

# The role of mentoring among rural 25+ NEETs in Romania

IMPACT ANALYSIS OF THE PROJECT 'FIND YOUR WAY TO THE WORD OF WORK'  
CONDUCTED BY CARITAS ALBA IULIA, ROMANIA

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

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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:



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## 1. Introduction and context

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### 1.1 Institutional context

As we have presented in our country report (Lázár & Telegdy, 2022), and as the latest data shows (presented in Table 1.), in Romania, the proportion of 25+ NEETs is among the highest in the EU and EEA countries. The situation is particularly harsh in the smaller, mainly rural areas. The gender gap in Romania is also considerable, as among the 25-29-year-old NEETs, the proportion of females is more than twice that of males.

**Table 1. The percentage of the different types of the 25+ NEETs in the Lost Millennials project partner countries.**

Country	Percentage of the 25+ NEETs - Total	Percentage of the 25+ NEETs – Towns and suburbs	Percentage of the 25+ NEETs – Rural areas	Percentage of the 25+ NEETs - Male	Percentage of the 25+ NEETs – Female
<b>EU27</b>	17,3	18,8	18,5	13,6	21,2
<b>Bulgaria</b>	23,9	27,3	34,3	17,6	30,5
<b>Czechia</b>	17,9	17,8	19,6	4,9	31,9
<b>Greece</b>	28,7	29,3	36,5	25,3	33,0
<b>Spain</b>	20,2	21,5	20,9	19,6	20,8
<b>Hungary</b>	13,4	14,2	19,0	9,5	17,6
<b>Malta</b>	9,2	6,7	-	5,4	13,7
<b>Austria</b>	10,8	12,3	8,9	8,5	13,2
<b>Poland</b>	16,9	17,8	19,7	9,6	24,5
<b>Romania</b>	<b>24,8</b>	<b>27,8</b>	<b>33,8</b>	<b>14,2</b>	<b>36,1</b>
<b>Slovakia</b>	19,3	22,2	19,4	11,9	27,0
<b>Finland</b>	11,9	15,6	14,6	11,8	12,0
<b>Iceland</b>	10,7	:	13,3	9,5	12,1
<b>Norway</b>	9,4	11,6	9,7	8,6	10,2

Source: Eurostat EDAT\_LFSE\_23 and EDAT\_LFSE\_29 database

### 1.2 Context of the project

Given the late adoption of the extended NEET category in Romania, our previous analysis (Lázár et al., 2022) regarding the programs and projects targeting the NEETs in this country were usually dedicated to the 16-24-year-old age group. There were only two possibilities to target 25+ NEETs with projects, programmes, or initiatives in Romania before September of 2021:

- One option was to create programmes, projects or initiatives which were dedicated to non-NEET groups (which, at that time, meant the population which were above 24 years old, so implicitly, the 25-29-year-old NEETs, which were not in education, training, or employment).
- The non-governmental institutions could be more flexible in defining their target group and involve the 25+ NEETs.

Our analysis enters this second possibility, as Caritas Alba Iulia (Romania) is a non-governmental organisation. Our chosen project is called 'Find Your Way to the World of Work' which was funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment. Four partners implemented the project: the lead partner was the 'Autonómia Foundation' from Hungary, and the partners were 'Fundacion Secretariado Gitano' from Spain, 'Trust for Social Achievement' and 'Arete Youth Foundation' from Bulgaria and the Association 'Caritas – Social Assistance' Branch of Caritas Alba Iulia Organization, from Romania.

Our impact analysis focuses only on the activity of the Romanian partner institution.

We chose to analyse this project because, at the start of this project (2018), the official definition of NEETs in Romania omitted the 25-29-year-old age group from the NEETs definition. But, as this project was conducted by an Association with the status of an NGO in Romania, it could use the broader definition of NEETs, which was already implemented in most European countries. In conclusion, the target group of the project was the 15–29-year-old age group, consisting, by the aim of the project, of secondary school-aged youth, with completed primary school with a high risk of school dropout and the NEETs. A specific attention was given to the economically disadvantaged groups and the Roma population within this group.

The main aims of the analysed project were to share 'the existing broad and diverse experience of the partners' and to explore 'new methods and approaches in supporting the equal access to quality education and employment of disadvantaged youth'.

## 2. The design of the project

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The project was conducted between 2018 and 2023. Even if the project aims for three main objectives, two of them were closely related to the high schools (creating partnerships with schools and professional mentoring and training for 45 teachers), and only one was which covers our research population, namely 'Carrier orientation and soft skills development for 180 young people'. Consequently, our evaluation report focuses on those 25+ NEETs who have participated in the thirdly mentioned aim and the relevant activities.

Regarding the geographical area of the implemented project, it took place in two counties – Mures and Harghita – which are situated in the central part of Romania and make part of the NUTS II region called Centre. This region is very heterogeneous, as some counties (like Brasov, Sibiu and Mures) are well developed and highly urbanised, while on the other part Alba, Covasna and Harghita counties are far less developed, and the proportion of rural population is significant. Also, in the first group the counties have at least one major city – like Brasov, Sibiu or Targu Mures – which can be considered as a local hub and promoters of the regional economic development, while in the other hand the biggest cities in Alba, Covasna or Harghita barely have 60 thousand inhabitants.

As we presented above, the analysed project has three main aims, which were concretized in ten outcomes, as can be seen in the table below.

**Table 2. The outcomes and indicators of the ‘Find Your Way to the World of Work’ project and the involvement of the 25+ NEETs population.**

Outcome	Indicator	Target	Realization
Improved employment situation of NEETs/target group	Engaged in active job search	200	182
Increased participation in education and training of former NEETs/target group	Early-dropouts re-entering secondary education/training	25	34
Increased number of NEETs/target group experiencing social inclusion	Nr. of NEETs/target group participating in inclusive encounters and cooperation with inclusive schools and employers.	270	437
Innovative approaches on lowering youth unemployment have been developed or adopted	Nr. of new approaches, methods and practices developed, piloted, or adopted	3	3
Innovative approaches on lowering youth unemployment have been developed or adopted	Nr. of new services targeting young unemployed established, strengthened, or adopted.	4	5

Innovative approaches on lowering youth unemployment have been developed or adopted	Nr. of beneficiaries receiving services (disadvantaged youth, teachers, employers)	700	737
Increased transnational cooperation on labour market issues	Share of individuals who apply the knowledge acquired from the transnational consortium	-	0
Improved employment situation of NEETs/target group	Nr. of NEETs/Target groups enter employment	50	110
Increased participation in education and training of former NEETs/target group.	Nr. of former NEETs/target group enrolled in education and training, including work-based learning'	90	87
Increased participation in education and training of former NEETs/target group.	Nr. of former NEETs/target group finishing secondary education	50	59

Source: own editing based on project documentation

As shown in Table 2, 25+ NEETs were involved in the mentoring and career guidance activities. The activities within the project, which initially aimed at the 25+ NEETs category, can be separated into two groups:

**a.** The hard skill training aimed to improve the participants' language skills. These activities focus on two languages. Firstly, we have to mention the Romanian language, which should seem strange to those who do not know the Romanian context: the project was conducted in those regions of Romania where most participants are ethnic Hungarians, and their mother tongue is Hungarian. Consequently, failure in the Romanian exam in graduation exam is common in this area, so every language course targeting the native Hungarian population increases their chances in the Romanian labour market.

The second language course was German, mainly in the Gheorgheni area, as many people work abroad, usually in blue-collar domains, in a German-speaking country (especially in Germany and Switzerland).

**b.** The second type of intervention targeted soft skills, as the usual activities were mentoring the 25+ NEETs. As the mentoring activities were conducted in three different regions, we reached out to participants involved in this program for all the involved regions.

To evaluate the effects of the hard skill intervention, we compared the results from the Gheorgheni area – where these courses took place – with the other areas. As presented in the tables below, the mentoring



activities referred to individual mentoring, which initially were conducted face-to-face, but after the pandemic, these activities were also conducted online. Besides the mentoring, some of the beneficiaries mentioned that they were involved in other activities of the Caritas or were invited to participate in job interviews, for empty positions at the Caritas, during their mentoring period.

For a better understanding, we should also mention that multiple activities were conducted within the project, but they were not implemented among the 25+ NEETs.

### 3. Descriptive statistics

Several activities were carried out under the project (*Find Your Way to The World of Work*, n.d.), which can be divided into two groups according to our desk research analysis. The first group consisted of activities that directly concerned young people aged 15-29, or a subset of them, who were the project's target group (see Table 3). These include mentoring, training, study trips or vocational training camps, lectures, personal development events, or employer meetings.

**Table 3. Activities directly involving young people.**

<b>Activities directly involving young people</b>	<b>Target group</b>	
<b>Mentoring</b>	Individual mentoring	16–29-year-olds
	Group sessions	18+ year-olds
	Online mentoring	16–29-year-olds
<b>Training</b>	Soft-skills training	16–29-year-olds
	Languages training	18+ year-olds
	Personality development	Secondary school students
	Lecture series on the world of start-ups	17–23-year-olds
<b>Meeting with employers</b>	Young graduates meet their future employers	Graduating secondary school students
<b>Camps</b>	Personality development camp	16–24-year-olds
	Career guidance camp	Young adults
	Occupational presentation camp	16–19-year-olds
<b>Study trips</b>	Study trip for graduating students	Graduating secondary school students
	Hiking and learning about the mountain rescue profession	Youth
<b>Company visits</b>	Introducing different workplaces and work environments to the mentees	Secondary school students

<b>Trying out professions</b>	Professional practice	Secondary school students, mentees
<b>Lectures</b>	Presentation of professions	Youth
	Motivational lecture	Secondary school students
	Personality development event with Osonó Theatre Workshop	Youth
	Online presentation for youth on the phenomenon of cyberbullying	Secondary school students
<b>City tour</b>	Skill-building game invented by mentors	Young adults

Source: own editing based on project documentation

The other group included activities that indirectly affected young people, such as professional conferences and workshops, raising teachers' awareness of disadvantaged youth, training on how to deal with these young people, and meetings with employers to facilitate the employment of disadvantaged youth (Table 4).

**Table 4. Activities indirectly involving young people.**

<b>Activities indirectly involving young people</b>		<b>Participants</b>
<b>Conferences</b>	Network meeting on early school leaving prevention	Professionals from Mureş County
	Conference of community builders on Roma Inclusion	Professionals working with communities in extreme poverty
<b>Workshops</b>	Roundtable on the problems of disadvantaged young people	Professionals working with young people
	Professional Consultation in Hungary	The project staff
	Professional roundtable discussion and workshop on Roma and Hungarian community relations	Experts from academia, representatives of civil and public institutions
<b>Meeting with employers, entrepreneurs</b>	Meeting with employers to promote the integration of disadvantaged young people into the labour market	Business managers, HR professionals
<b>Sensitisation and training of teachers</b>	training teachers to work with disadvantaged people	Teachers
	Self-awareness and team-building workshop for teachers	Teachers
	Theatre-based communication and self-awareness workshops for teachers	Teachers

<b>Activities to reach participants</b>	Meeting with foster parents to present the Find Your Way program	Foster parents and their foster children
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Source: own editing based on project documentation

The ‘Find Your Way to the World of Work’ project, given the fact that it runs over more than four years, has reached a significant number of people both in Romania and in partner countries. In Table 5 we present the number of the participants in the whole project.

**Table 5. The target groups of the ‘Find Your Way to the World of Work’ project and the number of persons reached within each category.**

Target groups	Target group description	Caritas Alba lulia cumulative numbers	Target group value - consortium
Youth (15-19)	The main target group is disadvantaged and Roma youth of secondary school age, with completed primary education. Members of this target group are either students in secondary school with a risk of drop-out, or early drop-outs, NEETs	450	1040
Young adults (20-29)	This is a mixed target group. On one hand they are disadvantaged and Roma youth with completed secondary education. On the other hand, there are a smaller group of women, who had been early drop-outs due to childbirth at a young age, willing to return to education when their children are school aged.	196	485
Students (any age)	Subgroup of the first two target groups, participants actively studying in secondary education.	390	995
Roma	A horizontal priority in all target group estimated to be at least 30% of all participants	165	475
Women	There is a strong emphasis on countering the higher drop-out risk of disadvantaged/Roma girls from education. The early drop-outs due to childbirth are a specific target group. Altogether at least 55% of target group should be women	318	846

Source: own editing based on project documentation

According to the project’s initial aim, the number of the involved Roma population should be much higher. Still, after the start, the Romanian project team realised, according to the Romanian project manager, that by the age of 15, the majority of the Roma population had already left the official education system, so they could not reach them in an organised way, meaning that through school-based activities. The only exception was those ethnic Roma students under the surveillance of the social

protection system (e.g., orphanage), which are strictly supervised until 18 to fulfil the school attendance requirements and obligations.

The total eligible cost of the project was 2,673,908.25 euros, from which the eligible project cost for Caritas Alba Iulia was 605,195.02 euros, including the 15% co-financing share.

*Our Key Evaluation Question was to prove that participation in the program called 'Find Your Way to the World of Work' has positively influenced the 25+ NEET participants.* This approach follows the logic of the theory of change.

## 4. Description of methodology

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Our evaluation methodology consists of a triangulation of the desk research, thematic qualitative interviews and expert interviews, structural questionnaires, and qualitative comparative analysis. The theoretical background lies in a comprehensive literature review conceptualised in the *theory of change*.

### 4.1 Theory of change

The first step in the theory of change was to define the desired impact: in this case, a high level of employability, since the main objectives of the project under review were to prepare disadvantaged young people for employment (*Find Your Way to The World of Work*, n.d.).

Then, to attain the goal for the project we were considering, we determined which components we believed to be necessary and/or sufficient. This entails more than just identifying the project-related activities; it also calls for recognising the mediating elements and broader contextual aspects that may support the project's success (Baptist & Befani, 2015). In addition to participation in the project, we have defined four conditions: negative school experiences, school-level career guidance, work-related experiences, and future orientation. These are described in more detail below.

#### 4.1.1 Negative school experiences

Negative school experiences must be understood in the context of structural conditions that become barriers to educational achievement (Lőrinc et al., 2020). The importance of educational attainment is shown by the fact that one of the main risk factors for becoming NEET is educational underachievement (Furlong, 2006). Negative school experiences include a lack of support from teachers, ignorance, or discouragement (Lőrinc et al., 2020), challenges with different subjects, and failing the National Baccalaureate Exam. Students who graduate high school must sit for a National Baccalaureate Exam, a highly centralised national examination. The baccalaureate is a necessary condition for higher education but is often also a minimum condition for employment. On this basis, the following indicators were defined (see Table 6.).

**Table 6. The indicators of negative school experiences.**

Condition	Indicators
Negative school experiences	Problem with different subjects
	Challenging relationships with teachers
	Failing the National Baccalaureate Exam

Source: own editing based on the literature

### 4.1.2 School-level career guidance

Career guidance involves services and activities designed to help individuals manage their careers and make meaningful education, training and occupational choices (Cedefop et al., 2021). In most countries, one of the main access points for career guidance is the school (Musset & Kurekova, 2018), where two career guidance activities are provided: career education and counselling. Career education focuses on assisting groups of people in acquiring the skills necessary to manage their career growth (Watts, 2009). Job-searching skills form the basis of career management skills essential for employability (ETF, 2020). Thus, teaching these skills is often a central element of successful job-search interventions (Liu et al., 2014). Another form of career guidance activities is individual or small-group career counselling, which focuses on individuals’ specific career problems, providing factual information and advice on career options and choices (Musset & Kurekova, 2018). Career guidance in schools can be a significant element in preventing NEET status by helping to overcome inequalities in opportunities related to students’ backgrounds and parental experiences and expectations (Musset & Kurekova, 2018). Based on these, we have identified the indicators of school-level career guidance as follows (see Table 7).

**Table 7. The indicators of school-level career guidance.**

Condition	Indicators
<b>School-level career guidance</b>	Existence of career guidance in Middle/Lower-Secondary Education
	Existence of career guidance in Secondary Schools
	Learning job-searching skills

*Source: own editing based on the literature*

### 4.1.3 Work-related experiences

To improve their employability, many job seekers urgently need career guidance. These include training, retraining, work experiences, and ongoing job search assistance (OECD, 2004). Having already considered career guidance and job search skills development in the previous sections, we now highlight the importance of work experience and work-related training in achieving better employability. Many school guidance services have weak links with the world of work, with students often having few opportunities to gain work experience, even though this facilitates the transition from school to work (OECD, 2004). Therefore, work experience was treated separately from career guidance activities in schools. Various studies have pointed to the link between work experience and employability (Finch et al., 2013), while employers also value work experience as an indicator of job readiness (Andrews & Higson, 2008). The following indicators have been defined (see Table 8).

**Table 8. The indicators of work-related experiences.**

Condition	Indicators
Work-related experiences	Work experience in Romania
	Foreign work experience
	Work-related training

Source: own editing based on the literature

#### 4.1.4 Future orientation

Thinking and planning for the future is particularly important for young people. Future orientation is a word that describes how people view their future in terms of objectives, hopes, expectations, and concerns (Nurmi et al., 1994). Future thinking is essential to encourage people in vulnerable situations to be aware of what they want to achieve in their future and to motivate them to act towards what they want to achieve (Masdonati & Fournier, 2015). According to Lens et al. (2012), goals are future-oriented. Even if someone is motivated by the present state, they are future-oriented because they want to possess in the future what they already have in the present, i.e., future goals create a future time perspective. One important area for the future is self-fulfilment (Piumatti et al., 2014), which increases employability (Wang & Lee, 2019). Based on the above, the indicators for future orientation can be defined as follows (see Table 9):

**Table 9. The indicators of future orientation.**

Condition	Indicators
Future orientation	Willingness to learn something new
	Willingness to work
	Self-fulfilment

Source: own editing based on the literature

## 4.2 Data gathering methods

Given the fact that only a few 25+ NEETS participants had participated in the project, we chose the qualitative methodology to evaluate the impact of the interventions strictly focusing on this age group, supplemented by data from quantitative data collection (desk research, secondary analysis of statistics).

#### 4.2.1 Desk research

Firstly, we conducted desk research to group the project activities under the study. The document analysis consisted of analysing 75 articles on the website of the Romanian institution (*'Iránytű a munka világába'*, n.d.) that implemented the project and reported on the activities carried out during the project.

#### 4.2.2 Interviews

To get a closer look at the project and better understand the context and aim, we interviewed two mentors (out of six) working on the project. We conducted another expert interview with the Romanian project leader. At the same time, we conducted six thematic qualitative interviews with project participants and two thematic qualitative interviews with NEETs aged 25-29 who did not participate in the project under study.

#### 4.2.3 Questionnaire method

In addition, the eight young people included in the interview research were also asked to complete an employability questionnaire. The employability questionnaire is a scale of forty statements related to employment developed by Hungary's National Office for Vocational and Adult Education (*Skála*, n.d.). The answers to the scale questions indicate whether the respondents are ready for work or should seek to counsel and what further steps they should take to improve their employability.

#### 4.2.4 The peak experience

The peak experience method is an essential element of the 'Appreciative Inquiry', which can provide a concise and coherent description of the project. The technique is also beneficial in identifying the impacts achieved and the information generated by the process itself (*Peak Experience Description*, n.d.), which allows the identification of possible unintended results.

### 4.3 Data analysis methods

All interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and analysed. The expert interviews were processed using qualitative content analysis, so the interview data were reduced and summarised according to the research questions defined. The thematic qualitative interviews with young people aged 25-29 were analysed in several ways.

#### 4.3.1 Thematic coding

First, we conducted thematic coding across all transcripts, using codes defined along pre-defined research questions in line with the literature. Among these codes, we mention Kirkpatrick's model, developed for measuring the effectiveness of training projects (Kirkpatrick, 2009). The model allows for four levels of results measurement for individuals involved in a project. These levels are:



1. Reactions – measuring user satisfaction
2. Learning – measurement of knowledge acquired
3. Behaviour – the knowledge acquired is incorporated into the participant’s everyday life
4. Results – the ability to consciously build a career

### 4.3.2 Content analysis

We then conducted a content analysis using a priori codes described in detail in the theory of change. In further data processing, the crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (csQCA) was used. The csQCA analysis was based on the content analysis of the thematic qualitative interview data of the NEET young people aged 25-29. The output was the result of the employability scale with these young people. This will be explained in detail below.

## 4.4 The Qualitative Comparative Analysis method

The methodology of qualitative comparative analysis (Qualitative Comparative Analysis, QCA) was created by the American sociologist Charles Ragin aiming to bridge the ‘methodological gap’ between small-sample qualitative studies and quantitative analyses. It is designed for use with an intermediate number of cases, typically between 10 and 50.

The method is suitable for handling the multivariate complexity and inductively determining the essential factors (*conditions*) influencing the research question (*outcome*); it can help explain why change happens in some cases but not others. The essence of the QCA algorithm is that based on cases with different conditions but the same outcome, the Boolean algebra method determines the minimum number of sufficient conditions that result in a particular outcome.

Several types have been developed within the QCA methodology. The csQCA (crisp-set QCA) is the classic initial version, published in the literature with Ragin's terminology, using the name QCA. It works only with dichotomised variables; all possible configurations of conditions in accordance with Boolean algebra are characterised by the values 0 (not fulfilled, false) and 1 (complete, true). The method examines all logically possible combinations to describe the case as best as possible (Schneider & Wagemann, 2010; Wendler et al., 2013).

The csQCA has been at the centre of criticism for its dichotomisation (0 or 1), saying it reduces the complexity of social reality due to the large loss of information. To eliminate this problem, Ragin adapted fuzzy logic to his method. Fuzzy reasoning interprets the possible connections and outcomes for all non-integer values of the [0; 1] interval. By abandoning the limitations of dichotomisation, formal logic and linguistic elements can be better coordinated. In our research, we apply the crisp-set QCA.

## 5. Evaluation questions

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### 5.1 Relevance

According to the previous country report (Lázár & Telegdy, 2022), in Romania, the schools in rural areas are less equipped and have fewer human resources than the ones from urban areas. Also, because of the demographic decline in Romania, even elementary classes are more infrequent in rural areas, and the ones which exist tend to be simultaneous classes meaning that one teacher is responsible for at least two parallel classes. Furthermore, the latest data shows that 850 school counsellors are missing from the Romanian education system, meaning that there is one counsellor for every 500-800 pupils. As we mentioned in the Romania country report (Lázár et al. 2022), There are policies aimed at tackling early school leaving at the county level (NUTS III) through the County Resource and Educational Psychological Assistance Centres (CJRAE in Romanian abbreviation). They should develop psycho-pedagogical assistance, school guidance services, and vocational guidance provided by county centres and school counselling offices. The school counselling centres are operated in schools with a minimum of 800 pupils or 400 preschool children or in groups of pupils of schools/kindergartens (ORDER No 5555 of 7 October 2011 approving the Regulation on the organisation and functioning of the county/urban centres for educational resources and assistance. ISSUER: Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport, Published in: Official Monitor No. 759 of 27 October 2011).

In this context, every programme, project, or initiative which aims to mentor a young person is highly relevant in Romania.

### 5.2 Coherence

At the beginning of the project (2018), there was only a few national-level public founded project which was dedicated to the NEET population in Romania, and there was no one which explicitly targeted the 25+ NEETs group, as we earlier presented in our policy context analysis (Lázár et al., 2022). In this context, the only initiatives, projects, and programmes aiming at the 25+ NEETs in Romania were those run by NGOs, who have the flexibility to address their interventions in concordance with the international partners, which already used the extended NEETs definition.

On the other hand, as we also presented in our (Lázár et al., 2022) country report, the central authorities were careful, at least in the analysed period, to cover the whole of Romania with the different programmes and projects so at the national level the regional disparities were covered. Given this context, the NGOs were those, who could be more specific in their interventions, and to get legitimacy to their founding, they had addressed a particular NEET-group where some segments were overrepresented (e.g., the rural NEETs). As the interview with the Romanian project coordinator confirms, the initial aim of the project was to target the Roma population, mainly in rural areas, and

another priority was to reach the female population as in Romania among the NEETs, the female population is overrepresented (as it is presented in Table 1.).

In conclusion, the analysed project was coherent in the national policy context.

## 5.3 Effectiveness

The program ended in April 2023, so the overall results can be counted. The project has fulfilled the proposed goals, as the target population was reached through different activities. The only objective that could not be totally fulfilled was that most beneficiaries were not members of the Romanian Roma community.

### 5.3.1 The effectiveness based on the thematic coding of the thematic qualitative interviews

To evaluate the effectiveness of the mentoring activities, we use multiple methods, as mentioned in the methodology. These included thematic coding of interviews based on Kirkpatrick's model, the results of which are presented below.

Regarding the reactions, all the participants were highly satisfied with the mentoring program and the mentors.

The learning process was very varied as the participants had different levels of education and orientation capabilities. However, the common conclusion was that mentoring helped them concretise their future by creating smaller, more achievable tasks until they reached their final goals. The program could also be considered a success at the behavioural level, as all the participants were actively engaged in the labour market.

The results, which are dedicated to measuring the direct results, were also positive, as all the interviewed participants were active workers or students at the time of the research.

The reasons for becoming a 25+ NEET among the participants were the following:

- Lack of career guidance in primary and general school (sometimes even in high school).
- The low level (or lack) of career guidance or future planning in the family.
- Choosing a high school or class profile after the “fashion”, not based on personal interest, capacity, or field of interest.
- The school is somewhat interested in fighting against early drop-out, but there is no or just a small level of support in the final/graduation exam.

To identify unexpected results of the project, we used the peak experience method (see Methodology). All the participants mentioned both their satisfaction with the mentors and the project. However, when we asked for a specific moment or action, they mentioned the following:

- To get a chance to try herself in the field of work (she worked a few days within the project).
- To know the mentor (a psychologist by profession), as she plans to learn further psychology or social work.
- To learn the “effective” German language spoken “in the streets”.
- The attention of the professors during the Romanian lessons.
- To overcome claustrophobia during a team building-like excursion (a visit to a cave).

Based on the results of the in-depth interviews and QCA, we can say that the project was effective at the output and outcome levels. Project participation of those NEETs who had been part of school-level career guidance and had work-related experiences effectively impacts employability. Participation in the mentoring activity of the project is effective even only with future orientation despite the absence of school-level career guidance and work-related experience. These results support the need for such project activities.

## 5.4 Efficiency

Unfortunately, we do not have detailed information regarding the specific costs of the project. Regarding human resources, all the mentors involved in this project had a university social sciences background (psychology, sociology, or social work), and they also participated in special training to develop their mentoring skills. From this perspective, the project would be sustainable.

Regarding the proposed size of the target group, the project can be considered successful, reaching a high level of efficiency, as in most cases, they reached more people than they initially planned, as presented in Table 5.

## 5.5 Sustainability

As mentioned earlier, the project’s main objective was to prepare disadvantaged young people for employment. This was achieved through various activities such as mentoring and developing skills that contribute to the employability of the project participants. These are skills that they can use not only in their current situation but throughout their lives. In addition to employability skills, the young people involved in the project also reported several personality changes that will persist after the project ends. These are illustrated in the following interview transcripts:

*‘It gave me confidence. I was quite lacking in confidence because of problems at home. I got much confidence too, so it was .... I really needed that.’ (Subject 1)*

*'Well (...) my opinion matters because I've usually been like that before I came to the programme, if I'm in a community and I'm asked for my opinion, I don't necessarily have to give it because everybody's not going to like it, I'd rather not say anything. And then it helped me to give my opinion because it won't be a time when everybody likes it anyway, and my opinion is important. So it also helped me open up more in a community.'* (Subject 2)

*'What have I improved the most? Maybe perseverance..... to really stick with what I want.'* (Subject 3)

In addition to the change in their personality, the project's lasting impact may also include the relationships and friendships made during the project, which are beneficial from a labour market perspective and positively impact individuals' well-being. As one interviewee put it: *'I made friends there. One boy and I became such friends that he asked me and my husband to be godparents to his surrogate, so we got a surrogate son from there, and we've kept in touch ever since. Then I found friends there, with whom I still keep in touch, and we help each other. So if we have a problem, we talk about it.'* (Subject 2)

In addition to the above, participation in the project has made a positive difference in the lives of several participants that might not have been possible without it. These include achieving a school leaving certificate or even the partial overcoming of claustrophobia. These are changes that will benefit the subjects later in life. This is illustrated in the following interview transcripts.

*'The good thing about it was that there were such tight spaces when we went into the cave. I have a problem; I'm trying to fight it; I have claustrophobia. My mentor encouraged me to try to go in as far as I dared, and then I overcame my fear a little bit because I was in such a tight place that if I couldn't overcome that fear, I wouldn't have been able to go into the cave. And it felt so good.'* (Subject 2)

*'If I hadn't applied for this programme, there is a good chance I would have failed my baccalaureate exam and wouldn't have been able to think about further studies. There is a good chance. So I would have been very.... That was one of the keys; this prep class was one of the big keys to getting my high school diploma.'* (Subject 3)

In the third chapter, we have already mentioned that the project has also implemented activities that indirectly impact NEET young people or even the prevention of becoming NEET. These are activities such as sensitising secondary school teachers to deal more empathetically with disadvantaged children or children from other ethnic backgrounds, which may contribute to supporting pupils in the school or even to preventing early school leaving. At the same time, raising employers' awareness of how to handle disadvantaged people can help not only to employ NEET young people but also to retain them in the workplace in the long term; as one mentor put it: *'They have learned ... so entrepreneurs have started to pay attention to how I employ a young person, for example, how I relate to a young person when I know*

*that he or she is, let's say, coming from a disadvantaged background (...) the manager has to step into such a mentoring role and had to step into it.'*

In conclusion, all the training and mentoring which led to a beneficial change in the daily routine of the involved target group led to a positive and sustainable impact of the project.

## 5.6 Impact

The main research question of the impact analysis is the employability of rural NEETs due to the project. As explained in the methodology section, we sought to answer this question through QCA analysis.

### 5.6.1 Defining the cases, the conditions and the outcome.

In our research, the cases represent the subjects of the thematic qualitative interviews, eight in number, both beneficiaries (6) and non-beneficiaries (2) of the project. We build up the conditions from sub-conditions, which are literature-based employability characteristics.

**Table 10. The characteristics of the evaluation**

Conditions		Sub-conditions
Negative experiences	school	0/1 – Problem with different subjects
		0/1 – Challenging relationship with teachers
		0/1 – Failing the National Bacculaureate Exam
School-level guidance	career	0/1 – Existence of career guidance in Middle/Lower-Secondary Education
		0/1 – Existence of career guidance in Secondary School
		0/1 – Learning job-search skills
Work-related experiences		0/1 – Work experience in Romania
		0/1 – Foreign work experience
		0/1 – Work-related training
Future orientation		0/1 – Willingness to learn something new
		0/1 – Willingness to work
		0/1 – Self-fulfilment
Participation in the 'Find Your Way to the World of Work' project		0/1 – Participation in the project

*Source: own editing*

We determined the true outcome as the values higher than the mean of the employability index described previously.

### 5.6.2 Data collection

The primary data collection is based on the criteria described in the table above, and the data is displayed in a two-dimensional table so that the cases are placed in the rows and the variables in the columns. The

conditions represent the sum of the dichotomous sub-conditions, taking several values in the interval [0;1].

### 5.6.3 Setting up the hypothetical truth table.

The concept of the truth table comes from formal logic and plays a central role in QCA analyses. Since the method uses the tools of formal logic, we must use dichotomous values in the hypothetical truth table, transforming the values of the primary data table defined in the previous step. Thus, the hypothetical truth table displays the necessary and sufficient conditions for its examination, where the conditions are in the columns, the rows represent the cases, and the values of 0 or 1 in the cells indicate the presence or absence of the given condition. Theoretically, all possible combination of the conditions could be  $2^5=32$ .

The so-called **hypothetical truth table** is based on the empirical primary data table, but the different condition-combinations usually are not presented case by case but aggregated. In our table, each case represents a different combination of the conditions.

Cases with the same configuration but different outputs can cause a significant analysis problem. Our research did not encounter such a contradiction (table 11.).

Table 11. The hypothetical truth table.

Combinations	E	G	W	F	P	Outcome	N (8)	Logical form
BB1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	eGWfP
BB2	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	eGWFP
BB3	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	EgWfP
TB1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	egwFP
TB2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	egwfp
TB3	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	EgwFP
NP1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	egWfp
NP2	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	EgWfp

Source: own editing

The outcome's true value represents a high employability level based on the previously detailed questionnaire filled out by all interviewees at the end of the qualitative thematic interviews.

### 5.6.4 The process of minimization

The purpose of the applied Quine-McCluskey algorithm is to logically minimise the system of necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of the outcome, thereby making it interpretable.

Based on the hypothetical truth table, we write the logical form of the two possible outcomes as combinations of non-fulfilment and the fulfilment of conditions using the notations of Boolean algebra. A Boolean sum represents the logical OR, multiplication represents a combination and can be interpreted as a logical AND. Each combination of casual conditions can be described as a Boolean product, where uppercase letters represent the fulfilment of the conditions (variables) (1), while lowercase letters represent the non-fulfilment (0). These Boolean products are presented in the last column of Table 12.

**Table 12. Formal logical expressions of the outcomes**

Outcome	Combination of conditions
<b>Y = 1</b>	$T = eGWfP + eGWFP + egwFP + EgwFP + egWfp$
<b>Y = 0</b>	$t = EgWfP + egwfP + EgWfp$

Source: own editing

The main advantage of the QCA method represents the minimisation process of the combinations written in formal logical expressions. If two expressions differ in only one causal condition yet produce the same outcome. The causal condition that distinguishes the two expressions can be considered irrelevant and removed to create a simpler, combined expression (Ragin, 2017).

By comparing configurations pairwise, we strive for logical minimisation and reduction of expressions. Only configurations that produce identical outputs can be compared; the 0 and 1 outputs can be tested differently. Minimisation in two steps can work: first, find adjacent combinations and compare them pairwise, followed by the generation of the prime implicant table (Wendler et al., 2013). Adjacent combinations: two combinations are adjacent if a condition (variable) is fulfilled in one case and not in the other, and the other conditions with the same value are listed. We can then simplify until it cannot be simplified any further until we arrive at an expression. This is achieved if only one condition (variable, letter) in the expression cannot be omitted without changing the value of the expression. E.g., if 'abc' and 'abC' lead to the same output, then 'ab' also leads to the same result regardless of whether it is lowercase or not, i.e. realized or not, i.e.  $abc + abC = ab(c+C) = ab$ .

1. First, we analyse the unreduced (*primitive*) expression of the Y=1 outcome:

$$T = eGWfP + eGWFP + egwFP + EgwFP + egWfp$$

The adjacent combinations are:

$$eGWfP + eGWFP = eGW(f+F)P = eGWP$$

The reduced set of inferences is termed the '*prime implicates*', which could not be minimised further:

$$T = eGWP + gwFP + egWfp$$

2. We apply the logical minimisation process to the Y=0 non-fulfilment expression:



$$t = EgWfP + egwfP + EgWfp$$

$$EgWfP + egwfP + EgWfp$$

The adjacent combinations are:

$$EgWfP + EgWfp = EgWf(P+p) = EgWf$$

The reduced form of the fals outcome is made up of two prime implicants:

$$t = egwfP + EgWf$$

The Boolean minimisation has a second phase to determine which prime implicants are logically essential. The use of the *prime implicants charts* needs to be introduced to the concept of implication.

A Boolean expression (e.g. a prime implicant) is said to imply another if the membership of the second term (e.g. primitive expression) is a subset of the membership of the first (Ragin, 2017). The prime implicants chart maps the links between prime implicants and primitive expressions to determine the smallest number of prime implicants needed to cover all of the original primitive expressions. This method applies to both true and false outcomes.

Table 13. Prime implicates table of Y = 1

Prime implicants	Primitive expression				
	eGWP	eGWFP	egwFP	EgwFP	egWfP
eGWP	x	x			
gwFP			x	x	
egWfP					x

Source: own editing

It can be observed that all primitive implicants are needed to cover the primitive expression, so the formula  $T = eGWP + gwFP + egWfp$  cannot be further reduced.

Now we try to reduce the Y=0 formula.

Table 14. Prime implicates table of Y = 0

Prime implicants	Primitive expression		
	EgWfP	egwfP	EgWfp
egwfP		x	
EgWf	x		x

Source: own editing

According to the prime implicates table, the primitive expression of the Y=0 is not reducible.

### 5.6.5 Interpretation

The final step, the theory generation, is the most important: once the prime implicates of both outcomes are defined ( $eGWP + gwFP + EgWfP, egwfp+EgWf$ ), we interpret the findings, firstly in a succinct way wording the formulas:

- Project participation is effective with school-level career guidance and work-related experiences.
- Project participation is effective even only with future orientation despite the absence of school-level career guidance and work-related experiences.
- Project participation combined with work-related experiences is effective despite negative school experiences, lack of school-level career guidance, and future orientation.
- Project participation alone is doomed to failure if none of the other conditions are not met.
- The work-related experience combined with negative school experiences, without the other conditions, also results in a low level of employability.

Based on all this, we can say that project participation has a positive, complementary impact on the participants' employability.

## 6. Conclusion

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Our main conclusion from the project evaluation concerns the importance of career guidance. At the beginning of the interviews with young people, we asked them about their school years after the introductory questions, emphasising career guidance questions. The purpose of these questions was to examine the role of career guidance in the lives of individuals, as previous qualitative research (Lőrinc et al., 2020) has shown that a lack of adequate career guidance contributes to becoming NEET. Our research results also supported this, as the interviews showed that neither the school choice nor the career choice were based on the modern career orientation approach, on individual characteristics (e.g. interests, skills, values), but on external factors such as proximity to school, fashion or financial opportunities. At the same time, interviewees reported a lack of career guidance or a low level of career guidance. The importance of career guidance is also supported by the QCA analysis, as in addition to participation in the project, one of the following conditions was needed to achieve a high level of employability: **school-level career guidance, work experience or future orientation**. As mentioned in the theory of change, these are part of career guidance.

The respondents also thought this was important since, when asked what they believed a NEET young person would need, they responded as follows:

*'Well, to have an adult behind them to support them. On the one hand, I am thinking here of parents, and on the other hand of a project like Find Your Way to The World of Work, because it can give a lot...'*  
(Interviewee 3.)

Based on the above, a first recommendation could be **to strengthen and expand career guidance in schools** to include not only career counselling but future orientation and closer links with the world of work. Our proposal is also in line with previous quantitative research findings that investment in effective career guidance pays off in the long run, as school-age teenagers' thinking about their future work, exploring and experiencing possible future jobs is associated with employment outcomes in young adulthood (Covacevich et al., 2021). One of the results of effective career guidance is that students are less likely to become NEET (Gatsby, 2014). Disadvantaged students, in particular, have much to gain from career guidance services to prepare them for the competition for available job opportunities. Young people have very different ways of accessing information and support; unless schools take action, the disadvantage will persist (OECD, 2021).

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