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NEETs' pathways towards Vocational Maturity

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Abstract

The group of 'NEETs', young persons who are neither in education nor sustainably in employment, are at high risk of becoming social outsiders with extremely limited chances of achieving a satisfying and self-sustaining life. At the same time, they require tremendous efforts at great costs for their communities. This paper offers a new approach to supporting the most at-risk group of the NEETs on their pathways into the world of work. As part of a fine-meshed taxonomy for these individual pathways, 'Vocational Maturity' has been identified as a significant state and phase. The European project 'Youth in transition' was the framework for processing this concept into an interactive self-evaluation tool. Trial runs in three countries have led to cross-national conclusions and recommendations for the application of the tool in counselling practice. This study also reflects on supportive settings, in particular a well-coordinated cross-professional and cross-sectoral 'chain responsibility', with a high focus on competent guidance of the individual NEETs.

1 Context

The study addresses the societal responsibility for promoting young peoples' pathways into the world of work, including Vocational Education and Training (VET). The focus is on "NEETs": young people, aged 15–29, who are neither in education nor in employment.

1.1 The NEET population and its diversity

Despite being on political agendas for decades, the proportion of NEETs has been rather consistent over time. The average numbers in European countries have stayed at 12 % – 16 % throughout the last 10 years (Eurostat 2021), but there are apparent differences among countries. As the latest data show a decrease in numbers in Slovenia (12.3 % in 2015 to 9.2 % in 2020), the numbers of NEETs in Denmark (8.5 % in 2015 to 10.2 % in 2020) and Iceland (4.1 % 2017 to 7.0 % in 2020) are increasing.

NEETs have an even lower attachment to the labour market than youth in general (Assmann et al. 2021), whose sensitivity to changes in the economy, compared to the general population, is especially evident in times of economic or social turbulence,

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where they are the last to enter the labour market and the first to exit (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 2011). Thus, the share of NEETs is expected to rise after the COVID-19 period. More than half of the NEETs across Europe are not actively seeking employment opportunities; many are not even registered at Employment Offices. All of this puts them at high risk of becoming social outsiders with extremely limited chances of achieving a satisfying and self-sustaining life. At the same time, they require tremendous efforts at great costs for their communities.

The risk of a young person as to becoming a NEET increases with individual characteristics such as a low level of qualifications, leaving school early, being a single parent, having a disease or disability, living in a remote area or small city, or having an extra-EU migration status (Assmann et al. 2021). On the personal level, NEETs tend to struggle with complex problems and issues that typically occur in combination with each other and reinforce each other, such as lack of basic educational skills, severe personal and social issues, mental diagnoses, abuse, drugs, crime, prostitution or homelessness (Lamscheck-Nielsen 2020).

1.2 Ready for the new world-of-work?

There are many attempts to outline the requirements at the new world-of-work, often formulated as sets of competences. Possibly most well-known are the “Key Competences for Lifelong Learning” to meet the needs of individuals regarding “[...] personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion and active citizenship” (European Commission 2018). Meanwhile, OECD offers a “Learning Framework 2030” for “individual and societal well-being”, based on the individual’s basal competences (2018, p. 4), supplemented with “transformative competencies”: to create new value, reconcile tensions and dilemmas, take responsibility (ibid, p. 5). When considering “human capital”, the World Bank Report (2019, p. 3) points at “advanced cognitive skills”, “sociobehavioural skills” and “skills combinations that are predictive of adaptability”. As an antipole, international researchers advocate for “a future with dignity” and: “It is vital for governments and workers to contest the rules of the game in order to reduce inequality and promote decent work” (Anner et al. 2019, p. 15).

While these ambitious sets of competences as well as the critical voices claim to prepare individuals for a modern life, NEETs can experience this as unattainable expectations. With these discourses in mind, it has been discussed in innumerable settings how VET can prepare young people to meet a yet unknown labour market and how to empower adult skilled workers. In the meantime, experience shows that VET can be a milestone for NEETs on their pathway towards the challenging labour market and a career in mainstream society. VET can be a development forum for NEETs, if teachers and counsellors are ready for this target group, and if the NEETs can work on their readiness for the new world of work.

2 Research questions

Learning processes, whatever their form, are part of the NEETs' process towards the new world of work. In formal education, this requires a certain *education readiness*. In addition, when speaking about VET, in particular dual programmes in VET, there is a need for *vocational readiness*; being ready for the world of work and *mature* in a sense of knowing yourself and being able to navigate towards and in this world.

2.1 Research questions

The above outlined context has led to the following research questions:

1. Why is 'Vocational Maturity' significant for NEETs and for professionals?
2. How to apply the concept of 'Vocational Maturity' to the support of NEETs on their pathways towards education / job?
3. Which settings are supportive for the NEETs' progression on their pathways towards 'Vocational Maturity'?

These questions have been dealt with in 3 independent but related projects. The findings are combined and concluded on for the first time in this paper.

2.2 Across a series of projects

In the European Union funded project "Youth in transition" (2018–2021), experts from Slovenia, Iceland and Denmark collaborated on solutions, with respect to their specific national conditions. The University of Hamburg qualified the work with scientific support.

In Slovenia, the recent introduction of apprenticeship exposed the lack of attention in the youth education system towards the key competences that support young persons on their first entrance into the labour market.

Iceland, although having one of the lowest levels of NEETs in Europe, needed a closer interaction between the employment sector and the educational sector.

In Denmark, new legislation (2018) for the 98 municipalities requires cross-professional, well-coordinated and individual work with NEETs. VET must reach out to the preparatory education system with purposive vocational activities helping NEETs move towards the labour market, while municipal counsellors communicate the needs of the youths and support them regarding their transitions to VET.

'Youth in transition' was complemented by the Danish project portfolio "Unge med kant" (Youth with edge, 2018–2022), with in a total of 11 (out of 98) municipalities, a range of associated municipalities, nation-wide stakeholder organizations, 6 vocational colleges, other school types and pre-educational institutions.

The empirical data for the practical work with the individual pathways of NEETs refer to:

- in Denmark 740 NEETs and around 150 professionals
- in Slovenia 120 NEETs and around 20 professionals
- in Iceland 45 NEETs and 5 professionals

The professionals were typically VET teachers, pedagogical assistants, education counsellors, employment counsellors, social advisors, psychiatric experts and other specialists.

The innovation work for authentic local solutions meant local capacity building for the implied parties and affected work processes, organizational set-ups, budgets and much more.

3 Vocational Maturity

When the international experts in YIT started to investigate 'vocational maturity' as a concept, it was found that very few countries have defined this term explicitly. If in use, as in Germany, approaches to this concept can differ and even clash between sectors and among professionals (Schulte 2018). Well-defined methods to identify the individual's status and his/her progression towards vocational maturity are therefore also rare. Interviews in 'Youth in transition' showed that implicitness and more or less arbitrary individual interpretations of young people's readiness for a job or an apprenticeship can occur, when vocational maturity is not a well-defined and transparent concept.

3.1 Vocational Maturity

'Vocational maturity' can be approached as a multi-perspective concept; from a business point of view, from pedagogical and guidance points of view and from young people's points of view. For the purpose of supporting NEETs on their pathways towards self-sufficiency, a simple definition, used in the innovation work described below, was applied:

"Vocational Maturity – as the goal of the NEETs' progression process – reflects the competencies and potentials that are necessary for starting in and retaining a job or an internship. This can also be true for the beginning of a vocational programme and during its educational processes." A young person's vocational maturity can be partial or fragile. It is not a fixed status but rather a phase, based on or even overlapping with other phases.

3.2 A user-generated taxonomy

A simple taxonomy with indicators was developed, mutually reviewed and found operational by a wide range of professionals during the project portfolio 'Unge med kant'. This taxonomy was agreed upon, although having in mind that individual progression rarely occurs linearly or simultaneously with others: contact readiness > counselling readiness > choice readiness > educational readiness > vocational maturity.



Figure 1: Taxonomy for youth progression towards Vocational Maturity (2020), EUK/KL/Moeve – Unge med kant Syddanmark & Hovedstaden, Youth in transition

The taxonomy outlines 5 phases. Each of the phases is described using action-based indicators (website ‘Youth in transition’). These indicators are applied mainly by monitoring the NEETs during the first 4 phases. The indicators for the last phase – vocational maturity – were processed into an interactive tool as self-evaluation in dialogue with professionals.

Note: Both the phases and the indicators must be adapted nationally and to a certain degree also locally, as they depend on the conditions of the system in which they are applied.

Self-evaluation in dialogue

As a method for identifying ‘vocational maturity’, an interactive tool was developed (see Ill. 2). 6 dimensions refer to research-based fields and are expressed as action-oriented competences with a total of 28 questions/statements:

- *Motivation*, as a context-related motivation-creating approach (Katznelson 2017)
- *Setting goals*, with inspiration from career learning (Law 2010)
- *Flexibility*, about coping with changes in the surroundings
- *Resilience*, from a sociological approach and potential for personal development
- *Social settings*, focusing on both adaptability and self-awareness
- *Professional skills*, referring to frameworks such as educational ordinances or job profiles

According to PhD Christiane Thole (quality assessment ‘Youth in transition’, University of Hamburg, 2021): “These dimensions are a common denominator of extensive scientific evidence such as career choices, identity, motivation, stress and coping theories.”

The tool is freely accessible as an artificial generic version in English, generated from Danish, Slovenian and Icelandic versions (2020), since 2021 also available in German. The national versions are adapted to national contexts, but with the same basic principles and ethics.

The method is applied in well-considered dialogues between professionals and NEETs, promoting reflection and personal goal setting. The output consists of profiles that are individual, mutually incomparable and do not give access to education or job.

The following 3 features are crucial:

Firstly, the *perspective from the ‘world-of-work’* has been balanced in the tool with the *‘youth perspective’* regarding the young person’s own strengths, weaknesses and dreams.

Secondly, the method implies attention to a *retrospective*, a *present perspective* and a *prospective* for the situation of the individual; comprising experiences and any competencies from the past, identifying significant elements in the present situation and exploring dreams, hindrances and possibilities for the future.

Thirdly, the criteria and their indicators must be *concretized* to the specific situation of the counselee and *contextualized* to his/her vocational context. This means that the content of the tool must be made understandable for the young person, in general as well as related to the specific vocational context that he/she has entered or considers entering.

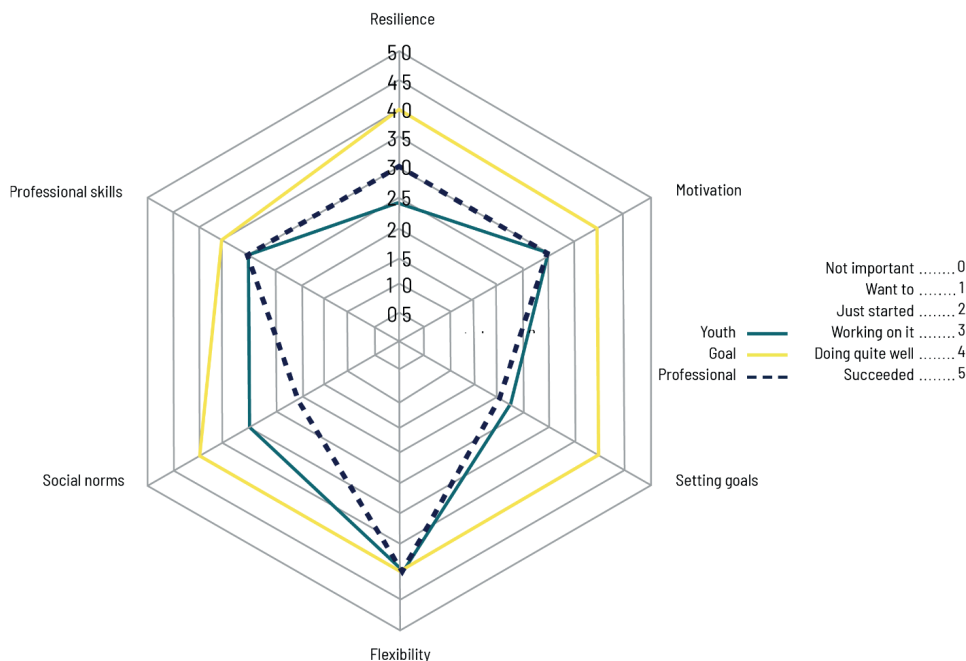


Figure 2: Interactive Tool for Self-evaluation of Vocational Maturity (Youth in transition 2020): profile example

Many other methods and tools can be and are locally in use for profiling young people. The Tool for Self-Evaluation of Vocational Maturity is developed specifically for the purpose of supporting NEETs on their pathways towards vocational education and/or job in a sustainable way. The tool is quality-assured by researchers, developed cross-professionally and by involving NEETs. The tool is not a diagnostic but a process-supportive instrument.

4 Trial runs of the tool

27 trial runs have been carried out in Denmark, Slovenia and Iceland in 2 phases (2019–2020), involving 168 NEETs aged 15–29 and 29 professionals. The methods included think-aloud tests, individual and group counselling sessions, interviews and observations, where the content and usability of versions of the tool were tested. In addition, the trial runs provided the data that made local application of the tool possible, practically and pedagogically.

	Slovenia	Denmark	Iceland
No. of trial runs	8	14	5
No. of NEETs	59	94	15
No. of professionals	10	17	2
No. of face-to-face counseling	10	13	3
No. of pairwise counseling	-		2
No. of group counselling	-	2	-
No. of distance counselling sessions	3	-	-

Table 1: Test samples. Public Education Centre Cene Štupar (2020) in cooperation with experts from Denmark, Iceland and Slovenia (Youth in transition)

4.1 Results

The findings helped to improve the tool with respect to content, language, design, on-line-interface and adaptation to the needs of the NEETs and the professionals in the 3 countries.

Thus, it was confirmed that the versions of the tool can be identical regarding graphic design and that the 6 dimensions are crucial for the concept of vocational maturity. Furthermore, suggestions on how to use the tool as part of the counselling process arose. Although the local versions of the tool differ slightly in concretion of the indicators and the taxonomy scale, several common cross-national findings for the best use of the tool were identified:

- Before the use of the tool, professionals should be well-prepared and the tool must be well-explained to the NEETs.
- Contextualization and concretization of the statements, undertaken solely by the professionals and adapted to the individual's situation, are essential. This includes offering the possibility for a dialogue to avoid misinterpretation of the statements and not attaining meaningful results.
- It was found that the tool should be used when trust and mutual respect are well-established between NEET and professional. Sufficient time as a condition for creating trust was emphasized in some settings, but not necessarily in other settings.

- In any case, timing was found to be essential. Preferably, the tool was not applied at the beginning of the progression, but rather when considerations about education, training placement and/or job were near.
- NEETs see the tool as useful and constructive in identifying new insights regarding their strengths and needs, and it helps them reflect on their education and career pathways.
- There is a need for continued training, update and exchange on how to implement the online tool in order for professionals to guide and support the NEETs.

The trial runs demonstrated that the tool neither is suitable for every individual nor at all stages of the taxonomy. Its uniqueness is not in measuring the status quo of a youth, but in supporting developmental processes towards vocational maturity. The formative self-evaluation assists NEETs in achieving greater self-awareness and self-understanding, supports relationship building with the professionals and consequentially helps in building trust.

4.2 Validity

As pointed out above, the tool does not measure a young person's competencies in a diagnostic way, but provides the professional and the NEET with relevant information about the NEET's level of knowledge, skills and competences for entering a job or vocational education. It also enables the professionals to adjust the counselling process according to the emerging or changing needs of the NEET.

The validity of the tool originates firstly in its content: the thoroughly investigated and defined vocational maturity dimensions and their indicators, which encompass the youth perspective on the one hand and the expectations of the 'world of work' on the other. Secondly, the validity originates in the professional understanding and use of the tool, which is implied in "[...] its individual application and in the counselling process between the professional and the NEET" (Prof. Dr. Werner Kuhlmeier, The University of Hamburg, quality assurance 'Youth in transition', 2020).

4.3 Pedagogical recommendations

The sensitivity of the individual situations of the NEETs and the complexity of the issues they are facing, demand careful considerations about the application of the tool as well as clear and to the point communication about its use.

Before introducing the tool, it is important that the NEETs have achieved a certain personal stability and openness to move forward in life, possibly at the time of deciding about or at the start of a VET programme or in the transition to a job, apprenticeship or internship. The use of the tool should be planned and communicated with the counsellor ahead of time, as well as the possibility for a follow-up.

Considering the dynamic of different settings and as proven in the trial runs, the self-evaluation can be done either individually, in pairs or groups. No matter which setting is chosen, young people should not be left alone with the tool. A professional or a mentor should be actively available and involved; to answer any questions prior, dur-

ing or after the use of the tool, to assist technically, to explain and to contextualize the statements into the counselees' experiences, aspirations, competencies, goals and dreams.

Before the self-evaluation, it is necessary for the young person to become familiar with aim, data protection and principles. A practical demonstration of the use of the tool can be beneficial. The results of the self-evaluation can be archived or shared with other parties, if advised by a professional and agreed upon with the young person beforehand on what, how and with whom, and following the given data protection protocols.

5 A cross-professional approach to the work with NEETs

In general, NEETs have typically been met with short-lasting incoherent serial initiatives with short-term aims and often contra-productive categorizations. It has rarely been taken into account that their profiles are highly individual, that their problems reinforce each other and that particularly transitions on their pathways cause difficulties. New, more holistic approaches are in demand, although some relatively new initiatives and policies can be found.

During the practical work with the young people in the project portfolio, attention was given to the professional settings around the NEETs. In the following extracts from a cross-national analysis regarding the work structures for the professionals and their needs are reflected (Lamscheck-Nielsen 2020), supplemented with new findings from the Danish projects.

5.1 Cross-organizational and multi-professional collaboration with commitment

The high complexity of the young persons' problems and their needs requires the design of meaningful individual pathways, and as far as possible with long-sighted perspectives. These pathways must be supported and adjusted all the way through and well-coordinated among the involved professionals and other key persons (parents, peers, mentors etc.). The roles of the professionals include systemizing and reducing the complexity of the individuals' problems, and helping them to organize, plan and stay on their pathways.

In particular, there is increasing attention to the fragile transitions of the young peoples' pathways, such as between educational and work phases, as well as between phases in the young person's personal life (first own home or workplace, broken or new relationships, bodily or other changes).

Almost always, several public institutions are involved in the NEET cases, and often also the private and the civil sectors. However, in these very heterogeneous settings, different professional approaches can easily clash. Disagreements or misunderstandings can arise between, on the one hand, professionals working with a strong youth perspective (pedagogical work, guidance counselling) and, on the other hand, profes-

sionals whose work processes represent vocational requirements (VET teaching, employment counselling). Clashes can typically also occur between professionals who mainly work with bureaucracy (legislation, documentation etc.) versus mainly with financial disposals (social expenses) versus mainly in the pedagogical/psychological field (Mik-Meyer 2017).

The professionals themselves often express a desire for aligning approaches and methods (Lamscheck-Nielsen 2020). But in the long run, this is neither realistic nor advantageous for the NEETs, who need the benefits from all fields (Mik-Meyer 2017). It is found that it can ease the professionals' daily work to focus on the benefits of each other's approaches and accept their diversity (*ibid*). Achieving balance and synergy can be promoted through constant exchange or even negotiations. In order for this to succeed, professionals must attain knowledge of each other's work conditions (procedures, legislation etc.), resources, languages (terms), approaches and methods. An increased transparency can become the basis for further joint development. As a commonly created language, the "Taxonomy for Youth Progression" (section 3.2.) was found valuable for increasing the mutual understanding.

5.2 'Chain responsibility' and 'scout'

In the framework of the Danish projects, the term 'Chain Responsibility' was fostered. The concept encompasses not only cross-professional work within the same institutions, but also cross-sectoral collaboration between municipalities and psychiatry (Regions of Denmark) and especially with VET colleges and other upper secondary education (Danish Ministry of Education). These stakeholders are the primary links in the chain around the NEETs, together with the NEETs' important personal connections, and supplemented with secondary stakeholders such as companies, leisure time organizations etc. Quality criteria for 'chain responsibility' have emerged from this still ongoing work, and a Danish research study will be published late 2022. An important player in this setting is the 'scout' (own term in 'Youth in transition'), a professional with a double role: The 'scout' is both a close contact person for the individual NEETs (a guiding counsellor regarding their pathways) and has an authorized coordinating role in the 'chain' around the NEETs. Local implementation depends on local organizational capacities as well as the needs of the individual NEETs.

6 Conclusions

All over Europe, far too many young people without education and job (NEETs) are stuck in their situation or find it worsened. Specifically, NEETs who are characterized by multiple mutually reinforcing problems, are in constant danger of drop-out or worsened personal circumstances. As a consequence, their chances for a satisfying life in norm society are minimized dramatically. In spite of innumerable initiatives for this highly heterogenous group, the alarming figures have not decreased significantly over the past decades. Instead, this paper points at the need for early, long-term, well-coordi-

nated and consistent interventions, which include personal support and focus on individual progression.

In the framework of the European project 'Youth in transition', 'Vocational Maturity' has been identified as a yet underexposed step on the individual's pathway to education and/or job. This step was outlined as a phase in a fine-meshed taxonomy for youth progression towards entering and remaining in a VET programme or the 'world of work'.

The project resulted in an interactive tool for NEETs' self-evaluation of vocational maturity, to be applied in dialogue with a professional. The tool helps to visualize progression on individual basis and to support reflection and decision-making processes. The concept was developed and tested with 168 NEETs in Denmark, Slovenia and Iceland, qualified by researchers from the University of Hamburg.

The crucial principles for the use of the tool encompass balancing the perspective of the 'world-of-work' with the 'youth perspective' of the individual's strengths, needs and dreams. Furthermore, the situation of the individual must be considered through a present perspective, a retrospective and a prospective. Finally, professionals must support the self-evaluation by concretizing and contextualizing the content of the tool to the young persons' specific situations and their vocational goals. Based on the feedback from NEETs and professionals in the 3 countries, operational and practice-directed pedagogical recommendations for the use of the tool have been identified.

For purposeful work with NEETs, cross-professional and cross-sectoral settings are needed. A joint focus on the individual's pathway can promote this collaboration and counteract typical dilemmas. Organizational skills and authorized coordination are needed, especially in transition phases, and combined with competent guidance of the NEETs.

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