

THE IMPACT OF MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNMENTAL POLICY ON EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATIONAL TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES IN RURAL CATALONIA

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Despite numerous policy interventions to improve education and employment outcomes across the European Union in the last decade, youth unemployment rates continue to be elevated in many EU countries. As rural rates are among the highest, the rural–urban divide is receiving ever-increasing attention, and the various dimensions of rural youth unemployment are becoming increasingly prevalent in the discourses of education and employment across Europe, not least in Spain, one of the European countries with the most significant degree of rurality. The objective of this paper is to analyse the differences in Youth-based Active Labour Market policies between rural and urban areas in the Spanish region of Catalonia, using a mix of longitudinal data collection and analysis, along with an examination of the relevant policy framework at all levels of government. Our findings reveal key differences between urban and rural opportunities, and shed light on how multilevel governance may play a role in expanding or reducing these gaps.

Keywords: rural youth unemployment; rural NEET youth; urban–rural gap; Spanish youth unemployment; halfway federal state policies; rural training courses; rural policy framework; urban–rural disparity.

INTRODUCTION

Following the 2008 economic crisis which profoundly impacted the economy of European countries, youth unemployment drastically increased, and has consequently received increasing attention at the European level. Meanwhile, as forces such as those of neoliberalism continued to perpetuate the vulnerabilities of the most at-risk young people (Mäkelä *et al.* 2021), the launch of the European initiative known as the youth guarantee managed, indeed, to reach fertile ground in

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2014. Through this initiative, the European Union targeted youth who were Not in Employment or Educational Training (NEET) by aiming to facilitate the provision of a decent job or training opportunity within four months of becoming inactive, through the medium of the Public Employment Services (PES) and their respective resources at both national and local levels. The NEET term, first coined in 1999 by the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU 1999, Eurofound 2016), has become a key concept in the discourse of youth employment, and reducing the number of NEET youth was included as a point in the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda.

The group of persons the NEET category is used to describe, however, is heterogeneous, and the usage of this term, while a powerful instrument in raising awareness of the labour market vulnerabilities of young people (Eurofound 2016), carries the inherent danger of oversimplifying and reducing a complex group of people with varying life circumstances into a single set of individuals with a single reality (Furlong 2006). Accordingly, the adoption of a series of at least seven subcategories was proposed by Eurofound in 2016. Building on this typology, one additional subgroup of NEETs, which is not one of the afore-mentioned subcategories, yet arguably has sufficient grounds to be included as such, is rural youth. Indeed, this area is understudied, since publications directly on this theme have appeared only in the last decade (Simões *et al.* 2022).

Rural youth are inherently vulnerable as a result of a number of common life circumstances they usually share; they are typically at odds with a lower developed infrastructure and poorer economic conditions in comparison to their urban peers. Consequently, these young people can be more exposed to the risk of poverty and family dependency, and limited access to services such as transport and recruitment opportunities (Sadler *et al.* 2015). The concept of the rural gap provides an adequate overview of the rural reality across Europe in general; it refers to the inability of rural areas to match the standards of opportunities, services and quality of life set by urban environments (Camarero and Oliva 2019), as a consequence of various demographic and economic factors (Camarero 2020).

One such infrastructure issue, of paramount importance, is the issue of transport and mobility. Many papers have provided insight into the issues associated with mobility in rural areas, and accordingly the general consensus is that the associated problems can have a negative impact on the education and employment paths of rural youth. These transport issues can lead to them underperforming as students (Baeck 2016). In terms of employment, these young people would not only have difficulty reaching a potential place of work, but employers have also been shown to be hesitant towards taking on employees who would be required to make complicated commutes in order to arrive at their job (Cartmel and Furlong 2000).

Issues such as these would threaten the very fabric of the rural economy due to the increased risk of migration from countryside to city, which in turn can further weaken local economy and create a vicious cycle of exclusion and social

marginalisation (Simões *et al.* 2017). As a consequence, in part, of this urban migration process, youth in rural areas tend to have a lower level of schooling, since those with a more academic mindset tend to leave, while those who are less skilled and lack secondary qualifications remain in the rural areas (Farrugia 2016). A traditional pattern is also visible in rural areas where primary sector work is inherited from generation to generation, perpetuating lower-skilled work, and creating less space for skills to be acquired (Zipin *et al.* 2015). A mutual exclusivity between higher education and urban–rural migration is visible and attributable to the concept of urbanormativity, where rural areas are stigmatized and regarded as abnormal, strange and deviant. This concept is generally embedded in the fabric of further educational institutions (Thomas and Fulkerson 2020). Hence, the circumstances surrounding rural youth are clearly working against them, and they find themselves at odds with an infrastructure that is not conducive to their academic development, with little external support to overcome this state of affairs.

Active labour market policies in the Spanish context

Spain, as a country that is predominantly rural, is most definitely a prime case study to understand the rural–urban divide. It is among the European countries that were most gravely affected by the 2008 economic crisis, and in terms of education and employment, its predicament is a key example of a context within which the youth guarantee has been put into practise, and while it has stimulated some success, it has ultimately fallen short of its targets. A macro-level early-stage analysis of the youth guarantee indicated that EU member states tended to focus their efforts on job-ready young people rather than more disadvantaged groups (Eurostat 2016), and this same trend is distinctly visible in the Spanish context.

Although the situation has improved and NEET rates have fallen since 2014, Spain is still one of the EU countries with the highest NEET rate, at 14.1%, which is higher than most European countries, and well above the EU average of 13.2% (Eurostat 2021). The country has a history of unsuccessful active labour market policies, since a number of evaluations of some of the policies implemented in the country in the last few decades have shown evidence of a large deadweight effect and virtually zero net benefit to unemployment rates (Arranz, Serrano, and Hernanz 2013). After the rollout of the Youth Guarantee in 2013, and despite the improvements it facilitated in Spain, progress has not been sufficient to refer to this programme as a guarantee of employment in the Spanish context, as the aim of providing good quality employment or training within four months has not been met (Strecker *et al.* 2021). Vallejo calculated in 2017 that only 0.5% of the 21% of NEETs in Spain in that year felt they had no interest in looking for work; the rest were available and actively searching for employment. This indicates the existence of other factors, such as the barriers brought on by rurality, that prevent Spanish youth from finding the employment they seek. Additionally, the youth in Spain that

actually are in employment are more likely to find themselves in precarious jobs such as short term, irregular and low-income roles than in other European countries (Strecker *et al.* 2021). Since Spanish youth commonly find themselves at odds with a system that attributes social problems to the individual (Serrano Pascual and Martin Martin 2017), there is clearly scope to investigate the levels of cohesion with youth on the ground.

As a parliamentary monarchy, Spain has a centralised government, and has operated as such since the constitution of 1978. However, while the central government of Spain has the initial authority to legislate across all policy domains, certain powers are delegated to each of the country's 17 autonomous communities, such as the ability to tailor education and employment policies, among others (Acosta 2010). This introduces a decentralised component to the Spanish governmental structure, making it a half-way federal state. The structure of the Spanish PES has the same form, mirroring that of the wider government. The national PES, which is known as SEPE, accordingly delegates certain powers to the PES of each autonomous community. In Catalonia, the PES is known as SOC, and the latter is responsible for tailoring the active labour market policies to the youth on the ground in Catalonia, meaning European policy has at least 2 layers through which it must permeate before reaching the individuals for whom it is designed to benefit.

Like many of the 17 autonomous communities in Spain, Catalonia is predominantly rural, featuring a small number of very densely populated areas such as the metropolitan area of Barcelona, the second largest in Spain. Within Catalonia there are 42 regions, known as comarcas, and the smallest of these by area, the comarca of Barcelona, is home to 30% of the population of Catalonia, while occupying only 0.5% of the area. In contrast, the comarca with the lowest population density, Pallars Sobirà, occupies 4.3% of the area, yet is home to 0.1% of the population. In total, 91% of the population of Catalonia live in 39% of the area, (IDESCAT 2022) leaving much of the area of Catalonia as rural, sparsely populated space.

Therefore, not only is the urban–rural divide in Catalonia clearly significant, but also of note is the NEET rate in Catalonia, which is 1% higher than the Spanish average, and 1.9% higher than the European average, at 15.1% as of 2021 (IDESCAT 2022). This suggests that Catalonia has an elevated role in the unemployment rates of Spain as a whole, and by extension an elevated responsibility in addressing it. Thus, this paper seeks to shed light on the extent to which rural areas within Catalonia contribute to this trend.

Digitalisation of Active Labour Market policies after COVID-19

The issues that make it difficult for rural youth to gain skills and access the labour market are clearly not insignificant, and they are manifold. The mobility challenges associated with rural areas put into perspective the value of online

training for rural youth, and the use of online education systems in conjunction with e-governance, as well as the potential for online employment and teleworking. This is therefore a topic which must be considered when exploring a framework to address the disparity between urban and rural areas. Even for those rural youth who have dropped out of formal education with basic qualifications, online education has the potential to address many problems associated with higher education in rural areas (Kumar 2016). New opportunities can also be offered to rural areas through telework, encouraging less urban migration, and, instead, the relocation of people from areas with a higher cost of living to that of lower cost of living (Schwartz 2012).

While digitalisation and teleworking show great promise, there are a number of factors which must be considered, and which explain in part their slow uptake in rural areas. The adoption of online training or employment for those in remote areas requires an initial investment in resources, such as a reliable internet connection and suitable equipment for conducting their work, which may not be attainable to them. Thus, inequality could be perpetuated, and such measures could therefore work against sustainable development objectives. There is also an assumption that all young people are technologically proficient, whereas a causal relationship has been found between level of schooling and acquired skills, with level of ICT literacy (Neagu, Berigel, and Lendzhova 2021). The adoption of teleworking platforms in rural areas is clearly a slow process, and while great potential benefits are visible in the long run, the underlying infrastructure that facilitates this advance typically takes years to fully implement. This can be seen, for example, through the data on internet connectivity in rural areas. The official data from 2022 for Catalonia shows that the rural parts in general trail behind the urban areas in broadband coverage, especially in the central and north-eastern regions, where some areas do not have any broadband coverage at all (Espana Digital 2022). Unfortunately, this means that companies that could drive such initiatives would often not be willing to wait such a duration for a return on their investment (Schwartz 2012), requiring state measures to catalyse these processes where necessary; as we move forward towards digitalisation and globalisation, the role these initiatives will have in rural areas cannot be underestimated, not least in the Catalan context.

METHODS

This paper seeks to examine the reality of Active Labour Market policies for rural youth in the autonomous community of Catalonia through the use of secondary data, policy analysis, and an overview of the situation in rural areas of Catalonia obtained from SOC, IDESCAT (The official body for statistics of Catalonia) and Eurostat. The secondary data and statistical analysis are quantitative in nature and provide a window into the disparity between rural and urban areas,

when viewed through the lens of the available employment and training opportunities. In the analysis training courses are specifically highlighted, since the level of education and qualification of youth in rural areas is typically lower than in urban youth (Eurostat 2023); training courses address the niche that is created by this void. The policy analysis then aims to investigate the underlying reasons for this disparity and create a cohesive vista of the employment and training situation of rural youth in Catalonia.

The following three sections aim to provide this overview with a specific focus on how the change in European and national policy has impacted the implementation of active labour market policies at the grassroots. Similarly, the research underpinning these sections was conducted in three stages. A longitudinal data collection phase took place over a series of six months, where statistics indicating numbers of accredited training centres, offers of employment and offers of education for each of the 42 comarcas were gathered monthly from the SOC database. The data was then tabulated and each of the comarcas were classified according to their population density, which was obtained from IDESCAT.

Although the Eurostat definition of rural areas results in those areas below 300 inhabitants per km² being categorised as rural (Eurostat 2018), it became clear that there would be a more suitable way to classify the data, due to the significant polarity of rural and urban spaces in Catalonia; of the 42 comarcas in Catalonia, 17 had a population density of less than 50 inhabitants per km² (41%). This figure was indicative of an entire range of comarcas with very low population density, and this was identified as a more suitable cut-off point for classifying rural comarcas for this purpose.

The data was therefore split into two categories, those comarcas with less than 50 and those with more than 50 inhabitants per km², with the aim of ensuring the rural reality was not diluted or in any way obscured by more densely populated municipalities across the state. This data was then plotted in graphs, with the two categories acting as data points for rural and urban comarcas, against the six data points for each month. This allowed conclusions to be drawn in conjunction with the other research for this paper. The number of young people across Catalonia was also calculated to assist in the analysis process, although exact rural youth figures could not be obtained since the parameters of the data available on IDESCAT made isolating the 16–29 years age-group impossible.

In collaboration with SOC, further analysis was then conducted on a leading training course which found particular popularity in rural areas. Data was obtained from SOC internal reports on the use of this course over time from its launch in 2015 until 2022. This data was used to create a graph, within which the number of total youth in Catalonia was compared against the number of these youth involved in this programme, to achieve a percentage value for each year. The aim of this process was to facilitate the exposure of a trend in this rate over time. The data from this graph was then analysed in conjunction with the first dataset, and finally,

European, Spanish and Catalan policy documents were studied in order to provide a clear picture of the context, timeline and rationale of the trajectory of rural youth employment and education in the last several years. These official documents pertained specifically to policy changes that were introduced at these three levels, in the form of EU council recommendations, SEPE national bulletins and SOC orders, which were acquired from the respective official websites of each institution. In parallel, the research team had conversations with representatives of SOC at different levels of governance, from the headquarters to directors of several offices in rural comarcas to understand how multilevel governance and legislative changes in Active Labour Market policies were affecting the implementation of programmes in rural areas.

RESULTS

Employment and education opportunities in Catalonia

The European Union has set the target for the NEET rate in Europe to stand at 9% or below by 2030 (European Commission 2021). The figure across Spain for youth in 2021 was 13.4%, a decrease of 3.9% from 2020 (Eurostat 2023), and almost one-third of the value of 2013, where it peaked at 25.1% after the economic crisis of 2008. The trajectory seen from these statistics indicates that, with respect to rural areas, Spain is well on track for this target. However, taking into account the data presented here, as well as the Eurostat classification of rural areas (below 50 inhabitants per km²), a different story emerges.

The longitudinal data collection process enabled us to observe not only the progression in the rate of offers of employment and training across the whole of Catalonia over a period of 6 months, but also the differences and contrast between rural and urban areas.

Firstly, in reference to *Figure 1*, it should be noted that the urban comarcas had many more accredited training centres at their disposal, averaging 2.7 training centres per comarca, in comparison to the 0.4 seen in the rural comarcas. This is not unexpected since the population of the rural comarcas is lower and there is therefore less of a demand for these centres. However, while the population of the rural comarcas composes 4%, and urban areas the remaining 96% (IDESCAT 2021), the proportion of training centres in rural comarcas is instead 15%, compared with the 85% in urban comarcas. This indicates that there is no shortage of centres available in rural areas in particular, suggesting that any issues related to training courses for rural youth are not immediately attributable to the lack of availability of government accredited training centres.

Figure 1

The number of accredited training centres in urban vs rural comarcas



Source: Own elaboration with data gathered from the SOC database.

Table no. 1

The number of training course offerings in urban vs rural comarcas

Number of training course offerings – Catalonia		
Month/Year	Urban comarcas	Rural comarcas
August 2022	23	0
September 2022	18	1
October 2022	11	0
November 2022	6	0
December 2022	94	3
January 2023	82	3

Source: Own elaboration with data gathered from the SOC database.

In the urban case, cross referencing *Figure 1* and *Table no. 1* reveals that the number of training courses per training centre was 0.6, and in the rural context, 0.2. From this data it may be deduced that the training centres in all comarcas in Catalonia are underutilised, despite their government accredited status, and to a greater extent in rural areas.

For those comarcas with less than 50 inhabitants per km², the single training course available on average (see *Table no. 1*) shows that there is a distinct lack of availability of these courses to the youth who reside there. The rural comarcas are

home to approximately 50,000 young people (IDESCAT 2022). Of these, around 6750 are NEETs (Eurostat 2021). The statistics indicate that there is an average of one course available across all the rural comarcas in total (see *Table no. 1*), which means that all 6750 of these young people have a single option for training courses offered through government channels. Those among these rural youths who seek training courses will either have to apply to one of the very few available, or relocate in order to participate in a course.

There are an average of 39 courses in the urban comarcas, with one course for around 31,000 people (see *Table no. 1*). Aside from the fact that urban youth are not subject to the same infrastructure challenges as rural youth, there is evidently far more variety for urban youth to choose from when searching for a training course.

Figure 2

The number of job offers in urban vs rural comarcas



Source: Own elaboration with data gathered from the SOC database.

In contrast to the scarcity of training courses in rural areas, the urban and rural trends take a similar form to each other with regard to offers of employment, as seen in *Figure 2*. As mentioned above, the population of rural Catalonia is 4% and the urban areas 96%, whereas 7% of the job offers are in the rural areas, leaving the remaining 93% in urban areas. While this may be unexpected based on the lower development typically inherent in rural Spain, the higher supply of primary sector jobs typically found in rural areas may be one of the factors to

which the demand for jobs in these zones can be attributed. As a result, demand is found to be roughly proportional to population, across both rural and urban Catalonia.

Table no. 2

The number of online training courses in urban vs rural comarcas.

Online training courses –Catalonia		
Month/Year	Urban comarcas	Rural comarcas
August 2022	2	0
September 2022	1	0
October 2022	1	0
November 2022	0	0
December 2022	2	0
January 2023	2	0

Source: Own elaboration with data gathered from the SOC database.

As *Table no. 2* reveals, there were no online training courses based in the rural comarcas, and very few in the urban comarcas. This is cause for concern since digitalisation has an absolutely key role in the vision of the European Union for social and economic growth in the next 10 years. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the migration of many education and training programs into an online or hybrid format. Since this represented a positive step in addressing mobility and infrastructure issues associated with rural areas, it is surprising to see how, as the economy began to recover and the training courses gradually shifted back to normal, these online and hybrid courses seem to have disappeared and were not perpetuated in rural areas, despite the clear benefits posed to the rural context. Taking the situation into account, it is unlikely that these trends will increase in the next few years, since the transition to or implementation of online courses is not a small feat; on the contrary, it is generally a complex process, and its success requires careful planning and resource allocation. These courses, typically, are met with challenges such as a deficit of available or allocated resources, and the lack of a long-term institution-wide planning process (Leist and Travis 2010), and the use of specific measures such as reaction-based e-governance is key in the process, since their use involves a shift away from traditional teaching and learning methods for both student and teacher (Kumar 2016). Whether or not the momentum gained in the past 3 years in this area is completely lost remains to be seen.

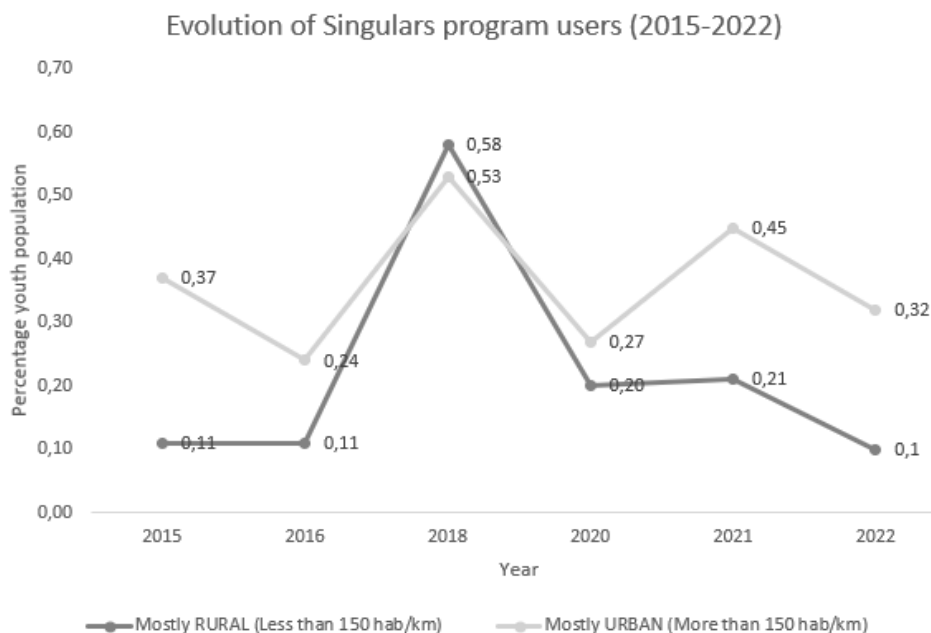
The case of the Singulars Programme

In order to understand the concept of the training course within the Catalan context, it is necessary to take a closer look at its history in the region and its trajectory in the last decade. One variety of training course may serve as an

example of this, namely the Singulares programme, which is the course that has gained the most traction across rural Catalonia following the launch of the Youth Guarantee. The course system, which was launched in 2015 by SOC, aims to assist rural youth to develop skills and capacities for their career, and the unique benefit that gave rise to its popularity in rural spaces was its flexibility. There were only two requirements for a youth to participate; that they were unemployed, and that they were registered with the Youth Guarantee. The courses could be designed and implemented as needed, based on the needs of the area, and tailored to match the resources available. The courses could therefore take place irrespective of the number of participants, and the schedule could also be moulded around the lives of the participants, which proved to be key in this rural context, and, crucially, European funding was available for these courses to take place. These specifics rendered the usual barriers to rural education much less relevant (see Baeck 2018), and opened up an avenue by which rural youth could become trained and further their career. Due to the turbulent decade, the figures above and the trajectory this course has taken over the last few years, secondary statistics from SOC internal reports were gathered to analyse it in more detail.

Figure 3

Percentage of 16–29 year olds in the Singulares programme, rural vs urban, where the cut-off of 150 inhab./ km² was used to best illustrate the trend



Source: Own elaboration with data from SOC internal reports.

It became clear through an analysis of the rates above that the course has declined in its use, particularly in rural areas, where an even higher percentage of the rural youth population were engaged in the course as compared with the youth of urban areas in 2018. Indeed, a decline of 83pp is observable in rural areas, in the space of 4 years. While COVID-19 is undoubtedly a factor in this trend in 2020 for both rural and urban areas, the course continued to decline in its use even after the economy at large had shown signs of recovery in rural areas. It is therefore clear that the Singulars programme has fallen out of favour in rural areas in the last few years.

The main causes for this decline are explained not by COVID-19 but by changes in the Spanish legal framework on Active Labour Market policies, constricting the possibilities of agents in rural settings to develop these programmes, as explained in the next section.

Changes in the Spanish legal framework with unanticipated consequences for ALM in rural settings

Our analysis of the European, National and local policy and legal framework reveals significant changes in recent years. At the European level, the underlying momentum has been an effort to improve the quality of training courses, and to create standardisation which is adhered to on a national level, in order to align the training courses with jobs. This was based on the fact that training courses varied greatly in size, length, quality, and indeed often did not result in outcomes that were conducive to entry into the labour market. The successful employment rates did not seem to correspond to the rate of successfully completed training courses in a manner that would be expected, and accordingly a common standard was to be established. In the European Council recommendation of 15 March 2018 (2018/C 153/01), on a European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships, point 2 stipulates that the training programmes should “reinforce the link between the world of work and the world of education and training”, and the following four requirements were laid down as a definition for apprenticeships:

- a) combine learning in education or training institutions with substantial work-based learning in companies and other workplaces;*
- b) lead to nationally recognised qualifications;*
- c) are based on an agreement defining the rights and obligations of the apprentice, the employer and, where appropriate, the vocational education and training institution, and*
- d) with the apprentice being paid or otherwise compensated for the work based component (p.3).*

Additionally, the European Union issued another council recommendation, of 22 May 2018 (2018/c 189/01), on key competences for lifelong learning, which

superseded that of 18 December 2006, on the same topic. This recommendation stipulates in point 3 that member states should:

“facilitate the acquisition of key competences by making use of good practices”, by “supporting and further developing the assessment and validation of key competences acquired in different settings in line with the member states rules and procedures”(p. 5).

While a document such as this exists as a platform and does not impose how the courses are designed specifically, the flow of funds to national and local initiatives across Europe depends on adherence to the points contained therein. The specific way in which these recommendations were implemented was therefore left to the discretion of the national PES. It was up to them to tailor their active labour market policies to the needs of their population.

In Spain, this recommendation led to new national resolutions being put in place, as communicated in documents (283/2019) and (369/2019). These measures served, in kind, as compulsory complimentary to those by the 17 autonomous communities in Spain. Both of these orders outlined specific measures to be put in place “taking into account the guidelines for employment policies of the member states of the European Union”. The outcome of these orders, and the way in which the Spanish government put European guidance into practice, was by designing a catalogue of specialties (El Catálogo de Especialidades Formativas), a list containing all the training courses that had met a certain set of requirements as defined by the state, on a case-by-case basis. This solution addressed both the EU recommendation for quality and effective apprenticeships, as well as the recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning. Any organisation, body or public employment service that aimed to conduct a training course would not be able to do so unless the course had been added to this list through the relevant process. While autonomous communities could freely add to this list, a training course had to meet those certain requirements to be considered for the catalogue, and the autonomous communities have therefore naturally gravitated toward the prioritisation of training courses that are urban-centric, since the requirements are easier to meet in higher developed areas with more capital. Each of the courses entered into the catalogue has its own set of requirements, and may differ slightly, but the new requirements for each course generally include:

- A minimum number of participants;
- A stricter accreditation system for training centres;
- A government recognised certificate issued to each participant; and
- Government accreditation requirement for host training centres.

While these orders were passed in 2019, their implementation was put on hold due to COVID-19, meaning that no changes occurred until 2022 when the bill was officially activated.

The main consequences these new specifics had for active Labour Market policies such as these training courses across Spain meant that in order for a course

to be allocated funds, it had to meet this new set of requirements, and for the autonomous communities such as Catalonia, that were able to add to the catalogue, the rural context was not taken into account.

It follows, therefore, that the new system had a direct impact on the Singulars programme. Programmes could no longer receive funding since they struggled to meet the minimum requirements, and the allocation of any additional resources was not possible due to the lack of these funds. The course therefore fell out of favour with local PES across the rural comarcas, and now it is barely used in these less densely populated areas. Since its inherent flexibility allowed it to be tailored to the often complex and nuanced needs of rural youth, this programme filled a niche that no other training programme could. This corresponds to the decline in training courses as seen in *Figure 3* for years 2021 and 2022.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to analyse the contrast between rural and urban employment and training in Catalonia, and to understand the role that multilevel governance plays in these differences by examining the relevant policy framework at European, National and local levels. To this end, the body of research gathered enabled us to identify some key points.

Firstly, it is notable that while the Eurostat definition of rural areas appears useful as a common ground, for standardisation purposes or in other similar contexts, it should be used with caution in more localised contexts such as that of our study, since there is a risk of the lines between rural and urban spaces becoming blurred.

Secondly, offers of employment in both urban and rural Catalonia were found to follow a similar trend over the course of the six-month period of our longitudinal data collection process, indicating a proportionality between the number of job offers and the population figures.

Thirdly, localised online training opportunities were almost completely non-existent in rural areas. This is alarming since not only are they arguably needed the most in these areas, but their presence stands to work towards sustainable development in a number of ways, such as through encouraging local economy, discouraging rural exodus and working towards the European Union's digital and green plan for the next decade. While certain online courses may be available based in large cities such as Madrid, Barcelona or Valencia, they are usually urban-centric and designed without the rural context in mind, and as such do not feature the necessary values advisable in rural areas.

Fourthly, while there was a higher than adequate number of government-accredited training centres in both rural and urban areas, government-accredited training centres in rural Catalonia were particularly underused. This can be

explained in part by the inability of rural areas to meet the requirements for funding of training courses.

Finally, and building on the previous point pertaining to training courses, a rather significant effect of the implementation of recent European policy regarding training course requirements on rural Catalonia was observed. After the order was released, and it was tailored and passed down through the chain of command from the National to the local government, and then put in place at the grassroots, the consequence was the stifling of rural training courses. The Singulares programme, the leading training programme in rural Catalonia, was heavily valued for filling a niche that no other course could, and ultimately the new policy led to the Singulares programme, designed by SOC specifically for Catalonia, almost being totally eradicated from rural parts of the autonomous community.

From a macro-level perspective, the analysis of the policy documents makes it clear that the top-down function of the government results in less and less power over the active labour market policies at each level. The national government has built its policy guidance for the autonomous communities of Spain around EU recommendations, and the local government around national legislation, resulting in a hierarchical system that has less and less room for flexibility as the level of government goes from macro to micro. Additionally, the decentralised nature of the Spanish PES system has made the issue even more complex. The manner in which policies have been put in place in Spain has evidently resulted in a lack of flow of information from the grassroots upwards, as local Public Employment Service offices in rural areas, for which the needs of the youth on the ground are distinctly clear, have limited reach to tailor active labour market policies to the local requirements, since the funding is no longer attainable.

Following the analysis of the data and discussion, we are left with three questions that future research could help address:

- What mechanisms can catalyse the adaption of policy, particularly at the national level, to match the rural context?
- What are the various facets of the requirements for rural areas to thrive?
- What is the role of the youth in this process and how do the two interact?

It should also be mentioned that stirrings can be seen that suggest there is potential for approaching a turning point for rural youth, both on the EU and Spanish front. Among the measures as put forward in the European Commission's 2021 long term vision for rural areas of Europe is the concept of rural proofing, where EU policies will be analysed "through a rural lens" (European Commission 2022). The aim of this concept, as they explain, is to question the impact of each EC policy initiative on rural employment, growth and sustainable development. This approach, should it find its place in future EU-wide policy making, could be ground-breaking for rural areas across all member states.

Further, Spain launched its reinforced version of the Youth Guarantee in the same year, the *Garantía Juvenil Plus*; at the heart of this revamped initiative is the

improved support and accompaniment for youth on the ground (Gobierno de España 2021). Although the research in this paper provides an overview of the reality in rural Catalonia, future research could certainly find a niche in analysing not just the impact on the Spanish context of the emergence of rural proofing in EC policy making, but also the success of the *garantía juvenil* plus initiative on a longitudinal basis, taking into account in particular the rural gap and the rural–urban disparity seen across the country.

Overall, it is clear that if rural youth are to avail of any kind of local, formal training course, the policy requirements must be adapted to allow the courses to take place, since the alternatives are that the youth relocate to an urban locale for training or that rural spaces become more urban to meet the needs of these courses, both of which are not only unrealistic options on the large scale, but also detrimental to sustainable development. While it is undisputable that the quality of training opportunities must be upheld to provide the vital school-to-work transition, the flexibility of rural training courses as seen in the past with the *Singulares* programme provided a suitable point of entry for many young people who would otherwise be inactive or without options in comparison to their urban peers. A balance must therefore be found between these two extremes going forward.

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În ciuda numeroaselor politici de intervenție pentru îmbunătățirea rezultatelor educației și angajării în toată Uniunea Europeană din ultima decadă, rata șomajului în rândul tinerilor continuă să fie ridicată în multe țări europene. Cum ratele rurale sunt printre cele mai mari, decalajul dintre urban și rural se bucură de o atenție în creștere, și diferitele rate ale șomajului tinerilor din mediul rural devin prevalente în discursul despre educație și muncă în toată Europa, la fel și în Spania, una dintre țările europene cu cel mai semnificativ grad de ruralitate. Obiectivul acestei lucrări este acela de a analiza diferențele dintre mediul rural și cel urban privind politicile active de pe piața muncii destinate în mod special tinerilor din regiunea spaniolă Catalonia, utilizând un mix de culegere și analiză de date

longitudinale, împreună cu o examinare a cadrului de politici relevant, de la toate nivelurile de guvernământ. Rezultatele noastre relevă diferențe cheie între oportunitățile din urban și rural, și pun în lumină modul cum guvernanta de tip multinivel poate juca un rol în extinderea sau reducere a acestor decalaje.

Cuvinte-cheie: *șomajul tinerilor din mediul rural; tineri NEET din mediul rural; decalajul urban–rural; șomajul tinerilor din Spania; politici de stat federale în parteneriat; cursuri de pregătire în mediul rural; cadrul politicilor pentru mediul rural; disparități urban–rural.*

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