

Chapter 22

The Changing Nature and Use of the Concept NEET in Contemporary Society: Normalising the NEET Age Cohort

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, significant variation exists between the use and application of the term 'NEET' (not in education, employment, or training) to define levels of economic and social exclusion among groups of young people. It depends on the situation, and/or the context in which the term is applied. The term draw attention to unacceptably high levels of youth unemployment and economic inactivity, as well as the scarring consequences this may have on young people's lives. This chapter aims to provide a review of the shifting and changing age cohort included within the NEET category since its inception in the 1990s. The study utilises an entity-related diagram to demonstrate the international variation that now exists. Recommendations are made in order to maximise the deployment of a standardised definition of NEET, in order to achieve some commonality of understanding about how we measure and define 'NEETHood', and crucially, in developing and applying policy responses to address their needs.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of the part of the population categorised as not in education, employment or training (NEET) is a cause of concern for South Africa (and international) because the population continues to grow amongst the youth, and there are many NEET people still seeking opportunities. Most legislation focuses on those who are NEET and within the age range classified as youth. The reason is mainly to afford young people with work and developmental opportunities. This makes it more difficult for those that are seeking opportunities to become economically active but have outgrown the age group categorised as youth.

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A large number of interventions focused on fighting unemployment tend to favour those who fall within the youth cohort and have skills, work and entrepreneurial opportunities. As a result, most of the opportunities are targeting the youth population between the ages of 18 and 34 years. For instance, recent interventions, such as the Youth Employment Services (YES) launched by President Ramaphosa, also focus on this group. Another recent intervention, the Tshepo One Million operating from the Gauteng Premier's office, also gives attention specifically to those categorised as youth. In 2014, the Gauteng Premier, Mr David Makhura, launched the Tshepo 500 000 programme for youth in the province (Gauteng Provincial Government, 2014). The Tshepo 500 000 programme seeks to provide training, upskilling and job placement of young people, particularly those in disadvantaged communities in the province, for a period of five years (Gauteng Provincial Government, 2014). In May 2017, Mr David Makhura doubled the target of the Tshepo 500 000 programme to the Tshepo One Million programme (SA News, 2017). The shift to Tshepo One Million came as a result of the private sector committing to work with the provincial government to assist in creating opportunities for youth in the Gauteng province (SA News, 2017). These are some of the government interventions that focus specifically on young people.

In the case of South Africa, the government is working hard towards economic transformation so that more black people can benefit and become active participants. However, the government should invest more in educating and upskilling people who are NEET from a disadvantaged background and underprivileged communities. Without skilled and educated people, the goal to reduce the high number of people who are NEET will remain a rhetoric.

In her work published in 2015, Sue Maguire questions whether the term 'NEET' does still have meaning (Maguire, 2015b). The term has been used loosely by scholars in some instances. However, NEET remains relevant, mainly because there continues to be a looming population with no work, and who are not studying or taking part in any economic activities.

The question that should be asked is *what about the population that is NEET and older than the youth cohort?* Given the extension of the NEET to age 24 (it was initially used to represent those between 16 and 17 years in the United Kingdom (UK)), which is attributable to extended 'youth' transitions, can we distinguish (or should we) between youth unemployment/economic inactivity any longer, meaning the NEET group, and adult unemployment/economic inactivity?

This concern arises because of the population who are NEET and who are past the youth age range. The issue of work opportunities, self-help opportunities and enterprise opportunities being channelled to people who are within the youth age cohort is creating additional frustrations for opportunity seekers who are no longer in the young age range. To avoid a reservoir of adults who are NEET, South Africa should have interventions in place for the population that remains NEET and is seeking opportunities after the age of being youth. The challenges that continue to face South Africa after 26 years (1994-2020) of democracy are categorised by poverty and unemployment. The staggeringly high rate of poverty and unemployment has made South Africa an unequal society (National Planning Commission, 2011).

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

A large number of published studies have highlighted the variability of the meaning of the term 'NEET' (Gaspani, 2018; Eurofound, 2016; Beck, 2015), but there is little evidence of published studies that have attempted to standardise the concept of NEET. The absence of international standardisation to define the term 'NEET' creates challenges in terms of having a universal definition and characteristics of the

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