

# Career Start Programme Bulgaria

EVALUATION

*Center for the Study of Democracy*

**2023**

**IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT 'LOST  
MILLENNIALS – TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH  
NETWORK FOR THE EVALUATION OF INITIATIVES  
TARGETING 25+ NEETS'**

*Please cite as: CSD (2023) Career Start Programme Bulgaria. Evaluation. Center for the Study of Democracy. Lost Millennials – Transnational Research Network for the Evaluation of Initiatives Targeting 25+ NEETs. Available at <https://lostmillennials.eu>*

Project summary:

*The project ‘Lost Millennials’ focuses on a regularly neglected group of the generation of Millennials: young people aged 25-29 neither in employment or education and training (25+ NEETs). This generation started their working life shortly after the economic crisis of 2008, perceiving uncertainty and lack of security for work and well-being, they are more likely to be inactive or in precarious jobs. The main objective of the project is to contribute to the successful integration of 25+ NEETs to the labour market through increasing knowledge on the effects of employment initiatives on 25+ NEETs, building capacity of stakeholders to perform impact studies and thus improving the quality of labour market interventions. This objective will be achieved through the creation of the transnational research network which will share know-how and good practices, the evaluations of governmental and community-based initiatives targeting 25+ NEETs, as well as the engagement of stakeholders to increase the policy-relevance of project results.*

For more information, please visit our [website](#), contact us on [lm.leadpartner@hetfa.hu](mailto:lm.leadpartner@hetfa.hu) and follow our social media ([Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#)).

*The Lost Millennials project is funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment.*

Implemented by:



## Table of Contents

---

<b>1. Introduction and context .....</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1 The labour market in Bulgaria and young NEETs .....	2
1.2 The Career Start Programme .....	3
<b>2. The design of the initiative .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. Descriptive statistics .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4. Description of methodology .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>5. Evaluation questions .....</b>	<b>8</b>
5.1 Unexpected finding about NEETs in the Context of the Career Start Programme .....	8
5.2 Relevance.....	10
5.3 Coherence.....	12
5.4 Effectiveness .....	17
5.5 Efficiency.....	20
5.6 Sustainability .....	21
5.7 Impact.....	23
5.8 Horizontal aspects .....	27
5.9 The Career Start Programme and 25+ NEETs .....	30
<b>6. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>7. References .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>8. Annex.....</b>	<b>36</b>

## 1. Introduction and context

---

### 1.1 The labour market in Bulgaria and young NEETs

Young people are a very specific group on the Bulgarian labour market. Some of them face difficulties to find jobs that match their university majors for various reasons: lack of professional experience, insufficient information on prospective job openings, and little interest on the part of employers to hire inexperienced workforce. Compared to people in their 40s, younger people experience higher rates of labour market inactivity (OECD, 2022). This requires concerted institutional efforts to utilize the opportunities for young people to access the labour market. The Career Start Programme is one of the major national initiatives in Bulgaria for young people up to 29 who have completed their university education, but are struggling to make the transition between education and employment. In the period since its inception in 2003, the programme has operated in differing economic contexts and labour market situations.

In 2020 Bulgaria had one of the highest NEET rates in the EU, at 18% against a European average of 14% (OECD, 2022, p. 16) (the NEETs term typically stands for young people who are not in employment, education and training). The shares of men and women in Bulgaria who fall within the NEETs category differ considerably: they are significantly higher among women. This ratio was maintained throughout the entire period between 2011 and 2021, with the annual rate of decrease in the shares being similar for both sexes. In almost all age groups, the share of NEETs among men in 2021 is significantly lower than that among women, with the difference being smallest among people at high school age - 15-19-year-olds – where it is just 0.8 percentage points. The next age group – from 20 to 24 years old – is the only one in which the share of inactive women is lower than that of men, the main factor for this being their significantly higher university enrollment rate. In the following age groups – between 24 and 29 years and between 30 and 34 years – the difference between the two sexes is respectively 9.2 and 8.4 percentage points, probably as a result of the higher employment among men and the impact of motherhood (Institute for Market Economics, 2022, p. 9). A worrisome fact is that during the ten-year period between 2011 and 2021 there is a much more significant drop in the share of inactive men than women (Institute for Market Economics, 2022, p. 8 - 9).

In 2021 there was an improvement in the conditions of the European labour market, hence, in the share of the NEETs as well (Institute for Market Economics, 2022). Bulgaria is among the economies where the fastest improvements are observed – 3.1 percentage points within a year, as a result of the rapid recovery of employment and the drop in unemployment after the lifting of the toughest anti-Covid-19 measures (Institute for Market Economics, 2022, p. 8).

The administrative statistics of the National Employment Agency show a decrease of youth unemployment in 2022 – a trend that continues from the previous annual period. In the period January – December 2022 youth unemployment in the country decreased compared to the same period of 2021. The registered unemployed people under 29 years of age were 16,540 on average in the period January – December 2022 and their share occupied 11.2% of all registered unemployed people. The parallel with the same period in 2021 shows a decrease in absolute numbers of 18.2% (3,690 persons), while the relative share in relation to the total number of registered unemployed people marks an increase of 0.1 percentage points. This shows that the decline in youth unemployment slightly lags behind the overall rate of decline in other age groups. This slowdown in the rate of decline for young people is due, first, to the deteriorating market situation and, secondly, to some implementation processes regarding the realization of anti-crisis and employment-promoting measures in the previous 2021 report. The implementation of schemes such as 'Employment for You' and 'Youth Employment' has provided short-term employment for 6 months to more than 10 thousand young people, some of whom, after the end of the subsidy period, registered again in the labour offices (National Employment Agency, 2022, p. 9).

The lack of connection between education and the labour market is one of the main reasons for the inactivity of young people on the job market (Institute for Market Economics, 2022). This is a problem of both the secondary and the higher education. This lack is tied to unrealistic expectations about employment on the part of students and discourages them when they first encounter the demands of business (National Employment Agency, 2021, p. 39). There is an oversupply of certain majors (e.g., those related to agriculture) for which there is not enough labour market demand (Bulgarian Industrial Association, 2022). Another explanation for the high number of inactive people with university education can also be sought in household work and child-rearing (Institute for Market Economics, 2022, p.13).

A number of cultural and social traits also play a role, such as the late age at which young people leave their parents' households, the generally low degree of labour force mobility, and the weak social and economic development of some regions in the country. The number of NEETs in Bulgaria is still high but steadily falling. Reaching and activating NEETs is one of the priorities of the National Employment Agency, the institution which is one of the main stakeholders implementing the Career Start Programme (National Employment Agency, 2021, p. 39 - 40).

## 1.2 The Career Start Programme

The Career Start Programme is an annual initiative that has been fully operational since its launch in 2003 and is designed to tackle issues of youth unemployment. The initiative addresses the difficulties young university graduates face to find jobs that are in line with their knowledge and skills due to the lack of work experience. This report covers the implementation and results of the Career Start Programme in Bulgaria for the period 2013 – 2022.

The overarching objective of the initiative is to provide opportunities for the acquisition of work experience for unemployed youth who have completed higher education, thus facilitating the transition between education and employment. It aims to: 1) prevent the loss of qualification of young people; 2) prevent 'brain drain'; 3) provide opportunities for renewal of the public administration; 4) provide an opportunity for permanent employment for some of the young people, participating in the programme; 5) achieve a flexible combination of knowledge, skills and experience corresponding to the requirements of the market economy (National Employment Agency, n.d., Career Start Programme, p. 2).

## 2. The design of the initiative

---

The target group of the Career Start Programme are young people up to 29 years of age, university graduates with no work experience, who are registered at the Labour Offices (also known as Bureau Directorates) of the Public Employment Service. The young people are given the opportunity to be employed and gain professional experience in the public administration – national institutions, regional and local/municipal administrations – for the period of twelve months. The scope of the initiative is national: it is implemented on the territory of the entire country.

The institutional framework in charge of the programme includes a number of stakeholders at various levels. The main institution responsible for the Career Start Programme is the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. The Minister of Labour and Social Policy approves the programme, the amendments and additions to it (if necessary), the participant selection criteria, the job application procedures, the annual job quotas. The Minister also provides the necessary funds for the programme implementation from the Ministry's budget for the relevant year, performs general coordination, control and evaluation of the results, and provides methodological assistance. The Ministry of Education and Science promotes the programme through its Regional Education Offices/Inspectorates and actively assists its implementation.

The National Employment Agency through its Executive Director gives instructions for the programme implementation, coordinates and organizes the Agency's territorial subdivisions, organizes and announces the job application procedures, appoints the candidate selection commission, prepares a list of approved candidates/programme participants, allocates the necessary funds and exerts continuous control over the programme implementation. The Agency is one of the main institutional stakeholders, responsible for the implementation of the initiative. The Regional Employment Service Directorates provide assistance to the Labour Offices/Bureau Directorates, provide the employers with the necessary funds for participation in the programme on a monthly basis, and have control, monitoring and coordinating functions at the regional level.

The Labour Offices/Bureau Directorates organize and announce the job application procedure, provide the necessary information about the programme to interested stakeholders/institutions, mediate between young people and employers, conclude an agreement for joint activity with the employer to provide funds for the young people employed under the programme, monitor employers and employed youth for compliance with the terms of the contract under the programme, control and coordinate the implementation of the programme at the local level. The Employment Committees/Commissions assist with the implementation of the programme. Their representatives participate in the selection committees for candidates to be employed in the public administration at the regional and municipal level, and monitor and control the implementation of programme activities. The Regional/District Administrations participate in the information campaign to promote the programme and to attract participants, appoint the selection committees for candidates to be employed at the regional administrations, assist with the programme implementation. Local/municipal administrations participate in the information campaign to promote the programme and to attract participants. The mayors appoint selection committees for candidates to be employed at the local/municipal administrations, and assist the implementation of the programme.

Finally, the employers who are partners under the programme provide suitable job positions for the young people, provide schedules for interviews with the nominated candidates, conclude agreements with the Labour Offices/Bureau Directorates, sign individual labour contracts with young people in accordance with the Labour Code provisions, pay the wages for the time actually worked to the persons employed under the programme, in accordance with the provisions of the Labour Code (National Employment Agency, n.d., Career Start Programme, p. 3–5).

When it comes to funding, the Career Start Programme is funded from the state budget. Resources are allocated to employers who hire young people under the programme, preselected by the Labour Offices/Bureau Directorates. The granted subsidies cover salaries, social security contributions, remuneration for paid annual leave, and social insurance. Employers provide funds for the material costs of the activities of the young people employed under the programme, as well as for all mandatory payments under the Labour Code, which are not subsidized under Art. 30a of the National Insurance Code (Career Start Programme, p. 5).

To monitor and assess the programme, the institutions responsible for the implementation of the programme prepare reports about the implementation of the Programme reports for the Minister of Labour and Social Policy. The assessment of the programme is on a national level based on collected information, in accordance with approved indicators, and direct observations. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the implementing organisations use this information for improvement of the mechanism and scope, and for extending the programme duration (Ibid.).

### 3. Descriptive statistics

---

The Career Start Programme aims to provide opportunities for acquisition of professional experience in the public administration to unemployed young university graduates who lack work experience, in order to facilitate the transition between education and employment. In 2021, 867 young people were employed under the programme, of which 853 were new. The funds paid to secure their remuneration from the state budget amount to BGN 5,907,770 (National Employment Agency, 2021, p. 42), that is, BGN 800 per employed person for salary and insurance for the 12-month period (Pariteni.bg, 2021). Overall, its budget has been substantial as the figures for the last three years point out – 1,964 mln EUR in 2020; 3,691 mln EUR in 2021; 3,514 mln EUR in 2022 (Bogdanova et al., 2022, p. 26). On April 20<sup>th</sup> 2022, the Council of Ministers raised the remuneration of the young people employed under the programme from BGN 800 to BGN 860 (DarikNews.bg, 2022).

Until 2020, the duration of the Career Start Programme was 9 months and this period was subsequently extended to one year. The extension from 9 to 12 months was made because it was identified during the course of the programme that a longer period was needed for a smooth transition. It would give young people the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the full annual cycle in the work of the respective administration. The duration of the Career Start Programme was extended until the end of 2022. It is fully funded from the state budget (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2020).

According to the Active Labour Market Policy Impact Assessment conducted in 2019, the programme has the highest gross impact of all national programmes and measures, indicating that young people are much more likely to find jobs and sustainable employment after participating in the programme (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2020).

### 4. Description of methodology

---

To obtain and review the information needed for the evaluation of the Career Start Programme, CSD collected data from public sources, from the institutions implementing the programme, and from beneficiaries. The evaluation covers a ten-year period 2013 – 2023, for which public information is available. We used several different methods in the data collection process.

First, we researched the Internet for public sources of information such as the Internet sites of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the National Employment Agency, the Career Start Programme Guide, the annual National Employment Action Plans and the reports on the implementation of these plans, other institutional data and assessments available, as well as media publications. Second, we devised interview questionnaires and conducted 12 structured interviews with representatives of the



implementing institutions and beneficiaries: the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the National Employment Agency, the Regional Employment Service Directorate – Sofia, labour offices in Sofia, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Sofia Regional Administration, Sofia Municipality – Sredets (we conducted two interviews with representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science, as well as two interviews with members of one of the Labour Offices in Sofia). Third, CSD requested data from the National Employment Agency, which is the main implementing institution, regarding indicators such as the number of applicants, the number of employed persons, the number of women, the administrative departments at which beneficiaries are employed, the employment and funds over the 10-year period. Fourth, CSD conducted two online surveys. The first survey was among various institutional stakeholders, representatives of implementing and employer institutions. Even though we distributed the survey across various institutions, only members of the National Employment Agency and the Labour Offices/Bureau Directorates responded to the survey, thus results are reported from these two institutions. The second online survey was conducted among Career Start Programme beneficiaries, with 612 respondents who completed this survey. The beneficiary survey aimed to get feedback from the representatives of the target group for whom the programme is designed. This feedback is of particular use to both policymakers and the institutions running the programme as we are not aware of any other in-depth account of beneficiaries' attitudes toward this employment measure.

In terms of the interview question protocol, we probed for information regarding the objectives/goals of the Career Start Programme, the practical importance of the programme for the target groups, the coherence of the Programme relative to other programmes, programme effectiveness, indicators of success of the programme, results achieved over the last 10 years, resource allocation (in terms of budget, expertise, and staff), programme sustainability, positive and negative impacts of the programme on beneficiaries and institutional stakeholders, unintended effects of the programme, the role of institutional partnerships, effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the programme implementation.

The online survey questionnaires which we developed for the two surveys follow the methodological guide as well and included similar questions. In total, the first survey contains 15 questions. The first survey results are based on 65 completed online questionnaires (20 employees from the National Employment Agency and 45 employees from the Labour Offices/Bureau Directorates of the Public Employment Service). We interviewed three programme beneficiaries and conducted a second online survey of program beneficiaries consisting of 37 questions.

## 5. Evaluation questions

---

This section presents the results of the evaluation of the Career Start Programme by the following topics: an unexpected finding, relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, impact. The analysis in this section follows this topical structure.

### 5.1 Unexpected finding about NEETs in the Context of the Career Start Programme

The interview data collected for this report revealed an unexpected finding relevant to the overall context of the Career Start Programme. The respondents have different perceptions about the extent to which the young people employed under the Career Start Programme can be classified as NEETs. It became evident that there was no clear-cut understanding of the term 'NEET' among the interviewees. The interviews suggested that there are three ways in which the respondents perceive this term in the context of the Career Start Programme:

1) According to some interviewees, the Career Start Programme targets **a special category of NEETs**. According to these interviewees, in principle, the category of NEETs is quite broad to include groups such as short-term unemployed, long-term unemployed, excluded from the labour market due to disability, and excluded due to home commitments related to a sick relative. In terms of NEETs, the Career Start Programme could be an opportunity for every young person. In the view of these respondents, however, the programme has not been created specifically for NEETs. The Career Start Programme does not work only for NEETs. It has specially developed criteria and the target group comprises young people with university degrees. They may be NEETs at some point, that is, they have already completed their university education, meaning they are no longer in education. At the same time, they might not be working or in training, and are, therefore, eligible to register at the Labour Offices and apply to the programme. In this particular case, they may be considered as NEETs – some type of temporary NEETs. The applicants should meet several criteria, but being a NEET is not a criterion in and of itself to participate in the programme, which in practice works as an extension of education. In reality, a young person who has graduated but is doing nothing could be considered as some sort of a 'temporary NEET' if there can be such a term at all. If one is inactive for a few months after graduation and then starts work under the Career Start Programme, he/she is not to be counted as being excluded from society (a facet which is considered to be part of the NEET definition). Thus, such young people participating in the programme are not exactly long-term NEETs. At some point in time, they fall into the criteria for NEETs because they are neither in education (having graduated already) and they are not in employment (because they have applied and are waiting for a placement). So they may fall under one of the NEET

groups – those waiting for inclusion into the labour market. According to some interviewees, such distinctions are very subtle (Regional Employment Service Directorate - Sofia)<sup>1</sup>.

2) In the opinion of other interviewees, the Career Start Programme **does not target NEETs at all**. These institutional stakeholders consider that the young people who apply to the Career Start Programme cannot be considered NEETs because they have actually completed their education, meaning that they are not uneducated or illiterate. Mostly, the applicants are people with opportunities – knowledgeable young people, who not only have completed their education, but who also know languages, have computer skills, and are in the process of looking for work. Thus, they are not part of the overall long-term NEETs system. According to such interviewees, it is people who are not working and who are less educated (mostly with secondary education) who fall in the NEETs category. Typically, such individuals do not meet the requirements/criteria for the Career Start Programme and do not qualify for it (Labour Office 1)<sup>2</sup>.

3) A third perception among interviewees is that the Career Start Programme **may or may not be targeting NEETs, depending on their activity/inactivity on the labour market**. In the view of these employees, very few of the young people eligible to apply to the Career Start Programme can actually be classified as NEETs. In principle, the programme is for people who are up to 29 years of age with no prior work experience related to their university major and actively looking for a job (and therefore, registered at the Labour Offices, which is a requirement under the programme). But there are also young people who are inactive and belong to this category of NEETs; they have attempted to find a job after graduation, but have been unsuccessful due to the lack of work experience. This has demotivated them and they have become permanently inactive in the labour market, thus becoming NEETs. The number of such people, however, is very small, according to the interviewees. It is noteworthy that the group of inactive young people is not homogeneous; there are subgroups with specific socio-demographic characteristics. The challenge to the Labour Offices is to detect and activate such people, to provide them with information about the existence of the Career Start Programme and the opportunity it provides, to motivate them to register with the Labour Offices and apply so that they do not remain in the inactive group, or in the category of NEETs. Overall, a very small percentage of university graduates may fall in the NEETs category, who are neither studying nor working over a given time period. Basically, one can posit that regarding the young university graduates who are potential Career Start Programme applicants, two subgroups of people can be differentiated – a majority who are not in the NEETs category

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Regional Employment Service Directorate – Sofia conducted on 02.03.2023.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Labour Office 1, Sofia, conducted on 02.03.2023.

because they start working and become active, and a minority that remains inactive for a longer period, or NEETs (Labour Office 2)<sup>3</sup>.

This discrepancy shows ambiguity in the perception of different stakeholders about the connection between the Career Start Programme and the NEET concept. NEETs can differ according to socio-demographic profiles and age. The addition of a temporal dimension to the definition of NEETs will specify who might be included in this category in accordance with the duration of their period of inactivity on the labour market. There is a need for clarification of this point as to whether only long-term or both short-term and long-term inactivity on the labour market can be defined for the NEETs category. Thus, based on the interview data, it is somewhat challenging to make solid claims about which special category of NEETs the Career Start Programme targets.

## 5.2 Relevance

When it comes to the relevance of the programme, we probed for the extent to which the objectives of the programme are consistent with the general socio-political and institutional context framing the programme.

The data analysis shows that the objectives of the programme outlined by the interviewees are fully consistent with the programme documents and correspond to its achievements. Two things stand out as most important in the capacity of the programme to respond to the general situation in Bulgaria at the national and municipal levels. First, the data show that the Career Start Programme curbs youth unemployment by hiring young university-educated people to work and gain experience at various levels in public administration with a view towards permanent employment after completion of the one-year programme period. Interviewees mentioned that many young people come to the programme and enrich their CVs and their work experience by participating (Labour Office 4)<sup>4</sup>.

Second, the data show that the programme attracts young people with the requisite knowledge as new recruits for the administration (central and local levels) to meet the strategic needs for the development and modernization of the civil service:

*'The Career Start Programme has another conception because it is linked to the principle strategies for modernisation and rejuvenation of administrations with well-educated people. The programme itself also stems from the needs of administrations.'* (Regional Employment Service Directorate - Sofia)<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Labour Office 2, Sofia, conducted on 21.03.2023.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Labour Office 4, conducted on 07.02.2023

<sup>5</sup> Interview with the Regional Employment Service Directorate, conducted on 02.03.2023.

Quantitative data from the first online survey show that all of the employees of the National Employment Agency and the Labour Offices believe that the aims and objectives of the programme meet the local needs (the vast majority think that they meet the needs to a great extent) (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1. Meeting Aims and Objectives, Institutional Survey**

In your opinion, to what extent do the aims and objectives of the programme meet local needs?	National Employment Agency	Labour Offices
Meet to a great extent	65.0%	62.2%
They rather meet the needs	35.0%	37.8%
They rather do not meet the aims	0.0%	0.0%
Do not meet the needs at all	0.0%	0.0%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>45</b>

The results of the second survey reveal a similar general impression among the programme beneficiaries. Univariate analysis of the beneficiary survey reveals more generally that the vast majority of the survey respondents think that the aims and objectives of the program either meet to a large extent (51.3%) or rather meet (43.0%) the local needs of the community where they live or have lived. For 4.6% of the respondents the aims and objectives rather do not meet these needs, whereas 0.8% say they do not meet them at all.

**Table 2. Meeting Aims and Objectives, Beneficiary Survey**

In your opinion, to what extent do the aims and objectives of the program meet the local needs of people in the community where you live or have lived?	Percentage
Meet to a great extent	51.3%
They rather meet the needs	43.0%
They rather do not meet the needs	4.6%
Do not meet the needs at all	0.8%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>610<sup>6</sup></b>

The beneficiary survey data largely corroborate the data obtained from the institutional survey and the interviews with institutional stakeholders that the programme meets or rather meets its aims and objectives regarding local needs with a cumulative 94.3%. Unlike the institutional survey, however, the beneficiary one displays some negative responses of a little over 5%.

<sup>6</sup> This total does not come up to 612 – the total number of respondents – due to missing responses on this question.

### 5.3 Coherence

Coherence is about how well the Career Start Programme fits other interventions and the extent to which other interventions support or undermine the programme and vice versa. To evaluate coherence, it is important to first provide a short overview of other similar interventions based on desk research since the interview and survey data did not provide sufficient grounds to make solid claims on how specifically the Career Start Programme fits alongside other similar initiatives.

There are two types of interventions stemming from the overall policy aimed at lowering unemployment among NEETs: one that specifically targets young people, and the other – targeting various groups of unemployed people, including youth up to 29 years of age. The Career Start Programme falls within the first group. To evaluate how well it fits among other interventions, a short overview of the other relevant interventions is appropriate.

The New Opportunities for Youth Employment Project is aimed at people up to 29 years of age who are registered with the Labour Offices/Bureau Directorates, do not participate in any form of employment, and do not participate in any form of education or training, including full-time, evening, part-time and distance education, as well as any type of vocational training and key competencies. For internships with an employer who is part of the central administrations of the executive and their territorial structures, in accordance with Article 38 of the Law on Administration, applicants must certify that they have completed university. Employers may create job positions and conclude employment contracts with the National Employment Agency to provide employment to unemployed persons approved by the respective employer and the Agency for a period as follows: internship – from 6 to 9 months; training – up to 6 months; employment (new activity) – up to 9 months. Exceptions are the central administration bodies of the executive power and their territorial structures, which may apply for vacancies only for internships with an employer for young people with a university degree. The eligible employers do not include the territorial executive authorities such as regional governors and regional administrations respectively. This last point overlaps to some extent with the Career Start Programme requirements. The funding of the activities under the New Opportunities for Youth Employment Project comes from two different sources – the European Social Fund and the Youth Employment Initiative (National Employment Agency, 2023, New Opportunities for Youth Employment Project). Unlike this project, the Career Start Programme is funded by the state budget.

Very similar in structure and funding to the Career Start Programme is the Youth Employment Programme in the Field of Culture. The main objective of the programme is to provide opportunities for gaining work experience for unemployed young people up to 29 years of age who have completed secondary education in the vocational fields of 'Fine Arts', 'Musical and Performing Arts', 'Design' and 'Applied Arts and Crafts' or university education in the fields of 'Arts', 'Theory of Arts', 'Fine Arts', 'Music

and Dance Arts' or 'Theatre and Film Arts' (National Employment Agency, n.d., Youth Employment Programme in the Field of Culture, p. 1). The beneficiaries must be registered at the Labour Offices/Bureau Directorates. Employers are institutes in the field of culture operating in the Republic of Bulgaria under the Law on the Protection and Development of Culture. The beneficiaries are employed for a 6-month period in accordance with the provisions of the Labour Code (Ibid., p. 2). The institutions involved in the implementation of the programme are the same as those implementing the Career Start Programme with one exception: the Ministry of Education in the latter programme is substituted with the Ministry of Culture (Ibid., pp. 3-4). Like the Career Start Programme, this programme is funded from the State budget (Ibid., p. 4). Shortly, the two programmes are mostly identical (e.g., funding, target groups, implementing institutions, territorial scope), save for a few differences: 1) different lengths of employment periods; 2) besides for university graduates the Youth Employment Programme is also designed for secondary school graduates; and 3) different types of employers (e.g., state and municipal institutions in the case of the Career Start Programme and cultural institutions in the latter case).

There are a number of other programmes that target young people up to the age of 29, but this is on a general basis alongside other target groups of unemployed people. These include: 1) the National Employment and Training Programme for People with Permanent Disabilities, aimed at increasing employability and providing employment to unemployed people with permanent disabilities registered with the Labour Office/Bureau Directorate or people of working age who have successfully undergone treatment for drug addiction; 2) National Programme 'Activation of Inactive Persons', whose main objective is the activation and inclusion in the labour market of inactive people, including discouraged persons and young people up to the age of 29, who do not work, study, and are not registered with the Labour Office/Bureau Directorate, and unemployed persons, through individual and group implementation of tools and services to attract and motivate them to register with the Labour Office/Bureau Directorate and encourage their inclusion in training, return to education and/or employment; 3) National Programme 'Melpomena', whose main goal is reducing unemployment by creating jobs to support theatres in Bulgaria, targeting unemployed persons with specific experience, professional qualification, knowledge and skills in the field of theatre art, registered with the Labour Offices/Bureau Directorates; 4) Training and Employment Programme for Long-term Unemployed Persons aiming to provide employment to long-term unemployed persons registered at the Labour Offices and to increase the employability of the persons targeted by the programme by involving them in training leading to an increase in knowledge and qualifications. There are also various regional programmes whose main objective is to increase employment, reduce unemployment and improve the quality of the workforce in the regions (National Employment Agency, n.d., National Employment Agency programmes and projects).

NEETs are also targeted by other general unemployment projects along other target groups, such as: 1) Successful Together Project main objective of which is to reduce the mismatches between labour supply and demand in order to support the process of overcoming the new labour market challenges related to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, and which targets, among others, young people who are neither in education nor employment (NEETs); 2) Workforce Adaptation Project for generally unemployed persons, among which young people up to 29 years of age, which aims to implement support activities to stabilise the functioning of the labour market in the new conditions; 3) STIMUL Project for unemployed persons with more than 6 months of registration with the Labour Offices from disadvantaged groups in the labour market, with priority given to NEETs and the unemployed without professional qualifications, to support the adaptation of the target group to the current labour market conditions, through the acquisition of new skills by the unemployed according to employers' needs; 4) Knowledge and Work Skills Project to support employment recovery, prioritizing quality jobs in the real economy, through training of unemployed persons to acquire knowledge, skills and competences in demand by employers, focusing on most unemployed groups, including NEETs; 5) Employment and Self-employment Project, enabling the matching of labour market supply and demand through training to meet the post-pandemic challenges to the economy; 6) With New Green and Environmental Knowledge and Skills towards New Employment Project ensures a rapid transition of unemployed people to employment by presenting training packages to increase their suitability and adaptability for subsequent employment and prepare for future changes in the labour market by acquiring digital, green and ecological skills.; 7) Horizons-7 Project the main goal of which is to reduce unemployment, improve skills and provide decent jobs and career horizons for people from disadvantaged groups in the labour market (Ibid.).

With its specific focus on young university graduates as recruits for the state and municipal administrations, the Career Start Programme is as a whole compatible with and complements other measures and initiatives tackling youth unemployment. Thus, the Career Start Programme generally fits well within the cluster of other interventions either specifically designed for young people or designed for unemployed people overall. The assessment in the National Employment Action Plan for 2022 corroborates this observation. The Career Start Programme, which gives young people the opportunity to gain 12 months of work experience in the administration, has the highest net effect, which shows its positive impact on the employment of young people with a university education (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2022, p. 43).

The interview data did not provide a detailed insight into how the Career Start Programme fits with other similar initiatives. The interviewees mostly claimed that the programme works well alongside other initiatives and suggested that the programme is unique in that it is the only programme that (1) is funded by the state budget and (2) targets young university graduates to start work at various public



administration levels – national/central, regional and municipal. It is specifically designed for that purpose and fits well into the cluster of other youth employment initiatives, generally without overlapping and competing with the rest of them. In this sense, it is a sectoral programme, with no other programme matching its specific objectives and tasks. One interviewee compared the success of the programme to other initiatives by stating that the programme ‘was rated highest compared to all the other programmes in the context of all active labour market policies’ (interview with Ministry of Labour and Social Policy).<sup>7</sup>

When it comes to the results of the survey data regarding coherence, the data show that the vast majority of the respondents in the institutional survey believe that the interaction between the Career Start Programme and other similar programmes is rather positive.

**Table 3. Programme interaction with other initiatives, Institutional Survey**

Would you say that the Career Start Programme interacts rather positively or rather negatively with other similar programmes?	National Employment Agency	Labour Offices
It interacts positively with other similar programmes	25.0%	28.6%
Rather positively	75.0%	69.0%
Rather negatively	0.0%	2.4%
Interacts negatively with other similar programmes	0.0%	0.0%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>42</b>

Beneficiaries also rate the interaction between the Career Start Programme and other youth programmes as high with a 78.5% cumulative score for positive or rather positive interaction, but less so, compared to the institutional survey.

**Table 4. Programme interaction with other initiatives, Beneficiary survey**

Would you say that the Career Start programme interacts rather positively or rather negatively with other similar programmes?	Percentage
It interacts positively with other similar programmes	44.3%
Rather positively	34.2%
Rather negatively	2.5%
Interacts negatively with other similar programmes	0.5%

<sup>7</sup> Interview with official from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, conducted on 09.03.2023.

Cannot assess	18.3%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>610</b>

Almost all of the employees implementing the programme who took part in the online survey believe that the Career Start Programme is compatible with other similar programmes. Only one of the 19 employees from the National Employment Agency disagrees with this. However, a larger percentage (18%) of the employees from the Labour Offices tend to think that the programme is rather incompatible, hinting at some aspects of the programme that potentially lack coherence/cohesion with other similar programmes in Bulgaria.

**Table 5. Programme compatibility with other initiatives, Institutional Survey**

In your opinion, to what extent is the Career Start Programme compatible with other similar programmes in Bulgaria?	National Employment Agency	Labour Offices
Very compatible	26.3%	22.7%
Rather compatible	68.4%	59.1%
Rather not compatible	5.3%	18.2%
Not compatible at all	0.0%	0.0%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>44</b>

As far as the compatibility of the Career Start Programme with other similar programmes in Bulgaria is concerned, a considerable portion of 66.2% of beneficiaries display positive attitudes.

**Table 6. Programme compatibility with other initiatives, Beneficiary Survey**

In your opinion, to what extent is the Career Start Programme compatible with other similar programmes in Bulgaria?	Percentage
Very compatible	29.1%
Rather compatible	44.3%
Rather not compatible	6.2%
Not compatible at all	2.0%
Cannot assess	18.0%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>609</b>

While the compatibility scores of the beneficiary survey are lower than those of the institutional survey, they still hint at the general coherence between the Career Start Programme and other programmes for

NEETs and youth in general. About 18.0% of surveyed beneficiaries cannot assess the compatibility and interaction of the programme with similar programmes tackling NEET and youth unemployment.

## 5.4 Effectiveness

When it comes to effectiveness, it can be measured in different ways such as by: 1) the number of applicants; 2) the number of people who are employed in the institution on a permanent labour contract after the end of the programme period; 3) the drop in the share of youth unemployment; 4) how the programme affects employer institutions (renewal); 5) the demand on the part of the institutions for young recruits; 6) the demand on the part of the young people for jobs in the state and municipal administrations; 7) the level of coordination among the institutions implementing the programme on the one hand, and the level of coordination and partnership between the implementing and employing institutions, on the other (generally considered good by the respondents); 8) the effects on the beneficiaries. For more concrete picture of the results, the survey defines effectiveness in terms of ‘the extent to which successful results are achieved from the implementation of the programme regardless of the cost/efforts put into the implementation’.

In this regard, the institutional survey shows that the overwhelming majority of the employees of the National Employment Agency (NEA) and the Labour Offices (LO) believe that the programme reached its aims and objectives for all five 2-year periods between 2013 and 2022 (aims and objectives for the program are usually set and evaluated for a two-year period). Nevertheless, it should be noted that for the later periods, the small percentage of employees who answered that the aims and objectives were rather not reached increased a little for the respondents from the National Employment Agency (0% in 2013-2016, 6% for 2017-2018 and 11% for 2019-2022).

**Table 7. Reaching objectives and aims, Institutional Survey**

In your opinion, did the programme reach its aims and objectives between:	2013-2014		2015-2016		2017-2018		2019-2020		2021-2022	
	NEA	LO	NEA	LO	NEA	LO	NEA	LO	NEA	LO
They were fully reached	41%	26%	44%	26%	44%	32%	44%	33%	42%	36%
Rather, they were reached	59%	72%	56%	72%	50%	66%	44%	65%	47%	61%
Rather, they were not reached	0%	3%	0%	3%	6%	2%	11%	2%	11%	2%
Not reached at all	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>44</b>

Almost all of the employees of both the Labour Offices and the National Employment Agency think that the programme was rather or very **effective** during all 2-year periods.

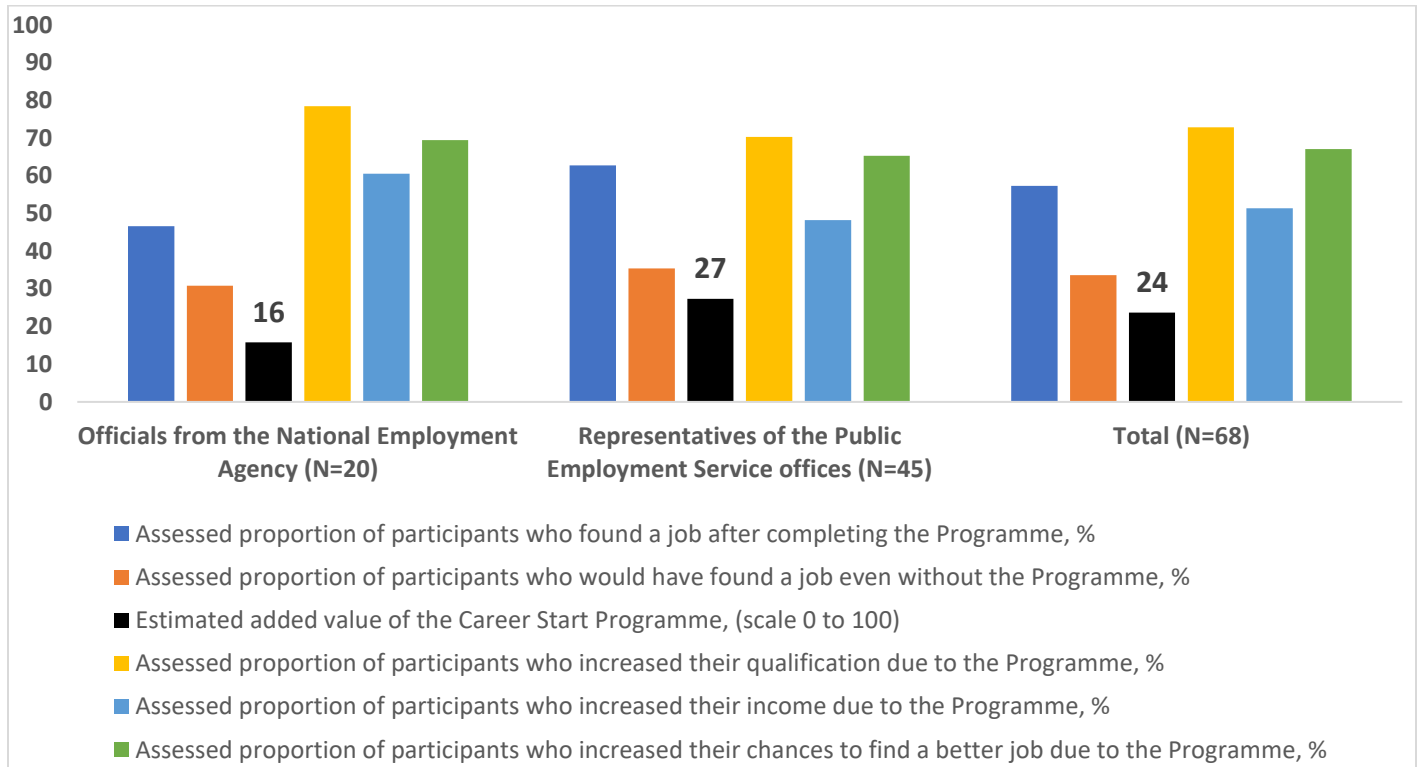
Table 8. Effectiveness, Institutional Survey

In your opinion, to what extent was the programme <u>effective</u> between: (‘Effective’ means the extent to which successful outcomes are achieved regardless of cost/effort)	2013-2014		2015-2016		2017-2018		2019-2020		2021-2022	
	NEA	LO	NEA	LO	NEA	LO	NEA	LO	NEA	LO
Very effective	35%	30%	35%	30%	44%	36%	44%	33%	42%	39%
Rather effective	65%	68%	65%	68%	56%	62%	50%	65%	53%	59%
Rather ineffective	0%	3%	0%	3%	0%	2%	6%	2%	5%	2%
Totally ineffective	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>44</b>

The institutional survey data also revealed positive effects of the programme according to a number of criteria, such as (see Figure 1):

- The portion of participants who found a job after completing the programme – nearly 60% of the surveyed institutional stakeholders claim that beneficiaries managed to find a job after completion of the Career Start Programme;
- The portion of programme participants who increased their qualification due to the programme – around 80% of the institutional respondents from the National Employment Agency claim that the programme has had this effect on the beneficiaries;
- The portion of the programme participants who increased their qualification due to the programme – nearly 70% of the institutional respondents from the Labour Offices claim that the programme has had this effect on beneficiaries.

Figure 1. Effectiveness by portions and added value, Institutional Survey



Importantly, though, less than 30% of the surveyed institutional respondents claimed that the Career Start Programme has had any added value as a whole. The interviews conducted also suggest that the institutional stakeholders consider the programme to be overall effective. However, the interviews revealed that there have been certain challenges with the programme lately, potentially compromising the claims for its effectiveness. The main challenge discussed by all interviewees concerns the diminishing interest of youth in the programme and accompanying decrease of the number of applicants. According to the Regional Employment Service Directorate – Sofia, effectiveness is about the active interest in and use of the programme by eligible youth, but these aspects have been challenged:

*‘Young people, especially in their first period of active contact with labour prefer big salaries. They prefer to get a job somewhere where they will get BGN 2,000 (Bulgarian leva), BGN 3.000. Unfortunately, under the programme, they are appointed for a specific amount of money, but it is far from BGN 1,000 or 2,000. The latest amount under the employment contract is 860 leva...’ (Regional Employment Service Directorate – Sofia)<sup>8</sup>*

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Regional Employment Service Directorate – Sofia, conducted on 02.03.2023.

The low payment for a position under the Career Start Programme is considered to be one reason for the decreasing interest of youth in the programme against the backdrop of the increasing interest of youth in the private sector:

*'... In recent years there has been a little bit less interest because private companies are still giving more pay and therefore there is a little bit of an outflow. The institutions provide a lot of open job positions, yet there are positions for which people don't even apply. There is not as much interest as it used to be at the beginning when the programme started.'*  
(Labour Office 2)<sup>9</sup>

The decreasing number of interested youth in the programme could be considered a potential challenge to the overall effectiveness of the programme – if young people do not have an interest in this programme, it can be difficult to make positive claims about its success (for more information on the decrease in the numbers of applicants to the Career Start Programme, refer to the Annex).

## 5.5 Efficiency

When it comes to efficiency we sought to understand whether the objectives of the programme and the available resources (e.g., budget, time, expertise/staff) respond to each other. The general impression of the interview respondents is that objectives and resources mostly correspond to each other. In terms of staff expertise and coordination between the institutions, things appear to run relatively smoothly. The programme seems financially stable. However, one obstacle to efficiency comes from the reality that the budgets for the salaries of the beneficiaries are relatively low (despite the fact that the salaries have been gradually raised over the years; for changes in the salary level, check the Annex). Currently, the monthly pay for a person hired under the programme is 860 leva.

As far as the utilization of time as a resource is concerned, the interviews revealed that the application procedure is quite prolonged and under certain circumstances it can take up to 4-5 months due to delays in the employers' selection processes:

*'We need to shorten the selection period. It should not be more than a month...I think the process could be technologically changed in this aspect. Technologically, to speed things up in terms of the selection of individuals and the conclusion of contracts, to run things with shorter, strict deadlines'. (Labour Office 4)<sup>10</sup>*

However, there could be a certain bias and subjective estimation/personal opinion on the part of the interview respondents which do not comply with the survey results. Almost all of the employees of both

---

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Labour Office 2, conducted on 21.03.2023.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Labour Office 4, conducted on 07.02.2023.

organisations think that the programme was rather or very **efficient** during all 2-year periods ('efficient' was explained in the survey questionnaire as 'achieving successful results with the least possible resources and effort').

**Table 9. Efficiency, Institutional Survey**

In your opinion, to what extent was the programme <b>efficient</b> between:	2013-2014		2015-2016		2017-2018		2019-2020		2021-2022	
	NEA	LO	NEA	LO	NEA	LO	NEA	LO	NEA	LO
('Efficient' means achieving successful results with the least possible resources and effort)										
Very efficient	41%	25%	47%	25%	35%	31%	39%	30%	37%	39%
Rather efficient	59%	73%	53%	73%	65%	67%	56%	67%	53%	59%
Rather inefficient	0%	3%	0%	3%	0%	2%	6%	2%	11%	2%
Totally inefficient	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>44</b>

It is important to note that such positive survey results regarding the efficiency of the programme could be explained by the very fact that the survey (the institutional survey) was completed by institutional stakeholders who have worked with the programme for a long time. Even if by certain objective criteria the programme may not be considered efficient (e.g., due to the scant financial resources allocated for the beneficiaries or the long application period), from certain perspectives, the programme could be deemed efficient. For instance, it is efficient for the employer institutions as the salaries for the programme beneficiaries (and all accompanying expenses), however small, are paid from the state budget, and not from the employers' own budgets.

## 5.6 Sustainability

Sustainability is about the extent to which the benefits of the Career Start Programme can be continued in terms of existing resources (e.g., time, staff, budget, etc.). In this regard, most interviewees argued that *the programme had been sustainable*:

*'The programme's sustainability is to be sought through its main mission and purpose. It is no coincidence that this is what gives it sustainability. It is sustainable because it has been in the national plan 10 years ago, in the last national plan, and will probably be in the new one for 2023. The permanence of the programme, the sustainability of the programme comes through the mission and the goals. Anyone who has studied something that will give them a career in*

*public service is able to participate, and by beating out the competition of other young people will be able to work where they are most interested. The other sustainability of the programme is that the administrations themselves - some years more, some years less - but they actively wait for it and use it, and hope to have the youth assistance annually. The one-year duration of the programme can also be thought of as a trial period. In one year, the employers see enough of this person and can afterwards employ him/her on a permanent basis. That gives the sustainability.’ (Regional Employment Service Directorate - Sofia)<sup>11</sup>*

Across the institutions we reached out for an interview, institutional stakeholders repeated that the sustainability of the programme is proved by its continuing existence for decades.

The institutional survey data also support this overall mood among the stakeholders. The survey results show that institutional stakeholders consider that the resources allocated for the implementation of the programme are more or less adequate for achieving the goals of the programme. The largest percentage of employees who answered 'rather insufficient' was regarding the available budget (1/5 of the respondents from both groups about whom we are reporting results). It should be noted also that a relatively higher share of the labour office employees think that time is not sufficient for the programme (16% compared to 5% of the NEA employees).

**Table 10. Resource allocation, Institutional Survey**

To what extent are the resources allocated for the implementation of the 2013-2022 Career Start Programme adequate for achieving its aims and objectives?	Budget		Time		Personnel expertise	
	NEA	LO	NEA	LO	NEA	LO
The resources are sufficient for achieving the objectives	32%	23%	26%	26%	47%	40%
Rather sufficient	42%	56%	68%	58%	53%	58%
Rather insufficient	21%	19%	5%	14%	0%	2%
Not sufficient at all	5%	2%	0%	2%	0%	0%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>43</b>

Despite the generally positive stance about the sustainability of the programme in the surveys and in the interviews, the interview data also revealed some problems which could tie to the sustainability of the programme. These issues could also account for the somewhat deteriorating performance in the past few years in terms of decreased interest/dwindling number of applicants. First, the sustainability of the programme can be compromised for financial reasons. As suggested above, the low salary rate for

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Regional Employment Service Directorate – Sofia, conducted on 02.03.2023.



beneficiaries is indicative of limitations in the programme budget. If the salary amounts continue to be low compared to what the private sector offers, the number of applicants may not be sufficient to claim that the programme is as successful as it has been claimed to be so far. Another financial challenge to the sustainability of the programme was until recently expressed in the reality that there was no budget approved for this programme for 2023 due to the unstable political situation in Bulgaria over the last two years, with frequent snap elections and the lack of an elected government.

Secondly, as it became clear from the interview data, the sustainability of the programme is contingent on streamlining the length of the application procedure, mainly shortening the application and hiring process.

Thirdly, a challenge tied to the insufficient popularity of the programme concerns the lack of adequate information about the programme among potential beneficiaries, as expressed by some of the institutional stakeholders we interviewed:

*'I would initiate a visit [to universities] without us [at the Labour Office] even being invited to meet [university authorities] to offer that we distribute flyers and posters with information [about the programme]. In my view, information does not reach to everybody to whom it needs to reach.'* (Labour Office 3)<sup>12</sup>

Given such challenges, recommendations concerning the streamlining of the programme could be tied to addressing these challenges.

## 5.7 Impact

Evaluating the impact of the Career Start Programme requires tracking the short-term and long-term effects of the programme, its unintended consequences, as well as the difference it makes to the target group, the broader community and society. As a whole, the survey data reveal a general perception that the programme has had a positive impact on the beneficiaries (both short- and long-term).

The Career Start Programme is considered successful by both institutional stakeholders and beneficiaries. The positive responses by the institutional stakeholders - 95% for NEA respondents and 89% for LO respondents (Table 11) - slightly predominate over beneficiaries' responses (Table 12), a fact that can be explained possibly by a certain cognitive bias.

---

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Labour Office 3, conducted on 21.03.2023.

Table 11. Success of the programme, Institutional Survey

The Career Start Programme can be considered successful.	National Employment Agency	Labour Offices
I do not agree at all	0.0%	2.0%
Rather, I disagree	0.0%	5.0%
I agree as much as I don't	5.0%	5.0%
I rather agree	53.0%	49.0%
I completely agree	42.0%	40.0%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>43</b>

Table 12. Success of the programme, Beneficiaries

The Career Start Programme can be defined as successful.	Percentage
I do not agree at all	2.9%
Rather, I disagree	4.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	8.8%
I rather agree	29.7%
I completely agree	53.9%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>610</b>

As a whole, based on the survey data analysis, the Programme can be deemed successful – a finding that corresponds to the evaluations in the institutional documents and the opinions expressed in the in-depth interviews. However, as can be seen above (Table 11), it is notable that the surveyed people from the Labour Offices (institutional survey) are more inclined to disagree that the programme is overall successful and carries positive short-term/long-term impacts.

When it comes to the impacts and effects of the programme, most respondents from both surveys agree or rather agree that the Career Start Programme has short-term and long-term positive impacts and effects, which further supports the evidence for its success.

Table 13. Positive short-term impacts, Institutional Survey

The Career Start Programme has positive short-term impacts.	National Employment Agency	Labour Offices
I do not agree at all	5.0%	5.0%
Rather, I disagree	5.0%	19.0%
I agree as much as I don't	11.0%	7.0%
I rather agree	47.0%	42.0%
I completely agree	32.0%	28.0%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>43</b>

Table 14. Positive short-term effects, Beneficiary Survey

The programme has positive short-term effects.	Percentage
I do not agree at all	5.2%
Rather, I disagree	14.5%
Neither agree nor disagree	13.4%
I rather agree	37.1%
I completely agree	28.3
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>603</b>

Table 15. Positive long-term impacts, Institutional Survey

The Career Start Programme has positive long-term impacts.	National Employment Agency	Labour Offices
I do not agree at all	0.0%	9.0%
Rather, I disagree	11.0%	9.0%
I agree as much as I don't	16.0%	11.0%
I rather agree	42.0%	48.0%
I completely agree	32.0%	23.0%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>44</b>

Table 16. Positive long-term effects, Beneficiaries

The programme has positive long-term effects.	Percentage
I do not agree at all	4.7%
Rather, I disagree	10.1%
Neither agree nor disagree	14.4%
I rather agree	30.2%
I completely agree	39.9%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>608</b>

However, the respondents register some unintended negative impacts, both in the case of institutional stakeholders and beneficiaries.

Table 17. Negative unintended impacts, Institutional Survey

The Career Start Programme has some negative unintended impacts.	National Employment Agency	Labour Offices
I do not agree at all	16.0%	19.0%
Rather, I disagree	37.0%	28.0%
I agree as much as I don't	21.0%	33.0%
I rather agree	26.0%	19.0%
I completely agree	0.0%	2.0%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>43</b>

Table 18. Unintended negative impacts, Beneficiary Survey

The programme has some unintended negative impacts.	Percentage
I do not agree at all	29.2%
Rather, I disagree	35.1%
Neither agree nor disagree	16.3%
I rather agree	10.6%
I completely agree	7.5%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>605</b>

When it comes to negative unintended impacts of the programme, it is notable that a good number of respondents (26% in the case of the NEA, and 19% in the case of the Labour Offices) consider that there have been some unintended negative consequences of the programme. In regard to this, one interviewee who used to be a programme beneficiary, but now is hired by the institution where he worked under the programme, mentioned that:

*‘There are unintended effects in terms of the work hired beneficiaries are given to do. Because there is a job description and it describes what employees have to do. And if they are asked to do something else, purely non-expert tasks, people get demotivated. You say to yourself, “I didn't come here for this”’. (former beneficiary, Ministry of Education and Science)<sup>13</sup>*

Importantly, such observations did not appear in all interviews. The interview data suggest, though, that instances as the one described above are not ubiquitous. Interview data show that such instances depend on the specific supervisors and beneficiaries involved in the various institutions which serve as employers under the programme.

Taken as a whole, the interview data too suggest that there are mostly positive impacts of the Career Start Programme. Interviewees commented that through the programme many young people have managed to find work by continuing to work for the institutions that had initially hired them under the programme (if there are open positions in the institutions for them to continue as full-time employees). Even if they did not remain at their workplace after the expiration of the 12 months under the programme, interviewees argued that, at the very least, beneficiaries have gained valuable work experience and have enriched their CVs by participating in the programme. Interviewees also argued that in these ways, the programme has contributed to the lowering of youth unemployment in Bulgaria. The programme has also had a positive long-term impact for state and municipal institutions which have managed to receive new and younger recruits without any expense on their end and, in its turn, this has contributed to the rejuvenation of the civil service sector in Bulgaria.

## 5.8 Horizontal aspects

Based on the interviewed respondents' observations, more women than men apply and are employed under the Career Start Programme. This supposition is corroborated by the official National Employment Agency data provided to CSD upon request (see Annex), which show that women recruited under the Career Start Programme outnumber men and this is a steady trend during the entire observation period (2013 – 2022). There are some sectoral differences, though, observed by the interviewees: generally, women apply more for administrative/civil service positions compared to men, but in some institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of

---

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Ministry of Education and Science, conducted on 23.02.2023.

Defence, the Directorate General of Corrections, or the Fire Brigade, the applicants are predominantly men.

The interviewees are almost unanimous that there is no gender bias as far as the application procedure is concerned. Both men and women are treated equally in the application process and they are assessed by their qualities, competences and knowledge. The information obtained from the interviews is supported with very high scores by the online survey conducted among representatives of the National Employment Agency and the Labour Offices. Twenty-one percent of the respondents from the National Employment Agency say there are no differences and 58% say there are rather no differences between male and female beneficiaries. Twenty-one percent respond that there are some differences, but they are not big, and no one declares that there are big differences. The respondents from the Labour Offices show pretty similar results: 36% think there are no differences, 48% are of the opinion that there are rather no differences, 14% say there are some differences but they are not big, and a mere 2% respond that there are big differences.

Employers, too, do not differentiate in terms of gender, according to the interviewed officials. Recruitment is based on merit: what is important to employers is how the applicants present themselves at the interviews, what attitude they demonstrate, what knowledge and skills they have, how they communicate, etc. There is no administration the interviewees have worked with that has expressed any tendency to hire mostly women or men.

The survey results among beneficiaries corroborate such observations (see Table 19). Largely, the respondents do not or rather do not see gender differences between men and women in the way the programme is implemented with solid 84.8%. Some 12.3% think there are some differences that are not big and a mere 2.8% claim there are big differences. This data support the interviewees' opinions that the programme does not differentiate or discriminate between men and women, and the conclusion that if there are some differences, such as a higher number of female beneficiaries, it can be due to other factors not linked with the programme's application requirements, selection criteria and selection processes.

**Table 19. Differences between men and women, Beneficiary Survey**

In your opinion, are there any differences in the way the programme is implemented when it comes to male and female beneficiaries?	Percentage
There are big differences	2.8%
There are some differences, but not big	12.3%
There are rather no differences	40.2%
There are no differences	44.6%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	611

Distinguishing between men and women as regards to the extent to which the Career Start Programme meets their needs and goals, about 70% of the respondents think that women benefit to a large extent from their participation in the programme compared to men (55%). 24.3% respond ‘to a small extent’ for women and 37.1% - for men. 6.0% express the opinion that the programme does not meet women’s needs and goals at all, whereas 7.2% say this is so with respect to men.

**Table 20. Extent to which programme meets beneficiaries’ needs and goals according to gender, Beneficiary Survey**

To what extent did the Career Start Programme meet your needs and goals? You are?	Female	Male	Total
To a large extent	69.8%	55.7%	67.5%
To a small extent	24.3%	37.1%	26.3%
Not at all	6.0%	7.2%	6.2%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	351	54	405

There are a number of factors whose interplay can explain the fact that women predominate over men as applicants and recruits under the Career Start Programme, but the opinions expressed and the existing data are somewhat inconclusive. Demography is seen by the respondents as a valid structural factor that accounts for this prevalence of women over men: the number of women in Bulgaria is larger compared to men. As of 31 December 2022, according to the National Statistical Institute, the total population of Bulgaria is 6,447,710 persons of which 3,099,503 are male and 3,348,207 are female (National Statistical Institute, 2023, April 28). We have to approach this claim with caution, however, as this variable alone does not have high relevance to explain gender trends within the programme, having in mind that the mortality rate among men increases with age, and that in the age group targeted by the programme there is rather small prevalence of men over women (National Statistical Institute, 2018).

The data on the number of tertiary education graduates in 2022 show that more women complete university degrees (30,247) compared to men (18,529), which is a more relevant variable to explain this gender imbalance (National Statistical Institute, 2023, April 26). This has been a steady trend in the observed period. The demand for certain majors can also possibly explain in part the gender gap. Among the factors that account for the prevalence of women over men, in the respondents’ opinion, are also the proclivity of women to work for lesser pay, a higher interest on the part of women to work in the administration in general (compared to men’s preferences for the private sector), or prospective

motherhood as administrative jobs are deemed more secure. These are logical and observable conclusions, but since there is no conclusive data, they remain largely unsubstantiated.

One thing stands out as a valid inference from the data obtained from the research, interviews and survey we conducted: the gender imbalance is not caused by any form of discrimination but rather by structural, attitudinal and cultural factors.

## 5.9 The Career Start Programme and 25+ NEETs

The assessments of the Career Start Programme in official documents do not differentiate among different NEETs subgroups according to age, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the 25+NEETs category on this basis alone. It is noteworthy that according to the programme requirements, participants must be university graduates. This means that they should have completed at least 4 years of higher education (bachelor’s degree at the minimum), which in any case makes their age after graduation somewhere between 22 and 25, and even closer to 25 if they have completed a master’s degree or have not started their university studies immediately after graduation from high school. Drawing on that, we can presume that the data collected for this study are more or less applicable to 25+NEETs as well. For higher precision of the results, however, we included questions about 25+NEETs in the beneficiary survey.

More than half of the beneficiary survey respondents (53.6%) consider the practical relevance of the Career Start Programme to the needs of 25+NEETs as much bigger or rather bigger than for other programme participants. A substantial percentage of the respondents (35.9%) are of the opinion that the relevance is the same as for other programme participants, whereas 8.5% say that it is rather smaller or much smaller.

**Table 21. Relevance of the programme for 25+NEETs, Beneficiary Survey**

<b>What is the practical relevance of the Career Start Programme to the needs of NEETs aged 25+?</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Much bigger than for the other programme participants	26.8%
Rather bigger than for the other programme participants	26.8%
The same as for the other programme participants	35.9%
Rather smaller than for the other programme participants	6.2%
Much smaller than for the other programme participants	2.3%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>600</b>



As for the respondents' assessment of the programme's relevance to the needs of male and female 25+NEETs relative to other programme participants, the results for men and women can be roughly approximated as can be seen from Table 22 and Table 23:

**Table 22. Relevance of the programme for male 25+NEETs, Beneficiary Survey**

<b>What is the practical relevance of the Career Start Programme to the needs specifically of male NEETs aged 25+?</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Much bigger than for the other programme participants	15.5%
Rather bigger than for the other programme participants	20.3%
The same as for the other programme participants	51.8%
Rather smaller than for the other programme participants	6.9%
Much smaller than for the other programme participants	2.9%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	596

**Table 23. Relevance of the programme for female 25+NEETs, Beneficiary Survey**

<b>What is the practical relevance of the Career Start Programme to the needs specifically of female NEETs aged 25+?</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Much bigger than for the other programme participants	19.1%
Rather bigger than for the other programme participants	20.9%
The same as for the other programme participants	49.5%
Rather smaller than for the other programme participants	5.7%
Much smaller than for the other programme participants	2.3%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	597

With respect to the effectiveness of how the Career Start Programme addresses the needs of 25+NEETs, 49.8% of the respondents agree that it is much bigger or rather bigger compared to other programme participants (of different age). A substantial number of 39.5% think that there is no difference among age groups as far as the effectiveness is concerned, which they deem the same as for all other participants. 8% of the respondents, however, claim that this effectiveness is rather smaller or much smaller compared to other age groups of programme participants.

**Table 24. Effectiveness of the programme in addressing the needs of 25+NEETs, Beneficiary Survey**

<b>What is the effectiveness of the Career Start Programme in addressing the needs of NEETs aged 25+?</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Much bigger than for the other programme participants	23.2%
Rather bigger than for the other programme participants	26.6%
The same as for the other programme participants	39.5%

Rather smaller than for the other programme participants	4.6%
Much smaller than for the other programme participants	3.4%
<b>Base (number of answers)</b>	<b>596</b>

## 6. Conclusion

---

This report presents insights from an evaluation of the Career Start Programme, one of the most enduring youth employment programmes over time. For twenty years, the Career Start Programme has been one of the most attractive youth programmes, with a sufficiently high impact rating. In the past years, with the reduction of unemployment level and the acceleration of transition from education to employment of young university graduates, a large part of job positions under the programme remain unoccupied. An insufficient number of young people has lately applied for the announced job positions. A great part of those who qualify for the job cannot start work under the programme due to the long application procedure of almost 4 months. This requires a programme update regarding this procedure (National Employment Agency, 2021, p. 43).

The collected data suggest that the programme is highly valued by institutions and beneficiaries. There are, however, a number of challenges this study identified which could be fit to consider for policy recommendations. The main issue the programme is facing currently is decreasing interest on the part of the young people and, consequently, a lower number of prospective applicants. The information we obtained from the desk research, interviews, survey responses, and the data provided by the National Employment Agency point out to three major impediments that account for the diminishing interest in the Career Start Programme. First, it is the low monthly pay of BGN 860 (approximately EUR 430), which, despite its gradual increase over the 10-year period we observed, is below the psychological threshold of BGN 1,000 (EUR 500) and a little over the minimal pay for the country of BGN 730. This generally discourages young people from applying to the programme. Second, the prolonged application and selection procedure also affects negatively the applicants in that they have to stay unemployed for a protracted period of time. In the meantime, they either remain inactive on the job market or find different jobs elsewhere. Third, we acknowledge a general lack of information campaigns or other promotional activities to popularize and make the programme more visible to the youth in search of employment.

To reverse this downward trend, we recommend, first, an increase of the monthly salary to at least BGN 1,000. In this regard, the employer institutions may consider contributing with some extra funds to add up to the state budget funding of beneficiary salaries, to have a share in the salary formation. Second, the application and selection procedure should be shortened and optimized at all levels of inter-

institutional and institution-beneficiary interaction. And third, an annual information campaign should be devised and launched prior to the beginning of the application process. This effort should be carried out simultaneously in media and at universities through their career centres.

This report has certain limitations. For one thing, even though it presents results of a great amount of collected data, it still does not manage to address the issue of the limited amount of public statistical data about diverse indicators of performance of this programme. Considering that the Career Start Programme is a flagship initiative dedicated to bridging the gap between education and youth employment, more substantive efforts into procuring detailed statistical data on various indicators at the national level could be one of the future efforts undertaken by institutional stakeholders to streamline the performance of this initiative.

## 7. References

---

Bogdanova, V., Rueda Orejarena, G., Yakova, L. (2022). *Employment initiatives supporting 25+NEETs: Country Report – Bulgaria*. Center for the Study of Democracy. Lost Millennials – Transnational Research Network for the Evaluation of Initiatives Targeting 25+ NEETs. Available at <https://lostmillennials.eu>

Bulgarian Industrial Association. (2022, February). *Education and employment: Index of compatibility between professional education and the profile of the economy*. [https://ime.bg/var/images/Education\\_Employment\\_Index\\_240222.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0PbbaBQqnZdfXiYHzSbK213vaBPbB1hNsvrGs8opfJuVfGXL2vh4BHDOK](https://ime.bg/var/images/Education_Employment_Index_240222.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0PbbaBQqnZdfXiYHzSbK213vaBPbB1hNsvrGs8opfJuVfGXL2vh4BHDOK)

DarikNews.bg. (2022, September 9). *При заплата от 860 лв., млади вишисти без опит могат да кандидатстват за работа*. <https://dariknews.bg/novini/obshtestvo/pri-zaplata-ot-860-lv.-mladi-vishisti-bez-opit-mogat-da-kandidatstvat-za-rabota-2323851>

Institute for Market Economics. (2022). *Assessment of young people not in employment, education and training and integration policies recommendations* [Оценка на младежите извън системите на заетост, образование или обучение и препоръки към политиките за интеграция]. [https://ime.bg/var/images/NEETs\\_IME\\_final\\_080822.pdf](https://ime.bg/var/images/NEETs_IME_final_080822.pdf)

Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. (2020, September 16). *One year of work experience will be accumulated for young people under the Career Start Programme* [Нагрупуване на една година трудов стаж ще имат младежите по Програма „Старт на Карриерата“]. <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/natrupvane-na-edna-godina-trudov-stazh-shche-imat-mladezhite-po-programa-start-v-karierata-za-prekhod-ot-obrazovanie-km-zae>

Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. (2022, April 26). *National Employment Action Plan 2022* [National Employment Action Plan 2022]. <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/natsionalni-planove-za-deystvie-po-zaetostta>.

National Employment Agency. (2021). *Report on the Action Plan of the National Employment Agency* [Отчет на плана за действие на Агенция по заетостта за 2021 г]. <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/otchet-za-deinostta-na-az/>

National Employment Agency. (2022). *Report on the Action Plan of the National Employment Agency for 2022* [Отчет на плана за действие на Агенция по заетостта за 2022 г]. <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/otchet-za-deinostta-na-az/>

National Employment Agency. (n.d.). *Youth Employment Programme in the field of culture [Програма за заетост на младежи в областта на културата]*.

<https://www.az.government.bg/pages/zaetost-na-mladezhi-v-oblastta-na-kulturata/>

National Employment Agency. (n.d.). *Career Start Programme [Програма „Старт на кариерата“]*.

<https://www.az.government.bg/pages/programa-start-na-karierata/>

National Employment Agency. (n.d.). *National Employment Agency programmes and projects. [Програми и проекти на Агенция по заетостта]*.

<https://www.az.government.bg/pages/programi-i-proekti/>

National Employment Agency. (2023, June 13). *New Opportunities for Youth Employment Project [Проект „Нова възможност за младежка заетост“]*.

<https://www.az.government.bg/pages/ophrd-2014-2020-procedura-mladezhka-zaetost/>

National Statistical Institute. (2018). *Population projections by sex and age*.

<https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/2994/population-projections-sex-and-age>

National Statistical Institute. (2023, April 28). *Population by statistical regions, age, place of residence and sex*.

<https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/2977/population-statistical-regions-age-place-residence-and-sex>

National Statistical Institute. (2023, April 26). *Tertiary education graduates by educational-qualification degree and sex*.

<https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/3403/tertiary-education-graduates-educational-qualification-degree-and-sex>

OECD. (2022, March 15). *Reaching out and activating inactive and unemployed persons in Bulgaria, connecting people with jobs*.

[https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/reaching-out-and-activating-inactive-and-unemployed-persons-in-bulgaria\\_7b91154a-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/reaching-out-and-activating-inactive-and-unemployed-persons-in-bulgaria_7b91154a-en)

Pariteni.bg (2021, April 22). *Осигуряват 800 лева заплата на 370 млади вишисти за година*.

<https://www.pariteni.bg/novini/rabota/osiguriavat-800-leva-zaplata-na-370-mladi-visshisti-za-godina-238808>

Spiridonova, S. (2022, August 30). *83% от започналите стаж по „Старт в кариерата“ остават на постоянна работа*.

*Bulgarian National Radio*. <https://bnr.bg/varna/post/101697649/83-ot-zapochnalite-staj-po-start-v-karierata-ostavat-na-postoanna-rabota>

## 8. Annex

Table 25. Career Start Programme, indicators (Source: National Employment Agency)

Indicators	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Jobs announced according to the quotas approved by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy under Component 1 of the Career Start Programme (no.)</b>	852	2249	1492	1095	2790	2566	2614	1989	2223	228
<b>Total number of applicants who have submitted documents for participation under Component 1 of the Career Start Programme, according to the approved procedures (no.)</b>	3002	3433	3093	1783	1857	1310	1053	840	1158	354
<b>Youth recruited (employed) under the Programme (total no.), including:</b>	1480	114	1002	896	884	788	692	442	853	692
<i>of them women</i>	1065	79	727	661	659	616	532	339	604	503
<i>of them in the central departments and their territorial structures</i>	861	21	417	547	504	492	445	442	625	516
<i>of them in the regional administrations</i>	95	0	99	87	35	42	47	0	24	21
<i>of them in the municipal administrations</i>	524	93	486	262	345	254	200	0	204	155

Table 26. Career Start Programme, Employment and Funds (Source: National Employment Agency)

Career Start Programme							
Period	Plan			Implementation			*Monthly salary (BGN)
	Employment - total	New employment	Funds (BGN)	Employment - total	New employment	Funds (BGN)	
2013	2 712	2 000	6 185 848	2 192	1 480	3 098 004	400
2014	2 626	1 145	5 025 204	1 595	114	5 025 110	400
2015	1 269	1 184	5 294 844	1 087	1 002	4 541 684	430
2016	896	896	4 185 751	896	896	3 871 391	500
2017	1 048	884	5 144 946	1 048	884	5 053 059	550
2018	795	789	4 520 942	795	788	4 467 953	600
2019	692	692	4 319 921	692	692	4 279 803	650
2020	441	440	2 933 652	443	442	2 899 010	700
2021	864	849	5 941 964	868	853	5 907 770	800
2022	1 406	683	6 943 715	1 414	692	6 927 347	860
<b>2013 - 2022</b>	<b>12 749</b>	<b>9 562</b>	<b>#####</b>	<b>11 030</b>	<b>7 843</b>	<b>#####</b>	

Note: \*Monthly wages are at the rates set for the Programme in the 'National Employment Action Plan' for the relevant year.

- 1) Total employment: the total employment is formed by the newly hired in the current year (new employment) and those hired from the previous year who continue to work under contracts;
- 2) New employment: new employment is formed by new recruits in the current year;
- 3) Average monthly employment: average monthly employment for the current year is formed by the sum of total employment by month divided by 12.