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## Supporting NEETs — challenges facing labor market institutions in Poland

**JEL Classification:** R23

**Keywords:** labor market; labor market institutions; public employment services; NEETs

### Abstract

**Research background:** Various and complicated reasons for belonging to the NEET category (not in education, employment or training), resulting largely from young people's personal and family circumstances, cause that the activation programmes undertaken by public employment services, both in the professional and educational sphere, prove inadequate. Despite the fact that labour market instruments dedicated to young people represent a wide range of possibilities for supporting them in combating professional and educational inactivity, the background of their problems requires new actions that should be undertaken by labour market institutions and their partners.

**Purpose of the article:** Taking the above into consideration, the aim of this study is to identify the challenges faced by the public employment services and other labour market institutions in the area of activating youth experiencing the most difficult situation in the labour market.

**Methods:** The article is based partly on the results of quantitative and qualitative research, conducted in the framework of the project implemented by the Provincial Labour Office in Białystok Podlasie open to young people, financed by Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development (PO WER).

**Findings & Value added:** The results of the study have led to the identification of necessary actions which should be undertaken by labour market institutions to support young people representing the NEET generation. These actions can be classified into different

categories. They include preventing inclusion into the NEET group, developing the most effective solutions in the area of getting in touch with this group of young people and supporting them as well as creating a culture of cooperation for their benefit. The study has also revealed the need to carry out in-depth research of the NEET population.

## **Introduction**

The main argument of this article is that the numerous studies related to strategies that can support NEETs, as they have been developing in recent years, have revealed many unexplored areas.

The NEET, the abbreviation of ‘not in education, employment or training’, was first used in the UK in the mid-1990s. It was then formally defined by the UK government as ‘those 16–18 year olds who neither participate in education or training nor have a job (for at least 6 months during this period) after leaving compulsory education’ (Pemberton, 2008, p. 243). However, this term is often defined in different ways, especially in the context of young people’s age. Nevertheless, in most European countries it is assumed that young NEETs are people aged 15–29 (Saczynska-Sokol & Lojko, 2016, p. 98).

The term assumes, or at least endorses, the belief that all young people who are at a given time not in the course of education, working or receiving training can be thought of as a homogeneous group (Finlay *et al.*, 2010, pp. 853–854). However, NEETs create a fairly diverse group of people. Its diversity is reflected in the classification presented in EU publications. According to it five main subgroups within the NEET population may be identified (Eurofund, 2012, p. 24):

- the conventionally unemployed, the largest subgroup, which can be further subdivided into long term and short-term unemployed;
- the unavailable, which includes young careers, young people with family responsibilities and young people who are sick or disabled;
- the disengaged: those young people who are not seeking jobs or education and are not constrained from doing so by other obligations or incapacities, and takes in discouraged workers, as well as other young people who are pursuing dangerous and asocial lifestyles;
- the opportunity-seekers: young people who are actively seeking work or training, but are holding out for opportunities that they see as befitting their skills and status;
- the voluntary NEETs: those young people who are travelling and those constructively engaged in other activities such as art, music and self-directed learning.

The above classification shows that NEETs form a heterogeneous group that includes people who are unemployed, either temporarily or long term, because of difficult reasons. For those who have economic support from their parents or who are unemployed for ‘legitimate’ reasons (e.g. pursuing higher education), joblessness is not much of an economic problem. The problem, rather, is that the idleness NEETs experience makes it more difficult for them to adjust to adulthood (Chen, 2011, p. 34).

Results of European Values Survey (EVS) data, a large-scale, cross-national and longitudinal survey, show that there is a range of potential risk factors related to the individual and their family background that increase the chances of an individual becoming NEET. Those with a low education level are three times more likely to become NEET compared to those with tertiary education. Living in remote areas increases the probability of becoming NEET up to 1.5 times. Having parents with a low level of education doubles the probability of becoming NEETs. Young people with an immigration background are 70% more likely to become NEET compared to nationals. Youth reporting having some kind of disability are 40% more likely to become NEET compared to others. Risk factors refer also to low household income or having divorced parents or who experienced unemployment (Eurofund, 2011, pp. 3–4). The risk factors identified above prove that there are some groups of young people ‘condemned’ to become NEETs. Therefore, “public discussion tended to focus on motivation, with deep suspicions that this group of workless youth are feckless parasites” should be toned down (Furlong, 2008, p.320). The consequences of becoming NEET are usually very serious. One of them refers to the risk of social exclusion. Young people are particularly affected by interpersonal rejection and isolation. This may have long-term implications for different aspects of their future (Rose *et al.*, 2012, p. 258).

Taking the above into consideration it is important to indicate the scale of the phenomenon. NEET rate places Poland in the middle of the rate among EU countries. In 2015 it amounted to 17,6% and was only slightly lower than the average in the European Union (17,9%).

As for the size of the NEET population in particular provinces, it can be observed that the highest NEET index was recorded in Podkarpackie, Zachodniopomorskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie provinces whereas the lowest — in Podlaskie, Śląskie and Mazowieckie provinces (Figure 1). However, it should be noted that in order to determine the size of the NEET population in a particular province the data were used on youth in two age groups: 15–24 and 18–24. This was because Eurostat statistics in this area are only available in these age groups.

Despite the fact that Poland's statistics do not compare badly with the size of the NEET population in the rest of Europe, it seems necessary to take all actions aimed at supporting young people. The solutions provided for in the Act on promotion of employment and labour market institutions prove to be insufficient.

Taking the above into consideration the aim of this study is to identify the challenges for labour market institutions and their partners in the field of supporting NEETs. To obtain the objective of the study, empirical research in Podlaskie province was conducted.

The paper presents methods of the research, an empirical assessment showing the areas of challenges facing institutions and labor market partners, and conclusions.

## **Research methods**

This paper partly uses the results of research conducted within the project *Podlasie open to young people*, financed by Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development implemented by the Provincial Labour Office in Bialystok in partnership with the Bialystok University of Technology.

The research was conducted in two paths. First of all, the research procedure included quantitative and qualitative research aimed at analysing and diagnosing the situation of young people on the labour market with special attention to people in the NEET category in Podlaskie province. The study covered 500 young people aged 15–29 including 300 NEETs, 62 institutions and labour market partners and 346 employers. The following methods of data acquisition were used:

- desk research consisting of compilation, comparison and interpretation of data (from primary and secondary sources) regarding young people in the most disadvantaged situation in the labour market;
- expert panel with the participation of external experts (representatives of employers and labour market institutions, training institutions, non-governmental organizations, unemployed youth including those from the NEET category);
- in-depth interviews with representatives of employers and labour market institutions from the Podlaskie province;
- paper assisted personal interviewing (PAPI) with young people including those from the NEET category;

- mixed mode survey CATI/CAWI — computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) and computer assisted web interviewing (CAWI) – conducted with representatives of labour market institutions and employers in Podlaskie province (Kobylińska *et al.*, 2016, pp. 20–21).

The results of the conducted research have allowed the author of this paper to identify the problems faced by young people in the most difficult labour market situation in Podlaskie province.

The identified problems concerning the situation of young people in the NEET category have become the basis for qualitative research conducted within the framework of the parallel second path. Their aim was to identify the actions that institutions and labour market partners should take to support the most disadvantaged young people in the labour market in Podlaskie province.

The starting point for this procedure was the establishment of Partnership. More than 40 institutions and labour market partners from the Podlaskie province joined the group. A number of meetings took place within the Partnership work, including thematic meetings for unemployed young people, the most disadvantaged young people in the labour market and young people from rural areas, as well as consultative and summary meetings. Apart from that, the work was also to participate in study visits to institutions dealing with providing the daily help to the young. Among the research methods applied in this phase of research were the following:

- expert panel with the participation of external experts (representatives of employers and labour market institutions, training institutions, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, educational institutions) who on the basis of their specialist knowledge and professional experience pointed out the actions that need to be taken to effectively support young people in the labour market;
- in-depth interviews with selected representatives of labour market institutions (5 district labour offices, 3 volunteer work groups)
- group survey with the use of brainstorm and role play techniques;
- observation serving as an additional, complementary measure.

The purpose of the above methods was to create a dialogue between professionals working in various entities dealing daily with the problems of young people in the most difficult situation on the labour market and thus sharing experiences and finding effective solutions for reaching young people as well as identifying the most effective support instruments and at the same time identifying problems and ways to solve them.

The applied research methods allowed to fulfil the research objectives. Firstly, an analysis and diagnosis of the situation of NEETs in the Podlaskie province was carried out. Secondly, the challenges faced by institutions and

labour market partners in promoting this category of youth have been identified.

### **Areas of challenges facing institutions and labour market partners — an empirical assessment and discussion**

Research conducted within the framework of the project allowed to formulate the key challenges in supporting young people of NEET category by institutions and labour market partners. These challenges are a comprehensive and coherent set of interrelated activities. They include the following areas:

- counteracting the entry into the NEET group by young people at risk of premature end of formal education, including people with disabilities;
- comprehensive identification of NEET population at the level of communities and counties;
- reaching out to young people in the NEET group in order to reintegrate them into the labour market and education;
- developing the most effective solutions for supporting NEETs, both at the level of existing instruments used by labour market institutions and at the level of proposed modifications or implementation of new solutions, often of a systemic nature, to support young people;
- creating a culture of cooperation for the benefit of young people, based on local partnerships of labour market institutions and other actors with the task of solving young people’s problems.

European evidence shows that preventive strategies or “first chance” programmes that focus on young people before they become unemployed may be more effective than remedial strategies (Kolev & Saget, p.182). Therefore, the first of the aforementioned areas concerns the prevention of entry of young people at risk of ending their formal education early, including disabled people, into the NEET group. Work and educational passiveness have, to a large degree, a personal, family, environmental or existential character, which leads to a situation in which the people closest to the at-risk subject are not aware of the fact that they are entering the NEET category, or are not able, or even willing, to prevent this from happening, which is why early intervention from the institutional surroundings is necessary. This preventative role should be fulfilled in principle by educational institutions and institutions that provide social assistance, however as a result of the complexity of the problems of young people at risk of entering the NEET group and the lack of permanent cooperation between institutions of the labour market and local authorities and the educational system, it seems

necessary to create a joint action plan. To this end it is necessary to take steps to establish real cooperation between the aforementioned institutions.

The prevention of entry into the NEET group should be realised through:

- working with the families of young people at risk from entering the NEET group;
- working with pupils through schools by providing early careers advice;
- working with pupils through schools by promoting an active work and educational life.

In order to create a model of joint activity for the prevention of entry into the NEET group through working with the family of the young person to be possible, it is necessary to estimate the scale of this issue individually at the level of individual municipalities and counties and to “localise” the areas in which it is visible. This is possible only at the local environment level. On the one hand, this information is in the hands of local institutions that provide social assistance, while on the other hand, thanks to compulsory education, local educational institutions are also aware of those pupils that need help to stay in the formal educational system. It is true that many barriers exist, which can make this kind of cooperation difficult, such as a lack of experience in cooperation, which makes forging the right relations that result in a transparent flow of information difficult, or resistance from schools to drawing attention to “unpopular” problems with which their pupils struggle. However, taking into account the essence of the problem, the desire of the local environment to undertake this kind of cooperation and to improve the quality of life of the local society should overcome these issues.

Prevention of entry into the NEET group should take place in schools, which often play a significant role in the lives of young people, becoming a source of behavioural patterns and inspiration where this is lacking in their family environment or personal surroundings. Educational institutions are therefore ideal places where young people can gain extremely important, from the point of view of their future careers, practical knowledge about the functioning of the local labour market and their career perspectives, which should be transmitted directly by representatives of labour market institutions. Furthermore, in order to avoid the often dramatic effects of bad choices with regards to further stages of study or the choice of a career path, it is indispensable to allow pupils, even those only in primary education, to receive assistance in the form of early careers advice through the assessment of their potential in competency questionnaires and through creating their first individual action plans. Direct contact between labour market institutions and pupils can bring very positive effects on the con-

scious choice of pupils' career paths, and as a result — further involvement in the educational and work spheres.

An important aspect of working with youth through schools is taking up non-standard actions promoting educational and vocational involvement. Some schools, and even some pre-schools, ensure that their pupils get the opportunity to get to know successful people, the attractiveness of certain professions, the advantages of education in vocational schools or the advantages of running their own businesses, however for the majority of them, organising non-standard activities in tutorial periods, after school or during school trips is a difficult feat. Therefore, it seems necessary for institutions and partners of the labour market to take the initiative to establish cooperation in this area with local authorities as those responsible for managing education, and directly with schools themselves.

The second area in which challenges for institutions and partners of the labour market were identified is the possibility of fully recognising the NEET society not only in the Podlaskie province, but in the whole of Poland. Currently, data on this group of young people are very limited. Despite a range of studies, the difficulties, or even the lack of possibility of reaching this category of young people make it difficult to determine full and representative numbers, structures and determinants of remaining outside the educational system and labour market in various areas of the country (at the level of individual municipalities and counties). Hence, in order to be able to talk about working out the most effective ways of reaching and activating this group of young people, its full recognition through carrying out complex studies aiming to identify the scale of this phenomenon, its age structure and the factors conditioning professional and educational inactivity of the young person, is necessary. This is an incredibly difficult task, since it requires unique knowledge of the NEET society. It should be remembered that NEETs very often do not feature in the registers of county employment centres. It is estimated that around 60% of people in this group do not ask for help from public employment services. Knowledge about those people is therefore possessed solely by local active organisations which, because of the character of their tasks, work on a daily basis with young people who find themselves in a difficult situation on the labour market. These include most importantly social welfare centres, since it is to them that young people or their families turn to for support — mainly financial — in which they are most interested. Therefore, in order to reach this group of people, firstly we must establish cooperation with social welfare centres in individual municipalities. Again, we can observe that cooperation between labour market institutions and social welfare centres is indispensable in effectively solving young people's problems.



The third area in which challenges that institutions and partners of the labour market looking to support NEETs are faced with were pointed out is determining ways of reaching this category of young people. The aim of that area is to provide NEETs with a wider range of information about possible ways of supporting them, undertaking activation activities and creating a better flow of information between cooperating organisations. Establishing close cooperation of public employment services and other labour market institutions with social welfare centres with the aim of elaborating and implementing local action plans based on reaching young people in the NEET category is indispensable also in this area. Experience shows that these people often decline assistance offered to them in the form of activation, hence the importance of elaborating paths by which they can be effectively reached through strengthening cooperation between public employment and welfare services with institutions from the third sector, which in these situations would offer young people assistance with the aim of “keeping” them in a state of constant support. Moreover, non-governmental organisations working with young people make use of non-conventional ways of reaching young people at risk of social exclusion on a daily basis, and the local nature of their activities, providing them with knowledge of the local society, increases the effectiveness of their activities. They make use of local media, that is, local radio stations and local newspapers, whose effectiveness they confirm, but also make contact through rural community centres, village housewives clubs, religious entities and festivities. These often bring together active members of local society, who can make use of their personal contacts to reach young people, which is significantly more effective than official channels of communication. They also involve street workers, who try to make direct contact with the young people that are the intended recipients of the offered support.

The wide range of activities undertaken by organisations of the third sector with regard to reaching young people does not change the fact that public employment services, despite considerably lower possibilities of reaching young people as a result of legal restrictions, but also because of the fact that they operate on a county, rather than municipal level, can make use of new methods of communicating with young people.

Firstly they can make use of the platform on which the presence of young people nowadays is widespread, that is, social media. In order to create profiles of county job centres on social media portals and keep them up to date, employees do not even require special training or preparation. The barrier which seems to appear is the excessive burden on employees to complete their everyday tasks connected with customer service. The problem can also be to do with the complicated, from the point of view of

young people, especially those with interpersonal dysfunctions, language that is used to communicate with them on these portals. Therefore, it seems necessary to take care to simplify the language used both in communications on social media platforms, and on the web pages of county job centres. Not without significance remains also the complexity of the difficulty rating of communications.

Furthermore, it seems necessary to give the job of a careers advisor the status of a mobile advisor (working in a given area), reaching the appropriate people on the basis of a signal from local partners of the completion of social work with the family and the readiness of the young person to participate in receiving career orientation and advice.

Another area of challenges is regarding the elaboration of the most effective solutions for supporting young people in the NEET group, both on the level of already existing instruments used by labour market institutions and on the level of proposed modifications or implementations of new solutions, often of a systematic nature, serving to support young people. They are the answer to certain problems linked with the situation of young people on the labour market. The first of them is the lack of close cooperation between various labour market institutions and partners and local authorities in supporting young people. Therefore, it is necessary to initiate common activities on a regional level with the aim of elaborating local activation programs for people at risk of permanent marginalisation, taking into account the complex nature given to the support of young people (social worker, psychologist, careers advisor).

A significant aspect of cooperation is the inclusion in activation activities of organisations from the third sector that possess much experience in working with young people in terms of developing their resourcefulness, breaking psychological and social barriers, shaping interpersonal relations, responsibility and consciousness and teaching awareness of the obligation to work. These aspects of work taken up by NGOs constitute an important element of local initiatives to help young people, who often do not possess the appropriate qualifications or competencies, as well as motivation, to be active on the labour market or remain in education.

The task facing public employment services is, in turn, a change in the way they work with young people who, as the results of studies show, are apprehensive about primary contact with labour market institutions and the bureaucracy associated with them, as well as being afraid to openly communicate their problems, often of a highly personal nature, therefore needing specific conditions to encourage the young person to open up. A solution to this situation could be the creation of designated areas in job centres (so-called helpdesks), where assistance can be given to young people who

are there for the first time, providing psychological comfort and privacy. It is also important to prepare employees of county job centres for work with young people with interpersonal competency deficiencies, problems in communicating or motivation.

Another postulate is increasing the level of individual support given to young people who cannot cope on the labour market through a more detailed approach to assessing and determining the needs of young people by creating individual action plans based on consultations with a careers advisor. Currently, this takes place through filling out a questionnaire on profiling help for the unemployed, which encourages “automatic” decision making in this respect.

A significant challenge in supporting young people is also the introduction of changes in the laws on providing social assistance through benefits. The problem of the effect of current rules regarding the provision of benefits that discourages people from entering the job market has been accentuated many times over the course of research. Moreover, ‘conditionality’ of social benefits is the guiding concept stressed together with the need to modernize social security systems in order to address the precarious situation of young people in whole Europe (Lahusen *et al.*, 2013, p. 307). Hence it is postulated that new laws regarding the social security system should be elaborated, in which the provision of benefits would depend on the undertaking of conscious employment or educational activities by young people. This kind of solution, based on the introduction of compulsory participation in activation programs, should particularly affect the marginal representatives of young people in the NEET category, that is, people who do not show any willingness to enter the labour market or education, and are simultaneously likely to collect benefits.

The last area in which labour market institutions face challenges is creating a culture of cooperation for young people, based on local partnerships of labour market institutions and other organisations, whose main purpose is to solve the problems of young people. Cooperation of labour market institutions with local councils in municipalities and counties is a necessary condition to implement the aforementioned solutions.

## **Conclusions**

This article presents conclusions on actions to be taken by institutions and labour market partners to support people in the NEET category. Support for young people is one of the key tasks of labour market institutions in Poland. According to the regulations, unemployed people under 30 are treated

as one of several groups of people in a special situation on the labour market, which results in the possibility of using additional labour market instruments. Taking the right action at the right time can save young people from serious consequences for themselves. However, the effects of being included in the NEET generation can occur not only at the individual level, but also in terms of social and economic costs.

The traditional approach of entities that deal with helping young people turns out to be insufficient for NEETs. The extremely complex background of problems in this category of youth is the cause. The nature of their problems makes it a group that requires a series of activities not only in terms of professional activation. Difficulties arise also with reaching out this category of young people. This is due to the fact that young NEETs remain out of the registries of public employment services. Another reason is the constantly neglected knowledge about the size and structure of the NEET population, especially in the spatial layout. This also applies to the population of people at risk of entering the NEET group. Insufficient cooperation between various labour market entities in supporting young people is the source of this problem.

Therefore, it is necessary to implement new measures that would be used by labour market institutions and partners. Because of their nature, these activities are a kind of challenge. They cover several areas. The first is to counteract the entry into the NEET group of young people at risk of premature completion of formal education, including those with disabilities. Activities in this area should take place in the context of working with both a young person who is at risk of being classified as NEET and his/her family and working through a school. The school should focus on providing its students with early careers advice and promoting professional and educational activities.

The second area of challenges is the comprehensive identification of NEET youth groups at the level of municipalities and counties in particular provinces. Knowledge about people in the NEET category is still incomplete. However, the scale of this phenomenon is known at the level of individual provinces, while at the level of counties, and even more at the level of municipalities the size of this population and its structure are often unknown.

The third area — reaching out to young people in the NEET group to reintegrate them into the labour market and education — is another challenge. The ways of reaching this youth group have not been effective so far. Moreover, the fact that young people stay out of the public employment services registers makes it impossible to reach them.

It is also necessary to develop effective solutions to support NEETs, both at the level of existing instruments used by labour market institutions and at the level of proposed modifications or implementation of new solutions, often of a systemic nature, to support young people.

The last area of challenges for institutions and partners in the labour market is the creation of a culture of cooperation for the benefit of young people based on local partnerships of labour market institutions and other organisations with the task of solving young people's problems.

It may be accepted that the conclusions presented in this paper, despite the fact that they are based on research conducted in the Podlaskie Province, are relevant in the context of the whole country. The background and specificity of the problems of young people in the NEET category are similar in Poland as are the activities of reaching out and activating them made by labour market institutions.

Possible directions of future research should address the phenomenon of "leaving" the NEET category as a result of the measures taken for vocational and educational reintegration and the assessment of the effectiveness of activation measures used by public and non-public labour market institutions. Future research could also explore factors facilitating reintegration.

Limitations of the research relate mainly to the lack of previous studies in the research area in Poland and especially in Podlaskie province. Despite the fact that the NEET category is currently a very popular 'aspect' of the labor market, there is a lack of reliable research characterising precisely this phenomenon. Foreign research findings concerning NEETs may not be adequate background due to different economic and social situation of young people on different labor markets.

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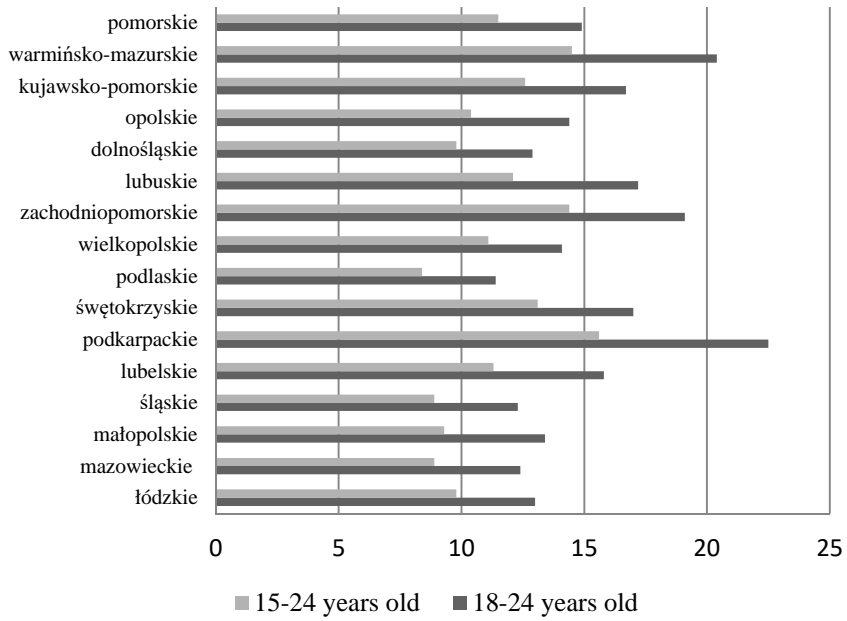
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## Annex

**Figure 1.** Percentage of NEET youth in specific provinces



Source: Eurostat (2016).