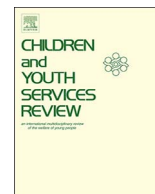




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Youth outside the labour force — Perceived barriers by service providers and service users: A mixed method approach

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ABSTRACT

Background: Young people who are neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) have received increasing attention in Western countries. While some young people in the labour force are unemployed because of a shortage of jobs, others would be without employment even in periods of economic growth, when more jobs are available. The latter group is referred to as neither in the labour force nor in education or training (NLFET), and such people need intervention to improve their chances of work participation. However, this group is poorly understood, and more knowledge is needed to develop efficient measures. The purpose of the study is to investigate the NLFET population and to identify barriers to education or employment.

Method: Interviews were conducted at all labour and welfare offices in a representative county in Norway, and an internet-based survey among 586 persons aged 18–29 years who met the NLFET criteria was conducted. Sixty case managers of young service users and 30 managers/assistant managers were interviewed at the 25 offices in the county.

Results: The local labour and welfare offices prioritize young clients, and some have designated follow-up teams for young service users. Three main barriers to education or employment were identified through the interviews at the offices: client motivation, the sense of lack of achievement/defeat, and unrealistic expectations about working life. A survey of the young people revealed other barriers, such as health problems (60%), low education (55%), lack of work experience (41%), the feeling of being exhausted (38%), low self-esteem (36%), feeling depressed (35%), sleeping problems (35%), and very often a combination of these barriers.

Conclusions: Health problems, social and other problems are highly prevalent among the NLFET population. The majority of the population wanted to find a job or to complete their education. We conclude that mental health problems often camouflage social problems. Treatment of complex problems should not be left to mental health services. Given the nature of the barriers identified, follow-up by strong multi-professional teams, including social work and health professions, should be part of the measures allocated to the NLFET population.

1. Background

Young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) have received increasing attention in western countries. While some young people in the labour force are unemployed because of a shortage of jobs, others are without employment even in periods of economic growth, when more jobs are available. They have health problems, social issues or other barriers to normal education or employment. The latter group is referred to as NLFET, neither in the labour force nor in education or training, and they need intervention to improve their chances of work participation. Studies have confirmed that both health and other problems in youth and adolescence predict weak labour market participation later in life (De Ridder et al., 2013a; Pape,

Bjorngaard, Holmen, & Krokstad, 2012; Winding, Labriola, Nohr, & Andersen, 2015), but it is unclear how mental problems and other problems are related and how they influence the services provided to facilitate labour market participation. Thus, the problems of this group are poorly understood, and more knowledge is needed to develop efficient measures. Estimates of the size of the NLFET population do not exist but more is known about the NEET population. About 5–10% of youth aged 15–24 years are recorded as NEET in the Nordic countries (Halvorsen, Hansen, & Tägtström, 2012), and similar rates are found in Switzerland (Baggio et al., 2015). In the UK, there are nearly a million 16–24 year-olds who are recorded as NEET, i.e., 13.5% of the total (Maguire, 2015).

The NEET term is often used in academic and political debates

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(Serracant, 2014). In 2011, the Eurostat, the *Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion* and the Member States reached an agreement to define the concept of NEET. It refers to non-employed and inactive people who are not undergoing any form of training or education, and is applied to young people aged 15–34 years. Their objective was to identify the group of unemployed young people that was not acting to develop their human capital. The term “NEET” was distinguished from “NLFET” in the 2013 report on *Global Employment Trends for Youth* by the International Labour Organization (Serracant, 2014). NLFET stands for “neither in the labour force nor in education or training”. It is similar to NEET, but it excludes unemployed youth (who are part of the labour force).

In Spain, the descriptive acronym NEET has become a negative label that has stigmatized the entire younger generation (Serracant, 2014). The media and popular understanding of this group is often that it consists of people who neither want to study nor seek to work. Thus, NEET people are linked to shortcomings such as idleness, effort avoidance and ultimately, a “values crisis” (Serracant, 2014). In Norway, it has been argued that the generous unemployment benefits and extensive labour market interventions found in the Nordic welfare states shield young people from the most severe consequences of economic inactivity, thereby failing to encourage workforce participation (Lorentzen et al., 2014). However, the majority of young beneficiaries do not receive the most generous benefits, and recent research has shown that less generous unemployment and social assistance benefits have become the most important form of income protection for young people (ibid). The reason that many do not receive unemployment benefits may be that most of the inactive young population have not previously worked, so they are not entitled to unemployment benefits. It is therefore necessary to study inactive youth who are not receiving unemployment benefits because they now constitute the majority of the inactive youth population.

A study in Australia showed that NEETs were more likely to be male, older, have a history of criminal charges, risky cannabis use, higher levels of depression, poorer social functioning, a greater degree of disability and economic hardship, and more severe mental illness than those engaged in education, training or work (O’Dea et al., 2014). A cohort study in Switzerland showed that previous mental health problems, cannabis use, and daily smoking were reported to increase the likelihood of being NEET (Baggio et al., 2015). Two British cohort studies associated poor childhood mental health with later unemployment (Egan, Daly, & Delaney, 2015). A Norwegian register data study used detailed grade transcripts from compulsory education at age 16, measuring “cognitive” skills using average grades in mathematics and science, and “non-cognitive” skills using average grades in “practical and behavioural” subjects (arts and crafts, food and health, music, physical education) (Falch, Nyhus, & Strom, 2014). That study found that low non-cognitive skills were the most important predictor of receiving welfare benefits at age 22, while high cognitive skills were most important for college enrolment (ibid).

A study of young people's perceptions of “social inclusion” showed that informal structures of recognition, such as knowing that someone trusted or believed in them, were important in young people's sense of inclusion and belonging (Rose, Daiches, & Potier, 2012). Another study reported that low levels of physical activity and factors such as “enjoyment”, “appearance” and “feeling good” were deemed important (Poobalan, Aucott, Clarke, & Smith, 2012). Because most studies target the NEET population, little is known about the NLFET population. When a large proportion of the NEET population is unemployed, but otherwise do not need help to stay in the labour market, these studies cannot provide sufficient information about the NLFET population where unemployment is more likely to be a consequence of other underlying factors. It is important to consider those with complex problems to increase their participation in education and the labour market. The nature of these problems should be studied both from the perspective of the NLFET population and from the perspective of the

service providers who initiate measures to facilitate labour market participation. Therefore, we were interested in studying the NLFET population and answering the following research question: What are the barriers to continuing education or entering the labour force for the NLFET population? In order to identify these barriers, we need to understand more about the services provided to youth by the welfare state in general, and especially how the services contribute to the NLFET population's effort to continuing education or entering the labour force. We are also interested in a potential discrepancy between barriers observed by the service providers and the perception of barriers among the youth.

2. Data and method

2.1. Setting

In Norway, all users of labour and welfare services are entitled an assessment of their needs for assistance from the services. The users are categorised into four types: Standard effort (can obtain work on your own), Situational effort (can obtain work with some assistance), Customised effort (can obtain work with extensive assistance) and Permanent customised effort (small chances of obtaining income-earning employment). Those with need for *Standard effort* are regular job seekers, they are unemployed but are economically active and are part of the labour force. Service users with need for *Situational effort* or *Customised effort* are also unemployed, but are typically economically inactive. They are typically not previously employed, and do not have the necessary skills and knowledge required by the labour market and are therefore outside the current labour force. These two groups of youth come closest to the NLFET population because they are neither in the current labour force nor in education or training. The last group, those with the need for *Permanent customised effort* is typically far from the labour market due to severe illness, permanent disability or for other reasons not able to work.

Data were collected from case managers in labour and welfare offices and their young clients in Sør-Trøndelag, one of the 19 counties of Norway. Sør-Trøndelag is located in the central part of Norway, and covers about 6% of the national population. The population of Sør-Trøndelag is representative for the total population of Norway for variables like population density, age distribution, labour market characteristics, and level of education. About 59% of the population of 313,370 live in Trondheim, which is the third largest city in Norway. A total of 456 local labour and welfare (NAV) offices are spread across Norway. The local NAV offices include employees from the local authorities (welfare) and the central government (labour). Sør-Trøndelag has 25 local NAV offices. The following two sources of information were targeted: employees and managers at NAV offices and the NLFET population. Data collection was conducted during the spring of 2014.

Youth unemployment rates are low in Norway compared to most other countries. However, the observed increase in youth receiving health related benefits might indicate hidden youth unemployment. The Norwegian labour and welfare services assess the needs of every user, and we are therefore able to identify persons the system assesses as outside the labour force who are in contact with the services because they are without a job and not in education (NLFET).

2.2. Data collection

A mixed method approach was chosen to obtain information from NAV offices and young welfare service users. NAV office employees and young service users took part in interviews and a digital survey, respectively. The choice of method for data collection was based on number of potential participants. We were able to contact and interview all office managers and case managers who follow up young service users in the county, but we were not able to get in contact and interview all young service users. The NAV County office have a register of all

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