
Inequalities, Vulnerability and Precarity among Youth in Greece: The Case of NEETs¹

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Undoubtedly, the prolonged, economic recession in the European Union had a major impact on both the labour market and the social fabric of the EU. The sharp increase in unemployment rates of all age groups, mainly in young people and other vulnerable social groups, such as NEETs, namely young people (aged 15-24) Not in Education, Employment or Training, had a clear effect on the deterioration of their life course and the rise of their degree of precarity, increasing the risk of poverty or social exclusion, especially, in the European South, as in Greece. The paper deals with the state of play regarding young people, and especially NEETs in both the EU and Greece. It initially focuses on the definitional issues and the theoretical insights concerning the socially vulnerable group of NEETs and the potential parameters of ending up a NEET. Further, the paper aims at bringing to the fore the regional dimension of the issue and focusing on the relation between youth unemployment and NEET rates. Additionally, based on a recent EEA-funded large-scale Project entitled ‘NEETs2’ (EEA Grants/GR07-3757), it proceeds to the analysis of some of the key quantitative and qualitative findings regarding the impact of the multi-parametric economic recession on NEETs’ and, in general, Youth’s employability and life course in Greece, including evidence-based insights on their survival strategies and public trust.

Keywords: NEETs, youth, inequalities, vulnerability, Greece.

Inequalities, Social Vulnerability and NEETs: Definitional Issues and Theoretical Insights

NEETs, both as a term and as a socially vulnerable group, is neither a newly introduced social phenomenon nor a newly introduced concept in the public sphere. The NEETs issue has been already high in the political and theoretical agenda for about two decades influenced by the continuous and abrupt changes in the socio-economic context at international, European and national level.

Specifically, at the European level, in most countries, the term ‘NEET’ is defined, as ‘young people, aged 15-24, who are not in employment, education or training’ (Eurofound 2012: 20); that is, they are absent from both the labour market and the key social institutions

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(Papadakis et al. 2017a). It is worth mentioning that ‘while the youth unemployment rate refers just to the economically active members of the population who were not able to find a job’ (Eurofound 2012: 23), the NEET indicator corresponds to ‘young people aged 15 to 24 who meet the following two conditions: (a) they are not employed (i.e. unemployed or inactive according to the International Labour Organisation definition) and (b) they have not received any education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey. Data are expressed as a percentage of the total population in the same age group and sex, excluding the respondents who have not answered the question ‘participation to education and training’ (Eurostat 2021a). Additionally, in the OECD database, the age group of NEETs is extended to young people aged 29 years (aged 15-29 years) (OECD 2013), while in Asia, specifically in Japan, the term NEETs refers to youth aged 15-34 years (OECD 2008 as cited in Eurofound 2012).

However, regardless the age groups in which NEETs population has been categorized by the various International and European institutions, this social category is characterized by social vulnerability, insecurity and a high risk of poverty and social exclusion (Papadakis et al. 2017b). In particular, ‘the term NEET was formally introduced at the political level in the UK in the late 1990s (more specifically, in 1999), in response to the need for the development/formation of an indicator to capture people aged 16-18 who were not in education, employment or training’ (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999 as cited in Eurofound: 20; Drakaki et al. 2014: 242), since a high percentage of young people from 16 to 18 years old were not allowed to have access to unemployment benefits, due to the change in the status of unemployed benefits in the United Kingdom at that time (Furlong 2006 as cited in Inui 2009, Furlong 2007 as cited in Eurofound 2012). Especially, the interest for young people not in employment, education or training turned to policy discourse officially, when the term NEET was first introduced in a policy document, namely the government report ‘Bridging the Gap’ in the UK. The aim of this report was the study of NEETs in terms of the intensity and extent of phenomenon and the parameters that lead to these young people’s social vulnerability, as well as to investigate the heterogeneity among their sub-groups in order to address NEETs phenomenon by proposing policy actions (Social Exclusion Unit 1999). It is worth mentioning that in Europe the term was firstly associated with early school leavers, aiming at reducing the high percentages of people who leave early education and training systems, as well as linking with the target setting by the Lisbon Strategy via the ‘Education and Training 2010’ Work Programme (Commission of the European Communities 2005, European Commission 2018). However, it seems that there is still a heterogeneity among NEETs population (Papadakis et al. 2015), as according to Eurofound report (2012), NEETs in Europe may be classified in five main sub-categories:

- ‘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' (Eurofound 2012: 24).

Based on the abovementioned, specific groups have increased probabilities of becoming NEETs, including those 'with low levels of education, an immigration background, some level of disability or problems of mental health as well as young people with a problematic family background' (Eurofound 2012: 55-56). In addition, it seems that social and cultural capital and subsequently socio-economic inequalities affect young people's life chances, and especially those of NEETs (Papadakis et al. 2020). For instance, family income (one of the main 'indicators' of the social capital) is substantially related to actual resources, especially when it comes to a young man/woman's life chances. Moreover, the individual educational capital is of vital importance (Green and Janmaat 2012), since it is one of the three key determinants of the cultural capital, for the educational qualifications represent substantial part of the institutionalized state of the cultural capital (Nash 1990). Additionally, the potential correlation of the family socio-economic capital and the individuated educational capital to the employment status has become even more crucial in the aftermath of the Crisis, since the employment status especially for the youth defines, at a large extent, their life chances as well as the degree of their vulnerability and precarity (Papadakis et al. 2020, Papadakis et al. 2021).

It is worth noting that the heterogeneity which is found among NEETs is related not only to the socio-demographic characteristics and family background but also to the heterogeneity and the characteristics of the countries. As Eurofound (2016: 1) points out 'since its inception, the NEET concept has proved a powerful tool in enhancing understanding of young people's vulnerabilities in terms of labour market participation and social inclusion. As arguably the best proxy to measure the extent of young people's disadvantage, the NEET indicator can integrate subgroups such as young mothers and young people with disabilities — groups particularly at risk of being marginalized under the traditional 'inactive' label — into the policy debate'. It should be mentioned that even though the characteristics of the NEETs' rate differ to the ones of youth unemployment rate, there is a strong association among them, as the NEETs' rate 'highlights the problem of 'inactive youth', together with the young unemployed, but it draws attention away from those who are employed but trapped in inferior types of jobs' (ETF 2015: 7).

The Current State of Play Regarding Youth Unemployment and Neets in the EU

NEETs, being a socially vulnerable group, face the risk of social exclusion as they do not participate in key social structures (see in detail Papadakis et al. 2015: 44-75; Papadakis and Kyridis 2016: 93-112). The risk of vulnerability and social exclusion for them has worsened during the global multidimensional Recession, which had started at the beginning of 2008 and was continuing, affecting the European economy and the social fabric for a whole decade, worsening the conditions and the opportunities of young people's, especially NEETs',

integration into the labour market and society (Papadakis 2013: 15; Drakaki et al. 2014: 240). Furthermore, the impact of the Recession was more ‘visible’ in the countries of the ‘European South’, namely in Greece, Spain and Portugal, as the vast changes and deregulations in the labour market and the sectors of economy were greater and acute, compared to the other countries of the European Union, amplifying, consequently, phenomena of social vulnerability and socio-economic inequalities (Eurofound 2012, Pardo and Prato 2021).

Within this context, in 2013 the percentage of NEETs (aged 15-24) reached 13% in the EU-28, namely it increased by 2.1% since 2008 (EU-28 average: 10.9%) (Eurostat 2021a). Additionally, there were significant variations among EU Member States regarding the share of the NEETs population. For instance, in 2013 the share of NEETs rate exceeded 20% in Italy, Greece and Bulgaria (22.2%, 20.4%, 21.6% respectively), while in Slovenia, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and other EU Member States the NEETs rates remained below 10% (9.2%, 9.3%, 6.3%, 5.6% respectively) (Eurostat 2021a). Even though the rate of NEETs in the EU Member States has decreased since 2013, both the percentages and the variations of the NEETs population among Member States have remained higher and significant compared to those before the onset of the Crisis (European Commission 2015: 17; Eurostat 2021a). It is worth mentioning that NEETs’ rate variations resemble the ones of the youth unemployment rates (aged 15-24), since in the wake of the multidimensional economic crisis, youth unemployment rate rose sharply peaking at 24.8% in 2013 (EU-27 average)² (Eurostat 2021b) and it was ‘[...]the highest level ever recorded in the history of the EU. During the crisis, 18 Member States recorded their highest-ever levels of youth employment’ (Eurofound 2014: 2).

During the following years (from 2014 to 2019), there was a considerable reduction in the rate of youth unemployment as it fell to 15.3% (EU-27) in 2019 (Eurostat 2021b). In 2020, due to the impact of COVID-19 crisis on the labour market, the EU youth unemployment rate increased again, reaching 17.1%, confirming that the COVID-19 impact on youth (aged 15-24 years) was stronger than the one on other age categories of the population. It is worth mentioning that, in 2020, the youth unemployment rate was about 3.5 times higher than the rate of unemployed population aged 50-74 years (4.9%) in the EU (Eurostat 2021b; Eurostat 2021c: 22; European Commission/DG EMPL 2021: 50).

In September 2021, the EU-27 youth unemployment rate decreased, reaching 15.9%, while the youth unemployment rate for women was higher (16.1%) than the respective rate for men (Eurostat 2021d). It is worth noting that in the majority of EU Member States, the increase in the rates of NEETs was more a consequence of the dramatic increase in youth unemployment rates, rather than youth inactivity (European Commission 2015: 48). Furthermore, according to Eurofound (2012: 33) a fairly high percentage of inactive NEETs are ‘discouraged workers’; that is, they believe that there is no available job for them. ‘This fact implies that there are structural barriers in relation to the young population’s transition and inclusion in the labour market or in education’ (Eurofound, 2016: 20; Papadakis et al. 2020: 4).

² EU-27 countries (from 2020). According to Eurostat database, statistics data of youth unemployment rates for EU-28 countries are not available (see Eurostat 2021b).

It is noteworthy that countries, such as Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Italy, Croatia and Romania, where NEETs rates have risen sharply during the Crisis, culminating in 2013 (21.6%, 20.4%, 18.7%, 18.6%, 22.2%, 19.6%, 17% respectively). Although these percentages are declining, these countries still have the highest NEETs rates across the EU Member States in 2020 — 14.4%, 13.2%, 14.4%, 13.9%, 19%, 12.2%, 14.8% respectively (Eurostat 2021a). Also, in 2020, the NEET rate in EU-27 reached 11.1%, increased by 1% from 2019 and decreased by 1.9% from 2013 (Eurostat 2021a; Eurostat 2021c: 19), while it should be highlighted that the NEET rate in Italy (19%) was more than four times higher as in the Netherlands (4.5%) (Eurostat 2021c: 19).

Regarding the relation of the degree of urbanization with the extent of NEETs phenomenon in the EU, according to Eurostat (2021e: 80), in 2020 some of the highest NEET rates in the EU were recorded in southern regions of Italy, in outermost regions of France, as well as in specific regions of Greece, Romania and Bulgaria. Specifically in 2020, there were seven regions in Italy, Bulgaria, Greece and France where more than 1 in 4 young people aged 15-24 years were included in the socially vulnerable group of NEETs (Eurostat 2021e: 80). 'Four of these were located in Italy — Molise (25.5%), Calabria (26.5%), Campania (28.0%) and Sicilia (29.3%); they were joined by Severozapaden in Bulgaria (27.0%), Voreio Aigaio in Greece (27.1%) and Guyane in France (33.6%), which had the highest rate' (Eurostat 2021e: 80). On the other hand, the lowest NEETs rates were recorded in the Nordic Member States, Austria and the Netherlands, such as in Noord-Brabant (3.9%) and Utrecht (3.7%) in the Netherlands and Praha — the capital region of Czech Republic — (3.4%) (Eurostat 2021e: 80). It seems that the degree of urbanization may be related to the intensity and extent of the phenomenon of NEETs in some European countries.

The above mentioned should be taken into account in the public debate and the public policy agenda in the EU, even after the end of the prolonged multi-parameter economic Recession and the formal completion of the 'Europe 2020' Strategy, aiming at initiatives and targeted actions to tackle the NEETs phenomenon across EU Member States.

NEETs, Vulnerability and Precarity in Greece: The Current State of Play

With regard to the case of NEETs in Greece, one of the countries in Southern Europe, heavily affected by the Economic Crisis and the subsequent Recession, the NEETs rate increased sharply from 11.4% in 2008 to 20.4% in 2013 (Eurostat 2021a). In addition, the impact of the Crisis and the Recession in employment and labour market was unbelievably huge and persistent and has resulted in weakening Greek society and greatly degrading the living standards of citizens, especially the youth ones, by intensifying their vulnerability and precarity (Papadakis et al. 2017b).

Concerning unemployment rates in Greece, during the first years from the onset of the Crisis, the total unemployment (aged 15-74) rose sharply from 7.8% in 2008 to 27.5% in 2013. Although the total unemployment rate decreased gradually during the next years, it still remained high compared to the EU total unemployment rate (Eurostat 2021f), while it was affected by the impact of the pandemic to the economy and the labour market. Specifically, in

2020 the total unemployment rate reached 16.3% — the highest unemployment rate among the EU Member States, and more than twice as high as the corresponding EU unemployment rate (7.1%) (Eurostat 2021g). In September 2021, the total unemployment rate in Greece was decreased by 3% (13.3%); however, it remained the second highest after Spain (14.6%) in the EU-27 (Eurostat 2021h). The total unemployment rate for men stood at 10.2% and 17.3% for women respectively. While for the same period (September 2021), the EU total unemployment rates reached 6.5% for men and 7% for women (Eurostat 2021h).

It is worth mentioning that in 2011, in the first years of the Crisis, Matsaganis had pointed out that ‘the rise in unemployment is likely to be transformed into higher poverty, while in the past the correlation between the two has been rather weak’ (2011: 510). Indeed, during the following years a remarkable share of population, especially the rural one, in Greece was living under the poverty limit, as well as a 35.7% of the total population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion (HSA 2016: 1-2; Eurostat 2017: 255). Especially, young people are the social group that were affected more than other age groups, as the impact of the multi-parametric Recession was particularly strong in this age group, as shown by the huge increase in youth unemployment rate in Greece, which is directly related to poverty-risk or social exclusion (Papadakis et al. 2017b: 11). Specifically, the youth unemployment rate in Greece rose sharply peaking at 58.3% in 2013 (respective EU-27 rate in 2013: 24.8%) from 25.7% in 2009 (corresponding EU-27 rate in 2009: 20.9%) (Eurostat 2021b). In 2013 the youth unemployment rate for men reached 53.8% and 63.8% for women respectively in Greece. Even though, during the following years, the youth unemployment rate gradually decreased in Greece, still remained high and ranked second below Spain in 2020 — youth unemployment in Greece is 35%. in Spain is 38.3% (Eurostat 2021b).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated measures disproportionately impacted on young people in Greece, inevitably increasing the unemployment rates and their vulnerability. In April 2021, the youth unemployment rate reached 48.2%. Then there was a gradual decrease, resulting in 24.5%, in September 2021 (Eurostat 2021d). At regional level, from 2019 to 2020, in eight Greek regions more than 40 % of young people (aged 15-24) were unemployed in 2020, while Sterea Ellada was affected more as the youth unemployment rate reached more than 50% (increase by at least 10 percentage points in one year) (Eurostat 2021e: 78).

The impact of the ten-year economic crisis and the current impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Greek youth remain alarming and create precarious and vulnerable conditions in young people’s life course, increasing their risk of poverty and/or social exclusion.

The case of NEETs, especially the case of Greek NEETs, confirms the abovementioned argument. To be more specific, Greece, before the onset of the Crisis, had almost a similar NEETs rate as the rest of the EU. However, the rate of Greek NEETs recorded a peak of 20.4% in 2013, from 8.8% in 2008, and was almost double compared to the EU average (13%) (Eurostat 2021a). In 2013, the NEETs rate for Greek young men (aged 15-24 years) stood at 20.9% (increased by 12.1% in 5 years). While the corresponding NEETs rate for women in Greece was 20% in 2013 from 14.1% in 2008 (Eurostat 2021a). During the period from 2014

to 2019, the NEETs rate in Greece fell slowly, however, it increased again due to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, rising at 13.2% in 2020, while the NEETs rates for men and women stood at 13.1% and 13.3% respectively in 2020, in contrast to the gender gap evident in the early years of the Crisis (Eurostat 2021a).

Regarding the regional dimension of NEETs, in 2013, when both youth unemployment and NEETs rate in Greece reached their highest peak, according to Eurostat (2021i) three Greek regions, namely Sterea Ellada, Peloponnese and Eastern Macedonia and Thrace had the highest NEETs rates among the Greek regions: 30.9%, 28.5% and 28.3% respectively (Eurostat, 2021i). Furthermore, from 2008 to 2013, the highest increase in NEETs rates took place in the following regions: Peloponnese (13.2%), Eastern Macedonia and Thrace (13%), North Aegean (12.5%), and Sterea Ellada (11.6%) (Eurostat 2021i). In the following years, from 2014 to 2019, there was a gradually decrease in NEETs rates across Greece, mainly in the regions of Peloponnese (decrease by 15.6%), Epirus (decrease by 9.2%) and Central Macedonia (decrease by 7.7%). In the North Aegean region there was an increase of 6%, from 19.7% in 2014 to 25.7% in 2019. In 2020, due to COVID-19 pandemic, the NEETs rates increased again in almost all the Greek regions. The regions of North Aegean, South Aegean and Sterea Ellada recorded the highest NEETs rates, 27.1%, 22% and 24.5% respectively (Eurostat 2021i), while the regions of South Aegean, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace as well as Sterea Ellada had the highest change regarding the increase in NEETs rates among the Greek Regions during 2019-2020, namely an increase by 5.9%, 3.2% and 2.4% respectively (Eurostat 2021i).

Based on the above mentioned, it seems that there is a slight relation between the degree of urbanization and NEETs rates among the regions in Greece. In addition, it is obvious that there is a direct correlation between both the impact of the crisis and the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis and NEETs rate in Greece, which was one of the main consequences of the huge increase in Greek youth unemployment.

The above mentioned in conjunction with the inadequacy of the welfare state in Greece, which has failed to protect as well as to re-integrate NEETs and, in general, young people in the labour market (Papadakis et al. 2021), constitute a key parameter for young people's gradual disengagement from labour market and the key social institutions (see in detail Papadakis et al. 2015; Drakaki et al. 2014; Kotroyannos et al. 2015: 275-276).

Research Findings of the Project 'NEETs2' (EEA Grants/GR07-3757)

The research project 'NEETs2' (EEA Grants/GR07-3757) included the conduction of a large scale nationwide primary qualitative and quantitative research (in 2016), aiming at the identification of the key characteristics of both Youth and NEETs in Greece. Among the objectives of the project was the deployment of the psychological profile of this category of young people along with the identification of any impact of the financial crisis on the latter as well as on their life course. Another crucial objective of the research was the mapping of NEET's skills profile along with their needs-in-skills.

The outcomes of the qualitative and quantitative research led to an evidence-based targeted and competency-oriented training-reskilling program, which included two counselling

and vocational handbooks as well as a proposal of set of psychological supportive activities aiming at fostering NEETs' social inclusion prospects. The emphasis of the project was mainly given on key determinants of NEETs' life course and values (as well as of young people generally in Greece) such as civic values, political behaviour, public trust and survival strategies. Stratification and quota-based sampling was conducted (with 2769 respondents in the total of the 13 Administrative Regions), which led to the following main outcomes: a) in May 2016 the NEET rate in Greece was 16.4% among the Greek young population aged 15-24 (KEPET and KEADIK 2016a: 7), b) NEETs, compared to the control group of young people aged 15-24, are older, have less age-adjusted years of education, are more likely to live with their parents, have more work experience and lower family income (see in detail Papadakis et al. 2017a: 18-19), c) age is a determining factor, affecting a young person's chances to become a NEET.

Quantitative Research Findings

The descriptive analysis indicates that after the age of 22 the percentage of NEETs grows dramatically until the age of 24, in which the NEETs' percentage reaches 34.9% of the young people of this age (KEPET and KEADIK 2016a: 7). These outcomes confirm the literature which points out the crucial role of family in the Southern European welfare states (Ferrera 2010, Rhodes 1996,) as long as it seems that the Greek family operates as a non-formal policy substitute which prevents the marginalization of younger people (and younger NEETs) and prevents the total disruption of NEETs' life course.

At the same time, recent surveys indicate that negative NEETs effects vary according to the educational attainment as well as gender (Ralston et al. 2016). In the Greek case and according to the findings of our research project, 1 out of 4 young people in Greece is highly skilled and 24.4% of the Greek NEETs have graduated from higher institutions. This is a finding which differentiates the Greek NEETs from the majority of NEETs in other EU countries, as long as they are usually low or medium skilled, while (on the contrary) in the Greek case 1 out of 4 is highly skilled.

The majority of NEETs, indicate that their family income is low or very low, namely NEETs come from lower income families, than their peers. Given the family importance in offering non-formal protection, it turns out that family income is a significant factor which determines a young person's chances to fall into NEET category, since the lower family income seem to lead in increased risk of social exclusion (Papadakis et al. 2016: 36-37). While previous research findings indicate the strong relation between NEET status and income as well as long-term unemployment with lower income (Gregg and Tominey 2005), the Greek case of NEETs indicate the frequent occurrence of this situation among lower socio-economic groups and alarmingly underlines the limited social mobility capacity even for university graduates (Ioakimidis and Papanconstantinou 2017, Maloutas and Malouta 2021) as well as the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Papatheodorou and Papanastasiou 2010; Papadakis et al. 2015: 56). This trend has been confirmed by the outcomes of the research which indicate

that approximately 40% of Greek young people live in households with total income less than 1000 €.

One of the most important indicators is the self-definition of young people about their individual condition. It is not surprising that 30.8% of young people and 45.8% of NEETs in Greece define their situation as hard and unbearable (KEPET and KEADIK 2016a: 26). Unquestionably, a large number of young people and half of the NEET population face difficulties in their daily life, indicating that NEETs psychology is negatively affected by social marginalization and exclusion from employment, education or training.

Employability is a crucial factor which could increase the prospects of integration into the labour market and broadly in society. Both NEETs and young people in general seem to have prior working experience (KEPET and KEADIK 2016a: 13), with those coming from lower socio-economic groups being forced to work earlier than the rest. Although 73.6% has working experience, the economic crisis has been determining in forcing them to unemployment. This is clear, as 84.3% of NEETs and 79% of young people in general became unemployed during the last 2 years. While young people and NEETs have working experience in services, the latter were previously employed in seasonal vacancies (catering, leisure and tourism). Even though we may presume that those NEETs, who have become recently unemployed, may be due to seasonal employment, a significant percentage both of young people in general (32.7%) and of NEETs (39.7%) are unemployed more than 6 months, so they are not connected with temporality of employment. Among young people aged 15-24, men aged 20-24 are the majority with work experience. Additionally, 44% of young people (26.4% of NEETs and 47.8% of young people in general) indicate that they have not working experience and from those who have, 26.3% of NEETs and 26.1% of young people in general, are currently long-term unemployed (KEPET and KEADIK 2016a).

Low employability levels seem to lead to increased unemployment levels, while on the contrary, its increase implies more opportunities for career development (Panagiotakopoulos 2012, Yorke 2006), psychological uplift and prosperity (Gowan 2012), as well as long-term stability prospects (Brockman et al. 2008). It should be noted, however, that the negative effects of the delayed entry or early exclusion from the labour market are not limited to the early stages of working life but are extended to the future, as they shape reduced prospects for integration, career development, a satisfactory salary (Gartell 2009, Mroz and Savage 2006, Oreopoulos et al. 2008, Schmelzer 2011) and ultimately undermine life-chances, thus continuing the vicious circle of youth – and general – unemployment and vulnerability. The research findings confirm that the economic crisis has reduced the chances for young people and NEETs integration into the labour market, formulating two categories; those who have not working experience and those who have limited working experience due to personnel cutbacks, enterprise closure, seasonal employment or even voluntary leave.

The implementation of actual active employment policies could be a solution, in order to increase the prospects for re-integration, of the excluded, into the labour market. Training is categorized as one of the basic active employment policies (Papadakis 2005) but the findings show that it has limited impact, since only 15.9% of young people (17.7% of NEETs and 15.6%

of young people) have ever participated in a training program. Even more discouraging is the fact that those who have participated in such a training program consider it ineffective, unattractive and untrustworthy.

The abovementioned data confirm that the economic crisis has created emotions of insecurity (48%), anger (27%) and anxiety (17.1%) among youth. Only 3.6% of the respondents is optimistic, with no statistically significant differences between NEETs and the rest young people (KEPET and KEADIK 2016a: 35).

However, regarding the personal perception of social exclusion, a paradox occurs as long as only 9.8% of NEETs and 6.4% of the rest young people feel socially excluded (KEPET and KEADIK 2016a: 26). While in the literature, NEETs is a social group which is categorized as socially vulnerable (even excluded), they do not admit that they are actually in such a condition. This finding also confirms the first primary nationwide research on NEETs in Greece ('Absents Barometer'/ 2011-2013), which revealed that the family was a crucial parameter in what NEETs feel about their social exclusion condition, since it is a vital supportive mechanism, an actual safety net (Kotroyannos et al. 2015, Papadakis, et al. 2015). At the same time, due to the fact that the phenomenon of NEETs is extended, several of their friends and peers are in a similar condition, thus diminishing their feeling of exclusion. On the other hand, this does not diminish the fact that their social vulnerability has been increased in alarming levels. Unquestionably, this situation affects NEETs life-course design and differentiates the priorities among them and the rest of the young people of their age. In fact, NEETs seem mainly to prioritize the choice of finding a job (60.6%) while the majority of the rest of young people primarily choose the learning process (51.6%) (KEPET and KEADIK 2016a: 30).

It should be pointed out that the top-5 responses are identical for both NEETs and the rest young people (KEPET and KEADIK 2016a: 28), uncovering the multi-dimensional impact of the crisis which has substantially affected the life and the future chances of young people, in total.

Qualitative Research Findings

The qualitative research included 71 semi-structured interviews, 96 (51% women) check lists and 2 focus groups of 5 people each (6 men and 4 women). The analysis of the qualitative research findings of the project 'Neets2' reveal that young people in Greece consider that social skills and competencies related to citizenship, skills related to learning methodology and meta-cognitive skills, entrepreneurial and initiative development skills, cultural expression and recognition skills, are of top priority (KEPET and KEADIK 2016b: 15; KANEP/GSEE 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Certainly, the development of these skills requires the possibility of gaining work experience, participation in internships and in training programs that can contribute decisively to the use of learning opportunities and the development of professional-business initiative, as well as team-work skills (KEPET and KEADIK 2016b: 15).

The lack of work experience and the related skills acquired, is a matter largely emphasized by young people, as they realize that they are lagging behind in this area, given the situation of the labour market. Respondents seem to demand a change of the knowledge-based nature of the

education system, while in terms of skills related to science and math, they seem to be relatively adequate. They consider it crucial to focus on those skills that can follow the developments and demands of the labour market, such as skills obtained from internships and apprenticeships (KEPET and KEADIK 2016b: 15; KEPET and KEADIK 2016c).

Regarding the socially vulnerable group of NEETs (16.4% of the youth population in 2016) KEPET and KEADIK 2016a: 7), the classification of the necessary skills and abilities is shown in Table 1.

Primary level of necessity	Stress management and work stress Time management-meeting deadlines Organizational competences Good communication with third parties
Secondary level of necessity	Initiative Crisis and conflict management in the workplace Ability to work in a team Methodology Synthetic thinking Problem solving Ability to trade
Tertiary level of necessity	Administrative Capacity Ability to adapt to new fields and working conditions and to changing work context Analytical thinking Writing texts with grammatical and syntactic clarity and completeness

Table 1. NEETs' skills prioritizations for further development Source: KEPET and KEADIK, 2016b: 18.

According to NEETs, the main reason for not acquiring the required knowledge, skills and abilities seems to be the content of the courses (knowledge-based) and consequently the way of learning, the general structure of the Greek educational system and the 'traditional' teacher-centred teaching model. Simply, all these three factors refer to the structure of teaching-learning process, attributing to it the incomplete or even distorted form of the knowledge and skills they receive, which ultimately does not allow them to integrate smoothly into the labour market (KEPET and KEADIK 2016b: 16; KEPET and KEADIK 2016c). At the second level, NEETs stressed that the leadership of education, the country's political leadership and textbooks are responsible for the lack of the required competences and of the limited development of critical skills. Therefore, they consider that all relevant institutional actors related to education are responsible for the lack of the proper learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and abilities). On the contrary, NEETs believe that parents, students themselves and (surprisingly) the economic recession that has reduced the required resources, are less responsible factors for their lack of skills, knowledge and competences (KEPET and KEADIK 2016b: 16; KANEP/GSEE 2016a). All the above-mentioned document the dysfunction of the educational system, which

seems to be perceived as a persistent pathogen, undermining the harmonization to the labour market and resulting in reproducing inequalities.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

A main conclusion drawn from the findings of the research project ‘NEETs2’ is that young people show very low levels of trust in public institutions, as they consider the administration of educational institutions, the staff of the education sector as well as the political system, as key factors for their lack of qualifications and skills and consequently for the problems and difficulties they face in their daily lives (see in detail Papadakis et al. 2017a: 29-33). The situation they are experiencing may not be accepted by them as a situation of social exclusion, but the available data confirm the extensive difficulties of integration in the labour market, as well as in their daily life, while 39.4% of all young people (42.9% of NEETs and 38 % of their peers) feel isolated and are not close to any political ideology (see Papadakis et al. 2017a: 31-33; KEPET and KEADIK 2016a: 43), a clear indication of the gradual and alarming collapse of public trust among Youth.

A key actor that aims to reduce social vulnerability and enhance the inclusion of those at risk of social exclusion, is the welfare state. However, both NEETs and the rest of the young people in this age group do not trust the welfare state (91.4% of young people). This is particularly worrying and highlights the inefficiency of welfare state services, as well as the negative impact of austerity policies, which have further reduced the ability of the welfare state to tackle social problems effectively. As Chiang points out, ‘Social welfare is now redefined as a privilege rather than a basic right for citizens’ (2018: 119).

One of the solutions to this problem is the establishment of a new active welfare state. The active welfare state should implement a fiscally prudent social policy, which includes both precautionary functions and a degree of selective solidarity in correcting imbalances, targeted in specific social groups which data show that need assistance. Such a case is the group of NEETs. The preventive function of the state must focus on the objective of employment integration. This can be achieved by focusing on the knowledge-based society and investing in (competence-based) education, training, innovation and new technologies. The aim of the labour market integration, as well as innovation should be taken into account in the educational process from infancy to the phases of vocational training and university education in order to provide necessary skills based on needs assessment, such as those that our qualitative research has revealed. In this context, cooperation between employment services and employers, as well as social economy actors, is also necessary to promote opportunities and incentives, initially for the inclusion of the most vulnerable and for those categorized as long-term unemployed and the youth (Duell et al. 2016). It is worth-mentioning at this point, that recent surveys in Mainland China document that another key factor related to the tackling of the phenomenon of NEET and broadly the social exclusion of young people could potentially be the development of advanced technologies that, when combined to the reduction of digital inequalities, contribute on the expansion of the labour market, in the digital era, i.e. in the Chinese model, the central government has played a proactive role in developing advanced technologies

through the establishment of multiple forms of institutes (see Chiang 2014 and 2020: 41-57; Chiang and Papadakis 2022).

At the same time, a holistic inclusion strategy must include measures for maintaining an adequate level of funding, with a focus on investing in human capital of young people, by providing incentives but also by enhancing the knowledge and skills, linked to the labour market and the new technological requirements. Thus, no young person in this case should be allowed to ‘cross the desert’ alone and no one should be left behind. Such a welfare state will be able to deal more effectively with the problems of the economic crisis that are particularly visible even today for young people (Green 2017), as austerity policies still define their lives, making social vulnerability and poverty, transferable conditions from one generation to another. Tackling this problem should be one of the priorities of a comprehensive welfare state strategy and subsequently of an actually re-distributive social policy, which aims at addressing effectively the social integration problems of the youth as well as at strengthening social cohesion, in the light of the new digitalization era, of the 4th Industrial Revolution.

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