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FROM MARGINALISATION TO EMPLOYMENT: STRENGTHENING HUMAN CAPITAL OF MIGRANT NEETS

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Purpose: This article aims to analyse and evaluate the model for strengthening the competences and human capital of migrant and refugee NEETs developed in the NewComers@Work project with particular attention to its significance for the effective use of the potential of this group in the labour market across diverse European contexts.
Design/methodology/approach: The article draws on an analysis of the implementation of the NewComers@Work project (2022-2025), including reports produced within the project, training programmes, documentation of pilot activities, and the results of consultations with youth workers and employers. The model developed within the project combines the development of individual competences with mentoring and cooperation with the labour market, and refers to the concepts of multidimensional integration, the capability approach, and social capital theory.
Findings: Effective labour market integration of migrant and refugee NEETs requires the simultaneous strengthening of individual competences and the development of bridging social capital through direct cooperation with employers. The model increases employability and reduces the risk of "brain waste". The effectiveness of these actions depends on the flexibility of support and on cross-sectoral partnerships.
Research limitations/implications: A key limitation of the study lies in the pilot nature of the implemented activities and the lack of long-term observation of the outcomes achieved.
Practical implications: The practical and social implications concern approaches to strengthening competences and human capital that may also be applied to other groups at risk of marginalisation in the labour market.
Originality/value: The article presents the NewComers@Work project as a model for the development of human capital rather than solely as an integration initiative. Its value lies in combining theoretical foundations with practical implementation in diverse European contexts.
Keywords: Human Capital; Competences; NEET; Migrant NEETs; NewComers@Work Project.
Category of the paper: case study.

1. Introduction

Migration is not a new phenomenon in Europe; however, recent years have brought an increase in both its scale and complexity. Wars, natural disasters, and deteriorating living conditions in many regions of the world are prompting a growing number of people to seek safety and stability in European Union countries. The scale of this situation makes the integration of migrants and refugees one of the key social and economic challenges facing the EU (OECD, 2025).

The situation is particularly difficult for migrants and refugees belonging to the NEET[1] group. Eurostat data (2024) indicate that young migrants are significantly more exposed to poverty and marginalisation than their peers from the host population. This is influenced by the accumulation of factors such as migrant background, low levels of education, and language barriers. In the context of the EU labour market, which is increasingly based on human capital, the lack of professional, language, digital, and social competences further limits their employment opportunities (Rahmani, Groot, Rahmani, 2024; World Bank, 2019). These competence deficits are often further intensified by migration experiences, the lack of recognition of prior qualifications, and insufficient support (European Commission, 2020). In this context, the full social and economic integration of this group has become a significant challenge.

The project NewComers@Work: Strengthening the Employability of Young Refugee and Migrant NEETs was developed in response to these challenges. Its main objective was to strengthen the competences and position of young migrants and refugees through activities aimed at increasing their employment opportunities and supporting their sustainable social and labour market integration. The project was implemented through a transnational partnership, which made it possible to take into account diverse national contexts while enabling the exchange of experiences between organisations working with migrants.

This article aims to analyse and evaluate the model for strengthening the competences and human capital of migrant NEETs (mNEETs) developed within the NewComers@Work project, with particular attention to its significance for the effective use of the potential of this group in the labour market across diverse European contexts

2. Migrant NEETs in Europe- labour market context and integration models

The term NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) refers to young people, most commonly aged 15-29, who are not working, studying, or participating in training (Eurostat Glossary). In the literature, it has often been stereotypically suggested that the factors leading to NEET status stem primarily from individual characteristics and deficits. However, analyses conducted in various European countries show that this phenomenon is more accurately understood as the result of a complex combination of individual and institutional factors, such as the functioning of education systems, labour market policies, and the availability of support systems (Rocca et al., 2022). Some authors go even further, rejecting the individualisation of the "NEET problem" altogether and pointing instead to structural conditions—including transformations in labour markets, limitations in support systems, and socio-economic inequalities—as the main drivers behind the growth of this group (Lőrinc et al., 2020).

The NEET rate is one of the key indicators used to assess the functioning of youth labour markets as well as the effectiveness of education systems and employment policies in the EU. In 2024, the NEET rate in the EU remained significant at 11.1%, with considerable variation across countries from below 5% in some Western European states to around 20% in certain countries in Southern and Eastern Europe (Eurostat, 2025). Compared with the general youth population, the situation of young migrants and refugees is particularly disadvantageous, as they are significantly more likely to belong to the NEET group. A migrant background substantially increases the risk of remaining outside both education and the labour market (Alonso et al., 2022). Young migrants and refugees often experience a cumulative set of integration barriers, including language barriers that hinder access to both education and employment (Fasani, 2024). An additional challenge is the non-recognition of qualifications and the frequent occurrence of employment below one's level of competence (brain waste), resulting from difficulties in recognising diplomas and professional experience acquired in the country of origin. The situation is further exacerbated by psychosocial factors such as migration-related trauma, legal uncertainty, and limited support networks (Eurofound, 2022; OECD, 2025). At the same time, research conducted in different regions indicates that the scale and nature of these difficulties are strongly shaped by the regional context, including the functioning of local labour markets, education systems, and the availability of institutional support systems (Rocca et al., 2022; Kallenberg, 2020). As a result, the human capital of this group often remains persistently underutilised, with consequences at both the individual and the socio-economic level.

In response to these conditions, the NewComers@Work project was grounded in the concept of integration understood as a multidimensional process. According to the framework proposed by Ager and Strang (2008), integration encompasses social relations, cultural adaptation, civic engagement, and participation in economic life. It is not a one-sided process of assimilation but rather a dynamic relationship between migrants and host communities. Labour market integration therefore goes beyond simple employment activation and includes the development of sustainable employability as well as the ability to function in intercultural environments. This perspective is consistent with Sen's (2002) capability approach, which emphasises strengthening individuals' real opportunities to choose and pursue their life paths. Putnam's (2008) theory of social capital was also an important reference point. The development of so-called bridging social capital through mentoring and cooperation with employers constituted one of the key elements of the adopted strategy.

The project also incorporated a structural perspective. Integration barriers are systemic in nature and include, among other factors, difficulties in the recognition of qualifications, limited access to professional networks, and discriminatory practices (OECD, 2025). For this reason, the project assumed the involvement of employers as partners in the integration process and the creation of collaborative frameworks enabling the monitoring of progress and the adjustment of support to the individual needs of participants. This approach is consistent with the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2020), which emphasises the importance of cross-sector partnerships and the shared responsibility of public institutions, civil society organisations, and the private sector. From this perspective, strengthening the human capital of young migrants requires both the development of individual competences and the creation of more inclusive institutional and professional environments.

3. The NewComers@Work project- objectives, structure, and operational strategy from a human capital perspective

The project NewComers@Work: Strengthening the Employability of Young Refugee and Migrant NEETs was implemented between 2022 and 2025 under the Erasmus+ Programme, Key Action 2: Cooperation Partnerships in Youth (KA220-YOU)[2]. The project involved a partnership of seven organisations from six European Union countries. The project coordinator was Gdańsk University of Technology, while the partner organisations included: FRAME Foundation for the Development of International and Educational Activity (Poland), Athens Lifelong Learning Institute (Greece), Social Impact Development Centre (Luxembourg), Amadora Innovation em Unipessoal LDA (Portugal), Asociația Institutul pentru Parteneriat Social Bucovina (Romania), and PRISM Impresa Sociale S.R.L. (Italy)[3].

The diversity of the partners' organisational profiles made it possible to combine a research perspective with practical experience in youth work, social integration, and cooperation with the labour market. The transnational character of the project reflected the significant differences in migration contexts across the partner countries (OECD, 2021). Poland and Romania experienced an unprecedented inflow of refugees from Ukraine. Italy and Greece faced intensified migration along Mediterranean routes. Portugal recorded increasing immigration both from Portuguese-speaking countries and from Asia. Luxembourg has one of the highest shares of foreign-born residents in the EU, and its migration profile is primarily economic in nature, linked to the financial sector and the presence of international institutions (OECD, 2025). Such diverse labour market and institutional conditions required and at the same time enabled the development of a flexible model of activities adapted to different national contexts and focused on identifying and strengthening the competence potential of mNEETs.

The main objective of the project NewComers@Work: Strengthening the Employability of Young Refugee and Migrant NEETs was to strengthen the competences and position of young migrants and refugees through activities aimed at increasing their employment opportunities and supporting their sustainable social and labour market integration. The project also defined a set of specific objectives addressing different stages of the social inclusion process. These included, among others: creating safe and mutually respectful environments for beneficiaries, enhancing their qualifications through personalised educational and training activities, identifying and developing their career goals and aspirations, providing personalised support for entering the labour market, and offering mentoring support during the initial stage of professional activity.

To make the achievement of these objectives more feasible, the operational strategy adopted in the project assumed comprehensive and simultaneous activities targeting three groups: mNEETs, specialists working with young people (youth workers, trainers of vocational and social skills, and staff of migrant support centres), as well as employers and HR professionals. Activities directed at specialists aimed to expand and deepen their competences and to equip them with tools necessary for working with mNEETs, including after the completion of the project. In turn, activities addressed to employers and HR specialists were intended to build bridges between mNEETs and the labour market, among others by creating real pathways to employment and mentoring opportunities.

4. Implementation process of the NewComers@Work project

The implementation of the NewComers@Work project was designed as a coherent and structured process aimed at moving from identifying the needs of mNEETs, through the development of appropriate support tools, to the implementation and evaluation of the outcomes

of the activities undertaken. The adopted project implementation logic included the following successive stages:

1. Needs identification:
   a. preparation of national reports on the situation of mNEETs and the conditions of local labour markets in the partner countries,
   b. preparation of a needs analysis report (Needs Analysis – Common Report) identifying key barriers and areas of competence requiring support.
2. Development and testing of tools:
   a. development of the NewComers@Work curriculum as well as materials and tools for specialists working with young people (Digital Toolbox),
   b. pilot implementation of the programme in local communities.
3. Refinement and finalisation of tools:
   a. evaluation of activities and the refinement and finalisation of project tools.

The sequence of activities planned in this way ensured coherence between needs identification and the design of solutions, while enabling a gradual transition from analysis to practical outcomes supporting the development of competences and the human capital of mNEETs.

In the first stage, reports on the situation of mNEETs in the partner countries were prepared. These reports covered, among other aspects, the specific characteristics of local labour markets, the scale and profile of mNEETs, and the available forms of support. The national reports made it possible to identify both shared challenges and specific conditions resulting from local institutional and social systems. In Greece, the labour market was characterised by the seasonality of employment and a relatively low motivation for long-term labour market integration, resulting from the perception of the country as a transitional stage in onward migration. In Luxembourg, despite well-developed institutional support systems, a key challenge was the multilingual nature of the labour market and the difficulty of accessing positions corresponding to migrants' qualifications. In Poland, the mass inflow of refugees from Ukraine was associated with a mismatch between qualifications and labour market needs, as well as limited access to systematic Polish language training. In Portugal, particular emphasis was placed on psychosocial barriers, including experiences of discrimination, mental health challenges, and difficulties in balancing labour market participation with care responsibilities, especially among young women. In Italy, regional disparities in the labour market played a significant role, along with the concentration of mNEETs in low-paid and unstable sectors such as agriculture, hospitality, and services. In Romania, the report highlighted a combination of poverty, limited work experience, and weakly developed local support systems, which increased the risk of prolonged NEET status. In addition to these differences, the reports also confirmed the presence of common barriers, particularly limited knowledge of the host country's language, deficits in digital and soft skills, and low levels of self-confidence in interactions with the labour market.

In the second part of this stage, the Needs Analysis – Common Report[4] was prepared on the basis of a synthesis of the national reports and qualitative data obtained from in-depth interviews and focus groups with practitioners working with young migrants. The analysis identified key integration barriers common to all partner countries, primarily language barriers and deficits in soft skills, reinforced by psychosocial factors, as well as a mismatch between existing forms of support and the specific needs of mNEETs, and the lack of tools enabling individualised work with this group. The analysis of interviews and focus groups also revealed characteristic national differences. In Poland, the coexistence of language barriers and psychosocial burdens such as war-related trauma and family separation was particularly visible among young refugees from Ukraine. This often resulted in employment below their qualifications and highlighted the need for long-term, individualised support. In Greece, labour market instability was accompanied by a high motivation to acquire practical skills. In Italy, the main challenge was the fragmentation of education-to-work pathways and frequent job turnover. In Luxembourg, high formal requirements constituted a major barrier, while in Portugal there was a strong need for closer institutional cooperation. In Romania, weak links with employers and the lack of tools for planning career development pathways were identified as key challenges. The findings confirmed that effective support for mNEETs requires both addressing common integration barriers and taking into account local institutional and labour market conditions.

In the second stage of the project, the NewComers@Work Curriculum[5] and the Digital Toolbox[6] were developed. The Digital Toolbox contains good practices, online tools, and ready-to-use resources for youth workers, employers, and institutions. The curriculum was designed as modular and flexible so that it could be adapted to the specific conditions of different countries and institutions while maintaining a common core set of competences. Each of the four modules included complete workshop scenarios with detailed instructions, training materials, and additional reference sources. Module 1 addressed the needs of mNEETs identified in the first stage and focused on recognising individual needs, barriers, and resources in order to plan further development activities and define realistic educational and career goals.

Module 2 supported the development of language and digital skills and focused on practical aspects of communication, job search strategies, and the safe and effective use of digital tools. Module 3 addressed soft skills that increase the chances of social integration and employment. Module 4 supported the development of cooperation between mNEETs, youth workers, and local stakeholders, particularly employers, creating a coherent support ecosystem that facilitates sustainable integration into the labour market. The individual modules were designed so that they could be implemented either sequentially, as a coherent developmental process, or as standalone thematic workshops. This allowed youth workers to adapt the course of activities to the participants' level of competences, motivation, and life circumstances. Such an approach made it possible to use the programme both in long-term support processes and in shorter educational interventions.

The third stage of the project involved the pilot implementation of the developed tools in local environments across the partner countries. The activities were carried out within existing support structures, such as non-governmental organisations and integration centres cooperating with local labour markets. The pilot phase consisted of testing selected programme modules through group workshops, individual work, and mentoring activities adapted to the competences and life situations of the participants. During the implementation, youth workers used the developed training materials, including tools for needs assessment, planning individual development pathways, and monitoring participants' progress. The use of workshop scenarios and exercises made it possible to assess their practical usefulness in working with mNEETs. At the same time, elements of cooperation with the labour market environment were also tested, particularly contacts with employers and the use of the Digital Toolbox as support for the process of young migrants' adaptation to professional environments.

At a general level, the results of the pilot phase confirmed the usefulness of the programme's modular structure and the practical nature of the tools supporting the individualisation of work with mNEETs. Improvements were observed in participants' understanding of the labour market, increased engagement in educational activities, and a greater willingness to engage with employers. At the same time, the pilot phase revealed the need to simplify some of the content, extend work on language competences, and further refine the tools used for planning individual development pathways.

The pilot results in individual countries also confirmed the importance of linking and adapting forms of support to local conditions. In Poland, the effectiveness of the activities increased significantly when they were combined with psychosocial support, particularly in work with young refugees from Ukraine, who initially demonstrated a limited readiness to plan their career paths. In this context, individual work and the gradual development of a sense of agency proved particularly important. In Greece, the effectiveness of short, intensive workshop formats was confirmed, with participants highly valuing the practical character of the sessions and their direct connection to labour market requirements. In Italy, mentoring activities and modules aimed at developing soft skills played an important role, particularly in relation to communication and functioning in the workplace, while at the same time highlighting the need for longer support during the transition from education or inactivity to employment. In Luxembourg, a key conclusion was the need to further simplify tools for participants with limited language proficiency and to combine language support with elements of workplace-based learning. In Portugal, the pilot confirmed the importance of intermediary institutions and local partnerships, highlighting the usefulness of tools supporting communication between youth workers and employers, as well as the role of the Digital Toolbox in facilitating the adaptation of mNEETs to the work environment. In Romania, the pilot demonstrated the need to equip youth workers with more detailed tools and methodological guidelines for planning individual development pathways, particularly when working with young migrants with highly

diverse educational backgrounds, the absence of which limited the possibility of implementing coherent and long-term developmental support.

Based on the results of the pilot phase, specific modifications were introduced to the curriculum. These included simplifying selected content, expanding the set of tools for individual development pathway planning, and clarifying how the Digital Toolbox should be used in activities implemented in cooperation with employers. These changes increased the programme's operational usability and facilitated its application in diverse national contexts. It should be noted that the pilot results presented here refer to a relatively short period of implementation and do not include an assessment of long-term outcomes. Nevertheless, they allow for a positive evaluation of the programme's usefulness and its alignment with the needs of mNEETs.

5. Project outcomes- implications for human capital development

From the perspective of human capital development, the NewComers@Work project contributed to increasing the capacity of mNEETs to participate in the labour market through the development of competences with high adaptive value. In particular, language, digital, and soft skills were strengthened, as these determine the ability to learn in the workplace and to maintain employment. At the same time, an increase in participants' sense of agency and readiness to make educational and career-related decisions was observed, which is of key importance for activating individuals who have previously remained outside the labour market.The scale of participation in the pilot activities also indicates a genuine interest among this group in programmes aimed at strengthening competences. In total, 366 young migrants and refugees from the NEET group completed the full cycle of support within the project, which included training activities, mentoring, and elements of workplace-based learning, with the involvement of 90 employers participating in the pilot process. In line with the project's assumptions, efforts were made to create approximately 50 employer–participant matches in each partner country, although in practice one employer could support more than one participant. The initially planned model of three-month work placements was adapted during the implementation phase to the legal and organisational conditions of individual countries and ultimately took the form of a hybrid model lasting at least two months, combining workplace experience with additional training and mentoring provided by partner organisations.

The project also contributed to improving the efficiency of the use of institutional resources by strengthening the competences of professionals working with mNEETs and by standardising the tools used in developmental work. The application of a common modular programme enabled more precise tailoring of support to the participants' profiles, thereby reducing the risk of inefficient allocation of training and advisory activities. Institutions implementing the project

gained solutions that can be reused and scaled without the need to design new interventions each time. In this perspective, the project addressed the problem of underutilised or insufficiently utilised human capital among mNEETs, whose potential was constrained by language, competence-related, and psychosocial barriers. The project activities contributed to reducing these barriers, thereby increasing the chances of more effective inclusion of this group in educational and labour market processes and decreasing the risk of long-term economic inactivity.

The key success factors of the project included a solid needs-based diagnosis underpinning the intervention, the modular and flexible structure of the programme, the possibility of individualising development pathways, and the parallel involvement of different stakeholder groups. Of particular importance was the tripartite model of activities involving mNEETs, youth workers, and employers, which increased the efficiency of resource use and strengthened the sustainability of the results.

At the same time, the limitations of the project should be acknowledged. The pilot nature of the implementation and the limited time horizon do not allow for an assessment of long-term outcomes in terms of employment stability or productivity growth among participants. The effectiveness of the activities was also partly dependent on local institutional conditions and the availability of labour market partners. Despite these limitations, the adopted model of action can be applied in different EU countries, combining a common competence framework with the possibility of adaptation to local labour markets. From the perspective of human capital development, the project represents an example of an intervention that enables the effective strengthening and utilisation of the competences of individuals from a group at high risk of long-term exclusion from the labour market, while requiring relatively low adaptation costs across different institutional contexts.

6. Conclusion

The implementation of the NewComers@Work project confirmed that the effective integration of migrants and refugees from the NEET group into the labour market requires a systemic approach combining needs assessment, individualised competence development, and cross-sector cooperation. The project results indicate that strengthening language, digital, and soft skills, complemented by individual support, increases the readiness of mNEETs to engage in educational and professional activities and reduces the risk of long-term inactivity.

An important outcome was also the increased effectiveness of activities through the application of a modular programme enabling the individualisation of support. Such a solution reduces the risk of a mismatch between forms of support and participants' needs and increases the potential for replication and scaling of activities in different national contexts.

Additional value resulted from the parallel involvement of migrant and refugee NEETs, youth workers, and employers in the training activities. This approach made it possible to better align competence development with the actual requirements of the labour market and to strengthen the sustainability of the outcomes achieved.

At the same time, the limitations resulting from the pilot nature of the implementation and the relatively short observation period should be acknowledged, as they do not allow for a full assessment of long-term employment outcomes. The effectiveness of the activities also remains partly dependent on local institutional conditions and the structure of labour markets. Moreover, the level of labour market participation among migrants and the scale of the NEET phenomenon may differ significantly across host countries due to variations in migration structures, economic conditions, and integration policies. For this reason, the perspective presented here has a model character and does not include a detailed comparative analysis of these differences, which could be further developed in future research using quantitative data.

From the perspective of human capital development, the model presented constitutes an example of an intervention that enables more effective support for strengthening the human capital of individuals from groups at high risk of labour market exclusion while maintaining the flexibility needed to adapt to the diverse realities of European labour markets.

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Footnotes

[1] In the following sections of the article, the abbreviation mNEET will be used instead of the full term "migrants and refugees belonging to the NEET group".

[2] NewComers@Work project website, available at: https://newcomersatwork.eu/, January 2026.

[3] More information about the project partners, available at: https://newcomersatwork.eu/about, January 2026.

[4] Reports are available at: https://newcomersatwork.eu/resources/, January 2026.

[5] NewComers@Work curriculum, available at: https://newcomersatwork.eu/2026/01/07/newcomerswork-curriculum/, January 2026.

[6] NewComers@Work Digital Toolbox, available at: https://www.newcomersatworktoolbox.eu/ January 2026.