



# Social Problems, Entrepreneurial Behaviour and NEETs

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## Introduction

In 2009, when the severe effects of the 2007–2010 recession began to hit the world economy, one of Spain's leading newspapers (*El Mundo*) printed an article in its Economic Section on: '*The NEET Generation, a danger to competitiveness and employment. The dark side of the Spanish entrepreneurship force lies in the 14% of the population between 16 and 24 years old that neither study nor work, a threat to the new economic model*'. The article, written by Tino Fernández who is an influential economic commentator, analysed an OECD report which provided information on the growth of the NEET population (Not in Employment, Education or Training). This label had come into existence in Europe a few years earlier to classify a group considered to be a statistical category that implied social integration problems among the young. Fernández (2009) argued that these unemployed, purposeless and poorly educated young people constituted a threat to economic growth and that

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their lack of enterprise was the real culprit of the world crisis. In 2009, when the recession began to affect the world economy, and many people pointed a finger at the banks and the capitalist system as the principal cause, the conservative press drew attention away from those some considered responsible for the crisis and put the blame on the dangerous new NEETs or 'the dark side of entrepreneurship'.

Fernández's article was not the only one that spoke out against NEETs. Over the next few years, many conservative press and television channels helped to build and disseminate this stereotype of NEETs, adding other negative moral and behavioural features to these young people's negative employment profiles. Besides being unemployable, idle and possessing poor educational qualifications, they were morally condemned for being partial to alcohol, bad mannered and prone to violence. This stereotype was soon complete. One of the Spain's most popular television channels aired a controversial reality show in 2010, called *Generación NINI*,<sup>1</sup> purposely designed to show this errant social group in a bad light. Physical violence on the set between the young participants was not infrequent and led to the show eventually being closed down. It is arguable that the repeated conflicts involving NEETs at that time came close to being regarded as a kind of 'moral panic' (Thompson 1998). They were seen as a symbol of a society in crisis, in the process of disintegration, that could only be brought back to the fold by austerity, plus the culture of effort and a spirit of entrepreneurship. It could be argued that the NEETs represented a type of scapegoat that could be blamed for all the ills that troubled the economy and in a very short time NEETs became a synonym for a social problem. A more expressive image than '*the dark side of the entrepreneurship force*' could not have been chosen to show how far NEETs were from the entrepreneurship spirit, which at that time was being successfully publicised and that promised to regenerate an economy which was in crisis.

The gulf between the NEETs and entrepreneurship is the reason why this chapter has a difficult starting point. However, the association between NEETs and entrepreneurship is becoming more frequently proposed in the social policies of international organisations such as the OECD, the EU and the World Bank, among many others. This association between NEETs and entrepreneurship has even begun to take shape in special intervention projects promoted by solidarity programmes and financed by large organisations and governments across the world. These projects aim to instil NEETs with an entrepreneurial spirit by providing finance, practical training and improving

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<sup>1</sup>In Spain and South America NEETs are known as 'NINIs'.

their entrepreneurship skills. Although little research has been carried out so far on NEET entrepreneurship, there are a large number of applied investigations and reports that deal with their generic problems and provide a significant amount of information regarding how they actually live and their need for social integration. From these investigations one can get an idea of their entrepreneurial behaviour and the obstacles they either have to overcome or perhaps regard as an incentive. This chapter will begin with an analysis of the NEET concept, how it is measured, how it arose, the heterogeneous sub-groups of which it is composed, its characteristics, its risks and other aspects of interest regarding the group's entrepreneurial behaviour. The second section will deal with the entrepreneurial behaviour of NEETs. The third section describes the role of governments and international organisations in designing social policies to deal with NEETs' entrepreneurship, while the chapter will conclude with some recommendations.

## **NEET: Statistical Category, Disadvantaged Group or Social Problem?**

The acronym NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) is meant to describe unemployed young people (unavailable or unemployed) who are not in an education programme. From the start it was associated with the difficult circumstances of disadvantaged groups and poorer urban neighbourhoods. The term NEET appeared in the UK around 1996 to describe problematic young people as a substitute for the derogatory 'Status 0' used in social policies at that time to describe disadvantaged youths (Simmons et al. 2014). Although it was initially associated with realities close to social exclusion, it was gradually amplified to include members of other middle-class youth affected by structural problems of labour market insertion and unemployment. The group consisted of youths both from poorer areas associated with criminal gangs and university graduates looking for a suitable job for their qualifications and the term rapidly spread to other OECD countries (the OECD has published a statistical NEET indicator series of its member states since 1997). The NEET rate is defined as the percentage of youths who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) in relation to the total number of young people in the corresponding age group, and is based on data from detailed national labour force surveys in each country. There is an abundance of statistical information available for international comparisons. ILOSTAT's Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM) include the NEET

rate in many different countries, while EUROSTAT gives the figures for the countries included in the EU27, plus some other European countries.

The NEET rate evolution varies widely from country to country. OECD-DATA in 2018 shows that the NEET (15–29) rate for its member states is 13.05 per cent, or around 34 million young people. This means that a considerable number of young people have gone through difficult times in the 2007–2010 recession, as in 2010 the rate reached 16 per cent of the 15–29 age group. This large number included different national situations: in the OECD countries, the lowest rate was in Iceland (6 per cent) and the highest was in South-Africa (37.7 per cent) and Turkey (26.5 per cent). Scandinavia and Central Europe were among those with the lowest rates, while the highest were found in Southern Europe, Latin America and North Africa (Bruno et al. 2016). The diversity of the different countries is repeated in the different statistical age groups in the NEET rate. The youngest 15–19 group have very different problems to those of the 25–29-year-old adults (the group with the highest rate). The former is closest to school age and usually live at home, while the latter are dealing with long-term unemployment and have (or are close to having) their own family responsibilities. Each group has diverse needs and different entrepreneurial potential and thus require different social policies.

The internal diversity of the NEET group has been the subject of many studies (Serracant 2014; Eurofound 2016; Bacher et al. 2017). Age is one of the most significant variables in this diversity. Initially attention was focused on the youngest group (15–19) and the older age groups were gradually added. The EU and Japan have since extended the definition of youth to 35 years of age and even extended their statistics to the 20–34 group, since a large percentage of the 15–19 group were involved in education (around 90 per cent) and few of them were unemployed. This does not mean this group is less important, since NEETs are formed by the cumulative handicaps encountered throughout their life course (Eurofound 2014). The Eurostat figures in 2019 for the EU28 gave NEET rates for the sub-groups as: 15–19 year-olds (5.7 per cent); 20–24 year-olds (14.4 per cent); 25–29 year-olds (16.6 per cent) and 30–34 year-olds (16.7 per cent). The last group has a growing number of ageing adults facing an uncertain future. Social policies designed to promote entrepreneurship among the young should therefore consider the diversity of a NEET's life courses. However, age is not the only diverse factor as gender, activity and educational qualifications are three other factors that define different NEET profiles (Cavalca 2016). Regarding gender, the Eurostat figures show that among 15–29 group, the rate of women in 2019 was 14.4 per cent, while the rate of men was 10.7. Although both sexes are

equally represented in the 15–19 group, at higher ages, labour inequalities and the number of women who look after their children than occupy a paid job increase the gender gap in the NEET rate. Maguire (2015) analysed the situation in the UK and concluded that, besides higher rates, women are NEETs for longer periods due to their family responsibilities and the gender barriers that hinder their return to paid work—loss of confidence, lack of infant care policies, worsening mental health and fewer opportunities in the local job market. Maguire and McKay (2016) provided details of an intervention strategy (training, social assistance, follow-up by job placement services, etc.) in which entrepreneurial advice would be an added help.

There is also diversity with regard to Activity and Employment Status. Young people may become NEETs through being unemployed or inactive (housewives, incapacity or for other reasons). An analysis of the composition of EU data on 15–29 year-olds found that 60 per cent were unemployed, while 40 per cent were classified as inactive (Eurofound 2016: 42). This information also revealed the diverse situations in different countries. For example, in Spain 70 per cent were unemployed and 30 per cent were inactive, while in Denmark the situation was the reverse with 47 per cent unemployed and 53 per cent inactive. Countries in Central European and Scandinavia had profiles with a high percentage of inactive populations, while unemployment was highest in Southern European countries. A deeper analysis of the Activity and Employment Status variable considering gender and the different age groups provides further nuances, varieties and divisions for which different social policies would be required. With regard to educational qualifications, the Eurostat figures (2019), show that the NEET rate is lowest among the most highly qualified; of the least qualified young Europeans on the ISCED scale (0–2, compulsory education or lower) 16.7 per cent are NEETs, 15 per cent of the 3–4 group (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education) are NEETs and 10 per cent of those who finish their university studies (levels 5–8) are NEETs. The rate among graduates is particularly high in Greece (28 per cent) and Italy (21 per cent). In spite of the fact that educational qualifications are protection against being unemployed, the figures in these countries clearly show a need to help NEET graduates. During the last economic crisis, there was a brain drain from almost all the countries in Southern Europe due to the lack of suitable opportunities in the domestic job market.

Arguably, one of the biggest problems NEETs face is their poor educational qualifications, which is one of the main causes of them falling into this category and a barrier that becomes ever more serious as they get the older. Dropping out of school has a significant multiplier effect on the future

vulnerability and job options of these young people. This hardcore of school dropouts also augurs ill for their children, who could well suffer the same fate (Furlong 2006; Simmons et al. 2014). As these young people grow older, their opportunities for returning to education or second-chance programmes become fewer; additionally, these programmes are underdeveloped in many countries as there are generally fewer educational opportunities available for the most vulnerable people. After the economic crisis in 2007–2010, the intervention programmes for this category tried to keep children at school as long as possible in order to slow down the dropout rate. When this had been achieved, most of the social intervention policies then focused on improving their employability and job-seeking skills by means of traditional practical courses (Hutchinson et al. 2016), since they were seen to be far removed from entrepreneurial initiatives. However, although programmes for promoting self-employment and entrepreneurship have less weight, they have increased considerably after the recent crisis, as will be seen in the subsequent sections (O'Reilly et al. 2019).

To complete this overview of NEET diversity, and thus be able to consider possible solutions to their problems to encourage them to go into entrepreneurship, some associated risk factors should also be taken into account, as described in the 2012 and 2016 Eurofound reports, in addition to those already mentioned above. Disadvantaged youths are 40 per cent more likely to become NEETs, those from immigrant families are 70 per cent more likely, those from divorced parents are 30 per cent more likely, those of unemployed parents 17 per cent more likely, while school dropouts from low-income homes are twice as likely to become NEETs. The Eurofound reports cited above offer an interesting classification of the NEET group (15–29), dividing it into seven sub-groups that can be given individual treatment (Eurofound 2016: 32):

- Re-entrants into the labour market or education: occasionally become NEETs, although there is a good possibility they will join the labour market or finish their studies. These represent 7 per cent of the total.
- Short-term unemployed NEETs: spend a short time with moderate difficulties looking for a job and represent 25 per cent of the total.
- Long-term unemployed NEETs: have a high risk of exclusion or disengagement (23 per cent).
- Unavailable due to illness or disability: they are not looking for work and are in urgent need of social support (7 per cent).

- Unavailable due to family responsibilities: caring for family members, they are mostly women with diverse possibilities of returning to the job market (20 per cent).
- Discouraged workers: unemployed who are not actively seeking work, with a high risk of disengagement (6 per cent).
- Others: young people who prefer to spend some time as a volunteer or on personal development before getting a job, with good expectations of success (12 per cent).

All the above-described variants illustrate the diversity of the NEET population and the difficulties of finding the right social and labour policies for the different types (Serracant 2014). To complicate matters further, a final difficulty can be added related to the extreme sensitivity of the NEET statistical category to national job market configurations and education systems. A specific type of national work contract or tradition regarding part-time work or the development of dual work-training systems can be the cause of much variation in the indicator and the many special cases on an international scale that are difficult to systematise.

## Some Criticisms of NEETs

The wide diversity of the NEET statistical category is not the only limitation that experts have identified. Other social criticisms have been levelled at them with the first being the effects of being labelled as a young NEET. Various authors (Furlong 2006; Simmons and Thompson 2013) considered that the stereotyped idea associated with unemployment, social deviation and even with crime came into fashion in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Thereafter, the concept came into the hands of public opinion and the social science experts, who continued to fashion and mould it. What was initially an under-defined, statistical category soon became an over-defined, socio-moral category that has since been used to discipline the wayward youths that have been accused of being responsible for the malfunctioning of society. From that time onwards, many reports, talk shows and articles have continued labelling these young people as disoriented, dependent and conflictive, directing at them a specialised line of intervention and considering them to be a 'social problem' (Cavalca 2016). They have been converted into an *objectivisable* group (as an object of study fit for specialists and not as the social group they really are), regarded merely as scientific specimens under permanent scrutiny and as a simplified stereotype of the real situation. This

negative classification fulfilled the function of a moral reprimand and either hid or lessened the basic social conflicts and inequalities that had produced NEETs and that were responsible for their origin as a social class (Simmons and Thompson 2013).

A second criticism, closely related to the first, has its roots not only in the *moralisation*, but also in the *psychologism* of NEETs (Kelly 2006; MacDonald 2011). The dominant focus among the experts contained a strong charge of the latter element and presented them as a problem due to their innate characteristics and motives, and not as a problem caused by social processes associated with the structural working of the job market. This psychological diagnosis was accepted by the media and reinforced the attitude of those people who considered them to be apathetic, unmotivated and more inclined to having a good time than to working, a diagnosis that converted social inequalities into a pathology and associated such under-class groups with 'social pathologies' (Simmons 2008: 434). The spread of this *psychologising* approach is usually accompanied by an individual interpretation of the social problems and therefore by diagnoses, criticisms and individual responses to the job problems of young NEETs. The most common and dominant approach has been to increase their individual employability in terms of both improving their technical skills and developing the attitudes, values and dispositions considered by experts as being necessary for an employment position. Profiling, counselling, individual advice and other similar treatments are thus the responses of this individualising paradigm. In the critical view of Serrano and Jepsen (2019), the worst effects of this paradigm are that it overlooks or neglects the structural problems that have an impact on NEETs, which started with an uncertain job market, unemployment and job insecurity, and continued with the loss of their social and political roles during the last thirty years (Yates and Payne 2007; Inui 2009; Russell 2016).

Proof of the present power of the above *psychologising* perspective is the spread of the term *disengagement*, which is aimed at replacing the terms *exclusion* and *educational exclusion* (Simmons et al. 2014). Very widespread in the USA, Australia and UK (Christenson et al. 2012), *disengagement* puts the accent on emotional aspects to explain the phenomenon of youngsters who drop out of school. The factors that mostly explain their negative attitudes to schooling are analysed from the perspective of human behaviour rooted in the psychological theory of individual weaknesses, while the critics of *disengagement* emphasise the educational, economic and social policies to explain inequalities and exclusion processes (Smyth et al. 2013; Kelly et al. 2018).



## NEET and Entrepreneurial Behaviour

The entrepreneurial behaviour of entrepreneurship minorities potentially contains many more factors than experienced by mainstream entrepreneurs. Cooney and Licciardi (2019) argued that to investigate whether these minorities are subject to the same determining factors or whether they have different characteristics to the majority group is clearly justified. However, the answer is not simple, because each entrepreneurship minority has its own unique factors and forms of behaviour, and is also a sub-group that has to fit into the common economic framework and entrepreneurial dynamics. This situation means attention must be paid to both the minority's singularities and the entrepreneurial fabric in which it is integrated (Valdez 2011; Wood et al. 2012; Galloway and Cooney 2012; Klingler-Vidra 2018; Cooney and Licciardi 2019). In addition, the various factors that influence the analysis of entrepreneurial behaviour have multiplied ever since research on the subject began (Kantis et al. 2014; McAdam and Cunningham 2019). In this research, the psychological/economic/social factors, the micro/meso/macro aspects, the formal/informal influential factors and many other possible classifications provide an extensive list of the variables that can help or hinder entrepreneurship, and there is still debate about the influence of each factor on business behaviour. It should also be remembered that starting a business is now regarded as a process with different stages (Grilo and Thurik 2008) in which the different factors can have different influences at different times, stages that particularly affect young people who are going through an uncertain period in their lives and are prone to doubt.

These multiple heterogeneous factors involved in determining the entrepreneurial behaviour of the general population are multiplied when added to the highly heterogeneous internal variety of the NEET group. There is very little academic literature available on this group relating to its entrepreneurial behaviour. Although many publications have analysed other NEET aspects associated with their social and work problems, few studies have been undertaken regarding their tendencies to creating a business. However, over the past ten years, some studies have begun to emerge regarding the development of various entrepreneurship projects for NEETs,<sup>2</sup> which try to characterise this group in order to obtain information to improve the applied results of the projects. The reports, recommendations or best practice guidelines that they contain are compiled by teams of experts

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<sup>2</sup>In the next section we will focus on the description of these programmes and projects financed by the EU and OECD, among others. In this section we will review some of the results as regards their entrepreneurial behaviour and the key factors involved when NEETs set up a business.

in social sciences, and even though they still have not been published in academic journals, they are the most important source of specific information that enables advances to be made in the research regarding NEETs as an entrepreneurship minority. Among the limitations of this literature, especially those referring to intervention projects, is the concern that the selection of the participants may not be sufficiently rigorous, which complicates the evaluation of the results. However, this type of applied research still offers valuable information on the specific difficulties of the different NEET sub-groups which will be addressed below.

If one considers the personal NEET factors that hinder their attitude to business and to setting-up business initiatives, it is important to first highlight their low levels of information, skills and entrepreneurial competences (Downs et al. 2019). Although there are deficiencies in many of their competencies (from the most basic to the most specific), some authors consider that this is especially true for the transversal competencies, such as the capacity for communication, creating networks, setting targets and making decisions (Young Enterprise Program 2018). The competencies linked to specific business information (such as financial literacy and an entrepreneurial spirit) are not common attributes among NEETs. In many cases their educational careers are short and have had little contact with entrepreneurship education, and this unfamiliarity with learning and training programmes means they find it difficult to imagine themselves within a training process. In many of the recent projects aimed at fomenting entrepreneurial activity among NEETs, the first priority has been to develop new teaching methods far removed from traditional formal approaches (European Commission 2017; Robertson 2018). Other types of personal factors are age-related psychological difficulties such as: a poor sense of responsibility, lack of concentration and resilience, poor self-esteem and self-confidence, lack of experience. Collectively, these undoubtedly influence their motivation and ability to generate the necessary ideas to consider starting a business. Some authors have highlighted the importance of self-efficacy and self-esteem as a means of increasing NEETs' confidence and helping them to decide to undergo training and be more enterprising (Denny et al. 2010). In this study, based on the analysis of the changes of attitude in a group of NEETs after a period of business training, the young people mostly considered the main barrier to setting-up a business to be their low standards in subjects like Maths and English, psychological problems and a lack of faith in their business skills. Training helped them to improve their beliefs and emotions regarding business, but it was not enough to convince them to follow an entrepreneurial pathway. Although the business world had become closer to them cognitively

and emotionally, actually creating a business was still considered to be far away and could be postponed to a future date.

Of the socio-economic obstacles that NEETs face, the most important include the lack of financial resources, difficulty gaining access to information, lack of opportunities for training, a lack of role models to imitate and a lack of social networks (Young Enterprise Program 2018). All of these difficulties evidently are more acute in those closest to social exclusion, from run-down urban habitats or from poor families. The effects of social class in these cases are difficult to overcome, and besides the poor chances of receiving financial support from the family, there is also a lack of social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1987). Different authors have emphasised that one of the key factors for young people creating a business or becoming self-employed is to have a parent who has already gone along this entrepreneurial pathway (Blanchflower and Oswald 2009).

Against all of these disadvantages, specific publications give a series of recommendations to help NEETs to go into entrepreneurship. The intervention projects aimed to help them are basically designed to get over the previously mentioned difficulties. Importance is particularly given to the 'proximity approach', which utilises local actors and spaces close to young people (youth and social centres) to impart entrepreneurial initiatives (Goldring 2015) in the form of information and orientation sessions given by local actors, and have been found to be very helpful (Virani et al. 2018). This involves close cooperation between those involved (youth associations and NGOs, social services, employment agencies, business companies, etc.), all of whom are familiar with the reality of these young people. In fact, many of these agencies/actors participate in multiple directives and programmes to promote entrepreneurial activities organised by large-scale national and international organisations (Green 2013). Such projects are very keen to promote entrepreneurship training by means of new teaching and learning methods as alternatives to traditional methods (Robertson 2018). Non-formal education, peer learning, role-playing activities and social gamification can help to promote entrepreneurial activities among NEETs (Open The Doors 2017). Besides teaching business skills, non-formal learning can teach important processes (such as motivation to learn), since teaching is provided through a variety of speeds, places and trainers (Smith and Air 2012; Council of Europe 2016). The difficulty of access to entrepreneurship training for NEETs (which is now given in many primary and secondary schools) can be overcome by these informal methods and by utilising counselling, mentoring and social tutoring. This personalised support could also be a good way of teaching the transversal entrepreneurial skills considered to be

essential for this group of disadvantaged youths (responsibility and commitment; resilience; planning, communication and creativity) (Young Enterprise Program 2018). Apart from business creation, entrepreneurial skills are being increasingly expressed as attitudes to life in the form of community initiatives or social enterprises through which young people can gain the necessary experience to be able to undertake entrepreneurial initiatives. McCallum et al. (2018) recently presented the European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework (EntreComp) as a typical example of this type of training organisation. In this context being an entrepreneur does not consist of starting a business, but developing the capacity to behave in an entrepreneurial fashion.

Due to the difficulties NEETs face in undertaking entrepreneurial initiatives, many of the intervention projects aimed to help them include intermediate steps designed, not to create businesses, but to foment the entrepreneurial spirit and apply it to their daily lives. For example, the Dutch project Kamers MetKansen (Goldring 2015) used a method known as the *personal action plan* in which the young people (under the guide of a coach) set a series of goals, planned strategies to achieve them, carried them out and evaluated the results. The idea is similar to the business action plan and is designed to help them control their emotions and improve their employability and social integration. Along the same lines and within the framework of a strong expansion of the entrepreneurial spirit, the social organisations are becoming vectors for diffusing entrepreneurial ideas among NEETs. Another Dutch initiative, the Studio Moio Project (Goldring 2015) described itself as a social educational innovation laboratory that aimed to improve the working and social skills of NEETs. The specialists involved in this project encouraged young people to produce creative ideas by turning them into community 'problem solvers' and then helping them to put their ideas into practice and attract financial investors. This work-style suggests the logic of business incubators, which has been successfully used in start-ups and social programmes. The director of Moio described the young participants as a mixture of:

Entrepreneur with a sense of business, Artist with a creative mind and Alchemist with a taste for making something out of nothing. (Goldring 2015: 60)

An initiative called the NEETs in Entrepreneurship project was funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA and a Norwegian Grants Fund for Youth Employment. This was run in a similar fashion to the Dutch projects and almost 400 NEETs were advised and trained in entrepreneurial skills. The project's *Neethubs* aimed to have helped at least

10 per cent of the participants to set up their own businesses by the end of the initiative in 2021.

The series of OECD reports entitled *The Missing Entrepreneurs* and *Minorities in Entrepreneurship* that have been published in different countries since 2013 offer interesting information on the entrepreneurial determinants and best practices relating to NEETs. Although *Missing Entrepreneurs* does not specifically deal with NEETs, different chapters have given special attention to young people in general (OECD/European Union 2012) and stated that NEETs share many of the barriers suffered by young entrepreneurs (social attitudes against entrepreneurship, lack of skills, inadequate entrepreneurship education, lack of work experience, undercapitalisation, lack of networks and market barriers) (ibid.). These reports have also found that entrepreneurial activity rates (TEA) are lower for NEETs (ibid.). The data provided by the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* (GEM) each year gives an overall view of entrepreneurial activity among the young and the principal determinants for setting-up a business. As the GEM data are difficult to apply generally because of the very different youth tendencies in different areas, the individual national analyses are more reliable to get a more accurate picture. Although the GEM data does not provide specific information on NEETs, it does permit some appropriate considerations on the required determinants and attitudes. Specialists in youth entrepreneurship who have analysed the GEM data (Schøtt et al. 2015) consider that young people represent a fundamental asset for business on a worldwide scale. The improved access to entrepreneurial training and education opens up positive expectations due to the relationship between training and successfully running a business. In spite of this advantage in training and a positive attitude to entrepreneurship (especially among those in their twenties or thirties), there is also less confidence in their business expectations, especially in the youngest, which is reflected in their entrepreneurial activity. GEM's international data has also revealed a worrying aspect of young entrepreneurial activity with 73 per cent of the companies belonging to those between 18 and 34 years old not having any employees (Schøtt et al. 2015). This means that there is a high proportion of self-employment, which is a warning signal regarding their lack of success in creating employment and indicates the need to investigate the living and working conditions of this substantial number of freelance workers, who suggest high rates of necessity-motivated entrepreneurship (Gutiérrez and Rodríguez 2016; Álvarez-Sousa 2019). Eurofound (2015) has highlighted that the EU countries with the highest NEET rates (Italy, Greece, Rumania and Spain) also have high rates of

self-employed workers, which was accentuated during the 2007–2010 recession, when unemployment grew and becoming self-employed was seen as a solution due to the lack of job opportunities (Fairlie 2013). This ‘refugee’ effect (Thurik et al. 2008) adopted by the unemployed was accompanied by personal and business problems for entrepreneurs motivated by necessity, who set up low-technology, non-innovative businesses with little capital, little prospect of creating jobs or growth, little entrepreneurial vocation, high aversion to risks and low tolerance of failure, since they were often established with personal savings or unemployment allowances and thus with the sensation that they must not fail (van der Zwan et al. 2016; O’Higgins 2017; Álvarez-Sousa 2019). In the personal context, the problems consist of low earnings, labour uncertainty and lower satisfaction (Fairlie 2005; Block and Koellinger 2009). This *desperate entrepreneur* identity could well spread among NEETs due to their urgent need, plus it could entail the risk of adding ‘no opportunities’ and ‘no skills’ to the NEET label (Mühlböck et al. 2018). Some authors have questioned the idea of unthinkingly implanting the entrepreneurial spirit among socially disadvantaged groups (Fairlie 2005; Shane 2009; Sutter et al. 2019) as potentially leading to greater long-term problems for them.

Another research theme relating to disadvantaged urban youth’s entrepreneurial activity focuses on local business initiatives and has had interesting results in some of the worst-hit areas. Such initiatives take advantage of local opportunities and demands. Smith and Air (2012) found that despite the disadvantages accumulated by the urban youth underclass stereotype, with a different entrepreneurial approach, locally or socially rooted initiatives and programmes can be designed to gradually imbue entrepreneurial roles into young people to help them to enter business. These professional careers would not be similar to those of the normal entrepreneurial archetype, but would be comparable to entrepreneurial models with an alternative narrative, created by the young entrepreneurs themselves in collaboration with instructors familiar with local conditions. Smith and Air’s conclusions are highly critical of the entrepreneurship studies published in the last thirty years that glorify the figure of an entrepreneur far removed from the realities of marginal zones or from groups such as NEETs. The aim of turning these young people into entrepreneurs by radical strategies without a knowledge of the territory and the local problems, with programmes that do not take them into account and based on the successful entrepreneur and enterprise (which do not have a good image in these contexts since they are seen to be responsible for the destruction of jobs) is destined to fail (White 2017). In their search for the ‘underclass entrepreneur’, Smith and Air recalled the tradition of studies

similar to that by MacDonald and Coffield (1991) who analysed the early results of enterprises created by disadvantaged young people in their home districts and who faced a series of significant difficulties (lack of finance, low demand, saturated markets, badly situated premises, long working hours and uncertainty of outcome). Despite these conditions, the young people studied showed considerable entrepreneurial qualities such as having to fight against situations of economic scarcity, seeking help from relations and friends, carefully administering their time and getting used to surviving in a difficult economic climate. Although this modest achievement profile does not coincide with the range of aptitudes of the ideal entrepreneur (talent, creativity, passion and love of risk), it can be seen that these features allowed the young people to keep their risky businesses alive with survival rates similar to those of mainstream entrepreneurs.

The wide variety of determinants that have been examined include: deficient entrepreneurial role models, lack of entrepreneurship experience in the family, lack of entrepreneurship training programmes and entrepreneurial skills, poor access to finance, discrimination for being young, poor capitalisation and lack of experience in access to clients and providers, the association between youth, inexperience and poor responsibility, bureaucratic obstacles to setting-up a business and difficulty getting access to information, all of which contribute to the restrictions young people (especially NEETs) find when acceding to the entrepreneurial world (Green 2013). This summary shows the need for a complex package of intervention tools from the appropriate organisations which will be examined in the next section.

## Entrepreneurial Activation

Since the late 1990s, 'active' employment policies have become the general model for interpreting the social action of the institutions and social actors in this field. These policies are characterised by a demand for greater involvement of young people regarding employment (that is to say, they are asked to assume more responsibility about their own job careers), this happens within the framework of 'activating' measures initiated by governments and international organisations to foment changed attitudes in the unemployed (Bonvin 2008; Lodemel and Moreira 2014). Within these activating programmes, the figure of the entrepreneur has expanded enormously in the years after the 2007–2010 recession. Initially confined to the economic and enterprise ambits, the concept of the entrepreneurial spirit has been embraced by the field of labour and social policies and an entrepreneur has become

a normalised figure worthy of being imitated. In business circles and international organisations, the messages to young people contain a set of positive images of the entrepreneurial mentality (talent, creativity, innovation, etc.) that emphasise the importance of human capital. In this logic of human capital, every individual is the owner and is responsible for his/her capital, which one must look after and adapt to the needs of the competitive market. This approach contains the idea that everybody is capable of becoming an entrepreneur, so that human capital has become a type of training space for constructing juvenile subjectivities based on the idea of being a business person of his/her own. In recent years this has been the pillar of most strategies for entrepreneurial activation (Santos and Muñoz 2017).

The EU and the OECD have welcomed these influences with numerous pro-business programmes in the context of the 2007 crisis, not that they had ignored this policy beforehand, but now it has been given special significance. For example, in the EU the fundamental document of this strategy is the 'Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan: Reigniting the Entrepreneurial Spirit in Europe' (European Commission 2012), which outlined the main ideas for fomenting entrepreneurship. The document begins with the argument that entrepreneurship is the best way to get out of the crisis and even suggests that the weakness of the entrepreneurial spirit was responsible for it. It supports business education programmes, creating an atmosphere favourable to entrepreneurs, funding, taxes, new technologies, help with bureaucratic processes and also programmes to extend the entrepreneurial spirit to disadvantaged groups, the so-called inclusive entrepreneurship.

If one looks at entrepreneurial activation within these groups, and especially in NEETs, Kelly (2006) suggested that the *youth at risk* category is being used as a worryingly negative image to show the virtues of the entrepreneurs of themselves by entrepreneurial thinking. This process, which has arisen in recent years, involves different actors (public administrations and business associations) who are able to collaborate in constructing a new entrepreneurial subjectivity in which responsible individuals are encouraged to lead their lives as if they were a business or a project in process. This norm is regarded as the model to follow for the actions of those responsible for social interventions and the large programmes for fomenting entrepreneurship (Gerrard 2017).



## European Union, OECD and Other International Programmes for NEETs

In harmony with all this encouragement to take up entrepreneurial activation, the EU has recently adopted the twin concept of NEET entrepreneurship through the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) and in 2013 established the Youth Guarantee initiative, a measure with considerable funds at its disposal and designed to relieve the juvenile unemployment caused by the recession of 2007–2010. This programme, primarily targeted at NEETs, not only aimed to support entrepreneurship, but also to improve the situation of these young people, either by finding them gainful employment, training or staying in business companies, among other measures. However, the basic YEI document (European Commission 2016) highlighted that 53 per cent of the Member States had already implemented start-up support for young entrepreneurs in projects financed by the YEI, showing the wide expansion of the NEET-entrepreneurship idea that has been the model of many projects. The profile of these initiatives can be found in databases<sup>3</sup> with information on the projects designed to encourage the entrepreneurial spirit among NEETs. In general, they were managed by consortia in which a number of countries and different actors participated, including universities, public administrations, business associations, chambers of commerce, etc. The projects marked out the intervention objectives, which ranged from simple training in basic skills in order to awaken their entrepreneurial spirit, to the most ambitious which aimed to set up specific business projects to give permanent jobs to the NEET participants. The most ambitious of these projects got the young people into funding and support programmes for start-ups and self-employment, and some of them were very similar to the business incubators often found in the world of start-ups. For example, the ‘Be the Change’ project, with teams from six European countries, was based on an intergenerational learning system in which entrepreneurs over 50 years of age used their experience to teach entrepreneurial skills to young NEETs by informal teaching methods (Be the Change 2017). Along similar lines, four EU countries with high percentages of youth unemployment participated in ‘Creative Business: A New Start for NEETs’ to inculcate 120 of them with the entrepreneurial spirit through a specially devised advisory tool based

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<sup>3</sup>To deepen the variety of European projects carried out with the NEET collective, we recommend the database of European Commission-Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. This database contains EU policy documents and reports relating to European Union employment, social affairs and inclusion policies. It is possible to find descriptions of EU-funded projects (<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1307&langId=en>).

on competencies, training and developing business ideas (Creative Business 2017).

Apart from training and competencies, other YEI measures were aimed at funding NEETs to help them set up micro-businesses. For example, the Italian employment service (ANPAL) created a fund to finance these initiatives in 2016. The *SELFIEmployment (Fondo Rotativo Nazionale)* awarded micro-credits to young unemployed people through a selection process and business plan follow-up scheme. Up to 2018, 4200 Italian NEETs had obtained micro-credits through this programme in order to start a business (European Commission 2018). Although the Youth Guarantee projects have been in existence for only a short time and a detailed examination of the results will be required, some good practice protocols and recommendations have already been created. The European Commission (2018) has published the following recommendations relating to programmes for NEETs: combine training-based support measures with funding, evaluate business plans, offer counselling and mentorship and provide follow-up support for young entrepreneurs during the first years of entrepreneurship. The YEI ends in 2020, but the interest it has created in inculcating the entrepreneurial spirit augurs well for the renewal of this type of measure and a connection to other EU funds, such as the European Social Fund. Some Member States have incorporated the EU recommended entrepreneurial directives into their national legislations and it is hoped that over time this will happen in all Member States. The last edition of the *Missing Entrepreneurs* report (OECD/European Union 2019) includes updated data on the trends in self-employment activities by women, youth, seniors, the unemployed and immigrants. Finally, the World Bank Group promotes entrepreneurship among young Latin American NEETs. In their report on this organisation, de Hoyos et al. (2016) described the profiles of these young people, who are often familiar with situations of poverty and exclusion and even serious problems of delinquency and drug-dealing, and how this organisation attempts to improve their situation by offering solutions to the lack of formal jobs in the South American labour markets.

## Conclusion

The present situation of NEETS relative to entrepreneurial spirit and starting a business could well be described as a complex reality. As argued in the first section, the term NEET is an unsatisfactory construct. Almost all authors cited in this work have highlighted the term's limitations in one way or

another. Statistically it includes various population strata with very different problems and experiences, and so is difficult to treat them as a homogeneous group. It is also a socially unpopular stereotype that sometimes generates a negative vision of disadvantaged youth and has been used by experts, journalists or politicians to present a reality to suit their own interests. The term has also often been used as a euphemism to avoid an argument on youth in precarious situations and the present generational inequalities, and thus divert these political questions to the technical field of specialists. Businesswise, the term is in another category to those of conventional types of business organisation and does not correspond to typical business behaviour, but rather one that accumulates apparently insuperable determinants for creating a business company and in the end defies being studied in the entrepreneurial field due to its extreme heterogeneity. Its members range from young university graduates who cannot find job opportunities to school dropouts living in tower blocks on the outskirts of cities. The best lesson one can learn from research on NEETs and the enterprising spirit is that a person must take into account this internal heterogeneity when proposing solutions aimed at encouraging NEETs to go into business.

To counteract their many difficulties and their entrepreneurial behaviour deficiencies, a new field of intervention is being opened up based on extensive projects financed by international organisations. These projects have an applied dimension and are directed by specialised teams from NGOs, universities and business companies with the aim of helping NEETs to set up successful businesses. Some of the most interesting of these projects are based on the idea that to be successful, it may be necessary to extend the frontiers of entrepreneurship beyond merely creating businesses. If NEETs lack the resources to start a business, then other opportunities can be found by achieving intermediate objectives that do not necessarily end in an actual enterprise, but in a gradual approach to this goal by learning competencies, taking initiative, plus becoming involved in local activities with which they can feel identified and whose needs they are familiar. In recent comments on entrepreneurship initiatives and entrepreneurial behaviour, O’Gorman (2019) proposed some interesting ideas that could be applied to NEET entrepreneurs. He suggested giving special attention to future research on certain aspects of business behaviour that are not usually taken into account in the conventional literature, but could have a positive influence on entrepreneurship. O’Gorman mentioned three interesting aspects for consideration: (1) Context—if this is considered to influence the entrepreneurship process, it may be vital to exploit the situational factors in order to boost entrepreneurial behaviour. Therefore, the micro factors and the local context

may be decisive in developing NEETs' entrepreneurial behaviour. A project anchored in the local context could reinforce an initially weak entrepreneurial initiative. (2) Temporal Perspective—this aspect could be considered not as a given situation, but as a transitory, dynamic, evolving condition inscribed in the entrepreneur's life course. This observation is highly applicable to NEETs, since they are usually reluctant to become entrepreneurs, but an entrepreneurial initiative could perhaps be gradually developed on a micro level. Being able to imagine themselves as entrepreneurs may be a gradual process inscribed in the NEET life course. (3) Variety of Routes into Entrepreneurship—attention needs to be given to the diversity of business enterprises and avenues into starting a business. This means that a NEET initiative may not necessarily involve a start-up, but may be related to self-employment, being part of a cooperative, working in a team within a local association or taking over a franchise. The 'natural' entrepreneur, who combines strong motivation with a promising and viable business initiative, may not be the only model NEETs can follow to make their own business initiatives a reality.

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