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Being a NEET: Which way to go - case study on Romanian VET graduates

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Abstract

Romania is one of the EU countries characterized by highest rates of NEET (neither in employment nor in education and training) youth aged 15-24, reaching out the level of 18.1% in 2015, significantly above the UE-28 average of 12.0%. What is even more worrying is that, starting with 2008, the NEETs rate has continued to increase, even if the economy started to recover. NEET youth are in fact a very heterogeneous group, covering both vulnerable, as well as non-vulnerable youth, unemployed and inactive youth, looking for a job or not. The aim of the paper is to analyse youth transitions between the state of NEET, employment or education/training, as well as the reasons for which these transitions fail or happen with difficulties. We use two wave panel data for a tracking study on transition from school to work covering VET graduates. Tracking data are collected in 2011-2012 at 6 months and 12 months after graduation and cover the entire graduates' cohorts of 2 counties in Romania. Findings of the study could substantiate better tailored programs targeting NEETs and their re-insertion in education or labour market.

Keywords: Youth, school-to-work transition, NEET, education.

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1. Introduction

Youth participation to education and labour market is one of the most important topics on the agenda of policy makers across many countries. Education is extremely relevant for the allocation of individuals on the labour market and mediates the effect of social origin on future career and life prospects (Wolbers, 2003). From this point of view, prolonging youth participation to education is beneficial for both individuals and societies. Better educated young people, lower the risk of unemployment and higher the chances to obtain quality employment. Research suggests that education and relevant skills determine higher labour market outcomes among individuals (Fasih, 2008).

Many young people experience important difficulties when entering the labour market. High rates of unemployment and involuntary temporary employment among youth are indicators of their difficult situation (de Lange, Gesthuizen and Wolbers, 2014). In this context, results of the research on school-to-work transition are very valuable for better designing public policies in this field.

The concept of NEET (youth which are neither in employment nor in education or training) is a relatively new one, but gaining increasing importance for policy and scientific purposes. The NEET rate represents a valuable alternative to the indicator of youth unemployment (OECD, 2009). Its popularity is related to the fact that this concept addresses various areas relevant for youth situation such as unemployment, early school leaving and discouragement. Thus, the NEET concept is linked to issues related to discouragement, joblessness and marginalization among youth (ILO, 2015a).

The aim of the paper is to analyse youth transitions between the state of NEET, employment or education/training, as well as the reasons for which these transitions fail or happen with difficulties. We use two wave panel data for a tracking study on transition from school to work covering VET graduates. Tracking data are collected in 2011-2012 at 6 months and 12 months after graduation and cover the entire graduates' cohorts of 2 counties in Romania. Findings of the study could substantiate better tailored programs targeting NEETs and their re-insertion in education or labour market.

2. School-to-work Transition: Obstacles, Vulnerabilities and Context

2.1. Conceptualizing school-to-work transition

School-to-work transition is a concept referring to a period of change and uncertainty in the life of young people. Various definitions of this process have been developed. The way school-to-work transition is defined influences the interpretation of data regarding youth participation on the labour market. Some studies consider that school-to-work transition covers the period between the moment when people leave education and the moment when they enter in their first job, irrespective of its characteristics (Guarcello, 2005). The moment of leaving education can be the graduation time or, in some cases, the time of school dropout.

Analysing the EU LFS 2000 ad hoc module on school-to-work transition, Wolbers (2007) studies transition from education to the world of work for graduates in 11 countries. He considers that school leavers have successfully transitioned on the labour market when they are employed in jobs in which they work at least 20 hours per week for 6 months or more. So, in this case, a completed transition is associated with having an employment spell sufficiently stable and significant to allow the acquiring of some working experience for young people.

International Labour Organization conceptualizes youth labour market transition by considering that a person successfully transitioned only when he/she entered in a job that can be considered as "decent". A decent job is a job in which youth have a permanent contract or feel personally satisfied. Thus, in this case, the definition of school-to-work transition involves both objective and subjective elements. Therefore, according to ILO approach, a young person has transitioned to labour market only when he/she is in one of the following situations (ILO, 2009): he/she is employed with permanent contract and in a satisfactory job; he/she is employed with permanent contract, but in a non-

satisfactory job; he/she is employed in a satisfactory job with temporary contract or he/she works in a satisfactory self-employed position.

Following the perspective of ILO, youth who started and not finished the transition are those who are in the one of the following situations (ILO, 2009): he/she is currently unemployed; he/she works as undeclared worker; he/she is employed with a temporary contract in a non-satisfactory job; he/she works in a non-satisfactory self-employed position or he/she left school, being currently inactive and wishing to look for work later. Practically the status of “still in transition” covers a wide variety of occupational statuses from inactivity, unemployment as well as working in non-satisfactory conditions or even without a labour contact. The statuses of “successfully transitioned” and “still in transition” are in fact obtain by cross-checking the occupational status of the type of contract and with the satisfaction with the position obtained. Finally, ILO methodology defines a third category that includes young people who didn’t start their transition as those who are in the one of the following situations (ILO, 2009): he/she is still in school or he/she left school, being currently inactive and not wishing to look for work later.

In the past, transitions were smoother and more straightforward than they are today (OECD, 2000). The role of social origin on the outcomes of the school-to-work transition was higher in the past when patterns of transition were highly structured. Nowadays, such trajectories are strongly individualized, but they last longer, being more complex and fragmented. Personal abilities play a greater role in influencing the structure and length of transition from school to work (Cartmel, 2001).

From point of view of the time to obtaining a decent employment, transitions can be classified as short, middling or lengthy. Moreover, building on the above mentioned conceptual framework, the structure of the school-to-work transition comprises several phases (ILO, 2009):

- [1] Direct transition – in the case of those that enter directly in a job with permanent contract or in a satisfactory job after leaving education;
- [2] Experiencing spells of employment in temporary jobs, undeclared work or self-employment in non-satisfactory positions;
- [3] Experiencing spells of unemployment interrupted or not by employment or inactivity periods;
- [4] Other situation such as staying in inactivity, engaged in home duties or traveling.

From a different theoretical perspective, school-to-work transition can be linear or non-linear. Linear transition appears in the case of young people entering smoothly in employment after they exist from education. Non-linear transition is found in the case of young people who experience difficulties in finding employment, inactivity periods or alternate periods of employment with those of repeated unemployment. Non-linear transition paths indicate higher chances of failure in school-to-work transition and remaining outside the labour market (Furlong et al., 2003).

2.2. Individual vs. structural factors shaping school-to-work transition

Outcomes of the transition from education to the world of work are shaped by both individual level and structural factors. Many studies show that socio-demographic variables influence the paths of labour market entry in great extent. One of the most important factors influencing performances in school-to-work transition is the educational level. Thus, young people with low education are characterized by lower employment rates at five and ten years after graduation (Quintini et al., 2007, OECD, 2008). Also, gender differences in labour market participation are to be found also in the case of school-to-work transition. Moreover, although in many countries education mediates the effect of the social origin, it still plays an important role in shaping early careers of young graduates, including the structure and outcomes of transition from school to work (Hannan et al., 1996).

From a macro perspective, cross country research show the effects of the national and local context. School-to-work transition of young people is significantly influenced by the economic cycle,

characteristics of local labour market and the way its institutions function. The economic conditions play an important role in the shaping employment rate and subsequently employment opportunities for those entering the labour market (Stanila, Andreica & Cristescu, 2014). Among the institutional factors, labour market (de)regulation and the active labour market policies are very important determinants for the features of school-to-work transition. In the same time, the vocational specificity of the educational program graduated by school leavers was found to significantly influence the patterns of labour market entry among school leavers (Wolbers, 2003).

2.3. Youth NEET and relation with the process of school-to-work transition

The concept “not in employment, education and training” is a relatively a new one, with its beginnings in the ‘80s in UK, aiming at that time to address the youth aged 16-18 that leave educational system and in the same time are excluded from the unemployment benefits system, thus being highly exposed to social exclusion (Furlong, 2006; Serracant, 2014). The concept was easily adopted by the European Commission and OECD (Eurofound, 2012; Serracant, 2014), while the age group was constantly extended and this way also the heterogeneity of the youth under scrutiny. Crises drastically affected the youth prospects on the labour market leading to high unemployment rates, longer periods of time spent in unemployment, fewer chances to find adequate employment and high inactivity and discouragement. Poor education, reflected by still high early school leaving rates, lack of working experiences in the early stages of adult life coupled with other vulnerabilities decrease the chances of youth to find employment and to have decent career and life prospects on the long run (Byneer & Parsons, 2002). The indicator covers the multiple vulnerabilities of youth in entering on the labour market, cumulating the increases in youth inactivity (for other reasons than education) as well as the unemployed (ILO, 2015b). It is a complex indicator developed to catch as well as possible the complexities of youth transitions. Practically both youth seeking employment but not finding it as well as inactive youth that left education but not searching for a job are considered vulnerable and more exposed to social exclusion under this concept.

Overlapping the conceptual framework of the NEET concept with the one of the phases of transition from school-to-work presented above, we notice that the concept of NEET covers the two situations of those experiencing unemployment or inactivity, thus referring to those more probably experiencing middling or lengthy transitions.

3. Data

In 2015, Romania was among the countries with the highest rate of young people NEET in the EU, along with Italy (21.4%), Bulgaria (19.3%), Croatia (18.5%) and Greece (17.2%). What makes the evolutions from Romania worrying is the increasing trend, irrespective of the economic cycle. As we can see in the Table 1, until 2008 the NEET rate constantly decreased, then during crises sharply increased, but even if the national economy started its recovery, the NEET rate continued to increase. Moreover, Romania is the only country among those mentioned before where the NEET rate still increases, while in all others improvements are witnessed during the years.

Table 1. Young people NEET in Romania and EU, evolutions for the age group 15-24 years old

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Eu-28	12.9	12.7	11.7	11.0	10.9	12.4	12.8	12.9	13.2	13.0	12.5	12.0
Romania	19.8	16.8	14.8	13.3	11.6	13.9	16.6	17.5	16.8	17.0	17.0	18.1

Source: Eurostat

The decomposition of the NEET rate by level of education (see Table 2) evidenced that all levels of education contributes to the increases of NEET rate. Lower the educational level, higher the

probability to reach the NEET rate. Practically, almost half of the youth NEET have only low levels of education, being in fact early school leavers, while the other half consists mainly in youth with medium education (ISCED 3-4). But as the most recent data provided by Eurostat shows, almost 1/3 of NEET has medium education but on vocational track (ISCED 3-4 vocational).

If the relation between early school leavers and NEETs are largely investigated in the scientific literature, their vulnerable position being strongly evidenced, the data on NEETs by level of education for Romania are quite puzzling. 1/3 of the NEETs are in fact youth having a qualification the present paper aiming to investigate the possible reasons for this state of art.

Table 2. Decomposition of NEET rate by ISCED levels, youth aged 15-24 years old, Romania

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Total	19.8	16.8	14.8	13.3	11.6	13.9	16.6	17.5	16.8	17.0	17.0	18.1
ISCED 0-2	10.3	8.5	7.7	7.1	6.6	7.1	8.1	8.6	7.9	7.6	8.2	9.1
ISCED 3-4	8.9	7.8	6.6	5.8	4.6	6.2	7.7	8.0	8.0	8.2	7.8	8.2
3-4 general											1.8	1.9
3-4 vocational											6.0	6.3
ISCED 5-8	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.7	0.8	0.9	0.9	1.1	1.0	0.8

Source: Eurostat

Thus, the aim of the paper is to investigate transition from school-to-work among VET graduates, as well as the individual set of reasons and beliefs that could explain the choices that youth are making in respect to leaving education, searching a job or opting for inactivity.

In order to meet the paper objectives we use two waves of a tracking study among VET graduates (level 1 and 2 of qualification) from two counties of Romania (Gorj and Galati). Tracking data are collected in 2011-2012 at 6 months and 12 months after graduation and cover the entire graduates' cohorts of the two counties. Level 1 of qualification was achieved by finalising the *arts and trades schools* (covering 2 years after tracking), while level 2 was achieved by finalising the *completion year* (another 1 year after the graduating of arts and trades schools).

The entire 2009/2010 cohorts of graduates from *arts and trades schools* and *completion year* from the two counties were surveyed at 6 and respectively 12 months after graduation with a complex tool covering plans to return to education, current occupation status, recent working experiences, registration to public employment services, job searching behaviour as well as intentions on short and long run with respect to employment and internal and external mobility. The two waves were used to design a panel for those graduates investigated both at 6 and 12 months after graduations, the final data set consisting in 431 records for the both moments of time. Data are even most valuable if we take into account that 2010 and 2011 were the years when the most social and economic effects of the crises were experienced. Data were collected by the two county school inspectorates and analysed by the National Scientific Research Institute for Labour and Social Protection (INCSMPS) under the project POSDRU/90/2.1/S/64310 "Evaluating the relevance of the VET supply by analysing the socio-professional insertion of graduates".

The findings of the paper are focused on the information on "occupation status on the labour market" at 6 and 12 months after graduation, the initial item being recorded in three categories as follows: "still studying", "employed" and "NEET". As the methodologies working with the NEET data recommends (ILO, 2015a), NEET were subsequently split in NEET_unemployed and NEET_inactive. The split was done taking into account only the self-declaration of surveyed graduates: the paid or unpaid unemployed were considered as NEET_unemployed, while the housekeepers were considered as NEET_inactive, irrespective of their job searching behaviour. We consider that the reasons behind those two status are different by gender and area of residence, and as the theoretical background

evidenced, those emphasise on different phases of transition from school-to-work as well as on different possible sets of reasons and behaviours.

4. Findings

As we can see below (Table 3), the large majority of graduates were in fact NEETs at 6 months after graduation (72.1%). Their share decreases significantly at 12 months after graduation, but still more than 50% of graduates were still NEETs. Only a minority of graduates return to education (being enrolled in evening courses) and most of the changes in the occupational status are explained by the transition to the world of work. If we analyse the composition of the share of NEETs by unemployed/inactive status we find that the share of unemployed decreased significantly, while the share of inactive decreased only with a small share.

Table 3. Status of surveyed graduates at 6 and 12 months after graduation (%)

	6 months	12 months
Still studying	9.6	9.9
Employed	18.3	36.7
NEET	72.1	53.4
<i>out of which</i>		
NEET_unemployed	41.0	26.4
NEET_inactive	31.1	27.1

Source: INCSMPS, 2011, 2012

Then we run the transitions in between the occupational statuses as mentioned at 6 and 12 months after graduation. In fact, at 12 months after graduation most of the youth conserve the status from the previous moment of time (see Table 4). The most significant example is the one of employed, 71.4% of those employed after 6 months being also employed after 12 months.

When we analyse the NEETs, we can see that almost 2/3 of them remain NEETs also at 12 months after graduation, while the others are mainly going into employment. More worrying is that most of the NEET_inactive at 6 months after graduation remain inactive also at 12 months, even if large shares of them are moving to employment (37.4%). The explanation from these puzzling transitions from inactivity to employment are to be found in the occupational patterns of rural areas, with high shares of unpaid family workers, the conceptual limits between housekeepers and unpaid family workers being sometimes rather wiperd.

Table 4. Transitions in between 6 and 12 months among surveyed graduates (%)

		Status 12 months					Total	
		Still studying	Employed	NEET	<i>out of which</i>	NEET_unemployed		NEET_inactive
Status 6 months	Still studying	68.3	14.6	17.1		7.3	9.8	100.0
	Employed	5.2	71.4	23.4		9.1	14.3	100.0
	NEET	3.0	30.7	66.3		33.7	32.7	100.0
	<i>out of which</i>							
	NEET_unemployed	3.5	25.6	70.9		48.8	22.1	100.0
	NEET_inactive	2.3	37.4	60.3		13.7	46.6	100.0

Source: INCSMPS, 2011, 2012

Then, in order to better understand the beliefs and behaviours of graduates with respect to education and labour market, we investigated them in relation with these transitions. Maybe one of the most important questions that may arise is why youth leave education, and, as we saw above, why they do not plan to reenrol in initial or continuing education.

One of the most important reasons behind the decision to leave education are the financial constraints (see Table 5). Cca. 1/3 of the investigated graduates declared that “going to school is too expensive”. All graduates reaching at a certain moment the NEET state put this reason on top.

Another very important reason for leaving education is the intention “to work”, the reason being very prevalent among those being employed at one or even both moments of the investigation. And the 3rd reason as importance, but to a large distance as compared with the previous ones is the intention “to have a family”. But this reason in fact characterize only the female part of the sample and mostly the female adolescents from rural areas, 18.5% of them invoking it. None of the men declared this reason as stopping him from continuing education. But men to a higher extent declared they left education in order to work. Both young men and women are in fact operating under a patriarchal logic, with the men aiming to become the main provider for their families and with women having their life prospects centred on the wife and mother roles.

In the end, another cca. 10% of graduates declared that going to school is for no help or that they never liked going to school. Even if they are not as significant as importance, teaching a learning content of the VET courses could become very important when they are coupled with the lack of financial means. Reducing the investment in education when this one is perceived as useless could become a ration choice for some of the graduates.

Table 5. Top 5 reasons for leaving education among surveyed graduates by transitions in between 6 and 12 months

	Transitions in between 6 and 12 months					Total
	NEET-NEET	NEET-Study	NEET-Employed	Employed-NEET	Employed-Employed	
too expensive to go to school	38.3	33.3	34.5	6.7	22.2	33.8
to work	24.4	50.0	32.2	40.0	51.1	30.7
to have a family	8.8		6.9		4.4	7.0
going to school helps me with nothing	5.7		6.9	6.7	11.1	6.5
never liked going to school	3.6		4.6		2.2	3.4

Source: INCSMPS, 2011, 2012

A very important and useful information is provided by crossing the previous working experiences with the different transitions in between 6 and 12 months after graduation. Cca. 7.5% of the graduates had at least one working experience until the 12 months tracking survey (excepting the workplace held at the moment of investigation by those employed). As Table 6 evidences, the youth entrapped in the NEET position both at 6 and 12 months after graduation display the highest lack of working experiences. Having no working experiences, in the form of apprenticeship or traineeship or even as undeclared worker increases the chances of a graduate to reach the NEET state and to remain entrapped.

Table 6. Surveyed graduates having previous working experiences by transitions in between 6 and 12 months (%)

Transitions in between 6 and 12 months									
NEET-NEET	NEET-Study	NEET-Employed	Study-NEET	Employed-NEET	Employed-Employed	Study-Study	Employed-Study	Study-Employed	Total
3.0	11.1	9.9	16.7	5.6	10.9	10.7	25.0	16.7	7.5

Source: INCSMPS, 2011, 2012

Another worrying information is provided by the answers of graduates to the items referring to their registration to PES (public employment services). The youth entrapped in the NEET position are those displaying the highest rate of registration to PES. This information can lead us to at least two conclusions. On the one hand there are some youth that do not plan to become active or to search for a job and for them the unemployment benefits provided to all graduates are in fact a “bonus”. They target only the passive measure and the registration to PES is done only in order to collect the unemployment benefits. But on the other hand, most of the youth in the risk to become NEET reach the PES, but the latter do not have adequate tools to identify them and to track them to adequate measures for activation/employment.

Table 7. Surveyed graduates registered to PES by transitions in between 6 and 12 months (%)

Transitions in between 6 and 12 months									
NEET-NEET	NEET-Study	NEET-Employed	Study-NEET	Employed-NEET	Employed-Employed	Study-Study	Employed-Study	Study-Employed	Total
40.3	-	23.7	0.0	16.7	5.5	-	-	0.0	28.1

Source: INCSMPS, 2011, 2012

The last part of the paper aims to analyse the job searching behaviour, as well as the reasons for not looking for a job. We consider that those looking for employment have the highest probability to find employment, to maintain employment or even to improve their transition in terms of adequacy or wages.

As we can see in the table below (no.8), the job searching is rather low among graduates both at 6 and 12 months after graduation. Approx. 1 in 4 graduates display a job searching behaviour, its intensity decreasing slowly at 12 months after graduation as compared with previous investigation. But those being NEET both at 6 and 12 months as well as those transiting from employment to NEET are characterized by an increase in the job searching behaviour. Differences are explained by the changes in the NEET structure by unemployed and inactive.

Table 8. Job searching behaviour by transitions in between 6 and 12 months

Transitions in between 6 and 12 months										
	NEET-NEET	NEET-Study	NEET-Employed	Study-NEET	Employed-NEET	Employed-Employed	Study-Study	Employed-Study	Study-Employed	Total
At 6 months	28.5	50.0	30.4	33.3	5.6	17.0	32.1	50.0	60.0	27.4
At 12 months	34.0	12.5	19.8	16.7	29.4	11.3	7.7	50.0	33.3	24.9

Source: INCSMPS, 2011, 2012

On the other hand, cca. 3/4 of the graduates do not search for a job. Their main reason is that “it is crises and no jobs are available”. This reason actually urges the NEETs to reenrol in education. The second reason (“helping parents to household works”) characterize mainly the rural areas and are

subsumed to the above mentioned overlaps in between inactivity and being an unpaid family worker. Another reason is the fact that the graduates receive the “unemployment benefit”. So, again we find that PES actually misses its role in activating youth on the labour market and in facilitating their transition from school to the world of work. Only a minority of respondents (7.1%) declare that they do not wish to ever have a job and this reason characterize mainly the urban areas.

Table 9. Top 5 reasons for not searching for a job by transitions in between 6 and 12 months (%)

	Transitions in between 6 and 12 months									Total
	NEET-NEET	NEET-Study	NEET-Employed	Study-NEET	Employed-NEET	Employed-Employed	Study-Study	Employed-Study	Study-Employed	
It is crises, no jobs available	28.5	75.0	15.6	25.0	29.4	9.1	31.6		100.0	23.6
I'm helping my parents to household works	11.8		26.6		11.8	22.7				15.2
I'm still a paid unemployed	17.4	25.0	15.6							12.0
I already have a job					29.4	45.5	5.3	50.0		10.4
No need/no interest in finding a job	7.8		12.5	25.0		2.3	5.3			7.1

Source: INCSMPS, 2011, 2012

4. Conclusions

Even if the data help us to carry only a case study on VET graduates from levels 1 and 2 of qualification and only from two counties of Romania, the findings are more than useful to conclude on some aspects of education and public employment services.

One of the most important finding is that once leaving school, the probability to reenrol in education in the following years is limited. A cocktail of reasons practically discourage youth with respect to education. The cost of education is considered too high by almost 1/3 of the respondents, so inequalities in the educational system have to be addressed.

The paper is focused on VET graduates, so we expect a large proportion of them to already have an experience in the world of work. Nothing is truer. Moreover, those having no previous working experience also have the highest probability to be NEET both at 6 and 12 months after graduation. Studies pointed out that earlier the working experiences, better the chances to find employment after graduation, and our findings are in accordance with the scientific literature. Transition has to be prepared even from education and VET schools/system have/has to put more emphasize on facilitating the acquisition of working experiences as well as on developing a job searching behaviour.

Traditional model tends to become preeminent among women in rural areas, where 1 in 5 female adolescents leave education in order to have a family. So, the role of education in combating gender stereotypes has to be addressed and the traditional norms must be constantly challenged. Nonetheless, teachers has to be adequately trained to do so.

Another puzzling and very important finding refers to the role of PES. Even if graduates aims and actually even register to PES in order to collect the unemployment benefits, PES fails to address their needs and problems. So one useful step is for PES and mainly for those carrying the career guidance

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and counselling to develop adequate profiling tools for those in risk to become NEET. Also, tracking them to adequate active measures could lead to a decrease of the NEET rates.

Nonetheless, once a NEET, always a NEET. The occupational patterns are mainly shaped in the very few months after graduation. Being a NEET after 6 months leads to a higher probability to also be a NEET after 12 months. So, the interventions in order to facilitate the school-to-work transition have to be designed in order to be implemented in the first months after graduation in order to have success.

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