

Evaluation practices assessing the impacts of initiatives targeting 25+ NEETs

COUNTRY REPORT – BULGARIA

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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](#)).

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Implemented by:



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1. Introduction

The evaluation of initiatives and programmes focused on NEETs, and 25+ NEETs in particular, between 2007-2020 has generally occurred in a context similar to the context of the creation of these initiatives and programmes. Similarly to other EU member states, Bulgaria was hit hard by the 2008 financial crisis, which caused an increase in youth unemployment. The youth group 25-29 suffered significantly from the effects of the crisis, with unemployment among this group reaching a record level (14.8%) compared to the levels from the decade before (Dimitrov, 2012). Challenges with youth unemployment continued for years after the 2008 financial crisis and they necessitated the implementation of sets of measures imposed by the EU to address youth unemployment. Despite such efforts to support the young, youth in Bulgaria were among those people whose employment prospects were the most negatively affected in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the key challenges for youth caused by the pandemic has been the increase of their (long-term) unemployment (Eurofund, 2021). According to a report by the OECD on activating inactive and unemployed persons in Bulgaria in the aftermath of the pandemic, NEETs aged 15-29 have been facing some of the most serious obstacles to employment and need to be the focus of interventions (OECD, 2022).

Between 2007-2020, there have been a number of initiatives and programmes which could be relevant to 25+ NEETs. Evaluations of such initiatives and programmes are present even though as a whole there is no consistency in the extent to which they can count as real evaluations making solid qualitative conclusions based on various types of data. There is one key trend in such evaluations – the extent to which evaluations have a certain depth depending on the donor. One of the major observations of this report is that there is a connection between the quality (and comprehensiveness) of an evaluation effort and the source of funding. This analysis suggests that procedures/programmes/initiatives funded directly through the state budget are marked by evaluations which provide more limited conclusions regarding the qualities and effectiveness of the respective programmes/initiatives. In contrast, interventions funded by the European Social Fund along the lines of the Operational Programme Human Resources Development (OP HRD) are marked by greater depth in the respective programme/initiative assessments. We also encountered some evaluations of projects/initiatives funded under the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Commission, but these evaluations were inconsistent, relatively rare and at times of questionable objectivity (given that some of them were evaluated by the implementing consortium). In the case of these evaluations, their rarity could be perceived as a critical risk for the respective project's sustainability, transparency, and funding mobilisation.

In terms of methods of obtaining information about evaluations and challenges we encountered, the main method of obtaining information was through the websites of the implementing organisations and

institutions, or the websites of the evaluated initiatives/programmes (if such were available). A main challenge we encountered was the uncertainty as to whether online reports and publications offered an exhaustive list of state-implemented evaluations. For this reason, we contacted the national institutions implementing the majority of state programmes and initiatives and requested that they provide us with links to evaluation reports of interventions they are implementing.

2. General information of evaluation practices

Out of the 140 programmes/initiatives in Bulgaria which could be relevant to 25+ NEETs, we discovered that 48 programmes/initiatives are evaluated in one way or another. As a whole, there are very few evaluations of programmes/initiatives directly targeting 25+ NEETs in Bulgaria, possibly tied to the reality that between 2007-2020 there were few such initiatives clearly designed for this specific target group. It is important to note that when we speak of 'evaluation', in a great number of the cases, we can rarely speak of full-blown evaluations providing data and results on a variety of indicators, with more comprehensive methodological approaches and detailed conclusive results. Rather, in many of the cases in which we identified some efforts at evaluation, these efforts could be viewed as a more superficial monitoring of progress.

Based on our analysis of the 48 programme/initiative evaluations, we identified two strands in these evaluations. The first strand concerns initiatives/projects funded through the Erasmus+ Programme and typically implemented by non-governmental stakeholders or schools/universities. Out of the initially identified 46 Erasmus+ projects which could potentially target 25+ NEETs, five of the projects had some sort of an evaluation. These initiatives were funded by the EU Commission and were worth between 223,000 – 490,000 euros. Some of their goals include the funding of strategic partnerships for vocational education and training for higher education on topics such as digital competences, entrepreneurial learning, career guidance and access to disadvantaged youth. Generally speaking, the evaluation of these initiatives is contained within an evaluation report where the evaluation methodology is specified. Most of these evaluations are internal to the respective projects. There is one project (Media Platform - Vocational guidance) in which evaluation was external by independent experts. In this evaluation a quality control approach was undertaken which assessed internal evaluations, the procedures followed by the partners for effective communication, and the documentation of the project deliverables. These types of reports are made by independent experts aiming to get an unbiased assessment by gathering the project impacts, like the *Impact Assessment Policy Report* presented in the Open Mind Project where target groups and stakeholders are assessed ex-ante and ex-post to measure variations. Accessing the evaluation documents is not always easy considering different nominations for different approaches. In

some cases when initiatives occur in many different locations, uploading numerous documents could lead to misunderstandings between deliverables and actual evaluations. But as seen, the rarity of this type of report only shows how infrequent this practice could be.

The second strand of programme/initiative evaluations concerns programmes and initiatives implemented by national state institutions, mainly the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) and related agencies. These programmes/initiatives are also fundamentally funded by operational funds of the EU, but the allocation of the funds and the actual implementation of the initiatives is operationalised by state institutions. Out of the total 91 such programmes and initiatives we identified, 41 are marked by some sort of an evaluation. Some of these interventions are evaluated a number of times in different years, but it cannot be said what the selection principle of the timing of such evaluations is. The majority of them are evaluated externally by consulting agencies and non-governmental survey organisations. Most of these programmes and initiatives are not evaluated individually, but within the larger umbrella evaluation of active labour market policies in Bulgaria. Indeed, any evaluation on the majority of these programmes/initiatives is included within a large-scale study entitled '*Conducting Evaluations of the Individual-level Effects of Active Labour Market Policies Financed Under the State Budget (Net Evaluation)*' and published by the MLSP. While large-scale, this study offers mostly a superficial overview of the results associated with each of the identified programmes/initiatives.

Thus, apart from their presence in the evaluations of active labour market policies, we can barely speak of evaluations which target specific programmes and initiatives. Even when it comes to the Erasmus+ projects we identified that had some evaluation, such cases are not the majority of the projects we came across. We cannot conclude what is the principle on which these projects/programmes were evaluated or not.

When it comes to the availability of evaluation of reports/outputs/results, since we did not find many evaluations, we can claim that such are rarely available and when they are, they are of a more limited nature. Most of the evaluations we discovered were publicly available on the websites of the respective procedures/programmes/initiatives (especially in the case of Erasmus+ projects) or the websites of implementing institutions (e.g., the MLSP). We contacted the MLSP and the Employment Agency and requested that they provide us with sources to any evaluation we may have missed. They responded, but they did not provide us with detailed documents of specific evaluations. Rather, they directed our attention to links on their websites leading to the assessments of the effects of active labour market policies. As mentioned above, these reports did not contain an evaluation in the real sense of the word. Rather, they cited outreach numbers of specific initiatives/programmes, but offered little beyond this information.

3. Characteristics of evaluation practices

The number of available evaluations is limited; thus, it is not possible to come up with a comprehensive typology of evaluations. Rather, in this section of the report, every evaluation is discussed separately. The analysis focuses on assessing the quality of the evaluations, in particular their methodological soundness, analytical depth, and the reliability of the recommendations they propose. Possible links between the funding sources of programmes/initiatives and the quality of their respective evaluations are also investigated.

3.1 Types of evaluations

3.1.1 National programmes and initiatives (included in the annual National Employment Action Plan)

Nearly all of the national programmes and initiatives of relevance to NEETs/25+ NEETs in Bulgaria that have evaluations have been assessed solely in the context of large-scale evaluations looking into the cumulative effects of active labour market policies. There are virtually no evaluations that are dedicated to single programmes/initiatives. Three large-scale evaluation reports are available: one covering the period 2000-2011, and two for the years 2015 and 2017, respectively (Ecorys, 2015; I-Research Association, 2017; I-Research Association, 2019). They focus on the major national programmes and initiatives – these are typically recurring national programmes and big projects targeting unemployed persons and most of them are in principle relevant to NEETs/unemployed youth up to 29 (for example, Training and Employment Programme for Long-term Unemployed, Regional Employment Programmes, ‘Assistants to Persons with Disabilities’ National Programme, ‘Career Start’ Programme, National Programme for Training and Employment of People with Disabilities). Those are ex post external evaluations.

Another available evaluation report (Angelova et al, 2019) offers an ex-post external evaluation of four procedures financed under the OP HRD¹ which aim to further the goals of the European Youth Guarantee (EYG) ('Youth Employment', 'Active', 'Education and Employment for Young People', and 'Ready for Work'). Three of those procedures are relevant to unemployed youth and are included in the annual National Employment Action Plan: 'Youth Employment', 'Education and Employment for Young People',

¹ A general ex ante country-level evaluation of the OP HRD is also available (Ecorys and Proxima Consulting, 2014). However, this evaluation is not discussed in the present report as it is too large-scale an assessment and, to a considerable degree, goes beyond the bounds of the topic of NEETs (as it simultaneously looks into all 6 priority axes of the OP HRD, and not only priority axis 1, 'Improving the access to employment and the quality of jobs', which is of direct relevance to NEETs).

and 'Ready for Work'. The report assesses the effectiveness, efficiency, impact and overall relevance to the EYG of these four measures for the time period 2016-2017.

In addition to these four evaluation reports, some monitoring information about individual national programmes and initiatives is made available in the annual National Employment Action Plan of the Employment Agency. However, the information provided is very basic – indicating only the number of persons supported by the programme/initiative who have entered employment as a result of the intervention. Importantly, this type of monitoring does not constitute evaluation in the sense of sound qualitative conclusions made on the basis of data obtained by means of a variety of methods. What is more, these are generic data and there is no disaggregation by age group or other social characteristics/subgroups of participants. Only in relation to those programmes and initiatives which target solely unemployed youth are there data about the number of young persons who have become employed after the intervention. However, the number of programmes and initiatives which exclusively target NEET youth is quite small, thus, such data are limited (e.g., available in relation to 'Career Start' Programme).

3.1.2 Initiatives funded under the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Commission

Similarly to national programmes and initiatives, there is a deficiency of evaluations also when it comes to Erasmus+ projects. Considering their limited number, little can be said about how standard these evaluations are. The following assessments of five Erasmus+ projects are available:

- *Needs Assessment Report* (QYCGuidance project): this ex-ante approach aims to explore a current situation that could help provide a starting point of analysis and a basis for evaluation of the project conditions (QYCGuidance project, n.d.).
- *Impact Assessment Policy Report* (Open Mind Project): this approach combines ex ante and ex post assessment tools and looks into project activities ranging from pilots launched in every partner country to full-scale activities (Open Mind Project, n.d.).
- *External Evaluation Report* (Media Platform - Vocational Guidance Project): considered an independent tool by the project partners, this evaluation gives the floor to external experts to carry out a broad assessment following a type of quality control (Media Platform - Vocational Guidance Project, 2020). It includes established indicators, methodology, and procedures for each activity and the results expected (ibid).
- *Internal Evaluation Report* (FIERST Project): this evaluation was used in the context of the project to monitor and analyse key results achieved over the course of the initiative's implementation (FIERST Project, 2021).

- *Usability Report* (EQAVET Project): this ex-post evaluation was aimed at determining how useful the tools created would be in a pilot experiment (EQAVET Project, 2017).

3.2 Methodology of evaluation practices

3.2.1 National programmes and initiatives (included in the annual National Employment Action Plan)

In order to assess the quality of the available evaluations, it is crucial to first and foremost critically examine their methodological components. The research underpinning the three evaluation reports which assess the cumulative effects of active labour market policies relies on mixed methods, namely: qualitative interviews among participants (as well as unemployed persons who have not taken part in the programmes/initiatives); qualitative surveys among employers of persons who have participated in the programmes and initiatives (as well as of persons who have not); and statistical analysis. In regard to the number of respondents in the research, these evaluation reports give information both about the total number of respondents – from all programmes and initiatives - as well as the number of respondents from each programme/initiative. A total number of 6 247 respondents participated in the research covering the time period 2000-2011, 4 093 - in the research focusing on the year 2015, and 4 506 - in the research focusing on 2017 (Ecorys, 2015; I-Research Association, 2017, p. 47; I-Research Association, 2019). Those numbers exclude the participants in the control groups.

There is also some information about the sample size in regard to each programme/initiative, i.e., the share of the total number of respondents in relation to the total number of persons in the evaluated group (though it is provided in absolute numbers rather than percentage points). It is highlighted that when it comes to smaller programmes and initiatives (with less than 300 participants) attempts had been made to involve all participants in the research. There were 15 such smaller programmes and initiatives of relevance to NEETs/25+ NEETs in 2017, for example, 'Melpomena' National Programme, 'New Perspective' Project, 'Encouraging Entrepreneurship' Programme, and 'Encouraging Employers to Hire Long-term Unemployed Young Persons up to 29 Years of Age on Part-time Positions' Programme (I-Research Association, 2019, pp. 44-47). In relation to larger programmes and initiatives, a representative sample of participants had been selected. In 2017, there were a total of 14 larger programmes and initiatives relevant to NEETs/25+ NEETs (I-Research Association, 2019, pp. 44-47). The approximate² sample size in regard to some of the key programmes and initiatives relevant to NEETs included in the report covering the year 2017 is: 'Career Start' Programme - 27%; 'Training and Employment Programme for Long-term Unemployed' - 10%; 'Encouraging Employers to Hire Unemployed Persons up to 29 Years of Age' - 19%, Regional Employment Programmes - 11%; 'Assistants to People with Disabilities' National

² Estimated for the purposes of the present study.

Programme - 8%; 'Working Chance' Project - 8% (ibid). However, there is no information about the share of young persons who took part in the research. In the report covering 2015, the sample size was: 'Career Start' Programme - 30%; 'Training and Employment Programme for Long-term Unemployed' - 17%; 'Encouraging Employers to Hire Unemployed Persons up to 29 Years of Age' - 29%, Regional Employment Programmes - 13%; 'Assistants to People with Disabilities' National Programme - 7%, 'Working Chance' Project - 10% (I-Research Association, 2017, pp. 45-47).

The evaluation report which focuses on four procedures financed under the OP HRD relies on the following methods: analysis of documents; in-depth qualitative interviews and/or focus groups with participants, employers and stakeholders; quantitative survey among former, current and potential participants as well as among employers; and statistical analysis (inter alia, descriptive, correlational, cluster, regression, outlier, and counterfactual) (Angelova et al, 2019, p. 7). In total, 36 respondents took part in the qualitative research, and 1056³ – in the quantitative. When it comes to the quality of this particular evaluation, the evaluation is based on sound and varied methodology and the analysis it offers is comprehensive and reliable. In terms of comprehensiveness and thoroughness, this evaluation definitively surpasses the three evaluation reports inquiring into the cumulative effects of national programmes and initiatives (described above). Thus, there appears to be a link between the quality of an evaluation and the source of funding of the programme/initiative in question. The OP HRD procedures, which are financed by the European Social Fund, have been subject to much more in-depth assessments than have national programmes and initiatives, which are solely or primarily funded under the state budget.

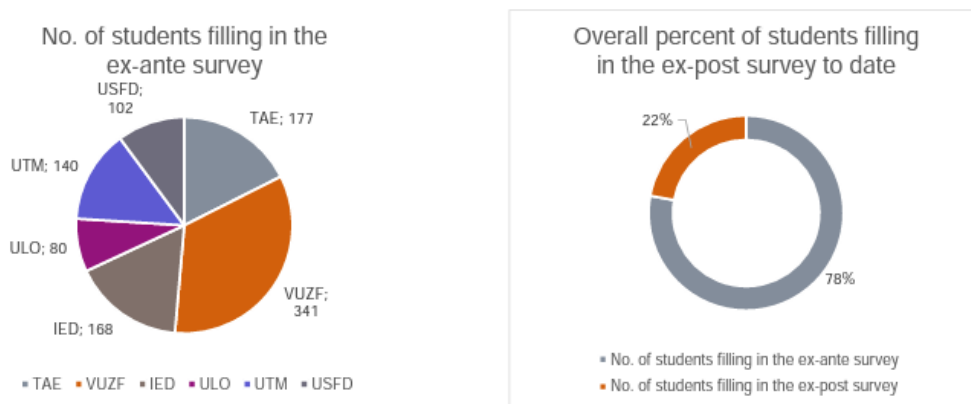
3.2.2 Initiatives funded under the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Commission

In the context of the evaluations of Erasmus+ projects, mixed methods were generally used, such as qualitative surveys, qualitative interviews, testimonials and other formats allowing for qualitative feedback, such as workshops. In fact, four out of five evaluations relied on a plurality of research methods, while employing surveys as a primary method. In any case, the variety of methods used adds to the reliability of the analysis and conclusions. A clear advantage of the more participatory methods, such as testimonials, is that they provide participants with the opportunity to give individual feedback on how personal and professional experiences changed as a result of an initiative, to raise questions and to offer suggestions for improvement. The evaluations provide no insights as to how the projects might have contributed to improving the situation of NEETs/25+ NEETs in particular.

³ This number does not include the control group.

In the impact assessment of the Open Mind Project, data from 38 trainers, 5 partners, and 120 students were collected during the pilot activities using ex-ante and ex-post surveys; data were also gathered from 'learners' taking part in the main activities (Open Mind Project, n.d.). Testimonials and qualitative feedback were also used in order to support the data collected (ibid). The latest results for Bulgaria (TAE and VUZF), Greece (IED), Poland (ULO), Romania (UTM) and the UK (USFD) are shown in Figure 1 (below). In addition, some partners, such as USFD in the UK, organised workshops which allowed for qualitative discussions and data gathering (ibid). In the UK, a total of 33 persons (30 students and 3 mentors) took part in the workshops and discussed concepts and ideas (ibid).

Figure 1: Number of research respondents (per partner organisation)



*The number of students to finish the course and to fill in the ex-post survey is subject to change, as participants can adjust their pace and the time when they finish all 8 modules.

Source: Impact Assessment Policy Report, Open Mind Project

The research underpinning the evaluation of the FIERST Project employed ex-post feedback surveys, self-reported participant surveys, observations as well as several ex-ante surveys (FIERST Project, 2021). It involved 250 teachers across 26 schools in Bulgaria, 82 teachers across 13 schools in Romania, and 100 teachers across six schools in Estonia (ibid). Although it is mentioned that students also took part in surveys, it was not specified how many of them were approached. As this evaluation applied Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Model, which focuses mainly on quantitative data gathering, nearly no open-ended questions were included that could help get a better understanding of the statistics.

In the *Usability Report* assessing the EQAVET Project, quantitative data were gathered and qualitatively assessed (EQAVET Project, 2017). The research relied on data collected during the pilot activities implemented in every partner country. The number of participants was 109 in Bulgaria, 20 - in Spain, 26 - in Turkey, and 18 - in Austria (ibid). The analysis in this report was developed on the basis of the statistics provided by each partner about individual participants, such as time spent in different learning modules and rate of success.

The ex-ante needs assessment carried out in the context of the QYCGuidance Project combined several methods. An identical survey questionnaire consisting of open-ended and closed-ended questions was employed in each of the 4 partner countries (QYCGuidance Project, n.d.). However, the number of respondents per partner country was not specified. This quantitative method was complemented by 10 interviews conducted in each partner country and expert observation (ibid). The data collected were then processed by means of content analysis (ibid). Relying on triangulation, this report aims to provide a comparative analysis which could prove useful during the different implementation phases or after the end of the project. However, there is no information concerning any further evaluations of this initiative.

In regard to the external ex-post evaluation of the Media Platform - Vocational Training Project, a quality control methodology was followed, meaning that the project deliverables were checked by the external expert to carefully monitor the operational, management and working procedures (Media Platform - Vocational Training Project, 2020). In contrast to the methodologies used in the other available evaluations, the methodological component of this particular evaluation cannot be categorised as quantitative or qualitative.

3.3 Results

3.3.1 National programmes and initiatives (included in the annual National Employment Action Plan)

The three evaluation reports assessing the cumulative effects of active labour market policies offer very few insights as to the effectiveness of individual programmes and initiatives. They only indicate the gross effects of the programmes and initiatives – the proportion of persons supported by each programme/initiative who have entered employment as a result of the intervention. In general, the national programmes and initiatives included in these three evaluation reports have been evaluated as successful. The report for 2017 states that more than half of the participants in the examined programmes and initiatives have found long-term employment (I-Research Association, 2019, p. 92). Notably, the evaluators point out that young people are one of the groups of respondents that have given the highest evaluations of the usefulness of these measures (ibid, p. 92). The recommendations provided in the report do take into account the particular challenges faced by unemployed youth and emphasise that measures should focus on unemployed youth up to 29 for whom participation in these programmes and measures would significantly facilitate future employment (ibid, p. 93). Despite this welcome focus on unemployed youth, the recommendations are quite brief and generic and barely make any substantial propositions as to how to enhance the design and implementation of interventions so as to improve their effectiveness. What is more, the recommendations put forward in the reports for 2017 and 2015 are identical, which raises questions about the quality and depth of the analysis and the

adequacy of the proposed paths of action (I-Research Association, 2019, pp. 88-91; I-Research Association, 2017, pp. 91-94).

By contrast, the third evaluation report assessing the cumulative effects of labour market policies, covering the time period 2000-2011, aims to look into the impact of active labour market policies not only on unemployed people in general but also on specific vulnerable groups, namely unemployed youth up to 29, unemployed persons over 50, long-term unemployed, unemployed persons with no qualifications, and people with disabilities (Ecorys, 2015, p. 137). Despite having set this research goal, the report provides only brief comments as to the effects of active labour market policies on unemployed young persons (ibid, p. 138). The authors assess the impact of national measures on young people who find themselves outside the labour market as generally positive. However, it is contended that those measures have made only a limited contribution to addressing the problem of the large number of unemployed youth with no qualifications and profession (ibid). This evaluation report also provides several insightful recommendations (pp. 139-141). In particular, it points out the importance of carefully defining and delineating the target groups of active labour market policies (ibid). In addition, it emphasises that, when it comes to unemployed youth, defining the target group as 'all persons up to 29 years of age' would be too generic to ensure that the participants in programmes and measures would be persons who are truly in need of those interventions (ibid, p. 140). Subgroups ought to be defined, such as unemployed young persons at risk of poverty, with no education and/or qualifications (ibid).

The evaluation report focusing on four procedures financed under the OP HRD concludes that these four measures have been successful (Angelova et al, 2019, p. 78). In terms of efficiency, they have allegedly achieved significant results with a relatively small amount of funding (ibid, p. 8). When it comes to net impact, the evaluators conclude that these procedures have indeed increased young people's employment prospects (ibid, p. 9). No single procedure is deemed superior or more effective than the others (ibid, p. 78). On the contrary, the four measures are regarded as complementary - taken together, they are believed to have offered the target group a full spectrum of support instruments (ibid). On the downside, the evaluators recognise that these four procedures have had a relatively limited impact when it comes to inducing structural changes (ibid, p. 149). However, it is pointed out that this deficiency is due to the small amount of funding and the specific objectives of the measures (ibid). This evaluation identifies several common implementation barriers, including: a low salary level (much below the national average) for those initiatives which have focused on provision of subsidised employment; educational structural deficiencies in the country as a whole; and challenges to the formulation and upgrade of labour market policies more generally (ibid, p. 11). Some of these problems – such as the low salary level – may in effect deepen inter-regional and inter-sectoral labour imbalances (ibid). The main issues related to programmes and initiatives which were funded under the four OP HRD procedures occurred during the initial stages of implementation and were related to: legal obscurity in regard to the

status of the participants and the different forms of support; the limited number of participants and unrealistic expectations on their part; and implementation delays (p. 71).

There appears to be a need to provide more in-depth analysis of the implementation challenges to these specific measures as well as more specific recommendations as to how to address them. The key recommendations proposed in the evaluation with a view to addressing the most common implementation barriers include:

- The design of such measures should include methods for determining a salary level (for the participants) that is competitive and congruent with labour market realities.
- Active labour market policies should continue to focus on programmes and initiatives which offer workplace training and opportunities for continued employment.
- The functionality of the Employment Agency's information system should be improved so as to provide more detailed information about the target groups and sub-groups and their subsequent realisation on the labour market and thus to enhance the design and implementation of measures.
- Regular analysis of the situation, needs and behavioural patterns of the target groups and sub-groups should be carried out as well as mid-term evaluations of the effects of the implemented approaches on specific sub-groups (ibid, pp. 150-152).

3.3.2 Initiatives funded under the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Commission

In four out of the five available evaluations, it is emphasised that a generally positive assessment had been made by the participants, external advisor and partners. Only the *Needs Assessment Report* does not offer any data regarding the participants' opinion of the outcome of the project. For example, in the context of the external evaluation of the Media Platform - Vocational Guidance Project, all the criteria assessed - conformity of activities, products and results delivered, added value and impact of the project, successful partnerships, and use of the budget - received a 'high quality' mark (Media Platform - Vocational Guidance Project, 2020). Overall, the assessment by the external expert was positive, highlighting that the intended project outcomes had been fully achieved (ibid). However, this positive assessment appears to be somewhat uncritical and insufficiently well-founded.

4. Conclusions

The results of the mapping and analysis of existing evaluations of programmes and initiatives relevant to 25+ NEETs in Bulgaria show that evaluations which make qualitative conclusions based on various

types of data are available in relation to both national and international interventions. Several programmes and initiatives have been evaluated more than once – these are some of the key recurring national interventions which have been implemented in the course of many years. There are a number of evaluations relying on a comprehensive and varied methodology and offering conclusions of considerable reliability.

However, several significant gaps concerning the existing evaluations have come to our attention. First, as the availability of such evaluations is very limited, they cannot be said to sufficiently cover the whole range of programmes and initiatives in the country. Second, there are virtually no national programmes and initiatives that have separate evaluations of their own which makes it difficult to determine the effects of individual programmes and measures on the situation of NEETs/25+ NEETs. What is more, the evaluation reports which focus on the cumulative effects of active labour market policies do not consider all national programmes and measures but only a selected number of interventions. Disconcertingly, there are a large number of national and international programmes and initiatives of relevance to NEETs in Bulgaria that have been subject to no form of evaluation whatsoever. The lack of any evaluation may detrimentally affect an intervention’s sustainability, transparency and funding mobilisation. Third, there are very few evaluations which offer a thorough analysis of implementation barriers and put forward useful recommendations.

It is not possible to say if the existing evaluations have had any impact on NEETs-related policies in the country. During the desk research carried out in preparation of the present study, no statements were identified (either in the evaluation reports or in programme/project documents) about ways in which policy-making may build on evidence resulting from previous evaluations.

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