

PROFEEDBACK POLICY BRIEF

BETTER EVALUATION FOR BETTER YOUTH POLICIES

Prepared by

Luca Koltai

Kinga Toth

HÉTFA Research Institute

COST Association AISBL

Avenue du Boulevard - Bolwerklaan 21 | 1210 Brussels, Belgium

T +32 (0)2 533 3800 | office@cost.eu | www.cost.eu



Summary

The demand for policies informed by evidence has increased considerably in recent years. Policies grounded in evidence aim to support individuals in making informed choices regarding programmes or initiatives by offering scientifically validated information. The HÉTFA-led ['Lost Millennials' project](#) gathered evaluation data on initiatives aimed at supporting young people across participating countries.

Better evaluation supports better youth policies by enabling evidence-based policymaking, ensuring interventions are effective and responsive to youth needs. It helps identify both barriers and enablers, such as funding challenges or successful community collaborations. Regular evaluation improves programme effectiveness by allowing adaptations based on feedback. Additionally, ethical and transparent evaluations promote inclusivity by incorporating diverse perspectives into policy formulation.

The evaluation of youth programmes faces several challenges. Evaluation cultures and public policy assessment practices vary widely across countries, even within Europe.

Key messages

Better evaluation supports better youth policies by enabling evidence-based decision-making, ensuring interventions are effective and responsive to youth needs.

The evaluation of youth programmes faces several challenges such as varying evaluation practices, limited access to reports, a preference for large-scale studies, a disconnect between evaluations and programme planning, with impact assessments being less common than policy implementation evaluations.

Recommendations

Implement regular, external evaluations.

Collect and use data, increase the availability and searchability of data.

Increase participation in evaluations.

Evaluate innovative small scale programmes too.

Accessible evaluation and impact assessments

Better timing, innovative methods of real-time and foresight evaluation must be explored to facilitate learning.

Support a culture of learning and a growth mindset

The quality and scope of evaluations depend on factors like expert involvement and public discourse, while EU-funded projects face increasing evaluation pressure, often leading to excessive formality. Large-scale evaluations are preferred over smaller innovations, and access to individual evaluation reports remains limited. While qualitative methods are common, advanced quantitative techniques are rarely used. Additionally, evaluations often lag behind programme planning, reducing their influence, and impact assessments are less frequent than policy implementation evaluations.

Methodology

The policy brief draws heavily on the work of the Lost Millennials project (<https://lostmillennials.eu/>). The policy brief is based on a series of research activities: Lost Millennials project partners first analysed policies addressing 25+ NEETs to identify the country-level contexts in which the project is embedded. The involved countries were Hungary, Greece, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Poland, Spain, Malta, Romania and Slovakia. They then mapped existing initiatives in their countries that support 25+ NEETs, as well as existing evaluation practices that assess such initiatives. One initiative per country was selected for evaluation, which was carried out by the partners. The nine evaluations focused on nine different initiatives in nine different countries, and the project partners evaluated the selected initiatives for 25+ NEETs. A synthesis report was carried out by consortium members to map evaluation practices and assess the impact of initiatives targeting 25+ NEETs (Polackova et al., 2022). And a synthesis of the main findings of nine evaluations carried out by the beneficiary partners of the Lost Millennials project (Tóth et al., 2023).

Additionally, the 9th PROFEEDBACK Conference, which took place on 18-19 June 2025, in Budapest, provided valuable practical insights into evaluation practices. The 'Shaping the Future: Evaluating Programs and Policies in Public Education and Youth Development' conference aimed to strengthen the policy evaluation community by fostering dialogue on impactful methods and tools, sharing lessons learned, and shaping future approaches to youth and education policies. Panel discussions and examples presented during the conference greatly influenced the brief.

Relevance Of Evaluation to Support Better Policies for Youth

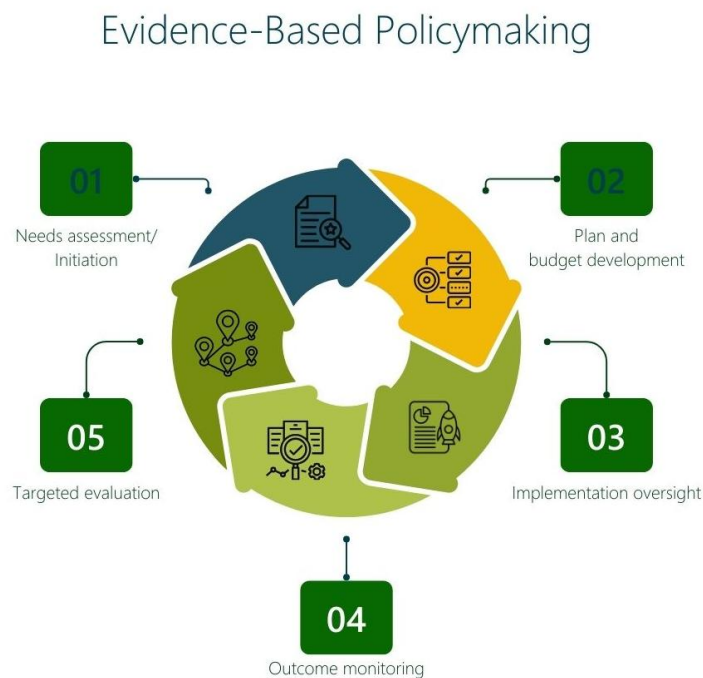
WHY EVALUATION MATTERS FOR BETTER YOUTH POLICIES?

Evidence-based policymaking has gained prominence as a way to replace opinion-driven decisions with scientifically validated evaluations, especially through the growing use of methods like randomised controlled trials.

Across the EU and globally, robust monitoring and evaluation are increasingly recognised as essential tools for designing, improving, and legitimising effective public policies.

The demand for policies informed by evidence has increased considerably in recent years. Policies grounded in evidence aim to support individuals in making informed choices regarding programmes or initiatives by offering scientifically validated information (Davies, 1999). However, generating credible evidence requires thorough and unbiased evaluations of past initiatives. Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are the considered the golden standard of policy evaluation, they were predominantly used in health policy research. By the 1990s, RCTs, along with other evaluation methods, gained traction in shaping social and economic policies, replacing decisions based on subjective opinions (Banks, 2009). Although this is currently one of the most reliable evaluation methodologies, evaluators support evidence-based policy using countless other methods.

Figure 1 Evidence based policymaking



Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative's 2014 report, "Evidence-Based Policymaking: A Guide for Effective Government," The Pew Charitable Trust 2014 p4

Across the European Union, the European Structural Funds have played a key role in advancing evaluation methodologies. Globally, there is broad recognition of the crucial role that monitoring and evaluation play in supporting policy-making (Head, 2016; Pattyn et al., 2018; Stephenson et al., 2019). Evaluating policies is essential for understanding, enhancing, and updating policies at both EU and national levels (European Commission, 2015). Irina Lorean (2020) also presents the experience of evaluating youth programmes. She also highlights the necessity of conducting comprehensive programme evaluations, especially for addressing complex societal challenges.

Results of Evaluations of Youth Programs

Of all labour market programmes, those targeting young people are perhaps the most frequently studied using conflicting impact evaluation methods. Numerous meta-analyses and systematic literature reviews have been conducted on this topic (see,

among others, Kluve, 2014; Kluve et al., 2016; Fox and Upaasna, 2018; on youth training, Wilson, 2013; Eichhorst, 2015; Bördös, Csillag and Scharle, 2015, Bördös-Koltai 2020, Strategopolis, 2018, Tóth et al in press).

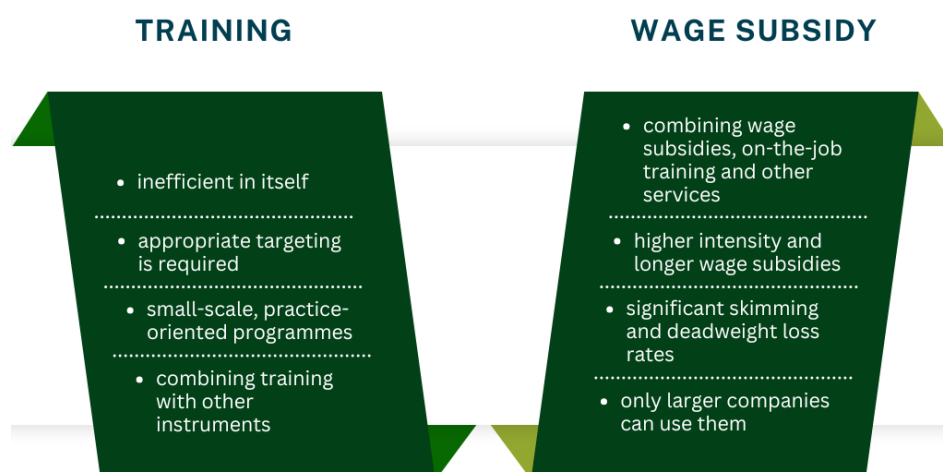
These evaluations examined the effectiveness of several different typical labour market instruments. One of the most common of these is the labour market instrument for the training of young people, which is present in the service palette of most European countries. For this form, the results of the impact evaluation literature are not very encouraging. Card and colleagues (2015) find that training alone does not significantly increase the chances of young unemployed people finding a job. De Koning (2005) comes to a similar conclusion. Kluve's (2006) comprehensive analysis of a total of 137 programme evaluations finds that the effects of training are felt only in the longer term, and even then, with little impact. Martin and Grubb (2001) point out that for low-skilled young people, classroom training is not motivating and therefore participants are poorly motivated, and their participation is often only formal. Training programmes per se are therefore less successful, but there are aspects that can improve this.

Wage subsidies are also common for disadvantaged young jobseekers, as they can compensate employers for lower worker productivity. Wage subsidy schemes, often combined with on-the-job training, are particularly common for young people. The combination of wage subsidies, on-the-job training and mentoring and counselling services can successfully increase the long-term employability of disadvantaged, mostly low-skilled young people (Blundell et al., 2004; Dorsett, 2006; Bördös, Csillag, and Scharle, 2015). More generous wage subsidies, i.e. with higher subsidy intensities and longer duration, can actually improve the employment prospects of disadvantaged youth (Caliendo, Künn, and Schmidl, 2011; Eppel and Mahringer, 2013; Bördös, Csillag, and Scharle, 2015). Subsidies or contribution reductions of a few months or less are less effective: short-term work-training programmes to try out a job may be a stepping stone into the labour market only for less disadvantaged, better educated young people.

However, experience shows that there is significant skimming in wage subsidy schemes, and therefore a significant deadweight loss. For this reason, proper targeting of public employment services is very important and requires a well-trained and highly capable administrative staff; statistical profiling systems can also help to ensure proper targeting. Another drawback of wage subsidies is that they are often only available to larger enterprises, as they usually require considerable administrative capacity, and are therefore ineffective in disadvantaged areas with few large enterprises and a higher share of informal or casual work.

However, Kluve and Schmidt (2002) argue that the experience from one country is not automatically transferable to another due to the heterogeneity of their labour markets.

Figure 2 Training and wage subsidy compared



Evaluation Practices of Youth Programs

EVALUATION PRACTICES

While countries receiving EU funding are required to conduct evaluations, there are significant differences in their scope, quality, and methodological rigor, with many assessments lacking depth and relying on basic descriptive analysis.

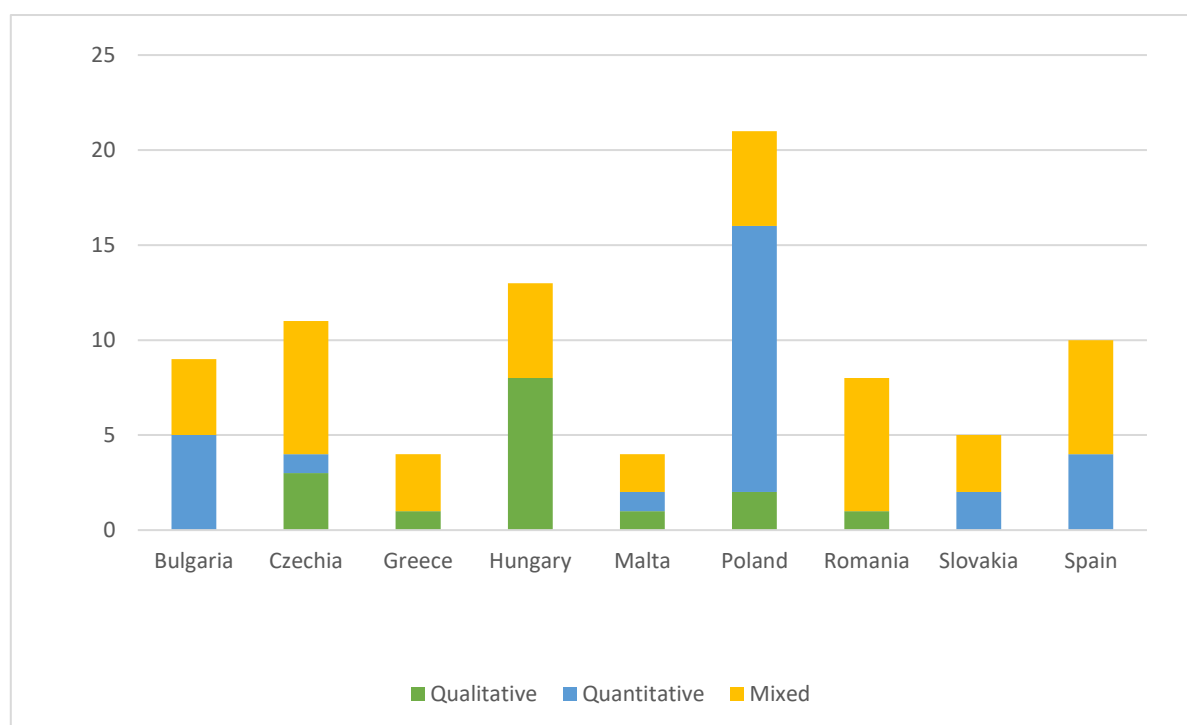
Gaps were identified, including weak evaluation cultures, limited use of advanced methods, poor alignment between evaluation and planning cycles, and a lack of accessible impact assessments, especially for smaller-scale or innovative programmes.

The HÉTFA-led 'Lost Millennials' project gathered evaluation data on initiatives aimed at supporting young people across participating countries (Polackova et al., 2022). The study highlighted that a country's evaluation practices and attitudes toward their importance are significantly shaped by the presence of European Cohesion Policy funding. The European Union mandates that resources from the Cohesion Policy, particularly the European Structural Funds, must be allocated based on evidence. This directive not only ensures the appropriate use of funds but also promotes their efficient and effective deployment. As a result, all countries utilizing Cohesion Policy funding are required to conduct programme evaluations, adhering to this obligatory standard.

The research revealed disparities among countries in the extent of their evaluation efforts. Certain countries (e.g., RO, MT, GR) centre their assessments on operational programmes or priority axes, whereas others (e.g., CZ, HU, PL) extend their evaluations to cover specific programmes. Evaluations often measure the impact of European Structural Funds on NEETs within active labour market policies, which are viewed as vital tools for reducing regional disparities and fostering social inclusion under Cohesion Policy. Additionally, beyond assessments of EU Cohesion Policy-funded programmes, two countries (BG and MT) reported conducting evaluations of the Erasmus Plus Programme. However, concerns were raised regarding the

thoroughness of these evaluations, as many appeared to fall short of comprehensive assessment standards.

Figure 3 Use of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methodological approaches in evaluation practices in the analysed countries (Number of evaluations, 2022)



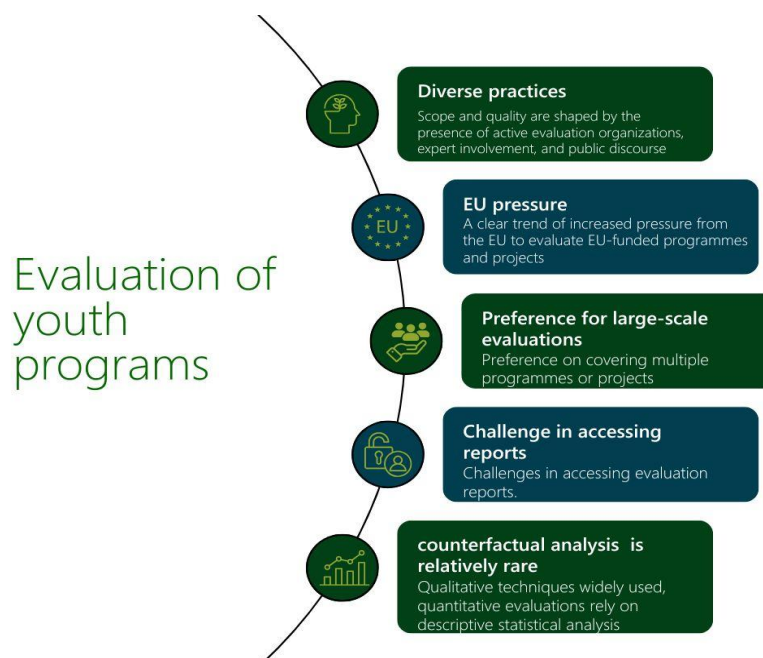
Source: Poláčeková et al. (2022)

Based on the literature, the following gaps in the evaluation of youth programmes can be identified:

- The evaluation culture and public policy assessment practices differ significantly across countries even in Europe.
- The scope and quality of evaluations are shaped by factors such as the presence of active evaluation organizations, expert involvement, and public discourse on evaluation needs.

- Findings reveal a clear trend of increased pressure from the EU to evaluate EU-funded programmes and projects, though many evaluations suffer from excessive formality.
- There is a preference for large-scale evaluations covering multiple programmes or projects, with limited focus on smaller-scale innovations.
- Challenges include gaps in accessing individual evaluation reports, which affects the quality of recommendations formulated.
- Qualitative techniques such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups are widely used. Quantitative evaluations primarily rely on descriptive statistical analysis, while advanced approaches like counterfactual analysis or other sophisticated methods are relatively rare.
- In a multitude of instances, a discrepancy is observed between the evaluation and the planning periods of the programmes. Planning commences prior to the evaluation or impact assessment of programmes, which hinders the incorporation of these assessments.
- There is a paucity of impact assessments in comparison to evaluations of policy implementation.

Figure 4 Challenges of evaluation of youth programmes



Recommendations

In summary, policy evaluation is crucial for developing effective policies to support young people, as it provides insights into the impact and effectiveness of different programmes. By systematically evaluating youth initiatives, stakeholders can identify strengths and weaknesses, leading to informed policymaking and improved outcomes for young people.

How better evaluation can support better policies?

- Evidence-based policymaking: Evaluations provide data to inform policy adjustments and ensure that interventions are effective and relevant to the needs of young people (Flückiger & Popelier, 2023).
- Identification of barriers and enablers: Evaluations highlight challenges faced by programmes, such as funding issues and logistical challenges, while also identifying successful strategies, such as community collaboration (Tidmarsh et al., 2022).
- Improving programme effectiveness: Regular evaluation allows programmes to adapt based on feedback, which is essential to meeting the evolving needs of young people (Melton et al., 2024).
- Stakeholder Engagement: Involving practitioners in the evaluation process fosters a culture of data-driven policymaking, which increases programme relevance and effectiveness (Melton et al., 2024).
- Transparency and inclusivity: Ethical evaluation promotes stakeholder engagement and ensures that diverse perspectives are considered in policy formulation (Annet, 2024).

How can we better use evaluation?

- The implementation of regular, external evaluations is to be encouraged. Evaluation of this kind should be carried out by external evaluators in a pre-planned way.
- The use of already existing data is encouraged. This should be as comprehensive a range of data as possible, and databases should be maintained and linked on

an ongoing basis in order to carry out data-driven evaluations and impact assessments. It concerns data from Labour Offices, Social Security Agencies, etc.

- The use of data is to be encouraged. It is noted that although most European countries have extensive data collections in the youth field, these are rarely used for data-based impact assessments. There is a need to increase the availability and searchability of data.
- Impact assessment: evaluations should seek not only to measure processes and outputs, but also to apply impact assessment methods, both qualitative and quantitative.
- Participation: diverse stakeholders should be involved in the evaluation process.
- Evaluation of innovative small-scale programmes: Support and evaluate small, targeted projects, which should be evaluated meticulously so that their lessons can be fed into the design of larger-scale projects.
- Accessible evaluation and impact assessments: make the evaluations and impact assessments produced accessible to policymakers, implementers, stakeholders and researchers.
- Timing: The timing of evaluations and planning needs to be improved. EU planning periods are quite long and many impact assessments are carried out only after projects have been completed. Consequently, these assessments cannot meaningfully influence the planning of the next period. Consequently, lessons learned can often only be applied in the subsequent period. Innovative methods of real-time and foresight evaluation must be explored to facilitate learning.
- In many cases, policymakers and implementers cannot afford to fail. Consequently, evaluation is not embedded in organisational culture. Evaluations are seen as a means of compliance, not learning. We need policy makers to be more tolerant of errors. We also need to support a culture of learning and a growth mindset.

Acknowledgements

The Lost Millennials project was funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment. We thank the members of the consortium for their cooperation: HETFA Research Institute Ltd, Institute of Entrepreneurship Development – iED, Center for the Study of Democracy, IREAS, Institute for structural policy, Evidence Institute Foundation (EIF), University of Burgos, Binda Consulting International Ltd, Sapientia University of Cluj Napoca, Slovak Business Agency, ZSI - Zentrum für Soziale Innovation GmbH | Centre for Social Innovation, Nord University, Bifröst University

Literature:

1. Adamecz-Völgyi, A., Csillag, M., Molnár, T., & Scharle, Á. (2017). "Képzéssel a munkaerőhiány ellen? A munkaügyi központok által szervezett vagy finanszírozott képzések célzása és eredményessége". In Munkaerőpiaci Tükör 2016, szerkesztette Károly Fazekas és János Köllő. Budapest: MTA Közgazdaság-és Regionális Tudományi Kutatóközpont Közgazdaság-tudományi Intézet. URL: http://www.mtaki.hu/wpcontent/uploads/2018/01/mt_2016_hun_54.pdf.
2. Banks, G. (2009). Evidence-based policy making: What is it? How do we get it? Archived 23 January 2010 at the Wayback Machine. Australian Government, Productivity Commission. Retrieved 4 June 2010
3. Blundell, Richard, Monica Costa Dias, Costas Meghir, és John Van Reenen. 2004. „Evaluating the Employment Impact of a Mandatory Job Search Program”. Journal of the European Economic Association 2 (4): 569–606.
4. Bördös K., & Petróczi A. (2019). A tartós munkanélküliek, valamint az 50 év feletti és a fiatal álláskeresők munkaerőpiaci integrációjának lehetőségei [Improving the employability of the long-term unemployed, jobseekers above 50 and youth in Hungary]. Hétfa Research Institute.
5. Bördös K. – Koltai L.: Sérülékeny csoportok a munkaügyi szervezet gyakorlatában, Új Munkaügyi Szemle 2020/2.
6. Bördös, K., Adamecz-Völgyi, A., & Békés, J. (2018). A Nemzeti Foglalkoztatási Szolgálat ügyfélkategorizálási rendszerének értékelése („A profiling rendszer hatékonyságával kapcsolatos statisztikai és módszertani értékelés” című projekt értékelő tanulmánya). Hétfa Kutatóintézet. URL: http://hetfa.hu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/HETFA_NGM_Profiling_ertekeles.pdf
7. Bördös, K., Szőnyi, E., Koltai, L. (2022). Analysis of the policy context addressing 25+ NEETs. Country report – Hungary. URL: https://lostmillennials.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/O4.4_Policy-analysis_Hungary.pdf
8. Bördös, K., Csillag M., & Scharle Á. (2015). „What works in wage subsidies for young people: A review of issues, theory, policies and evidence”. 199. Employment Working Paper Series. Genf: International Labour Office - Employment Policy Department. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Niall_OHiggins/publication/299764480_Fiscal_policy_and_the_youth_labour_market/links/57050e3408ae44d70ee305d5.pdf.

9. Caliendo, M. & Künn, Steffen & Schmidl, Ricarda, 2011. "Fighting Youth Unemployment: The Effects of Active Labor Market Policies," IZA Discussion Papers 6222, Institute of Labor Economics (IZA).
10. Card, David, Jochen Kluve, és Andrea Weber. 2015. „What Works? A Meta Analysis of Recent Active Labor Market Program Evaluations”. Working Paper 21431. National Bureau of Economic Research. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w21431>.
11. Csillag M., Molnár T. és Scharle Á. (2020). Do the Public Employment Services Reach Non-Employed Youths? Budapest: Budapest Szakpolitikai Elemző Intézet. Downloaded: 17.10.2022., URL: <http://yepartnership.ibs.org.pl/p/do-the-public-employment-services-reach-non-employed-youths>.
12. Davies, I. C. (1999). Evaluation and performance management in government. Evaluation, 5, 150-159.
13. Dorsett, Richard. 2006. „The new deal for young people: effect on the labour market status of young men”. Labour Economics 13 (3): 405–22.
14. Eichhorst, W. (2015). Does Vocational Training Help Young People Find a (Good) Job? IZA World of Labor, 2015: 112 doi: 10.15185/izawol.112. Downloaded: 17.10.2022, <https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.112>.
15. Eppel, Rainer, és Helmut Mahringer. 2013. „Do Wage Subsidies Work in Boosting Economic Inclusion? Evidence on Effect Heterogeneity in Austria”. Working Paper 456. WIFO Working Papers. <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/128998>.
16. Flückiger, A., & Popelier, P. (2023). Policy evaluation in the legislative cycle (pp. 64–75). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800884892.00011>
17. Fox, Louise, és Kaul Upaasna. 2018. The Evidence Is In: How Should Youth Employment Programs In Low-Income Countries Be Designed? Policy Research Working Papers. The World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-8500>.
18. Head, B. W. (2016). Toward more “evidence-informed” policy making? Public Administration Review, 76(3), 472–484.
19. Kluve, J. (2014). Youth Market Labor Interventions. IZA World of Labor. Downloaded: 17.10.2022., <https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.106>.
20. Kluve, J., Puerto, S., Robalino, D., Romero, J. M., Rother, F., Stöterau, J., Weidenkaff, F. és Witte, M. (2016). Do Youth Employment Programs Improve Labor Market Outcomes? A Systematic Review. IZA Discussion Paper, 10263. Downloaded: 17.10.2022., <https://docs.iza.org/dp10263.pdf>.

21. Kluve, J., Puerto, S., Robalino, D., Romero, J. M., Rother, F., Stöterau, J., Weidenkaff, F. és Witte, M. (2016). Do Youth Employment Programs Improve Labor Market Outcomes? A Systematic Review. IZA Discussion Paper, 10263. Downloaded: 17.10.2022., <https://docs.iza.org/dp10263.pdf>.
22. Koller, K., Wolter, S., Tschank, J. & Vana, I. (2022). Transnational research report on the situation of 25+ NEETs in the EU and in beneficiary countries. Centre for Social Innovation. Lost Millennials – Transnational Research Network for the Evaluation of Initiatives Targeting 25+ NEETS. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RC.2.2.34912.97281>
23. Koning, Jaap de. 2007. „The Reform of the Dutch Public Employment Service”. In The Evaluation of Active Labour Market Policies, by Jaap de Koning, 4170. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781953013.00017>.
24. Lonean I. (2020) INSIGHTS INTO YOUTH POLICY EVALUATION, Council of Europe and European Commission, October 2020
25. Martin, John P. and Grubb, David. 2018. „What Works? A Meta Analysis of Recent Active Labor Market Program Evaluations”. Journal of the European Economic Association 16 (3): 894–931. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvx028>.
26. OECD (2010), Quality Standards for Development Evaluation, DAC Guidelines and Reference Series, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264083905-en>.
27. Pattyn, V., Van Voorst, S., Mastenbroek, E. & Dunlop, C. A. (2018). Policy evaluation in Europe. The Palgrave handbook of public administration and management in Europe, 577-593.
28. Poláčková Z., Fanta P., Blizman Servilová V., Kubíková M., Dvořák V. (2022): Synthesis report on the mapping of evaluation practices assessing the impacts of initiatives targeting 25+ NEETs, Institute for Structural Policy and Slovak Business Agency 2022, Lost Millennials – Transnational Research Network for the Evaluation of Initiatives Targeting 25+ NEETS.
29. Rainer Eppel & Helmut Mahringer, 2013. "Do Wage Subsidies Work in Boosting Economic Inclusion? Evidence on Effect Heterogeneity in Austria," WIFO Working Papers 456, WIFO.,
30. Scharle, Á., Csillag, M. 2016. "Gyakorló szakemberek eszköztára a tartós munkanélküliséggel kapcsolatos javaslat végrehajtásához". European Commission.
31. Stephenson, P. J., Schoenefeld, J. J. & Leeuw, F. L. (2019). The politicisation of evaluation: Constructing and contesting EU policy performance. Politische Vierteljahresschrift, 60(4), 663–679.

32. Strategopolis. (2018). Aktív munkaerőpiaci eszközök eredményességének értékelése— Hatásosság, eredmények, javítási lehetőségek: Nemzetközi szakirodalom, hazai eszközök hatásvizsgálata és a rendszer értékelése alapján. Draft.
33. Tidmarsh, G., Thompson, J. L., Quinton, M. L., & Cumming, J. (2022). Process Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programmes for Disadvantaged Young People: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Youth Development*, 17(2), 106–140. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2022.1156>
34. Tidmarsh, G., Thompson, J. L., Quinton, M. L., & Cumming, J. (2022). Process Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programmes for Disadvantaged Young People: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Youth Development*, 17(2), 106–140. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2022.1156>
35. Tóth K., Szőnyi E., Koltai L. (2023): Synthesis report on the evaluation of initiatives addressing 25+ NEETs HÉTFA Research Institute, 2023, Lost Millennials – Transnational Research Network for the Evaluation of Initiatives Targeting 25+ NEETS.
36. Kinga Tóth, Eszter Szőnyi, Luca Koltai (in press): Empowering Europe's Lost Youth: A comprehensive review of the evaluation of selected initiatives for NEETs aged 25 and over *The Quality of Life Journal*
37. Kluve, J., Schmidt, CH., M. (2002). Can training and employment subsidies combat European unemployment?. *Economic Policy*, 17(35), pp. 409 – 448.

This publication is based upon work from COST Action CA20112 PROFEEDBACK, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is a funding agency for research and innovation networks. Our Actions help connect research initiatives across Europe and enable scientists to grow their ideas by sharing them with their peers. This boosts their research, career and innovation. Visit www.cost.eu