

***POLICY AND PROGRAMME EFFECTIVENESS FOR ADOLESCENTS,
YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS: INSIGHTS AND EVIDENCE***

INTRODUCTION

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In a society shaped by socio-economic uncertainty, evolving civic and political landscape, rapid technological development, misinformation or disinformation, young people should adapt to many different realities in various ways. Young people across Europe encounter a wide range of challenges, including social and economic inequalities, issues relating to education, employment, health and civic participation (Mauro Ellena *et al.* 2021; Petrescu *et al.* 2024; Eurofound 2024).

Considering all the problems young generation is facing and the high rate of young people that are not in employment, education or training (NEET), governments, non-governmental organizations, and community groups have allocated substantial resources to a multifaceted array of youth programmes and policies. The main European Union response to address the social inclusion and employment challenges faced by youth has been the establishment of the Youth Guarantee (and Reinforced Youth Guarantee from 2021) policy framework since 2013 (Petrescu *et al.* 2024). The Youth Guarantee was accompanied by a range of policy measures at national, regional, and local levels, as well as by other programmes at the EU level (CERV, ERASMUS+, HORIZON etc.). These initiatives, which aim to address a wide range of issues affecting young people, including educational attainment, workforce readiness, mental well-being, civic and democratic participation, represent a societal commitment to the next generation.

In an era of competing priorities and finite resources, there is an imperative to move beyond anecdotal evidence and good intentions towards robust, evidence-informed practice. In this context, the systematic evaluation of youth programmes and policies is not merely an administrative task, but rather a fundamental component of effective governance, fiscal responsibility, and a genuine commitment to enhancing youth outcomes. The demand for evidence-based policies has grown considerably in recent decades. Evidence-based policymaking is widely recognised as a way of ensuring that public interventions are well-intentioned and demonstrably effective. As Davies (1999) observes, policies based on reliable evidence enable individuals and institutions to make informed decisions using scientifically validated information. However, generating credible evidence requires systematic, transparent and unbiased evaluations of past and ongoing

initiatives. Without such evaluations, distinguishing between effective and ineffective policies is difficult, and resources risk being misallocated. (Head, 2016; Pattyn *et al.* 2018).

Evaluation is therefore central to developing and refining European education and youth policy. By rigorously examining the design, implementation and outcomes of programmes, evaluation enables policymakers and practitioners to identify effective practices and conditions. This knowledge is vital for tailoring interventions to the diverse needs of young people across Europe. Furthermore, evaluation promotes accountability by demonstrating whether investments in youth-related initiatives result in tangible improvements in areas such as education, employment, well-being, and social participation. In an era characterised by rapid social, technological and economic change, continuous evaluation is especially important. New challenges, including digitalisation, climate change, and evolving labour markets, require adaptive policy responses. Through ongoing evaluation, European countries can ensure that their youth policies remain relevant and equitable, and that they equip young people with the necessary skills, resilience and opportunities to thrive in the future. (Lorean 2020; Bördös-Koltai 2020; Koltai-Tóth 2025).

This special issue showcases robust impact assessments that demonstrate the extent to which such initiatives achieve their intended goals. By taking this action, the issue will promote the development of evidence-based policies, which in turn have the potential to generate enhanced opportunities and outcomes for young Europeans.

Rigorous evaluation provides crucial formative insights for continuous improvement, unpacks the complex mechanisms through which interventions achieve (or fail to achieve) their effects, and identifies how outcomes may vary across diverse youth populations. However, the transition from evaluation design to meaningful impact is often accompanied by numerous challenges, including methodological complexities, ethical considerations in working with young people, and the persistent gap between research findings and their uptake in policy and practice. The present collection of articles confronts these issues directly, showcasing innovative methodologies, presenting empirical findings from diverse contexts, and stimulating a critical dialogue on how we can better generate and utilise evidence to ensure that our investments in youth are not just well-intentioned, but truly effective.

This special issue of the Quality of Life Journal is made together with PROFEEDBACK COST Action (COST Action CA20112, <https://profeedback.eu/>) and is titled “Policy and Programme Effectiveness for Adolescents, Youth and Young Adults: Insights and Evidence”. By showcasing empirical studies, the special issue aims to shed light on the effectiveness of various initiatives and their potential to influence future policy development.

CONTRIBUTION OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The current special issue examines policy and programme effectiveness for Adolescents, Youth, and Young Adults. Our objective is to stimulate and advance the scholarly discourse on several key themes: the dynamics of youth inclusion and social exclusion; the methodological challenges and innovations in evaluating the effectiveness of youth policy interventions; and the profound impact of context on policy design and implementation.

The articles curated for this volume offer compelling theoretical and empirical insights that push the boundaries of conventional evaluation.

For instance, the contribution by **Paabort and Beilmann (2025)** challenges traditional top-down evaluation, positing **youth involvement and co-creation** as fundamental principles for meaningful assessment. This shift in perspective is complemented by **Lonean (2025)**, who uses a **realist evaluation** framework to reveal how program outcomes are determined not by simple inputs, but by the complex interplay between **context, mechanisms, and youth responses**. Broadening this focus on systemic factors, **de Oliveira Rodrigues et al. (2025)** provides a vital **multi-level analysis** of academic pathways, demonstrating how effective interventions must account for interconnected family, school, and individual factors. Collectively, these articles provide a textured and forward-looking perspective on the science and practice of evaluating youth policy.

The articles are effectively united around the common issue of youth inclusion and social exclusion. We can see that all articles assessed how policies work in practice, emphasizing the importance of processes, context and mechanisms, and not only the declared results. Funding for the creation of youth programs alone does not guarantee impact, as political stability, cultural norms, and the involvement of families, schools, and local communities are also crucial.

Youth inclusion and social exclusion. The research (Paabort and Beilmann 2025; Lonean 2025; de Oliveira Rodrigues 2025) presented in this special issue has examined youth challenges such as neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET) in Romania to atypical youth educational pathways in Portugal, and broader political-educational processes in the European context. The findings from this research have shown how various policy instruments (employment programs, inclusive education projects, social funds) affect young people's opportunities to integrate into society.

Evaluating the effectiveness of youth policy interventions. It should be noted that the articles emphasize the importance of processes as well as outcomes. For example, the Romanian study uses a realistic evaluation (CMO – context, mechanism, outcome) approach to understand why EU-funded measures have not had an impact about youth (Lonean 2025). de Oliveira Rodrigues et al. (2025)

examined the case of Portugal to identify how family, school and informal factors shape educational success.

The context of youth policy design and implementation. The articles emphasize the importance of implementing policies in a real context. It is noted that simply allocating funding or declaring goals is not enough to ensure effective implementation. Lonean (2025) found that political instability, legal barriers and gender inequality norms hindered the impact of youth programs. de Oliveira Rodrigues et al.'s study (2025) showed that even with national youth programs, only specific practices, such as teacher attention and maternal involvement, can determine real results. According to Paabort, Beilmann (2025), universal EU instruments (e.g., the Youth Guarantee Initiative) are not sufficient if the structural vulnerabilities experienced by young people are not taken into account. Therefore, policy evaluation must be based not only on predetermined indicators but also on the experiences and needs of young people themselves.

The COST Action PROFEEDBACK – Platform OF policy Evaluation community for improved EU policies and Better ACKnowledgement (CA20112, MoU 052/21) 2021-2025 aims to foster the networking of the policy evaluation community at EU-level, raise awareness on the importance of evaluation policy research and improve its impact on policymaking. The Platform, following a bottom-up and open approach, gathers researchers and professionals from various scientific fields and sectors to present and evaluate theories, topics, tools and methods of policy evaluation. Results of the Europe-wide assessment of good practices provides direct and high-quality inputs for national and EU bodies responsible for policy evaluation. Policy evaluation is a key tool in understanding, developing and modernising EU policies, thus there is a growing demand for EU-wide and high-quality evaluation services.

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