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## Conclusions and Discussion

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# 11 Conclusions and Discussion

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## 11.1 Study findings

This volume has attempted to go beyond existing research on young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEETs), addressing some of the important limitations that had remained largely unexplored to date. We have attempted to tease out the heterogeneity in life-course patterns, individual and institutional correlates, and later consequences of prolonged NEET statuses. In doing so, we have added to a new literature tackling longitudinal descriptions of individual life trajectories and pathways through NEET statuses (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2018; Contini et al., 2019; Giret et al., 2020) but from a novel comparative perspective. Indeed, our life-course perspective enabled us to consider how NEET patterns are both shaped by earlier life experiences and are themselves defining characteristics that influence later income and occupational statuses. Finally, our multi-faceted comparative analyses also allowed us to explore and discuss how national and global opportunity structures affect youths' lives in different contexts (Holte, 2018; Holte et al., 2019).

We argued that this was necessary to distinguish more at-risk NEET youth from those requiring less policy attention. Our research underscores the heterogeneity of NEET youth (Furlong, 2006, 2007) and lends support to the notion that NEET in its broadest sense is not a sociologically meaningful category. While often viewed as more vulnerable, persistently inactive, and less responsive to policy initiatives than unemployed youth, we find that not all NEETs are equally disadvantaged and that most NEETs (re-)enter the educational system or labour market within a ten-year period. Thus, only a small proportion of youth remain in a NEET status long-term. Indeed, we find that less than 18% of youth with at least one month of NEET in the Netherlands, about 13% in France, about 12% in Germany, and just shy of 20% in England should be considered problematic because of extended or later occurring but long NEET pathways. This percentage is quite a bit higher in Japan, where more young people with one month of NEET status or more are engaged in these prolonged NEET pathways (32%). However, generally, from this longitudinal perspective, we argue that NEET spells are best understood as part of the normal school-to-work (STW) transition. Thus, for the vast majority of youth, being NEET is not a long-lasting pathway, but rather a short, transitory life stage.

The central research goals of our research project were threefold. We aimed to outline different longitudinal patterns of being NEET across our sample of countries using a life-course perspective. Another objective was to identify individual predictors of NEET status in different countries, exploring how individual characteristics and countries' institutions and policies interact to explain why young people are more likely to become NEET in certain countries and less in others. Finally, we intended to identify some of the key consequences of being NEET, and how this differed across countries.

To accomplish these objectives, we used longitudinal national databases from the five countries in our core country sample. We used register data from the Social Statistical Database (SSD) of Statistics the Netherlands (CBS) (Bakker et al., 2014), retrospective longitudinal data from the German National Education Panel Study (NEPS) (Blossfeld et al., 2011b), longitudinal labour market entry data from the *Génération* survey of the French Centre for Research on Education, Training and Employment (*Céreq*) (Joseph et al., 2008), longitudinal secondary school cohort data from Next Steps (formerly known as the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England) in England (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2018), and data from the Longitudinal Survey of Adults in the 21st century conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare. In addition, we used the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) data to conduct cross-national analyses on a larger sample of countries to tease out interactions between micro and macro variables at the individual and country levels and test the generalizability of our findings.

## 11.2 Cross-national differences in individual determinants of NEET

Based on existing literature, it was clear that many different micro-level explanations would be required when attempting to predict NEET statuses. We found that multiple complementary factors each explained a piece of the puzzle of this diverse category of youth, including educational attainment, gender, health, immigration status, growing up with parents of low socio-economic status (SES), and living in poor housing. We used our in-depth analyses of different types and patterns of NEET in various countries to predict how these variables related to different NEET patterns. These individual factors played different roles in each of the five country case studies in this volume, with several key commonalities emerging from our analyses.

Our main findings from these country analyses are:

- A brief period as NEET is in most cases a part of the normal STW transition.
- Only a relatively small subgroup of those that experience a period as NEET, remain NEET for a long time.
- These long-term NEETs are the most vulnerable and experience the most scarring effects.

- Low SES, low educational attainment, truancy, early school leaving, and bad health are associated with long-term NEET risks in the various countries we studied.
- Women who have children are more likely to become long-term or late NEET, but not men.

### 11.2.1 The Netherlands

The Dutch case study in [Chapter 2](#) uncovered six longitudinal patterns in youth NEET statuses in the STW transition. The largest group of youth followed a typical higher education trajectory after leaving secondary education, with very short and infrequent NEET episodes. Three other large groups experienced different STW-patterns through vocational education and training (VET), either through the classical vocational training trajectory, finding employment relatively soon after secondary education and some vocational training, or first attending VET then higher education and then transitioning to the labour market. Two distinctive groups showed patterns dominated by NEET. Long-term NEET youth often became NEET right after secondary education and failed to integrate into the labour market. Late NEET most often participated in some VET, experienced short spells of employment, and then ended up NEET.

In the Netherlands, women were more likely than men to experience Long-term and Late NEET patterns than men. Women with children were not more likely to be Long-term NEET but were more likely to become Late NEET, consistent with the Dutch social norm of making the transition into motherhood at relatively older ages. This suggests that motherhood does not lead to long-term disengagement in this context, although it does indeed represent a penalty in the labour market and reflects the continued dominance of the male breadwinner model. Migrants also more often experienced Late NEET, but not Long-term, NEET trajectories, and those whose father was not employed had a higher risk of becoming both Late NEET and Long NEET.

Overwhelmingly, early school-leavers (without a diploma) were much more likely to follow both problematic NEET trajectories in the Netherlands, and this was the strongest predictor of problematic transitions. We described the Netherlands as having a highly stratified educational system with a rather strong vocational orientation that tracks early into many discrete tracks and selects students through standardized high stakes tests. Our analyses suggested that in this context, early school-leavers are much more likely to be NEET for at least a month, but also that having a vocational education does not necessarily protect against being NEET. While those with a VET qualification were less likely to find themselves in problematic NEET trajectories, we saw that *unfinished* VET education was an important correlate of a Long NEET trajectory. While these two types of pathways are driven by different life-course impetuses, they both have important scarring effects in the Netherlands: at age 30 years, those young people who were either Long-term

NEET or Late NEET had a considerably lower monthly salary than those who follow more standard trajectories.

### 11.2.2 Germany

The German case study in [Chapter 3](#) hypothesized that due to the conservative German welfare state and its traditional orientation towards the male-breadwinner model, women would be more engaged in family care and, therefore, make up a higher share of long-term NEET. We also expected that disadvantaged groups such as migrant and low-qualified youth would experience more NEET periods and longer NEET durations. These differences in individual characteristics of gender, origin and children stood out starkly. Mothers, youth born abroad, and low qualified had a higher probability of reporting NEET status. On the other hand, holding an upper secondary degree (Abitur/FH) and having a father with a higher level of education decreased the probability of experiencing NEET. Since the German data allow a comparison across time, we also find that younger cohorts clearly are more affected by NEET experience than older cohorts, which supports the deregulation hypothesis as well as the de-standardization of life-courses.

Eight separate NEET patterns were distinguished, with three of these suggesting problematic STW transitions: an exit pattern (late NEET), where people dropped out of VET or employment and remained NEET afterwards, a secondary school dropout pattern (long NEET), where school-leavers did not even start a labour market integration process, and a back-and-forth pattern (discontinuity), comprised of many changes between different activity statuses, including NEET. The ‘classical’ trajectories (long VET, short VET) accounted for half of the NEET trajectories, emphasizing the structured nature of the German education and transition system.

The risks of falling into a Late or Long NEET pathway were particularly high for women with children. Young mothers had a much higher probability of entering the labour market via a pattern with Long NEET periods and – to a lower extent – via the Long NEET pathway or repeated NEET pattern. They also showed much longer cumulative NEET lengths. Thus, the gender effect mentioned above can be more specifically identified as a mother effect in Germany, as was the case in the Netherlands as well. Youth born abroad were also more likely to enter the labour market via patterns involving long NEET periods or an unstable trajectory (discontinuity or repeated NEET) and not by classical institutional pathways (long VET, short VET). Younger cohorts were more likely to report NEET statuses but did not show more risk of explicitly problematic NEET trajectories. Traditional labour market entry patterns through VET study were also less common in these more recent cohorts, where university pathways become more dominant along with higher educational expansion.

In terms of outcomes of NEET in Germany, occupational statuses at age 30 years were affected by the NEET pattern itself as well as by cumulative

NEET length and educational level. Youth with university credentials had higher occupational statuses than others and did not appear to experience negative repercussions from short NEET periods during their STW transition. Surprisingly, the effect of NEET length on occupational status for males was *positive*, while it was negative (as would be expected) for women. Youth in the discontinuity pathway also had a higher occupational status at the age of 30 years. We hypothesized that this may reflect a sort of adaptive flexibility in the job market: these youth may have been able to upskill and adjust their qualifications more often than other youth who remained in the same job.

Overall, NEET in Germany was found to be mainly female and strongly connected to family formation. We suggested that policy recommendations should be retargeted away from their conventional focus on inactive youths and dropouts in Germany and towards young mothers.

### 11.2.3 France

The French case study in [Chapter 4](#) described France's strongly academically oriented educational system, which is characterized by internal stratification based on types of *baccalauréats*, and its largely 'insider' labour market, which disadvantages young people and the least qualified. We argued that a gendered occupational structure continues to exist in France today, even though family policies, social norms, and childcare provisions are more advantageous than in many other countries. Based on this institutional context, we hypothesized that young women with children, and youths with immigration backgrounds, lower socio-economic statuses, living in sub-urban or rural areas, and youths who performed less well early in their educational trajectories would have higher probabilities of reporting NEET statuses and remaining NEET for longer periods of time. We were unsure of the effect of apprenticeships, based on the existing literature.

In our logistic regression model predicting the probability of experiencing at least one month of NEET status, we found that those who repeated at least one grade before entering middle school, and those whose parents were not born in France were significantly more likely to experience at least one month of NEET status. On the other hand, those with children, those who had at least one parent with a professional occupational status, those who completed an apprenticeship, and those with mothers who were employed when the individual left the educational system were less likely to report at least one month of NEET status in the ten-year period.

In our classification of the trajectories of those individuals who experienced at least one month of NEET status, we identified five distinct types: Long Higher Education, Short Higher Education, Return to Formal Education or Training, Direct-to-Employment, and Long-term NEET. Our 'Long-term NEET' cluster showed a cluster membership of youth with lower socio-economic statuses and educational levels, along with young mothers and men who had not participated in an apprenticeship at the end of

secondary schooling. We found that women only had a higher probability of entering the NEET trajectory when they have a child during their studies (a moderated effect of gender by childbirth). However, this effect was relatively small, while the effects of grade repetition before middle school, mother's employment status, and immigration background were much stronger. However, later analyses showed that women with children also tended to have more accumulated months of NEET status.

Parental employment statuses were important predictors and having an employed mother in particular reduced the risk of falling into a NEET-dominated pathway. We interpreted this as suggesting that female labour market participation may have a significant cross-generational effect on long-term NEET statuses in France (Berloff et al., 2017). Having at least one parent who works in a white-collar or professional occupation and participating in an apprenticeship programme were also protective against long-term NEET pathways. In contrast, having inactive or unemployed parents, as well as those from working-class or immigrant backgrounds, increased the chances of following a long-term NEET trajectory. Overall, regional characteristics appeared to have a relatively weak impact.

When looking at outcomes of NEET statuses and patterns, monthly income after seven years in the labour market significantly differed by both the qualitative cluster groups and the quantitative cumulative NEET length indicator. These indicators both had a strong negative impact on earnings. These findings underscore the difficulties that the one in ten young people in France who experienced NEET-dominated STW transitions face. While these youth are characterized by a diversity of situations that require different policy responses, a focus on promoting young mothers' employment opportunities through childcare and information campaigns and addressing social inequalities within the educational system will have cross-generational benefits and remain key to solving the 'problem' of NEET youth in France.

#### **11.2.4 England**

In the English context, as described in [Chapter 5](#), NEET pathways unfold within an institutional context where, unlike in the other European countries in this book, there is no established vocational route prior to the end of compulsory secondary schooling and where – similar to France – VET continues to have a second-class status amongst students and parents as compared to academic qualifications. However, lower levels of employment protection legislation (EPL) and high job turnover also mean that youth can transition out of unemployment relatively quickly. Similar to the case in the Netherlands, childcare availability and costs are a significant barrier to entering the labour force. These contextual features led us to expect that while the experience of being NEET would generally be short-term, for some female NEETs this might be lengthier and involve having childcare responsibilities and not actively searching for work.

Specifically, we hypothesized that vocational education would not be protective against NEET statuses nor provide a significant route out of being NEET. We argued that NEET should be seen predominately as a transitory stage before employment and security. Finally, we predicted that childcare would make women, rather than men, more likely to embark on a long-term NEET pathway.

We found that those who experience at least one month of NEET status are more likely to have had a child, to be less educated but more likely to have participated in VET and have a lower socio-economic background. In terms of patterns in STW transitions for those with at least one spell of being NEET, we identified five clusters of trajectories, which we described as 'Higher Education', 'Into Employment', 'Further Education', 'Long-Term NEET' and 'Unstable Employment'. These clusters notably overlap with those found in France. The first three clusters are characterized by very few months of NEET, but rather a more or less neat transition from school or higher education into employment. The Unstable Employment group have relatively low education attainment and is typified by many different short spells of different activity and frequent shifts between employment and NEET status, like we saw in the 'Discontinuity' cluster in Germany. However, in the English context, this is the cluster with the highest share engaged in VET, which was a 'Traditional' pathway in the German context. Finally, as in the other countries, we find a Long-Term NEET cluster of youth who are NEET for the majority of the time period we examined.

The strongest findings relate to gender and having children: women without children were less likely than men to report at least one month of NEET status, but women with children had triple the risk of being NEET. In terms of patterns in NEET statuses, women with children were much more likely to end up in a Long-Term NEET pathway than men and these risks were larger if the woman had a child at a younger age. For men, we found no such differences. This corroborates other findings in the UK that suggest that childcare is key to the over-representation of young women in NEET.

In contrast to the findings in the Netherlands and Germany, VET completion was not a safeguard against experiencing NEET statuses. Those who did vocational training at any point during their early adult years were no less likely to be NEET for at least one month over the study time period and those who had completed VET were more likely to belong to the Cyclers cluster, who tended to experience difficulties finding stable employment.

In terms of the outcomes of NEET pathways, English youth with at least one month of NEET status had a higher chance of not being employed at the age of 25 years, or if they were employed, it was more likely to be precarious and lower paid. They were also more likely to report lower life satisfaction and worse health at age 25 years, have a lower adult identity score, and report feeling less in control of their lives. The consistency of these findings across the different trajectories suggests that even the experience of having been NEET for only one month – without a drawn-out period – has lasting effects.



Two-fifths of the youth who experienced NEET statuses did not show the relatively smooth transition towards employment that we had hoped to see: instead, they tended to either cycle between short spells in education, training, employment and being NEET, or experience extended periods of NEET after short spells in employment or further education. This latter group represents the key policy target group and are unlikely to be affected by labour market flexibility. Rather, this finding underscores the need for affordable childcare and preventative physical and mental health interventions to stem long-term economic inactivity amongst English youth.

### 11.2.5 Japan

In [Chapter 6](#), we investigated problematic NEETs in the very idiosyncratic transition-system in Japan. In Japan, the STW transition is characterized by very strong institutional linkages, and a relatively closed job market in which firms recruit school-leavers at universities. This system ensures a relatively efficient allocation of school-leavers to vacant jobs but also provides a barrier for those that do not make the cut directly.

To contribute to this book, we deviated from normal research practices on Japanese marginalized youths, and used a harmonized definition of NEET, which allowed us to for the first time compare Japanese jobless youth with comparable youths in other countries. It also allowed us to paint a more complete picture of Japanese vulnerable youth than is normally given. This is due to the very specific definition of vulnerable youth commonly used in Japan. Whereas in other countries, the NEET definition is commonly used, Japanese policy-makers forewent the NEET category for a more specific definition of so-called Niito. The Niito definition excludes unemployed youth and married women. This definition has cultural roots that overestimate the ease with which unemployed can find jobs and also reflects strict traditional gender norms. By studying NEETs and not Niito, we are better able to describe all youth non-employment and understand its transformation before and after the Japanese economic downturn. As such we are able to clearly illustrate the divided gender structure of the Japanese labour market and observe the way joblessness in Japan is transforming.

Our analyses showed that Japanese school-leavers are less likely to become NEET if they are higher educated, but that higher educated school-leavers are increasingly likely to become NEETs. Our sequence analyses on NEETs allowed us to distinguish five NEET clusters, namely HE (Higher Education), Later NEETs, Long-term NEETs, Short-term NEETs with no higher education, and Short term NEETs with higher education. We drew four general conclusions.

First, we pick up signals from slowly shifting gender norms. Japanese women still tend to become Later NEETs. However, we also found that Later NEETs are less probable in recent cohorts, which we interpret as a manifestation of the gradual transformation of gender divisions in Japanese society.

We also observed a relatively large decrease of female Long-term NEETs, which also probably reflects the transformation of the existing gender norms. Various other changes in NEET patterns among the recent cohort also suggest that gender-based differences in individuals' NEET experience are reducing in Japan. For example, we see that women are increasingly likely among highly educated NEETs and Short-term NEETs. However, having a child still sharply increases the risk of becoming Later and Long-term NEETs, but only for women.

Second, we could make an interesting observation about Long-term NEETs. Contrary to what we expected, the youth who remain NEET for a long time (Long-term NEETs) were not more likely among younger cohorts. Rather, we found the opposite, which would indicate that Long-term NEETs are not a recent phenomenon but have been existing in Japanese society for a long time. It also suggests that the emergence of Long-Term NEETs is not, or at least not only, related to economic downturns.

Third, we found that the number of highly educated NEETs is increasing among men and women. Educational expansion increased the number of highly educated NEETs and Short-term NEETs with higher educational backgrounds. Finally, we studied the long-term consequences of becoming NEET in Japan by studying length and income at age 30 years. We found that higher education still protects against longer NEET spells, but also that there is a negative effect long-term effect of childbirth that applies only to females. We also found considerable scarring effects of being Long-term or Later NEET, in the sense that they have a much lower income at age 30 years than the other groups. The size of scarring effects do not differ between men and women in general, but women with children are much less-well off at age 30 years, in terms of their income.

### **11.3 Institutional effects on NEET**

In the introduction to this volume, we argued that NEET needs to be viewed as an emergent process that cannot be reduced to either individual characteristics or institutional environments, but instead is shaped by an interplay between the two. Important differences in NEET rates, longitudinal patterns, and individual determinants of NEET statuses make clear the need for additional theories incorporating contextual effects to predict probabilities of reporting NEET across countries. Our longitudinal data analysis therefore leaves room to recognize that life-courses and decisions are affected by various institutional configurations. The ten-year periods of youths' lives that we describe are also reflections of the societal context in which they take place. To address this interplay, we examined key institutional characteristics that may lead to increased probabilities of long-term NEET periods in youth and young adulthood. We combined these macro variables with individual-level data from the PIAAC. We then tested several key theoretical insights from education, labour economics, and sociology using cross-national analyses to

determine how NEET risks and patterns depend on individual characteristics and their interaction with institutional configurations.

### **11.3.1 Education system characteristics**

First, we focused on the education system, analysing the extent to which it succeeds in promoting labour market engagement for youth – or rather reducing the number of youths who experience long-term periods of NEET status – through its stratification, vocational orientation, and institutional linkages. We hypothesized that in countries with higher levels of these three institutional characteristics, young people would be less likely to become long-term NEET. We also predicted that young people with vocational credentials would be particularly protected against long-term NEET periods in countries with higher institutional linkages. Thus, countries in our key sample with a well-established VET system, high on these three measures, particularly Germany and the Netherlands, should show lower NEET risks for youth in general and particularly those with a VET qualification.

We found support for our hypotheses when examining the five countries in our case study sample. The higher the level of stratification and vocational orientation within a country, the less likely young people were to become long-term NEET. In terms of interactions with individual characteristics, we found that lower levels of stratification increased the probability that low-educated youths reported long-term NEET statuses, and that higher levels of vocational orientation reduced gender differences in these probabilities (as mentioned earlier, young women are significantly more likely to report long-term NEET statuses). When focusing on young people with a vocational degree, we found that countries with higher institutional linkages – in other words, where vocational programmes are more work-based – had lower likelihoods of long-term NEET periods in our five-country sample. However, these relationships were no longer significant in the sample including 26 OECD countries. The only exception was for young women in highly stratified education systems, who were significantly more likely to become long-term NEET as compared to young men in these contexts than in contexts where the education system was less stratified.

### **11.3.2 Labour market institutions**

Next, we examined labour market policies in relation to long-term NEET. We again analyse three different country-level characteristics: the level of permanent EPL; general spending on different types of active labour market policies (ALMPs), including enabling and enforcing ALMPs; and labour market arrangements, which are categorized as internal labour markets (ILM) or occupational labour markets (OLM). We hypothesized that youth would be more likely to report long-term NEET periods in countries with stricter levels of EPL, such as Germany and the Netherlands, due to their outsider

status in the labour market. We expected that high spending on ALMPs, such as is the case in the Netherlands, France, and Germany, would lower NEET risks. Finally, we predicted that young people living in OLM-countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, would be less likely to become long-term NEET than those in ILM-countries, such as France, Japan, and the UK, because they have less difficulties when entering the job market due to enhanced matching processes based on standardized, vocationally specific qualifications.

We found moderate support for our hypotheses. In our five-country analyses, we found that higher levels of EPL, higher spending on ALMPs and OLM labour market organization were indeed associated with a decreased probability of long-term NEET. Furthermore, these institutional factors interacted with individual characteristics. The significant differences in the probabilities of reporting long-term NEET statuses between young women and men were reduced in contexts with high levels of enabling ALMPs but were augmented in contexts with higher spending on enforcing ALMPs. Importantly, this suggests that policy initiatives directed at young women – and the young mothers we described in each of our country findings – might benefit from focusing on enabling rather than enforcing measures to address this key NEET sub-group.

However, when we enlarge our sample to 29 OECD countries, the results are less clear-cut. While spending on ALMPs remains a significant correlate of lower long-term NEET probabilities, levels of EPL and OLM versus ILM distinctions are no longer significant factors in explaining long-term NEET statuses. Spending on ALMPs thus emerges as the most robust finding, with varying effects for individual youth depending on their gender and educational attainments. As spending on ALMPs increases, NEET probabilities become more similar between young women and men. This suggests rising gender equality, however, in contrast, disparities in the probabilities of reporting long-term NEET between different education levels become larger with more ALMP spending, suggesting greater educational inequality. Thus, policies helping one group may hinder another, highlighting the complex nature of directing and optimizing policy responses.

### ***11.3.3 Family policies***

In our final set of analyses on institutional configurations, we concentrated on two types of family policies: job-protected leave schemes and the affordability of childcare services. These types of policies appear to be central based on our findings in the country chapters: in all contexts, women with children faced significantly greater chances of belonging to a prolonged NEET pathway, particularly for entering extended NEET patterns late in young adulthood. Leave schemes allow parents to leave the labour market temporarily to take care of their children while ensuring that they can return to their previous job (or an equivalent one). We hypothesized that young people living

in countries with longer leave schemes (e.g., maternity, paternity, parental) would be less likely to become long-term NEET because they would be less likely to leave their job or education to take care of their children. Affordable childcare services allow parents to combine family and professional responsibilities. In countries where childcare is more affordable, we expected that young people would be better able to access these services and thus less likely to become long-term NEET. We noted in the English country chapter that childcare costs are very expensive in the UK, and much more so than in the rest of Europe.

Contrary to our hypothesis, youth in countries where women had access to longer maternity leaves were actually *more* likely to become long-term NEET. This suggests that these longer leaves do weaken labour market attachment, as was suggested in the German country chapter. This suggests that despite having safeguarded a particular job, young women still suffer from the effects of human capital depreciation and experience loss. While the total length of paid maternity and parental leave was significantly related to lower NEET risks in our five-country sample, this was not generalizable to the larger country sample of OECD countries. Lower childcare costs were significantly associated with lower long-term NEET risks in our 5-country but not our 28-country analyses. Interactions with individual characteristics were, however, significant, with education inequalities in long-term NEET statuses becoming more pronounced in countries with higher childcare costs. This is likely related to the fact that more educated youth earn higher incomes and are thus better able to pay elevated childcare costs. This points again to the complex interrelations between various individual and institutional factors, where different policies promote certain forms of equality and diminish others. Disengaged youth in long-term NEET pathways with low education will not be responsive to the same institutional incentives as young mothers with higher levels of education, nor will the same policy measures reach both of these target groups. Thus, policy responses must also be diverse enough to reach the multiple sub-populations of NEET youth highlighted in this volume.

## 11.4 Policy implications

We emphasized the heterogeneous nature of NEET status, capturing not only youth unemployment, but also disengagement and social exclusion, throughout this volume. Our country chapters showed that NEET patterns are incredibly diverse, but all linked to significantly poorer outcomes after ten years. This fact poses great challenges for effective policy responses.

Existing policies in our five case study countries can be characterized along numerous dimensions. First, we can distinguish ‘preventive’ and ‘reintegration’ programmes. ‘Preventive’ policies attempt to reduce the likelihood of disengagement at a later stage. These may include good quality Early Childhood Education and Care; tracking and supporting groups of

young people that have been identified as being ‘at risk,’ including offering financial support; allowing multiple pathways through school, in particular in vocational programmes; and raising the participation age at which young people can leave education or training. Some examples included the *Aanvalsplan Voortijdig Schoolverlaten* (Attack Plan Early School Leaving) in the Netherlands and the *Mission de lutte contre le décrochage scolaire* (Mission to Combat School Dropout) in France. Differences in the success of these two programmes may be linked to the crucial step of identifying and following young people through data collection. However, this also requires a shared understanding of why individuals are being monitored and the use of this information to create programmes that meet the needs and abilities of specific groups. Our German example showed another way in which preventative policies can be integrated into a state’s institutional fabric: the so-called third pillar of German VET system, the transition systems including measures such as the ‘ausbildungsbegleitende Hilfe’ (abH) prepares school-leavers for the labour market with additional learning opportunities, language training and social pedagogical assistance.

In contrast, reintegration programmes attempt to re-engage those youth who are already NEET. These policies often take the form of various ALMPs and may include job-search assistance; training programmes; subsidized employment; direct job creation and public employment programmes; and start-up subsidies, self-employment assistance and support. Some examples included the *Ecoles de la deuxième chance* (E2C) in France and the New Deal for Young People (NDYP) in the UK. However, these programmes tend to work best for those who are the ‘labour market ready’ but are often ineffective for the most disadvantaged groups. Harder-to-reach groups require further re-engagement strategies, such as outreach services, pre-vocational programmes, multi-element programmes, and follow-up systems. An important problem may be just identifying the eligible population, as was highlighted in the case of early school-leavers as well. One potential solution was brought to light in the UK case study, where charities play a large role in finding and helping groups that might otherwise not be reached.

Thus, current policy directions risk completely overlooking certain NEET sub-groups, including the economically inactive (EI) and young women with children. Indeed, the term ‘NEET’ may even hide them – and their unique needs – from view. While the size of NEET problem differs strongly between our case study countries, varying from very low in the Netherlands, Germany and Japan to quite high in France and the UK, one constant across our analyses was the particular risk for young women with children to become NEET later in young adulthood. NEET policies often do not even try to address their unique challenges, which might hinge on policies such as one mentioned in the preventative strategies above: affordable and good quality Early Childhood Education and Care. These types of policies would ‘hit two

birds with one stone,’ by allowing one generation economic participation and encouraging a future generation’s participation. We provided some evidence for these types of policies in the chapter on family policy, where long maternity leaves tended to exacerbate labour market disconnection rather than protect against long-term NEET statuses, and [Chapter 4](#), where mothers’ labour force participation was shown to have a positive impact on young people’s labour market entry pathways in France.

This ‘motherhood’ effect was one of our key findings: although it varied in size, the gender-child nexus emerged in all countries as a strong predictor of NEET patterns. Our analyses of institutional configurations of family policies underscored that overly long maternity leaves may indeed exacerbate this problem. What is more, reducing childcare costs is only a partial solution: Individual levels of education will remain strongly determinate in predicting long-term NEET statuses across these contexts. Vocational education appears to be helpful in this regard, based on our comparative analyses. However, high levels of educational stratification, shown to be helpful for reducing long-term NEET overall, may indeed increase gender inequalities in NEET risks. Moreover, we also showed that enabling but not enforcing ALMPs reduced the long-term NEET risks of young women. These results warn against simple solutions. For example, encouraging individual human capital development through supportive measures remains as important as offering affordable and socially accepted childcare for young mothers, and the two need to be developed conjointly.

Another sub-group within the NEET concept is those youth who are EI due to psychological, health-related, social, or financial problems. These youth are ‘buried’ within the NEET term in all countries. In Japan, these youth are given the name Niito: they are unmarried, not seeking work, do not express a desire to work, and are not engaged in any kind of education or training. Multi-dimensional policy responses including housing and meals, social contact, and psychological counselling, such as those introduced by the Japanese government, may indeed help youth to build social connections and economic independence. This type of approach requires governments to invest sufficiently to reach these EI groups who need more than just work skills, but rather point to the need for affordable housing and nutrition, as well as publicly funded mental health programmes and professionals to address increasingly diverse aspects of ill health.

However, it is necessary to urge caution in focusing on vulnerable NEET sub-groups such as EI or young women with children as a policy target. Learning from the Japanese experience, just focusing these categories may also pose a risk. Niito in Japan has not been treated as societal problem but trivialized to the problem of their individual motivation or their own life choice (Honda et al. 2006). Society needs to understand that the heterogeneous nature of NEET is embedded in the institutions and policies of the society as discussed in this book.

### **11.5 Discussion: Limitations and topics for further research**

Our goals in this book were to:

- advance on common theoretical explanations that are adequate for explaining youth unemployment but fail to explain certain types of NEETs, such as the EI;
- use data that allow for distinguishing different NEET categories and age groups and conduct analyses on assumptions behind the NEET concept;
- analyse individuals becoming NEET as a dynamic process and not a single event, using longitudinal studies and sequence analyses;
- study the interplay of individual and institutional factors, which might affect the incidence and the age-specific risks of NEET periods, as well as the probabilities of short- and long-term durations of NEET-status.

To reach these goals, we proposed an approach in which we combined longitudinal analyses of STW transitions with cross-national analyses of institutional and policy effects. This approach has several limitations. First and foremost, the combination of different research techniques and data sources limits the extent to which we can formally compare the results of analyses from the different countries, and limits the extent to which we can use cross-national data to make inferences about the generalizability of conclusions from such comparisons. The ideal large-scale cross-nationally comparable longitudinal data sets that would be required to make formal inferences do not exist. We invested a lot of effort to harmonize the country datasets regarding scope and concepts, but a few differences remained, e.g. the opportunity to analyse different cohorts of graduates varies between datasets. Therefore, we cautioned against formally comparing the results from the country chapters and tried to carefully examine whether results from the countries were in line with theoretical expectations.

However, our conclusions would be much stronger if we could have analysed a more cross-nationally comparable longitudinal data set. The fact that there is no longitudinal comparative dataset available that includes information on NEET in all of the five countries of the analysis stays an obstacle for international comparisons, that needs to be addressed. Existing data sets form potential starting points. The 'European Union Statistics of Living and Income Conditions (EU-SILC)' provides longitudinal micro-data, but the rotating panel structure allows only observation windows of a maximum of four years, which is even insufficient for classifying NEET trajectories, not to mention short- or mid-term consequences. The Cross-National Equivalent File (CNEF), which ex-post combines a common set of variables from a set of national household panel surveys only covers nine countries so far. France and the Netherlands are among the not included countries. Researchers should aim to construct a large scale cross-nationally comparable data set with longitudinal information about STW trajectories.



Second, there are limitations related to the decisions we made when analysing our data. One consideration in this regard is for example related to the time period studied and its effects on our clusters in the longitudinal analyses. A significant portion of NEET youth, especially women, became NEET later in the STW transition. Since our data are right-censored by our ten-year time frame, these young people may actually be long-term NEET that do not in fact re-enter the labour market and might thus experience further problems later on. This can only be addressed by longitudinal research using even longer periods of time (and thus stretching beyond the traditional period of young adulthood included in the NEET definition). We could not do this here; the best we could do was reason that these ‘Late NEETs’ should be regarded as potentially vulnerable.

Another limitation regards the relatively limited explanatory power of our models. We aimed to predict and explain vulnerable NEET clusters in a series of multinomial regression models and were able to identify patterns in different countries. However, the number of potentially relevant explanatory variables in these models was limited, both because of data limitations, and because of our attempts to perform analyses that were as comparable as possible. This of course limits our understanding of the characteristics of vulnerable NEETs.

Finally, another important limitation regards the causal interpretation of our analyses. While we use one of the most comprehensive cross-nationally and cross-culturally comparative data sets on education, skills, and work, the cross-sectional data and the multilevel analyses we use to analyse them do not allow to formally identify causal effects of institutions and policies on long-term NEET risks. As such, we have to caution against a causal interpretation of the correlations in our models. We use the estimated parameters to help us understand whether institutions and policies could be expected to affect the STW-transition at all, and also to explore potential mechanisms.

These limitations imply that the research in this book should by no means be seen as the final word on NEETs. We see our main contribution in the observations that (a) not all NEETs are equally vulnerable and thus should not be treated as such, and (b) that the most vulnerable NEETs are very irresponsive to institutional or policy incentives.

We believe that further research should first and foremost focus on the most vulnerable NEETs. The NEET definition is too opaque and lumps together too many different groups of young people. By continuing to use the definition of NEET without making further qualifications about NEETs actual vulnerability, researchers that are interested in youth marginalization risk studying the wrong people. Distinguishing vulnerable NEETs from the others is therefore of crucial importance.

To increase our understanding of policy effectiveness, future research should focus on the causality issue that we could not address in this book. To build on our work and further the state-of-the-art, researchers may want to investigate the causal effect of policies and institutional reforms have on

the reintegration of vulnerable long-term and late NEETs, using appropriate experimental or quasi-experimental designs. The policy examples in this book may be useful as an important source of information on potentially relevant policies and institutions.

Furthermore, further research could more strongly delve into the relevance of specific economic conditions and how they change the impact of personal characteristics on the chances of being NEET. This is particularly relevant in light of economic crises, such as the Great Recession or the Covid-19 economic crisis. During the Great Recession in Ireland, education and nationality became more important factors for finding a job, while there was ‘a fall in the scarring impact of unemployment durations’ (Kelly and McGuinness, 2015, p. 59). This suggests that NEET status alone may lose some of its stigmatizing effects during periods of economic downturn, but social class effects may be exacerbated. These two forces may work in contrast: there is evidence of higher incidences of long-term unemployment for youth whose parents experienced unemployment in previous recessions, which creates new forms of societal polarization in the form of ‘family work history legacies’ (O’Reilly et al., 2015). Thus, while unemployment may lose its stigma for one generation, its cross-generational impacts may grow in importance. This will also be central to understanding the repercussions of the Covid-19 crisis on youth.

Furthermore, the increasingly important place of temporary and short-term work contracts creates inequalities between cohorts, where younger generations may also face scarring processes due to precarious employment (O’Reilly et al., 2015). However, perceptions of social disadvantage may paradoxically be more limited in recent years, due to the fact that ‘our subjective awareness of social structures has become increasingly obscured as collective approaches are displaced by individualist values, and young people are encouraged to conceptualize their biographies as the outcome of individual choice, aspiration or failure’ (Thompson, 2011, p. 787). These generalized global patterns interact with national contexts, in some cases exacerbating already existing challenges.

Moreover, more indicators are needed ‘to draw attention to the marginalization of the millions of youth working in poor quality employment,’ which cannot be characterized as a successful alternative to or exit from NEET status (Elder, 2015, p. 9). Such an indicator would capture the ‘vulnerable employment rate’ (Elder, 2015) and requires further development.

Likewise, exits from NEET status cannot always be considered a success story: research does not find that ‘any job is better than no job’ in terms of future earnings or quality of life (Voßemer et al., 2018). For example, when an unemployed youth accepts a job for which she or he is overeducated, monthly transition rates into adequate employment fall drastically, although this also depends on the elapsed unemployment duration (Baert et al., 2013). These findings are at odds with the ‘career mobility thesis’ and

suggest that ‘the short-term benefits of policies that generate quick transitions into employment must be traded-off against the long-term costs of an inadequate job match’ (Baert et al., 2013, p. 123). Furthermore, these risks operate in a global context of ‘overschooling,’ where ‘employers are increasingly demanding higher levels of education even for jobs that do not require much education’ in an intensified screening process (Bol, 2015, p. 108). However, these personal risks are often overlooked, and governments may even assume that young people are ‘avoiding’ permanent work, rather than searching unsuccessfully for stable employment, such as has been argued to be the case for ‘freeters’ in Japan (Inui, 2005, p. 244).

## **11.6 To conclude**

This book aimed to add to scholarship in youth Not in Employment, Education, or Training, which remains an important target group for policy-makers. All throughout the book, we hinted that the categorization of youths as NEET maybe problematic in itself. The focus on NEET status is based on ‘a conception of social exclusion in which the central policy focus is on moving young people across a boundary between participation and non-participation,’ while ‘inequalities within education and employment receive less attention’ (Thompson, 2011, p. 785). As we have suggested, the ‘muddled’ nature of the NEET category is useful to governments: by lumping different types of inactive youth together, they can make improvements while only addressing the easiest and most superficial problems of a select part of this group, and turning a blind eye to the rest of more systemic and hard-to-solve problems (Jongbloed and Giret 2021).

To further the debate about the usefulness of the NEET definition, the longitudinal analyses in this book serve to demonstrate that most NEET spells are best understood as part of the normal STW transition. This indicates that not all school-leavers who experience a period as NEET are actually vulnerable. Indeed, by far the most who experience NEET eventually find jobs or find their way to education. However, we also show that there exist a sizable group of long-term NEETs in each of the countries. While this group has slightly different characteristics in each of the countries, what they have in common is that long-term NEET pathways involve serious scarring effects.

If governments aim to aid vulnerable, marginalized youth, these long-term NEETs should be the focus of policies. But our book also suggests that it will be hard to help long-term NEET back on track. The cross-national analyses in our book suggest that long-term NEETs are remarkably resistant to institutional configurations and government policies. While we did find that some institutional characteristics and policies may be predictive of long-term NEET risks, the overall picture suggests that long-term NEETs will be hard to reintegrate.

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