

NEET STRATEGIES IN POST-RECESSION IRELAND: REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTING FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATIONAL SUPPORTS¹

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In the aftermath of the 2007–2008 global economic crisis, Ireland had one of the highest unemployment rates in the OECD for those aged between 15–25 years. An over-dependence on the construction and agriculture sectors (used to absorb early school leavers into related apprenticeship programmes) was exposed. Consequently, a reassessment of the challenges this demographic faced informed the development of a suite of targeted responses. This paper reflects on three distinct, although interrelated, areas where strategies which impacted upon NEETs were actioned in Ireland between 2007 and 2019. These are: formal education; non-formal education and training; and, establishing the voice of those most impacted (i.e., NEETs and potential NEETs), as central to the success of emergent and future responses.

Keywords: NEETs; Youth; Education; Training.

INTRODUCTION

In 2007–2008, Ireland experienced an economic trauma that exposed both its urban and rural communities to global instability, as with many other countries during this period (Murphy and Scott 2014; Kiberd 2017; Kinsella 2012). Citizens from across all demographics were affected, and young people also felt the full force of this economic shock. Indeed, prior to 2007 Ireland tracked the OECD average rate of youth Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) at a rate of -2.41% for the age group 15–24 years. However post-2007, similar to other countries such as Spain and Italy, the number of Irish youth NEETs rose from a low in 2005 of 4.88%, to a high of 12.06% in 2009 for the same age group. This is 3.47% above the OECD average during the same period (OECD 2021). In many ways, this is unsurprising, given the buoyancy of Ireland's construction industry up to 2007: construction accounted for over 13% of all employment in the country

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(Whelan 2011). At this point in time, while the construction industry had the highest rate in the OCED for percentage of employment in that sector, the Irish tourism industry accounted for 10.4% of all employment in the country during the same year (CSO 2012; MacFeeley and Delaney). Each of these major economic players in the Irish economy account for a significant number of Irish citizens who may be at risk of falling into the NEET categorisation. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the fallout from this economic shock was felt sharply by those aged 15–24 years: they may have traditionally entered into employment, education and/or training in these critical sectors.

However, since 2009, the impact of the Irish response (namely, to the challenge that this demographic experienced) can be viewed as a steady, sustainable decline in the number of youth NEETs, and how present-day Ireland, from 2018–2020, tracks quite closely to the OECD average of 6.74% NEET youth unemployment (for those aged between 15–24 years). While the acronym NEET includes a specific reference to education, it is also the case that education is the foundation of all initiatives targeting NEETs. The location and/or mode of that engagement is often that where it is considered necessary for education providers in this area to focus on either formal, or non-formal settings. It is perhaps the case that the presentation of these two educational settings, often as a dichotomy, is problematic. In the Irish context, post-2007/2008 with respect to NEETs, this dichotomy was broken down, and re-imagined as an educational continuum. To that end, it was/ is one where the needs of industry and associated opportunities for NEETs were/are aligned with formal and non-formal learning, and consequently a reimagining of the relevance of education to the sectors hit hardest by the 2007/2008 economic downturn.

This paper reflects on the Irish education and training response to this major economic shock. Firstly, a brief overview of the Irish education system is presented (including a characterisation of milestones most relevant to Irish NEETs). Secondly, a chronological exploration of significant policy informing activities, initiatives, and resultant programmes are mapped against a steady decline in NEET numbers between 2009 and 2019 (OECD 2021). Finally, this paper reflects on the role that the youth voice has in making explicit connections between formal and non-formal education initiatives, and how this can also factor in preparing for future economic events that may disproportionately impact young people aged between 15–24 years. Specifically, the recognition given to the voice of young people in preparing for the future is highlighted.

THE IRISH EDUCATION SYSTEM – NEET MILESTONES

For most children in the Republic of Ireland, primary education begins at age four or five, and in predominantly mixed-gender school settings. Typically 60,000 primary school students begin an educational journey that for many will last at least 10 years. This sustained engagement is a direct consequence of the minimum

age for leaving school being set at 15 years in 1972: this was done in response to transition rates to second level education in 1964 running at less than 33% (Coolahan 1981). This change resulted in a sharp increase in the primary school completion rates, and sustained engagement with education up to 15 years between 1972 and 1981. In the context of the Irish education system, the age category of 15 years is aligned with a state examination process called the Junior Certificate. Students typically sit between 8–10 written examinations supplemented by, in most cases, low stakes continuous assessments tasks completed in the previous two years (NCCA 2021). This examination process represents a significant milestone for NEETs and for those at risk of falling into the NEET category.

Historically, it is the case that most students who have opted to leave formal education post-Junior Certificate examination enter into a variety of apprenticeship pathways. Prior to 2007/2008, registration intake for apprenticeships peaked at 8,307 in 2006: this reflects the demand being expressed by the construction sector in particular. This sector experienced a decline in intake registrations to 244 in 2010 from that initial high in 2006 (DPER 2019). Following this, in 2013 the rate of youth unemployment peaked at 26.6% (CSO 2013). It is clear, therefore, that many of those young people who may have entered into training and subsequently employment, as a consequence of participation in initiatives such as the apprenticeship model, fell into NEET status, and thus relative precariousness. As will be explored later, the Junior Certificate examination point, although now diminished in its relevance for the majority of the school going population, still remains the minimum qualification for entry into the apprentice system, but also a symbolic milestone event for a significant number of young people (SOLAS 2021).

For those students who remain in the education system up to the age of 18, and successfully complete second level study (culminating in the award of the Leaving Certificate), over 56% enrol at higher education institutions, and attain a third level qualification (CSO 2016). However, for a significant percentage of the population eligible to progress beyond the Leaving Certificate, this award represents a significant milestone also. This is particularly true for NEETs. Indeed, NEETs who have obtained a Leaving Certificate are more likely to re-engage with education later in their lives (CSO 2021). The high completion rate to this level is in part due to the introduction of multiple pathways to completing the secondary school post-Junior Cycle, including the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme (Smyth, Banks and Calvert 2011). The LCA programme was introduced in 1994 to offer students who would have traditionally been defined as early school leavers wishing to enter the labour market, an opportunity to develop necessary labour market skills (Banks *et al.* 2014). Despite the relevance of the programme and its relative success in preventing students from prematurely entering into NEET status, participation in this program generally results in exclusion from the progression pathways into higher education (Banks *et al.* 2014; Trant *et al.* 1999).

It is clear, therefore, that there are a number of key milestones which impact on young people's thinking regarding early school leaving. From an education perspective, legislation has had a significant impact on establishing key milestones for prospective NEETs to aim for in the Republic of Ireland. It is equally clear, however, that multiple pathways towards completion of secondary school is an important factor in establishing interim targets for prospective NEETs to work towards. Nevertheless, not all young people will opt for these pathways, and parallel opportunities and options for engagement are also essential in offering alternate staging points for the prevention of young people aged between 15–24 years falling into NEET status. In the Irish context, programmes that operate in the non-formal sector (such as Youthreach and the School Completion Programme) aim to support engagement with the education system and re-engagement with skills development for employment supplemented and supported by schemes such as the Back to Education Initiative 2014–2020.

FORMAL SUPPORTS AND ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PATHWAYS

Youthreach

Referring back to the formal/non-formal education dichotomy, a need for a hybrid space was identified in 1989, as the number of young people still opting to leave secondary school at the Junior cycle milestone remained significant. Youthreach is an education, training, and work programme for early school leavers aged 15–20 years of age. It offers support to young people to help them identify what they would like to do in adult life, and allows them to gain a certificate. It operates on a full time basis, and takes in new students all year round. As of 2020, there are over one hundred Youthreach centres in the Republic of Ireland hosting almost 6,000 students every year, and who are also eligible for a training, meal, travel and accommodation allowances (DES 2021). In 2009, the numbers of enrolment in Youthreach and associated training centres peaked, in line with similar trends evidenced in the OECD average for unemployment at this time. This indicates that early school leavers who may have entered into tractional apprenticeships (available to them pre-2007) were engaging with education, and re-evaluating their future pathways. Indeed, as Ireland diversified its skills needs in 2013, explored further below, the number of youth unemployed and those opting for Youthreach programmes declined, and tracked closer to the OECD average (OECD 2021). At the same time, an increase in uptake of new apprenticeship options increased (CSO 2021). It is clear that the presence and availability of Youthreach was an important factor in mitigating the number of young people in Ireland who emerged from the economic downturn disengaged from education, employment, and/or training.

The School Completion Programme

The success of Youthreach in providing a progression pathway to employment through sustained engagement with training has done much to prevent Irish youth from falling into NEET status. However, in 2002, the School Completion Programme (SCP) was developed to support students and young people at primary or secondary level education who have been identified as being at risk of leaving the formal education system at an earlier stage (Smyth *et al.* 2015). Specifically, at either just after (or prior to) the major milestones identified above. Typically, SCPs focus on schools that are part of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) network in Ireland. Students enrolled in DEIS schools are, generally, from disadvantaged communities, and experience socio-economic disadvantages that have a negative impact on their capacity to sustain engagement with education. Indeed, students enrolled in DEIS schools are nearly twice as likely not to progress to higher education than students enrolled in non-DEIS schools (European Commission 2017; HEA 2018; Smyth *et al.* 2019). The overarching aim of the SCP is to retain students to completion of the leaving certificate (or a suitable equivalent) that will allow them to transition into further education, training, or employment. The SCP is a good example of where formal and non-formal education initiatives can work together to provide a more holistic set of supports. The SCP is one of three strands of Tusla, the Irish Child and Family Agency, Education Support Service, including the Home School Community Liaison Scheme and the Educational Welfare Service (Tusla 2021). All three strands share the same national outcomes: improved attendance; improved participation, and improved retention. Considering the remit of Youthreach, the formation and implementation of the SCP provides for a continuum of targeted supports that can make a positive contribution towards preventing young people from disengaging with education, and subsequently, training and/or employment. In 2017, Ireland had exceeded its 2020 targets in reducing the number of early school leavers (European Commission 2017).

REIMAGINING NON-FORMAL SUPPORTS POST-2007

While there will always be instances where the aforementioned formal education programmes and supports will not address the needs of all students in all circumstances, the formal education system has nonetheless established a continuum of supports for those at risk of leaving school prematurely. However, for some young people, early school leaving in pursuit of a vocation is an inevitability. Pre-2007, these pathways would have been quite clear for many young men in particular, with the construction industry and agriculture attracting a significant number of early school leavers (CSO 2021). However, in 2007 and the subsequent post-economic downturn, an Expert Group on Future Skills Needs was convened in order to assess the future needs of Ireland's economy, and to make

recommendations that would help Ireland transition from an economy with a high dependence on one or two areas, such as construction or agriculture, to a more diversified and inclusive economy by 2020 (DES 2013). Following on from this, in 2013, and in response to the findings of a review of vocational training in Ireland by the OECD (2010), a review of the provision of apprenticeship opportunities, the pathway into the construction industry most frequently accessed by young people in the Republic of Ireland, was published. At that time, youth unemployment was 26.6% (CSO 2013), and it had become clear that the availability of traditional employment and vocational training opportunities had been eroded: this was particularly true for youth in rural areas.

The Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA), an independent expert group convened to examine and report on the near future economic development of rural Ireland up to 2025, engaged in a public consultation with a number of public forum meetings, stakeholder engagement meetings, and a wide-ranging online surveys. These were undertaken in order to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by all of those living in rural settings. This research activity culminated in a report published in 2014, *Energising Ireland's Rural Economy*. This was published by the Commission. Consequently, thirty-four recommendations were made to the Irish government, focusing on an integrated approach to the development of the rural economy. Key recommendations that may have a near future impact include: the establishment of Rural Economic Development Zones, and the development of Rural Town Stimulus programmes, which focus on rural settlements and their surrounding areas (CEDRA 2014).

Following on from the CEDRA report, an action plan called “Realising Our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development 2017–2019”, was developed. This report sought to build the inherent strengths present in rural communities, and utilise the contribution that such communities can, and do, make to Ireland's economic prosperity. There are five key pillars, with associated objectives and designated responsible bodies for implementation. They are:

- Supporting Sustainable Communities;
- Supporting Enterprise and Employment;
- Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential;
- Fostering Culture and Creativity in Rural Communities;
- Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity.

However, at the heart of all of these plans and initiatives rests education, training and employment. This calls for a deliberate re-focusing of efforts and a recognition that the connections between formal and non-formal education are vital components in the realisation of any aspects of the CEDRA report. To that end, the subsequent action plan resulted in a re-imagining of the manner in which young people are both included in national conversations that affect them, and how programmes of education (both formal and non-formal) are made available to them. One of the first initiatives to emerge at this time was the formation of the Apprenticeship Council.

Generation Apprenticeship

In the wake of the 2007/2008 economic downturn (and as Ireland was emerging from this period), a review of skills shortages was carried out in 2013, and revealed that multiple areas were experiencing skills shortages, specifically: science (including biopharma and medtech); a broad spectrum of engineering skills associated with production and manufacture, and ICT, ranging from software developers to user support (DES 2013). Considering the pre-2007 focus on construction and agriculture (and the subsequent desire to shift to a more diversified economy) this shift towards a knowledge economy presented an opportunity to re-imagine the concept of apprenticeship provision in the Republic of Ireland. In 2014, the Minister for Education announced the formation of The Apprenticeship Council. This was formed to specifically be enterprise informed, with representatives from business, trade unions, further and higher education bodies, as well as government taking part. In particular, the council was tasked with responding to the emergent needs of Ireland's changing economy (DES 2013; DES 2014). Since 2014, apprenticeships in Ireland have been overseen by the Apprenticeship Council. The further education and training authority, SOLAS, is the lead agency responsible for apprenticeship on behalf of Government. It works in close partnership with the Higher Education Authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, industry, and education and training providers across further and higher education. SOLAS' responsibility includes maintenance of a national register of employers approved to take on apprentices, and a national register of apprentices. For those wishing to pursue an apprenticeship pathway to employment, they are now directed to *Generation Apprenticeship*. *Generation Apprenticeship* presents a directory of apprenticeship pathways which reflect the full range of opportunities available to young people in industry in Ireland. These include: Agriculture; Arboriculture; BioPharma; Construction; Electrical; Engineering; Equine; Finance; Hairdressing; Healthcare; Hospitality & Food; ICT; Insurance; Logistics; Motor; Property Services; Recruitment, and Sales (DES 2021). Whilst the negative post-recession impacts of the economic downturn were felt by many for over a decade, it is also the case that the resultant reconceptualisation of apprenticeships in Ireland has also, along with programmes in the formal education sector, contributed to the steady decline in youth unemployment in Ireland overall.

Back to Education and Training Initiatives

However, for those who may have fallen into precariousness between 2007 and 2008 (and before the aforementioned formal and non-formal support mechanisms were put in place), additional supports were required so that their disconnection from lifelong learning opportunities did not prevent them from trying again. To that end, a number of initiatives were developed to support

returning to education at both the second level and via further education. The Back to Education Initiative, a part-time second chance at a second level programme, provides opportunities for second chance education to adult learners and early school leavers who want to upgrade their skills. The initiative builds on existing schemes such as Youthreach and the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). The Back to Education Allowance is a financial incentive that is available to young people aged over 21 years, enabling them to return to complete their second level education full-time. Applicants can also make use of supports to continue on into higher education if they wish. Young people who are unemployed, parenting alone, or who have a disability, and those who receive certain payments from the Department of Social Protection, are particularly encouraged to apply. The allowance is also available for those over 24 years of age to pursue postgraduate programmes, or to enrol in initial teacher education programmes in Ireland (DSP 2021). Such initiatives are an important component in the overall approach to supporting those who, for various reasons, find themselves in the NEET classification, and encouraging them to pursue employment, education and training opportunities.

It isn't always possible for NEETs to return to formal education settings. In response to this challenge, the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) was also introduced in 2012. VTOS is a special range of courses designed to meet the educational needs of unemployed people who are early school-leavers and are not in position to make a sustained return. The scheme aims to give them a choice of options from basic education and training, to advanced vocational preparation and training. It targets people over the age of 21 who have been getting unemployment payments or signing for welfare credits for at least six months. It is delivered through the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) at centres all over Ireland. In any given academic term during 2018, up to 5000 people were utilising the VTOS programme and its associated supports (CSO 2021).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE YOUTH VOICE IN SHAPING THEIR OWN FUTURE

Between 2007 and 2019, as this paper has explored, a large number of initiatives that link both formal and non-formal contexts have been implemented. A significant evolutionary aspect of how such programmes are now sustained and informed is the presence of the voice of young people in shaping their own future. Increasingly, at both a local and national level, young people between the ages 15–24 years are considered not merely as stakeholders, but as key informants of policy and initiative development. Indeed, this has been evident in the formation of national strategies and frameworks in the last decade. For example, Better

Outcomes Brighter Futures (BOBF): National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020, is a framework which seeks to improve the lives and life chances of children and young people aged under 25. The policy framework, prefaced by the National Children’s Strategy, *Our Children – Their Lives* (2000–2010), identified six areas that have the potential to improve outcomes, and transform the effectiveness of existing policies, services and resources in achieving these national outcomes. They are:

- Active and healthy, physical and mental wellbeing;
- Achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development;
- Safe and protected from harm;
- Economic security and opportunity;
- Connected, respected, and contributing to their world.

This national policy framework also recommended the development of a National Youth Strategy as being central to the success of the aforementioned outcomes, particularly in relation to rural communities.

Following on from *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* (2014–2020), the National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making, 2015–2020 was developed. This strategy is primarily aimed at children and young people under the age of 18, but also embraces the voice of young people in the transition to adulthood up to the age of 24. The strategy is guided and influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The strategy focuses on the everyday lives of children and young people, and the places and spaces in which they are entitled to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. This work prompted the development of the National Youth Strategy, as called for, and aimed to enable all young people to realise their maximum potential, by respecting their right and hearing their voices, whilst protecting and supporting them as they transition from childhood to adulthood. The published strategy builds a consultation process implemented in 2014/2015, framed by the objectives in the BOBF policy document. This process highlighted that young people identified mental health, education, inclusion, employment, access to services, youth work/youth organisations, and supporting transitions as key areas requiring focused action (DES 2014).

Further to this, it was identified that consultation and intake development needed to serve the prosperity of all citizens, and to insulate them from the precariousness of NEET status. In 2017, the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021 was launched. Travellers and Roma are amongst the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in Ireland. The 2011 census indicated that there are almost 30,000 travellers in Ireland, and their average age is 22.4 years. 18% of travellers live in rural areas, however many urban areas are located within rural development zones. 55% of travellers leave second level education by the age of 15, and a significant majority of the travelling community are without

work. In addition, in 2018, the previously mentioned BOBF document was found wanting in relation to inclusion and, consequently, the National Youth strategy was revised, and republished as the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018–2020, in order to recognise that young Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex (LGBTI+) people can flourish when they have consistently positive interactions with those around them, as well as supportive experiences in the services which they utilise regularly.

It is clear from the development of these policy frameworks and strategies that the voice of young people is recognised by the citizenship as a core informant in the shaping of opportunities for all young people to flourish, and to mitigate the risk of falling in to NEET status. However, it was also clear that a forum for that voice was absent. In response to this, The National Youth Council of Ireland Strategic Plan (2018–2020) was published. It presents youth work as having a number of purposes that include:

- Giving young people a voice in decisions that affect their lives.
- Giving young people the opportunity to talk and be listened to.

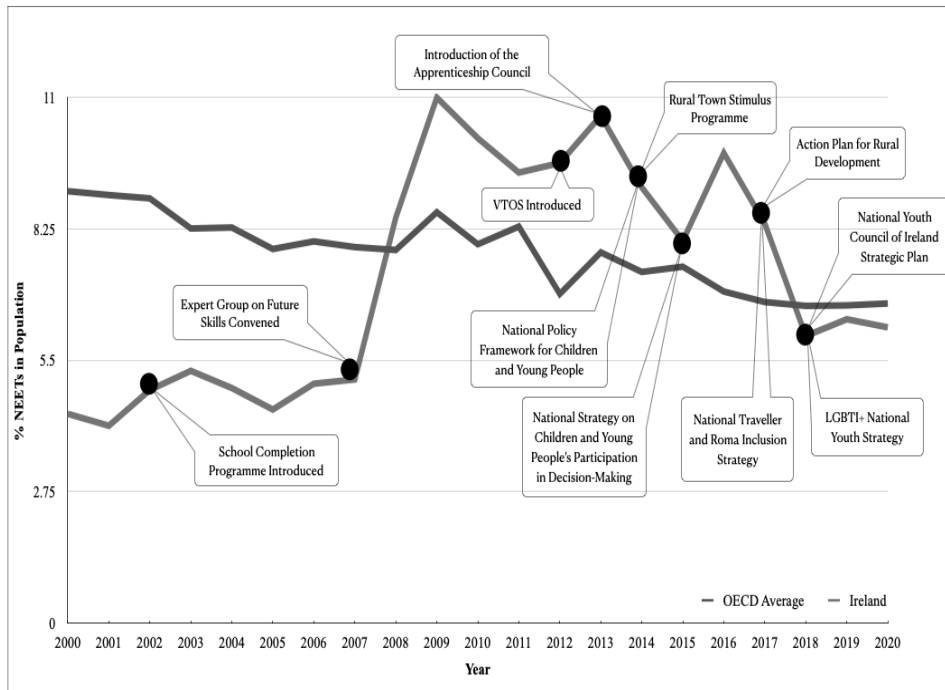
The National Youth Council of Ireland provides a forum for young people to participate in the conversations that shape their future and, in the future, for their voice to shape how those that follow them into adulthood have the best possible chance of not falling into NEET status, and the respective problems this would entail.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to present an insight into the impact of the 2007–2008 global economic downturn on the fortunes of those ages between 15–24 years, from that period onwards. It is clear from the OECD data presented in this paper that Irish youth were disproportionately affected by this, in turn resulting in a high unemployment rate, which took over a decade to address and return close to the OECD average (OECD 2021). Initially, an overview of the Irish education system and the key milestones which impact upon Irish NEETs provided a contextualisation of the challenges associated with sustained engagement with education between the ages of 15 and 18 years old. The complexity of these challenges are also evident within the formal and non-formal responses (see *Figure 1*) that were designed and implemented in order to ameliorate the precariousness faced by NEETs. Most notably, this includes the retention programmes linked to the formal education system and the overhaul of the apprenticeship model in Ireland in 2014.

Figure 1

The relationship between NEET trajectory and introduction of initiatives, programmes and supports in Ireland (NEET Trajectory Data Source: OECD)



However, it is this complexity and the inter-relatedness of each of the initiatives that has been highlighted in this paper which points to three key considerations for any NEET strategy. They are:

- It is vital that supports and a multiplicity of pathways exists across the continuum of education in order to encourage as many young people as possible to remain in education for as long as possible.
- In addition it is crucial that supports in the non-formal sector link to that of the formal education sector in order for the circle to be closed on the challenges that NEETs face. Such challenges do not exist in one sector or the other. Consequently, an integrated response is required.
- Finally, as has been the case in recent years in Ireland, the voice of youth citizens should shape the direction, and form of responses to challenges that impact upon them.

Taken together, these three key considerations formed Ireland's response to the 2007/2008 global economic downturn and its impact upon Irish youth. Whilst it is certain that some young people will be impacted more than others (and that the

strategies, frameworks and programmes highlighted in this paper will inevitably let some people down), the response has nonetheless slowly but progressively provided a robust platform upon which not only to continue to build, but also be informed by those it is designed to support.

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În perioada care a urmat imediat după criza economică globală 2007–2008, Irlanda a avut una dintre cele mai mari rate de șomaj din OECD, pentru cei cu vârstele între 15 și 25 de ani. S-a observat o supradependență de sectoarele agricol și de construcții (folosite pentru a absorbi pe cei ce părăseau școala devreme, în programe destinate ucenicilor). În consecință, o reevaluare a provocărilor acestor desfășurări demografice a dus la crearea unor răspunsuri de politici sociale țintite. Acest studiu se concentrează pe trei arii distincte dar aflate în relație, unde s-au creat strategii cu impact asupra NEET, între 2007 și 2019. Acestea sunt: educația formală, educația non-formală și programele vocaționale, care pun în centrul lor pe cei asupra cărora au și cel mai mare impact: NEET și potențialii NEET.

Cuvinte-cheie: NEET; tineret; educație; instruire.

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