

Article

NEET, One Term to Bind Them All

Carlos Pesquera Alonso ^{1,*} , Práxedes Muñoz Sánchez ² and Almudena Iniesta Martínez ³ ¹ Tutmonda Esperantista Junulara Organizo, 3015 BJ Rotterdam, The Netherlands² Education Department, Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia, 30107 Guadalupe de Maciascoque, Spain; pmunoz@ucam.edu³ Psychology Department, Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia, 30107 Guadalupe de Maciascoque, Spain; ainiesta@ucam.edu

* Correspondence: cpesquera2@alu.ucam.edu

Abstract

In many cases the label NEET (referring to the youth Not in Education, Employment, or Training) is applied without really taking into account the diversity within the group. Even among the studies focusing on NEET diversity, few publications challenge the use of the label at the international level. This article accepts that challenge and combines the mentioned perspective regarding educational level. The article also presents explanatory models, with variables belonging to four categories (NEETs and unemployment, economy, social aspects and education) aiming to analyze those differences. The results reveal that the difference between countries on the average educational attainment of NEETs and the rest of the youth are considerably big and that (1) variables connecting NEETs and unemployment do not explain those differences; (2) economic variables slightly explain the phenomenon; (3) social aspects show volatile significance; and (4) mostly educational factors clarify the differences. This study shows that for the study countries, the less competitive the education system, the higher risk of becoming a NEET for those who attain higher educational levels.

Keywords: NEET; education; youth; unemployment; European Union; policy

1. Introduction

Although nowadays the term NEET (young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training) is currently a generally accepted and adopted concept, it needed time to develop and expand (Mascherini, 2019). Initially, when the related concept appeared during the 80s of the last century, it was called *Status 0* and it exclusively referred to youth aged 16–17 who had dropped out of school but were not working, because research diagnosed that it was a group of young people for whom there was no status in which to categorize them (Rees et al., 1996). The idea continued its development in the global north, and other categories aiming to better understand that gap arose. Some examples are concepts like early leavers (Psifidou, 2023) (putting the focus on those who stop their educational path before finishing it), excluded positions like the Asian categories of *Freeter* in Japan (Nagatomo, 2004), *Tang ping* in China (Lu et al., 2026), and *N-po generation* in South Korea (Cho & Stark, 2016), or the category NEET itself. Those and some others reflect different approaches to the related issue of not integrating a considerable percentage of the youth into their respective societies.

The term NEET itself makes it clear that it is a technical definition, regarding the relationship of young people both with the labor market and their preparation to participate in



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it. Because of that nature, the term NEET puts young people into the same group without taking into account other characteristics, such as age, gender, location or attained educational level. In other words, the concept of NEET brings together very diverse groups and does not consider the reasons why each young person becomes a NEET. Thus, the expansion of the use of the term has led to criticism about whether the use of NEET is useful (Contini et al., 2019) or whether it is a good approach to embrace the concept of NEET without considering which subgroups build the whole set (Eurofound, 2016).

In particular, one of the many factors that influence the debate regarding the heterogeneity of NEETs is the educational level, an aspect on which we focus in this research. Following that perspective, authors such as Zudina (2021) have already analyzed this issue. However, Zudina focuses almost exclusively on the individual and their chances of being NEET. This type of criticism is shared by Serracant (2014), who goes so far as to propose the need to have a different indicator than the term NEET. This type of approach analyzes the risks of being a NEET according to access to education, but neglects the fact that, when applying a state perspective, as in the multi-state case of Berlin et al. (2021), it is forgotten that there are substantial differences between countries regarding the average educational level achieved by NEETs and the rest of the youth.

This divergence between countries and attained educational level has not yet been explained by the literature, but we believe that its analysis can lead to understanding the appropriateness of the use of the term NEET, especially when the national framework to which it refers is changed.

The initial hypothesis of this article is that the elements of supply and demand are key to understanding the differences in the average educational level reached by NEETs. On the one hand, each educational system is more or less selective according to its particular conditions (Stumbrienė et al., 2022), with the consequent variability in the pressure to obtain a certain educational level according to said educational system. Considering this perspective, this study does not focus on the quality of the training itself but on the advantages that obtaining or not obtaining a particular educational accreditation grant when competing for a job. The hypothesis that this research contrasts is whether what generates a different starting situation, depending on the country analyzed, is due to the fact that young people are exposed to different types of pressure (which may depend on market, family, social or other relevant requirements) when they decide to try to obtain a certain educational level. This text highlights one of those factors, specifically that the difficulty of attaining a higher education, which varies in one country or another, affects the ease of obtaining an accreditation, and therefore the distinction that educational accreditation provides. In short, we analyze whether the difference between the average educational level attained by NEETs and the rest of the youth (from now on EETs, as in *Education, Employment, or Training*) depends on the educational system itself or on the market and the geographical framework. In line with other research, such as that of Ciccarelli and Fabrizi (2017, p. 35) where the “wait and see” concept is used, we signal that cultural factors, such as support and pressure from the family to obtain an accreditation or to keep the young person as a NEET while looking for a job opportunity within what they have been trained for, can have an effect on the NEET rate.

Thus, the objective of this article is dual. On the one hand, it seeks to point out a problem that has not been given due attention, the difference in attained education between NEETs and EETs. On the other hand, this research also intends to clarify the adequacy of the use of the term NEET according to the national space in which it is used. Furthermore, beyond any intellectual interest, its understanding also aims to contribute to the improvement of public policies that seek to alleviate the NEET situation.

To test these hypotheses about the differences in the average educational level of NEETs and EETs in the different European Union (EU) countries, we take a selection of countries with some of the highest NEET rates that present a substantial difference in the average educational level attainment between NEETs and EETs. Once we present descriptive statistics of said difference, we proceed to the creation of explanatory models of the phenomenon, with the introduction of variables according to four categories (NEETs and unemployment, economy, social aspects and education).

In the following sections of this text, we first present a review of the literature on the factors that affect the NEET diversity that may have an effect in explaining the actual differences between countries. In Section 2, we describe the methodology of the study in detail. It is followed by Section 3 exposing the results of the analysis of the models. Section 4 covers the discussion and at the end, Section 5 includes the conclusions reached thanks to the analyzed data.

With the expansion of the concept in the analysis of public policies and in the scientific literature, the term experienced modifications and began to refer to a bigger age interval. In fact, this age range is not delimited in a uniform way between countries and time periods. As an example, it is enough to analyze the age limitation in the literature (e.g., [Maguire, 2015](#); [Liszka & Walawender, 2018](#); [Maynou et al., 2020](#)) or the changes that key public policies, such as the Youth Guarantee ([Kraatz, 2017](#)), have undergone in this regard. The direct consequence of this process is the increase in the group size, which goes hand in hand with an increase in the diversity of profiles covered by the NEET label ([Contini et al., 2019](#)).

Despite this fact, it is common to find multiple studies in which the NEET group is considered as a homogeneous group in terms of education, resources, family situation, etc. ([Carcillo et al., 2015](#)). As a consequence, multiple public policies understand the NEET category as a whole and do not consider its diversity ([Yates & Payne, 2006](#)). Like Yates and Payne, authors such as [Liszka and Walawender \(2018\)](#) criticize this approach. Without assessing the moral or intellectual importance of adapting the term more to its reality, these criticisms focus on the consequences that this approach has on NEETs. As such, authors like [Strecker et al. \(2021\)](#) show how the main consequence of this approach is that public policies aimed at NEETs do not achieve their objective.

The extension of the aforementioned criticisms, and the appearance of studies that revealed the importance of taking into account the diversity of NEETs, built the ground for studies such as the one performed by [Eurofound \(2016\)](#) exactly on this subject. This Eurofound report seeks to contribute to the improvement of public policies on NEETs, for which it breaks down the NEET population into a total of seven groups. The criteria for establishing these subsets are sociodemographic factors (such as gender and age), educational level, enrollment in public employment services, and history and relationship with the labor market. The report in its conclusions also points out that this diversity is not homogeneous between countries, showing the prevalence of some groups over others varies depending on the geographical framework.

The previously mentioned increase in the NEET age range up to 30 years has also led to the analysis of age as another key factor in understanding the diversity of NEETs. Thus, [Caroleo et al. \(2020\)](#) differentiate two main groups according to age, although they do not define a fixed age range to differentiate both groups. The authors base that dichotomy on seeing youth as when the process of transition to adulthood takes place. Following that mindset, those young NEETs of younger age find themselves in a situation substantially different from that experienced by the NEETs whom they call young adults. According to the perspective of Caroleo et al., the difference stems from the approach and perspectives that NEETs have, and thus, society understands that the youngest NEETs are in a stage

where they are still being trained; society expects that they will mainly remain linked to the educational system. However, for the so-called young adults, society expects that they have already completed their training or, if they are prolonging their training process, that they will combine it with an active participation in the labor market. Faced with environments with such divergent social pressures, we find what MacDonald (2011) supports by highlighting the role of public policies: reality strengthens the argument of considering the NEET diversity, so that public policies aimed at NEET can offer solutions tailored to their needs.

Another relevant aspect for this analysis is the factor of education as a key element among NEETs. Nonetheless, this approach includes positions that are substantially different. Authors such as De Luca et al. (2020) identify that one of the characteristics that defines the group is that there is a high number of early leavers who are NEETs. Meanwhile, other approaches lead to analyzing the quality of training and education centers with the individual probability of being a NEET. Although there are analyses that go beyond this individual focus, those analyses tend to be limited by the national perspective, as in Barth et al. (2021). However, there are few studies that make a comparison between the different educational systems and the NEET level, as in the cases of Agranovich (2019) and Choi (2015), where they analyze the correlation between the quality of the results in PISA and the NEET rate.

Meanwhile, authors such as Rambla and Scandurra (2021) also focus on this point. In their research, they show the varying positions between NEETs who have obtained university education and NEETs who have not completed compulsory education, depending on the European countries being analyzed.

This geographical emphasis is one of the deficiencies of these studies, which focus on specific countries or commit the same problem they criticize: they understand the group as a unit within the selected geographical framework they analyze. Few are the examples like Bradley et al. (2020) or Bacher et al. (2017), where they put the focus on the regional component to understand the NEET heterogeneity. Maynou et al. (2020) also reflect this geographical problem:

“the fact that a particular region in a country can be more similar to a region in another country than to some other regions in its own country” (Maynou et al., 2020, p. 4).

However, to understand the reasons behind the NEET characteristics, it is not enough to merely describe them. Other external factors have a direct impact on the NEET heterogeneity. This is highlighted by Pesquera Alonso and Strand (2020), who illustrate how the percentages that make up the NEET set, with respect to their main characteristics, have changed considerably depending on the disturbances and fluctuations of the economy. Caroleo et al. (2020) also highlight this aspect, pointing out how the appearance of economic crises generates both a disruption in the number of NEETs and changes the NEET prototype with respect to their educational level. Along these same lines, Amendola (2021) verifies this type of disturbance, by giving special attention to the gender of the NEETs.

However, the disturbances caused by the economy in the characterization of NEETs are not limited to growth. Thus, authors such as Vancea and Utzet (2018, p. 882) point to the “shortage of low-skilled jobs on the labor market”, as an argument to understand why certain NEETs have a lack of interest or confidence in finding a way out of their situation. In this framework, sectors with a large percentage of unskilled employment, such as tourism or agriculture (Simões & do Rio, 2020), can have a bigger effect on the NEET rate, and, as a consequence, on the composition of the group as a whole.

Another type of external factors that affect the NEET heterogeneity are social and cultural factors. In the research by Kotroyannos et al. (2015), the authors highlight how

the idea of family has repercussions on this fact. They signal that there are family models, such as the Mediterranean, that tend to have an effect in keeping young people as NEET, thus giving those with high qualification time while they are waiting to find a job in the field in which they received their education or training. Along these lines, Robson (2010) reveals how the structures of the Welfare State transfer the weight of the supporting NEETs to the families, influencing the NEET rates and their main characteristics.

In this regard of social factors that contribute to varying the composition of NEETs, emigration should also be considered. Multiple studies have verified the relationship between worse economic conditions and emigration, Prada (2017) being an example of incorporating the focus on NEETs and applying that approach. Knowing this trend and the brain drain related to migration, studies such as the one by Nándori et al. (2018) highlight the possible relationship between youth employment and the effects of the emigration of young people that attained high education.

2. Materials and Methods

The research main questions of this study are:

1. “What are the differences in the average educational level attained by NEETs and EETs in the EU?”;
2. “What explains the differences in the average educational level attained by NEETs and EETs in the EU?”.

From them, we obtain secondary questions:

3. “How do the **NEET rate and unemployment** contribute to explaining the differences in the average educational level attained by NEETs and EETs in the EU?”;
4. “How does the **Economy** contribute to explaining the differences in the average educational level attained by NEETs and EETs in the EU?”;
5. “How do **Social aspects** contribute to explaining the differences in the average educational level attained by NEETs and EETs in the EU?”;
6. “How does **Education** contribute to explaining the differences in the average educational level attained by NEETs and EETs in the EU?”.

These will guide the structure of the following sections.

Therefore, the main core of the research relies on the possibility to calculate the average educational level attained by NEETs and EETs in a replicable format for all the study cases. Furthermore, the questions already reveal that we set a framework based on countries that may present considerable structural and cultural differences. Both elements, measurability and a macro perspective, made us select a quantitative methodology based on secondary databases. However, in that regard, this study admits falling into generalizations that it criticizes. Indeed, we argue that this research would have added more value if the analysis used regions as the main element, such as Avagianou et al. (2022). However, due to more extensive data availability at the national level and that it is the first analysis of this kind, the methodology is limited to the state level.

That is linked to the used databases, which correspond to those provided by the network of EUROSTAT offices, through labor-force surveys and other databases, and sources from the OECD regarding the PISA study (EUROSTAT, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e, 2025f, 2025g, 2025h, 2025i, 2025j, 2025k, 2025l, 2025m, 2025n, 2025o).

The selection of those databases limits the research framework, although it brings more advantages than disadvantages (e.g., ease of access and quality of data, relevance of public policies such as the Youth Guarantee, clear diversity of states, language, culture...) (Pesquera Alonso et al., 2021). On this basis, we prioritize the study in countries that are most affected by the NEET problem. We add this limitation due to the consideration that al-

ready the youth represents a relatively small percentage of people included in the surveys, due to current demographics, and that the label NEET refers to an even smaller percentage of the samples (EUROSTAT, 2025m, 2025n, 2025o). Thus, we chose three representatives from countries with high NEET rates (Greece, Spain and Italy) plus the European Union 27 from 2020 as a whole (EU27). The reason is that, as [Pesquera Alonso and Strand \(2020\)](#) show, these countries represent the three possible situations regarding the study variable (the differences in the average educational level attained by NEETs and EETs (1) is higher for NEETs, (2) is higher for EETs and (3) is more or less the same for both groups). Therefore, they cover the whole spectrum of possibilities regarding the difference in educational attainment between NEETs and EETs in the EU. In addition, although these are geographically distant countries, the added value of the fact that these countries share a series of relevant similarities adds value to their comparison. Nonetheless, we assume that the geographically cautious selection of three representative countries may reduce the validity of extrapolation attempts aiming to expand the conclusions of this study to the whole EU.

Regarding the time frame, the study period covers the last 20 years, between 2005 and 2024. This interval implies the inclusion of years during which the percentage of NEETs has varied considerably. It includes periods of crisis and economic booms. Those characteristics facilitate understanding the changes in the variable of interest and ensure that the core of the analysis is based more on a structural perspective instead of on a specific economic situation.

Having set the limits of the investigation, we developed the main indicator. In this case, it is the difference between the average level of education reached by NEETs and EETs. This indicator is made by the authors. We started with the percentages of young people according to their level of education (EUROSTAT, 2025i) and the percentage of NEETs with respect to young people according to their level of education (EUROSTAT, 2025n) grouped in three categories:

Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education;
Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education;
Tertiary education.

Those categories correspond to categories 0–2, 3–4 and 5–8 of ISCED 2011 ([UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012](#)). It allowed us to weigh each category and create an indicator for the average for each of the two groups, for each selected country and for the EU27. We later subtracted both averages, to know the difference between the two groups ($NEET_{edu}$ and EET_{edu}). Then we calculated the proportion of the difference with respect to the average educational level that the NEETs attained (Δedu). The consequence of that formula is that a positive result means that NEETs have a higher average level of education than EETs, while a negative result implies the opposite situation, that NEETs have a lower average attained level of education than EETs. This also means that the value of the indicator shows the percentage of this difference with respect to the average education level that the NEETs attained.

$$NEET_{edu} = \frac{NEET_{ISCED\ 1-2} * 1 + NEET_{ISCED\ 3-4} * 2 + NEET_{ISCED\ 5-8} * 3}{NEET_{ISCED\ 1-2} + NEET_{ISCED\ 3-4} + NEET_{ISCED\ 5-8}}. \quad (1)$$

$$EET_{edu} = \frac{EET_{ISCED\ 1-2} * 1 + EET_{ISCED\ 3-4} * 2 + EET_{ISCED\ 5-8} * 3}{EET_{ISCED\ 1-2} + EET_{ISCED\ 3-4} + EET_{ISCED\ 5-8}}. \quad (2)$$

$$\Delta edu = \frac{NEET_{edu} - EET_{edu}}{NEET_{edu}}. \quad (3)$$

In the next section, firstly we present the aforementioned indicator as a descriptive variable, fulfilling the function of introducing the analysis of the results. After that, in a

second step of the analysis, we show statistical models that allow us to analyze the correlation between independent variables and the dependent variable, the indicator of the percentage difference in the average educational level NEETs and EETs attained. The dependent variables selected for the creation of the models, ordered according to their theme (NEETs and unemployment, economy, social aspects and education), are the following:

1. NEETs and unemployment
 - a. Percentage of youth unemployment (15–29 years) (EUROSTAT, 2025o);
 - b. Percentage of NEETs among youth (15–29 years) (EUROSTAT, 2025m);
2. Economy
 - a. Number of beds (tourism) per 1000 inhabitants (EUROSTAT, 2025g, 2025j);
 - b. Percentage of GDP from agriculture (EUROSTAT, 2025e);
 - c. Percentage growth of real GDP per capita (EUROSTAT, 2025k);
3. Social aspects
 - a. People emigrated from the country per 1000 inhabitants (EUROSTAT, 2025d, 2025j);
 - b. Percentage of households with three or more adults (EUROSTAT, 2025b);
 - c. Percentage of children under 3 years of age who use childcare services for at least one hour per month (EUROSTAT, 2025a);
4. Education
 - a. Percentage of people aged 30–34 with a university education level (EUROSTAT, 2025h);
 - b. Percentage of early leavers (18–24 years) (EUROSTAT, 2025c);
 - c. Mean percentage of 15-year-old students who did not pass the three PISA tests (EUROSTAT, 2025l);
 - d. Household spending on education per inhabitant (EUROSTAT, 2025f, 2025j);
 - e. Household expenditure on tertiary education per inhabitant (EUROSTAT, 2025f, 2025j).

The selection of the variables in the category of NEETs and unemployment is because they control the direct influence of the situation of NEETs and employment in the study variable. Regarding the category of economy, the variable related to tourism shows the influence of a sector that mainly employs unskilled manual labor, similarly to the variable of agriculture. The fifth independent variable, on GDP per capita, controls the relationship of growth with changes in the study variable. In the third category, on social aspects, the migratory variable is introduced as an element that can contribute to a reduction in the total number of young people in the country. The number of households with three or more adults shows how family support may affect the study variable, while the use of nurseries works as a variable that may influence the presence of young people who are forced to stay at home, or not, and may reveal a strong incidence of gender on it. Considering the last category, education, variables directly linked to the educational level are selected, either by their culmination in the ninth variable or by their abandonment, in the tenth. The eleventh variable, on the results of PISA, assesses the level of demand of the educational system and the last two variables show economic barriers to access education.

While most of these variables are directly available in the mentioned sources, variables 3, 6, 11, 12 and 13 have been created from combining different indicators. In the case of the variable on PISA, the mean has been created with equal weight to the three categories of the study (Mathematics, Reading and Science) and in the rest the absolute indicators have been divided by the total population.

In the models created from the aforementioned independent variables, this article shows the correlations of each study country, of the three countries combined and of the EU27, as well as their statistics and their significance. The formula for trend lines follows the linear regression model, according to the following formula,

This is example 1 of an equation:

$$y = mx + b. \quad (4)$$

To complete the analysis, we will focus on how the aforementioned correlations vary between each country, how they behave as a whole and how this dynamic is somehow similar to the EU27 as a whole or is only present among the study countries.

3. Results

The first step to understand the differences in the average educational level NEETs and EETs attained is to know the reality of said divergence. Figure 1 shows the level of said difference according to each of the study countries and for the EU27. Regarding each of the study countries, the contrast already shown by [Pesquera Alonso and Strand \(2020\)](#) can be seen between the selected countries with a high NEET rate. The figure shows Greece at the top level, revealing that on average the NEETs attained a higher educational level than the EETs in a range that goes from a minimum of 2.66% to a maximum of 14.85% difference. Spain is on the opposite side, where on average every year NEETs had an attained educational level lower than EETs, varying from -21.65% to -11.35% . In between those cases, is Italy, whose line crossed five times the level of 0, the bar showing no difference on average attained education between NEETs and EETs. Italy presents values where the educational level of EETs exceeded that of NEETs by -2.96% , and also where it reversed up to 4.73% . Finally, focusing on the EU27, the European line shows that on average NEETs attained a lower educational level, but its variation is smaller than for Spain, having been between -8.39% and -3.63% .

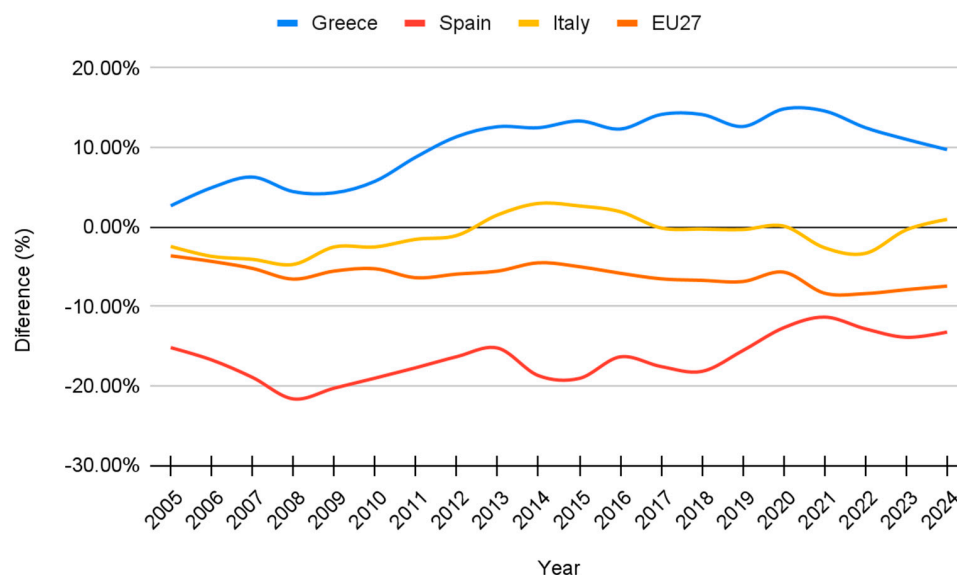


Figure 1. Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%).

In Table 1 we include the information obtained after the elaboration of the 13 models described in the Section 2. It shows the independent variable of the difference in the average educational level NEETs and EETs attained and each of the dependent variables. The information includes the slope m , the cut-off point with the b -axis, the coefficient of determination R^2 and the significance according to F-test.

Table 1. Relation between difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and the dependent variables.

		Greece	Spain	Italy	Study Countries	EU27
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and NEET rate (%)	m	0.379	−0.298	0.387	0.959	0.607
	b	0.028	−0.116	−0.094	−0.210	−0.146
	R ²	0.175	0.142	0.287	0.124	0.526
	F-test				***	
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and youth unemployment (%)	m	0.256	−0.025	0.320	0.209	0.285
	b	0.027	−0.158	−0.079	−0.079	−0.103
	R ²	0.434	0.007	0.605	0.027	0.361
	F-test	***	***	***		**
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and bedplaces per 1000 inhabitant	m	0.001	0.005	0.001	0.005	−0.003
	b	−0.036	−0.566	−0.124	−0.469	0.135
	R ²	0.397	0.494	0.091	0.588	0.521
	F-test	***	***	***	***	***
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and contribution of agriculture to the GDP (%)	m	3.263	7.430	8.351	7.691	3.017
	b	−0.013	−0.357	−0.168	−0.229	−0.110
	R ²	0.106	0.255	0.093	0.229	0.019
	F-test	***	***	***	***	***
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and real GDP growth per capita (%)	m	0.088	0.081	−0.085	−0.133	−0.098
	b	0.101	−0.166	−0.010	−0.024	−0.060
	R ²	0.013	0.013	0.019	0.002	0.038
	F-test			*	***	**
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and emigrants per 1000 inhabitants	m	0.013	0.003	0.019	0.000	
	b	0.006	−0.192	−0.049	−0.023	
	R ²	0.699	0.138	0.361	0.000	
	F-test	***	***	***	***	
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and households with three or more adults (%)	m	−1.198	−0.921	−0.904	1.277	1.671
	b	0.293	−0.041	0.098	−0.201	−0.203
	R ²	0.415	0.291	0.199	0.070	0.508
	F-test	**	*	**	***	***
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare (%)	m	0.188	0.223	0.083	−0.632	−0.231
	b	0.071	−0.261	−0.033	0.165	0.011
	R ²	0.287	0.401	0.036	0.457	0.694
	F-test	***	***	***		***
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and 30–34 people with tertiary education (%)	m	0.432	0.527	0.286	−0.268	−0.181
	b	−0.056	−0.393	−0.078	0.068	0.005
	R ²	0.752	0.452	0.299	0.053	0.572
	F-test	**		**		***
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and early leavers (%)	m	−0.719	−0.292	−0.327	−1.275	0.424
	b	0.164	−0.101	0.042	0.173	−0.111
	R ²	0.670	0.499	0.251	0.686	0.475
	F-test		***	.	**	*
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and underachievers in the three PISA sections (%)	m	0.523	0.659	−0.484	1.666	−0.318
	b	−0.062	−0.314	0.102	−0.454	0.010
	R ²	0.416	0.338	0.281	0.581	0.364
	F-test				**	*
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and household educational expenditure per capita (€)	m	−0.001	−0.001	−0.003	0.001	−0.001
	b	0.320	−0.012	0.504	−0.220	0.076
	R ²	0.398	0.119	0.697	0.313	0.306
	F-test	***	***	***	***	***
Difference in average educational attainment level [NEETs vs. EETs] (%) and household tertiary educational expenditure per capita (€)	m	0.000	−0.003	−0.001	−0.005	
	b	0.106	0.001	0.026	0.214	
	R ²	0.000	0.210	0.064	0.463	
	F-test	***	***	***	***	

Note: *** ≤ 0.001 ≤ ** ≤ 0.01 ≤ * ≤ 0.05.

3.1. NEETs and Unemployment

The first model, which introduces the variable of the **NEET rate**, is shown to lack significance for all cases except for the grouping of the three study countries. In this case, the positive value of the slope indicates that an increase in the rate of NEETs increases the educational difference in favor of NEETs, but the explanatory power that the NEET percentage variable has on the variance is very low (0.124).

The same positive direction is present in all cases when **youth unemployment** is introduced, but, in contrast to the previous models, only the case of the group of study countries is not significant. Although the introduction of youth unemployment has considerable explanatory power for the difference in Italy (0.605), it is not that strong for Greece (0.434) and the EU27 (0.367) and irrelevant to explain the variations in Spain (0.007).

3.2. Economy

We obtain greater explanatory power for the variance caused by the introduction of the variable of the number of **beds per 1000 inhabitants**: 0.588 for the set of study countries, 0.521 for the EU27, 0.494 for Spain and 0.397 for Greece. This proxy of the influence of tourism is significant in all cases, and positive (if the number of beds per inhabitant increases, NEETs attain a higher average educational level in comparative terms with EETs).

With different intensity, but following a similar process, the increase in the **importance of agriculture in GDP** shows that the slope for all cases is positive and the significance falls below acceptable levels. However, the explanatory power is low for all cases.

For the last variable of the category “economy”, **real growth of GDP per capita**, the regression is not significant for Greece and Spain, and in the other cases its explanatory power is very low (with values between 0.038 and 0.002).

3.3. Social Aspects

Moving on to the variables for the category of social factors, firstly we have the variable of **emigration per thousand inhabitants**. This model is significant for the four cases for which we have data (no data is available for the EU27). It shows a positive trend in all cases. In the Greek case, emigration shows a strong capacity to explain changes in variance (0.699), but for the other cases, the set of study countries (0.000), Spain (0.138) and Italy (0.361), the value is small or even 0.

All cases show an acceptable significance when we introduce the variable of **households with three or more adults**. Thus, while for the cases of individual countries the sign of the slope of the equation is negative, in the cases of the agglomeration of countries, the sign is positive. Regarding the coefficient of determination, the EU27 has a considerable value (0.508), Greece has a relative level (0.415), but it is low or very low in the three other cases.

The last variable of the group, **percentage of children under 3 years of age who use childcare services**, we denote the significance for all cases but the conjunction of the three study countries. The slopes have positive values for the countries and negative values for the agglomerations of countries. It is noteworthy that in the model for the set of the three study countries, a greater part of the change in variance (0.694) is explained for the EU27, while the values are relatively reduced for the individual countries (0.287, 0.401 and 0.036 respectively).

3.4. Education

Finally, the group of educational variables begins with the **percentage of people in the age range of 30–34 years who have completed a tertiary education**. The models produced by the introduction of this variable are significant in the case of Greece, Italy and

the EU27. The Greek model presents a positive slope, and a strong correlation (0.752). The Italian model also has a positive slope, but its R^2 is much lower (0.299). In contrast, the EU27 has a negative slope and weaker correlation than for the Greek case (0.572).

Regarding the variable of **early leavers**, the model for the group of the three study countries is again significant, as for the cases of Spain and the EU27. In that case, the EU27 is the only model with a positive value. The explanatory power of the model stands out for the group of countries (0.686), followed by Spain (0.499) and the EU27 (0.475).

Among the models generated by introducing the mean of **underachievers in PISA**, only the combined cases are significant. For the combination of the three study countries, the slope is positive and the value of the coefficient of determination is considerable (0.581), but for the EU27 the slope is negative and the correlation value is not that big (0.364).

When **household spending on education per capita** is taken into account, all cases are significant. The slope is negative for the cases of Greece, Spain, Italy and EU27 and positive just for the three countries together. The value of R^2 is considerable in the case of Italy (0.697), but it decreases considerably for the other cases.

The last variable, which deepens on the previous one by focusing on **household tertiary educational expenditure per capita**, is also significant for all the models with available data. The slope values are negative, with the exception of the null value for Greece. Nonetheless, we highlight the low value of R^2 , with maybe the relative exception of the three study countries together (0.463).

4. Discussion

This study confirms the discovery of [Pesquera Alonso and Strand \(2020\)](#), showing that there are very substantial differences between the average educational level attained by NEETs and EETs in EU countries with a high percentage of NEETs, and extends its results by showing that such difference is still present. This initial contribution inexorably supports the criticism of the widespread use of the NEET label in public policies that seek to tackle this problem ([Yates & Payne, 2006](#); [Liszka & Walawender, 2018](#)) by highlighting the diversity in one of its main aspects, education. In this case, it both validates the argument for the use of adapted public policies ([Berthet & Bourgeois, 2014](#)) and raises awareness on the importance of avoiding generalizations that may hinder the development of efficient NEET policies that cover multiple geographic locations.

The article is also strong proof against common assumptions on NEETs and their related stereotypes. Metastudies like [Rahmani and Groot \(2023\)](#) compile many examples of research based on well spread misunderstandings about the profile of NEETs (especially when compared to those who are not NEETs). Linking the concept of NEETs and negative concepts like low education or lack of skills is not uncommon ([Jongbloed & Giret, 2023](#)), although this article shows that even on average the opposite can be the normal.

Apart from the interest in improving the development of public policies aimed at NEETs and facing the problems of NEET generalization, in this article we tried to delve into the reasons that explain the aforementioned differences between countries, regarding the average educational level that NEETs and EETs attained. We have gone beyond finding variables that help to understand how these differences are generated within the countries themselves. In particular, we showed variables that may have an explanatory capacity for a particular country, but that may not contribute to clarifying the group dynamics. Such information helped us to create explanatory models that analyze the set of three study countries—three EU countries with a high percentage of NEETs and also opposite situations regarding the different education attained by NEETs and EETs. For this we selected variables grouped into four categories: NEETs and unemployment, economy, social aspects and education.

4.1. NEETs and Unemployment

For the first category, NEETs and unemployment, we verified that its variables do not help explain the differences between countries. This conclusion coincides with the research basis, due to the selection of countries with high NEET rates that also represent opposing situations on the spectrum of educational differences.

4.2. Economy

In the second section, on economics, the results are considerably different. The research shows that this category contributes to better clarifying differences between the study countries, but very slightly. The main contribution of the section is to show a common element, which is that if one promotes tourism, where a high educational level is not required, the difference in average educational level increases positively for the NEETs, although it does not happen with agriculture. Thus, it is possible that if the market gives more room to unskilled jobs, NEETs with less education have an advantage in leaving the NEET situation. This conclusion is reinforced when we analyze the contribution of economic growth, seeing that it does not depend on how much the economy grows, but on how.

4.3. Social Aspects

The category of social aspects revealed a bit more volatile significance. Given the chosen variables, we have found relevant correlation values for some cases, but not for the set of study countries. Among the results, we especially highlight that the use of formal childcare services, although the variable shows enough significance for all the cases but not for the agglutination of the study countries, make us think that perhaps there is a special relevance when explaining the differences, not with respect to the educational level, but to the percentages of women who are NEETs. Although it is not the focus of this research in particular, studies such as the one by Lüküslü and Çelik (2021) point out the importance of this point, and we hope that future research can analyze and verify its explanatory capacity on the differences in the NEET rate between sexes.

4.4. Education

It is the last category, of educational variables, that best explains the inequalities in the difference between the average educational level NEETs and EETs attained, although the results may not be obvious at first glance. In the case of all the study countries together, when the percentage of early leavers increases, the educational level decreases in terms of the relative position of NEETs. In other words, the early leavers are not distributed proportionally among the groups, indicating a greater tendency towards that of NEETs. However, the opposite happens for the EU27. A similar contradiction occurs in the model in which we introduce the average percentage of PISA underachievers. The correlation for the three countries together indicates the explanatory capacity of the variable, where its positive slope indicates that when the number of underachievers increases, the difference between the educational level of NEETs and EETs increases in favor of the EETs. This indicates that, if the education system requires a lower level to successfully complete it, NEETs obtain a comparatively higher average educational level than EETs. This fact validates the argument that the difference is explained within the framework of competitive education. In other words, education plays the role of a social space guided by the laws of supply and demand on obtaining educational accreditations. The information obtained through the education spending variables also validates that argument. In that case, when we combine the study countries, it is seen that the increase in spending on education, especially in tertiary education, reduces the difference in average educational level achieved to the

detriment of NEETs. Thus, the educational variables clarify that the difference between countries can be explained to a large extent by the number of barriers that exist to obtain different educational certifications, beyond their usefulness or not to escape the category of NEET.

5. Conclusions

In this research we showed that, despite the use of a term to refer to the entire set of NEETs, there are substantial differences to consider when speaking about their educational attainments. These differences refer to differences between NEETs, as other research already pointed out (Eurofound, 2016; Strecker et al., 2021; Contini et al., 2019), as well as to between the average NEET depending on the study country. This means that the policies that encompass several countries should take the fact of the average educational level attained into account, so that the profiles they assume for the NEETs are adequate when proposing solutions for their status.

This article also reveals that the NEET rate is not a factor that explains the differences between the educational level of NEETs between countries. The results showed how the economic structure affects this difference, and how the empowerment of certain sectors can reinforce the stereotype of the NEET as a person with a low educational level (Maguire, 2015), which can be counterproductive in countries where on average NEETs attained higher education than EETs.

Some of the models helped us prove that certain social aspects have an impact on the difference in the average educational level NEETs and EETs attained. However, this fact only helps to explain the changes within certain countries. Nonetheless, this information can be useful when dealing with a set of countries where the difference in the average educational level between NEETs and EETs is considerably dissimilar.

Nonetheless, this study also has its limitations. Firstly, while most of the effort is dedicated to presenting the original comparison between average educational attainment of NEETs and EETs in different countries, the developed models are not as expansive as they could be. The models can be expanded, so they contrast other relevant variables that may better explain the aforementioned differences. This goes hand in hand with another limiting factor in our models; the variables introduced are intertwined at different levels. In this case, this common feature in the Social Sciences, which causes multicollinearity between predictors, is not addressed as much as it could be. Lastly, we highlight a limitation that we already signaled: the limitation of using a national approach. Although we clarified the issue with the availability data, it does repair the loss of detail and understanding more precise data could add to the research.

Aiming to surpass those limitations, we argue that future research could easily revolve around improving the current models. We encourage considering expanding on the gender dimension, adding other economic variables, introducing other aspects of the educational systems, selecting more social and cultural factors, or reflecting on any interaction between such indicators, as they may produce key results in the field. Furthermore, we also would like to see future research that applies a regional perspective while using a similar methodological approach to the topic of the article and other publications that expand the geographical framework of this research and covers more study countries.

To conclude, our research introduces a useful new indicator for the analysis of the NEET situation, especially for comparative studies between countries. It also proposes some prospective ways to advance the research in the field. Finally, it proves the influence of competency, ease and cost of educational systems on explaining the difference in the average educational level NEETs and EETs attained. This fact has a high risk of leading to

human capital losses, since the data revealed that there are countries where one is more likely to be a NEET if their educational level is higher.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
EET	in Education, Employment, or Training
EU	European Union
EU27	European Union 27 (from 2020)

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