Youths not in Education, Employment and Training: An Overview of Characteristics, Challenges and Future Prospects

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Abstract: This paper investigates the characteristics and the challenges of youths not in education, employment, or training (NEETs), particularly those aged between 15 and 29 years. This study also discusses strategies that are needed to give them a better direction in life. The literature review gives an overview of the studies conducted by several world organisations, namely, the European Union, the OECD, and UNESCO. It then goes on to discuss the various categories of NEETs, the causes for becoming a NEET, and intervention programmes. A qualitative kind of study was conducted through telephone interviews with eighteen participants. The majority of the participants were NEET for less than six months and almost all of them were planning to go back to work or study. Covid-19, together with personal or medical reasons, were the main hindrances for the participants to find a job. Career guidance was one of the main factors that was suggested by the participants as a helping tool to find a job because they did not know in which sector they would like to work or study. Further recommendations emanating from this study were those of helping these youths to enhance their self-confidence and supporting them in literacy and numeracy skills throughout their studies.

Keywords: youths not in employment, education, or training; categories of NEETs; challenges of NEETs; intervention programmes

Introduction

Young people who are not engaged in education, employment, or training are recognised as NEETs and are considered to be a vulnerable group (Eurofound 2016; Stea, de Ridder and Haugland 2019). The term ‘NEET’ emerged in the 1990s in the United Kingdom to categorise youths who were not accumulating human capital through work or learning (Istance et al. 1994). International organisations, such as the European Union (EU), the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) continued to develop and modify this term and have confirmed that youths aged between 15 and 29 years who are neither registered in formal education or a training programme nor in paid employment are classified as NEETs (Eurofound 2016; OECD 2016; UNESCO 2019). Over the years, member states within these organisations developed various policies and initiatives in order to reduce youth unemployment and prevent the social exclusion of young people.

Various studies within the EU project “Adding Value: Nurturing Learning Journeys in IVET at MCAST” have explored the challenges and barriers that vulnerable students may encounter while pursuing their studies. This one was carried out with eighteen youth NEETs to explore their characteristics, challenges, and opinions about their living situation, its causes, and the future prospects of these youths.
The research question for this study is:

*What are the main characteristics of youths who are not in education, employment, and training, and what strategies are needed to give them a better direction in life?*

This is then broken down into three further questions:

- What leads youths to become NEETs?
- What are the main challenges that NEETs face?
- What national strategies are needed to prevent young people from becoming NEETs?

**Background to the Study**

The transition into adulthood used to be considered “a linear sequence running from school to work” (Eurofound 2014: 5), where youths used to integrate easily into society and the labour market. However, during the last years, the IT revolution and globalisation have changed the context of the labour market. Furthermore, changing lifestyles, such as a desire to travel before settling down into a career, have led to different behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions, which resulted in a further complex transition into adulthood (Eurofound 2014; Rodriguez-Modroño 2019).

The age group of 15 to 29 years is expected to experience periods of unemployment, given that youths may be unsure about their future occupation and may also travel more often than adults (Higgins 2016). However, if these periods of unemployment become frequent, one may risk disengagement from the labour market and eventually feel socially excluded (Eurofound 2014; OECD 2019). Moreover, the loss of work experience in youth may scar labour force participation and its earnings (Eurostat 2014). Consequently, transitioning from school to work is becoming more complex owing to crucial structural and institutional factors, such as the country of origin, gender, social class, the welfare system, and educational and labour policies (Rodriguez-Modroño, 2019).

This matter has concerned public policy in various countries for many years and is constantly debated. It has also been identified as a “problem” (Stoten 2014) which can be a quite complex one. Nevertheless, the approach to this “problem” should not simply be a political one—that of reducing the figures of jobless youths—but a holistic one which meets the needs of young NEETs in a long-term and purposeful manner (Stoten 2014).

**A Global Overview**

A report by the OECD (2019) declares that the average NEET rate for young people between 15 and 29 years old is 13% across OECD countries. Additionally, the highest rates of NEETs seem to be in the group aged between 25 and 29. Those in teenage years may be still attending post-secondary or tertiary education. The female rate of NEETs in OECD countries exceeds the male one and the highest rates are in Mexico and Turkey. The report adds that half of the NEETs in OECD countries live with their parents, as opposed to the two-thirds of non-NEETs who live with their parents, especially those who are still studying. Twenty-six percent of NEETs also live with a partner and a child, which could indicate one’s cause for being NEET.

In the European Union, more youths between 15 and 19 years of age seem to be continuing their studies. In fact, in 2018, 89.7% were participating in education and training while 12.2% were transitioning from education to work. In the 20-24 age group, 18.5% were doing the same transition, compared to 14.2% within the 25-29 age group. Eurostat (2019) reports
that the trends have been changing during the last years. Instead of starting work after completing the highest level of education or training, young people are switching jobs more often, leading to a longer time to establish oneself within the labour market. For instance, it is highly common for tertiary students to work part-time or find a seasonal job while studying, in order to increase their income. Others may be continuing education and training while working, such as attending evening classes or doing a distance-learning course. This indicates a change from the usual linear transition from education to work.

With regard to the NEET sector, in 2018, there were only 5.8% in the 15-19-year-old bracket. On the other hand, there were 16.5% of people who were NEETs between 20 and 34 years of age, that is, one in every six people, which amounts to 15 million people in the EU. Eurostat states that this has its origins in the 2008 recession, when NEETs amounted to 16.5% too and increased to 18.5% in the following year. The peak was reached in 2013 with 20.1%. However, the rate started decreasing gradually till it reached 16.5% in 2018, as already stated.

Policymakers are concerned about these rates because it means that a huge cohort of the young generation may remain outside the labour market and may experience poverty and social exclusion. They may also “represent considerable loss in terms of unused productive capacity and a considerable cost in terms of welfare payments” (Eurostat 2019: 2).

The National Situation

In Malta, the number of NEETs was slightly over 10% in 2017 and the amount went down to 9.1% in 2019. Therefore, Malta was also within the group of countries who have the lowest rates of NEETs. As in OECD countries, young women are more likely to be NEET than young men. In 2018, 20.9% of women were NEETs, which is more than one-fifth of all women in the country, compared to a rate of 12.2% among men. This means that there is a difference of 8.7% between the two groups. Eurostat (2019) explains that this may be due to the social pressure put on women to fit within the family and on men to be within the workplace. Another reason may be that women may be advised and directed towards a narrow range of occupations. At times, employers may prefer to engage young men rather than women because of childbirth issues. As a result, women may end up getting low-paid jobs or unstable ones.

With regard to the educational attainment level, the percentage of NEETs with a low level of education (Level 0-2) seemed to be much higher than that of NEETs with a higher level. In 2018, in the EU, there were 37.2% who were NEETs (20-34 years) with a low academic level while 14.7% were of intermediate level (Level 3-4). Nine point five (9.5) percent were of a high level of education. At 3.5%, Malta seemed to have the lowest rate of highly educated NEETs in the EU. The number of Maltese NEETs with the lowest level of education “is six times higher than the one for those with a high level of education” (Eurostat 2019: 6).

Unesco (2017) highlights that the main factor that puts a youth at risk of being NEET is having low educational attainment, which includes poor literacy and numeracy skills. This is likely to result in low wage levels. In a 2017 study, Unesco found that those countries which had over 50% of their NEETs with an MQF level 1 or no schooling came from low-income countries, such as Uganda, Benin, Gambia, Yemen, Tanzania, Niger, Cote d’Ivoire, and Mali. This study also indicates that, in two thirds of all countries, there were over 75% of NEETs who completed MQF level 1, 2, 3 or 4, and it seemed that they were middle to high-income countries. The study also indicates that one fifth of all countries have a proportion (over 10%) of NEETs who completed tertiary education (Malta did not participate in this study).
Between July and September 2015, a Census study on Maltese youth NEETs, aged between 16 and 24, was carried out by JobsPlus, in which 279 interviews were held. The main findings were the following:

- 90% of Maltese NEETs were still living with their parents;
- 11.1% of the participants were parents;
- The majority of the participants had a School Leaving Certificate, Ordinary Level, or diploma level (ISCED level 0 – 3) (This is similar to the Eurostat and the Eurofound reports);
- A small number of respondents had a tertiary level of education;
- 43% said that they did some form of apprenticeship or training experience;
- 95% stated that education and training are highly important for employment;
- 76% did some kind of odd job at one point or another;
- 41% had experience in a full-time job;
- 70% agreed that having a full-time job was important;
- More than 50% said that they did not have any plans for the future;
- 43.3% claimed that they had no plans for their future;
- The majority of the participants preferred to work in traditional sectors;
- Only 6% considered to start their own business;
- 39.5% stated that they suffered psychologically due to being without a job;
- 70% of respondents had never heard of the Youth Guarantee Programme.

According to the above findings, young Maltese NEETs are heavily influenced by their families, which may result in not having enough exposure to the labour market or being poorly guided. With regard to parent NEETs, it was very likely that they were unable to work because they needed to take care of their children.

As for education, almost all the participants were aware that education and employment are connected, however, 54% of the respondents said that they were not rightly equipped to achieve their plan. The majority of these NEETs never seemed to plan to actually settle down or plan a long-term career. The fact that 76% work in odd jobs could indicate that they had no better options (MEDE 2015).

The majority of these NEETs in the Maltese census (2015) preferred to work in traditional sectors. This indicated that they were either reluctant or discouraged to work in emerging sectors, or else they did not have any exposure to them. Another factor mentioned in the findings was that of psychological suffering because of unemployment. This factor may increasingly hinder young persons from seeking and engaging in employment because of feelings of lack of self-confidence or helplessness (MEDE 2015).

The 2015 Maltese census also reports that 70% of the participants never heard about the Youth Guarantee Programme, perhaps because they have never needed it or because the programme has not been advertised widely enough. This programme is funded by the European Social Fund and it is implemented in various EU countries in order to support NEETs and guide them to seek life-long careers. The census further recommends that more work needs to be done on this programme in order to increase its awareness.

Another characteristic that was noted within the Maltese Census (2015) was that the majority of participants lacked intrinsic motivation to better their life and find a job; they seemed to be helpless in some ways. They expected the support of others or waited for some kind of luck in order to find a job. Participants also mentioned ‘fear, lack of trust and confidence, lack of work experience, lack of qualifications and a lacking support structure related to childcare’ (Maltese Census 2015: 90) as factors which hindered them from seeking jobs.
Ultimately, these respondents stated that they ‘prefer job opportunities that allow them to express themselves; jobs that provide them with a learning experience and jobs that give them satisfaction and financial rewards’ (Maltese Census 2015: 90).

The Theoretical Frameworks

The philosophical assumption in this study is social constructivism, where “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2013: 8). Participants develop the meaning of their personal experiences, which may be varied and complex and may be formed through their interaction with others. John Dewey (1933), Jean Piaget (1972), Lev Vygotsky (1978), and Jerome Bruner (1990) are considered to be the four pillars of social constructivism.

Dewey (1933) highlights that students ideally engage in real-world situations and practical workshops in order to learn, while demonstrating knowledge through creativity and collaboration. He insists that learning should be grounded in real experience. Moreover, he claims that communication is key in environments where youths are involved. Learning should be strongly bonded with the ideals and practices of society in order for youths to feel motivated. Similarly, Piaget (1972) states that knowledge should be constructed by creating and testing one’s own theory of the world. In this way, human beings will not be forced to learn but knowledge will be created for themselves.

Vygotsky (1978) also highlights the importance of social aspects in one’s learning. He says that children first learn on a social level, through interaction with others and, then, they learn from within, through the help of an adult, that is what is called the zone of proximal development. This also leads to learning through ‘scaffolds’, where concepts are built and developed. The relationship between individuals remains the highlight in one’s own learning. Parallel to what Dewey (1933) and Piaget (1972) say, Vygotsky emphasises that human beings learn by doing rather than through observation.

Bruner (1990) was influenced by Vygotsky (1978). He says that social interaction is the root of good learning. According to him, learners have different processes for problem-solving. He believes that one learns effectively through dialogue and reflection. In this way, the human being constructs new concepts based on one’s current knowledge. Ultimately, Bruner states that instruction should be structured in order to be easily grasped and must be based on experiences.

The above theorists clearly reflect social constructivism, where the individuals learn through social interaction and communication, two elements which are fundamental in the lives of youths. The theories also form part of one’s own cognitive development. Earlier on, reference was made to worldwide international organisations whose studies outlined solutions that could help NEETs, such as levels of education, work experiences, apprenticeships, training experiences, coaching, mentoring, and psychological support, amongst others. Therefore, social constructivism, together with the above social theories, may be intertwined within these factors.

Various Categories of NEETs

Eurofound (2016: 25) argues that the term NEETs seems to sometimes be misused to stigmatise young people as being “disadvantaged and problematic” or “hard-to-reach”. Therefore, Eurofound (2016) highlights that NEETs are people with potential who have their own characteristics and needs, not problems. It reiterates that the policy actions of every member state must be tailored to the characteristics of each group in order for these youths to be re-integrated into the labour market or the education system. This
foundation states that, as an umbrella term, ‘NEET’ includes youths who may have become disadvantaged as a result of various factors, such as:

- having low levels of educational attainment
- coming from an immigration background
- having health issues
- coming from a difficult family background

Others may have become NEETs because they will be aiming at alternative careers which totally differ from traditional ones.

Serracant (2013) and Robson (2008) argue that, occasionally, the term NEET may imply that young people are reluctant to work or study and both authors suggest that the term should be avoided as much as possible. Similarly, Elder (2015) says that, regrettably, the term may be equalled to a status of joblessness, discouragement, and marginalisation. For this reason, different categories were formed in order to differentiate between one group and another and, eventually, preventive measures and intervention programmes will be applied accordingly.

The Malta Youths NEET Census Report (2015) refer to three different categories of NEETs: Core, Floating, and Transitional NEETs.

Core NEETs involve youths coming from families where unemployment is the norm and education is not prioritised at all. This category also includes youths with social and behavioural difficulties, especially if they are coming from families with a low socio-economic status or with a history of crime. If these youths are not rightly guided and supported from a young age, they tend to leave school early and remain unemployed. Yates and Payne (2006: 337) refer to these type of NEETs as “complicated”.

Floating NEETs are those youths who wish and attempt to be in education, training, or employment but rarely succeed because of a lack of motivation and direction. Therefore, they require a great deal of guidance and support so as to be engaged effectively in education or employment.

Transitional NEETs involve young people who are progressing to further education or employment, thus, they may be regarded as NEETs for short periods of time, usually for about three to six months. These youths are likely to have support from their relatives and friends, which leads them to return to education, training, and employment. Similarly, Yates and Payne (2006: 334) refer to this group of NEETs as “transitional”. These authors add another sub-category, that of “young parents” (Yates and Payne 2006: 334), that is, when young parents decide to become NEETs so as to look after and take care of their young children.

Similarly, the National Employment Policy (Malta Ministry for Education and Employment 2014: 85) identifies “five target groups classified as NEETs” from the Labour Force survey:
Figure 1: The five NEETs target groups targeted by the National Employment Policy

Williamson (2010) divides NEETs into the following three groups:

- **Target group 1**: single unmarried parents
- **Target group 2**: disabled youths
- **Target group 3**: registered unemployed youths for more than 6 months
- **Target group 4**: registered unemployed youths for less than 6 months
- **Target group 5**: unregistered unemployed youths

Figure 2: The three groups that Williamson (2010) divides NEETs into

According to him, the first category refers to those youths who are willing and ready to re-engage themselves in education or employment, as long as they are given the right support and reassurance. The youths in the second category would need patience and understanding, together with support, in order to deal with particular matters that would be going on in their lives at those moments in time. The youths in the third group are the most at risk. They may be disengaged and disaffected. They may have also discovered alternative ways of gaining money, especially through the informal and illegal economy. These risky behaviours may also lead to the consumption of alcohol and drugs.

For these reasons, Williamson (2010) suggests that the three groups may be divided into two categories: policy possibilities and policy problematics. It seems possible that the
groups characterised as “essentially confused” and “temporarily side-tracked” return back to education or the labour market. They may know what they want to do, what they want to study or what type of work they wish to have. However, it may be quite problematic to encourage and persuade the “deeply alienated” to engage in education or work, especially if they become young offenders through risky behaviours. Williamson (2010) adds that this category may also include youths from the middle class who may wish to become artists, musicians or painters, for the reason that they may not want to participate in government training schemes.

Eurofound (2016) developed seven categories of NEETs which evolved from the EU Labour Force Survey (2013):

![Figure 3: The seven categories of NEETs developed by Eurofound](image)

The survey indicates that some of the ‘re-entrants’ have already been previously enrolled in education or training. As a matter of fact, these youths were waiting to start or resume employment, education, or training.

The youths who were regarded as ‘short-term unemployed’ had been unemployed for less than a year. They were seeking work and were available to start work within two weeks. Eurofound (2016: 29) states that “a short period of unemployment during the transition from school to work can be considered normal, and the level of vulnerability among people in this category can be expected to be moderate”.

On the other hand, youths who had been unemployed for more than a year were categorised as ‘long-term unemployed’. These youths were considered to be at a high
risk of disengagement and social exclusion. Eurofound (2016: 29) states that, regretfully, "long-term disengagement damages young people's employability, their human capital and their future employment outcomes". There is also the risk that the situation may last for the rest of their lives. This is also referred to as 'long-term scarring' (Andersson, Gullberg Brännstrom and Mörtvik 2018: 191).

With regard to the ‘unavailable’ category, this report sub-divided this group into two: those unavailable due to illness or disability and those unavailable due to family responsibilities. The former group needs more social support because their condition does not allow them to do a paid job. Meanwhile, other youths are unable to get employed or study because they may be caring for children, disabled adults, or else they may have other family responsibilities. The report adds that one other reason that these youths are unavailable may be because they may not afford child care, which would give them the freedom to look for a job.

The category of ‘discouraged workers’ is the most at risk. The survey indicates that these youths "stopped looking for work because they believe that there are no job opportunities for them" (Eurofound 2016). These youths are at a high risk of social exclusion due to poor employment outcomes. Eventually, this may result in lifelong disengagement.

Ultimately, the Eurofound survey (2016) states that the category of other inactive NEETs is made up of youths who did not provide a reason for their status. The report maintains that this group consists of a mix of NEETs, from the most vulnerable to the hard-to-reach, to those who are privileged or intend to follow an alternative path, such as careers in music or art.

**Causes for becoming NEETs**

Various authors indicate that the main causes for youths becoming NEETs may vary from their family background to their school and childhood experiences. The learning experiences achieved in one’s childhood reflect one's motivation to succeed and accomplish one's life goals. Alfieri et al. (2015) discuss family characteristics among 9,000 Italian youths. They found that the parents' level of educational support has an impact on one's learning. Some parents may be demanding and intrusive while others with a low level of education may guide their children towards poor career choices. Other causes may be other family issues that affect the child academically and socially, such as sickness, poverty or crime, together with educational failures (Backman et al. 2014). Similarly, Carcillo et al. (2015) state that youths coming from disadvantaged families and with a low educational background have a higher tendency to remain NEET. They tend to leave education early and spend a longer time unemployed, especially if the father is continuously unemployed. Sadly, “parental unemployment can become a legacy for their children” (Rodriguez-Modroño 2019: 435).

A British study by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2013) interviewed over 800 young NEETs aged between 18 and 24. Amongst various barriers to learning, they mentioned the family as one of the major causes of staying NEET. Particularly, one in every five participants mentioned family members or peers as being significant obstacles in their learning engagement. Parenthood was considered another hindrance to further one's learning and training or to engage in a job. This was more common in women rather than in men. Furthermore, 6% of these interviewees referred to ‘mental health problems’, ‘long-term physical health conditions’, and ‘sensory impairments’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013: 15) as main reasons for being NEETs. Another matter that was mentioned by this study, which was carried out in the UK, was challenging problems of specific personal circumstances, such as being homeless, abusing drugs, or trouble with the law. These conditions often led to a lack of confidence, which contributes to becoming NEET.
Schooling and educators also cause a huge impact on one's educational achievements and developments. In a study by Agrusti and Corradi (2015), it was found that, when teachers do not give merit to low achievers, students are stigmatised, resulting in low self-esteem and disengagement. Similarly, the previously mentioned study by the London Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2013: 16) states that “previous negative learning experiences, either at school or in further education, can act as a powerful deterrent to taking up learning in the future”. These negative experiences also led to a lack of confidence and direction. These resulted in feeling de-motivated to pursue learning and finding a job. Another factor mentioned in this study was that of a lack of skills or qualifications. Lack of literacy and numeracy skills and underachievement at school led to particular youths in this study becoming NEETs.

For the above reasons, some of these youths tried to engage in further educational training to make up for their lost qualifications; however, one in every six youths “identified factors such as the style of learning, relationships with the teachers, the learning environment, and a lack of enjoyment or interest in the content of the course, as being particularly unhelpful” (London Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013: 14). Some of them also had problems with the application process or with the location of the course or college, because it was far from their home. Other hindrances mentioned in this study were behavioural problems, which then led to absenteeism or being asked to leave the course. Some youths also stated that the financial costs of further training were a burden to them because they could not afford to live and pay for their courses simultaneously. Furthermore, at times, engaging in further training would have meant losing their benefits entitlements. Therefore, they preferred not to continue with their studies.

Similarly, another English briefing paper by the House of Commons (2018) reported that youths tend to become NEETs for the same abovementioned reasons. It was reported that NEET youths:

- were continuously excluded or suspended from school
- failed their GCSE examinations
- lacked motivation, had poor mental and physical health, or had special educational needs
- had difficult family circumstances
- lacked training, apprenticeship opportunities, and welfare support
- had to tend to their own children

Ultimately, one final barrier to learning mentioned in these studies was that of a lack of support and guidance. As already mentioned, youths might have lacked motivation, direction, and confidence, both from their own families and from their educators (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, UK 2013; House of Commons, UK 2018).

Gadsby (2019: 36) confirms that the most common reasons why young people become NEETs are because of “poor attendance, challenging behaviour in school and exclusion from mainstream education”. However, Gadsby (2019) states that academic achievement is only half of the matter, even though it is a vital one. Guidance and support are equally as important. Therefore, prevention and intervention programmes are significant in the NEETs sector. Various countries implement these programmes in order to enhance skills and self-confidence in these youths to help them increase their employability (Gadsby 2019; House of Commons, UK 2018).

Reducing youth unemployment has been continuously a top priority on every country’s policy agenda. As stated earlier, health, mental well-being, and social inclusion are negatively impacted by having a NEET status during young adulthood. For this reason,
intervention programmes were created to target these youths’ needs and help them re-engage in work, education, or training.

**Intervention Programmes**

It is necessary for policy-makers to primarily identify the causes for youth vulnerability, that is, the reasons why particular youths are out of school, training, or employment. In this way, intervention policies will be targeted towards their proper needs (UNESCO 2019). Additionally, one also needs to determine why a youth is NEET, especially where there are ‘social, economic, cultural and individual’ factors involved, such as family, migration, disability, gender, or a complex combination of various factors (UNESCO 2019: 13).

Mawn et al. (2017: 2) state that intervention programmes include those which are:

- educational (academic, basic, social skills, guidance, and support)
- vocational (work placements, career planning, volunteering)
- counselling or mentoring
- service-based

Many of these programmes combine education, such as academic skills or basic skills, with work placements. For this reason, many countries try to involve and liaise with various employers and industries. Meanwhile, counselling, guidance, and support are given throughout the programmes as psychological support for career advice and also for life coaching.

One of the main intervention programmes across European countries is that of the European Youth Guarantee, which was set up in 2013. After the economic crisis of 2008, there was a sharp increase in youth unemployment, which lasted till 2012 (Eurofound 2016). For this reason, the policy of the Youth Guarantee came in place to help young people re-enter employment, education, or training: “the aim of this policy is to ensure that all young people under the age of 25 receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education” (European Council 2013: 1). Another primary aim of this programme was that of assisting long-term NEETs because they may be at risk of suffering lifelong consequences due to long spells of disengagement from employment or education (Eurofound 2016).

The Youth Guarantee Programme is made up of these three elements:

- Early activation: Young people are enrolled in employment or education with a four-month limit in order to make sure that they are not stranded in long-term disengagement.
- Short and long-term interventions: Short and long-term NEETs will both benefit from “partnerships among key stakeholders: educational providers, labour market actors, social partners, and youth organisations, to re-align education, training (including VET) and Public Employment Services (PES) provisions to the long-term needs of young people” (Eurofound 2016: 44).
- Personalised and integrated support: The programme aims to provide personalised and integrated support by offering tailored opportunities for every individual’s needs, through the provision of jobs, apprenticeships, traineeships, or further education.

The Council of the European Union recommends that this policy framework is implemented and tailored according to the country’s national, regional, and local circumstances (European
Council, 2013). In this way, it will not be a ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy but every Member State can take into account its institutional set-ups, labour market, and structural frameworks, including those which are political, legal, and financial (Eurofound 2016). A more holistic approach was applied by some member states where links were created with the labour market, VET measures, education, youth and social policies. Some states decided to focus only on employment policies. Other member states focused solely on persons who were job-ready. However, over time, disadvantaged youths started to be included in the Youth Guarantee as well.

These are some of the policies which are being implemented in the Youth Guarantee Scheme:

- Information, guidance, and counselling - To provide personalised support and guide the young person to their preferred job or training programme.
- Outreach programmes – Online tools are being provided as a means of information and support for various youths, especially those who are hard-to-reach.
- Assisting school-to-work transitions – These transitions help prevent early drop-outs and to reintegrate early school-leavers while promoting employability.
- Training and work experiences – Work placements, apprenticeships, and training opportunities are being provided, while employers gain wage subsidies and financial incentives.
- VET and apprenticeships – Through apprenticeships, youths gain dual learning pathways.
- Youth entrepreneurship – New programmes were initiated in order to enhance youth entrepreneurship.

With regard to Malta, as part of the recommendations in the Malta NEETs Census (2015), a number of preventive measures were presented. Primarily, it was emphasised that parents need to recognise the importance of education and employment. It is a known fact that parents are role models for their children and that the child’s approach to education and employment is reflected on that of the parents. The document suggests that parents must be educated “to develop the right mind-set required to support their children in becoming ‘active’ in the labour market and education system” (Malta NEETs Census 2015: 98).

Similar to the aim of the UK House of Commons (2018) study mentioned in the previous section, another recommendation is that of identifying early school-leavers and supporting them during their adolescent years in order to be prevented from leaving school with low or no qualifications or without employability skills. For this reason, engagement programmes were suggested in this census. These programmes would target those students who may be inclined to become core NEETs. The document suggests new subjects that concentrate on the workplace in order for students to be equipped with the right skills.

Presently, in Malta, through the reform ‘My Journey’ (Framework for the Education Strategy 2014-2024, MEDE), various vocational subjects were introduced in the secondary schools. The aim of this reform was to decrease the number of low achievers, reduce the number of school leavers, and raise the levels of student retention and attainment in vocational education and training. Furthermore, in secondary state schools, 15-year-old students experience a week of job shadowing in a workplace. This links with another recommendation that the Maltese Census (2015) had presented, that of creating more vocational-oriented courses that include hands-on experiences. As already stated, these type of subjects were introduced only recently in secondary state schools, however, students may further their studies in vocational subjects at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) and at the Institute of Tourism Studies, as post-secondary education. The census
provided this type of recommendation due to the fact many NEETs in the census said that they used to lack motivation and interest at school and they also indicated a high degree of low self-confidence.

Another recommendation in the Maltese Census (2015) was that of engaging youths in social activities which have to do with sports, culture, and adventure. These type of activities instil particular personal traits, such as enhancing self-discipline, motivation, and competitiveness, which can be beneficial in life.

Ultimately, guidance and support are always a priority in the field of NEETs. The census recommended that career counsellors and youth workers be included both in the prevention programmes and the intervention ones. The census states that youth workers and counsellors “can work with youths and ensure they develop their ‘Self’ and are given guidance in relation to the repercussions of certain behaviours/decisions taken” (Maltese Census 2015: 100).

Complementary to the above, the census also recommended that student support services must be strengthened through a team of various professionals, including social workers, psychologists, youth workers and career advisors, and other agencies, such as Aġenzija Żgħażagħ, which should be involved as well.

Apprenticeships and childcare services were also suggested for NEETs in order to infuse the learning experience within the work experience and to assist those NEETs who were parents with young children.

Since 2015, one can say that all these recommendations were put into place through the introduction of various MEDE policies, Alternative Learning Programmes, the Prince's Trust, SEC revision classes, MCAST preventive classes, and MCAST work-based learning, amongst other programmes (Youth Guarantee, Implementation Plan, MEDE 2014). The Youth Guarantee Programme was continuously promoted and, according to the Malta National Statistics Office, the unemployment rate eventually continued to decrease. (Here the researchers must note that this literature review covers up till February 2020, that is, pre-Covid-19. From March 2020 onwards, it was noted that the rate of unemployment started increasing due to the Covid-19 situation).

**Methodology**

This study is based upon the constructivist worldview, where individuals indicate their own views and the world in which they live in. The researcher seeks to interpret the individual's situation through multiple lenses in order to make sense and give meaning to these situations (Cohen et al. 2018). For this reason, the study was a qualitative study and telephone interviews were conducted through purposive sampling.

The researchers decided to go for NEETs youth participants who had already participated in a previous study about dropouts held at MCAST. During this study, thirty-eight participants had declared that they were NEETs; therefore, the researchers contacted these particular participants again by phone and asked them further questions about their present situation. Out of the thirty-eight participants, twenty-one people responded. Additionally, three individuals in this group had found work and were not interested in talking about their previous unemployed status; therefore, the findings are based on the other eighteen participants.
Why Telephone Interviews Were Used

Originally, the researchers made a request to Jobsplus in order to be able to reach their clients and ask them to participate in this study. Due to GDPR regulations, however, it was not possible for the researchers to directly contact JobsPlus’s clients. Instead, JobsPlus had to ask its clients to contact the researchers to take part in the study if they wished to do so. Unfortunately, this resulted in no one contacting the researchers to participate.

Meanwhile, the researchers also tried to search for individuals who were NEETs and not registered with Jobsplus through convenience sampling, where they contacted people who were acquaintances and who may have been in contact with these youths. However, regrettably, this method did not succeed. Furthermore, while searching for participants, Covid-19 cases in Malta were on the increase and a partial lockdown was announced, therefore, this made it more difficult to try and meet people for face-to-face interviews. It was then therefore decided to contact the participants of a previous MCAST study (after getting ethical approval to do so) by phone. This proved convenient for the researchers because these people were easier to reach and were known to be willing participants in research who would open up about their experience.

The Findings

As already stated, there were originally 38 participants on the list. However, 16 of them did not respond to the phone calls. Twenty-one answered the phone calls, out of which three respondents were working, and they were therefore not included in the analysis. Responses from 18 participants were hence included in the analysis; 11 were males and 7 were females.

1. **How long have you been unemployed?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 year 4 months</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>18</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: The participants’ duration of unemployment*

2. **Are you registered with Jobsplus?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registered</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not registered</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Registration with Jobsplus numbers*
3. **Are you following the Youth Guarantee Programme?**

| Following YG | 3 |
| Not following YG | 15 |

*Table 3: Youth Guarantee Programme numbers*

4. **Do you plan to go to work or study?**

| Planning to work | 11 |
| Planning to study | 3 |
| Plan to study or work | 3 |
| Not planning to work or study | 1 |

*Table 4: Figures showing work or study plans*

The participant who is not planning to work or study is currently helping in a family business.

5. **Did you work in the past?**

| Five worked full-time | In a supermarket, as a storekeeper, factory stacker, shutterer, in a hotel. |
| Seven worked part-time | Car work, bartender, waitress, retail, gardener, shop worker, hairdressing. |
| Six never worked | |

*Table 5: What kind of work the participants did, and whether full or part-time*

6. **Why did you leave the job?**

| Problems with the manager |
| Health issues |
| Wanted to work full-time |
| Got fired |
| Wanted to change career |
| Not sustainable |
| Not enough work |
| Not worth it |
| Due to Covid-19 (4 participants) |

*Table 6: Reasons why participants left their job*
7. What is hindering you from finding a job?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four participants mentioned Covid-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five participants mentioned personal reasons/medical reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One participant referred to the fear of not being given proper training for the job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another participant said that she is not receiving any responses from employers whenever she applies for a job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another participant with a condition said that employers are not empathising with his needs and adapting work for him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The rest of the participants said that they do not know what is hindering them from finding a job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7: Reasons for not finding a job yet*

8. What would help you to find a job?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Six participants referred to career guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One said better qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another participant said “I do not feel that I need help”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another participant said “There need to be more jobs at my level”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another participant said “nothing special” would help her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three participants said that it would be better if Covid-19 ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two participants said that they were “not sure” what would help them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three participants said that they did not know what would help them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other comments included: more self-confidence, training with individual attention, better literacy and numeracy skills, having support during studying, a decrease in Covid-19 cases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 8: Factors that would make finding a job easier*

9. Which sector would you like to work in?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Office work/clerical (2 participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair and beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police or army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hospitality
Child care
“I want to open my own shop”
“not sure”/“don’t know” (6 participants)

Table 9: Sectors the participants would like to work in

10. Are you happy?

All the respondents said that they were happy in their status, however, two of them added that they were also concerned.

11. How are you spending the day and do you have plans for the future?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Looking for work (3 participants)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Looking for work and study opportunities (3 participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I spend my time with my friends and family and help around the house. Maybe I will search for work in the future if the need arises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am doing nothing special, I will look for work after Covid-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am searching for a new course (3 participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am registering with Jobsplus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am helping in my family’s business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searching for opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying for what I want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am helping my parents and they help me financially in return</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am looking for work. Maybe I will study again in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I spend most of the time at home but I search for work sometimes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: The participants’ daily activities and plans

Discussion

The majority of the participants were NEETs for less than six months. Only three participants were NEETs for more than a year. Two of them had medical conditions, therefore, this was one of the reasons why they were unemployed for over a year. There were various reasons why the participants left their job, however, Covid-19 seemed to be one of the main issues, both for losing one’s job and also to find another job. The majority of them were registered with Jobsplus, with six participants not being registered. Nevertheless, only three participants were following the Youth Guarantee programme.

All the respondents bar the three who had been NEETs for more than a year may be regarded as transitional NEETs (MEDE 2015; Yates and Payne 2006) because they were NEETs for less than six months and they may have been progressing to other jobs or other courses of study. As seen in the literature review, MEDE (2014) had also developed five target groups of youth NEETs and these participants pertain to target group 4, which
entails those youths who are unemployed for less than six months. However, the MEDE report included a target group 2, which is specifically for disabled youths. Therefore, those two participants who had medical conditions and were unemployed for over a year can be regarded as part of this target group. According to Eurofound (2016), the former participants may be classified as short-term unemployed while the other two participants, owing to their medical issues, are regarded as unavailable.

Positively, almost all the participants were planning to go back to work or study, therefore, this factor indicated particular motivation to do something meaningful in their life. In fact, eleven participants were planning to go to work, three were planning to study, and another three participants were planning to work or study. Only one participant said that she is not planning to work or study; however, she declared that she is helping in the family business. Therefore, it could be that, eventually, she will continue developing her career within that business. Williamson (2010: 18) referred to these youth NEETs as “essentially confused”, because they are youths who are willing to re-engage themselves in education or employment as long as they are given the right support. Eurofound (2016) also refers to them as “re-entrants” because they have been already previously enrolled in education or employment.

When participants were asked about their past work experiences, twelve of them mentioned various workplaces, such as working in a supermarket, working as a storekeeper, factory stacker, and also in the hospitality and retail sectors. Six of the participants stated that they had never worked (MCAST student apprenticeship schemes aside). Furthermore, they mentioned various reasons why they left the job, such as having problems with the management, getting fired, wanting to work full-time rather than part-time, wanting a career change, while a few number of participants left the job due to health issues and Covid-19.

As part of the study, the researchers felt the need to go back to the previous study from which these participants were identified—wherein they had referred to their schooling experiences when they were young—in order to understand their background and the cause which may have led them to the NEET situation. As a matter of fact, all of them had stated that school was regarded as a bad life experience. Three of the participants further added that the reasons for this were mainly bullying, learning difficulties, family issues, and educators. These factors correlate with the literature review, where it can be seen that various authors found that the family background was one of the main causes for youths to become NEETs, especially with regard to the parents’ level of education and family difficulties, such as, poverty, crime, or unemployment (Alfieri et al. 2015; Backman et al. 2014; Carcillo et al. 2015; London Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013; Rodriguez-Modrono 2019). Furthermore, Agrusti and Corradi (2015) had also found that educators played a crucial role in a learner’s experience, because they can affect the learner’s self-esteem and learning engagement. Learning difficulties, such as a lack of literacy and numeracy skills and underachievement at school were also found to contribute to the NEETs status (London Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013).

When they were asked about their learning experience at MCAST, they all confirmed that they had a good overall experience. The reasons why they chose to go and study there were mainly due to their subject choice preference, the fact that MCAST offers a more hands-on learning approach, and also because they could start studying their subjects from a lower level. Six participants stated that they left their studies because they were performing poorly academically and that they found the course too difficult for them. Two other students had to leave due to medical reasons, while other students gave various other reasons such as feeling overwhelmed and lost in a big institution, feeling the need to work due to money issues, failing a dissertation, and choosing the wrong course. Therefore, as
seen from their own schooling experiences and as seen from the literature review, barriers to learning seem to persist for youth NEETs.

Covid-19, together with personal or medical reasons, were the main hindrances for these participants to find a job. As seen from the results, a number of participants lost their job due to the pandemic and, if they were suffering from particular chronic medical issues, they were reluctant to find a job during the peak of the pandemic. Meanwhile, another participant complained that she was trying to apply for jobs, however, she was not receiving any replies from the employers concerned. Furthermore, one particular participant had a condition or disability and he wished to apply for a job; however, he was finding it hard to find employers who could understand his needs and adapt a job for him.

Career guidance seemed to be one of the main factors that was suggested by the participants as a helping tool to find a job. Some of them declared that they do not know what would help them find a job or in which sector they would like to work, therefore, this indicates that career guidance would surely be effective, especially during the schooling years. This matter is in line with the literature review, where various documents and authors confirmed that counselling and career guidance were highly important within prevention and intervention programmes (Eurofound 2016; Gadsby 2019;; House of Commons, UK 2018; Mawn et al. 2017; UNESCO 2019). Increased self-confidence and a decrease in Covid-19 cases were also mentioned as a priority when searching for employment by a few of the participants. Furthermore, better literacy and numeracy skills, together with support while studying, were also mentioned as helping factors in job searching.

All the participants stated that they lead a happy life, although two of them further added that they were also concerned about their future. However, as already stated, almost all the respondents are searching for a job or thinking about starting studying again. This reflects particular positivity from this small and young group of NEETs. It would have been ideal to include other NEETs participants with various backgrounds; however, it proved very difficult due to the pandemic restrictions that were in place at the time of the study. As such, this was one of the main limitations of the research.

Conclusion

This study sought to learn more about the thoughts, lives, and problems of Maltese youths not in education, employment, or training. It used a constructivist approach to build a theory based on established literature and 18 qualitative phone interviews. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling.

From the youths' point of view, the findings point towards difficulties which are in their control to do something about and others which are not. The interviewees frequently mentioned a need for more guidance and counselling, something which is backed up by the literature. There are a number of such services at JobsPlus and the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, for example, so the youths can reach out for help. On the other hand, the youths mentioned Covid-19 as a problem which is affecting their employment prospects. This, as well as personal medical conditions which were identified as a hindrance to employment and study and which they can do little about, can contribute to a sense of increased helplessness.

In view of the above, the respective authorities should check how easily accessible guidance services are, whether there are enough of them, and how to better inform people about them. Meanwhile, in strategies meant to tackle other problems (such as Covid-19), the
authorities need to incorporate NEETs policies so that this sector is not left behind or badly affected by solutions to other problems.

This research points towards Maltese youth NEETs being positive individuals who are motivated to improve their lives by studying or finding employment. This suggests that, with the right strategy and the right incentives, these young people can be steered towards fulfilling their potential.

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