

# CHALLENGES TO RURAL NEETs' TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK IN LITHUANIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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*This paper discusses challenges to rural NEETs' transition from school to work in Lithuania during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus is on identifying the main issues related to the successful transition of young people from education to the labour market. The paper draws on extensive research on NEET youth transition from school to work in Lithuania, using mixed research methods including social and public policy, survey research on NEETs registered with the PES and a secondary data analysis (Eurostat data on NEETs). The study is based on survey research conducted in Lithuania from February to April 2021. A total of 453 young people who were unemployed and registered with the PES participated in the study. A subjective evaluation of the attitudes and experiences in the Lithuanian labour market of the unemployed youth (aged 18 to 35 years), registered with the PES and living in rural areas is presented. The results reveal that more young people living in rural areas claim that their situation in the labour market worsened considerably during the pandemic. Despite the fact that a number of active labour market policies targeting the NEET group are in place, specific policy measures targeting young NEETs living in rural areas need to be developed in order to address their specific needs.*

**Keywords:** unemployed youth, rural NEETs; the transition from education to the labour market; PES (public employment service); the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth employment.

## INTRODUCTION

Youth transitions from school to work are affected by the socioeconomic crisis (Brazienė *et al.* 2022; ILO 2021; Eurofound 2021; OECD 2020; etc.). The COVID-19 pandemic had a particularly negative impact on youth employment, creating significant challenges for NEETs in general, however these challenges are often amplified for rural NEETs. Job opportunities in rural areas are largely limited

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when compared to urban areas, and the pandemic further reduced the overall number of available jobs (Eurofound 2021; OECD 2020; etc.). Many businesses closed down or reduced their operations, leaving rural NEETs with few employment options. Due to the majority of job interviews, applications, and training programmes' shift to online modes as a result of the pandemic, rural NEETs may struggle with limited access to technology and reliable internet connections. This hinders their access to job opportunities or participation in online training programmes (ILO 2021). Furthermore, NEETs are confronted with transportation challenges, as rural areas frequently have limited public transport options, thus making it difficult for rural NEETs to travel to in-person job interviews or training programmes. One of the main concerns regarding rural NEETs is mental health and isolation (COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch 2020; OECD 2020). The pandemic has increased feelings of social isolation and loneliness for many people, and rural NEETs may be particularly vulnerable to these challenges. Limited social support networks and access to mental health services may add to rural NEETs' challenges to cope with the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic. Moreover, many rural schools have faced disruptions due to the pandemic, including closures and online learning challenges. This has had an impact on the education and training of rural NEETs, making it more difficult to transition to work.

Youth transition from school to work has featured in strategic policy documents at European and national levels over the last decade. The fourth principle of the European pillar of social rights states that, "Young people have the right to continued education, apprenticeship, traineeship or a job offer of good standing within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education". As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries introduced new plans and strategies and made commitments. A number of countries introduced special emergency schemes: income support for young people, hiring subsidies for employers recruiting young people, new apprenticeship schemes, and lower minimum contribution requirements to enable young people to access social security benefits (COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch 2020; OECD 2021; etc.). The Youth Guarantee scheme (the reinforced Youth Guarantee 2021), under which EU member states provide all young people under 30 years of age with employment, education, an apprenticeship, or a traineeship within four months of either leaving education or becoming newly unemployed, was reinforced to respond better during the pandemic. All EU countries have committed to implementing the reinforced Youth Guarantee scheme, which 'steps up the comprehensive job support available to young people across the European Union, now reaching out to a broader target group of 15 to 29-year-olds' (the reinforced Youth Guarantee 2021). The new action plan for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee initiative in Lithuania was approved in 2021.

The COVID 19 pandemic and lockdown significantly affected youth employment in Lithuania. According to (PES) administrative data, in June 2020, 39.3 thousand unemployed persons aged 16–29 years (the % is needed to be comparable with 2021 data) were registered with the public employment service. In 2021, 17.6% of all registered unemployed persons represented the 16–29 years age bracket. As NEET youths in rural areas represent a particularly vulnerable group of young people in relation to the labour market, the NEET rate in Lithuania increased in rural areas more than in larger cities during the pandemic. In comparison with 2019 (13.2% in rural areas and 7.6% in urban areas respectively), the share of NEETs has increased in rural areas to 16.5% (in comparison to 9.5% in 2020 in urban areas).

The paper draws on extensive research on NEET youth transition from school to work in Lithuania, using mixed research methods including social and public policy, survey research on NEETs registered with the PES, and a secondary data analysis (Eurostat data on NEETs). The aim of this paper is to investigate the challenges faced by rural NEETs registered with the PES in their transition from school to work during the COVID 19 pandemic in Lithuania. Research questions: what were the main challenges for rural NEETs registered with the PES in their transition from school to work during the COVID 19 pandemic in Lithuania? What were the main obstacles in finding a stable working position?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The concept of NEETs

The ambiguity in defining NEET youth in the scientific literature is partly due to the fact that NEETs are not a homogeneous category, as the varied experiences and perspectives among the individuals who are considered part of this group may be significant. Youth is a distinct phase of life that is characterised by certain developmental milestones and experiences that are shared by individuals within the age range (Arnett 2001). The term NEET refers to young people between the ages of 15 and 29 years who are not in education, employment, or training (Mascherini *et al.* 2012). In addition to their difficulty in finding jobs, young workers often find themselves excluded from both jobs and education and training opportunities (Kalleberg 2020). According to the definition provided by the ILO (ILO 2020), a person is referred to as NEET when the following two conditions are met: 1) they are not employed (i.e., unemployed or inactive according to the International Labour Organisation definition) (ILO 2020); 2) they have not received any formal or non-formal education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey. The concept has rapidly gained prominence among international organizations and the media as a barometer of the degree to which

youths are socially excluded and disconnected from major institutions in society, such as education and work (Kalleberg 2020).

A Eurofound analysis has acknowledged the heterogeneity within the NEET group, and, unlike the ILO, it examines young people between the ages of 15 and 34 years (Eurofound 2012). In a study by Sadler *et al.* (2015), conducted in the UK, rural versus urban areas' socio-economic problems were highlighted as a risk factor for the NEET status (Sadler *et al.* 2015). This is also related to the high rate of early school leavers, as the majority resided in rural areas. Eurofound (2020) has emphasized the following NEET risk factors, among others: health restrictions, migration background, low level of schooling, young people living in low-income households, adolescents with unemployed parents, adolescents whose parents have a low level of schooling, and adolescents with divorced parents). Young people living in remote areas have a 1.5 times higher NEET risk than young people living in medium-sized cities. In addition to the specific issues of young people in NEET situations, NEET youths in rural areas face additional challenges, including the lack of infrastructure, high school dropout rates, high unemployment rates, and the depopulation process, caused by youth migration to urban areas for other reasons (Mujcinovic *et al.* 2021; Simões *et al.* 2021).

The literature investigates how personal characteristics affect the NEET status in many cases. It is argued that NEETs are directly affected by macroeconomic factors, however the literature argues that personal characteristics are also of equal importance (Furlong 2006). The risk of becoming a NEET is strongly related to personal factors such as a poor family background, personal characteristics, etc. (Parsons 2002). This escalates especially when a disability, stigmatised residential areas, immigrant status, low level of schooling and other similar factors are involved (Eurofound 2012, Furlong 2006). Indeed, not only is it common for people who have left the education system early and are not employed to engage in informal or illegal economic activities, but there is also a long-established link between unemployment and poor mental health, anxiety, depression, and suicide (Eurofound 2012). However, the NEET condition is not exclusively associated with the most marginalised populations, such as young offenders and the homeless (Thompson 2011), and it is not always a personal choice. The NEET condition may be a product of the failure of hegemonic value systems to inspire, guide, and provide meaning for young people as they move into the workforce or not (Furlong, 2006). Moreover, while some NEETs (such as the chronically ill and disabled) have little influence over their personal circumstances, others (such as those who choose not to apply for jobs) do have some power (Eurofound 2012).

The proportion of NEETs in the national population varies significantly across countries, where the same personal characteristics can easily correspond to radically different propensities to becoming a NEET, and in some cases across the EU regions within the same country, even if these characteristics are NEET status

trends everywhere (De Luca *et al.* 2019). Some of these discrepancies could be attributed to economic factors: it is well known that young people are more likely to be concentrated in a small number of cyclically vulnerable industries and temporary jobs where it is easy to be laid off, making them more susceptible to economic fluctuations (Bernal-Verdugo *et al.* 2012). The institutions governing the school-to-work transition (including the calibre of the education system and integration between school and work-based training), as well as labour-market regulation (hiring and firing rules, safety nets, and industrial relations systems), should be taken into account in order to understand why youth labour-market performance varies so significantly between countries (Pastore 2019). The transition from school to work is simply the shift from a life of learning to a professional or vocational one (Elder and Matsumoto 2010). Numerous parties are involved in this process, including organizations that operate in the labour market and education and training systems. Due to a larger unemployment inflow and outflow that are experienced by adults, young people typically endure significant volatility when they enter the workforce. Since they frequently seek the best—if not the only—jobs for themselves, they occasionally pursue more education or training after employment or unemployment (especially if they are underqualified), according to Clarck and Summers (1982). Failures in this process are more likely to occur when solutions are ineffectively tailored to eliminate information asymmetries or when ineffective intermediaries act on their behalf. The more education a person has, the more likely it is that they will find employment (Becker 1964), nevertheless, employment is not necessarily the best option for students who can continue to obtain an education, which can boost their human capital. From this perspective, a crucial problem with education systems is their (in)ability to transmit the knowledge and skills required by the labour market and to keep students from dropping out of school prematurely.

### **School to Work Transitions**

The scientific literature presents numerous definitions of youth transitions from school to work (Gebel 2020; Pastore 2015; Brzinsky-Fay 2013; Elder 2009; Marchetti *et al.*, 2001; etc). Generally, it reflects the process in which young people transit from one institutional setting to another, e.g., in which a person moves from the education system to a relatively stable working position (Marchetti *et al.* 2001). As observed by Pastore (2015), the school-to-work transition, namely the shift from education to gainful employment, is a complex mechanism which is affected by different organizations and institutions, such as the family, the educational and training system (Pastore 2015).

The transition of youths from education to the labour market is a complex multidimensional phenomenon, determined by multiple interacting factors. Research in different Eastern and Western European countries has highlighted the central role of educational qualifications for the integration of young people into

the labour market (Braziene, 2020; Gebel, 2020; Müller, Shavit, 1998; etc.). The situation of young people in the education system and the opportunities to gain professional experience while studying are key factors that influence their future employment possibilities (Braziene and Mikutavičienė 2013). A solid education and the acquisition of skills are essential for the future employment of young people (Alam and de Diego 2019; Braziene and Dorelaitiene 2012; etc.). NEETs need to be equipped with the necessary employability skills to ensure their effective transition from school to work. Evans *et al.* (1999) suggest a division of employability into supply-side and demand-side elements (described as ‘employability components’ and ‘external factors’). Other significant individual-level factors include gender, social capital and family status, etc. (Versnel 2011; Putnam 2001; Laroche *et al.* 1999; etc.). As young people represent a social group that is particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in employment opportunities (Gebel *et al.* 2021; Baranowska-Rataj *et al.* 2017; etc.), it is also important to mention macro-level factors, e.g., social and economic transformations and demographic changes. Indeed, NEETs face unique challenges when transitioning from school to work. These challenges can stem from a lack of skills, of education, or of work experience, as well as other factors such as social and economic barriers. Due to the pandemic, the share of young people not in employment, education or training was seen to increase in many countries in 2020 and, in most cases, it has not yet returned to pre-crisis levels (ILO 2021).

Earlier school leaving has a negative impact on youth transitions from school to work. There are many reasons for early school leaving, including financial difficulties, family obligations, lack of academic motivation, bullying, and other personal or societal issues. Early school leaving can have negative consequences for individuals, including reduced employment opportunities, lower income, and lower quality of life. Early school leavers rates in Lithuania in rural areas (18 – 24 years age bracket) fell from 10.7% in 2011 to 8.2% in 2021. In cities, early school leaving rates (18–24 years age bracket) decreased from 7.4% in 2011 to 5.3% in 2021. It should be noted that early school leaving rates prior to the COVID-19 pandemic stood at 4.9% in 2019 in rural areas and 4.0% in cities and in 2020, 8.2% in rural areas and 5.6% in cities, indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on early school leaving (Eurostat 2022). Many countries have implemented policies and programmes to encourage students to complete their education, such as providing financial assistance, mentoring, or counselling services, and creating alternative education programmes (such as Youth Guarantee, etc.). In addition, promoting a positive learning environment, supporting student engagement and motivation, and addressing issues related to poverty, social inequality, and discrimination can also help reduce early school leaving.

## NEETS CHARACTERISTICS IN LITHUANIA

### Youth population and (un)employment

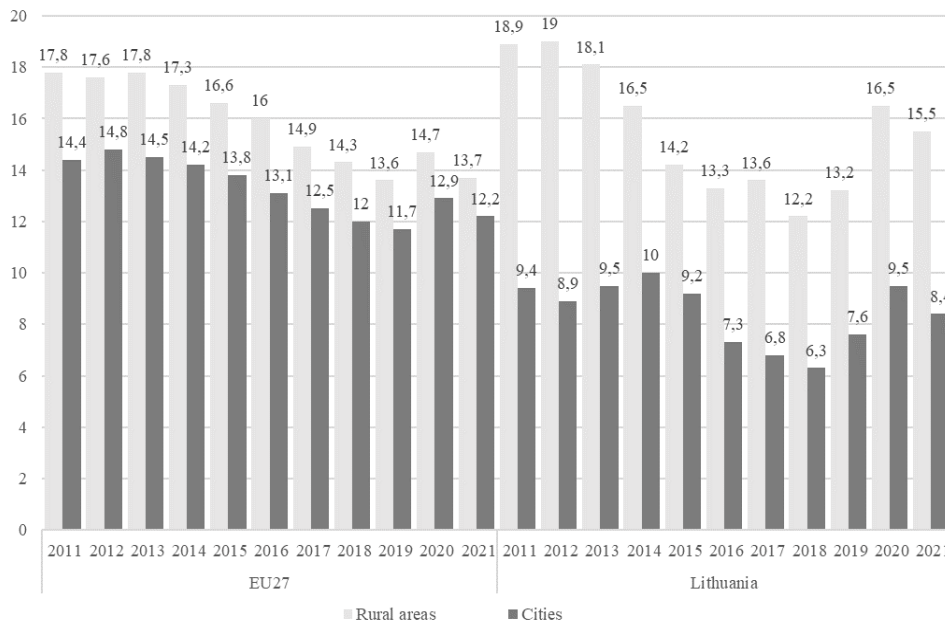
Lithuania is among the European countries facing demographic challenges. The youth population in Lithuania has decreased significantly over the past decade. Between 2011 and 2021, the population aged 15 to 29 years decreased from 210,2 thousand in 2011 to 126,5 thousand in 2021. The trend was similar for cities and rural areas. The total youth (aged 15–24 years) employment rate in Lithuania in 2021 stood at 82,2% (Eurostat LFS, 2022). According to quarterly data, the total youth (aged 15–24 years) unemployment rate in Lithuania in 2023 is 13.7% (Lithuanian Statistical Agency, 2023). In comparison, the youth unemployment rate (aged 15–24 years) stood at 11.5% in 2019. Over the last 10 years (2011–2021), youth unemployment in Lithuania has decreased. Youth unemployment by age bracket differs significantly. In comparison to other age brackets, those aged 15–19 years, experienced the highest levels of unemployment in 2011 (51.4%) and in 2021 (17.3%).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected youth employment in Lithuania. Youth employment in the country saw a sharper decline than the EU–27 average. During the first lockdown in March–May 2020, 22,5 thousand young unemployed persons were registered with the public employment service (PES). In comparison to the same period in 2019, this represents an increase of 33.9%. According to (PES) administrative data, in June 2020, 39,3 thousand unemployed persons aged 16–29 years were registered with the public employment service. In 2021, 17.6% of all registered unemployed persons represented the 16–29 years age bracket. According to the PES register data, the total number of all registered young people for the 18–29 years age bracket increased from 78207 in 2019, to 117 450 in 2021. The fact that young people have lower levels of job security and are at greater risk of losing their job is a direct consequence of the COVID–19 pandemic. The main losses have been observed in sectors that employ a large proportion of young people with temporary contracts (Eurofound, 2021).

The Eurostat statistics on young people who are neither in employment nor in education and training (15–29 years) by the degree of urbanization over the last decade (2011–2021) indicates that the share of NEETs in rural areas is larger in Lithuania when compared to the EU-27 level. Additionally, the gap between cities and rural areas is also wider in Lithuania (see Figure 1). Since 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, NEETs have increased in rural areas and cities in Lithuania, climbing from 13.2% in rural areas in 2019 to 16.5% in 2020.

Figure 1

**Young people who are neither in employment nor in education and training by the degree of urbanisation (NEET rates) [edat\_ifse\_29] extracted on 08.05.22**



**ACTIVE LABOUR MARKET POLICIES FOR RURAL NEETs IN LITHUANIA OVER THE LAST DECADE**

As a result, in order to reduce the number of NEETs, effective educational systems and a smooth transition from school to the workforce are important prerequisites (Eurofound 2014). Ryan (2012) states that there are various forms of policy interventions that influence active labour market programmes (ALMPs), vocational education and training programmes (VET), and apprenticeships are all types of school-to-work transition. Regarding the techniques used to connect the school and work systems and the VET content of their educational systems, European nations vary greatly (Zimmermann *et al.* 2013).

The Lithuanian 18<sup>th</sup> Government Programme (2020) seeks to decrease unemployment and actively include different population groups in the labour market. Among other groups, young persons and the long term unemployed are priority groups. It is foreseen that through higher education institutions and the private sector, “social innovations will be expanded and ensure that young people have the opportunity to work and earn and that working conditions are more



flexible and responsive to individual needs”. **The Income Inequality Reduction Programme 2021–2030 (2021)** states that the potential of young people to participate in the labour market should be used more effectively and foresees several measures aimed at increasing the employability of job seekers and the effectiveness of the employment support system. **The National Youth Policy Development Programme 2011–2019** establishes the most important features of contemporary and future youth policy in the country. The programme defines the main aspects of the youth employment policy. Its primary aim is to provide possibilities for young people to become active and motivated citizens in modern society, by improving social security, education and health systems. Another document that stresses the successful transition of youths from education to the labour market is **The Strategy for Demography, Migration and Integration Policy 2018–2030**. The need to strengthen a smooth transition from education to the labour market through active labour market policies for young people is highlighted, in order to reduce the high levels of youth emigration. **The National Demography, Migration and Integration Policy Strategy 2018–2030** provided, inter alia, measures to tackle population ageing problems, i.e., improving the quality of life of Lithuania’s population, reducing morbidity, mortality and inequality to increase life expectancy. The third goal of the Strategy is to provide opportunities for young people to integrate into society, e.g., ensuring the participation of young people in the labour market and their financial security and opportunities for lifelong learning. **The 2014–2020 Programme for Increased Employment** sets a strategic objective to raise employment levels as much as possible so that every person may find a job in line with their qualifications and secure an adequate standard of living. This objective is based on three tasks: (1) promoting the creation of jobs and labour demand; (2) improving the match between labour skills and market needs; (3) integrating and retaining free labour resources in the labour market. Although all the objectives and tasks indirectly contribute to the implementation of active ageing objectives, the inclusion of young people in the labour market is only specifically identified in the third objective of the Programme which reads “to encourage young employees to stay in the labour market more effectively”. **The Inclusive Labour Market Development Programme (2021–2030)** states that young people in rural areas are facing challenges to penetrate the labour market due to structural factors, e.g., lack of suitable transport, lack of financial motivation, and flexible working arrangements. There are also issues related to the quality of services provided by the PES. As stated in the programme, only 60% of employers are satisfied with the services provided by the PES. The Inclusive Labour Market Development Programme (2021–2030) is aimed at improving the employability of the unemployed and the effectiveness and efficiency of the employment protection system. The programme states that the employment of young people under the age of 29 years (25.8% of the registered unemployed consists of young people under 29 years of age) is limited

by: early withdrawal from the education system (5.6% of youths up to the age of 29 years leave the education system early), low qualifications or lack of qualifications, the unsuitability of the available education to the labour market (on average, young people under 29 years need 3.8 months from the moment of registration with the PES to obtain a job); lack of a smooth transition from school or studies to the labour market, complex social problems (13% of youths up to the age of 29 years do not work, study or participate in training), lack of motivation and social skills (7% of young people up to the age of 29 years have no motivation, 1.1% – social skills), lack of work experience (1.3% of young people up to the age of 29 years start working for the first time in accordance with the acquired specialty or profession; 12.2% of young people up to the age of 29 years have not worked before registering with the PES). As far as specific measures targeting NEETs over the last decade are concerned, on 18 December 2013 Lithuania presented a Youth Guarantee implementation plan (updated in May 2014). Lithuania elected to extend the coverage of the Youth Guarantee (YG) beyond that specified in the Council Recommendation so that the scheme is available to all young people aged 15–29 years not engaged in employment, education or training. The first aim of the YG Plan is early intervention and activation and the motivation of young people, while the second aim is to enhance youth integration in the labour market. The system, consisting of primary and secondary intervention projects, provides comprehensive, consistent support to young people in more complex situations, which includes not only basic social and job skills, and vocational training, but also integration and retention in the labour market. The new action plan for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee initiative was approved in 2021. The aim of the new plan is “to ensure that all persons aged 15–29 years who are not in employment, education or training receive an offer to work, continue learning (including professional training in the form of an apprenticeship), practice or an internship”. During the implementation of the plan, services are provided to inactive young persons and unemployed persons aged 16–29 years. Career counselling services can be provided to persons aged 14–29 years. The implementation of the new YG action plan seeks to ensure that most of the attention is paid to persons with medium and limited employment opportunities and low motivation, who already have a long-term unemployed status or are at risk of becoming unemployed without additional help. Since the long-term unemployed are one of society's most socially vulnerable groups and particularly at risk of becoming socially excluded, the initial priority should be to prevent individuals from becoming long-term unemployed. The responsible authority for the YG implementation in Lithuania is the Ministry of Social Security and Labour. Other actors involved include the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, the Ministry of Economy and Innovations, Municipalities, NGOs and the Centre of Information Technologies in Education.

## DATA AND METHOD

This study is based on survey research conducted between February and April 2021 in Lithuania. A total number of 453 young people (aged 18 to 35 years), unemployed and registered with the Lithuanian public employment service (PES) participated in the study. Due to the pandemic situation, the data was collected by using computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI). The link to the online questionnaire was sent to all registered unemployed youths aged 18–35 years by the PES. The respondents voluntarily participated in the study. The survey data was collected in compliance with all ethical and other standards for research quality according to the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR). The survey questionnaire was based on a previous survey instrument on the transition of youths from education in Lithuania (Brazienė 2020; Brazienė and Merkys 2013; etc.). The aim of the research instrument is to highlight the main challenges for the transition of youths from education to the labour market. The instrument consists of a total of 262 indicators. Only some of the data from the survey is used in this paper. The main dimensions of the survey instrument are as follows: educational background (educational achievements, educational choices, participation in training/seminars), employment history (transition period from school to the labour market, first job characteristics/experience, first job search obstacles), work experience, the (mis)match between the work position and education acquired (if any), the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment situation, the role of private and public employment services in the search for work, and socio-demographic and household characteristics. As the answer format, a Likert scale from 1 to 5 was used. As for the data presentation in the results section, answer formats completely agree/agree and completely disagree/disagree were merged into one category. The degree of urbanization was measured by using the Eurostat classification of degree of urbanization, e.g., cities (more than 100 000 inhabitants), towns or suburbs (10 000 to 100 000 inhabitants), and rural areas, small towns or villages (less than 10 000 inhabitants).

### **Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents**

The average age of the respondents was 24.6 years: the youngest respondent was 18 years of age, and the oldest 34. The largest group of respondents, 32.6%, had completed secondary education, 26.5% held a vocational education qualification, and 5.7% had completed primary/basic education. Out of the remaining respondents, 20.4% had tertiary, 11.3% tertiary (professional, BA), and 3.6% tertiary (MA) education. In comparison with the general population aged 18 to 35 years, the respondents had a lower level of schooling.

Limitations of the study. Due to the personal data protection policy, the link to the survey questionnaire was distributed by the PES representatives. The researchers were unable to control the sample size and characteristics (gender,

place of residence, education, etc.). Also, due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation and subsequent lockdown, face-to-face survey research was not possible.

## RESULTS

### The role of public employment services

The Lithuanian public employment service (PES) provides a different type of support for job seekers. As determined by Articles 37, 38, 39, 39(1), 42, and 43 of the Law on Employment of the Republic of Lithuania, NEETs are provided with vocational training, apprenticeships, internships, and subsidized employment. The subjective evaluation of the services provided by the PES shows that most of the respondents claim to have received information about job vacancies and advice on how to search for a job (for further details see Table 1). Therefore, it should be noted that almost one-third of the respondents (29.8%) claimed not to have received any support from the PES. ANOVA test results indicate that there are no statistically significant differences in satisfaction with the services provided among NEETs youth registered with the PES according to the degree of urbanization (see Table no. 1).

Table no. 1

Respondents' satisfaction with the services provided by the PES, N=453

	Completely agree/ Agree, (%)	Neither agree nor disagree, (%)	Completely disagree/disagreed, (%)	M (average)	Sd.
I have not received any support from PES	29.8	31.1	39.1	2.84	1,287
I have received advice on how to search for a job	<b>47.4</b>	23.6	28.9	3.13	1,273
Information on job vacancies was provided	<b>59.7</b>	19.4	20.9	3.43	1,241
Consultation regarding training and qualification improvement opportunities was provided	40.8	23.1	<b>36.1</b>	2.97	1,325
Places for training and qualification improvement opportunities	25.9	28.7	<b>45.4</b>	2.65	1,253

The situation of young people in the labour market is made particularly vulnerable not only by the high unemployment rate and inactivity in the country but also by the changing conditions in the labour market. The mismatch between the qualifications available to young people and the demands of the labour market complicates the transition from school to work and the reluctance of employers to recruit young people without previous working experience and necessary skills. According to the opinion of the respondents regarding successful employment, a set of skills are key to obtaining a decent job. Knowledge of foreign languages (89,8%), ICT skills (82,9%), communication (91%) and teamwork skills (87,3%) are among the most important characteristics (for further details see Table no. 2).

Table no. 2

**The most important personal characteristics to gain decent employment, N=453**

	Completely agree/Agree (%)	Neither agree, nor disagree (%)	Completely disagree/Disagree (%)	M (average)	Sd.
Higher education	62,5	19.6	17.8	3.59	1,149
Acquired profession in demand on the market	72.4	19.3	8.3	3.87	1,019
ICT skills	82.9	10.3	6.4	4.03	0,904
High professional qualification and competence	77.2	16.3	6.5	3.99	0,949
Knowledge of foreign languages	89.9	7.3	2.9	4.29	0,805
Leadership	57.0	33.7	9.3	3.61	0,978
Business knowledge	58.6	32.9	8.5	3.64	0,958
Communication skills	91.0	5.6	3.4	4.35	0,815
Teamwork skills	87.3	9.9	2.9	4.24	0,805
Representative appearance	60.4	28.6	10.9	3.64	0,992
Personal ambitions	77.3	16.9	5.7	4.03	0,951
Useful relationships/contacts	71.1	19.9	9.1	3.92	1,059

Among the main obstacles mentioned by the respondents that prevent young people from finding a stable working position or a job that is appealing to them were a lack of work experience, lack of suitable education, lack of marketable profession. Previous work experience is an important factor in finding a stable working position. However, almost two-thirds of the respondents completely agreed that they do not have work experience. Relatively more respondents living in rural areas indicated that they lack working experience (see Table no. 3).

Table no. 3

**The main obstacles to finding a stable working position, N=453, %**

	Completely agree, Agree			Neither agree nor disagree			Disagree, Completely disagree		
	Cities	Small towns	Rural areas	Cities	Small towns	Rural areas	Cities	Small towns	Rural areas
I do not have suitable education	<b>50.2</b>	30,4	<b>50.0</b>	22.2	26.1	34.1	27.6	43.5	15.9
I do not have a marketable profession in the labour market	41.2	34.8	47.8	30.3	26.1	29.5	28.5	22.7	28.5
There is little supply of jobs in the labour market	<b>52.5</b>	<b>47.8</b>	<b>54.6</b>	27.1	21.7	31.8	20.4	30.4	13.6
I do not have work experience	<b>62.0</b>	<b>69.5</b>	<b>72.7</b>	12.2	17.4	18.2	25.7	13.0	9.1
I can't find a job I like	41.6	43.4	45.5	26.7	30.4	27.3	31.7	26.0	27.3
I do not have a demand to work	2.3	8.7	4.6	10.9	8.7	11.4	86.9	82.6	84.1

The duration of the respondents' work experience varies from up to 3 months to more than 2–5 years. The majority of the respondents (30.9%) had up to one year's work experience.

### **Impact of COVID 19 pandemic on the youth labour market situation**

The vulnerability of young people in the labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic is related to the fact that young people have lower levels of job security and are at greater risk of job loss, sectoral job vacancy rates and the major losses are in sectors that employ a large proportion of young people with insecure contracts (Eurofound 2021). The respondents indicated that in comparison to the pre-pandemic period, their situation in the labour market had worsened. The research results revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic affected more young people living in rural areas ( $p = 0,005$ , ANOVA), young women ( $p = 0,000$ , ANOVA) and those with lower levels of schooling ( $p = 0,003$ , ANOVA). More young people living in rural areas indicated that their situation had considerably worsened during the pandemic ( $p = 0,002$ , ANOVA). Rural NEETs were more pessimistic about their future in the labour market than those living in urban areas ( $p = 0,000$ , ANOVA).

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Due to the pandemic, young people's situation in the labour market has worsened considerably. Overall, the challenges facing rural NEETs in the transition from school to work as a result of the pandemic are complex and interconnected. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach that includes access to job opportunities, technology, transport, mental health support, and education and training resources. The transition from school to work may be defined by a set of complex factors, i.e., the result of the interaction of macro-factors (education system, type of economy, labour market characteristics, active labour market policy) and individual characteristics (competencies, motivation, experience, etc.).

The aim of this empirical study was to investigate how young people who are currently unemployed and registered with the PES evaluate their possibilities in the labour market in Lithuania and to ascertain the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth transitions from school to work. The findings revealed that there are no statistically significant differences in satisfaction with the services provided among the NEET youth registered with the PES according to the degree of urbanization. The main challenges rural NEETs face are due to individual characteristics (lack of appropriate education, work experience, etc.) and structural conditions in the labour market in rural areas.

Despite the fact that several active labour market policies target the NEET group already in place, specific policy measures targeting young NEETs living in rural areas need to be developed to address their specific needs. The Reinforced Youth Guarantee is designed for persons with medium and limited employment opportunities, low motivation, long-term unemployment, and socially vulnerable groups at risk of becoming socially excluded, but lacks specific measures for NEETs living in rural areas.

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**A**cest articol pune în discuție provocările întâmpinate de (tinerii) NEET lituanieni în procesul lor de tranziție între școală și muncă, în timpul pandemiei Covid 19. Studiul este centrat pe identificarea principalelor dificultăți cu privire la tranziția reușită a tinerilor între educație și piața muncii. Lucrarea se bazează pe cercetare de amploare asupra subiectului, folosind metode mixte de cercetare ce includ politici publice și sociale, anchete asupra NEET ce prezintă PES și analize secundare de date (date Eurostat despre NEET). Studiul are la bază și o anchetă desfășurată în Lituania între februarie și aprilie 2021. La studiu a participat un total de 453 de tineri șomeri și înregistrați PES din mediul rural. Este prezentată o evaluare subiectivă a atitudinilor și experiențelor șomerilor de pe piața muncii lituaniene (cu vârste cuprinse între 18 și 35 de ani), înregistrați PES, din mediul rural. Rezultatele arată că mulți tineri din mediul rural susțin că situația lor pe piața muncii s-a înrăutățit considerabil pe perioada pandemiei. În ciuda faptului că există un număr de politici active privind piața muncii, ce țarghetează grupul NEET, mai trebuie încă dezvoltate măsuri specifice de politici, îndreptate spre tinerii NEET din mediul rural, cu scopul de a veni în întâmpinarea nevoilor acestora.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** tineri șomeri; tineri NEET din rural; tranziție de la educație spre piața muncii; Serviciul Public de Angajare (PES); impactul Covid 19 asupra angajării în rândul tinerilor.

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