







Foreword

THE CURRENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS TRIGGERED by the unexpected and violent Covid-19 is severely impacting the social future of an entire generation, exposing an alarming number of young people in Europe to poverty. These serious repercussions on the school-to-work transition affect particularly young people living in social and family contexts characterised by poverty and social exclusion.

The joint research conducted by Caritas Europa, Caritas Italiana and Don Bosco International highlights several critical factors among an adequate job placement and the possibility for young people to improve their formation and social conditions.

Showing the direct link between unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, this study underlines the actual risk of a significant increase in youth unemployment, NEETs and early school-leaving.

At the same time, the results indicate the potential of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in fostering vulnerable young people's social and professional integration and acting as a powerful agent of socialisation, through holistic education programmes and equal access to high-quality VET training.

The report values the key role of civil society organisations in reaching young people, especially from socio-economic vulnerable backgrounds, understanding their difficulties, and translating their needs into recommendations able to shape national and European policies.







Acknowledgements

Caritas Europa¹ is a European confederation of Catholic relief, development, and social service organisations operating in Europe, founded in 1971 as Eurocaritas. The organisation was renamed Caritas Europa in 1992 and is one of the seven regions of Caritas Internationalis working with people of all faiths to end poverty and to promote the dignity of all people. It consists of 49 national member organisations operating in 46 European countries.

Don Bosco International (DBI)² is the body that represents the Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB) to the European Institutions in Brussels. In liaison with the SDB General Council, DBI offers networking, information, advocacy, and training services to SDB provinces in Europe and around the world regarding the policies and opportunities offered by the European Union in the fields of education, social inclusion of children and youth, their school-to-work transition, and their integral human development.

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¹ https://www.caritas.eu/who-we-are/

² http://donboscointernational.eu/







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Index of acronyms

VET centres: Vocational Education and Training centres
DAD: Distance Learning
I-VET: Initial Vocational Education and Training
VET: Vocational Education and Training
T-VET: Technical and Vocational Education and Training
KA: Key Action
NEET: Not in Education, Employment or Training
EU: European Union







Executive summary

This study is the result of research, led by Caritas Italiana, Caritas Europa and Don Bosco International in examining the situation for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) to transition from schooling into the labour market and to examine the significance of apprenticeships and Vocational Education Trainings (VETs) in supporting this transition and contributing to reducing school dropouts. The findings are based on an analysis of over 375 surveys completed by young people, aged between 14 and 22, who have themselves or their families been relying on Caritas' social services in five different countries (Albania, Finland, Greece, Italy and Portugal), as well as on surveys conducted with those working in the VETs run by Don Bosco. It also contributes to understanding correlations between the COVID pandemic and the economic difficulties of these young people impacting on their transition into employment. On the basis of these findings, the following recommendations emerged:

- 1. The European Commission and EU Member States should increase investment through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) to support measures aimed at integrating disadvantaged youth and those not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) into the labour market as well as reducing school dropouts. The European Institutions and EU Member States should likewise improve the inclusivity of apprenticeships to support school / training-to-work transitions, particularly in countries with weaker Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems. With the support of public and EU funding (such as ESF+, the Youth Employment Support (YES) and Horizon Europe, local authorities should promote start-ups, aimed at helping young people start their careers and acquire competencies.
- 2. The European Institutions and EU Member States should prioritise the educational training, qualifications, and skilling of people in situations of vulnerability in order to improve their active participation in the labour market, by for instance, adapting upskilling and reskilling training to the capacities and desires of individuals and ensuring tailor-made support for NEETs (not in education, employment or training). Trainings should also provide skills for the green and digital economy, within a lifelong learning framework.
- 3. The European Institutions and EU Member States should reinforce the Youth Guarantee through coherent actions and intergenerational solidarity. Member States should better target their policy interventions by taking into account the different characteristics and needs of the various subgroups within the NEET population, prioritising those disengaged and experiencing long-term unemployment. Cooperation between Public Employment Services and civil

society organisations should be encouraged to reach out to these young people and address their motivation levels, while also building their trust and confidence in the relevant institutions.

- 4. The European Institutions and EU Member States should guarantee an accessible and inclusive reskilling and upskilling process for all, leaving no one behind, assuring more support to civil society organisations that play a key role in reaching young people from vulnerable and difficult socio-economic backgrounds, who are currently at risk of increased social inequalities and discriminations due to potentially elitist access during this transition.
- 5. The European Institutions and EU Member States should increase accessibility and social inclusion in the Erasmus+ framework in order to facilitate the participation of vulnerable and marginalised young people in the programme. The Erasmus+ financial support for mobility should be tailored according to the social economic background of families, considering also the cost of living of destination countries. Support schools and civil society organisations should implement an effective information strategy to raise awareness on Erasmus+ opportunities and funds for young people in need.
- **6.** The European Commission should frame 2023 as the European Year of Skills in a holistic and integral manner, avoiding the portrayal of education, training and reskilling or upskilling as a means to competitiveness and employability alone.



Introduction and methodology

In order to highlight the critical factors in the school-work transition of young people living in disadvantaged families from a supranational point of view, Caritas Europa and Don Bosco International collaborated in gathering data via a survey that focused on some critical and unresolved factors of this phenomenon in five European countries: Albania, Finland, Greece, Italy and Portugal.

The aim of the survey was to examine and deepen understanding of the pandemic on vocational training opportunities and employment outcomes of young people from families in difficulty. Limiting ourselves to the cohort served by Caritas, we considered:

- Whether young people from disadvantaged families have the opportunity to receive training offers and benefit from job placements?
- How did Caritas respond to the work and training needs of such young people?
- Was civil society able to engage in dialogue with the agents of vocational training and the business world?
- In the post-pandemic training and employment panorama, were the institutional school and employment actors able to guide and accompany young people from difficult backgrounds overall toward making appropriate future choices?

The survey had a quantitative slant and was carried out by means of an online compilation of semi-structured questions, targeting two parallel survey paths:

- **1.** Salesian vocational training schools: the questionnaire was answered by the directors of some 50 vocational training schools in the five countries under review.
- 2. Caritas centres, which are also connected with the Young Caritas' structural dimension (parishes, listening centres, youth centres, etc.) spanning about five months, and targeting all young people aged 14-21 interacting with these centres (either personally or through their families).

1.1. Structure of the study

This study is broken down into five chapters. Chapter one describes the research questions and methodology applied in this study, as well as its structure. It also contains data on the subjects of the study, both the young people in situations of disadvantage as well as the those working in the Vocational Education Training (VETs) Centres run by Don Bosco International. Chapter two describes the analysis of main findings. Chapter three considers the challenges from the angle of institutions providing vocational education

and training. Chapter four presents a more detailed case study of the situation in Italy, and Chapter five concludes the study. The recommendations to policy makers are described in the Executive Summary at the start.

1.2. Subjects of the study

This section describes the subjects of the study, namely the young people in situations of disadvantage as well as the those working in the Vocational Education Training (VETs) Centres run by Don Bosco International.

1.2.1. The voice of youth and teenagers

375 young people, aged between 14 and 22, participated in the survey and were reached as a result of their or the family's interactions with Caritas services and centres in five different European countries, namely Albania, Finland, Greece, Italy, and Portugal. The age group of the young people interviewed corresponds to the typical upper secondary school level, marking a life stage in which the elements of orientation and planning one's future play a decisive role and influenced from different viewpoints (i.e., relative to orientation and accompaniment in study for the youngest, or transition from school to work, or even further education for the oldest).

From a strictly statistical point, the data does not provide a representative sample indicating the viewpoints of young people in the five countries, since the aim was not to provide valid analyses for the entire population of young people, but rather to delve into the situation of those young people who in some way or another experienced social hardship and who themselves or their families sought out Caritas' support in various locations. Those young people who fit, within a timeframe of about five months, a specific socio-demographic profile (young people residing with families in difficulty, engaged in traditional or vocational training courses, at school and training institutes of various kinds, public vocational training centres or connected with various expressions of the local Church, etc.) were requested to be interviewed.

1.2.2. Salesian VET - Vocational Education and Training in Europe

The Salesians of Don Bosco currently run institutions in 134 countries all over the world, including 19 in Europe. As Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers, the Salesians of Don Bosco, founded as a society by Giovanni Bosco (also known as "Don Bosco") in Turin, Italy, in 1859, formally started their activities in 1870, though Don Bosco himself was able to broker a first apprenticeship contract for a young person attending his informal VET courses already in 1852. Nowadays the Salesians are actively managing about 1,845 technical schools and VET centres in 108 countries, addressing more than 1,215,000 direct beneficiaries. Hereinafter, this worldwide network of educational and training institutions will be referred to as "Salesian VET", positioning the Salesians of Don Bosco (SDBs) among the oldest, long-lasting, and broadest networks of global training providers.



In Europe, the Salesian VET encompasses 196 VET centres in 19 European countries (including 13 EU Member States), reaching 62,640 learners¹ (90% of whom are vulnerable youth) by providing holistic education and VET services in all the main professional sectors and economic areas. This offer of integral education includes:

- Vocational guidance, orientation, and counselling services.
- Both initial and higher VET services, as well as adult education.
- Continuous vocational training paths tailored to the needs of industries and of stakeholders from the private sector, with whom partnerships are built.
- Accompanying measures and projects, run in partnership with social workers and various market agents, aiming to foster young people's full social and vocational integration.

Thanks to the collaboration between DBI and the national Salesian vocational training networks, the researchers involved in this research interviewed 67 directors of vocational training centres from eight European countries (including six EU Member States), representing both different geographical areas and different educational and welfare systems.

¹ In 2021, the Salesian VET national platforms of Italy, Spain, Belgium, Germany, France and Hungary conducted an assessment of the European Salesian VET. A final report, published in April 2022 within the Erasmus+ "DB WAVE" project, coordinated by CNOS-FAP Federation, includes detailed statistics and data at national level on the VET Centres' training offers (learners, services and VET courses, sectors addressed) and on the Salesian students' formative success (number of qualified students who, one year after obtaining their qualification/diploma, are successfully employed or continuing their studies).







2 Analysis of main findings The difficult school-to-work transition in Europe amid post-pandemic social and economic challenges

72.3% of the young people interviewed were natives of their country of residence. As such, the data yielded an overrepresentation of young people of foreign origin, compared to the general population.

| | Italy | Albania | Finland | Greece | Portugal | Total | % |
|-----------------------|-------|---------|---------|--------|----------|-------|-------|
| Autochthonous | 126 | 52 | 6 | 27 | 45 | 256 | 68.3 |
| Different citizenship | 39 | / | 15 | 7 | 58 | 119 | 31.7 |
| Total | 165 | 52 | 21 | 34 | 103 | 375 | 100.0 |

Tab. 1 - Number of young people in the survey according to nationality (v. a.)

Overall, this cohort has been particularly affected by the various social, work, and economic consequences triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, many educational and employment opportunities have been cut off to them, leading to an overall climate of uncertainty and concern for their future.

However, an examination of the data collected through the survey shows that the impact of Covid, which affected various social classes and groups across the board, was not particularly strong in the case of young people from difficult social backgrounds. In response to a specific question, on the weight of the Covid pandemic in the design and planning of future projects, the majority of respondents (59.2%) in all five of the countries involved stated that the pandemic had influenced their future plans 'not at all' or 'a little' (see Table 2). This type of situation can be read ambivalently: on the one hand, the lack of influence of the pandemic on one's personal prospects may be due to the structural uncertainty about the future that has always characterised certain age groups, especially those coinciding with pre-adolescence. On the other hand, it may instead demonstrate a certain degree of distance and substantial indifference on the part of certain social groups with respect to social and economic contingencies that do not change their level of social and labour insertion, in any case characterised by clear signs of social disadvantage.

| | Italy | Albania | Finland | Greece | Portugal | Total |
|---------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| Not at all/not much | 58.9 | 75.5 | 73.7 | 45.7 | 53.2 | 59.2 |
| Fairly/very much | 41.1 | 24.5 | 26.3 | 54.3 | 46.8 | 40.8 |
| Total | 100.0 (163) | 100.0 (49) | 100.0 (19) | 100.0 (34) | 100.0 (94) | 100.0 (359) |

Tab. 2 - Has Covid influenced your future plans? (%)

A second aspect concerns the sections of the questionnaire revolving around guidance and accompanying actions for the school-to-work transition. These aspects do not necessarily concern older youth about to finish their studies. Orientation towards higher education or insertion in the world of work should in fact be conceived as a broader accompanying pathway, one which, in some way must be developed over several years, envisaging the use of ad hoc trained figures, from both within and outside the scholastic domain. This action is even more important in the context of social discomfort, i.e., when children lack real and valid parental support and are unable to receive motivated support and guidance regarding possibly future decisions impacting their lives. According to the data collected, 40.4% of the young people who participated in the survey had not received any form of guidance (in Italy, this figure is higher: 51.3%). Going into detail, it turns out that guidance was mainly provided by family members, friends, and people outside the school context (78.6% of the young people in the survey were not accompanied by anyone at school as they sought direction for their future).

A further aspect worth exploring is relative to the manner in which young people were introduced to the world of work during their years of compulsory schooling. In Italy and in Europe, young people's first experience of the world of work does not only take place at the end of compulsory schooling or on completion of university studies. There are various models of dual and alternating training, in the course of which, periods of theoretical training (carried out at a school or training agency) are alternated with periods of practical training (carried out at one or more places of work). This approach has been further accentuated since the early 2000s, when the European Union adopted training is not necessarily tied to time limits and can be carried out within a plurality of contexts, formal, non-formal and informal. As a result, whereas in the past there existed a rather marked division between the theoretical and practical spheres of training, today it is the principle of the centrality of the learner that prevails, even though a substantial educational equivalence is attributed to multiple learning contexts.

In the case of young people from socially disadvantaged families, the possibility of approaching a company or business represents a strategically vital opportunity for their future job prospects. Moreover, since the young people have the chance to approach a professional world that is often rather different from the life-contexts they traditionally inhabit, this opportunity offers them the possibility of broadening and extending their social circle.

The three-year period 2020-2022 was decidedly penalising for the new generations with respect to the question to what extent have young people from disadvantaged families had the opportunity to approach the world of work, through internships, apprenticeships, etc.? Many companies reduced this type of collaboration, not only because of the



reduced volume of activity, but also because of the various social containment measures introduced by national governments, which, for the sake of public health protection, nevertheless ended up eroding some forms of young people's integration into the world of work. 69% of the young people in the survey stated that they had not been able to carry out any kind of school-work alternation experience during the previous school year, despite it being required by law in all types of high schools. The highest peaks of non-participation were recorded in Greece (90.6%) and Portugal (88.4%). In Italy, despite logistical and health difficulties, almost half of the young people in the survey were at least able to gain some kind of work-related experience. The Italian case is described more in detail in a later chapter.

| Tab. 3 - Number of young people among those in the survey able to access internships/ |
|---|
| apprenticeship/school-to-work experience – for the school year 2021-22 (%) |

| | Italy | Albania | Finland | Greece | Portugal | Total |
|-------|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| Yes | 49.0 | 18.2 | 56.2 | 9.4 | 11.6 | 31.0 |
| No | 51.0 | 81.8 | 43.8 | 90.6 | 88.4 | 69.0 |
| Total | 100.0 (149) | 100.0 (44) | 100.0 (16) | 100.0 (32) | 100.0 (95) | 100.0 (336) |

The low diffusion in the two-year period of alternation between school and work experiences from 2020 to 2022, combined with the difficulties experienced by the school system during the months of the pandemic, have produced a level of training output that was not always up to standard, and in any case of lesser value than that of the pre-pandemic years, particularly in the vocational education systems. Looking at the data concerning the incidence of failures or of those who declared having finished the year with debts not subsequently recovered the situation concerns an average of 17.8% of the sample. The incidence of such situations was particularly high in two countries, which alone record an average of 26.1% of failures (28.6% in Portugal and 23.6% in Italy). Low values are also recorded in Greece (18.7%), Finland (14.3%) and Albania (3.9%)² as well.

When questioned about this, it is interesting to note that a significant proportion of young people declared that they did not feel prepared to enter the world of work (35.2% in Italy), while 57.1% of the young people in the survey did not feel *adequately* prepared (see Table 4). The highest level of dissatisfaction was recorded in Finland, involving 76.5% of the young people who stated that they were "not at all" or just a "little" prepared to enter the world of work). In the study (see Table 7), the proportion of young people who perceived themselves as inadequately prepared to continue their studies was lower, involving a minority of young people (37.8%).

² The low rate of failures can also be attributed to the fact that in some countries there is no end-of-year failure, instead replaced by the assignment of educational debts to be made up in subsequent school years. However, in some cases, the educational school load to be made up may itself be a reason for discontinuing studies.

| | Italy | Albania | Finland | Greece | Portugal | Total |
|------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| Not at all | 16.9 | 4.1 | 41.2 | 17.1 | 26.7 | 21.2 |
| Not much | 36.9 | 51.0 | 35.3 | 28.6 | 27.9 | 35.9 |
| Fairly | 42.5 | 28.6 | 23.5 | 37.1 | 26.7 | 31.7 |
| Very much | 3.7 | 16.3 | / | 17.1 | 18.6 | 13.9 |
| Total | 100.0 (160) | 100.0 (49) | 100.0 (17) | 100.0 (35) | 100.0 (86) | 100.0 (347) |

Tab. 4 - Do you feel prepared for the working world? (%)

| Tab. 5 - <mark>Do</mark> | you feel prepared | d to continue your | studies?(%) |
|--------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|
|--------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|

| | Italy | Albania | Finland | Greece | Portugal | Total |
|------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| Not at all | 6.4 | 2.0 | / | 17.1 | 22.0 | 6.4 |
| Not much | 31.4 | 8.2 | 44.4 | 22.9 | 28.6 | 31.4 |
| Fairly | 58.3 | 55.1 | 38.9 | 42.9 | 27.5 | 58.3 |
| Very much | 3.8 | 34.7 | 16.7 | 17.1 | 22.0 | 3.8 |
| Total | 100.0 (156) | 100.0 (49) | 100.0 (18) | 100.0 (35) | 100.0 (91) | 100 (349) |

Partly because of the European spirit of the young people in the survey, one aspect emerging from the data referred to the participation of young people in international exchange experiences generally promoted by educational institutions, or by other public or private entities active in this field of activity. Restrictions on international travel in 2020 and 2021 clearly resulted in a significant reduction in this type of experience. However, given the age group of those in the survey ranged up to the age of 21, some experiences abroad may have taken place before the outbreak of the pandemic.

Again, the guiding hypothesis of the research is that young people from families in difficulty have less access to such opportunities than their peers. Firstly, such forms of exchange, although possibly financed by public, national, and/or European funds, almost always involve a contribution from the families, at least relative to some of the expenditures, including for instance a passport. Secondly, it is very likely that interest in such international experiences is fostered more among the more culturally equipped families, who are able not only to grasp the 'long-term' added value of such experiences but also have the financial possibilities to support such exchanges. Finally, there is also a distinct possibility that some of the young people experiencing hardship and poverty may be engaged in work activities and commitments preventing them from travelling abroad for short or longer periods of time.

Whatever the reason, ultimately, only 8.9% of the young people in the survey in the five countries had participated in international exchange experiences abroad, with the smallest number of young people (6.3%) from Portugal engaging. 9.3% of the young people in the survey in Italy included this type of international experience in their curriculum. Yet, in some cases the figure may be overestimated, since some young people may have included in their 'international exchanges' some work activities abroad,



carried out on an individual basis and not based on projects and agreements between educational institutions in Europe and other countries.

| | Italy | Albania | Finland | Greece | Portugal | Total |
|-------|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| Yes | 9.3 | 10.9 | 9.5 | 11.8 | 6.3 | 8.9 |
| No | 90.7 | 89.1 | 90.5 | 88.2 | 93.8 | 91.1 |
| Total | 100.0 (162) | 100.0 (46) | 100.0 (21) | 100.0 (34) | 100.0 (96) | 100.0 (359) |

Tab. 6 - International exchange experiences (%)

The survey devoted a specific space to the Youth Guarantee programme, one of the instruments set up by the European Union to counter the spread of the NEET phenomenon and to offer opportunities for integration and orientation on possible training and job placement paths. One question referred to young people's awareness of this opportunity. The highest level of awareness/knowledge was found to be among the young people in Italy and Greece (21.9%). In Italy, a quarter of the young people in the survey had at least heard of the Youth Guarantee. The lowest levels of knowledge were in Finland (5.6%) and Portugal (8.4%).

Finland Italv Greece Portugal Total 21.9 25.2 5.6 8.4 18.5 Yes 74.8 94.4 78.1 91.6 81.5 No 100.0 100.0 100.0 100.0 100.0 Total (163) (18) (32) (95) (308)

Tab. 7 - Do you know about Youth Guarantee? (%)

Beyond the dimension of knowing about the Youth Guarantee, the findings show an almost zero level of take-up of the programme. Overall, only eight Italian young people (16.1% of those in the survey) declared they had approached a Youth Guarantee infopoint, while no respondents from the remaining countries had said so. As such, it would seem that this community resource has been largely ignored and underused, at least as far as the sample of young people in difficult situations, relying on Caritas services was concerned. One lesson in future could be drawn, namely, to promote such opportunities more among services providers.







3 VET, a protective barrier against marginalisation of young Europeans

Salesian VET is well known in Europe, universally recognised by national and Europeanlevel stakeholders (policy makers, institutions, VET stakeholders and market agents) as a quality brand endorsed by organisations that, in the spirit of Don Bosco, provide at all levels holistic education and quality employment to youth in the most vulnerable situations. According to the assessment done in 2021 on all the European VET centres, the average formative success of the Salesian students in Europe one year after their qualification/diploma is around 88.5%. **34.46%** of the qualified students are to be found in a stable job/occupation, **54%** are continuing their studies towards a diploma or a higher VET path, while just **7.3%** remain unemployed³.

| No. | Country | No. of VET centres/ schools | No. of students |
|-----|----------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Albania | 2 | 225 |
| 2 | Belgium | 18 | 10,500 |
| 3 | Bosnia | 1 | 360 |
| 4 | Croatia | 1 | 150 |
| 5 | France | 28 | 12,000 |
| 6 | Germany | 10 | 3,500 |
| 7 | Italy | 63 | 15,000 |
| 8 | Ireland | 1 | 410 |
| 9 | Kosovo | 1 | 400 |
| 10 | Moldavia | 1 | 200 |
| 11 | Montenegro | 1 | 130 |
| 12 | Poland | 6 | 400 |
| 13 | Portugal | 1 | 120 |
| 14 | Czech Republic | 1 | 250 |
| 15 | Romania | 2 | 610 |
| 16 | Slovakia | 1 | 350 |
| 17 | Spain | 54 | 14,120 |

Tab. 8 - Distribution of Salesian VET centres in Europe - Year 2021

³ The assessment is based on a statistical sample of 5,032 European young people in Italy, Spain, Germany, Belgium, France and Hungary, who attained their qualification/diploma in 2020 and were interviewed in 2021.

| No. | Country | No. of VET centres/ schools | No. of students |
|-------|---------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| 18 | Ukraine | 1 | 120 |
| 19 | Hungary | 3 | 1,800 |
| Total | | 196 | 60,645 |

Tab. 9 - Number of Salesian VET centres participating in the survey

| European countries | Number of directors who participated in the survey |
|--------------------|--|
| Albania | 2 |
| Bosnia-Herzegovina | 1 |
| Germany | 2 |
| Italy | 32 |
| Poland | 1 |
| Portugal | 1 |
| Spain | 25 |
| Hungary | 3 |
| Total | 67 |

Most of these centres have already been in operation for several decades. As many as 39 were founded between 1951 and 1999, 15 were founded in the first half of the 20th century and two have been around since the late 19th century. Only 11 of the observed centres were founded since the year 2000.

The sectors most present in the training offers are certainly the sectors of "Electronics/ Mechanics/Domotics" (present in 52 out of the 67 centres), followed - though at a certain distance - by "Administration/Company Secretarial Services" (in 18 centres, mainly in Spain), "Information Technology" (14), "Agriculture/Food" (12), "Aesthetics/ Wellbeing" (9), "Crafts" (8), "Hotel/Catering" (8) and "Other" (8). In the transition from one school year to the next, between 2019 and 2021, there was still no significant change in the course offerings. A very small percentage of centres added new courses or closed others in the transition between the 2020-21 school year and the 2021-22 school year.

The number of students attending VET courses offered by these centres varied between 30 and 2,000. On average, the directors interviewed were entrusted with the supervision of VET courses offered to 448 young people aged between 14 and 25. Considering the overall number of students enrolled in these courses, the sample of centres reached 25,624 students in the 2020-21 school year and 26,561 in the subsequent year, thus registering a small increase in enrolment. Only four centres reported seeing a significant drop in enrolment between the two school years. Most reported "a few" (49 centres) to no (13) dis-enrolments. Among the main reasons for non-enrolment were 'failures' or 'unsatisfactory results'. To a lesser extent, the following reasons emerged: the fact that the student did not get on well in the class or in the school, the student embarked on other scholastic pathways, the field of study initially chosen no longer offered satisfactory job



prospects, as well as excessive distance between the centre and the student's home, excessive costs, and/or the need to work.

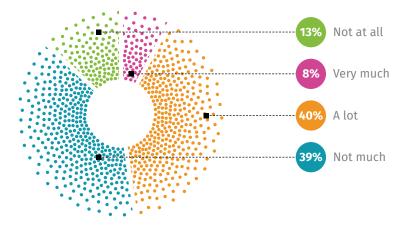
The presence of female students averaged 25.44%. In some centres, peaks of female enrolment (95%) occurred, while in others, only male students were present. This depended on the centre.

As for the presence of students with a nationality other than that of the country in which the VET centre was located, the average participation of foreign students was 16.8%, although one of the observed centres recorded a peak presence of such students at 70%, while in some others there were no foreign students at all.

The directors of the VET centres were asked to indicate the percentage of students from poor families enrolled in their centre. The perception of these privileged observers showed an average of 28% of students hailing from perceived poorer families. Also, according to the 67 directors interviewed, more than one in five students experienced their (personal and/or family) economic situation worsen because of the pandemic. Furthermore, according to the directors interviewed, about 40% of the students had experienced direct infection, bereavement, and illness related to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, those interviewed were almost evenly split on whether the pandemic had severely affected the sectors' coursework offered by the 67 VET centres (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 - Effects of the pandemic on VET labour sectors

In your country, have the target job sectors of the courses you offer in your school been challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic?



From one school year to the next, the findings indicate a significant change in the use of so-called 'distance learning' (DAD). As soon as health conditions allowed, those working in the VET centres tried to favour face-to-face teaching, either exclusively or predominantly (Fig. 2).

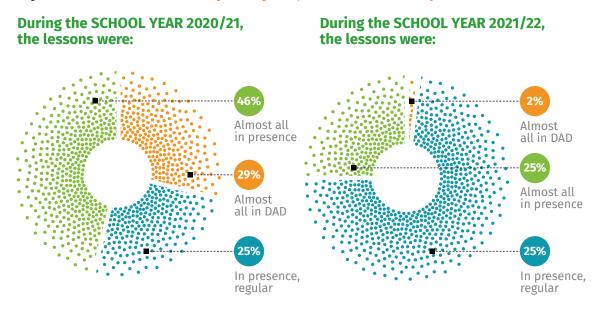


Figure 2 - Mode of VET teaching during the previous two school years

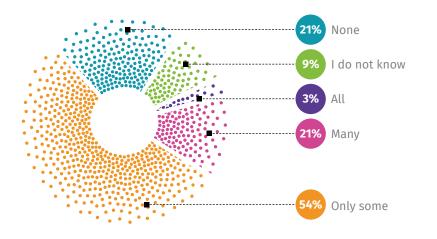
Only two directors stated that they would resume distance learning if given the choice. On the other hand, most of the directors interviewed affirmed that they would continue with face-to-face teaching, and only five directors admitted they would prefer to alternate between distance and face-to-face teaching. Most of the directors said overall that they were satisfied (six said they were very satisfied, 48 fairly satisfied) with the educational preparation their centres' students received in the 2020/21 school year. Only eight directors said they are not very satisfied and five not at all satisfied. The dissatisfaction is related to the fact that the measures adopted for preventing Covid-19 infection imposed by the authorities in some countries have severely limited the ability of school staff to train and for students to learn.

Included as a focus in this research was the question whether some of the pupils enrolled during the two school years (2020-22) had received free help with DAD/school activities (loan/gift of tablet computers, internet subscription, tutoring, after-school activities, etc.). In most of the VET centres, only some of the students received such support. All the students received some form of help in only two VET centres, while the directors in fourteen centres stated that no students had received this kind of support in their centres. Where some form of help was provided, it was often from the school itself. More than one in three (38%) young people who received some form of free support for DAD or other school activities had received help by the school itself. Further support was provided by local Caritas and other religious associations (15%), as well as by local public authorities (12%), alluding to some other active entities in offering this type of support (Fig. 3).

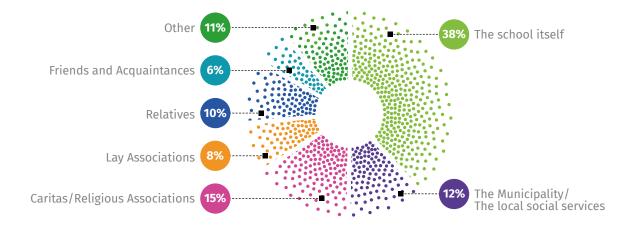


Figure 3 - Free student aid for DAD and school activities in 2020 and 2021

To your knowledge, have any of the children enrolled in the school received/ receive FREE help for DAD/school activities (loan/gift of tablet computers, Internet subscription, tutoring, after-school activities, etc.)?



IF YES: Who generally provides this help? (several answers possible)



As expected, considering the type of training proposal analysed, the findings show that laboratory activities and practical exercises are provided in almost all of the vocational training centres involved. The research therefore sought to investigate the effects of health restrictions linked to the pandemic on the accessibility of these services for students attending these centres. Based on the data, indeed, during the school year 2020/21, in most cases these laboratory or exercise activities were not carried out regularly. During the subsequent school year 2021/22, on the other hand, almost all the activities in the laboratory or practical exercises were carried out completely or fairly regularly. The same applies to the possibility of internships/traineeships outside the school as well as to the possibility of periods of apprenticeships/practical training in 'work contexts' at external companies/bodies during the observed period (Fig. 4). The latter activities were carried out by 56 out of the 67 VET centres involved.

Figure 4 - Access to workshop, traineeship, apprenticeship experiences during the previous two school years



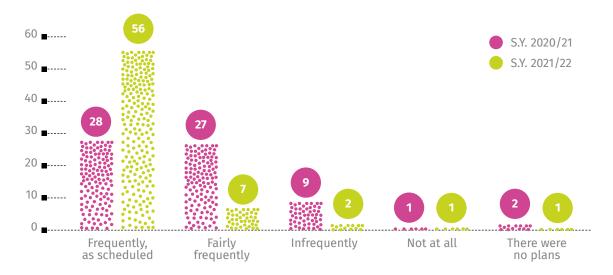
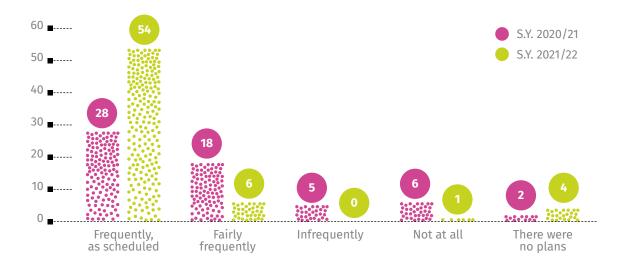


Figure 5 - Access to workshop, traineeship, apprenticeship experiences during the previous two school years

During the last two school years, have students undertaken periods of apprenticeship/practical training in 'work contexts' at external companies/bodies?



Regarding the relationship with companies for the placement of VET students in school/ work alternation or apprenticeship programmes, there was a slight decrease compared to the period before the Covid-19 pandemic emerged. The number of directors stating that they were contacted 'infrequently' by companies for these reasons increased (from nine to 16 before and after the outbreak of the pandemic), and the number of directors stating that they were contacted 'fairly frequently' by companies decreased (from 53 to 46).



Only 18 out of 67 directors stated that they had considered the possibility of including new courses in their VET centres' curriculum, following the events and production restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Regarding the sectors affected by this innovation, they included new courses in the personal services sector (8), digital transition (7), ecological transition (6), health professions (4), food trade (1) or other (6).

As many as 47 VET centres out of 67 promoted the participation of young people in international exchange experiences (Erasmus+, European Voluntary Service, Discover EU, European Solidarity Corps, etc.). In 39 of these centres, there was a person/teacher within the organisation chart who was in charge of coordinating these projects. In the other centres, however, these initiatives were often left to the initiative of individual lecturers. The vast majority of directors of centres where students were able to benefit from international exchange experiences were overall very (18 directors) or fairly (24) satisfied with these opportunities.

As many as 62 out of 67 centres provided orientation activities for students to help them in their future educational/professional choices. Most of the directors interviewed declared themselves very or fairly satisfied with the preparation offered to students for both further studies and the world of work, with a few exceptions (Fig. 5).

Figure 6 - Perception of the preparedness of VET students to continue their studies or enter the labour market



In your opinion, the young people coming out of your school are adequately prepared

According to the directors interviewed, the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant influence on the future planning on the lives of at least four out of five students (Fig. 6). For more than 80%, the pandemic had a very (45%) or fairly (37%) strong influence.

This influence was expressed in a variety of ways. The majority of responses indicated negative impacts. In many cases, students had to cope with unexpected needs in the family because of the pandemic. Several students further lost the job they had found after their studies as a consequence of the pandemic and found it difficult to find another job. In other



cases, if nothing else, the condition created by the pandemic enabled them to redirect their education. In a positive light, it should be read that it was precisely during this difficult phase that some students realised how important it was to consolidate their schooling. According to the directors interviewed, a group of students emerged, who in this phase of economic transition, were able to find new jobs, apprenticeship opportunities, or benefit from some other undefined form that had a positive impact on their future planning.

It would be important for policy makers, institutions, and civil society, indeed all educational communities throughout Europe, to review these findings and address the needs of young people more adequately, especially those most affected by the effects of the pandemic, in their transition to adulthood.

In general terms, do you think Covid-19 has influenced the lives of young people and the planning of their future? 3% Not at all 15% Not much

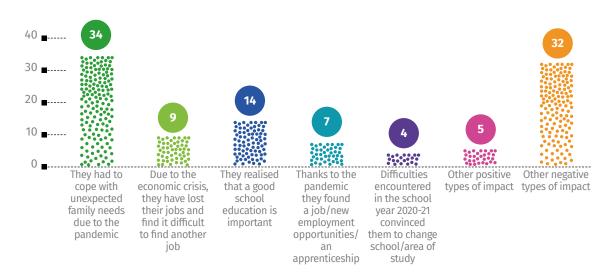
Verv much

Fairly

37%

Figure 7 - Effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on VET students' future planning

Figure 8 - Effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on VET students' future planning How do you think Covid-19 has influenced the lives of young people and the planning of their future?





The difficult school-to-work transition in Europe, amid post-pandemic social and economic challenges – a case study of Italy

Compared to the past, young Europeans are facing numerous difficulties on their educational and career paths toward becoming economically autonomous, reaching full social maturity and enjoying their living conditions. A series of challenges have been identified that are impacting young people in this pursuit. Some such challenges are a result of external factors, like economic conditions, public debt, the configuration of the job market, the education system, the state of the environment, and demographics, while others may arise impacting young people's choices and their sense of having opportunities to pursue their goals and hopes. The degree of impact of course depends on the precise location and situation. Despite this, however, a variety of factors are known to have contributed to an impoverishment of the new generation when compared with that of their parents. This is reflected in international rankings, where Italy, for instance, features at the bottom with a wide intergenerational gap and low social mobility.

In a supranational comparison, the critical factors affecting the youngest Italian generations are often greater than those faced by their peers in other developed countries. When all 27 indicators in the Global Youth Development Index⁴ were considered, Italy scored 0.816, placing 23rd in world rankings (16th among the 28 EU Member States in 2020), with a particularly critical performance in the fields of education (36th place) and employment (46th place) and minimal political and civic participation (125th place).

⁴ The Global Youth Development Index is produced by the Commonwealth Secretariat every three years and aims to rank more than 180 countries around the world with respect to youth development. The index ranges between 0 (lowest value) and 1 (highest) based on an analysis of 27 indicators that measure the status of education, employment, health, equality and inclusion, peace and security, and political and civic participation of young people aged 15-29. The data used to compile the index were collected before the Covid-19 pandemic, the last to allow comparability. See The Commonwealth, Global Youth Development Report 2020. London, 2021.

| | Score YDI | Position in the general ranking | Position in the ranking by sector | | | | | |
|----------|--------------|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| | | | Education | Jobs & Opportunities | Quality & Inclusion | Health & Well- being | Peace & Security | Civil & Political Participation |
| Portugal | 0.845 | 10 | 31 | 19 | 34 | 7 | 9 | 98 |
| Finland | 0.827 | 17 | 5 | 8 | 30 | 104 | 6 | 36 |
| Italy | 0.816 | 23 | 36 | 46 | 16 | 6 | 41 | 125 |
| Greece | 0.799 | 34 | 39 | 42 | 29 | 30 | 46 | 129 |
| Albania | 0.764 | 55 | 67 | 105 | 45 | 25 | 53 | 48 |

Tab. 10 - YDI (Global Youth Development Index) ranking of some European countries - Year 20205

Source: The Commonwealth, Global Youth Development Report 2020

Recently, this historical situation of disadvantage has been exacerbated by the effects of the post-pandemic crisis, which has negatively affected all areas of young Italians' lives, from education to socialisation, from work to cultural participation, to the point of producing phenomena of negative psychological experience and unprecedented forms of suffering in relation to mental health.

As various other studies conducted in the Catholic sphere show, young Italians appear to be more concerned than their European peers about the impact of the pandemic on their working paths and life projects.

In 2020, the Osservatorio Giovani (Youth Observatory) of the Giuseppe Toniolo Institute promoted a survey of 2000 citizens aged 18 to 34. The survey, conducted by Ipsos, was carried out in the middle of the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic at a time when, according to official data, the spread was peaking. When asked about this, most respondents (52.5%) thought that health emergency risks were set to increase, 12.6% disagreed, while the rest were somewhere in the middle.

According to the *Toniolo* researchers, fears about the environment are now joined by fears about exposure to the spread of aggressive viruses. The Covid-19 epidemic is an indication that the world is interconnected, with exposure to new risks and not just a temporary phenomenon in just a few locations. A rupture has, in fact, emerged not just in people's common habits and individual life trajectories but also in social and developmental models. As a result, the perception of a future full of risks and unknowns has increased for almost half of those interviewed. In particular, the majority indicated experiencing a worse economic situation, and for many of those surveyed, working conditions worsened. This is even more pronounced for the most disadvantaged social classes (26.1% of respondents considered the economic situation "seriously" worsening for those with low qualifications as opposed to 14.2% for those highly qualified). Negative repercussions on education are also significant, particularly for those under 25 years of age (36.5% of those surveyed under 25 indicated that the possibility to attain an adequate education had worsened).

There are clear concerns about Italy's stability and social conditions with almost two out of three young Italians expecting negative consequences, especially on the economic and

⁵ The table shows the case study countries involved in the VET survey coordinated by Caritas Europa and Don Bosco International, the results of which are reported in the second part of this paper.



employment dimensions. Also worrying are the possible repercussions on family income, on the resilience of public welfare and on the exacerbation of inequalities in society.

It is interesting to note how even the adult world appeared sensitive to the issue of difficult prospects for the new generations, showing a capacity for empathy and emotional closeness to young people that has not always been recorded in post-modern Italy, where the situation is normally characterised by intergenerational conflict. By way of example, the directors of the diocesan Caritas organisations, interviewed on various occasions during the acute phases of the Covid-19 pandemic, depicted a worrying account of the situation of young people. Specifically, based on a survey on needs and vulnerabilities that emerged during the most advanced phases of the pandemic (September 2020 to March 2021), 92.1% of the diocesan directors in Italy identified job insecurity and youth unemployment as one of the main social problems resulting from the pandemic, with 80.5% also indicating the "psycho-social discomfort of young people".

Returning to the context of barriers to better social and market integration of young people in Italy, several factors that hinder the development and aspirations of young people can be highlighted. These include the low rate of economic growth, the persistence of a dualistic job market that pitches workers with job security against precarious workers, the reduced ways of participating in the community, the scarcely inclusive configuration of the job market, the fragility and rigidity of the education and training system, the low level of housing autonomy and the propensity of a minority to seek better opportunities in other countries. In this complex context, it is our intention to focus on one of these critical dimensions: the school-to-work transition, analysed from an international comparative perspective. The final outcome of this fragility of education is well documented by the high risk of unemployment among those under 30 years of age, which in Italy is about twice as high as that recorded for the EU27 Member States. By comparison, this is just under one in three young people who would like to be employed but remain outside the job market. Only Spain and Greece have higher rates, while the scores for Germany and other central and northern European countries are below 10%. Italy also stands out for having the widest gap between youth and adult unemployment rates (youth unemployment being 3.4 times higher than adult unemployment, while across Europe the ratio stands at 2.1). It appears that in our country, the problem of young people in the job market is not only linked to the weak economic situation but more hidden structural causes, including the inability of the education system to reduce work experience gaps that young people endure more compared with adults. This then penalises the young people in transitioning to employment.

In fact, Italy scores last in Europe for transitioning between school and the job market. According to the most up-to-date OECD data processed by the think-tank 'Welfare, Italy', 20% of workers in Italy are under-qualified with respect to their job and therefore at greater risk of being replaced in a shorter time. Conversely, a theme of over-qualification also emerges with 31.6% of the employed being over-educated. The skills gaps of Italian workers are summarised by the European Skills Index, which is based on three main elements: *skills development* (training and education measures); *skills activation* (measures useful for transitioning into the world of work), and *skills matching* (the degree of effective matching between required and acquired skills). Italy ranks third-last overall, which is primarily due to being in twentieth place in the two components of *skills development* and *skills matching*, but above all to its languishing in last place across Europe in the *skills activation* component, in which Italy scores only 6.2 points out of 100.



In short, the most penalising component is precisely the one linked to the phase of transitioning between the world of education and the job market. It should be noted that in Italy, 15-34-year-olds who do not study, work or train (the so-called NEETs) reach over three million (composing 25.1% of young people). But in some southern regions they exceed 40%, costing the country an estimated EUR 21 billion. This is a real emergency that positions Italy with the highest number of NEETs (25.1%) across the European Union and in fourth place across continental Europe, after Turkey (33.6%), Montenegro (28.6%), and Macedonia (27.6%).

One of the main factors contributing to this problematic is due to the weakness of the institutional framework, with particular reference to limited active labour policies. An example of this is evident by the Youth Guarantee programme, designed by the European Union to tackle difficulties in job placement and youth unemployment. The programme, introduced in Italy in 2014 within the broader framework of the 'Jobs Act' labour reform, specifically targets young people, including NEETs in order to support them in pursuing training or starting an apprenticeship or traineeship.

According to Anpal data, the number of people enrolled in the Youth Guarantee between May 2014 and March 2022 was 1,658,904⁶. Based on an analysis of historical data⁷, the determining factors for deciding to enrol in the Youth Guarantee programme was linked to *the level of education* (the higher the level, the greater the likelihood of enrolling), having had *previous contact with public employment centres*⁸, and when *still living in the household of their parents*. As age *increases*, the propensity to enrol in the programme *decreases*.

Comparing the outcome of the enrolment in the programme, the available data clearly show a decrease in the effectiveness of the intake as the youth move toward increasingly concrete measures and measures oriented toward job placement. With respect to the total number of those enrolled, 1,411,304 young people (85.1% of those registered) were taken on by the employment services. These are young people who, to a large extent, have experienced high difficulties integrating into the world of work, i.e., those characterised by a *medium-high* and *high* profiling index (79.7%)⁹. The initiation of active policy measures concerns only half (50.9%) of the registered young people (843,854). The measures provided are mainly extracurricular traineeships (56.2%), followed by employment incentives (19.8%) and training (17.3%). Not all young people complete the pathways in which they have been placed: out of the total number of young people placed in some kind of job inclusion measure, 781,831 young people (47.1% of those initially registered) completed the measure. As of 31st March 2022, 519,123 of the registered participants were employed, indicating an employment rate of 31.3% from those registered. However, it should be emphasised that this does not entail a stable outcome, since only 302,130 employees ended up on a permanent contract. In summary, the programme was only able to contribute to a stable employment solution for 18.2% of the young people who originally registered for the Youth Guarantee.

⁶ Anpal, *Garanzia Giovani in Italia*, Monlty Note n. 3/2022.

⁷ ANPAL, Secondo rapporto di valutazione della Garanzia Giovani e del Pon Iog, Collana Biblioteca ANPAL, 2019.

⁸ With regard to the role of public employment centres, an analysis of RCFL Istat microdata conducted by Anpal Servizi shows that 45% of NEET youth have never had contact with an employment centre compared to 53% who say they have had contact at least once.

⁹ Otherwise called the Profiling Index, it is an indicator expressing the distance of the unemployed and/or job seeker from the labour market.



Tab. 11 - Performance of participation in the Youth Guarantee Programme(% of total enrolled) - Year 2022

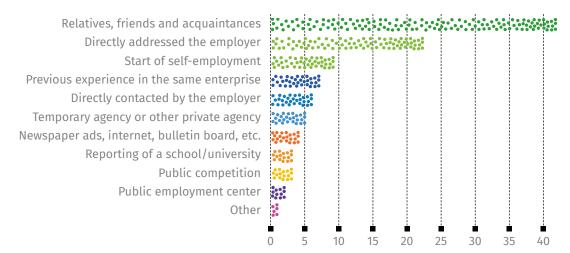
| Measurement and outcomes | Number of young people | Accumulated % of enrolled | |
|---|------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Enrolled and registered in the Programme | 1,658,904 | 100.0 | |
| Taken in by employment services | 1,411,304 | 85.1 | |
| Initiated into active policy intervention | 843,854 | 50.9 | |
| Service completed | 781,831 | 47.1 | |
| Employed | 519,123 | 31.3 | |
| Employed with a permanent contract | 302,130 | 18.2 | |

Source: our elaborations on Anpal data, 2022

The analysis of employment placement rates by civil region also highlights a strong gap between northern and southern Italy, amplified in a spiral of negative complementarities, by the elements of institutional fragmentation that characterise the vocational training and active employment policy system in the country. the unequal distribution and extreme volatility of regional funding affect the regional gaps, as do the strong territorial differentiations in the implementation of the Youth Guarantee and a persistent weakness of the National Agency for Active Employment Policies (ANPAL), which should be responsible for overseeing the overall architecture of the programme.

The regional disparities are further reinforced by the characteristic territorial fragmentation of the Italian welfare system, which is not able to flank the implementation of labour policies with adequate operational methods targeting the most fragile and weakest strata of the population.

Chart 1 - Job search mode of young people 15-34 years old (% values) - Year 2017



Source: Irpet elaborations on FDL-ISTAT data, 2017

45



The weakness of institutional governance in job search and outgoing guidance support lengthens the waiting time between leaving school/university and the first work experience. According to EU-Silc data related to 2017, the average duration of the School-to-Work Transition (TSL) for an Italian young person is 2.35 years (corresponding to 28 months), compared to 5 months in Austria, 11 in Poland, and 4 in the UK. The duration in Italy averages 58 months, i.e., almost 5 years, for young people with a low level of education, and just one year (around 11 months) for university graduates.

The weak correspondence between educational qualifications and occupied positions also exerts a certain weight on the job market, including, above all, the phenomenon of the so-called under-educated or over-educated workers¹⁰. According to latest Eurostat data (2020), 8.2% of Italian university graduates are employed in positions that would require a lower educational qualification than the one they possess. In this case, the incidence value of the phenomenon in Italy is lower than the European average value (10.9%). The highest incidence is found among males, among whom are active in the distribution services sector, employed in medium-large enterprises, and/or with an open-ended contract. The phenomenon is sustained by subjective determinants (the graduate's choice to opt for an under-qualified job but one that can offer economic and work stability) and by cost containment on the part of companies that pursue competitive strategies that do not envisage hiring a highly qualified workforce.

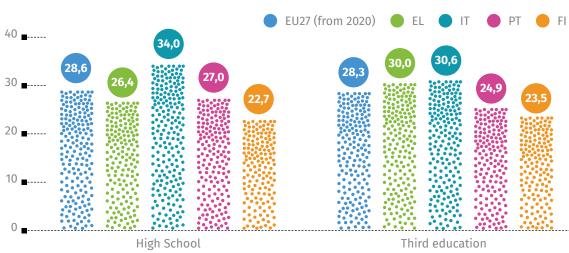
To complete the picture, a further element of indeterminacy can be observed among graduates: we refer to the phenomenon of the so-called horizontal mismatch, a condition that concerns those who find themselves working in a very different field from the one in which they have invested in training¹¹.

In Italy, like in the rest of Europe, the horizontal mismatch appears to be stronger at medium levels of education than at higher levels: 34% of 15-34-year-olds with an upper secondary school qualification compared with 30.6% of 15-34-year-olds with a university degree. The European average is lower in both cases: there is a 28.6% mismatch among high school graduates and 28.3% among university graduates.

¹⁰ A worker is defined as over-educated or under-educated if he or she performs a job for which the most adequate educational qualification is less than the one actually possessed. The qualification with the highest relative frequency for that occupational group is considered adequate. More specifically, the characteristic qualification is identified by considering the three main levels of education of the employed labour force: middle school degree; 4-5-year diploma; and 4-5-year college degree or higher. The 2-3-year diploma was equated with the 4-5year degree, while for technical occupations the most appropriate qualification was identified as the bachelor's degree, where most of those employed in the profession are concentrated.

¹¹ A graduate is defined as mismatched if he or she is in an occupation for which the most appropriate type of degree/certificate is different from the one held. The diploma or degree with the highest relative frequencies for that occupational group is considered adequate.





Graph 2 - Horizontal mismatch in the labour market - Young people 15-34 years Year 2020 (% values)

Source: Eurostat, 2020

At the level of the institutional framework and the dominant cultural model in education, vocational training, and the gradual approach of young people to the world of work typically takes place on different levels in Italy, some of which target the same youth population¹²:

- School-based vocational training at technical and vocational institutes;
- Training apprenticeships integrated with the secondary and tertiary educational systems (level I and III apprenticeships);
- Level II vocational apprenticeships, organised mainly around on-the-job training initiatives, with external support from the regions;
- Compulsory school-to-work alternation schemes in secondary schools;
- Vocational training promoted by the regions; and
- Apprenticeship training promoted by the regions.

The situation emerging from this heterogeneous configuration is one of lights and shadows, affecting the quality of the school-to-work transition:

- 70% of apprentices are concentrated in six regions in the Centre-North¹³;
- Level I and III training apprenticeships continue to show a modest spread, amounting to just over 5% of total apprenticeship contracts;
- The Italian picture is completed by the poor development of tertiary training with a vocational direction, with the partial exception of a few three-year courses and the introduction of higher technical institutes;
- The introduction of school-to-work alternation¹⁴ has been accompanied by various

¹² Ruggero Cefalo e Yuri Kazepov, «Verso un approccio integrato alle transizioni scuola-lavoro: un confronto tra Italia e Austria», *Quaderni di Sociologia* [Online], 84- LXIV | 2020, online since 1st September 2021, consulted on 18th July 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/qds/4153; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/qds.4153.

¹³ Inapp data, 2019.

¹⁴ Italian Law 145/2018 renamed school-to-work alternation: "Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (Pcto).



problems, highlighted by the second monitoring of school-to-work experiences in Italian schools, conducted in 2018 by the *Giuseppe Di Vittorio Foundation*: the considerable organisational difficulties in coordinating schools and enterprises; the reduction in the number of hours for the different school categories (from 90 hours for high schools to 210 for vocational institutes); the good spread of the practice on the national territory; the good involvement of micro and small enterprises (about 1 out of every 2 companies hosting the students is a micro company with less than 10 employees while 36% are a small company with 10-49 employees); the growing involvement of large enterprises (from 1% to 3.5%); the drop in the number of schools signing territorial network agreements with public bodies (from 50% to 40%); and the absence of stringent criteria and procedures for accrediting the training capacity of host facilities.



5 Conclusions. Vocational Education and Training, a protective barrier against marginalisation of young Europeans

The factors of weakness in the school-to-work transition which are highlighted in this study and common to the entire universe of young people, nevertheless, particularly affect young people living in social and family contexts characterised by poverty and social exclusion. In fact, among these types of situations, some critical factors emerge with alarming values that prevent an adequate job placement of young people and the improvement of their training capital.

A first objective element lies in the fact that many families in difficulty reside in territorial contexts marked by a strong precariousness of the local job market, which does not appear capable of guaranteeing stable job placements that respect the level of qualifications of the young people (in this type of situation, the mismatch is both vertical and horizontal).

Again, in the same fragile territorial contexts, we note the accentuated difficulty of institutional bodies in guaranteeing orientation and training pathways for insertion in the corporate world. If we take Italy as an example, this is also due to the small size of businesses in southern Italy, where most of the country's poverty situations are concentrated. (In this regard, we recall that 70% of apprentices are concentrated in just six regions in the centre-north of the country).

It should also be noted that many families facing socio-economic difficulties have a relational network, in other words is dependent on their own limited social contacts, alludes to a certain level It should also be noted that many families facing socio-economic difficulties have a relational network, in other words is dependent on their own limited social contacts

of social fragility, an element that likely reduces opportunities for social advancement and, above all, affects the possibility of finding employment through one's own network of acquaintances. (We have observed the channel for finding work among Italians to revolve mainly on informal exchanges, gossip, and chatter among friends, relatives, and acquaintances, for instance).

The effects of the socio-economic crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic were superimposed on these situations, already characterised from the start by an evident weakness in Italy. Hence, 2020 and 2021 have further aggravated the default conditions of many families engaged in a balancing act on the poverty line, with specific repercussions



on education and training. Indeed, over the past two years, the world of vocational training suffered a severe blow: class attendance shifted to go online, which is unsuitable for technical studies and vocational training. Many workshop activities were skipped or interrupted, impairing the quality of students' preparation and formation. The most penalised were the students in their final year, who were unable to complete their studies properly, finding themselves with a degree that did not always correspond to the expectations on the job market.

Traineeships, internships, and apprenticeships were also skipped during the pandemic, due to logistical difficulties and the closure of many companies, which halted activities or prevented them from taking students on board. In Italy, for example, companies that were receiving redundancy payments (a useful social parachute that saved many companies from closure) were not allowed to take on young trainees and interns, a measure which blocked the potential of many school and work alternation experiences.

The sectors that suffered most were those connected to the hospitality industry (tourism/restaurants/hotels) and to wellness/personal care services. With respect to this set of problems, young people were also penalised from the point of view of their choice of career paths and their future employment and training. For many, the need to rethink and reprogramme future options loom large, indicating a difficult path, especially in the absence of adequate guidance services. Those who come from culturally and economically well-equipped families may well consider new educational paths that will allow them to make up for lost time. Others will turn towards further education, a solution accessible to families with greater resources, but for those without such resources, lies a future full of uncertainty. In the absence of credible proposals, one sees the risk of a staggering increase in youth unemployment, NEETs and early school-leaving, with serious repercussions on the social future of an entire generation and possibly generations to come.

Although not all official data are available for a historical comparison, some anticipations confirm a strengthening of criticalities in the educational area. In the Italian context, *Invalsi* data for 2019 show that there was a 7% implicit dispersion (which does not necessarily imply dropping out of school but rather an objective difficulty in attending lessons). In 2021. this reached 9.5%, with double-digit percentages in areas throughout Italy already historically affected by the dropout phenomenon, such as in the south: in Calabria and Campania implicit dropout is close to a quarter of the school population, at 22.4% and 20.1% respectively.

Though Europe is on track to meet its 2030 targets on education, progress is uneven on employment and meagre on poverty reduction: in 2020, there were 96.5 million people in the EU at risk of poverty or social exclusion, representing 21.9% of the population (27.6 million of whom were severely materially and socially deprived). This included more than a quarter of the population in Romania (35.8%), Bulgaria (33.6%), Greece (27.5%) and Spain (27.0%), while EU youth unemployment stood at 22.7%¹⁵. At the end of 2020, nearly 725.000 more young people aged 15-29 were not in employment, education or training (NEETs) across the EU-27. In contrast to previous crises, the share of inactive NEETs increased twice as much as that of unemployed NEETs¹⁶.

¹⁵ Eurostat 2021.

¹⁶ European Parliament, Youth in Europe: Effects of Covid-19 on their economic and social situation, 2021.



This study shows the direct link between unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. Thus, as a result of growing unemployment, young people are experiencing increased levels of poverty and social exclusion. Social and professional inclusion through learning is in times of crisis one of the most important test benches for industrial companies in which social exclusion begins to involve increasingly large groups of people: young people, low-skilled workers, adults excluded by the labour market with enormous difficulties to move out of this situation, without prospects, adequate professional skills, and sometimes with reduced mobility.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) can be a means to foster vulnerable young people's social and professional integration, and hence act as a powerful agent of socialisation. Both initial TVET (I-VET) and continuing TVET (C-VET) share the dual objective of contributing to employability and economic growth, and of responding to broader societal challenges, promoting social cohesion in particular. In the case of disadvantaged groups, such as vulnerable youth and young people who are not in mainstream educational services, the relevance of VET can be increased by tailoring provision to specific needs, by strengthening guidance and counselling and by providing people in need with the necessary support. VET providers can play an important role both in shaping and implementing relevant policies.

The unexpected and violent outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis in February 2020, highlighted, amplified, and widened the pre-existing education inequalities by reducing the opportunities for many of society's most vulnerable people, who should be supported through holistic education programmes and equal access to high-quality VET provisions¹⁷.

European VET providers have the potential to foster

Though Europe is on track to meet its 2030 targets on education, progress is uneven on employment and meagre on poverty reduction: in 2020, there were 96.5 million people in the EU at risk of poverty or social exclusion, representing 21.9% of the population (27.6 million of whom were severely materially and socially deprived)

inclusion and employability, though a number of problems are known to commonly inhibit their full contribution to quality and inclusive VET. Unfortunately, VET suffers from low recognition in society, mainly due to a false perception that there are few career prospects for VET graduates. In many EU countries, VET providers have detected an increasing need to improve the employability of young people, especially those in NEET situations, those who are usually at most risk of early school leaving and of dropping out of formal education. As highlighted by the European Skills Agenda¹⁸, there is a huge skills mismatch between the job market, the new skills required and the training provided: "the twin green and digital transitions are reshaping the way we live, work, and interact. The EU's move to a resource-efficient, circular, digitised and climate neutral economy and

¹⁷ 2021 Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, 2021/C 445/13.

¹⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223, page 2



the wide deployment of artificial intelligence and robotics are expected to create new jobs, while other jobs will change or even disappear". There is still very little awareness of the Lifelong Learning approach, and the need for continuous and comprehensive education and training opportunities, and of integrated services and measures to foster young people towards a holistic social and vocational integration.

"Now, more than ever, Europe needs a paradigm-shift on skills" (European Commission, European Skills agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, 2020). VET schools and centres in Europe, in partnership with all the actors of the "socioprofessional integration ecosystem" are crucial and have to fully understand their role, duties and responsibilities in order to support this paradigmatic-shift, from supporting learners to find a job, to providing them with life-long skills for work and life¹⁹.

In light of these findings, Caritas Europa and Don Bosco have identified clear recommendations to policy makers to address these issues, which are described in the executive summary.

¹⁹ ILO, Global framework on core skills for life and work in the 21st century, 2021.







