

GUIDELINES

ASSISTED

TRAINING SCHEME

Part III:

Challenges, defining the target group and recommendations



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1. Who are the NEETs?

Target group of the It Works! project

1.1. Definition

The acronym NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) refers to a person who is unemployed and does not receive an education or vocational training.

1.2. Theory vs. reality

Education and training are essential pillars to the European. According to the European Commission “Widespread access to quality education and training is a driver of economic growth, social cohesion, research and innovation - and dramatically increases citizens' prospects for personal development” (EC, 2021a).

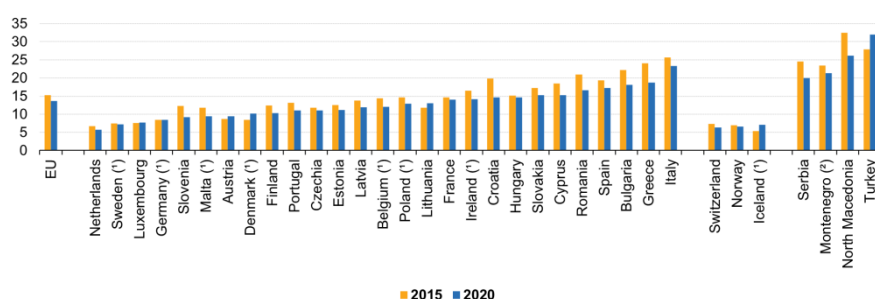
The responsibility for education and training systems lies with the Member States, *the role of the EU is to support and supplement their action*. In some countries the group of young people gets divided in different clusters by national legislation to ensure that everyone receives the needed / fitting form of assistance (*as further developed in [It Works Guidelines for Assisted Training Scheme Part II: State of the art - internships and VET activities for young people with difficulties](#)*). However, the term NEET is all the more established in policy papers and academic literature as a key concept to illustrate the number of young persons not in education, training and employment among the total youth population. Although there is considerable critique on the term’s vagueness, as it is used to describe a population heterogeneous by definition –it may as well include a young single mother without a job or qualifications and a young university graduate that takes his/her time to decide his/her professional path- , there is significant consensus that “[t]he term NEET entered into European policy debates as an additional indicator to facilitate a better understanding of young people’s vulnerabilities [...] concerning their labour market participation” (Mascherini, 2018).

The topic of NEETs is considered crucial for the EU member-states wellbeing and further development: a number of young people to be “left behind”, trapped in a state that combines disadvantage and disengagement goes against all EU principles and standards (O’Reilly, 2018). Following the Europe 2020 flagship initiative Youth on the Move (EC, 2010), the term became all the more central to EU’s policies and measures (Mascherini, 2018), the main reason for this being probably the “heuristic power” of the concept to include aspects of vulnerabilities and inequalities that would otherwise need extensive description each.

As part of our “It Works!” project, each partner had to run Focus Groups with local stakeholders – individuals active and experienced in the field of youth work – to test the applicability of the results produced along the project. The target group of the “It Works!” project being the NEETs, the Focus Groups process allowed us to gain information and knowledge on how this group is perceived by professionals and stakeholders; it also contributed to clarifying how these perceptions reflect on the actual implementation of measures taken to tackle the challenge that the NEET population group represents. In one of these Focus Groups, the stakeholders emphasized that in Germany young people who are neither in school, vocational training, education, nor in employment are hard to find. The school, vocational training and youth welfare system offer many forms of support, so that nearly no one is left without an offer.

Table 1.1

Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET), by country, 2015 and 2020
(% of population aged 15 to 29)



(*) Break(s) in time series between the two years shown.
(*) 2019 data (instead of 2020).
Source: Eurostat (online data code: sdg_08_20)

eurostat

At the opposite end of the spectrum, while the German colleagues found it hard to locate a NEET person in their region due to the availability of support, in Greece the “It Works!”

project was one of the very few projects implemented for this target group in the last decade. Furthermore, measures and policies of such objectives have not been funded or realized in any way since 2010 in Greece, although the country has the second highest rate in numbers of NEETs in the EU after Italy (Eurostat, May 2022). This, we think, is an example of how diverse the measures and support offered to NEETS are across Europe, reflecting perhaps the different kinds of welfare state existing in the EU. According to this typology, Greece is in the “sub protective” cluster as well as Italy, the two countries with the highest scores on NEET numbers, while Germany is classified as an “employment-centred” welfare state (Mascherini, 2018).

Theoretically no one shall be left behind as NEET, because of extensive offers and trainings available for each young person. However, when dealing with the reality, NEETs do exist! However, when dealing with the reality, NEETs do exist! And, sadly, there are figures to prove it (see Table 1.1). According to Eurostat, “13.1 % of the 15-29-year-olds in the EU in 2021 were neither in employment nor in education and training” (Eurostat, May 2022). More importantly perhaps, the diversity between member states is also reflected on this topic: “the proportion of 15-29-year-olds in the EU neither in employment nor in education and training in 2021 ranged from 5.5 % in the Netherlands to 23.1 % in Italy” (Eurostat, May 2022).

Again, this brings the question of the heterogeneity of the NEET population group: what kind of policy interventions should be designed to address the needs of such a diverse population? We must be

reminded at this point that the term is coined as a concept to include more than one social characteristics rather than demographic ones. All relevant studies agree that education is the main driver affecting the probability of being NEET. Also, young people with an immigration background are 68% more likely to become NEET compared to nationals (Mascherini 2018, ΚΑΝΕΠ ΓΣΕΕ , 2020).

As Mascherini (2018) puts it, NEET lies at the intersection of joblessness, discouragement and marginalization of youth. Taking this interpretation a bit further, other studies relate the impact and consequences implied by the NEET concept to marginalization, exclusion and disengagement, terms that allow for inclusion and re-engagement (Mascherini, 2018; Williamson, 2010), thus giving specific objectives to the policies that need to be designed.

1.3. Challenges in the work with NEETs – literature-based findings

NEET may indeed be an imprecise label when used pejoratively, implying the transfer of the weight that socio-economic factors have on a person's attitudes and choices to the person's character or personality. In the case of the "It Works!" project the term is used as a key concept that captures the impact that aspects of socio-economic and cultural conditions have on a young person's life trajectory. In accordance to literature suggestions that the term can define all young people who are not currently participating in the labour market or in education but the emphasis is put on vulnerable groups and those with accumulated disadvantages (including lower education levels, immigration background, health issues, young mothers, or young people with a difficult family background) (Mascherini, 2018), we focused on involuntary NEETs, with a focus on the correspondence between risk of social exclusion and NEET status. But only with naming them, and considering the problem of stigmatizing, we can give these young people a voice in the policy discourse, train professionals to appropriately work with them and develop fitting offers

One of the challenges in the work with NEETs is the transition from education/school to work.

The European Union has set an EU-level target stipulating that the share of young people neither in employment nor in education or training should be less than 9 % by 2030 (EC, 2021b). In 2021, an average of 13.1 % was identified as NEET within EU. However, there are differences between Member States as several countries have already reached the goal for 2030 (Eurostat, May 2022) while others fall considerably behind.

As indicated in literature, the symbolic space and time of "becoming a NEET" is when transitioning from education to work. Following the Eurostat findings, the younger the person the more usual it is that he/she is in school and not in employment and v.v. Following the same source, "in 2021, 10.9 % of young people aged 15–19 in the EU were both employed and in education and thus made use of this more flexible transition from education to work. The share rose to 19.6 % among those aged 20–

24, before falling somewhat for older age groups” (Eurostat, May 2022). Given the diversity among the EU member states, the research findings converge that even when well-functioning transition paths into education and employment or school-to-work transition policies are in place, their successful performance for all is questionable (O’Reilly et al., 2018): there are always these young students or apprentices or trainees that “don’t make it” to a job. They can be described as “having low motivation and aspiration, including lack of confidence, sense of fatalism, and low self-esteem” (Strelitz and Darton 2003; Mascherini, 2018) reflecting their disadvantaged social status and position. In other words, these are the “It Works!” target group.

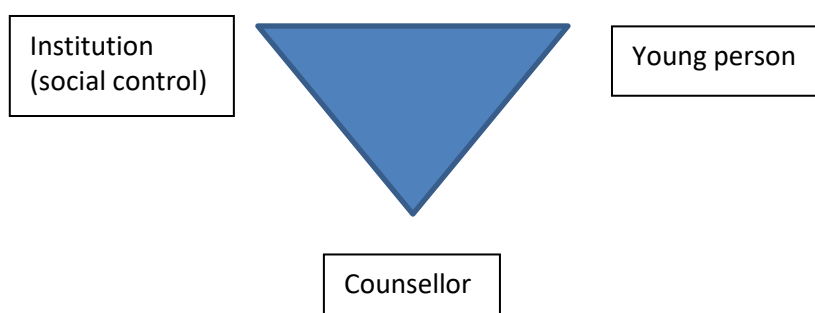
Non-formal adult education can provide adequate responses to address the multiple challenges underlying the transition from school to work for the NEET cases, especially when its principles and methods feed into established training forms: “At best, non-formal adult education as training is a dialectical and relational process of action and pedagogical principles that simultaneously builds skills, critical awareness, and participants’ self-confidence” (Suoranta et al., 2021). All it takes is to recognize the practical importance of basic/key skills.

One of the challenges in the work with NEETs is the coercive context.

A context in which young people are forced to participate in trainings / compulsory consultations goes hand in hand with motivation deficits and the question how to handle this as professionals.

The German psychologist, Dr. Marie-Luise Conen (2005), was researching solutions for involuntary behaviour. The popular question **how clients can get rid of helpers** is today the base of systemic specialist discourse on compulsory contexts. The question to face NEETs in compulsory contexts therefore should be: **How can I help you get rid of me?** To answer this question the young person is seen as expert of his situation. Therefore, in a coercive context he/she will try to get rid of his/her social worker / youth worker. The first step therefore is to find out the young person’s willingness to change.

To bring together the advocacy for the young person and the fix goal of incorporating into employment or a program is the challenge of triangulation:



The motivation of the young person is different from the motivation of those who criticize the respective behaviour on the basis of laws, case law or regulations. The order for change, which is addressed to the young person, is raised by an institution that is endowed with a corresponding mandate.

It is of central importance that the social / youth worker includes both perspectives (of the institution of social control and of the client) as legitimate in the work and contributes as a supporter and facilitator of communication between both sides. This also applies to contexts in which the professional is part of the control of an institution.

Especially in these contexts, it is useful if the social / youth worker includes the norms and rules of this institution in their interventions and at the same time takes the young person's autonomy seriously, as he/she largely determines the outcome of the dispute about compliance with the normative expectations.

At its core, working in coercive contexts is about increasing the number of opportunities for young people. This makes it possible to reshape the triangulation in the existing triangle and open up new options for action. In addition, more attention should be given to also "involving employers in policies that will enable and encourage them to employ young people, especially in difficult times (Grotti et al., 2018).

For the work with NEETs showing up their (vocational) opportunities and widening their horizon is the guideline for professionals, and always keeping in mind that we work with and for young people.

2. Challenges of running a project for this target group under the Covid-19 pandemic

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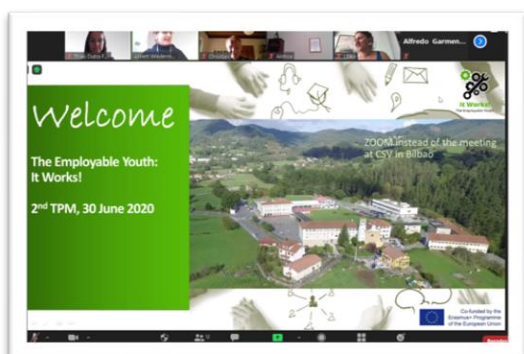
The Erasmus+ project “It Works!” had its first transnational project meeting in Athens (GR), on January 2020. Project partners from each organisation had two days to lay the foundation of the project and to clarify and decide what tasks should be achieved until the next transnational project meeting, planned to take place in June, 2020 in Bilbao.

The partners also specified how their different organisations supported unemployed youth in respective countries and presented the structure of each organisation, which elucidated common strengths and similarities. It was clear that great resemblance could be found, despite regional and national differences. The personal meeting with the youth, where national and international methods and tools were being used, showed how each partner had a well-structured organisation of support answering to their local challenges.



Yet, all partners agreed that an assembling of creative and well-functioned tools that could be used by other professionals in their meetings with disadvantaged young learners did not exist in Europe. Thus, the purpose with It Works!

Little did we know that the world was about to undergo a rapid and complete change in terms of social distancing.



During spring it became clear that the project partners should organise virtual meetings to keep the productivity in the project. The text aims to underline the difficulties and challenges in all the ways that the pandemic has affected the work with our project. It does however also show possible new ways of working with disadvantaged target groups.

This project aims at the creation of tools for employability and soft skills to support the youth along with a number of job placements for youngsters. The different countries within the “It Works!” project has, throughout the pandemic, been dealing with restrictions in very various ways. While Spain, UK, Greece and Germany were experiencing their first lockdown, Sweden was still focusing on finding job placements and carried out the work almost in the same way as before the pandemic. Such

differences in policymaking implicate uneven challenges for each project partner and have created specific difficulties for some partners, regardless of their starting point.

The second wave hit hard on the world, on each organisation, and each youth in the target group of “It Works!” with closed schools, working from home, distance learning, and little or no job placements for youngsters to be found. **Some partners found themselves in a situation where they had to focus on supporting their local youth and their family members, due to the serious effects of the pandemic.** The autumn of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 was a challenging time for “It Works!”.

At this time, consequences for the youth started to appear. **Being already a disadvantaged target group, national restrictions affected them in ways that many others could resist.** Some youngsters learn that distance learning has been of value to them due to their various needs of a self-dependent learning style. **Other youngsters, already isolated from the social context, are finding themselves socially excluded without being able to keep up with the formal learning because of the lack of support.** Many youngsters in vocational education and training have lost a job placement and are returning to be a NEET.

The It Works! project aims at enhancing the knowledge of the professionals (youth workers, educators, coaches and trainers) who work with NEETs through capacity building and training in order to be able to facilitate job placements for socially excluded youth. Numerous employments and job placements have been lost in the pandemic and the disadvantaged youth are not as able to compete on the labour market as others are.



This is well-known among all partners and is perhaps one of the reasons that the project group came through and launched their focus groups in digital and physical forms, depending on national restrictions.

Communicating about the project with other professional has been invaluable for the proceeding work. There’s an absolute consensus among partners and their local stakeholders regarding what type of support must be addressed for the youth, and what type of support the professional needs to grasp those tools and methods.



To run a completely digital project when the point is transnational learning has been challenging. We found that the lack of physical meetings demands an increase in digital meetings. **Digital growth will be an even more occurring field in our society, but it will not outnumber the need for real meetings where there’s always time for precision and clarification at a higher level.**

As goes for common target groups within European projects. **European professionals must develop new tools when supporting i.e. youngsters and immigrants to decrease the digital gap that may exclude them even more from a social context.** Such work is being discussed and thought of in It Works! but it will inevitably be of importance for future projects as well.

The organisations for formal learning could probably transform their teaching into more digital shapes but placing and training within VET activities include and assumes the power of the physical meeting. One of the key factors for each project partner is the individual meeting with each youth, and this is the area where we can structure our different functions to meet the needs of our youth.

Europe has undergone a mass vaccination and the partners of “It Works!” carefully planned the autumn of 2021 and what could be a full-on focus on the intellectual output of the assisted training scheme, where youngsters are assisted in their job placement.

Covid-19 caused considerable obstacles for the most part of the project, with several partners mentioning that finding traineeships in areas that usually offer vacancies was quite challenging now, as many of these companies were closed or dormant. Young people from disadvantageous backgrounds who experienced a lack of social learning in the past two years, had to go through social skills reinforcement sessions again. Nonetheless, the partnership eventually managed to implement the assisted training scheme with success and to find traineeship and job placements for a considerable number of young participants.

In spring of 2022 most travelling restrictions were lifted and **the majority of partners were able to meet again on-site in Germany**. As the project came almost to its end, they had the opportunity to contribute valuable exchanges and evaluate together the pilot interventions and the project implementation in general. Partners faced to a shorter or larger extent challenges delivering the pilot interventions, as also the feedback received in the focus groups highlighted.



3. Recommendations

Based on the experiences we gained throughout this project, we compiled the following key recommendations for all stakeholders involved in the fields of VET provision, training schemes, organizations combating unemployment and social exclusion and companies that are active in offering trainings, internships and work-based learning.

3.1. NEET and policies: what needs to be done?

The term NEET contributes towards acknowledging dimensions of disadvantage and inequality that would otherwise remain hidden. In regards to the young population of Europe, the reduction of the NEET numbers becomes of imperative importance because their mere existence jeopardizes the EU's social and political values. More so that this is a time that populist reactionary trends gain legitimacy and audience across the EU.

“NEET captures all young people who are not currently participating in the labour market or in education. This includes vulnerable groups and those with accumulated disadvantages (including lower education levels, immigration background, health issues, young mothers, or young people with a difficult family background) [...] NEET status can be described as both an outcome and a defining characteristic of disadvantaged youth, who are at much greater risk of social exclusion.” (Mascherini, 2018)

(i) EU initiatives such as the Youth on the Move (2016) and the Youth Guarantee have raised the NEET issues to full recognition. However, the EU member states do not deal with them in a uniform manner, this also reflecting current political debates in most EU member states regarding social welfare priorities, as well as responses to inequalities and disadvantage. We believe that EU institutions have a role to play at this, designing and coordinating tailored interventions, allowing for synergies and interaction among the different systems of education, training and employment, encouraging and supporting their implementation in the member states.

(ii) Given the multifaceted nature of the NEET status and the heterogeneity of the group itself, policies that focus on participation in education or in employment or even in both of them, should be replaced by holistic approaches that take in the impact of societal factors on the individual person in connection to his/her participation in education, training and employment.

One of the most important “lessons learned” out of the implementation of the “It Works!” project was to approach the NEET “problem” as a combination of the employment and/or training opportunities to the integration/inclusion ones, the terms used here to signify the reverse of marginalization and exclusion. This given, we strongly recommend to policy makers and social intervention designers to address the issue of NEETs by **approaches that are both holistic and emancipatory**. This translates into focusing on the social inclusion of the NEET rather than his/her integration in either or each one of the education, training or employment systems: under the lens of social inclusion support practices (see indicatively Watts, 2001), because they are designed as holistic approaches, what now is conceived by the NEET person as fragmented and/or pointless, acquires meaning and consequently it (is expected to) trigger encouragement and motivation. To achieve that, it is important to:

- (a) create practical synergies among the systems of education, training and employment on local level, thus allowing the NEET transition from one point to another, for example from school to work, in flexible ways, adjusted to the needs, aspirations and capacities of the young person, in order to
- (b) support the young person make sense of his/her world and consequently gain control over his/her life and choices. The various offers, measures or choices available to NEETs seem fragmented to them as far as they are not contextualized into a greater scheme. It is important for the NEET to be able to see how one step leads to another, also what lies ahead, in the form of a pathway rather than random steps. The issue is not about desires and dreams coming true (or not) but simply about achieving goals you have set yourself and gaining confidence on the way.

3.2. NEETs and implementation of policies: what can professionals on the field do?

In the everyday work with and for NEETs the approach we suggest calls for a work frame that allows for continuity and cohesion, interaction between the counsellor and his/her young client/beneficiary and participation of the beneficiary in the decisions that concern him/her. In implementing the “It Works!” project this approach was secured by

- the Individual Support Plan as the basis for successful support planning. After getting to know each other, the counselor and the beneficiary, the current starting situation is discussed in one-on-one consultations. As a result, goals and the necessary measures are defined in small steps. The goals and measures are regularly evaluated, updated and, if necessary, adjusted.
- counsellor/youth worker acting as the Person of Reference or Personal Adviser for the NEET, remaining the same all the way of the intervention with the relationship having started in the selection process of the NEETs participating in the project. More precisely, the counsellors/youth workers acting as Persons of Reference had been

selected by the participating organizations to be trained in the Handbook for Professionals of the project, then they implemented this in their everyday professional life and from that point onwards through their work they chose the NEETs that would participate in the next phases of the project, that is the Training on Employability and ultimately in the Assisted Training Scheme.

- vocational orientation/career guidance techniques that have been included in the “Handbook and Toolbox for Professionals” and in “Soft Skills for Employability” to secure that each participant had recognized his/her specific goals and coupled with the Individual Support Plan provided by the Person of Reference created a clear path for the participant to follow.
- linking training to non-formal adult education as regards pedagogical choices on skills building to be able to provide a contextualized training in an accessible manner to the participants given their out of education status.
- structured assistance during training and internship/traineeship placements, to overcome the difficulties that the participating organizations have experienced when a young person enters a new job. It has been noted that one of the main barriers that youngsters face when entering the labor market especially in low skilled positions is the lack of appropriate communication and other employability skills. The project came as an attempt to help overcome these difficulties.

deriving from Critical Pedagogies (Freire, 1997; Suoranta et al., 2021) and the Social Work Case Model (Moore, 1990).

Four further sub-categories of recommendations were produced in the “It Works” project. Each of them refers to the different steps undertaken in this project and illustrates our relevant recommendations to professionals in the field/offering front-line services.



Adapt your training participants’ recruitment process to efficiently reach your target group!

Make sure that your candidate participants are aware of the nature of the training assisted scheme structure and goals offered to them. It is important to use orientation/career guidance practices to help them make informed decisions.

For a faster and more efficient recruitment process, create connections with local youth and build a stable network with traineeship providers Moreover, national public employment services should facilitate organizations and trainers in their recruitment processes for similar projects, providing them with contacts of youth they are already in contact with. It is equally important to engage local state actors and stakeholders to participate in the promotion of relevant training projects and initiatives through their regular communication channels.



Prepare your trainers/counsellors adequately for their role!

Ensure that trainers/counsellors recognize the needs of the particular target group and acknowledge the importance of their guiding role in this process. It is important that all professionals receive the appropriate preparation beforehand to ensure that their knowledge, tools and methodologies are in accordance with the project's objectives.

To learn more about our approach and get inspiration, check our [It Works! Handbook and Toolbox for Professionals](#).



Diversify your training assistance schemes based on your target groups needs and expectations!

Ensure that the preparation and guiding material are adapted to the needs, age and interests of your target groups and that the language used for the written training material is simple and easy to follow.

It is important to provide your participants with thorough explanations on how each step followed during their training will benefit them in finding employment later. Dedicate time on the youngsters' social skills reinforcement (e.g. how to interact with job recruiters, how to present oneself in an interview, job dress code, etc.) and assist them to discover their own talents and realize that all their assets are useful to access the job market.

For a longer-lasting effect, we recommend that the guidance offered is stable before, during and after the training placements.



Prepare your workplace mentors and guide the trainees during the assisted training and internships placements!

Diversify the methods to put employers in contact with employees. Inform and engage the employers and their HR departments on the benefits it has for them receiving the assistance scheme within the project. Moreover, invest in assisting and mentoring the workplaces before the traineeship. Awareness of challenges and successful strategies often reduce conflicts and sets the right expectation for the training. To educate workplaces is a way to ensure a quality

checked workplace that engages in the training and owns the right tools for future traineeships. A win-win for trainees, VET organisations and for the workplace.

Ensure that the placements are timely adjusted for each trainee to receive adequate knowledge and skills on their domain. Also, keep a stable contact person communicating with the employers during the placement, as this makes communication and follow-ups easier. Make sure that from the beginning there is regular communication and feedback from both the trainees and employers on their placement.



Advocate for more investment in NEETs training!

Recruiters, especially in the private sector, need to understand that unemployed young people need training before assuming employment tasks. On-the-job training is a necessary investment for companies in search of qualified personnel, and a boost for the young people that they can escape unemployment. Make sure that you bring attention on those aspects when in search of placements for your target group!

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Reference IO: IO5
IO Leader: YES Forum and IEKEP
Project Title: The Employable Youth: It Works!
Project Acronym: It Works!
Project Number: 2019-1-DE02-KA202-006136

Imprint

This publication was created by all projects partners: BAG KJS, Centro San Viator, IEKEP, The Inclusion Network, Piteå Kommun, Nevo Parudimos and YES Forum. The text was written by all project partners.

Feedback process: All project partners

Coediting and design: YES Forum

Disclaimer

The Employable Youth: It Works! (Grant Agreement No. 2019-1-DE02-KA202-006136) is a Strategic Partnership for Vocational Education and Training funded by the Erasmus+ programme, and coordinated by the YES Forum. For more information or to check our other Intellectual Outputs, please visit the project's website (<https://yes-forum.eu/our-work/projects/it-works-the-employable-youth/>) or contact us directly. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of the project partners and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union. Images used are made by and are therefore property of the YES Forum respectively its project partners. Usage by any other party is prohibited.

Date and year

August 2022



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Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Programme. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.