teachers were invited to participate in focus group discussions, where they reflected on their classroom experiences, the role of gender in their teaching, and how they address or overlook gender inequalities, enabling the researcher to examine how gendered expectations might differ for male and female students in the same educational context.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection process involved focus groups and participatory observations, both of which were designed to engage teachers as active contributors throughout the study. The focus group discussions allowed teachers to express their perceptions of gender dynamics, reflect on their teaching practices, and explore how they address gender inequalities in their civic education lessons. This process was not just about data collection, but it was an opportunity for teachers to critically analyse their teaching practices, with the researcher and teachers working together to identify key themes and strategies for promoting gender equality. Through participatory observations, teachers also played a role in the analysis of their classroom dynamics. Teachers were encouraged to reflect on the classroom observations and share their thoughts, making the research process interactive and ensuring that their perspectives were integrated into the final analysis. This collaboration between the researcher and teachers reflects the participatory research model, where teachers' insights are central to understanding and addressing the gendered aspects of civic education.

Data were collected using a combination of focus groups and participatory observations, focusing on the teachers' perceptions of gender dynamics in the classroom, the teaching methods they use to engage both male and female students, and their strategies for fostering gender equality. The focus group discussions with teachers provided qualitative data on their lived experiences, their challenges in addressing gender equality, and their approaches to promoting inclusivity in the classroom. These discussions were analysed to identify key themes related to gendered teaching practices and classroom dynamics.

The participatory observations took place in the classrooms of the selected teachers, where the researcher observed interactions between teachers and students, particularly looking at gendered patterns in teacher-student interactions, classroom organization, and student engagement. The aim was to see firsthand how gender bias might manifest in the teaching process, including whether boys and girls receive equal attention, how they interact with the teacher, and how the classroom environment may reflect broader societal gender roles. The qualitative data from focus groups and observations were analysed thematically. The thematic analysis helped identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights that shed light on the ways gender influences the civic education experience. The qualitative analyses provide not only a comprehensive understanding of the research topic but also contextual insights into gender dynamics in the classroom.

# **Findings**

The study explores the gender dynamics within Albanian primary school classrooms, focusing on teachers' practices, student interactions, and the physical organization of learning spaces. The findings are organized around three main themes: (1) Teacher Practices and Gender Sensitivity, (2) Classroom Organization: Physical Space and Gender Dynamics, and (3) Teacher- Student Interactions and Gender Bias. These findings highlight the complex interplay of conscious and unconscious gender roles in education, illustrating how gender is socially constructed and reinforced in the classroom. In this chapter, the analysis brings together insights from participant observations, teacher focus groups, and classroom interactions, offering a multifaceted view of gender dynamics in Albanian primary schools.

## **Teacher Practices and Gender Sensitivity**

One of the core findings of this study was the prevalence of gendered practices among teachers, even when they claimed to practice gender equality in the classroom. During focus group discussions, teachers generally insisted that they treated boys and girls equally. However, observations of their classroom practices revealed subtle but significant gender biases. The teachers' statements about non-differentiation in their teaching methods appeared to contrast with actual practices, where gender stereotypes were often reinforced.

Teachers tended to assign different types of tasks based on gender, often unintentionally perpetuating traditional gender roles. For example, girls were often expected to be more attentive and to complete written tasks, whereas boys were sometimes given more hands-on activities or were called upon more frequently to answer questions aloud. Although some teachers consciously made efforts to counteract these tendencies, their behaviour often reflected an embedded cultural bias. This tendency for teachers to unconsciously accommodate gender stereotypes speaks to the broader issue of implicit bias in the educational system, which can influence students' academic outcomes and perceptions of gender roles.

Moreover, teachers displayed different levels of awareness regarding gender equity in education. While some teachers explicitly stated their commitment to gender equality and actively worked towards creating an equitable environment, others struggled with unconscious biases and a lack of training in gender-sensitive pedagogy. One particular case was that of an older teacher nearing retirement, who regularly reinforced gender stereotypes. She would often reprimand girls for untidy desks while ignoring similar behaviour among boys. She also regularly asked boys to assist with heavy tasks such as hanging maps, reinforcing the notion that physical tasks were masculine and more suitable for boys. Furthermore, she later openly expressed her belief that boys were better students than girls, highlighting a direct contradiction to her previously expressed claims of neutrality.

### Classroom Organization: Physical Space and Gender Dynamics

Classroom organization plays a crucial role in shaping students' learning experiences, and gender dynamics are often embedded in the way physical spaces are structured. The layout of desks, seating arrangements, and group

formations have significant implications for how gender is enacted and perceived in the classroom. In the majority of the classrooms observed, desks were arranged in traditional parallel rows, with each desk containing two or three chairs. These rows faced a blackboard, and the teacher's desk was positioned in a place that allowed the teacher to maintain a clear view of the students. This traditional setup has long been the norm in Albanian schools, and while it can facilitate teacher-centred instruction, it does not necessarily encourage interactive, student-centred learning.

Gender segregation in seating arrangements was also observed across multiple schools. In many classrooms, boys and girls chose to sit separately, often forming gender- specific groups. This tendency was not actively enforced by teachers but rather emerged naturally among students, perhaps due to internalized social norms about gendered behaviour. Some teachers attempted to break this pattern by encouraging mixed-gender seating or by consciously placing a boy and a girl together at each desk. However, this practice was not always consistent or effective in challenging traditional gender roles.

Interestingly, there were a few cases in which classroom space was organized differently. For instance, in one high-performing urban school, two teachers who had obtained Master's degrees in education had arranged their classrooms with desks in pairs, where girls and boys worked together. This layout was designed to encourage cooperative learning, and it was observed that students engaged positively with each other, regardless of their gender. This arrangement supported the idea that classroom space can be organized in ways that promote equality and reduce gendered distinctions.

#### Teacher-Student Interaction: Gender Bias and Role Reinforcement

Teacher-student interaction plays a pivotal role in the educational experience, shaping students' perceptions of themselves, their peers, and their abilities. The way teachers interact with boys and girls, both verbally and non-verbally, can reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms. In the observed classrooms, teachers often displayed unconscious gender biases in their interactions with students. For example, in one classroom, a teacher was observed consistently calling on boys to answer questions while ignoring the girls, even though the girls were equally active and vocal in class. In another case, the teacher often praised boys for their performance but would only provide minimal feedback to girls,

which created an imbalance in the way students were treated. These instances exemplify the subtle but powerful impact of gender bias in teacher-student interactions.

Furthermore, gendered expectations were apparent in the types of roles that teachers assigned to students. Boys were frequently asked to assist with physical tasks, such as moving furniture or distributing materials, while girls were more often asked to help with organizing the classroom or assisting the teacher in less physically demanding ways. This division of labour reflects broader societal gender norms, where physical tasks are considered masculine and organizational tasks are viewed as feminine.

The most significant findings related to teacher-student interaction involved teachers' responses to student behaviour. Boys, particularly in rural schools, were often given more flexibility when it came to behaviour management. Teachers were more likely to reprimand girls for speaking out of turn or for being disruptive, while boys were often allowed more freedom to express themselves in ways that would have been deemed unacceptable for girls. This behaviour reflected a broader societal pattern, where boys are often granted more freedom to exhibit assertive behaviour, while girls are expected to remain passive and compliant.

However, there were exceptions to this pattern. In one classroom, a teacher made a rigorous effort to ensure that all students, regardless of gender, received equal opportunities to participate. This teacher was also noted for her positive reinforcement of both boys and girls, frequently using praise to encourage student engagement. Her approach was particularly notable in the context of students with special educational needs. She was observed providing extra support to three boys with learning difficulties, who had repeated grades and were significantly older than their peers. Her commitment to inclusivity and equal opportunity in student participation was a positive example of how teacher-student interactions can be reframed to promote gender equity and support diverse learning needs.

The active involvement of teachers by sharing their reflections also had a transformative effect on their teaching practices. Many teachers expressed that they had not been fully aware of the subtle gender dynamics that shaped their classrooms until they were directly involved in this reflective process. This raised awareness led some teachers to experiment with new strategies, such as

ensuring equal participation in discussions, offering leadership roles to both boys and girls, and designing classroom activities that were more inclusive and sensitive to gender differences. It helped teachers feel more empowered to make these changes, as they were actively involved in identifying the issues and finding solutions.

#### **Conclusion and Reflections**

This case study reveals that while many teachers in Albanian primary schools may openly express a commitment to gender equality, the practices observed in classrooms often reflect unconscious gender biases that reinforce traditional gender roles. Despite these challenges, the study also revealed positive examples of teachers who actively worked to challenge gender norms and promote inclusivity. These teachers were more aware of their actions and how these affected both boys and girls in their classrooms. The findings suggest that raising awareness about gender biases, providing professional development on gendersensitive teaching practices, and rethinking the physical and organizational layout of classrooms are key steps toward creating more gender-equitable educational environments.

Moreover, this research revealed significant gender inequalities in classroom dynamics, particularly in the areas of teacher-student interactions and student participation. It was found that male students received more teacher attention and dominated classroom discussions, while female students often took more passive roles. Teachers, despite promoting equality, exhibited unconscious biases, favouring male students in terms of praise and participation. To address these inequalities, it is essential to implement teacher training programs that raise awareness of gender biases and equip educators with strategies to ensure equal participation. Curriculum development should also be revised to incorporate more inclusive content that challenges traditional gender roles and promotes diverse role models. Moreover, schools could benefit from promoting inclusive group work and classroom activities to encourage equal involvement from all students. These actions are crucial for creating more inclusive and equitable learning environments where both male and female students can increase their chances for higher accomplishment in educational environments.

This paper provides valuable insights into the gender dynamics that shape classroom interactions and the subtle ways in which educational practices can

perpetuate gender inequalities. One of the key takeaways was the realization that gender bias often operates unconsciously, with teachers unintentionally favoring male students through increased attention and engagement. We also learned that even in an environment where equal opportunities are encouraged, the implicit cultural and societal norms around gender roles can affect students' participation and self-confidence. Observing these dynamics in real-time reinforced the importance of creating a classroom environment that actively challenges traditional gender roles and promotes inclusivity.

Furthermore, this study highlights the critical role that teachers play in shaping students' understanding of gender and social justice. Teachers, through their active participation in the research, became key agents of change, demonstrating that participatory research is not only about gathering insights but also about transforming the educational practices that perpetuate inequality. Their involvement in the study helped them see the importance of creating gender-sensitive teaching practices, fostering an environment where both boys and girls feel equally valued and empowered to engage in critical discussions about civic responsibility and justice.

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Dr. Çela's contributions to academia and society reflect her dedication to promoting inclusive education systems and empowering future generations through critical pedagogy and feminist perspectives.

Social Innovation in Community Development, Community Spaces for Youth



# Mihajlo Djukic, Kosovka Ognjenovic Institute of Economic Sciences, Serbia

# ASSESSMENT OF THE CAPACITY OF LOCAL YOUTH OFFICES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF YG IN SERBIA

#### **ABSTRACT**

The Youth Guarantee (YG) is an important European mechanism to support the young population in their efforts to achieve goals such as improved employability, opportunities for further education and increased chances to participate in apprenticeship and traineeship programmes. The aim of this paper is to assess the local capacity of youth offices to contribute to the implementation of YG in Serbia. The survey conducted includes a series of questions to assess internal capacities that include human capital, involvement in local incentives and links to key stakeholders, financial stability for the implementation of activities, capacities to reach young people, and attitudes towards how young people perceive the support of local youth offices to meet their needs. Based on the data collected through the specifically tailored survey, the quantitative methods of statistical analysis will be used to classify and extract the main factors that will contribute to the understanding of the data and enrich the conclusions with the presentation of the recommendations for the local youth offices and other relevant stakeholders. The experience gained through the analysis of the local capacities of youth offices in Serbia will provide useful lessons that can be used as examples of good practise and transferable knowledge that can be disseminated across the region.

Key words: Youth Guarantee, local youth offices, NEET, youth employment, Serbia

JEL: J13, J21, E24

#### Introduction

The Youth Guarantee (YG) program was adopted by the European Council in 2013 as a unique active labour market policy aimed at combating youth unemployment across the EU. The program is designed to ensure that every young person receives a good-quality offer of apprenticeship, training, continued education, or employment within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed. In most countries, YG programs are coordinated by

Public Employment Services (PES), institutions responsible for offering employment or educational opportunities to individuals who meet defined eligibility criteria (Escudero et al., 2015). However, the implementation of specific measures is often delegated to subnational authorities, making the program highly contextual and dependent on local policy environments (Shamsuddinova, 2024).

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2013), several critical prerequisites are essential for successful implementation of the YG:

- Timely intervention and precise targeting of the eligible population
- Well-developed administrative capacities and institutional arrangements
- Adequate budgetary support
- Strong education and training systems

Therefore, beyond securing sufficient financial resources, the success of the YG also relies on the ability to identify hard-to-reach target groups, particularly NEET youth (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) and on strong institutional capacities and inter-institutional cooperation. The engagement of all relevant social partners is fundamental, as cooperation with trade unions, schools, training providers, and civil society organisations plays a vital role in tailoring and delivering effective YG measures. As reported by the European Commission (2016), experience from several CEE countries, particularly the Czech Republic, Romania, and Slovakia, reveals that, in addition to limited PES capacity, insufficient coordination between PES, schools, educational centres, social partners, and private stakeholders presents a significant barrier to successful implementation.

By signing the Western Balkans Declaration on ensuring sustainable labour market integration of young people, Serbia confirmed its commitment to gradually introduce the YG and develop a national implementation plan. This declaration followed the EU Commission's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, which outlines four phases of YG implementation in Serbia: Implementation Planning, Preparatory Work, Piloting, and Progressive/General Deployment (National Employment Service, 2023). The overall coordination, implementation, and monitoring of the YG will be led by the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs (MoLEVSA), with the National Employment Service (NES) serving as the main implementing partner. In

addition, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism and Youth will play key roles in the early intervention and outreach phases, respectively.

In relation to the outreach phase, the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan for 2023–2026 foresees the introduction of an outreach model to be incorporated into the new Law on Youth, including the development of a framework for reaching and activating young NEETs who are disconnected from formal systems. This activity will require strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations and local youth offices to engage directly with disengaged youth populations (National Employment Service, 2023). Although the new Law on Youth is still pending adoption, under the current framework, youth offices, established by the 2008 Youth Law and the first National Youth Strategy, remain key institutional checkpoints for YG implementation. According to the National Association of Local Youth Offices, 117 out of 174 municipalities in Serbia have formally established local youth offices. However, evidence from recent research suggests that the actual number of active and functional youth offices may be significantly lower (Djukic, 2022; KOMS, 2021).

Institutionally, youth offices operate within the local municipal administrations, though their work is primarily funded and monitored by the Ministry of Tourism and Youth, which oversees the implementation of the National Youth Strategy 2023–2030. The piloting phase of the Youth Guarantee in Serbia officially began in 2024 across 28 municipalities under three NES regional branches. This research focuses on the challenges associated with the outreach phase, which requires both institutional collaboration and adequate local implementation capacity, including the ability to establish direct, field-level communication with vulnerable youth populations.

As Djukic (2022) notes, evaluations of YG programs across the EU have repeatedly highlighted difficulties in reaching and activating inactive youth. In Serbia, these challenges stem largely from institutional shortcomings within the NES branch network and under-resourced local stakeholders. Therefore, analysing the institutional capacity at the local level and providing evidence-based inputs for the localisation of employment and youth policy is critical to ensuring effective outreach and successful implementation of the YG in Serbia.

This study aims to assess the extent to which local youth offices, as integral parts of local government structures, are equipped to support the implementation of

YG, particularly in relation to reaching vulnerable and inactive youth. The research addresses three main questions:

- 1. How do representatives of local youth offices assess their own capacity to support YG implementation in Serbia?
- 2. To what extent are these offices integrated into broader local employment initiatives and collaborative efforts with other stakeholders?
- 3. What are their experiences and practices in conducting outreach to vulnerable youth populations?

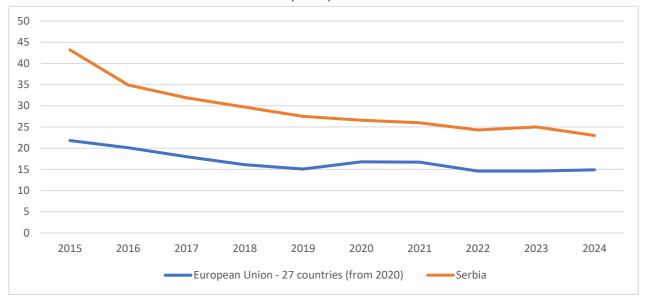
The structure of the paper is as follows. Following this introduction, the next section presents stylized facts on youth unemployment trends and NEET rates in Serbia. The methodology section describes the research design and analytical tools used. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of the empirical results. Finally, the paper concludes with key policy recommendations and suggestions for future research directions.

# Stylized facts on youth unemployment trends in Serbia and the EU-27

Over the last ten years, Serbia made a noticeable progress in reducing youth unemployment rates and NEET rates benefiting combinedly from the improved overall macroeconomic environment and the positive effects of the youth unemployment policies. However, despite positive steps reflected in gradual reduction of the gap with the EU-27, youth unemployment and NEET rates are still high and addressing the issues of strengthening employability and facilitating youth school to work transition represent one of the important elements of the economic policy.

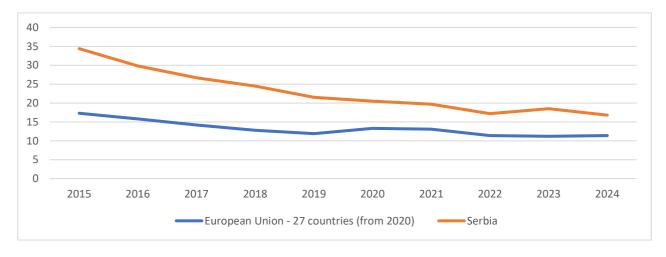
In the 2015-2024 period, youth unemployment rate (15 to 24 years old) has been almost halved amounting to 23% at the end of 2024 (Figure 1). Over the same period, rate of youth between 15 and 29 years has been reduced from 34.4% to 16.8% being a 5.4 percentage points lower compared to the EU-27 average (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Youth unemployment rate (15 to 24 years old) over the period 2015-2024 in Serbia and the EU-27\* countries (in %)



Source: Authors' calculation based on Eurostat data, \*EU-27 refers to the average of 27 EU member states from 2020

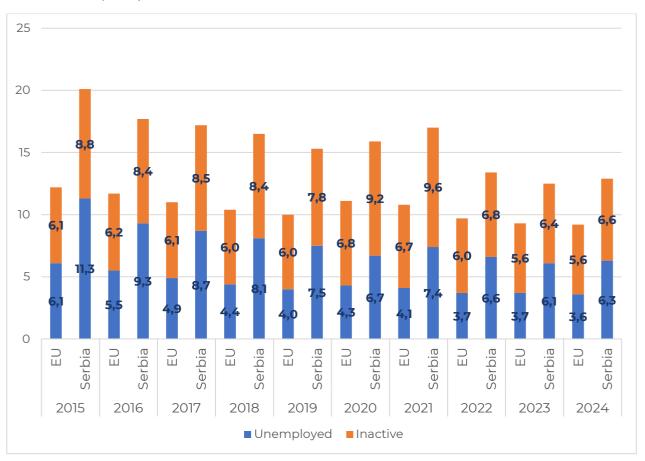
Figure 2. Youth unemployment rate (15 to 29 years old) over the period 2015-2024 in Serbia and the EU-27\* countries (in %)



Source: Authors' calculation based on Eurostat data, \*EU-27 refers to the average of 27 EU member states from 2020

The focus of the Youth Guarantee is mainly the group of youth under the NEET status either being unemployed or outside the labour force (inactive). Addressing the issues of NEET represents a complex issue for the policy makers since this group is often heterogeneous in terms of various challenges which prevented them from finding a solid job or even entering the labour market. Inactive youth represent a particularly hard-to-reach category of population which is sometimes facing difficulties arising from their health status or different challenges referring to social exclusion. Although showing positive trends, Serbia still has 12.9% and 14.9% share of youth in NEET status among 15-24- and 15-29-years old youth population respectively. Analysis of the presented data (Figures 3 and 4) confirms solid improvements referring to unemployed NEET youth but still persistent difficulties in activating NEET youth under status of inactive persons which account for around half of the total NEETs and 7.7% of the youth (15 to 29 years old).

Figure 3. NEET rates in Serbia and the EU-27\* (15 to 24 years old) over the period 2015 – 2024 (in %)



Source: Authors' calculation based on Eurostat data, \*EU-27 refers to the average of 27 EU member states from 2020

30 25 20 1<mark>0.</mark>6 10,0 10,5 15 11,6 10.6 10 5 0 Serbia Serbia Serbia Serbia Serbia Serbia Serbia Serbia Serbia  $\subseteq$  $\subseteq$  $\mathbb{E}$ Serbia  $\Box$  $\Box$  $\Box$  $\Box$  $\Box$  $\Box$  $\Box$ 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023 2024 Unemployed Inactive

Figure 4. NEET rates in Serbia and the EU-27\* (15 to 29 years old) over the period 2015 – 2024 (in %)

Source: Authors' calculation based on Eurostat data, \*EU-27 refers to the average of 27 EU member states from 2020

## Methodology

Although the descriptive part of the paper deals with the broader impact of YG implementation in the EU, the aim is to assess the capacities of local youth services, their links with local initiatives and actors, and examples of co-operation and outreach to young people belonging to vulnerable socio-economic groups, including the NEET category, through a case study focusing on Serbia.

The data came from a customized questionnaire designed to assess the capacity of local youth offices based on their responses and self-assessments.

The questionnaire consisted of several modules including questions on human resources, equipment, project management, financial resources, experience with NEET outreach, capacity development needs, quality of cooperation with local authorities and other stakeholders.

The local youth offices across Serbia were contacted by e-mail and all received the questionnaires with instructions on how to complete the questionnaire and when to return it with the answers.

A total of 48 questionnaires were completed, which corresponds to a response rate of 34.2%.

The general hypotheses to be analysed on the basis of the data collected with the questionnaire are set out in the following order:

H0 1: Local youth offices do not have the necessary capacity to implement YG smoothly.

H0 2: Local youth offices are not connected to other local incentives and key stakeholders.

H0 3: The capacity to reach young people, especially those in NEET status, is modest.

Based on a descriptive statistical analysis of the survey data, the main relationships between local youth services, other incentives, institutions, actors and young people in NEET status are analysed and their main obstacles to the implementation of youth employment policies are identified.

#### **Results and discussion**

## How do the local youth offices perceive their capacities?

The capacity of LYOs is more than modest, so any additional activity beyond the scope of their usual work may lead to a need for additional resources, especially with regard to the recruitment of experienced professionals. Almost all LYOs that completed the questionnaire have at least one staff member, and more than two-thirds of them have an additional temporary staff member (Table 1), but even beyond administrative work, involvement in development or implementation programme activities, as envisaged with the YG, can lead to bottlenecks. At the local level, bodies that bring young people together, such as local youth councils in developed countries, can play an important role, not only in matters that affect young people, but also in relation to other issues that are relevant to local social and economic development or even the impact of natural disasters (Fernandez and Shaw, 2014). And these countries also struggle with the challenges of attracting young people and activating them in carrying out activities that can lead to changes in local policies (Collins et al., 2016). The most common barriers arise from the inability to identify a wider group of young people who could

benefit from or directly contribute to the implementation of local youth policy initiatives.

Table 1. Human resources and budget of LYOs

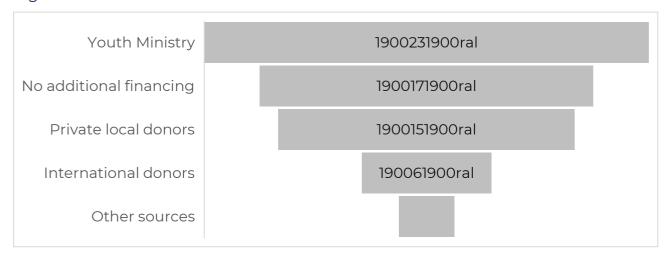
Human resources			Budget		
	N	%		Ν	%
Permanent employees	47	97.9	Up to 200000 RSD 200000-1000000	13	30.2
Temporary employees	32	66.7	RSD More than 1 mil.	12	27.9
No. of LYOs with volunteers			RSD	18	41.9
Up to 10	11	22.9			
More than 10	24	50.0			

Source: Authors' calculation based on especially tailored survey.

Only just over a fifth of LYOs can gather up to 10 volunteers, and more than 50% of them can gather more than 10 volunteers (Table 1), but it is difficult to infer from respondents' answers which activities volunteers usually participate in. In terms of the frequency of their involvement, the relatively modest number of activities, as indicated by the budget support, also suggests that their involvement is still rare.

In addition to the figures presented in Table 1, which indicate small, fixed amounts ranging from less than €2,000 per year (reported by 13 LYOs) to more than €10,000 (reported by 18 LYOs), some additional sources of funding for the activities are mainly linked to the Ministry of Youth and private local donors (Figure 5). However, it is alarming to note that apart from the small budget of between less than two and less than ten thousand euros (reported by 25 LYOs in total), 18 LYOs do not receive any additional funding for their activities/incentives, if at all.

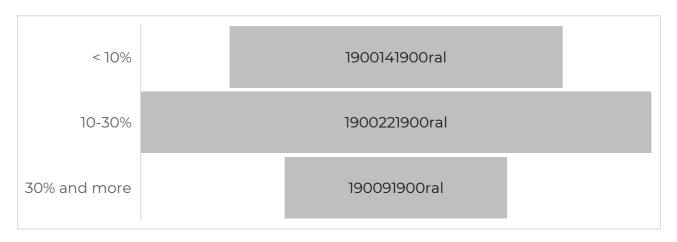
Figure 5. Sources of additional finances



Source: Authors' calculation based on especially tailored survey.

It is difficult to conclude from these images that regular funding of LYOs' activities/incentives can have an impact on improving local youth policies in Serbia. Tosun et al. (2019) found that overall, financial incentives are important for the success of local policies implemented through YG programmes in the EU. When examining the results of the YG programmes in the period 2007-2014, the authors found that the impact of the measures implemented under this programme indicated convergence between Member States in terms of sectoral coverage, but that the policies of individual countries differed in that they led to divergence in terms of the policy instruments adopted. This is not an unexpected result given the differences between countries.

Figure 6. LYOs with the youth included in their activities



Source: Authors' calculation based on especially tailored survey.

Figure 6 shows the responses of the LYOs regarding their assessment of the participation of young people in their activities. Most LYOs (23) believe that they

are able to attract between 10% and 30% of local young people, while 15 LYOs believe that they cannot attract more than 10% and 10 of them believe that they can attract more than 30% of young people in their communities. These results are in good agreement with later results showing that LYOs participate in a limited number of local incentives.

## How are the local youth offices connected to local incentives and key stakeholders?

It is a somewhat surprising result that 43 of the 48 LYOs who responded to the survey do not co-operate with the municipalities and local government in their communities. The reason for this could be the fact that these offices were established with the support of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, so the majority of their activities and budgets depend on this ministry (as indicated by 32 LYOs). A large part of the local youth offices work with civil society organisations, among which there is a considerable number of non-governmental youth organisations. According to their activities and capacities, it is the civil sector organisations that most strongly implement youth policy at the local level. As they are more flexible in attracting donors, they also have a larger number of funded activities and are therefore more recognisable on the ground than youth offices, which are perceived as part of the local administrative infrastructure.

In the field of youth work, the main partner of LYOs is the National Employment Service and its branch offices, but as Figure 7 shows, only 24 local youth offices worked together to support the implementation of employment measures. As innovative measures and initiatives are usually initiated and recognised by the private sector, local or regional chambers of commerce and international donors, the LYOs cannot point to good connections with these organisations. When it comes to the implementation of projects that are usually funded by donors, it is an unenviable result that only 6 out of 48 LYOs who responded to the survey have experience with the initiatives of international donor organisations on the ground.

Municipality/local 1900111900ral administration Ministry of Youth and Sports 1900311900ral Civil sector 190021900ral Media 190031900ral 1900231900ral **NES** Chamber of Commerce 1900151900ral Regional development agency International donors 1900141900ral Private sector State-owned enterprises 1900241900ral Educational institutions 190061900ral Centers for social work 1900261900ral Public health institutions 1900281900ral

Figure 7. LYOs in cooperation with local institutions and other stakeholders

Source: Authors' calculation based on especially tailored survey.

Other

As Neagu (2023) shows, YG programmes can contribute to a significant increase in the employability of young people, improve their informal education and promote their social integration. In particular, Eastern European countries, which suffer from a larger number of young people who are neither in the education system nor have a job compared to the total youth population, can expect a greater contribution from incentives such as those implemented through the YGs. So, if LYOs want to impose themselves as partners in the implementation of the YG programme locally in Serbia, which is naturally expected considering the population group, they must establish better cooperation with all local institutions.

## What capacity do the local youth offices have to reach young people with socio-economic disadvantages?

The LYOs have not demonstrated through their activities to date that they are able to attract larger numbers of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged groups, such as young people who are not in education, training or employment. Table 2 shows that only 7 of the 48 LYOs that responded to the survey have data on young people from the NEET category. In addition, 7 of these organisations carried out projects on the problems of NEETs in their local communities. A slightly larger number of organisations (21 out of 48) have communication with economically inactive young people from disadvantaged groups. However, communication alone is insufficient if there are no initiatives to involve young people from this sensitive group.

Table 2. Activities of LYOs in relation to the local NEET population

NEET specific topics	Yes			No		
	Ν		%	Ν		%
Data on NEETs in the community		7	14.6		41	85.4
Communication with economically inactive young						
people from disadvantaged groups		21	43.8		27	56.3
Have completed projects on the problems of						
NEETs		7	14.6		41	85.4

Source: Authors' calculation based on especially tailored survey.

Figure 8 shows that the services provided by LYOs to young people from the NEET population are limited to the participation of young people in career guidance and counselling workshops, entrepreneurship training or other training related to improving skills for the labour market. From this, one could conclude that the services provided by LYOs to young people are primarily educational in nature. However, only a very small number of such services were identified by local youth organisations in the survey.

Figure 8. Type of services provided to local NEET population



Source: Authors' calculation based on especially tailored survey.

Some previous studies show that the impact of employment support programmes can be highly dependent on their level of vulnerability and family relationships when focusing on socio-economically disadvantaged young people (Selenko and Pils, 2019). People who previously had the status of NEET category are more likely to leave the employment programme than the rest of the unemployed young people. Special support programmes are therefore created for this category of young people, which include professional support during the implementation of the measure in order to prevent drop-outs. Emmanouil et al. (2024), examining the impact of the implementation of the YG programme in several regions of the EU Member States, concluded that its application depends to a considerable extent on regional socio-economic inequalities and precarious employment.

#### **Conclusions**

The results presented in the paper show that the local youth offices are not equipped with the personnel and technical capacities to adequately support the implementation of the YG program in Serbia. As the implementation of YG actions at the local level requires the involvement of local actors who play a complementary role to the efforts of the NES, especially in terms of building and maintaining contacts with the local youth population, policy makers need to rethink their policy approach and provide more support to local actors. The research presented suggests that this type of support can be provided not only

through closer engagement in the capacity development of CSOs, but also through institutional support programs targeting local youth offices.

The results so far show that the effects of programmes to promote the employability of young people can vary. In countries with high youth unemployment and a high proportion of NEETs in the total youth population, the impact of the youth employment programme is generally better. On the other hand, in some developing European countries, the results of the YG programme may be blurred by regional differences in socio-economic inequalities and precarity, into which young people from vulnerable groups most often fall.

The limitations of this work are related to the low response rate of the survey, which can lead to a certain degree of bias in the answers. However, the low interest in the survey itself may be a sign of the inactivity of the local youth offices that did not respond to the survey, so that the general conclusions drawn on the basis of the available responses can still be considered relevant.

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My motivation is to share new aspects of functioning organizations and models for developing HRM practices that follow the new trends in the core area of HRM, but also connect to the emerging technological trends and their impact on employees and the functioning of organizations.

I can contribute to the Working Groups active participation in the activities envisaged as parts of this COST action. I plan to take parts in the events that will be organized by this action, initiate discussions and support the efforts of Working Groups' members to effectively met this Action's goals. I also hope to find new partnerships for further projects and incentives.



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## EXPLORING SOCIAL INNOVATION: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY SPACES IN SUPPORTING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

#### **Background**

The significance of youth mental health in influencing lifelong well-being and societal participation cannot be overstated. Social innovation approaches have demonstrated the potential of community spaces as effective tools to support youth mental health. The challenges posed to young people's mental well-being by increased social isolation, economic uncertainty, and digitalization following the COVID-19 pandemic are significant. Community spaces have emerged as vital solutions, providing young people with opportunities to build social connections, express themselves, and access support services. Social innovation transforms these spaces into more than just physical locations, enabling them to foster social inclusion and resilience through innovative practices and programming.

#### Aim

This study aims to evaluate the role of community spaces in promoting youth mental health through the lens of social innovation. Specifically, it seeks to examine how these spaces strengthen social bonds, improve access to mental health services, and enhance young people's sense of belonging within their communities.

## Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed for this study. First, a literature review was conducted to analyse the impact of youth programs implemented in community spaces across various European countries. Secondly, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the experiences and perceptions of young people participating in activities within community spaces. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from these discussions.

#### Literature Review

Youth mental health is a pressing global concern, with mental health disorders accounting for a substantial burden of disease among individuals aged 10–24

(Patel et al., 2007; Kessler et al., 2005). Early-onset mental health challenges can have enduring consequences for educational attainment, employment opportunities, social relationships, and overall life satisfaction (Gore et al., 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges by intensifying social isolation, disrupting education, and increasing economic insecurity—factors strongly linked to declining mental well-being among young populations (Loades et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2022).

In response, there is growing interest in social innovation as a framework for addressing youth mental health beyond traditional clinical interventions. Social innovation refers to the development and implementation of novel solutions that meet social needs more effectively than existing approaches, often involving cross-sector collaboration and active community engagement (Mulgan et al., 2007; Nicholls & Murdock, 2012). Within this framework, community spaces—ranging from youth centres and libraries to maker spaces and informal gathering hubs—are being reimagined as critical infrastructures for mental health promotion.

Community spaces offer more than recreational utility; when designed with inclusive and participatory principles, they can support protective psychosocial factors such as social connectedness, self-expression, and civic participation (Secker et al., 2007; Pinfold et al., 2003). Emerging research from European contexts suggests that community spaces that embed co-creation, peer support models, and localized service delivery can improve mental health outcomes and mitigate barriers to care (Barry et al., 2013; Prati & Albanesi, 2011). For marginalized youth in particular, such spaces can foster a sense of belonging and collective resilience, buffering against the alienation often associated with institutional service settings (Pittman et al., 2007; Oosterhoff et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the integration of accessible mental health services within community spaces—such as drop-in counselling, psychoeducational workshops, and peer mentoring—has been found to reduce stigma and increase early help-seeking behavior (Rickwood et al., 2007; Rowe et al., 2013). These innovations align with broader shifts in public health and social care towards community-based, youth-centered approaches that are responsive to the complex and intersectional needs of young people (WHO, 2021).

In conclusion, the literature supports the view that community spaces, when guided by social innovation principles, can play a transformative role in promoting youth mental health by embedding support within the social fabric of everyday life.

# Focus Group and Interview Findings: Exploring Youth Experiences in Community Spaces

To explore how youth perceive and experience the role of community spaces in supporting mental health, a focus group with five participants aged 16–22 was conducted, supplemented by individual semi-structured interviews. All participants were active users of local community centers in urban and semi-urban areas. The focus group lasted 90 minutes and was followed by individual interviews of 30–45 minutes each. Data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights.

#### Results

The results of the study indicate that community spaces have a positive impact on the mental health of young people. Participants reported a reduction in social isolation, an increase in self-confidence, and an improvement in stress management skills. Furthermore, the presence of accessible mental health counselling services within these spaces enabled young people to receive timely professional support. Community spaces designed following social innovation principles were found to strengthen young people's sense of belonging and contribute to community resilience.

#### Themes Identified:

## 1. Sense of Belonging and Social Connection

Participants consistently highlighted the value of having a "safe space" where they felt accepted and supported. One participant stated:

"I don't feel judged here... It's one of the only places I can actually be myself." (Participant 2)

The community spaces helped reduce feelings of loneliness, especially after the isolation many experienced during the pandemic. Regular group activities such as music workshops, sports, and discussion groups were credited with fostering lasting friendships and peer support networks.

## 2. Accessible Support Without Stigma

A major theme was the non-threatening environment community spaces provided for accessing mental health resources. Unlike formal clinical settings, participants viewed these spaces as informal, welcoming, and peer-oriented.

"It's easier to talk to someone here than at school or a doctor's office. It doesn't feel like you're being diagnosed." (Participant 4)

The presence of counsellors or youth workers who offered guidance without pressure was seen as especially helpful.

### 3. Empowerment and Personal Growth

Participants reported gaining confidence and learning to manage emotions through structured programs such as leadership workshops, peer mentoring, and creative expression (e.g., art or spoken word). Several noted that these experiences made them feel more capable and hopeful about their futures.

"I used to just sit at home and overthink. Now I'm actually doing something and helping others too." (Participant 5)

This theme also linked to improved self-awareness and motivation.

## 4. Barriers and Gaps

Despite the overall positive feedback, participants identified several limitations. Some mentioned that program times were not always convenient, especially for those with school or work commitments. Others felt there was limited outreach to marginalized youth or those unaware of available services.

"There are kids who would benefit from this but don't even know it exists." (Participant 1)

A lack of consistent funding and changes in staff were also cited as potential threats to the continuity of support.

Table 1. Summary of Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description	
Belonging peer ties.	& Connection	Community spaces offer a refuge from isolation and foster strong
Non-Stigmatizing Support youth.		Informal access to help and counselling is more approachable for
Empowerm	nent & Growth	Programs build confidence, emotional awareness, and agency.
Barriers & E	Equity Gaps	Challenges remain in access, outreach, and program sustainability.

## Conclusion

The results of the study highlight the significant role of community spaces in supporting youth mental health and the potential of social innovation to enhance their impact. These findings suggest that youth policies and mental health services should be restructured to encourage the effective use of community spaces, with local governments encouraged to allocate more resources to ensure the sustainability of programs implemented within these spaces. Ultimately, community spaces enriched through social innovation represent a powerful tool for improving both individual and collective well-being among young people.

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SHORT-TERM RESULTS AND LONG-TERM LESSONS: EVIDENCE FROM THE RAISE-UP PILOT TO PREVENT EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN ITALIAN VET

#### Introduction

Early school leaving (ESL) continues to pose one of the most persistent barriers to inclusive economic performance and social cohesion in advanced economies (Oreopoulos, 2007; Deming, 2022; Bonnet and Murtin, 2024). Commonly defined as the share of 18- to 24-year-olds who have completed at most, lower secondary education and are no longer in education or training, it signals more than just an educational failure. Leaving school early has long-term consequences for individuals and imposes significant economic and social costs on society (Brunello & de Paola, 2014; Bonnet and Murtin, 2024). Although ESL rates have declined over the past two decades in many developed countries (Eurostat, 2024; Vegliante et al., 2024), they remain elevated, and reaching ambitious policy targets will require innovative and effective interventions. Thus, the educational intervention 'RAISE-UP' was aimed at reducing the risk of early school leaving in vocational education and training (VET) schools through an integrated school-based intervention.

#### Scope

This extended abstract aims to provide context and critical reflection alongside a summary of our key findings. While we briefly outline the main results of the RAISE-UP intervention, detailed statistical analysis and interpretation are reserved for the full paper to be published elsewhere (Dworsky, Pipke, & Tschank, 2025). Instead, this abstract expands the literature review to explore in greater depth the underlying causes and consequences of early school leaving, and to review existing educational interventions in this space. Furthermore, we reflect on tangible implementation challenges encountered during our study, offering practical insights for other researchers and practitioners developing similar interventions across diverse educational systems.

#### Literature review

Early school leaving (ESL) is a complex and persistent challenge with significant individual and societal consequences. Students' decisions to leave education before completion are shaped by a range of interrelated risk factors operating at individual, social, and institutional levels. Rather than being attributable to a single cause, research consistently shows that the probability of early school leaving increases when multiple risk factors accumulate over time (e.g. Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Suh & Suh, 2007). Educational research has developed multiple theoretical frameworks to explain these trajectories, recognizing the interplay between structural disadvantage, personal agency, and institutional responses. As the RAISE-UP intervention was implemented in Italian schools, this review synthesizes current evidence on the risk factors associated with ESL, drawing primarily from studies in Western contexts, particularly Europe and the United States, while recognizing that the drivers of ESL vary significantly across regions.

To provide context, the first section of the literature review outlines recent statistical trends at both global and European levels. Subsequent sections examine risk factors at different levels: Individual, socio-economic and institutional, explore the consequences of ESL, and review selected interventions designed to address it.

#### Global and European context

The EU average early school leaving rate dropped from 13.8% in 2010 to 9.9% in 2020, reaching 9.5% in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024). Some countries, such as Croatia, Greece, Poland, and Ireland, have reduced their ESL rates even further to below 5%. Others, however, continue to face elevated levels: Romania (16.6%), Spain (13.7%), and Germany (12.8%) remain well above the EU average. Italy, once among the highest, reduced its rate from 25% in 2000 to 10.5% in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024), which still exceeds the EU benchmark. In light of these disparities, the EU has now set a more ambitious goal of reducing ESL to below 9% by 2030.

Globally, progress has been limited. As of 2024, 251 million children and youth remain out of school, with only a 1% reduction over the past decade. The majority live in low-income countries, where structural barriers persist (UNESCO, 2024).

Geographical location significantly affects ESL rates. In the EU, towns and suburbs reported the highest share of early school leavers in 2023 (10.6%), followed by rural areas (9.9%), and cities recorded the lowest rate (8.6%) (Eurostat, 2024).

Gender is also a key variable, though its effects differ by context. At the global level, girls face a higher risk of dropping out, particularly in rural and low-income regions. Barriers include early marriage, pregnancy, and household responsibilities, which limit girls' opportunities to complete formal education (UNESCO, 2012, Shahidul & Karim, 2015). In contrast, boys are more likely to leave school early in Western contexts such as Europe and the United States. In the EU, 11.3% of young men aged 18 - 24 were early school leavers in 2023, compared with 7.7% of young women (Eurostat, 2024). The gender gap is widest in Italy (5.5 percentage points), followed by Germany (4.8 pp), Spain (4.7 pp), Finland (4.6 pp), Latvia, and Malta (both 4.5 pp). This disparity may indicate underlying differences in engagement, educational experiences, and broader factors that disproportionately affect male students (van der Steeg et al, 2015; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022).

### **Understanding risk factors**

We group the risk factors for leaving school early into two levels: Individual and social. The social level is divided further into socio-economic and institutional risks, as shown in Figure 1.

(Social) Risk Factors Socio-economic on Institutional Risk Factors Level Geographical area of the Place of birth; age; gender; school; type of school; teachernative language; geographical student relationship; genderarea of the home; degree of ratio; peer affiliation; peer urbanisation: student's influences; labour market socioeconomic status (SES); conditions SES of parent(s); family structure Social level Main Dropout Risk Factors in Individual level the RAISE-UP Context Academic under-achievement; Self-efficacy; self-esteem; learing difficulties & resilience; motivation; myopia disabilities; low engagement; deviant behaviour; absenteeism Individual Risk **Factors** 

Figure 1: Main Dropout Risk Factors in the RAISE-UP Context

#### Individual level

At the individual level, academic underachievement and low engagement are among the most frequently cited risk factors (Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022; Levitt et al., 2018; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Other individual-level predictors include academic failure, grade retention, chronic absenteeism, behavioural problems, and early manifestations of aggression (Rumberger, 1983, 1995; Suh & Suh, 2007).

From a behavioural economics perspective, sustaining long-term motivation to complete education poses challenges for many students. As the costs of schooling in time, effort, and financial resources are immediate, while the benefits, such as higher income, stable employment, and social mobility, are deferred many students especially those who struggle to value long-term or delayed rewards (Levitt et al., 2016) underinvest in education. This myopia or present bias is often reinforced by economic conditions offering immediate but precarious job opportunities (Bonnet & Murtin, 2024).

Psychological factors also play a crucial role. Constructs such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, resilience, and hope have been consistently linked to academic motivation and outcomes (Ciarrochi, 2007; Nicoll, 2014; Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011). In a study of 426 upper-secondary students in Tuscany, Alivernini and Lucidi (2011) found that higher self-determined motivation and self-efficacy reduced intentions to leave school, while lower levels of both predicted poorer academic performance.

Patterns of absenteeism are a key early warning sign of ESL. Persistent absenteeism, typically measured by school days missed per academic year (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017) is associated with disengagement and higher risk of early school leaving (Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022). Early identification of attendance patterns is therefore vital for timely and effective intervention.

Early school leavers are more likely to experience dissatisfaction, depression, and alienation in interpersonal contexts (Larsen & Shertzer, 1987; Tidwell, 1988, as cited in Prevatt & Kelly, 2003). They also tend to earn less, experience poorer health outcomes, and face significantly higher risks of deviant behaviour, criminal activity and incarceration (e.g. Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022; Wilson et al., 2011; Prevatt & Kelly, 2003).

Social level: Socio-economic factors and (social) risks factors on institutional level

Dropping out of school is rarely the consequence of individual shortcomings alone; rather, it reflects an accumulation of risk factors at the individual, social, and institutional (school-specific) levels.

Social risk factors include for example socioeconomic status (SES) including parental SES, family structure, age, gender, and native language. Research consistently shows that students with lower SES backgrounds are at a greater risk of early school leaving, with those from low-income households leaving school more frequently than their more afluent counterparts (e.g. Wilson et al., 2011; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022). Similarly, children raised in single-parent households are more likely to become early school leavers than those from two-parent families (Pong & Ju, 2000; van der Steeg et al., 2015).

Institutional risk factors refer to school-level dynamics such as teacher-student relationships (Korpershoek et al., 2016; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022), peer affiliation and influences (e.g. Farmer et al., 2003; Estell et al., 2008; Valås, 1999), and classroom

gender composition (Lavy & Schlosser, 2011). Numerous meta-analyses summarised by Ramsdal & Wynn (2022) have demonstrated that, among various factors influencing successful learning, teacher quality is a particularly good predictor of learning success (Hattie, 2008).

Peers also exert a strong influence on academic performance (e.g. Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Lavy & Schlosser, 2011). According to deviant peer theory, peer groups can reinforce both positive and negative behaviours (Farmer et al., 2003; ibid.). Negative peer affiliation is linked with disengagement and risk-taking, while positive peer influence, such as learning partnerships and shared academic goals, is associated with improved outcomes (Eisenkopf, 2010; Vollet et al., 2017).

Students with learning disabilities are particularly vulnerable, as they often experience greater social isolation and weaker peer-group affiliation, which negatively affects their school experience (Estell et al., 2008; Valås, 1999). This underlines the critical role of positive peer affiliation in mitigating educational risk. Strong peer-group bonds are associated with improved academic outcomes and increased school satisfaction (Ryan, 2001).

Evidence also suggests that classroom gender composition shapes outcomes: For example, a a higher proportion of girls in a class has been associated with improved cognitive performance for both sexes (Lavy & Schlosser, 2011).

### Consequences of early school leaving

The sections above have shown the risk factors for ESL. This section examines the consequences of ESL, which extend beyond the individual to affect both society and the state.

At the individual level, the repercussions are severe: They face reduced lifetime earnings, limited employment opportunities, and higher risks of criminal involvement. Their employment prospects are markedly weaker (OECD, 2024), and even when employed, they earn substantially less. Microeconomic evidence shows that completing secondary school yields wage premiums of 30 - 50%, even after accounting for employment probabilities, returns that early school leavers forgo (Campolieti et al., 2010; Brunello & de Paola, 2014). As a result, many endup in low-wage, insecure employment, if employed at all.

Beyond individual financial hardship, early school leaving generates significant social costs. Dropouts are more likely to rely on public assistance, leading to

higher lifetime spending on unemployment benefits, welfare, and other transfer programmes (Brunello & de Paola, 2014). This increases the risk of poverty and social exclusion among early leavers (Koc et al., 2020). At the community level, high dropout rates are linked to negative externalities, including elevated crime rates (Machin et al., 2011; Anderson, 2014; Cook & Kang, 2016; Na, 2017; Gerlinger & Hipp, 2023) and poorer health outcomes (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2012; Vaughn et al., 2014; Hjorth et al., 2016; Davies et al., 2018).

In addition, early school leaving interrupts the intergenerational transfer of human capital, whereby parents' educational attainment and skills influence their children's outcomes. This process is reinforced by peer effects: Children of early school leavers are more likely to grow up in networks where low educational attainment is normalised, further perpetuating disadvantage. Individuals with lower education are less likely to support the academic development of their children, perpetuating educational disadvantage across generations (Oreopoulos, 2007, in van der Steeg et al., 2015).

These broader repercussions underscore that reducing early school leaving is not merely an educational objective, but a pressing social, economic, and policy imperative. They also highlight the importance of continued research to identify effective strategies for reducing ESL(European Commission, 2017).

#### Interventions as responses to early school leaving

Given these effects, preventing ESL is a global priority (UNICEF, 2018). A wide range of educational interventions has been developed to address the underlying causes of early school leaving. To establish which approaches are genuinely effective, researchers frequently employ experimental or quasi- experimental designs. These methods allow for robust causal inferences by comparing treated groups with appropriate controls, thereby isolating programme impacts (Avvisati et al., 2014; Fryer, 2011; Fryer et al., 2022). The resulting evidence base underpins the design and refinement of intervention strategies.

These interventions are often grounded in the economic education production function, a model that conceptualises student achievement as the outcome of various inputs - such as school resources, teacher quality, family support, and targeted programmes (e.g. Glewwe et al., 2020; Hanushek 2008; Levitt et al., 2016). Within this framework, inputs shape students' learning effort and behaviour, ultimately influencing academic outcomes (Hanushek, 2008). The model

assumes a causal relationship between inputs and outputs, informing education policy decisions aimed at improving student performance (Hanushek, 2008; List et al., 2018).

Interventions frequently adopt experimental or quasi-experimental designs to evaluate effectiveness (e.g. Avvisati et al., 2014; Fryer, 2011; Fryer et al., 2022). These designs allow for causal inferences by comparing treated groups with suitable control groups, thereby isolating programme impacts.

Several well-documented approaches use extrinsic rewards - such as cash transfers or tangible incentives - as tools to increase student motivation and task performance (e.g. Levitt et al., 2016; Baird, 2013; Fryer, 2011). These strategies have shown positive short-term effects on academic effort under specific circumstances and, particularly, when rewards are immediate and task-specific (Levitt et al., 2016).

Interventions vary widely in structure and delivery. Classroom-based approaches (as the RAISE-UP programme), integrated into the school curricula, aim to improve the learning environment and foster socio-emotional development (Korpershoek et al., 2016). In contrast, extracurricular programmes implemented outside formal teaching hours offer additional flexibility and often target students' broader wellbeing, enjoyment, and motivation (e.g. O'Neill et al., 2024) and may focus on strengthening core skills such as reading and mathematics (e.g. Otte et al., 2019). Hybrid models combining curricular and extracurricular components have also proven effective, as demonstrated by a Dutch coaching initiative that reduced dropout rates by more than 40 % from 17 to 10 percentage points after one year of coaching among students aged 16–20 (van der Steeg et al., 2015).

Positive psychology-based interventions represent a growing area of practice. These focus on enhancing intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, and self-efficacy particularly in relation to academic activities and achievement (e.g. Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022; Alivernini & Lucidi, 201), and through mentoring, group activities, or structured learning camps (e.g. van der Steeg et al., 2015). Other interventions address concrete skill deficits that increase dropout risk, such as gaps in literacy or numeracy (Otte et al., 2019). Mixed models often combine academic with psychosocial support, for example through coaching or mentoring (Korpershoek et al., 2016; van der Steeg et al., 2015).

Effective programmes frequently adopt a dual focus on students and teachers. Teachers play a key role in shaping student outcomes, not only through instructional quality but also via classroom climate and their support for student autonomy (Hattie, 2008). Research highlights that teacher-centred interventions - such as coaching or professional development - can improve the implementation of effective pedagogical strategies and increase student engagement (Reinke et al., 2014). This is reflected in the RAISE-UP programme that also provided coaching services and capacity-building for teachers.

It is also essential to recognise that intervention success is context dependent. Local factors - such as national policy frameworks, school governance, and community norms - shape both the drivers of ESL and the feasibility of particular approaches (e.g. Freeman & Simonsen, 2015, Prevatt & Kelly, 2003). As a result, there is no universal solution. Effective interventions must be tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the students they target. The RAISE-UP programme draws from these proven approaches, with a particular emphasis on building digital and green competences, supporting teachers through coaching, and enhancing students' motivation and engagement. This holistic design is explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

## The RAISE-UP project at a glance

RAISE-UP<sup>12</sup> was a pilot programme designed to prevent early school leaving (ESL) in the Turin region of Italy. Its purpose was twofold: To strengthen students' motivation to complete their education and to equip schools with the capacity to respond more effectively to dropout risks.

The classroom-based component formed the core of the programme. It was delivered through a co-teaching model pairing traditional teachers with professional educators—specialists from accredited training centers who focus on applied, practice-oriented modules. This collaboration linked theoretical instruction with project-based learning, bridging the gap between curricula and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> RAISE-UP is an acronym for gReen and digitAl Initiative addreSsEd to dropoUts' Prevention. This project received funding from the EUROPEAN COMMISSION, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion under project number 101102484 (Call: ESF-2022-SOC-INNOV, Topic: ESF-2022-SOC-INNOV, Type of action: ESF Project Grants, Granting authority: European Commission-EU). The content of this paper does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Union.

labour market needs (CEDEFOP, 2020; INAPP, 2020). The co-developed curriculum integrated digital and green competences with transversal skills such as problem-solving and communication, and was implemented from January to June 2025 in weekly four-hour sessions.

To prepare for implementation, teachers and professional educators took part in a 24-hour training programme on embedding green and digital skills through active, project-based methods. A voluntary coaching service was also available to support staff with classroom management and motivation, helping to equalise teaching capacity across the participating schools.

The programme aimed to raise students' aspirations for further education, strengthen their confidence and satisfaction with schooling, and encourage engagement with green and digital competences. It also sought to increase awareness of the labour market relevance of these skills and foster interest in related career pathways. The specific hypotheses tested in the evaluation are outlined in the methodology chapter.

## Methodology

The evaluation employed a quasi-experimental design using a difference-in-differences (DiD) approach with individual fixed effects and aggregated-level analyses to measure programme impact. Teachers and educators as well as students were assessed at three testing waves: Two prior to the interventions and one after the implementation. The design allows for causal inference under the assumption of parallel trends in the absence of treatment. By comparing changes over time between treatment and control groups, the approach mitigates endogeneity strengthens validity of the findings.

The intervention was implemented in implemented in two vocational education and training (VET) schools in the Turin region of Italy across four classes. Randomised allocation was not feasible, as participating schools were selected through an open call, and within those schools, classes were identified by the directors based on logistical considerations. To strengthen baseline comparability, a DiD design with repeated pretests was adopted.

The evaluation considered the programme's three components: The classroom-based intervention, capacity-building for teachers and professional educators, and a voluntary coaching service. This paper, however, reports results only for the

first two. The classroom-based element was assessed using the DiD design, while the capacity-building component was examined through a one-group pretest–post-test design. A qualitative evaluation of the coaching service, along with focus groups and interviews with students, teachers, and educators, will be conducted later in the year to validate the findings; these results are not presented here.

Independent variables included treatment status, time period, and the interaction between them. Outcomes covered motivational, attitudinal, and skill-based domains: Students' educational aspirations, motivation to complete their current track, satisfaction with schooling, self-confidence, and engagement with green and digital competences, including their perceived labour-market relevance. To ensure the robustness of the DiD estimates, pre-intervention trends were inspected and robustness checks were applied.

Data were collected through pretested online surveys administered in classrooms. Responses were anonymised in a way that allowed matching across waves without disclosing participant identities.

The main hypotheses, pre-registered on the Open Science Framework (osf.io/x4e2h), were as follows:

H1 Educational aspirations: Students exposed to the RAISE-UP intervention are expected to express a higher likelihood of planning to pursue further education, compared to those in the control group.

H2 Completion motivation: Treated students will report greater motivation to complete their current educational track, as reflected in a higher self-assessed probability of finishing school.

H3 Green and digital skills: The intervention is expected to improve students' attitudes and engagement with green and digital topics along three dimensions:

H3a Treated students will report higher self-perceived knowledge and competence in digital and green domains.

H3b They will assign greater perceived labour market relevance to these skills.

H3c They will report more frequent engagement with related activities, such as using digital tools or participating in environmental initiatives.

H4 Sectoral preferences: Exposure to the intervention will shift students' career interests toward green and digital sectors, as measured by changes in the point allocation task relative to other industries.

H5 School engagement and self-confidence: Treated students will report higher satisfaction with their schooling experience and increased self-confidence compared to the control group.

#### Results

The impact of the RAISE-UP intervention was tested against five pre-registered hypotheses (H1–H5), using three survey waves with 161 students and analysed through a difference-in-differences design with student fixed effects.

Despite its ambition, quantitatively, the programme did not produce measurable gains in educational aspirations (H1:  $\beta$  = -0.26, p = 0.191) or in motivation to complete school (H2:  $\beta$  = 0.10, p = 0.596). Similarly, no significant effects emerged for digital and green competences: Self-perceived knowledge of sustainability (H3a:  $\beta$  = 0.27, p = 0.245), technical competence (H3a:  $\beta$  = -0.30, p = 0.133), awareness of green jobs (H3b:  $\beta$  = -0.22, p = 0.325), awareness of digital jobs (H3b:  $\beta$  = 0.06, p = 0.790), or pro- environmental behaviours (H3c:  $\beta$  = 0.11, p = 0.637). A marginally significant decline was observed in self-reported use of computer skills (H3c:  $\beta$  = -0.37, p = 0.061). Sectoral preferences (H4) also showed no measurable change ( $\beta$  = -0.26, p = 0.112). Measures of socio-emotional engagement produced similar null results. Self-confidence did not change significantly (H5b:  $\beta$  = -0.24, p = 0.304).

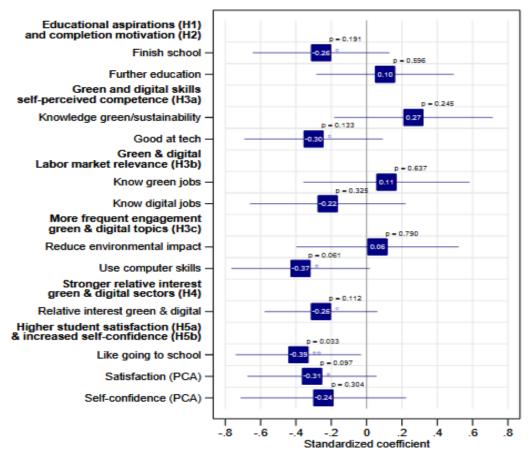
The only robust finding was negative: Treated students reported significantly lower enjoyment of school than the control group (H5a:  $\beta$  = -0.38, p = 0.033), with a marginal decline in broader school satisfaction ( $\beta$  = -0.32, p = 0.097). This effect was most pronounced in one of the participating schools and among female students.

At baseline, treatment and control groups were broadly balanced across demographic and socio- economic variables, though some minor imbalances

existed (e.g. parental birthplace and self- employment status). Outcome-related differences were also Evident: Treated students initially expressed higher optimism about finishing school, greater interest in green and digital careers, stronger self-confidence, and higher enjoyment of school. These differences had largely vanished by the final survey wave, underscoring the need for a difference-in-differences design. Moreover, no systematic heterogeneity in treatment effects was observed by socio-economic background, indicating that the null and negative impacts were similar across higher and lower SES families.

In the final survey wave, students were also asked additional questions about the programme. Treated students evaluated its usefulness, describing the coteaching experience as modestly helpful (mean = 4.25 on a 7-point scale; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), while their assessments of the intervention's green and digital content were moderate (mean scores of 3.91 and 3.84 respectively on a 7-point scale). A substantial minority (25%) strongly disagreed that the programme had prepared them for future educational goals. Control group students were asked about their awareness of the programme and whether they felt excluded; they reported minimal awareness or envy (mean envy = 2.25), reducing concerns about spillover effects.

Figure 2: RAISE-UP effects on main outcomes. The figure shows standardised coefficients for each of the main outcome variables



In addition to student outcomes, the evaluation also examined the experiences of teachers and professional educators. Survey results indicated modest gains in self-assessed familiarity with green topics and awareness of digital and green competences relevant to students' labour market prospects. Reported improvements in general digital familiarity were statistically significant among teachers ( $p \approx 0.02$ ) and approached conventional significance levels in the combined sample ( $p \approx 0.06$ ). In contrast, changes in broader pedagogical attitudes such as willingness to integrate new material, perceptions of classroom disruption, or confidence in managing difficult students were mixed and largely not significant.

In the final survey wave, teachers expressed high levels of satisfaction with their capacity-building component (mean ratings above 6 on a 7-point scale across quality, relevance, and preparedness items), whereas professional educators provided more moderate evaluations, typically just above the neutral midpoint. Both groups agreed that the capacity-building activities were politically balanced, reporting low perceived bias.

Taken together, the student and staff results suggest that while the RAISE-UP intervention modestly enhanced awareness of green and digital competences among educators, it did not translate into improved outcomes for students and in some cases reduced their enjoyment of school.

### Discussion

The most notable outcome of the RAISE-UP evaluation was a decline in treated students' enjoyment of school (H5a), accompanied by a marginal decline in overall school satisfaction and a possible reduction in reported computer use (H3c). Rather than indicating a fall in competence, the latter may reflect substitution of free-time digital activity with structured in-class use digital activities during class. This is consistent with prior evidence that formalising voluntary behaviours can crowd out leisure engagement without reducing skill acquisition (Frey, 1994; Gneezy et al., 2011). This suggests that the decline does not necessarily reflect a loss of competence but rather a shift in context.

More concerning were the socio-emotional outcomes. The evaluation found a significant decline in students' enjoyment of school (H5a) and a marginal decline in overall satisfaction. These two measures are closely related, both capturing students' affective connection to schooling, which research consistently links to engagement, wellbeing, and persistence (Durlak et al., 2011; Ciarrochi, Heaven, & Davies, 2007; Nicoll, 2014). For some participants, the additional project-based tasks introduced by the programme may have been perceived as a burden rather than an opportunity, particularly among students already struggling with low baseline engagement (Lamonica, Ragazzi, & Sella, 2020). This helps explain why the intervention could be associated with reduced enjoyment and satisfaction.

Other outcomes remained largely unchanged. No measurable improvements were observed in students' educational aspirations (H1) or motivation to complete school (H2). This is perhaps unsurprising in the institutional context of Italian VET schools, which are designed primarily to prepare students for immediate labour-market entry rather than further academic study (Brunello & Rocco, 2017; Brunello & de Paola, 2014). One of the participating schools was described as a "last resort" option (Vegliante et al., 2024), suggesting that many learners were already facing significant barriers. In such circumstances, aspirations and motivation are unlikely to shift quickly, and any small gains may take longer to mature and become measurable. These contextual factors also limit the

generalisability of the findings. The study was confined to two vocational schools in Turin, a region with above-average dropout rates and a high proportion of migrant students (Lamonica et al., 2020). Moreover, research suggests that the resonance of green-skills content varies across socio-economic and cultural settings (Qadri et al., 2025), meaning effects may not transfer directly to other contexts.

Similarly, no gains were observed in green and digital competences (H3a), awareness of their labour-market relevance (H3b), sectoral preferences (H4), or self-confidence (H5b). Several factors likely contributed to these null results:

The short and disrupted duration of the programme constrained itspotential effects. RAISE-UP ran for only one semester (January–June), interrupted by holidays and school events, with the final survey administered within six weeks of completion. Prior research show that socio-emotional and behavioural outcomes generally require longer and more sustained exposure to take hold (Durlak et al., 2011; Rodríguez-Planas, 2012). Some outcomes, particularly in self-confidence and vocational maturity, are likely to emerge only gradually and thus were unlikely to be captured immediately after such a brief intervention period.

This compressed timeframe was not incidental but reflected the structural conditions under which EU-funded projects typically operate. Preparing a programme that met the expectations of a competitive call, aligning diverse partners, and negotiating school timetables required substantial groundwork before implementation could begin. Within the rigid timelines of the funding framework, the window left for classroom delivery was inevitably narrow. As a result, despite careful design, the intervention was constrained in both duration and intensity.

Variability in delivery may have weakened consistency. The co-teaching model depended heavily on the engagement and teaching styles of teachers and professional educators. While no systematic class-level differences were detected in the available data, the short duration and timing of the evaluation may have prevented such differences from becoming evident. Uneven implementation could therefore still have diluted potential effects, particularly if impacts require more time to materialise. Prior research confirms that outcomes are strongly moderated by delivery quality and active student participation (Reinke et al., 2014; Korpershoek et al., 2016; Vollet, Kindermann, & Skinner, 2017).

Conducting the evaluation in real-world school settings also presented challenges. Attrition was particularly notable in one school due to logistical and communication difficulties. The anonymisation code, although pre-tested successfully in Austria, proved difficult for many Italian students, undermining longitudinal matching. The questionnaire, while pre-tested, was lengthy and demanding, and administration varied across settings: developed by one team, translated by another, distributed by a third, and implemented by teachers often without direct oversight. Such multi-actor delegation is known to reduce fidelity (European Commission, 2017; UNICEF, 2018). Resistance from some teachers further compounded these challenges.

The perspectives of teachers and professional educators provide a complementary picture. Teachers reported modest gains in familiarity with green and digital competences, including significant improvements in digital familiarity, and expressed high satisfaction with their training. Professional educators offered more moderate evaluations. While these changes at the staff level did not translate into measurable student outcomes during the study period, they may represent early steps toward building institutional capacity. Additionally, consistence with existing evidence that short-term professional development rarely produces downstream effects without sustained institutional support (Reinke et al., 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Korpershoek et al., 2016). It remains possible, however, that these staff-level improvements could yield indirect benefits if followed up over a longer period.

Taken together, the evaluation points to limited measurable effects. The clearest result was a decline in students' enjoyment of school, with a marginal decline in overall satisfaction, and the apparent reduction in reported computer use, plausibly explained by substitution into structured activities. Beyond these patterns, no clear improvements were observed within the study period. While this may suggest that the intervention did not achieve its intended outcomes in the short term, it does not mean that the programme was irrelevant or a failure per se. The design was robust and capable of identifying causal effects, so the expectations for measurable impact were justified. Yet real-world implementation rarely follows the clean lines of theory: schools are complex environments, and factors such as brief and disrupted duration, variability in dosage, and the challenges of conducting longitudinal surveys with younger students inevitably

shape outcomes. Under such conditions, immediate, measurable change within a single semester is difficult to achieve.

These results therefore highlight the conditions under which programmes like RAISE-UP are most likely to succeed. Longer duration, greater continuity, and the opportunity to track outcomes over a longer period appear essential if effects are to consolidate and become visible. In this sense, RAISE-UP contributes not only by piloting a novel model, but also by clarifying the systemic and practical challenges that future efforts will need to confront if early school leaving is to be reduced effectively.

### Conclusion

The RAISE-UP evaluation provides a realistic picture of what can and cannot be achieved within a single semester in vocational education and training. Despite its ambition and rigorous design, the programme did not yield measurable gains in aspirations, competences, or socio-emotional outcomes, and in some cases appeared to reduce students' enjoyment of school. These findings must be acknowledged: They remind us that innovative interventions are not automatically effective, particularly when delivered in complex school environments where students already face barriers to engagement and where resources especially time are strained.

At the same time, the absence of immediate gains does not mean that the intervention was without value. On the contrary, the study highlights the conditions under which programmes of this kind are most likely to succeed. The positive signals from teachers such as improved digital familiarity and strong satisfaction with the training point to institutional potential that may take longer to translate into student outcomes. Planned follow-up interviews and focus groups with students, teachers, and professional educators will provide further insight into these dynamics.

The evaluation also points to the need for greater realism in how such initiatives are structured. EU-funded projects like RAISE-UP play a vital role in promoting educational innovation, yet rigid timelines, resource limitations, and bureaucratic procedures often compress the window for delivery. By the time schools align timetables and partners coordinate implementation, the period left for meaningful engagement is narrow. Greater flexibility and more realistic timeframes would allow promising interventions to realise their full potential.

For policy and practice, the findings reinforce broader European evidence that reducing early school leaving and preparing students for the twin transitions of digitalisation and decarbonisation demands multi-year engagement, strong institutional support, and high implementation fidelity. Referring to the gender-specific effects observed in one of the participating schools, future interventions should also take into account the differing perceptions and levels of self-confidence that may arise from entrenched gender differences in socialisation and educational expectations (e.g. the stereotype that boys are more competent in technology-related fields than girls). This points to a pressing need for further research on gender-sensitive education and the development of inclusive, nongender-normed learning tools.

In as much as RAISE-UP did not deliver the intended short-term outcomes, it offers important lessons about the obstacles and conditions that shape impact. Understanding these lessons is essential if future interventions are to give young people in vocational education the genuine opportunities they deserve.

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IMPACT EVALUATION OF LIFE SKILLS CURRICULUM
IMPLEMENTATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN BOSNIA AND
HERZEGOVINA

### **ABSTRACT**

Life skills are defined as "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" (WHO, 1997). Recognizing their importance, the Life Skills Program was implemented in primary schools across Bosnia and Herzegovina, aiming to foster decision-making, emotional regulation, critical thinking, effective communication, and social responsibility among students. The program integrated life skills content into existing curricula through non-intrusive classroom methods led by trained teachers.

To assess the program's effectiveness, a quasi-experimental repeated-measures design was employed, with matched comparison groups created using propensity score matching and inverse probability weighting. The impact was measured using a difference-in-differences (DiD) approach, comparing changes in psychological and behavioral outcomes over time between students in treatment and comparison groups. Instruments used included the Life Skills Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Developmental Assets Profile, CBCL, and custom tools measuring exposure to violence.

Although the evaluation did not yield statistically significant results across the primary outcome domains—decision-making, emotional regulation, communication, interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, social responsibility, and violence reduction—it provided critical insights into implementation processes, data collection strategies, and the value of integrating rigorous evaluation frameworks in education reform. Variability in implementation fidelity and short exposure duration were identified as key limitations. Nonetheless, the study demonstrates the feasibility of conducting robust evaluations in

transitional education systems and offers a roadmap for future assessments of similar initiatives.

### Introduction

Over the last two decades, life skills education has emerged as a critical tool for equipping young people with the competencies necessary to navigate the complexities of modern life. In post-conflict and transitional societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where educational systems are pivotal for fostering social cohesion and preparing youth for active citizenship and employment, the relevance of life skills curricula is especially pronounced.

According to the World Health Organization (1997), life skills are defined as "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life." These skills include cognitive (e.g., problem-solving and decision-making), emotional (e.g., coping with emotions and stress), and interpersonal (e.g., communication and relationship-building) competencies. The integration of life skills into formal education systems has been recommended by global bodies such as UNICEF and WHO to promote mental well-being, reduce risky behaviors, and enhance academic achievement.

Despite international advocacy, evidence regarding the effectiveness of life skills education remains mixed, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Many interventions are inadequately evaluated, and few use rigorous methodologies that allow for attribution of outcomes. This study aims to address this gap through a comprehensive impact evaluation of a life skills curriculum implemented in primary schools in Tuzla Canton, BiH. The evaluation was commissioned by USAID/BiH under the MEASURE project and implemented by the Centre for Development Evaluation and Social Science Research (CREDI).

# Theoretical Background

Life skills are broadly understood as psychosocial abilities that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. The World Health Organization (1997) identifies ten core life skills: decision-making, problem-solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, self-awareness, empathy, coping with stress, and coping with emotions. These competencies are foundational for young people as

they navigate the transition from childhood to adulthood, influencing their ability to succeed academically, form healthy relationships, and participate constructively in society.

The development of life skills during primary and secondary education is critical. At the primary level, children begin to internalize social norms, develop emotional regulation, and learn how to engage with peers. Embedding life skills into the curriculum at this stage can foster resilience, empathy, and a sense of agency. As students progress into secondary school, life skills education becomes even more salient as they face increased academic pressure, social complexity, and future planning. Research suggests that students who receive structured life skills training demonstrate improved academic performance, lower levels of psychological distress, and decreased engagement in risky behaviours (Nasheeda et al., 2019).

The theory of change assumes that exposing children to life skills program will develop different type of life skills and attitudes that will be beneficial both to individual and to nearest society. It is argued that life skills program will contribute to promotion of the health and well-being of children. More precisely, it is argued that expected benefits (outcomes) of life skills programs are as follows:

- positive psychological and behavioural response of children who are exposed to life skills program and
- increase of labour skills and employment rate.

The theoretical framework underpinning the life skills curriculum in BiH draws upon several intersecting bodies of literature, including social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), positive youth development (Lerner et al., 2005), and the developmental assets framework (Search Institute, 2005).

Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of observational learning, self-efficacy, and reciprocal determinism in behaviour change. According to this theory, children who are exposed to modelling of life skills behaviours (e.g., through teacher demonstrations or peer interactions) are more likely to adopt these behaviours themselves. Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's capacity to execute specific actions, is a central mechanism in this process and is explicitly targeted in many life skills curricula.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) frameworks complement this view by focusing on the promotion of internal assets (e.g., social competencies, positive identity) and external supports (e.g., family support, school climate) necessary for youth to thrive. The Five Cs of PYD—Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring—align closely with the outcomes targeted by life skills education.

The Developmental Assets Framework, developed by the Search Institute, identifies 40 internal and external assets that predict youth success across diverse cultural settings. These include empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, and commitment to learning, all of which were operationalized in this study through the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP).

Empirical evidence supports the theoretical underpinnings of life skills education. Esmaeilinasab et al. (2011) demonstrated that high school students in Iran who received life skills training experienced a significant increase in self-esteem. Ghasemian and Kumar (2017) found reductions in psychological distress among adolescents in India following structured life skills interventions. Botvin and Griffin (2014) reported significant reductions in substance abuse among American adolescents who completed life skills programs. In Kenya, Werunga et al. (2011) observed improved transition rates from primary to secondary school when life skills training was integrated into the curriculum.

Nevertheless, critiques such as those by Gorman et al. (2009) caution against overgeneralizing the effectiveness of life skills interventions, pointing to the need for rigorous evaluation designs. This study addresses such concerns through its quasi-experimental methodology and use of validated measurement instruments.

# Previous Research on the Evaluation of Life Skills Programs

The global literature on evaluating life skills programs underscores the challenges and complexities of measuring psychosocial outcomes within educational settings. Despite widespread implementation of such curricula, rigorous impact evaluations remain relatively scarce, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

A number of large-scale evaluations have demonstrated positive effects of life skills programs. For example, the Life Skills Training (LST) program developed by Botvin has been extensively evaluated in the United States and shown to reduce adolescent drug and alcohol use, improve social competence, and strengthen decision-making skills (Botvin & Griffin, 2014). Similarly, the Better Life Program for persons with severe mental illness in Norway demonstrated improved coping and communication skills following structured group-based life skills training (Grawe et al., 2007).

In India, Kumar and Krishnamurthy (2016) found that structured life skills education enhanced psychological well-being and emotional resilience among high school students. Meanwhile, Visser (2005) evaluated a large-scale life skills and HIV prevention program in South African secondary schools, finding improvements in knowledge retention, communication skills, and assertiveness. These findings align with those from the Search Institute's Developmental Assets framework, which emphasizes the role of internal assets in promoting youth well-being and prosocial behavior (Search Institute, 2005).

However, evaluations have also highlighted methodological limitations. For instance, Gorman et al. (2009) criticized the evaluation of the Strengthening Families Program Plus Life Skills Training for lacking experimental control and over-reliance on self-reported measures. Similarly, Malatest & Associates (2014) noted that inconsistent implementation and varying teacher training undermined the impact of life skills programs in Canadian schools.

A systematic review by Nasheeda et al. (2019) synthesized findings from over 40 studies and concluded that while life skills education shows promise, more studies using randomized controlled trials (RCTs), longitudinal designs, and mixed-methods approaches are needed. The authors stressed the importance of implementation fidelity, cultural relevance, and the integration of qualitative methods to understand context-specific outcomes.

The current study seeks to contribute to this growing field by applying a robust quasi-experimental design and multilevel statistical analysis in a real-world school setting in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It addresses many of the methodological gaps identified in prior research by using validated instruments, controlling for confounding variables, and disaggregating results by key demographics such as gender and socio-economic status.

# Methodology

# Study Design

The evaluation employed a quasi-experimental, repeated measures design using a matched comparison group to estimate the causal impact of the life skills curriculum as a full randomized controlled trial (RCT) was not feasible due to the pre-selection of intervention schools by implementing partners. However, robust methods were adopted to minimize bias and enhance internal validity.

The difference-in-differences (DiD) approach was used to evaluate changes in outcomes over time between the treatment and comparison groups. This approach allowed the estimation of treatment effects by comparing pre- and post-intervention differences while accounting for baseline differences.

To improve group comparability, propensity score matching (PSM) was used. The matching algorithm employed nearest-neighbour matching without replacement, using school- and student-level covariates, including municipality, school size, student age, gender, baseline academic performance, and teacher-reported classroom environment. Propensity scores were estimated using a logistic regression model. Additionally, Inverse Probability Weighting (IPW) was used to further reduce selection bias. This ensured that the matched sample represented the target population more accurately by weighting observations according to their inverse probability of receiving the treatment, based on the estimated propensity scores.

Model robustness was assessed through multicollinearity checks, intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs), and sensitivity analyses with fixed effects and clustered standard errors

Subgroup analyses were conducted by gender, municipality, and socioeconomic background to identify differential impacts of the intervention.

# Sampling Strategy

The sample consisted of 822 students drawn from 40 classrooms in 27 public primary schools across 9 municipalities in Tuzla Canton. Schools were selected in collaboration with education ministries and World Vision, which had previously identified intervention sites. Treatment group included 20 classrooms in schools where the life skills program was implemented, while comparison group

included 20 matched classrooms in schools not exposed to the intervention, selected through PSM.

In each classroom, students in grades 8 and 9 participated in baseline and endline data collection over one academic year. The study also collected data from teachers, parents, and school administrators to triangulate findings.

#### **Instruments and Measures**

A range of validated psychometric instruments was used to assess changes in student competencies and behavioral outcomes, namely:

- Life Skills Scale (Mincemoyer & Perkins, 2001): Assesses decision-making, emotional regulation, communication, and problem-solving.
- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965): A widely used 10-item scale measuring self-worth.
- Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) (Search Institute, 2005): Evaluates internal and external developmental supports.
- Cognitive Behavioral Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001): Used to identify behavioral and emotional problems from the child's perspective, and
- Violence Manifestation and Exposure Questionnaire (adapted by World Vision): Measures perceived and experienced violence in school and community settings.
- Each instrument underwent internal consistency analysis at the baseline and endline. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.72 to 0.91 across domains, indicating acceptable to excellent reliability.

Reliability analysis of the measurement instruments confirmed that most scales demonstrated acceptable to excellent internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha values were highest for the decision-making ( $\alpha$  = 0.91–0.93), critical thinking ( $\alpha$  = 0.93–0.94), and emotional management ( $\alpha$  = 0.91–0.93) subscales, indicating strong internal reliability. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ( $\alpha$  = 0.78–0.81) and the total Developmental Assets Profile ( $\alpha$  = 0.66–0.83) also showed acceptable reliability. However, a few subscales, such as Constructive Use of Time and Coping with Problems, demonstrated lower alpha values ( $\alpha$  < 0.50), likely due to a limited number of items and reduced item intercorrelation. See Annex 1 for detail data on internal consistency of the used scales.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected at two time points: baseline from September–October 2018 (start of the school year), and endline from June 2019 (end of the academic year)

Data collection teams were trained extensively to administer instruments uniformly and ethically. Questionnaires were distributed in classroom settings under supervised conditions. Parent and teacher surveys were self-administered and collected confidentially.

Informed consent was obtained from school authorities, parents/guardians, and students. Participation was voluntary and confidential, in accordance with national regulations and international research ethics standards.

### **Results**

### **Baseline Characteristics and Balance**

At baseline, treatment and comparison groups were assessed for equivalence using descriptive statistics and balance diagnostics after propensity score matching. Prior to matching, treatment group students exhibited marginally higher average scores across domains such as self-esteem, decision-making, and emotional regulation.

After implementing propensity score matching and inverse probability weighting, the covariate distributions between groups were significantly balanced across demographic and academic characteristics. Standardized mean differences for key covariates fell below 0.1, indicating strong post-matching comparability. The overlap of the distribution of the propensity scores across treatment and comparison groups is displayed in **Hiba! A hivatkozási forrás nem található.** 

0 .2 .4 .6 .8 Propensity Score

Untreated Treated

Figure 1 Distribution of Propensity Score across Treatment and Comparison

Source: Authors' calculations

The baseline analysis revealed statistically significant differences between students in the treatment and comparison groups prior to the intervention. Specifically, students in the treatment group reported higher mean scores across several core life skills dimensions, including decision-making, critical thinking, emotional management, social responsibility, and interpersonal relationships. These differences, statistically significant at p < 0.05 across most domains, indicate that the treatment group was relatively advantaged at baseline, thereby justifying the use of a difference-in-differences (DiD) analytical framework.

Despite baseline differences favouring the treatment group, the DiD analysis found no statistically significant differences in post-intervention outcomes between treatment and comparison groups across most domains. While students in the treatment group generally continued to report slightly higher scores on life skills dimensions, none of these improvements reached statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. For example, the estimated treatment effects for post-intervention decision-making and emotional regulation were positive (+0.05 and +0.12, respectively), but the associated p-values (p = 0.298 and p = 0.759) indicated a lack of statistical robustness. A small negative effect was observed in post-intervention social relationship scores (–0.08), yet this, too, was not statistically significant. See Table 1:

Table 1 Results of difference in difference

Subconstruct	Life Skills Scale	DID	Subconstruct	The Developmental	DID
				<b>Assets Profile</b>	
MD	Making Decisions	104	DAP_SUP1	Support	465
	in everyday life	(.062)*			(.485)
CR	Social	093	DAP_EMP2	Empowerment	589
	responsibility	(.062)			(.493)
	scale				
СТ	Critical thinking	108	DAP_BE3	Boundaries and	480
	in everyday life	(.066)		expectations	(.476)
SR	Social	176	DAP_CUT4	Constructive use of time	630
	relationships	(.061)**			(.650)
	scale				
CS	Communication	058	DAP_CL5	Commitment to	754
	scale	(.057)		learning	(.522)
EM	Emotional	128	DAP_PV6	Positive values	120
	management	(.055)**			(.409)
	scale				
Subconstruct	Cognitive-	DID	DAP_SC7	Social competencies	732
	<b>Behaviour Check</b>				(.465)
	List				
AP	Attention	.019	DAP_PI8	Positive Identity	850
	problems	(.028)			(.487)
SP	Social problems	005	DAP_EAC	External asset side	-5.42
		(.019)		(SUP1+EMP2+BE3+CUT4)	(4.164
TP	Thought	.005	DAP_IAC	Internal asset side	-6.152
	problems	(.014)		(CL5+PV6+SC7+PI8)	(3.91)
AB	Aggressive	.023	DAP_TOTAL	DAP Total	-11.57
	behavior	(.018)			(7.51)
MB	Relationship with	.012			
	peers	(.023)			
MC	Relationship	011			
	between child	(.020)			
	and teachers				
CBCL_MD	Coping with	.013			
	problems and	(.026)			
	locus of control				
ME	Social anxiety	.018			
		(.025)			
MG	Hyperactive	.029			
	behavior	(0.04)			

MA	Difficulties in	009
	learning and	(.024)
	behavior	
SC	Somatic	019
	complaints	(.020)
RBB	Rule-breaking	.003
	behaviour	(.011)
AD	Anxiety and	010
	depression	(.024)
Construct	Rosenberg self-	DID
	esteem scale	
ROS	Rosenberg self	082
	esteem	(.046)*
Subconstruct	Violence	DID
	Manifestation	
	and Exposure	
	Questionnaire	
IZL	Violence	.018
	exposure	(.041)
ISP	Violence	.047
	manifestation	(.033)

Notes: Standard errors are in the parentheses.

\*/\*\*/\*\*\* significantly different from 0 at the 0.1/0.05/0.01 levels, respectively, two-tailed test.

Behavioral and emotional outcomes, measured using the Cognitive Behavioral Checklist (CBCL), similarly showed no statistically significant effects. Although the treatment group showed minor improvements in behavioral functioning—such as decreases in somatic complaints and learning difficulties—these effects were modest and did not reach significance. The absence of negative outcomes reinforces the finding that the intervention did no harm, but also suggests limited measurable behavioral impact within the evaluation period.

Measures of violence manifestation and exposure, assessed via the Violence Questionnaire, yielded slightly unexpected results. In the treatment group, both perceived exposure to violence and self-reported manifestation of violence increased marginally following the intervention. These findings, though not statistically significant, may reflect increased awareness and self-reporting among students following classroom discussions on violence, rather than actual increases in violent experiences.

The Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) showed small, non-significant gains in several subdomains, including empowerment, positive identity, and commitment to learning. Although these trends suggest the potential for longer-term improvements, the absence of statistically meaningful change again underscores the constraints of a single academic year for effect detection.

Subgroup analyses explored potential moderating effects of gender and socio-economic status. Although underpowered for definitive conclusions, the trends were noteworthy: girls showed greater improvement in emotional regulation and social responsibility, while boys showed small gains in self-esteem. Furthermore, students from low-income households exhibited relatively higher improvements in interpersonal relationship skills and emotion-focused coping strategies. These preliminary findings point to the possibility that the program may have differential effects across demographic subgroups, a topic worthy of further investigation in future studies.

Qualitative implementation monitoring revealed that approximately 60% of teachers reported regular (weekly or bi-weekly) integration of life skills content, classrooms with higher fidelity to curriculum guidelines showed larger, though still non-significant, gains, and teacher training quality and perceived administrative support were strong moderators of program delivery success.

In summary, while the evaluation found no statistically significant treatment effects, the results revealed positive trends across most psychosocial domains. Instrument reliability was strong, and the application of rigorous statistical controls enhanced confidence in the null findings. The lack of statistically significant change is most likely attributable to factors such as implementation heterogeneity, variation in exposure duration, and the inherent difficulty of achieving measurable psychosocial transformation within a single academic year.

# **Concluding Remarks**

Although the evaluation did not yield statistically significant program effects, several important trends and lessons emerge. First, descriptive improvements in emotional regulation, decision-making, and interpersonal skills are directionally consistent with the program's Theory of Change. This suggests that the intervention has potential, especially with enhanced implementation fidelity and longer timeframes.

The lack of statistical significance may be attributed to several factors:

- Short duration of exposure: Students participated in the program for only one academic year. Evidence from the literature (e.g., Botvin & Griffin, 2014; Nasheeda et al., 2019) suggests that sustained engagement over multiple years is typically needed to yield observable behavioral and psychosocial changes.
- Implementation variability: Differences in teacher training, motivation, and institutional support influenced curriculum delivery. Schools with consistent implementation exhibited stronger gains.
- Measurement challenges: Life skills are inherently difficult to quantify, and many outcomes were measured via self-report surveys, introducing potential social desirability and recall biases.
- Complexity of outcomes: Constructs such as empathy or social responsibility may be influenced by numerous environmental and cultural factors, not easily isolated in short-term interventions.

The findings align with previous mixed evaluations of life skills interventions. For instance, Gorman et al. (2009) highlighted how design flaws and weak implementation compromise impact potential, while Grawe et al. (2007) and Visser (2005) noted positive but variable program effects based on context-specific delivery factors.

Unlike studies in high-resource settings, this evaluation occurred in a transitional, post-conflict environment where systemic constraints (e.g., teacher overload, lack of funding) limit implementation capacity. Thus, while the results may seem underwhelming in isolation, they offer valuable insights for scaling up interventions within complex educational ecosystems.

Key policy and practice Implications recommendations include:

- Institutionalizing teacher training: Effective delivery depends on wellprepared educators. Training should be comprehensive, ongoing, and practice-oriented.
- Extending program duration: Life skills curricula should span multiple academic years to allow skill internalization.
- Targeting equity gaps: Subgroup trends suggest that vulnerable populations, such as low-income students and girls, may benefit disproportionately from life skills interventions.

• Embedding monitoring and evaluation: Future implementations should integrate real-time feedback loops to support course correction and identify classrooms at risk of low fidelity.

This study demonstrates the feasibility and importance of rigorous evaluation in transitional education systems. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to capture long-term outcomes (e.g., employment, civic engagement) utilize mixed methods, including qualitative interviews and classroom ethnographies, and explore implementation science frameworks to systematically assess delivery quality and barriers.

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# Annex 1 Internal consistency

	Scale	PRE	POST
Subconstruct	Life Skills Scale	Cronbach	's α
MD	Making Decisions in Everyday Life	0.91	0.93
CR	Social responsibility scale	0.77	0.7834
СТ	Critical thinking in everyday life	0.93	0.94
SR	Social relationships scale	0.81	0.84
CS	Communication scale	0.90	0.92
EM	Emotional management scale	0.59	0.61
Subconstruct	Cognitive-Behaviour Check List		
AP	Attention problems	0.74	0.76
SP	Social problems	0.65	0.67
TP	Thought problems	0.59	0.58
AB	Aggressive behavior	0.81	0.81
МВ	Relationship with peers	0.59	0.61
МС	Relationship between child and	0.48	0.62
	teachers		
CBCL_MD	Coping with problems and locus	0.41	0.45
	of control		
ME	Social anxiety	0.61	0.59
MG	Hyperactive behavior	0.70	0.67
MA	Difficulties in learning and	0.51	0.53
	behavior		
SC	Somatic complaints	0.72	0.74
RBB	Rule-breaking behaviour	0.51	0.64
AD	Anxiety and depression	0.78	0.77
Construct	Rosenberg self esteem scale		
ROS	Rosenberg self esteem	0.78	0.81
Subconstruct	Violence Manifestation and		
	<b>Exposure Questionnaire</b>		
IZL	Violence exposure	0.87	0.86
ISP	Violence manifestation	0.86	0.84
Subconstruct	The Developmental Assets		
	Profile		
DAP_SUP1	Support	0.72	0.73
DAP_EMP2	Empowerment	0.66	0.70
DAP_BE3	Boundaries and Expectations	0.73	0.75
DAP_CUT4	Constructive Use of Time	0.37	0.41
DAP_CL5	Commitment To Learning	0.78	0.81
DAP_PV6	Positive Values	0.79	0.81
DAP_SC7	Social Competencies	0.73	0.72
DAP_PI8	Positive Identity	0.68	0.71
DAP_EAC	External asset side	0.79	0.79
	(SUP1+EMP2+BE3+CUT4)		

DAP_IAC	Internal asset side	0.72	0.86
	(CL5+PV6+SC7+PI8)		
DAP_TOTAL	Total	0.66	0.83

	Scale	Cronbach's α
Subconstruct	Life Skills Scale	
MD	Making Decisions in Everyday Life	0.91
CR	Social responsibility scale	0.77
СТ	Critical thinking in everyday life	0.93
SR	Social relationships scale	0.81
CS	Communication scale	0.90
EM	Emotional management scale	0.59
Subconstruct	Cognitive-Behaviour Check List	
AP	Attention problems	0.74
SP	Social problems	0.65
TP	Thought problems	0.59
AB	Aggressive behavior	0.81
МВ	Relationship with peers	0.59
МС	Relationship between child and teachers	0.48
CBCL_MD	Coping with problems and locus of control	0.41
ME	Social anxiety	0.61
MG	Hyperactive behavior	0.70
MA	Difficulties in learning and behavior	0.51
SC	Somatic complaints	0.72
RBB	Rule-breaking behaviour	0.51
AD	Anxiety and depression	0.78
Construct	Rosenberg self esteem scale	
ROS	Rosenberg self esteem	0.78
Subconstruct	Violence Manifestation and Exposure	
	Questionnaire	
IZL	Violence exposure	0.87
ISP	Violence manifestation	0.86
Subconstruct	The Developmental Assets Profile	
DAP_SUP1	Support	0.7221
DAP_EMP2	Empowerment	0.66
DAP_BE3	Boundaries and Expectations	0.73
DAP_CUT4	Constructive Use of Time	0.37
DAP_CL5	Commitment To Learning	0.78
DAP_PV6	Positive Values	0.79
DAP_SC7	Social Competencies	0.73
DAP_PI8	Positive Identity	0.68
DAP_EAC	External asset side (SUP1+EMP2+BE3+CUT4)	0.79
DAP_IAC	Internal asset side (CL5+PV6+SC7+PI8)	0.7221
DAP_TOTAL	Total	0.66

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ATYPICAL ACADEMIC PATHWAYS: ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES IN PORTUGAL

### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines how public educational programs support academic pathways of students at risk of school failure and social exclusion in a municipality in north-eastern of Portugal. Employing a qualitative multi-case study, it analyses the experiences of children and young people participating in two socioeducational practices assigned in two national interventions—TEIP program (school-based) and the Choices program (community-based). Through 20 biographical interviews, this research highlights how family involvement and support, school responsiveness, and non-formal learning contexts interact to foster academic success. The findings underscore the transformative potential of integrated inclusive socio-educational practices in constructing successful, albeit atypical, academic pathways.

Keywords: Academic success; Inclusive education; Educational programs; Formal and non-formal education

### Introduction

Persistent educational disparities remain a significant concern across European contexts. In Portugal, efforts to expand inclusive policies have led to national programs targeting vulnerable populations. Despite improvements, challenges related to socioeconomic disadvantage, migration, and family instability continue to threaten equitable school participation (Barros et al., 2022).

Recent data point to an urgent need for holistic responses capable of addressing not only academic gaps but also broader social inequalities. Atypical academic pathways are characterized by initial disruption, such as disengagement or failure, followed by a redirection toward success. These pathways are often marked by improbability, resilience, and institutional support (Antunes & Sá, 2019). Rather than accepting linear or deficit narratives, this perspective values the interplay between individual agency and socio-educational supports (Antunes, 2019: Lahire, 1997).

Within this framework, school success is not viewed as a mere product of cognitive performance but rather as a process shaped by multidimensional interactions. Research in the sociology of education, especially the contributions of Bourdieu and Passeron (1970), has illuminated how educational systems reproduce social inequalities. However, scholars have increasingly emphasized the role of inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogies in subverting these patterns (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Antunes, 2019).

The four analytical dimensions, family, school, non-formal education, and individual agency, offer a comprehensive lens through which to interpret student progress. Each domain contributes distinct yet interconnected forms of support that, when aligned, enable students to reconstruct their educational pathways in ways previously deemed unlikely or impossible (Rodrigues & Antunes, 2021).

This approach also highlights how educational interventions must extend beyond the classroom to consider the ecological contexts in which students live and learn. It suggests that atypical success arises from a constellation of relational, cultural, and structural supports that converge to create new educational possibilities (Antunes, 2019; Rodrigues et al., 2023).

This study situates within this context by exploring how two inclusive socioeducational practices framed in two educational national public programs operate to reconstruct academic pathways of students facing adversity. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform systemic approaches that move beyond reactive interventions and toward sustainable, inclusive models of schooling.

This paper explores how two nationwide interventions, the Educational Territories of Priority Intervention (TEIP) program and the Choices program, contribute to building academic success for students typically at risk of exclusion. These initiatives operate across formal and non-formal education systems and are designed to promote school success, continuity in education, and social

integration (Antunes & Sá, 2019; Loureiro & Rodrigues, 2024; Rodrigues & Antunes, 2021; Rodrigues et al., 2023;

The article is structured into three main sections: the first outlines the methodological approach; the second presents and discusses the empirical findings through three analytical dimensions, family, school and non-formal education, and the final section offers concluding reflections on the implications for inclusive educational policies and practices.

## **Methodological Approach**

This research adopted a qualitative, multi-case study design (Yin, 2010) to explore how inclusive socio-educational practices impact student development in two national programs. The participants comprised 10 students aged 11 to 18, from one municipality in north-eastern of Portugal. Five were enrolled in the TEIP program and five participated in the Choices program.

Each student engaged in two biographical interviews, resulting in a total of 20 narratives. These interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to reflect openly on their educational histories, personal challenges, and turning points (Bergier & Xypas, 2013). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized in accordance with ethical standards.

Data analysis followed a content analysis approach (Bardin, 1995; Amado, 2014), guided by the pre-established categories corresponding to the conceptual framework. Coding focused on identifying categories related to family involvement and support, school system, and non-formal education and sociability. The triangulation of sources and peer debriefing strengthened the validity of the interpretations.

This methodological approach was chosen not only for its flexibility and depth, but also for its capacity to centre student voice in understanding educational dynamics. The use of life stories enabled access to biographical turning points and relational moments that are often obscured in quantitative analysis.

#### **Results and discussion**

This section presents the key findings from 20 biographical interviews conducted with 10 students (aged 11–18), including 6 girls and 4 boys, who overcame school failure through their participation in inclusive educational initiatives.

Two specific inclusive socio-educational practices served as the context for these pathways: the "My Own Pace" practice (*Ao Meu Ritmo*), embedded within the TEIP program and implemented in formal school settings; and the "*Learning Space*" (*Espaço Aprender*), part of the Choices program and based in a relaxed, community-based environment. Both initiatives focused on differentiated support, emotional connection, and long-term inclusion.

## **Family Dimension**

Family involvement emerged as a structuring element in supporting students' academic engagement, particularly in situations of heightened vulnerability and risk of school failure. The accounts collected highlight the significance of close family network, particularly mothers and other extended relatives, in providing emotional stability and educational continuity, even in contexts marked by socioeconomic hardship, parental separation, or housing instability.

Mothers were consistently described as key figures in supporting school attendance, organizing study routines, and celebrating academic achievements (Justino, 2018; Teixeira, 2010). As Carolina (13 years old, My Own Pace) noted: "My mother supports me, she never compares me to my cousins, and she doesn't criticize me, but she supports and encourages me." This non-punitive, affective support proved crucial in reinforcing students' self-esteem and perseverance in the face of academic difficulties.

Extended family members, particularly godparents, siblings, and aunts, frequently assumed mentoring roles, drawing on their own educational or life experiences to support students (Roldão, 2015). Luísa (18 years old, Learning Space) shared: "My godmother helped me study. I would go to her house on Sundays when my mom was working. She encouraged me to study and was right there next to me." Such forms of consistent presence and accompaniment shaped relational dynamics that counterbalanced material deprivation and family instability.

The persistence of familial support, even under adverse conditions, was repeatedly interpreted by students as a source of resilience and motivation. The everyday valorisation of education in family interactions, emotional availability during exam periods, and sustained encouragement were described as essential in fostering a sense of responsibility and long-term educational aspirations. In this

regard, the family functioned, for many, as the first and most enduring line of resistance against exclusion and school failure.

#### **School Dimension**

Formal education settings, particularly schools operating within the TEIP framework, emerged as central environments for sustaining students' educational pathways in contexts of risk. Participants emphasized the importance of differentiated instruction, inclusive pedagogical strategies, and emotionally accessible teacher-student relationships. Inclusive socio-educational practices such as My Own Pace and individualized support structures provided spaces where learning could unfold at a student's pace, free from comparison and stigma (Antunes & Lúcio, 2019).

The My Own Pace practice, for instance, grouped students in Portuguese and Mathematics into smaller, more flexible learning environments. Teachers were able to slow the pace of instruction, repeat content as needed, and adapt to students' individual learning rhythms. As Diogo (14, *My Own Pace*) explained: "In 7th grade, I joined *My Own Pace*. They placed us in a small group where the teacher went slower and helped us understand. It helped me get better grades." This differentiated approach allowed students to reconnect with learning processes that had previously been sources of stress or failure.

Teachers played a decisive role in shaping renewed academic identities, not only as knowledge providers but as relational figures who listened, encouraged, and recognized students' progress. Relational practices such as one-on-one encouragement, positive feedback, and validation of student voice were frequently highlighted (Bergier & Xypas, 2013; Loureiro & Rodrigues, 2024; Rodrigues et al., 2020). These emotional investments contributed to strengthening students' sense of belonging and self-efficacy. As noted by several participants, recognition of effort, even when achievement remained partial, fostered a more confident and agentic academic self.

The school was not perceived merely as a site of instruction, but as a relational and affective space where students felt safe to take risks, make mistakes, and grow. Classroom safety emerged as a recurring theme: structured, respectful, and emotionally secure environments helped students cope with experiences of bullying, anxiety, or prior academic failure. In this sense, the pedagogical ethos promoted within TEIP projects, particularly through inclusive and student-

centred practices, functioned as a protective and enabling factor in students' educational pathways.

Moreover, students referred to structured peer mediation sessions, participation in class assemblies, and access to emotional counselling as forms of care that facilitated their continued presence and engagement in school. These inclusive mechanisms allowed them to navigate conflict, rebuild trust in educational relationships, and regain a sense of recognition and belonging within the school community.

## **Non-Formal Education and Sociability Dimension**

Non-formal educational space, particularly those developed within the *Choices* program, played a crucial role in supporting students' educational and emotional pathways in contexts of vulnerability. These environments extended learning beyond the formal classroom, offering flexible and relational settings where personal development was valued alongside academic progress (Antunes, 2017).

The Learning Space, a key component of the Choices program, was described by participants as a space of calm and trust, where support was tailored to students' individual needs. Luísa (18 years old, Learning Space) recalled a decisive moment: "I arrived there crying because I didn't understand the test material. They sat with me for two hours, and I passed with a good grade." This type of sustained, relational support— provided by emotionally available adults, was central to restoring confidence and promoting a sense of efficacy.

Such environments allowed for academic reinforcement at each student's pace and were often described as safe spaces to rebuild learning without judgment. Gaspar (12 years old, *My Own Pace*) observed: "Our group was small, and we worked in a calm way. If I didn't get something, the teacher would come and sit next to me, just like in tutoring." The affective dimension of these interactions fostered both cognitive engagement and emotional regulation, helping students to perceive learning as accessible and achievable.

Extracurricular activities—including sports, arts, and social clubs, were also frequently cited as spaces of sociability and belonging. Participation in these initiatives enabled students to cultivate friendships, explore personal interests, and gain confidence (Roldão, 2015; Justino, 2018). These informal settings provided relational continuity, where mentorship and peer interactions

reinforced the idea that educational success was not limited to formal achievement, but could also be nurtured through trust, creativity, and shared experiences.

Moreover, these spaces offered opportunities to decompress from school-based stress, receive academic help without the pressure of formal assessment, and engage with education as a constructive and affirming process. For many, they became places where learning could be reclaimed and re-signified through care and recognition. The adults who facilitated these environments were often perceived as *significant others*, reliable, attentive figures who filled relational gaps not always addressed within school.

In this dimension, education was understood not only as academic transmission, but also as a relational and social process, anchored in trust, availability, and the everyday construction of a meaningful sense of self in connection with others. Taken together, these three dimensions, family, school, and non-formal education and sociability, interact to shape and sustain atypical academic pathways. The results drawing on students' narratives illustrate how these dimensions operate in practice and contribute to reversing pathways of school failure.

The development of atypical academic pathways, as illustrated by the participants, reflects the interdependence of personal agency and systemic support. When families, schools, and community programs operate in alignment, they create the conditions necessary for educational bounciness (Antunes & Sá, 2019). Each domain plays a distinct but complementary role in scaffolding success.

These findings align with theories of inclusive education that emphasize the importance of relationships, recognition, and responsiveness (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). They also reinforce the idea that educational disadvantage is not a fixed condition but a dynamic process influenced by institutional responses. What students repeatedly described were moments of recognition, both emotional and academic, that shifted their pathways and renewed their commitment to school.

The evidence also suggests the value of non-formal learning as a critical complement to formal education. These settings offer relational depth, cultural relevance, and emotional security that many formal institutions struggle to

provide. As such, they should be seen not as ancillary but as integral components of an inclusive educational system. Only then can policies and practices be aligned with the realities and aspirations of diverse learners.

#### Conclusion

This study illustrates how atypical academic pathways emerge from the convergence of supportive environments across familial, school, and non-formal contexts. The success of these students was neither linear nor inevitable. Rather, it resulted from a series of relational investments and structural opportunities that allowed integration, growth, and achievement.

Inclusive educational strategies must therefore be understood as multi-layered interventions. Sustained attention to students' voices, emotional wellbeing, and social contexts is essential. The findings advocate for integrated educational ecosystems where formal and non-formal actors collaborate to foster inclusive, equitable pathways to success.

Future research should continue to explore how these practices evolve over time and how they can be institutionalised at broader scales. A commitment to listening to youth, recognising their potential, and adapting systems to their needs remains central to the mission of inclusive education.

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THE USEFULNESS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE POLISH SECONDARY SCHOOL GRADUATES' CAREER TRACKING SYSTEM. THE USEFULNESS OF THEORY-BASED EVALUATION

#### **ABSTRACT**

The Secondary School Graduates' Career Tracking System, based on data from public registers, was launched in Poland in 2021. The system offers several significant advantages over the data that can be obtained from longitudinal surveys with students and graduates. First of all, a system based on registry data contains information on (almost) the entire graduate population. It can therefore provide results relating even to small, precisely defined groups. Conducting career tracking is a task assigned to the Minister of Education in the Education Law Act, which is the reason to believe it will be a sustainable solution.

Between 2023 and 2028, the Educational Research Institute – National Research Institute, together with the Educational IT Centre, is implementing a project, financed by the European Funds, to adapt the scope of the results and the way they are presented to the needs of users. The career tracking system is intended to provide feedback to the education system. The development of this system is also based on research.

A useful exercise is to treat career tracking as an intervention and sketch its mechanism. This approach comes from a strand of evaluation research known as theory-based evaluation. "Theory" in this context means a set of assumptions describing how an intervention is expected to achieve its aim, also taking into account external factors. The text presents a proposal for a 'theory' of graduate career tracking. The usefulness of this approach is demonstrated by presenting the research questions based on this theory, together with the methods used to answer them.

The evaluation of the system's relevance for the (intended) institutional users, based on the theory of intervention, is presented in more detail. The results of this evaluation were used to verify and justify the need to expand the scope of the public records data used and to prioritise the work on the inclusion of particular

data. The evaluation also provided insights into additional needs that secondary school graduate career tracking could contribute to, and identified new sources of useful data.

## **Secondary School Graduate Career Tracking System**

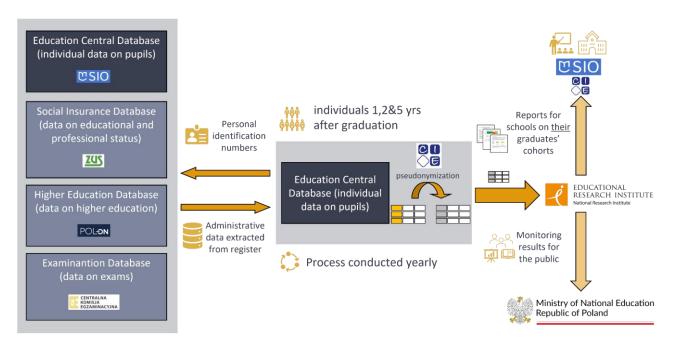
The Secondary School Graduate Career Tracking System, based on registry data, was launched in Poland in 2021. The system was introduced by adding an article to the Education Law according to which the Minister of Education, supported by the Educational IT Centre and the Educational Research Institute, is responsible for conducting the tracking. Such a legal basis - and the fact that the provision added to the law was adopted by parliament almost unanimously - allows us to assume that it will be a sustainable solution.

The Education Law Act sets out the objectives of tracking, indicates the tasks of the institutions involved, specifies the sources and scope of data, and formulates rules to prevent the attribution of results to specific graduates. According to the Act, the tracking of graduates' careers is to provide information supporting the educational policy of the state at the national, regional and local levels, including the adaptation of the directions and content of education to the requirements of the labour market and to help students make informed decisions on their educational paths.

The processing of registry data begins annually with the Educational IT Centre identifying in the Education Central Database those who graduated from secondary schools one, two and five years earlier. The identification numbers (PESEL) of these individuals are provided to the institutions that maintain other public registers used in the tracking to add the data indicated in the Education Law Act. The Educational Central Database is the source of the information on the enrolment in a further post-primary school, the Higher Education Database on the continuation of studies, the Examination Database on the passing of matura and vocational exams and the Social Insurance Database on social security contributions. The information about who and on what account pays this contribution makes it possible to establish whether a given person was employed, self-employed or registered as unemployed in the labour office. The Educational IT Centre, after combining all the data on individual graduates, pseudonymises the data and transfers it to the Educational Research Institute.

The Institute processes the data, performs calculations and presents the results in reports.

Diagram 1: Data processing in the Secondary School Graduates' Career Tracking System



The reports on the country level, in the form of .pdf files of 200-300 pages, are published by the Minister of Education on his website, and reports on the situation of graduates from individual voivodeships (NUTS-2) and individual branches (in the case of vocational education) are made available to interested institutions. In addition, school principals are provided with reports on the educational and professional situation of graduates of a given school from a given year; in the 2024 edition, there were 6320 reports presenting career tracking results. Such reports take the form of approximately 20-page PDF files containing charts, tables and descriptions. They are created automatically based on a script developed by the Educational Research Institute. In addition, the career tracking data are used to conduct problem-based analyses - for example, to check whether having a vocational diploma pays off in terms of job search time and salaries.

The country-level reports include information on whether graduates continue their studies and/or work professionally, whether they are registered as unemployed, whether they have passed their *matura* and/or vocational examinations, what type of school they are attending or what field they are studying in and what income they earn. The results are presented in groups

defined by the type of school and (in case of vocational education) occupation learned, gender and the voivodeship where their secondary school was located (NUTS-2). The range of indicators in the reports for schools is narrower. These reports present results describing the careers of graduates from individual schools and graduates from the reference group. The reference group consists of graduates of the same type of school (and in the case of vocational schools: educated in the same occupations) from the same poviat, voivodeship or the whole country.

# Career tracking system based on registry data versus representative survey research

Basing career tracking on data from public registers gives this system several advantages over longitudinal survey research. By using data from public registers, career tracking covers almost all graduates from consecutive years. This makes it possible to present reliable results relating even to small, precisely defined groups, for example, to describe the situation of graduates trained in an unpopular profession or graduates of a specific school. The only limitation arises from the rule that results are not presented for groups of less than ten people this rule, enshrined in the Act, is intended to prevent the results being linked to a specific individual. Since the results of career tracking cover the entire population, they have no margin of statistical error, unlike the results of surveys conducted on representative samples. Career tracking based on register data is free of the bias typical of survey research concerning graduates' careers. The first source of the bias in surveys is the lower propensity of disadvantaged graduates to report their situation in surveys. The second is a consequence of the difficulty of respondents in recalling their situation accurately (particularly the duration of the different work episodes). Due to the limitations of respondents' memory and the limited number of questions that can be included in the questionnaires, it is the register data that are characterised by greater granularity - that is, they reflect the situation of graduates with greater frequency. An important advantage of using register data is also the significantly lower cost; the saving comes from the lack of fieldwork.

At the same time, tracking based on register data also has two limitations. Firstly, by definition, it does not show the activities of graduates that are not reflected in registers. In the case of tracking the careers of graduates of Polish post-primary

schools, such invisible situations are mainly studying abroad or working without paying social insurance contributions in Poland, including illegal work. Also invisible are incomes from work performed "in the black economy". In surveys, at least some respondents provide such information. Secondly, in the case of analyses based on data from public registers, the list of variables that can contribute to explaining the situation of graduates is much shorter than that possible in survey research. In particular, information on family socio-economic status is missing. The limitations mentioned above are unavoidable, but the other can be overcome. By including new register data in the system, the scope of the results can be broadened, and the reliability of some of the indicators can be increased.

## Using a theory-based evaluation approach for system development work

The Secondary School Graduates' Career Tracking System is being improved under the project carried out between 2023 and 2028 by the Educational Research Institute and the Educational IT Centre. The project is funded by the European Funds for Social Development 2021-2027 programme. The improvement of the system aims to adapt the range of results and the way they are presented to the needs of users. The work aims to appropriately expand the scope of the public registers data used (which requires both conceptual and legislative work) and to create dashboards enabling users to select the indicators and aggregates that interest them.

The assumed users of the dashboards include, in particular, the Ministry of Education, local governments running schools, labour market institutions, social partners (including employers' organisations) and students facing the decision on the choice of secondary school and field of study, as well as their parents and career advisers. (The needs of schools have so far been met by the reports provided to them annually on the situation of their graduates).

The career tracking system, which shows how the educational and professional paths of post-primary school graduates are progressing, is intended to provide feedback to the education system. Also, the development of the career tracking system is based on research to ensure its usefulness. A useful exercise, giving direction to the work of developing the system and situating research in this process, is to treat career tracking as an intervention and sketch out its mechanism. This approach comes from a strand of evaluation research known as theory-based evaluation or theory-driven evaluation. "Theory" in this case means a set of assumptions describing how an intervention is to achieve its purpose, also taking into account external factors.

The purpose of theory-driven evaluation is to provide information not only on the performance or merit of a programme, but on how and why the programme achieves such a result.<sup>13</sup>

Proponents of theory-based evaluation point out that evaluations limited to checking whether the planned activities have been implemented and whether the expected change has occurred may lead to erroneous findings (in particular because factors external to the intervention may have influenced the occurrence of change). Furthermore, the results of such evaluations are not conducive to formulating sound recommendations for the further course of action and possible adjustments worth making. To achieve this, it is necessary, as metaphorically put by proponents of *theory-based evaluation*, to open the 'black box' containing the mechanism of the intervention.

Theory-based evaluation research typically consists of two phases. In the conceptual phase, a theory of intervention (its causal model) is developed or reconstructed, which guides the further evaluation. The empirical phase involves checking which of the assumptions that make up the theory of the intervention have been fulfilled during the implementation of the intervention and checking for phenomena that are independent of the intervention, but which affect the change it was intended to bring about. Theory-based evaluation is methodologically neutral: methods are selected according to the research questions arising from the intervention theory. In addition to serving as a basis for evaluation design, the theory of intervention directs everyday work on implementing the intervention towards an overarching goal.

The proposed theory of career tracking is presented in the diagram below. Assume that the long-term outcome to which the intervention is intended to contribute is that graduates are adequately prepared for further education and/or employment (box G). The process leading to achieving this outcome consists of successive elements (boxes A-F). The arrows connecting the boxes indicate assumed causal relationships. However, the occurrence of the assumed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Chen H.T. 2005 *Theory-driven evaluation*. In: Mathison S. (ed). *Encyclopedia of Evaluation*, London: SAGE Publications, pp.415-419.

causal relationships depends on whether the key conditions(marked with numbers and listed below the diagram) are fulfilled.

A functioning tracking system (A) is expected to equip institutions involved in shaping the education system and in supporting students with actionable information (B). For this to happen, it is necessary to ensure that the range of presented results is in line with the institution's tasks, responsibilities and priorities (1), that the results of career tracking are presented in an accessible way (2) and that institutions are familiar with the results (3). Moving from informed institutions to relevant<sup>14</sup> educational offers (C) require institutions to have the necessary resources (4).

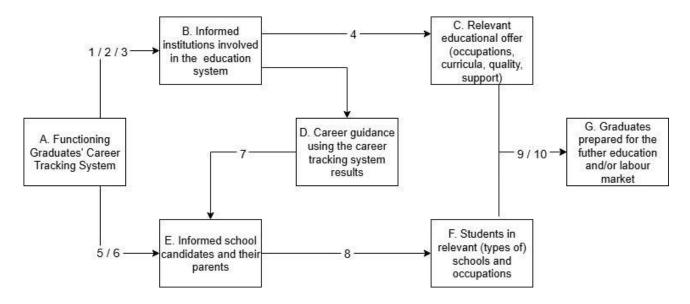
Career tracking is intended also to equip school applicants and their parents (E) with relevant information as well. As with institutions, this requires that results are presented in an accessible way (5) and that the target group is familiar with the results (6). In addition, it is important to integrate the findings of the tracking into careers guidance (D), provided that students make use of it (7). The role of guidance appears to be particularly important in supporting school candidates in making educational decisions that take into account both information about the demand for graduates and the individual potential and interests of students. It is a prerequisite for candidates to undertake education in relevant types of schools and professions that they have the necessary capital (economic, social, cultural) to do so (8).

Relevant educational offer and students entering relevant (types of) schools and occupations lead to a long-term outcome of the system. In order to achieve this outcome (G), two further conditions need to be met. The first is that students achieve educational success, i.e. graduate with good results (9). In addition, the assumption must be fulfilled that the demand for graduates with a certain profile has not changed substantially since the period for which career tracking provided results.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> "Relevant" in this case means convergence with tracking results and with information from complementary sources, in particular, qualitative research focused on understanding how schools' offerings affect students' educational failure or success.

Diagram 2: Theory of career tracking of secondary school graduates as an intervention



## Key conditions:

- 1. The scope of the results corresponds to the tasks, responsibilities and priorities of the institutions shaping the educational system.
- 2. The results are presented in a way that is accessible to the institutions
- 3. Institutions familiarising themselves with the results
- 4. Institutions have the resources needed to provide the educational offer based on the results of graduates' career tracking system and complementary sources
- 5. The results are presented in a way that is accessible to the secondary school candidates and their parents
- 6. Secondary school candidates and their parents familiarising themselves with the results
- 7. Secondary school candidates use career guidance
- 8. Secondary school candidates have the capital (economic, social, cultural) needed to choose the relevant options
- 9. Students achieve educational success
- 10. The demand for graduates of a given profile remains relatively stable

The next step is to translate the theory of intervention into research questions and then to select appropriate research methods to answer them. So far, this effort was made for the part of the process which the team responsible for implementing and improving the system can influence. In future, the proposed

outline of an intervention mechanism may in the future serve as a basis for a comprehensive evaluation of the graduates' career tracking system. The numbers of the research questions below correspond to the conditions listed above.

- 1. Does the scope of the results provided by the system correspond to the institutional user's tasks, responsibilities and priorities? If not fully, what should be added? 

  Evaluation of the relevance of the results provided by the system for the users: a) Desk research on the law defining institutions' tasks and responsibilities b) Qualitative interviews with representatives of the institutional users
- 2. Are the results presented in a way that is accessible to the users? If not, what should be fixed or improved? 

  UX research: usability tests
- 3. Do the (intended) users access the results? 

  Web metrics analysis

In the next section, we briefly present the evaluation of the relevance of the results provided by the career tracking system <sup>15</sup> - i.e. the study that aimed to answer the first research question formulated above.

## Evaluation of the system's relevance for the (intended) institutional users

The evaluation used a triangulation of research methods. The first stage of the study was an analysis of the legislation, through which the remit of each type of institution was established. This was the starting point for determining to what extent the career tracking system could be used by the different types of institutional users: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Family Labour and Social Policy, local governments running schools, labour market institutions - mainly employment offices at the voivodeship level (NUTS-2) and employers' organisations as partners in social dialogue. This was followed by 51 interviews with institutional staff, using scenarios developed taking into account, among other things, the results of desk research. The most important results are presented below, together with recommendations based on them.

The study confirmed the potential of career tracking in supporting education policy at national, regional and local levels. Therefore, it is necessary to provide dashboards with results at different levels of territorial aggregation.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Research with students and parents was planned separately.

The results support the use of tracking not only for education policy but also for labour market policy. Career tracking is the responsibility of the Minister of Education, but in the development of this system, it will be important to avoid a siloed approach (i.e. separation of different domain-specific public policies).

Some users are concerned that a potential negative effect of tracking could be the creation of rankings of schools solely on the basis of indicators describing the situation of graduates. In such rankings, it would be more difficult for schools admitting students with lower initial potential to rank satisfactorily. There are various ways of reducing this risk: making appropriate disclaimers, not publishing results describing the situation of individual schools' graduates (making such detailed results available only to selected institutions), integrating information on the results of examinations passed at the end of primary school into the tracking and using them in analyses. This issue requires consultation with career tracking system stakeholders. It would also be useful to learn about the experiences of other countries where tracking of graduates' careers is carried out, in terms of the occurrence or avoidance of such adverse effects.

An important application of tracking would be to use it to analyse the situation of vulnerable groups to support them effectively. It is therefore advisable to broaden the scope of the data used to include information that would allow results to be presented also for groups identified by their country of origin (immigrants, including refugees from Ukraine), disability or upbringing in foster care. It has been established that public registers containing such data exist.

Furthermore, it was found that from the perspective of institutional users, the main limitations of the results provided so far by the career monitoring system are the lack of fully reliable information on earnings and the lack of information on the (mis)match between the occupations performed by graduates and the occupations learned in initial vocational education. This justifies the inclusion of additional data in the monitoring system, primarily distinguishing full-time from part-time employment (as without this, data on earnings are biased) and on the occupations performed by graduates.

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