

Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on 25+ NEETs

COUNTRY REPORT – GREECE

Institute of Entrepreneurship Development

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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 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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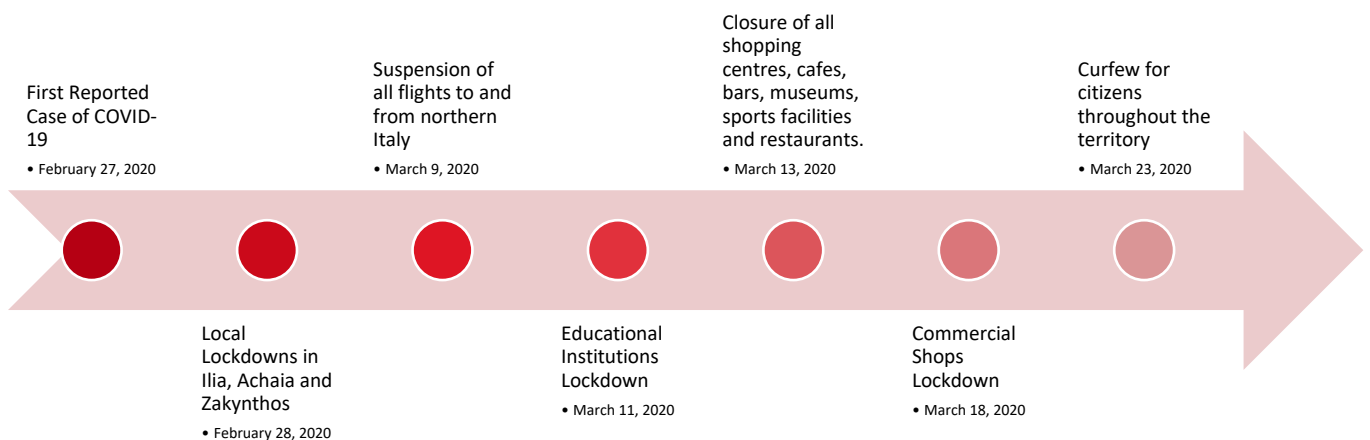
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1. Introduction

Greece, much like the rest of the world, was profoundly impacted by the global outbreak of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. Emerging in late 2019 and escalating in 2020, the virus ushered in an era of uncertainty, leading governments worldwide to adopt emergency measures to curtail its spread.

Following the confirmation of the first three outbreaks in Greece, event suspension measures were gradually imposed (Wikipedia, 2023), initially at local level in the affected areas. However, during March 2020, due to the appearance of outbreaks of the virus in various regions of the country, it was decided to close all educational institutions nationwide and to gradually close catering facilities, commercial outlets and places of worship (see **Hiba! A hivatkozási forrás nem található.**). The government implemented a phased reopening, close to full normalisation of economic activity (except for major public events), from July 2020. However, as a result of the increase in cases, the government announced a new national lockdown in November 2020, with some key businesses open. Authorities called off the second lockdown in early 2021, keeping the curfew and selected restrictions in place. However, a third lockdown was reintroduced in March 2021, which was extended until May 2021. Authorities eased the restriction and reopened their borders to tourism on May 14, with some requirements for overseas travellers. The total cost of the measures announced by the government to support the economy, businesses and workers amounts to €24 billion, equivalent to 14% of the country's GDP (IMF, 2021).

Figure 1. Timeline of key measures implemented by the Greek government during the initial phase of the COVID-19 outbreak



During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Greek Government acted promptly to ensure public awareness and safety. On March 16, 2020, they rolled out the 'Stay at Home' information campaign (Stay at Home campaign, 2020). Designed to emphasize the severity of the situation, this campaign appealed to citizens to exercise responsibility and adhere to the guidelines laid out by health experts. The underlying objective was to safeguard the most vulnerable sections of the community by reducing the spread of the virus, which was achievable if people limited their outdoor activities. The government leveraged media platforms, broadcasting informative spots on television and radio that conveyed the campaign's ethos. Parallely, advertisements and articles echoing the 'Stay at Home' theme found prominence in print media, online newspapers, and websites. To ensure that this message reached every corner of the country, the General Secretariat of Civil Protection sent out emergency alerts to mobile phones nationwide on the 11th, 17th, and 22nd of March (Wikipedia, 2023).

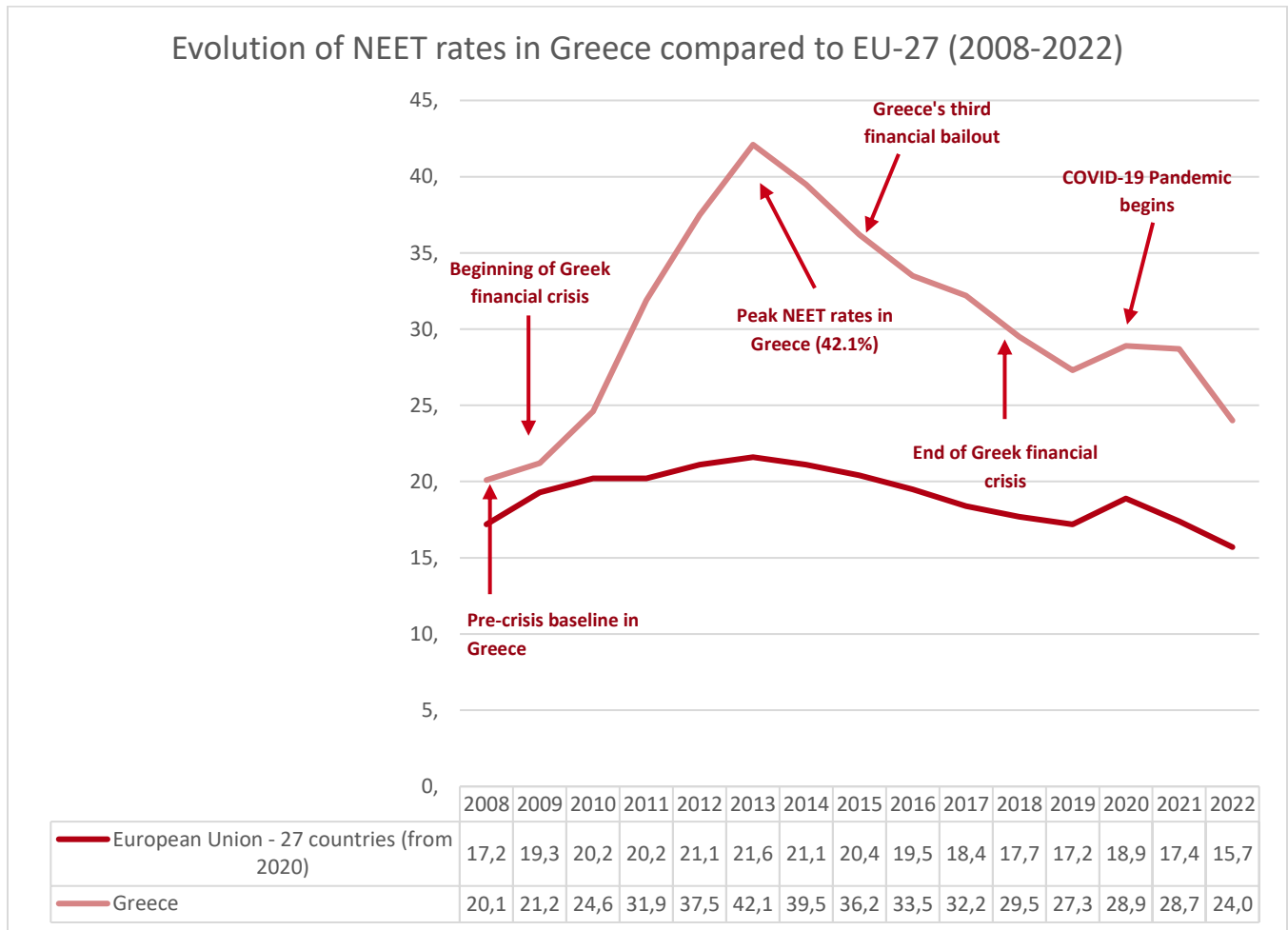
The effect of these preventive measures was enormous and permeated every aspect of Greek society. From the economy, especially the sectors dependent on tourism and hospitality, to the education system that had to switch to distance learning, the challenges were manifold. However, the rapid and comprehensive nature of the Greek response was commendable and played a key role in managing the immediate impact of the pandemic.

2. The impact of the pandemic on 25+ NEETs

Prior to Greece's extended economic downturn from late 2009 to 2018, the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rates for individuals aged 25-29 (Eurostat, 2023) were only modestly above the EU average (see Figure 2). Specifically, in 2008, the NEET rate for this age group in Greece was **20.1%**, while the EU-27 average was 17.2%. However, as the financial crisis set in, the NEET rate escalated dramatically, reaching a peak of **42.1%** in 2013, far outpacing the EU-27 average of 21.6% at the time. This historical context adds a layer of complexity to the gradual decline in Greece's NEET rates from 2013 to 2019, which went from 42.1% to **27.3%**. Although the rates were decreasing, the age group was still grappling with high unemployment and limited opportunities due to the lingering effects of Greece's economic crisis. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, this age group was already at a disadvantage due to the lasting impacts of the economic crisis. NEET rates for those aged 25-29 rose slightly from 27.3% in 2019 to **28.9%** in **2020** and levelled off at **28.7%** in **2021**. This uptick, although marginal, came after a period of gradual improvement and should be read in the context of Greece's already fragile economic condition. The fact that Greece's NEET rate for this demographic did not skyrocket but rather experienced a moderate rise during the pandemic could be seen on the back of an already high baseline rate, accentuated by years of economic hardship.

Compared to the EU-27 average NEET rate, which stood at 18.9% in 2020 and improved to 15.7% in 2022, the rate for Greece's 25-29 age group remained significantly elevated during the same period, indicating a higher level of vulnerability.

Figure 2. Greece’s NEET rates in context of the EU-27



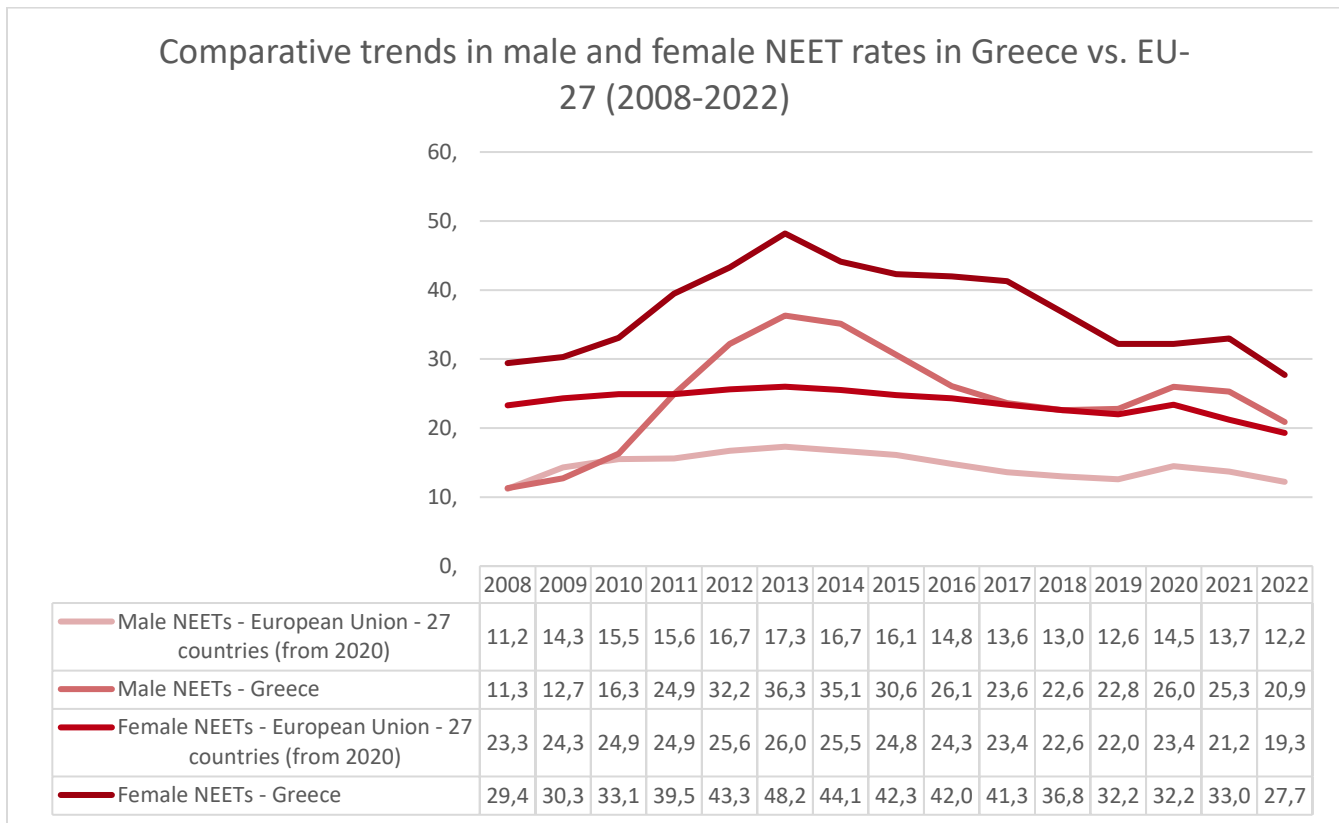
The COVID-19 pandemic had distinct but relatively moderate impacts on both male and female NEET rates in Greece for the 25-29 age group. In 2008, before the financial crisis, the **NEET rates for males** aged 25-29 in Greece were quite close to the EU-27 average—**11.3%** compared to 11.2%. However, the economic crisis had a devastating impact, pushing the rate up to an alarming **36.3%** by 2013. While there was a decline in the following years, reaching **22.8%** in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic caused another uptick to **26.0%** in 2020, stabilizing slightly at **25.3%** in 2021. It's worth noting that the male NEET rate

dropped to **20.9%** in 2022, which suggests some recovery, yet it remains elevated compared to the EU-27 average of 12.2% for the same year.

For females in Greece, the scenario is even more challenging. Even in 2008, before the financial crisis, the **female NEET rate** was already above the EU-27 average—**29.4%** compared to 23.3%. The economic crisis widened this gap dramatically, pushing the rate to a staggering **48.2%** by 2013. While there was some improvement, the rates remained high, standing at **32.2%** in 2019. During the pandemic years, the female NEET rate increased slightly to **33.0%** in 2021 before decreasing to **27.7%** in 2022. Despite this drop, it remains substantially higher than the EU-27 average of 19.3%.

Figure 3 presents a longitudinal comparison of NEET rates for males and females aged 25-29 in Greece, juxtaposed with the EU-27 averages from 2008 to 2022. It highlights the significant impact of Greece's economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic on gender-specific vulnerabilities, showing that both events have had a more pronounced effect on Greece's NEET rates compared to the EU-27 averages.

Figure 3. Longitudinal NEET rates in Greece and the EU-27: gender-specific analysis from 2008-2022



While the COVID-19 pandemic had a notable influence on all age groups, its effects were far from uniform (see Figure 4). The younger population, specifically those **aged 15-19**, witnessed an initial NEET rate increase from 7.0% in 2019 to **7.8%** in 2020, followed by a significant drop to **4.4%** in 2021. Given that a significant number of individuals in this age group are likely enrolled in secondary education, the sharp decline may largely reflect their return to educational settings or adaptation to remote learning options.

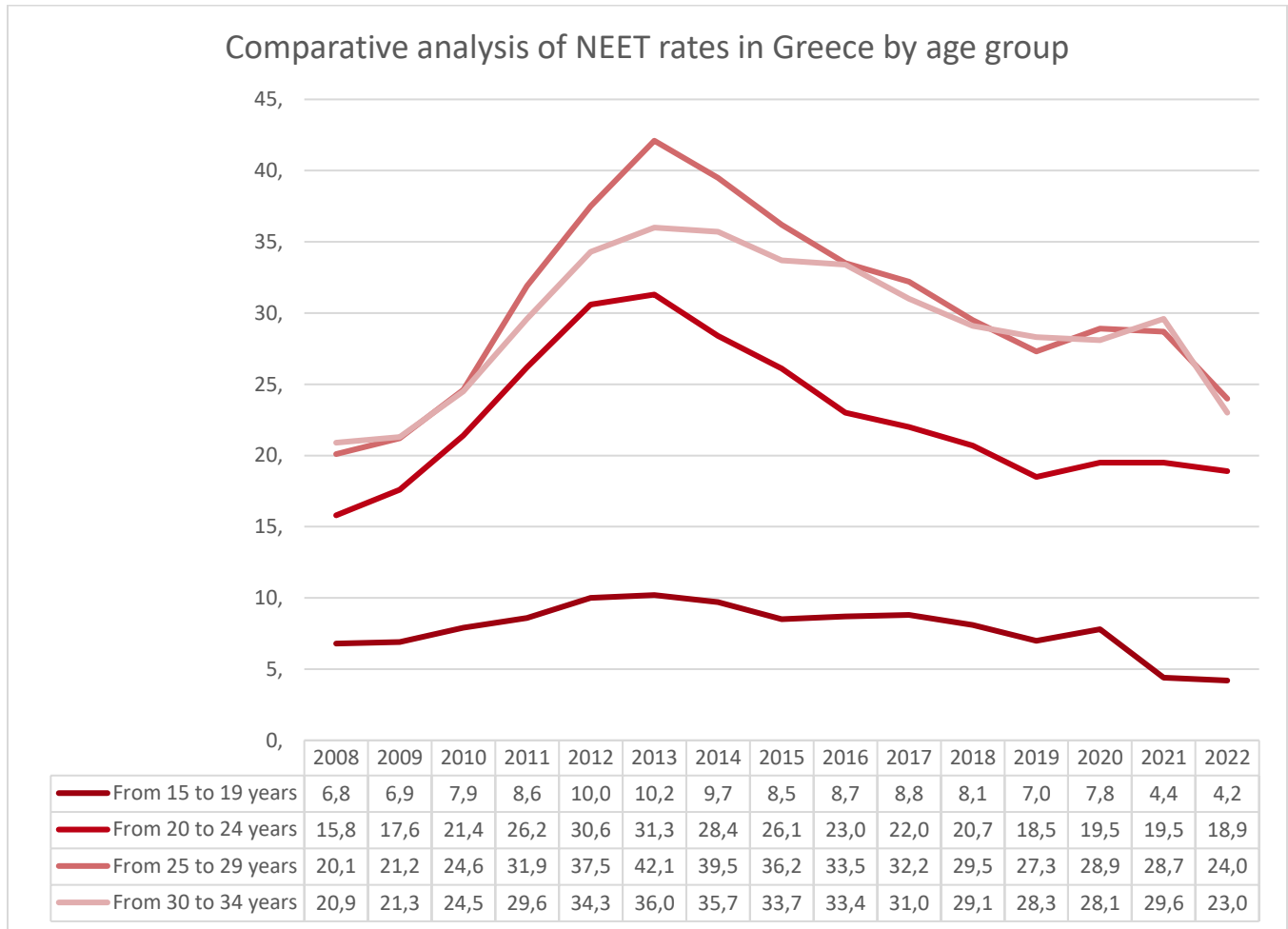
For those in the **20-24 age bracket**, the NEET rate moved marginally from 18.5% in 2019 to **19.5%** in both 2020 and 2021. This relative stability could be a sign of the group's resilience, perhaps facilitated by educational opportunities.

In contrast, the **30-34 age group** faced a challenging environment. Despite a slight increase from 28.3% in 2019 to 29.6% in 2021, the rate improved to 23.0% in 2022. While this is a substantial decrease, it's important to acknowledge that the rate remains exceedingly high, signifying that this age group continues to struggle in the wake of the pandemic.

Comparing these trends with the 25-29 age group, which saw a NEET rate of 28.9% in 2020 and 28.7% in 2021 before dropping to 24.0% in 2022, it becomes clear that the economic recovery is not being experienced uniformly across age groups. The 25-29 age group, although improving, still has a rate that's troublingly high, similar to the 30-34 age group. This suggests that despite some signs of recovery, particularly for those in their late 20s and early 30s, the impact of the pandemic continues to be felt most acutely among these older age cohorts.

In summary, while the younger groups appear to be rebounding more quickly, possibly due to their flexibility and options for education and remote work, those in their late 20s and early 30s continue to experience elevated NEET rates, indicating the lingering impacts of the pandemic on this segment of the population.

Figure 4. NEET rates in Greece by age group



2.1 Labour market

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted various sectors, but the impact was not uniformly negative across all industries (Kapitsinis & Sykas, 2020). **Tourism and hospitality** experienced the most dramatic decline, with employment falling by 20.4% between the second quarters of 2019 and 2020. This sector was followed by **water supply**, which saw a decline of 17.4%, and **construction**, where employment dropped by 9.5%.

Interestingly, sectors such as **electricity supply** and **activities of households** as employers actually saw increases in employment by 6.8% and 3.5% respectively, between the first and second quarters of 2020. **Professional, scientific, and technical activities** also witnessed a modest growth of 2.7%.

Young people, particularly those in the 25-29 age group, often find employment in sectors like tourism and hospitality, which were among the hardest hit. Consequently, the younger workforce faced significant challenges, particularly in these vulnerable industries.

Regions specializing in tourism and hospitality, which had previously been less vulnerable to economic downturns like the 2008 crisis, found themselves severely impacted. In contrast, metropolitan areas exhibited more resilience, possibly due to a broader economic base and greater adaptability to remote and digital forms of work. It is indicative that in Crete (where the local economy relies heavily on tourism) there has been a rapid increase in unemployment especially after the start of the second wave of the pandemic and consequently the new restrictive measures (Papadakis, 2022). Thus, in the Region of Crete, which was the region in the EU with the highest increase in unemployment, 2020 closed with an increase in unemployment of 5.6% (from 12.3% in December 2019 to 17.9% in December 2020). This is a percentage change of 45.5% in one year, whereas in October 2020 the percentage change was 60.8% in one year.

2.2 Reskilling and upskilling

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally reshaped the domain of adult education, reskilling, and upskilling in Greece, especially for the demographic of 25+ NEETs. Enforced lockdowns and the temporary closure of educational institutions paved the way for a rapid transition to digital learning platforms. Preliminary observations hint at a fluctuating participation rate in trainings and adult education during this period. On one hand, the accessibility of online courses, offering both synchronous and asynchronous learning methods, presented an opportunity for many. Conversely, others found it challenging due to a myriad of factors.

The abrupt move to online platforms posed significant barriers for many NEETs. Notably, a substantial portion of this group struggled with basic requirements such as reliable internet access, a conducive learning environment, and appropriate learning equipment at home. Geographical disparities further exacerbated the situation, especially for NEETs located in rural or infrastructure-limited regions of Greece.

Moreover, while a range of online courses became available, the associated costs acted as deterrents for a significant number, considering the financial constraints faced by NEETs. The digital divide also became prominently visible during this transition. Those with prior digital knowledge adjusted relatively smoothly, but a considerable section faced challenges due to limited digital literacy. However, this very challenge, over time, might have also become an unintentional catalyst, pushing many to accelerate their digital learning curve.

Despite the obstacles, there were undeniable benefits. The inherent flexibility of online learning platforms allowed many to adapt their learning schedules around other commitments. This period also saw an increase in access to international courses and resources, previously not as easily accessible to Greek NEETs.

2.3 Mental health and well-being

The pandemic's impact on the mental health of young Greeks cannot be understated. With abrupt changes to their work situations, many faced intensified feelings of insecurity. The suspensions from work during lockdowns not only disrupted their financial stability but also posed significant psychological challenges. Young people, already navigating the tumultuous phase of transitioning to full adulthood, found themselves grappling with heightened uncertainty. The enforced physical distancing and the limitations on social activities further compounded feelings of isolation. For many, this period of isolation wasn't just physical but emotional as well, sometimes leading to strained family dynamics and the breakdown of critical social relationships. With limited access to regular support systems and the added weight of economic and health concerns, the mental well-being of young Greeks during the pandemic was profoundly tested, highlighting the need for accessible and targeted mental health resources. For the NEET population specifically, precise data on the mental health implications remained elusive. However, the general trends within the broader young and unemployed cohorts offer insights that may be indicative for NEETs as well.

High anxiety levels permeated these groups (Tountas, 2021). Particularly, students emerged as a segment grappling with heightened anxiety, with 48.7% reporting such feelings. Young scientists and freelancers followed suit, with 37.2% indicating significant anxiety. Meanwhile, the unemployed segment highlighted a 32.9% prevalence. These statistics underscore the mental toll brought about by educational disruptions, a challenging job market, and uncertainties tied to the pandemic's future trajectory. Sleep disturbances, another facet of mental well-being, saw a spike. In the pandemic's aftermath, 22.3% of the young respondents identified with such issues over the prior two weeks, marking a rise from the 14.7% observed in 2019. Among these, young women (26.6%) reported higher disturbances compared to young men (18.2%). The age group of 17-24 stood out, facing a striking sleep disturbance rate of 42.2%.

Transitioning to a largely digital domain, the pandemic era had youths leaning more into online platforms for education, work, and socializing. While this digital transition was a necessity, it may have intensified feelings of isolation, loneliness, and digital fatigue among Greece's young population.

Interplay between physical and mental health also became evident. With public spaces such as cafes off-limits, healthier outdoor activities, like hiking, became the go-to. This shift not only provided a physical outlet but likely also bolstered positive mental health outcomes.

Certain sections, especially individuals with a monthly family income below €500, those in Central Greece, and inhabitants of areas with over 2,000 residents, appeared more susceptible to these mental health challenges. In sum, while specific data on NEETs was unavailable, the broader trends in Greece's youth and unemployed segments shed light on the pervasive mental health challenges during the pandemic, underscoring the need for comprehensive support and interventions.

3. Support measures

In the face of unprecedented challenges ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Greek government and educational institutions demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience. This section delves into the multi-pronged support measures initiated to mitigate the pandemic's impact on three crucial fronts: employment and financial support, reskilling and upskilling, and mental health support. From launching strategic financial support programs for businesses and their workforce to the rapid digital transformation of universities and the prioritization of mental health initiatives, Greece's comprehensive response reflects its commitment to safeguarding its citizens' well-being and future prospects in tumultuous times.

3.1 Employment and financial support

During the tumultuous period brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Greek government launched the "SYN-ERGASIA" programme as a strategic response to safeguard both businesses and their employees from the economic repercussions (Hellenic Republic, 2020). The initiative was particularly pertinent given the vast disruptions businesses faced, with many grappling with decisions related to layoffs and contractual suspensions.

Under the aegis of the "SYN-ERGASIA" programme, enterprises, regardless of whether they operated year-round or seasonally, could participate. In this critical juncture, the programme extended its support to employees on full-time employment contracts as of 30 May 2020. Notably, for those in sectors deeply impacted by the pandemic, such as tourism, hotels, and tourist buses, seasonal workers with full-time contracts were also embraced by the initiative, especially if they had rights to mandatory re-employment based on established laws and collective agreements.

One of the pivotal reliefs offered by the "SYN-ERGASIA" programme was its provision for employees whose contracts had been put on hold due to the pandemic's economic strain (TaxHeaven, 2020). Upon

joining the programme, these suspensions were considered irrevocably withdrawn. This meant a quick reintegration into the workforce for many who had faced uncertain professional futures. However, the programme was clear in its exclusions: part-time dependent workers and certain 2019 employees from the tourism and catering sectors were not covered. The latter, though, were compensated with a special allowance.

Furthermore, as part of the government's comprehensive response, the "SYN-ERGASIA" programme ensured the State Budget would bear the employer's insurance contributions for some employees, specifically those engaged part-time up until 30.9.2020, spanning from June to September 2020. However, amidst its many provisions, the "SYN-ERGASIA" programme did not cater to NEETs, leaving a segment of the population without specific support during the pandemic.

3.2 Reskilling and upskilling support

As the world grappled with the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the field of adult education experienced a tectonic shift. The era marked by "social distancing" and a sudden reliance on "emergency remote teaching" laid bare both the vulnerabilities and the adaptabilities inherent in our educational systems. With physical classrooms rendered inaccessible and face-to-face interaction curtailed, the digital realm became the de facto medium for continuing educational endeavours. The abrupt changes posed pressing questions about accessibility, quality, and equity in the delivery of education.

Remarkably, Greek universities emerged as a paragon of adaptability and efficiency during this period. With an astonishingly rapid transition, within mere weeks of the lockdown, they had already migrated approximately 96.5% of their courses to an online format (Lintzeris & Valassi, 2022). This feat is exemplified by the University of Patras, which, during the early phase of this shift, logged nearly 3.4 million minutes of connectivity, conducting 18,888 lessons on their digital platform (University of Patras, 2020). What's even more commendable is the active participation of students, with around 60% of them seamlessly adapting to this new mode of learning. Survey data from the University of Patras underscores this success - a significant 82.6% of students affirmed that the university responded in a timely manner, while 77.05% lauded the efficacy of the online and asynchronous education system. Despite inevitable hiccups, like technical issues and communication barriers, the overarching sentiment was one of approval for the solutions provided. Multiple studies echo this positive reception across various Greek institutions. Thus, the story of Greek universities during the pandemic is one that celebrates not just agility, but also the unwavering commitment to upholding educational standards of the highest caliber.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented disruptions to the established norms of vocational education and training (Lintzeris & Valassi, 2022). Historically, such programs thrived on the

promise of facilitating smoother transitions into the workforce, largely through experiential learning components like internships and apprenticeships. These hands-on experiences were essential not just for young learners, but also for adults seeking skill upgrades. However, the pandemic-induced constraints led many enterprises to either pause or entirely abandon their involvement in such programs. This led to a significant delay in the bridge between education and employment for many trainees. Moreover, the sudden shift to remote learning highlighted an existing flaw in our education system: the disproportionate emphasis on theoretical learning at the expense of practical application. The limitations of remote education became acutely apparent in vocational training, where the nuances of tactile experiences, emotional engagement, and social interactions play a pivotal role. Addressing this, there was an urgent need for the vocational education system to innovate, ensuring that theoretical training was complemented with immersive, hands-on experiences, even in a virtual environment. This period underscored the indispensable value of practice in skill acquisition and reinforced the call for a balanced educational approach that melds theory with practice.

3.3 Mental health support

One of the profound impacts of the pandemic and the associated containment measures, such as social distancing and isolation, was on the mental health of citizens. Recognizing that these preventive steps, though critical in curbing the spread of the virus, might intensify feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and distress among people, governments and health organizations took concerted actions to address these concerns. The Greek Ministry of Health, being at the forefront of this issue, swiftly undertook initiatives to ensure the psychological well-being of its citizens during these unprecedented times. As part of its response, the Ministry unveiled the '*Guidelines for the Psychological Support of Citizens due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19)*' (Mavromara, Georgoulis, & Gonidakis, 2020).

The guidelines aimed to provide holistic psychological support tailored to the unique challenges presented by the pandemic. They offered practical advice and strategies to cope with the emotional and psychological stressors linked to COVID-19. Additionally, they addressed the specific needs of various demographic groups, including frontline workers, children, elderly citizens, and those already dealing with mental health conditions. Specific provisions for NEETs were not explicitly addressed. By creating a structure for professional mental health interventions, these guidelines also sought to destigmatize the process of seeking help during such trying times.

In response to the novel challenges and emotional toll brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the National & Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA) launched a dedicated psychosocial support hotline (Hellenic Republic, Ministry of Health, 2020). The entire framework of the helpline operates under the scientific oversight of the 1st Psychiatric Clinic of the Medical School of the NKUA. Numerous organizations have also joined the effort. The Federation of

Psychosocial Rehabilitation & Mental Health Organizations *ARGO*, comprising over 160 experts from 40 entities, collaborated closely on this initiative. Additional support came from the National Centre for Social Solidarity, the non-profit organization *The Smile of the Child*, and a commendable assembly of volunteer psychologists who swiftly answered the call to service by the Ministry of Health. The hotline acted as a beacon for individuals experiencing intensified emotions, offering them a platform for dialogue, guidance, and hope. It particularly catered to those grappling with severe mental health challenges, such as acute anxiety, overwhelming fear, and panic.

4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront significant challenges for Greece's young adult population, especially the 25-29 age demographic. A salient issue emerged early in our examination: a conspicuous gap in detailed and accurate data for the 25+ NEET group. The data that was available, primarily sourced from Eurostat, revealed troubling insights, yet lacked the specificity required for nuanced interventions.

The disruption wrought by the pandemic was particularly evident in sectors like tourism and hospitality, which typically employ a significant portion of this age cohort. Employment in these sectors saw a precipitous decline, placing a disproportionate burden on young adults. Notably, Greece's NEET rates for this age bracket remained stubbornly higher than the EU-27 average. The gender disparity was striking, with female NEET rates in Greece outpacing both their male peers and the broader EU-27 average, revealing an entrenched, pre-existing vulnerability exacerbated by the pandemic.

Geographical variances also emerged as a poignant theme. While metropolitan regions showcased a degree of resilience, likely due to a diverse economic foundation and increased adaptability to remote work, tourism-reliant areas such as Crete bore the brunt of the pandemic's economic aftermath.

In response to the compounding challenges, Greece instituted measures aimed at supporting the mental well-being of its citizenry. Initiatives such as the psychosocial support hotline stand testament to Greece's commitment to ameliorating the pandemic's psychological toll. However, a more targeted approach catering specifically to the unique needs of NEETs remains a pressing requirement.

In sum, the pandemic underscored the urgent necessity for a more detailed understanding and targeted interventions for the 25+ NEET demographic in Greece.

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