

TACKLING THE INTEGRATION OF 25+ NEETS INTO THE BULGARIAN LABOUR MARKET: POLICY CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Policy Brief, November 2023

Even though the youth unemployment situation in Bulgaria has been improving over the last few years¹, **some young Bulgarians continue to face difficulties** in being active on the labour market. When compared to Bulgarians in their 40s, younger individuals overall experience higher rates of labour market inactivity.² In this regard, particularly vulnerable are the so-called NEETs.

In Bulgaria, the age group between 25 and 29 is more likely to be in the NEET category than youth of lower age groups (15 – 24 years). In 2022, 19.9% of all youth between 25 and 29 were in the NEET category, compared to 8.3% of youth between 15 and 19, and 17% of youth between 20 and 24.³ Compared to the EU-wide NEET rate for this age group (of 15.7%), the

¹ National Employment Agency. (2022). Report on the Action Plan of the National Employment Agency for 2022 [Отчет на плана за действие на Агенция по заетостта за 2022 г.]. <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/otchet-za-deinosttana-az/>

² OECD. (2022, March 15). Reaching out and activating inactive and unemployed persons in Bulgaria, connecting people with jobs. <https://www.oecd.org/els/reaching-out-and-activating-inactive-and-unemployed-persons-in-bulgaria-7b91154a-en.htm>

³ Eurostat, (2022a) Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training#Young_women_are_more_likely_to_neither_be_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training_than_young_men

This publication is part of 'Lost Millennials' funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment. It focuses on the generation of Millennials: young people aged 25-29 neither in employment or education and training (25+ NEETs). The main objective of 'Lost Millennials' is to contribute to the successful integration of 25+ NEETs in the labour market through increasing knowledge on the effects of employment initiatives on 25+ NEETs, building capacity of stakeholders to perform impact studies and improving the quality of labour market interventions. This is achieved through the creation of a transnational research network which shares know-how and good practices, the evaluations of governmental and community-based initiatives targeting 25+ NEETs, as well as the engagement of stakeholders to increase the policy relevance of project results.

KEY POINTS

- **NEETs** (young people not in employment, education and training) in Bulgaria are typically individuals who are: (i) in some **precarious situation** (such as suffering a disability or taking care of relatives with health conditions), (ii) marked by certain socio-cultural **vulnerability** (e.g., being from an ethnic minority with historical experience of discrimination on the labour market), (iii) belonging to a certain **gender** and having family and parental duties, or (iv) living in **remote and economically disadvantaged areas** (e.g., the Severozapaden Region and Yuzhen tsentralen Region of the country). Youths between the ages of 25 and 29 are the most vulnerable to becoming NEETs compared to other age groups.
- Such realities require proper policy strategies which support the integration of NEETs on the labour market. Yet, there is a **lack of a comprehensive national strategy targeting NEETs** in the Bulgarian policy framework. Policy strategies should be based on suitable subcategorizations of NEETs (e.g., by age, gender, ethnicity, health status, etc.) as NEETs are not a homogenous group and subgroups may need specific responses.



- Given that most programmes and initiatives are state-led, there is a need to **prioritize additional resource allocation** for publicly-driven initiatives aimed at NEETs, such as the Career Start Programme. Significant challenges within existing programmes revolve around insufficient wages for their beneficiaries, as well as the lack of information campaigns and promotion about these initiatives.
- Efforts should also focus on **enhancing the general appeal of youth employment in the public sector** through promotional campaigns in order to strengthen its desirability among potential young candidates.
- There is a need to **enhance the comprehensiveness and availability of policy evaluation and monitoring** of programmes and initiatives aimed at addressing NEETs' employment challenges.

rate for Bulgaria is higher – 19.9%.⁴ Such discrepancies are not a novelty even though this rate has been significantly decreasing over the past decade relative to the EU average (with some increases of the rate in Bulgaria during the years of the Covid-19 pandemic). However, the overall NEET rate for this age group in Bulgaria continues to lag behind the rates for the majority of EU member states.⁵ Importantly, across the EU over the last decade, the 25-29 age group has always had higher NEET rates than the younger age groups – a general trend showing that this age group is more likely to be absent and excluded from the labour market.⁶

In Bulgaria, one cannot make conclusive assessments about the situation of 25+ NEETs from the **available public data**.⁷ Thus, specific claims about detailed trends and tendencies among 25+ NEETs may not be fully accurate for analytical purposes.

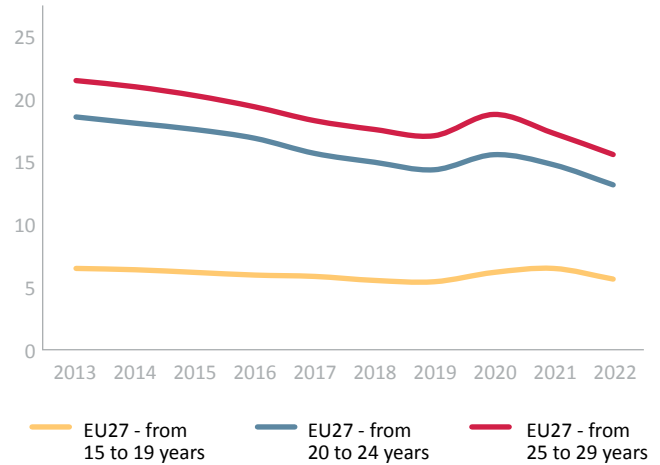
⁴ Eurostat, (2022b) Young people neither in employment nor in education or training by sex, age and degree of organisation (NEET rates). https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_29_custom_7602437/default/table?lang=en

⁵ ibid.

⁶ Eurostat, (2022a) Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training#Young_women_are_more_likely_to_neither_be_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training_than_young_men

⁷ Koller, K., Wolter, S., Tschank, J. & Vana, I. (2022). Transnational research report on the situation of 25+ NEETs in the EU and in beneficiary countries. Centre for Social Innovation. Lost Millennials – Transnational Research Network for the Evaluation of Initiatives Targeting 25+ NEETs. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366499099_Transnational_research_report_on_the_situation_of_25_NEETs_in_the_EU_and_in_beneficiary_countries

Young people neither in employment nor in education and training, by age, EU27, 2013-2022

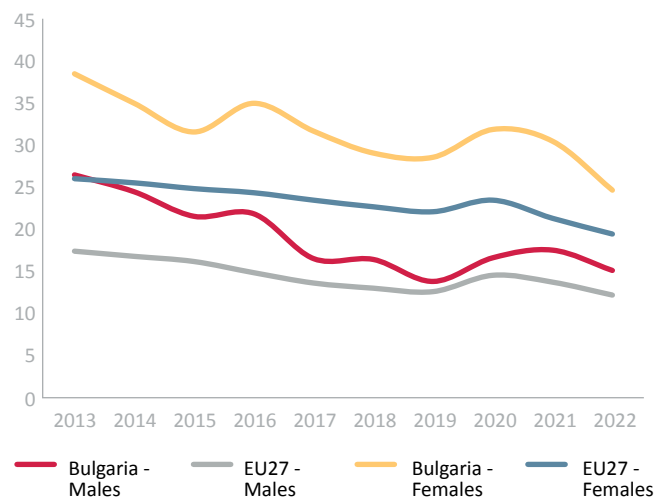


Source: Eurostat, 2022, ([edat_lfse_20](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_29)).

However, this should not preclude us from attempting to pin down aspects of the 25+ NEETs reality by looking more generally at the situation of NEETs in the country. NEETs in Bulgaria (regardless of age) face similar challenges and, as we observe in Bulgaria, experience policy interventions which are typically tailored to youth as a whole or the entire pool of unemployed individuals in the country.

In this regard, a main challenge related to policy responses to the situation of NEETs in Bulgaria, their evaluation and monitoring, is that the NEET group in specific remains relatively under-targeted within the policy framework in Bulgaria. **The NEET category itself remains conceptually underused by administrative authorities, which could possibly contribute to the lack of a comprehensive national strategy** that specifically aims to address the issues faced by NEETs.

Young people neither in employment nor in education, age 25-29 (25+ NEETs) by sex, EU27 and Bulgaria, 2012-2022



Source: Eurostat, 2022, ([edat_lfse_20](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_20)).

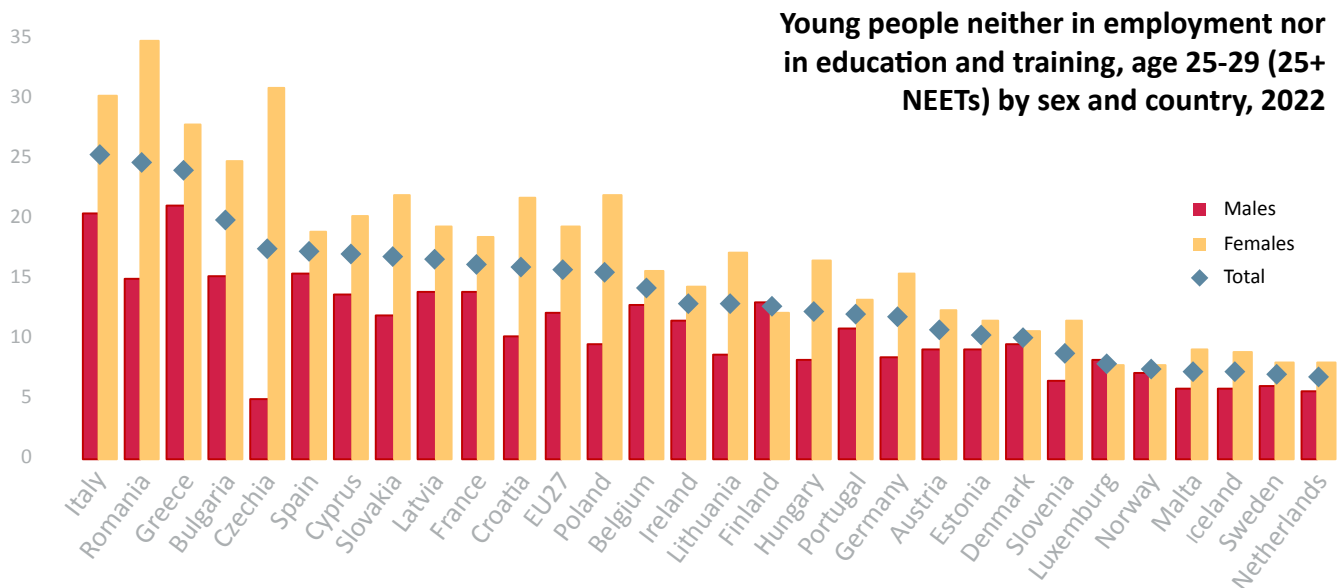
One of the major initiatives on a national level that is potentially relevant to the NEET demographic is the Career Start Programme. Launched by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in 2003, the Programme aims to facilitate the transition between education and employment for university graduates up to 29 years of age with no work experience in their field of specialisation. The Career Start Programme offers these individuals the opportunity to gain their first professional experience through a year-long posting in the public administration in a domain related to their area of study. Initially, the Programme included a component that incorporated private employers seeking to hire young people with secondary education, an element which was subsequently removed. Beyond the primary objective of decreasing youth unemployment, the Programme also seeks to prevent 'brain drain' and contribute to a progressive renewal of the public administration, including by attracting long-term young employees.⁸

Despite being generally positively evaluated as a sustainable initiative to address youth unemployment,

Challenges

Inequalities and vulnerable groups

While the NEET rate in Bulgaria has exhibited a significant improvement (characterized by the second-largest decrease in the EU during the period 2011-2021),⁹ the current NEET rate in Bulgaria still continues to be a cause for concern as it is the 4th highest in the EU, with a rate of over 15%, compared to the 11.7% EU average.¹⁰ This phenomenon can be attributed to a complex interplay of personal and socioeconomic factors, such as the unrealistic salary expectations of unemployed youth, an overall lower level of educational attainment, and a lack of employment opportunities (especially in certain geographical areas).^{11, 12} Data show that Bulgaria, compared to the rest of the EU, has the second largest difference between the NEET rate in cities and that in rural areas (14.5 percentage point difference) compared to the rest of the EU (Romania has the highest recorded rate of 19.1 percentage points).¹³ Almost 50% of all NEETs in



Source: Eurostat, 2022, ([edat_lfse_20](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&plugin=1)).

the Programme still faces a number of obstacles that result in the yearly decrease of the number of applications.

The following section will therefore (1) seek to further characterise the NEET group in Bulgaria and its challenges and (2) examine the main policy challenges relevant to the NEET group, also including the particular obstacles associated with the Career Start Programme.

⁹ Eurostat. (2022a). Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training#Young_women_are_more_likely_to_neither_be_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training_than_young_men

¹⁰ ibid.

¹¹ Eurofound. (2017). Long-term unemployed youth: Characteristics and policy responses. Publications Office of the European Union.

¹² Institute for Market Economics. (2019). Assessment of the people not in employment, education and training (NEETs) in Bulgaria and policy measures to effectively address their integration. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/768177>

¹³ Eurostat. (2022a). Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training#Young_women_are_more_likely_to_neither_be_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training_than_young_men

⁸ National Employment Agency. (n.d.). Career Start Programme [Програма „Старт на кариерата“]. <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/programa-start-na-karierata/>

Bulgaria live in rural areas.¹⁴ One-third of all NEETs in Bulgaria are concentrated in the Yuzhen tsentralen Region¹⁵ and the Severozapaden Region.¹⁶

The Covid-19 pandemic has also been a contributing factor that has proven to be damaging to NEETs employability (due to the lower quality of learning and qualifications obtained through remote work, lower income, poor mental health, and decreased provision of social protection).¹⁷

It is noteworthy that in the Bulgarian context, a considerable proportion of NEETs belongs to vulnerable and disadvantaged subgroups.¹⁸ For instance, the gender disparity is obvious with 17.4% of the women between 15-29 falling in the NEET category compared to 12.9% of men.¹⁹ This gender disparity is even larger in the 25+ NEETs age group where 24.7% of the women fall in the NEET category compared to 15.2% of the men. This tendency could relate to the long duration of paid and unpaid maternity leave for women in Bulgaria, as well as the fact that women are the family members who usually become engaged in 'care work' in the household if needed.²⁰ The gender discrepancy is further emphasized in the subgroup of young mothers in need of support whose number is considerably higher compared to the number of young fathers.²¹ Ethnic minorities are also much more likely to fall in the NEET category, primarily the Roma and Turkish minorities.²² As of 2022, 101,625 people from Bulgarian ethnic origin between 20 and 29 years of age were in the NEET category, whereas 72,868 persons of Roma ethnic origin and 15,659 individuals of Turkish ethnicity

were NEET.²³ Ethnicity with some of its accompanying challenges (e.g., anti-gypsyism trends in Bulgaria)²⁴ appears as a highly determining factor for becoming a NEET. Data from recent years suggest that 'the share of the Roma youth [mainly among younger NEETs] is 5 times, and of the Turkish youth – 1.5 times, higher compared to the control group,' with Roma women being 5 times more likely to become NEETs than women who are of ethnic Bulgarian origin.²⁵ Moreover, Roma people often experience intergenerational market exclusion as they more likely encounter discrimination which can hinder their employment.²⁶

There are also special circumstances which contribute to young Bulgarians' potential of becoming NEETs, such as challenging family situations, psychological issues or physical disability, mental health issues even though the latter have not been confirmed to be necessarily a strong contributing factor for having a NEET status.²⁷

Overall, this difficult situation of vulnerable and disadvantaged NEETs coincides with the existence of a systemic issue in Bulgaria regarding the institutional framework's provision of equal access to opportunities.²⁸ This ultimately results in high levels of labour market exclusion of some youth (especially among ethnic minorities and women), connected to high levels of disengaged youth that are not in the active process of seeking work, ultimately resulting in the issue of long-term unemployment among some youth.²⁹

[employment_nor_in_education_or_training_than_young_men](#)

¹⁴ Institute for Market Economics. (2019). Assessment of the people not in employment, education and training (NEETs) in Bulgaria and policy measures to effectively address their integration. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/768177>, p. 23.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p.17.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 19

¹⁷ Eurofound. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 on young people in the EU. Publications Office of the European Union.

¹⁸ Institute for Market Economics. (2019). Assessment of the people not in employment, education and training (NEETs) in Bulgaria and policy measures to effectively address their integration. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/768177>

¹⁹ Eurostat. (2022a). Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training#Young_women_are_more_likely_to_neither_be_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training_than_young_men

²⁰ Institute for Market Economics. (2019). Assessment of the people not in employment, education and training (NEETs) in Bulgaria and policy measures to effectively address their integration. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/768177>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ Institute for Market Economics. (2022). Assessment of young people not in employment, education and training and integration policies recommendations [Оценка на младежите извън системите на заетост, образование или обучение и препоръки към политиките за интеграция]. https://ime.bg/var/images/NEETs_IME_final_080822.pdf

²⁴ Stanchev, K. (2021). Administrative Unfairness: The Case of Roma in Bulgaria. Public Policy. *bg*, 12(2), 15-32.

²⁵ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. (2017). Report for supply and demand of labour in Bulgaria for 2017 and medium-term and long-term forecasts for the development of the labour market. Information for the labour market – current condition in Bulgaria. <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/informatsiya-za-pazara-na-truda-tekushcho-sstoyanie-i-prognozi> Last visited: 22.02.2022.

²⁶ Dimitrov, D., V Grigorova and J Decheva. (2012). Civil Society monitoring report on the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategy and Decade Action plan in 2012 in Bulgaria. Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation. [https://www.rcc.int/romaintegration2020/romadecadefold//decade%20implementation/4.%20civil%20society%20reports/Civil%20Society%20Monitoring%20Report%202012%20\(Bulgaria.%20English%20language\).pdf](https://www.rcc.int/romaintegration2020/romadecadefold//decade%20implementation/4.%20civil%20society%20reports/Civil%20Society%20Monitoring%20Report%202012%20(Bulgaria.%20English%20language).pdf) Last visited: 14.02.2022.

²⁷ Association SPOC. (2020). Isolation and Self-isolation of young people with mental health problems. Research Data Analysis and Five Step Report: Interests, Trust, Anxieties, Expectations and Benefits. Implementation of the Research Phase of the Project L.I.K.E. – Life Investment is the Key to Employment. <https://project-like.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Five-step-Report-Analysis-of-NEETs.pdf> Last visited: 14.02.2022.

²⁸ Institute for Market Economics. (2019). Assessment of the people not in employment, education and training (NEETs) in Bulgaria and policy measures to effectively address their integration. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/768177>

²⁹ Eurofound. (2016). Exploring the diversity of NEETs. Publications

Insufficiently tailored policy strategies

Policy strategies in Bulgaria aimed at mitigating unemployment generally target a broad category of unemployed persons that only partially address the specifics of NEETs. Programmes and initiatives particularly tailored to young NEETs are comparatively underdeveloped. Overall, the efficacy and efficiency of programmes and initiatives are impeded by their rather broad and general approach. This is apparent in a number of instances:

- NEETs who are particularly vulnerable (e.g., those with lower education status, ethnic minorities) suffer from insufficient access to vocational education and training.
- While labour market policies, implemented under the Employment Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030 offer individual support to young jobseekers, these policies are mainly able to provide internships and apprenticeship contracts, not prospects of long-term employment. NEETs are not explicitly targeted in national strategies on entrepreneurship policies, work-life reconciliation policies, or health and social policies. This is further impaired by a lack of consistent sustainable initiatives for career orientation and career counselling. Particularly vulnerable groups such as the younger Roma population (comprising 50% of all NEETs in Bulgaria) are systemically under-targeted by programmes and initiatives.³⁰
- Social security policies constitute an exception to this, as the National Plan for the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee (2014-2020) includes a provision for reductions on social security contributions for employers hiring NEETs up to 30 years of age – nevertheless, the amount of such reductions remains unspecified. These reductions represent the only financial incentives for hiring such youth, as there are no additional tax deductions.
- There is a lack of differentiation of NEETs in policy strategies, such as by age, gender, geographical profile (rural-urban) subcategorizations. Without such categorizations, policies miss on key needs and characteristics specific to particular subgroups, and consideration about which could be instrumental in designing approaches tailored to the relevant subgroups. Such is especially the case with age subcategorizations (e.g., 25+ NEETs) – as noted, certain age groups may experience a greater

likelihood of being in the NEET category and may require tailored policy approaches to their own age group.

Resource allocation

Considering that the majority of projects targeting young NEETs are state-driven, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of appropriate resource allocation for publicly-financed programmes and initiatives. Equal emphasis must be placed on appropriate resources for public institutions in general, as this aspect bears a direct influence on the efficient implementation of the prescribed policy measures.

A main issue of programmes and initiatives concerns the low salary levels for their beneficiaries. This challenge has been identified as a hindrance to the implementation of procedures that are otherwise positively assessed (notably those financed through the Human Resources Development Operational Programme (OP HRD)) and especially when addressing underlying structural challenges.³¹ The low beneficiary salary levels resulting from insufficient budget allocation intensify inter-regional and inter-sectoral economic disparities.³² Such a deficiency in funding is also visible in the context of primary functioning mechanisms aiming to support young university graduates, such as the Career Start Programme. While the monthly salary for beneficiaries has increased over the years, it is still lower than the competitive offers emerging from the private sector, which is the dominant employer in Bulgaria.³³ A study conducted by CSD among Career Start Programme institutional stakeholders and beneficiaries points out that there is a likely discrepancy between the salary expectations of university graduates, which (according to institutional stakeholders) tend to gravitate around 2000-3000 BGN, while the salary offered by the Career Start Programme is set at 860 BGN, barely surpassing the 780 BGN minimum wage.³⁴ According to the institutional stakeholders designing and implementing the Programme, this has resulted in a consistent

Office of the European Union.

³⁰ Institute for Market Economics. (2019). Assessment of the people not in employment, education and training (NEETs) in Bulgaria and policy measures to effectively address their integration. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/768177>

³¹ Angelova, R., Dimitrova, M., Ganeva, I., Ganev, K., Simeonova-Ganeva, R., Taskova, I., Uzunova, E. (2019). Evaluation of Measures Under the Youth Employment Initiative Within the Framework of Priority Axis 1 of the Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2014-2020. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352089957_Ocenka_na_merkite_po_iniciativata_za_mladezka_zaoetost_v_ramkite_na_prioritetna_os_1_na_Operativna_programa_Razvitie_na_coveskite_resursi_2014-2020

³² *ibid.*, 11

³³ National Statistical Institute. (2023). Employed and employment rates – national level; statistical regions; districts. <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/4009/employed-and-employment-rates-national-level-statistical-regions-districts>

³⁴ Center for the Study of Democracy. (2023). Bridging Education and the Labour Market: Evaluating the Career Start Programme in Bulgaria.

decrease in the number of applicants and participants in the Programme over the years, thereby affecting its effectiveness and sustainability.

Appropriate resource allocation and funding are also crucial in terms of increasing visibility through information campaigns for individual programmes and initiatives (such as the Career Start Programme) as well as increasing the competitiveness of the public sector, especially in comparison with the private sector. Overly long bureaucratic procedures, such as the application and recruitment procedure for the Career Start Programme (4 to 5 months), also hinder participation for disadvantaged youth that need an immediate source of income and work experience, which therefore undermines the efforts of reaching out to NEETs.

This tendency reflects a prevailing pattern present in the bureaucratic procedures characterising the public administration. In this particular context, its processes, although originally aimed at increasing the employability of NEETs, have been found to prioritise formalism³⁵ that may not entirely align with the actual needs of its beneficiaries. Both in the case of the Career Start Programme, but also more generally, the competitive appeal of the private sector necessitates a more comprehensive approach to increase the overall attractiveness of the public sector in Bulgaria, which has somewhat suffered from cultural devaluation. The attractiveness of the public sector expressed in its ability to provide future employees with possibilities for work in the capacity of public experts (even as an entry-level/junior expert in the case of programmes such as the Career Start Programme) has been found to be a key determining factor influencing a person's likelihood of pursuing a career in the public service.³⁶

Evaluation and monitoring transparency and availability

Policy evaluation and monitoring of programmes and initiatives targeting the employment struggles of NEETs is particularly challenging due to the limited availability of such evaluations, as well as their generally cursory and collective nature. This is due to a series of factors:

- The limited number of programmes and initiatives tailored exclusively to NEETs undermine data availability, while the use of the 'up to 29 years old' age group would benefit from further subcategorization as to reflect the realities of subgroups within the NEETs category.

- There is a link between the source of funding and respective quality of evaluation, as the OP HRD financed by the European Social Fund tend to undergo significantly more in-depth evaluations compared to: (1) state-funded programmes and initiatives and (2) Erasmus programmes. Across these categories, evaluations are generally scarce (only 48 out of 140 programmes evaluated).
- There is insufficient information regarding the frequency and timing of evaluations of state-led programmes and initiatives, while Erasmus-funded projects are characterized by diverging approaches which impede the access to evaluation documents and subsequent differentiation between deliverables and actual evaluations.
- While the National Employment Action Plan's national programmes and initiatives are individually monitored, the only available information concerns the numbers of beneficiaries with no further sub-categorisations of the beneficiaries or details on the impact on them.
- Considering the need for increased attractiveness of the public sector to boost job applications and job satisfaction, there can be discrepancies between the initial job descriptions advertised by public institutions and the de facto work responsibilities of some beneficiaries. In the case study evaluation of the Career Start Programme some respondents have observed acquaintances who had been once beneficiaries who had complained that their tasks sometimes did not correspond to the previously advertised expert-level work, ultimately resulting in decrease in motivation to continue the Programme, as well as contributing to the promotion of negative perceptions of the public administration.³⁷

Policy solutions and recommendations

To enhance the design and implementation of policy mechanisms for the employment of young people in Bulgaria, the relevant policy institutions (at national, regional and local levels) can consider the following recommendations:

³⁵ Boyanov, K. (2023). Redesign of the processes in the Bulgarian administration – theoretical aspect. *Journal of Management Sciences and Applications*, 1, 22–32. Retrieved from <https://www.jomsa.science/index.php/jomsa/article/view/29>

³⁶ Perry, James L., and Lois R. Wise. (1990). The Motivational Bases of Public Service. *Public Administration Review*, 50(3), 367–373.

³⁷ Center for the Study of Democracy. (2023). *Bridging Education and the Labour Market: Evaluating the Career Start Programme in Bulgaria*.

General policy

- Establish more specialized targeted programmes and initiatives for NEETs, taking into consideration the different subgroups that constitute the umbrella NEET category (e.g., the 25+ NEETs). This can be achieved through:
 - The creation of specific inclusivity and diversity programmes and initiatives or quotas aimed at specific subgroups, such as persons with disabilities;
 - An increase of childcare facilities and subsidies for part-time employment for NEET mothers to improve work-life reconciliation;
- Create a broader range of far-reaching information campaigns aimed at stimulating youth interest in employment, in an effort to ultimately increase youth employability. The existing initiatives need to be sufficiently promoted in order to be implemented and live up to their fullest potential. This entails increased collaboration between the public institutions in charge of initiative implementation and potential career orienting institutions and mechanisms (universities and high schools, career centres and fairs, personalised career counselling and orientation). Such endeavours can help meet the realities and needs of the current job market to future job seekers, facilitating a smoother transition between education and professional life.
- Work towards increasing the attractiveness and positive image of the Bulgarian public administration. This can involve targeted PR campaigns to increase the interest and perception of prestige in the administration, including through optimisation of procedures and regularly updated, easily accessible information in the digital space. This can be achieved through cost-effective promotion and digitization of interfaces for online job applications, thereby increasing user satisfaction and consequently encouraging applications from creative and ambitious young jobseekers.³⁸ Other advantages of working in the public sector can be emphasized in cost-effective promotional activities by: communicating about additional bonuses and income coming with public service employment, the benefit of no unpaid overtime, the possibility to avoid unregulated employment, and the fulfilment coming from meaningful work that contributes to the betterment of society.
- Establish more consistent and frequently scheduled monitoring and evaluation of programmes

and initiatives on an individual initiative basis (rather than collectively grouped initiatives into one evaluation). Existing or new collaborations between research institutes with expertise in policy evaluation and policy institutions should be encouraged and enhanced. Trainings of institutional staff and project implementers in evaluation/monitoring methodologies could also enhance the evaluation capacities of designing and implementing institutions.

- Develop a mechanism or system for inter-institutional access to and exchange of data by connecting institutional registers, in order to improve the connectivity among institutions regarding the transfer of reliable data that will allow for better data-driven policymaking and evaluation.

Career Start Programme

- Reincorporate the private sector component which was previously present in the Career Start Programme, considering the interest of recent graduates in the private sector. Given its previous limitation to high-school graduates and eventual exclusion, introducing this component at the university graduate level could be beneficial.
- Consider the issue of perceived low salaries of beneficiaries to enhance possibilities for meeting beneficiary expectations and needs (currently, both institutional stakeholders and beneficiaries considered this as a problem).³⁹ Receiving (employer) institutions may also contribute with some extra funds to add up to the state budget for the funding of beneficiary salaries and thus share in the salary formation.
- Shorten the application and recruitment procedure from 4-5 months to a maximum of one month.
- Invest in a more comprehensive information campaign about the programme, including through university career fairs and visits, with a possible participation of current or previous beneficiaries who can share their experience and perspective on the benefits of participating in the programme. This can also involve the building up or strengthening of the relationship and coordination between implementing institutions and higher education institutions (through their career centres). It might be crucial that such campaigns also highlight the general advantages of working in the public sector versus the private sector (e.g., regulated work hours, additional bonus options, relatively stable employment, etc.).

³⁸ Nikolov, N., Stefanov, S., & Georgieva, G. (2022). Engagement barometer – Fourth national survey on the attitudes of civil servants. Institute of Public Administration. <https://www.ipa.government.bg/en/engagement-barometer>

³⁹ Center for the Study of Democracy. (2023). Bridging Education and the Labour Market: Evaluating the Career Start Programme in Bulgaria.

-
- Create a systematic digitalized survey mechanism aimed at collecting three-fold feedback from programme beneficiaries: (1) possibly a month after the start of a programme cycle, (2) near its end, (3) and 6 months to a year after its completion. The survey will aim to measure the overall satisfaction of the beneficiaries, the long-term consequences on their employability, and whether they are currently professionally active, in the public or private sector.