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The Fundamental Role of Training Systems and Educational Policies in Preventing the NEET Phenomenon

Antonio Pellicano *

Abstract: Over the last two decades, the NEET phenomenon has become a pressing social issue, prompting intervention by the European Union. As early as 2013, the EU introduced the Youth Guarantee programme to promote youth employment and reduce both unemployment and inactivity across all member states. This paper provides an updated overview of the NEET phenomenon in Italy, explores its primary causes, and evaluates the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at facilitating young people's integration into the labour market. Special attention is given to the crucial role that education systems and training policies can play in addressing this issue. Finally, the paper proposes future actions to reduce the significant gap between Italy and more successful European countries in combating NEETs.

Keywords: *NEETs; Youth Guarantee; GOL; National New Skills Plan; School-to-work transition; education.*

1. Framing the Issue¹

While in the past the transition to adulthood followed a relatively straightforward trajectory, marked by well-defined and sequential stages², in recent decades the modalities and timing of these stages have evolved in response to economic, social, and cultural changes. The transition to adulthood has, in fact, become considerably more complex and decidedly less linear³, characterised by de-standardised⁴, reversible stages⁵ that can easily lead to “interrupted transitions” in which the risk of social exclusion becomes highly tangible.

NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) represent a paradigmatic example of a “blocked transition”.⁶ In much the same way as souls not yet freed from original sin wander in Catholic limbo, NEETs find themselves in a cyclical existence where no one works, studies, or

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¹ This contribution is a reworking and update of the paper presented at the “XXIV ISLSSL World Congress - Work in a Changing World: The Quest for Labour Rights and Social Justice,” Rome, 17-20 September 2024. It is attributable to the activity carried out by the local research unit of the University of Bari (CUP H53D23010850001), as part of the PRIN PNRR 2022 “YES - Youth Employment Strategy” (P.I. Prof. Carmela Garofalo, Code: P2022H89ZS), funded as part of Mission 4 “Education and Research” of the PNRR (component C2 - investment 1.1, Fund for the National Research Programme and Projects of Significant National Interest - PRIN), utilising the European funds from the NextGeneration EU Programme.

² The transition to adulthood has traditionally been characterised by progressive stages, such as the completion of one’s education, entry into the world of work, housing independence, the formation of one’s own household and ultimately parenthood.

³ These non-linear transitions have been termed “yo-yo transitions”. See, on this point, A. Biggart, A. Walter, *Coping with Yo-Yo Transitions: Young Adults’ Struggle for Support, between Family and State in Comparative Perspective*, in C. Leccardi, E. Ruspini (eds.), *A New Youth? Young People, Generations and Family Life*, Ashgate Publishing, 2006, pp. 41-60.

⁴ H. Brückner, K.U. Mayer, *De-Standardization of the Life Course: What it Might Mean? And if it Means Anything, Whether it Actually Took Place?*, *Advances in Life Course Research*, n. 9, 2005, pp. 27-53.

⁵ M.J. Shanahan, *Pathways to Adulthood in Changing Societies: Variability and Mechanisms in Life Course Perspective*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, n. 26, 2000, pp. 667-692.

⁶ M. Santagata, R. Lodigiani, *Ripensare la socializzazione alla vita adulta tra lavoro e partecipazione sociale. Il contributo della riflessione teorica*, in Vv.Aa (eds.), *From NEET to Need. Il cortocircuito sociale dei giovani che non studiano e non lavorano*, FrancoAngeli, 2020, p. 104. Also emblematic is the title of the recent report conducted by the National Youth Council, published in March 2024, *Lost in transition. Contrasto al fenomeno dei NEET: azioni di prossimità*.

follows an educational path, trapped in an existential stalemate from which escape is exceedingly difficult⁷.

The term “NEET” first appeared in the late 1990s in a British government document, replacing previous labels, and was used to refer to young people aged 16-18 who had left the education system early⁸. Later, in response to growing attention to this group at the European level, the age range was expanded to include all young people who are neither employed nor engaged in education or training⁹.

As is well known, NEET is an “umbrella category”¹⁰, capable of encompassing a wide range of young people with differing circumstances. According to an initial classification proposed by Eurofound, NEETs are divided into five subgroups: the conventionally unemployed; the unavailable due to family responsibilities, illness, or disability; the disengaged, those who are neither seeking work nor education and are not constrained by other obligations or incapacities; and, finally, the opportunity seekers and voluntary NEETs, who do not face significant hardship because they are engaged in other activities or are awaiting a specific professional and/or life opportunity¹¹.

A subsequent analysis introduced a further disaggregation of the NEET population into seven subgroups: the re-entrants, who may soon become

⁷ Cf. M.S. Agnoli, *Generazioni sospese. Percorsi di ricerca sui giovani NEET*, FrancoAngeli, 2014, pp. 280 ss.

⁸ The term NEET was initially preceded by the term “Status 0” to refer to those young people who didn’t fall under any labour market analysis status due to the absence of work experience or education and training. Later, the term “Status A” was adopted to emphasize the drop-out status (A, *abandoned*) of a generation. For an effective reconstruction of the origin of the NEET phenomenon, M. Mascherini, *Origins and Future of the Concept of NEETs in the European Policy Agenda*, in J. O’Reilly, J. Leschke, R. Orlic, M. Seeleib-Kaiser, P. Villa (eds.), *Youth Labor in Transition: Inequalities, Mobility, and Policies in Europe*, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 503 ss.

⁹ In recent years, and particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic, the target age group for scientists and policy-makers has expanded to include young people neither employed nor in education or training aged 15-29. It should be noted, however, that in Italy the acronym is now used to refer to the inactive aged 15-34 in some regions (Basilicata, Campania, Calabria, Apulia, Sicily, Abruzzo, Molise and Sardinia).

¹⁰ V. Cuzzocrea, *Projecting the category of NEET into the future, Perspectives on Youth*, 2014, p. 72. Cf., also, S. Maguire, *Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET): Recent policy initiatives in England and their effects, Research in Comparative and International Education*, n. 10, 2015, p. 534: “NEET has become a “catch all” definition for young people who have failed to make successful transitions”.

¹¹ Eurofound, *NEETs. Young People not in Employment, Education or Training: Characteristics, Costs and Policy Responses in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2012.

involved in employment or education and training; the short-term unemployed, who are job seekers and available to start within two weeks, and who have been unemployed for less than one year; the long-term unemployed, who are job seekers and available to start within two weeks, but who have been unemployed for more than one year; those unavailable due to illness or disability; those unavailable due to family responsibilities; discouraged workers, who have stopped searching for work due to a belief that no opportunities are available to them; and other inactive individuals, who do not fit into the previous categories¹².

Beyond these different individual characteristics¹³, NEETs share a condition of vulnerability that exposes them to a significantly higher risk of social marginalisation. This condition arises from a complex network of intertwined individual, family, social, and economic factors¹⁴.

Specifically, among the key individual factors are early school leaving, low self-esteem and confidence, and mental health issues. At the family level, factors such as low socio-economic background, poor-quality family relationships, and limited encouragement for autonomy can play a significant role. At the social level, the opportunities available in the country in which these individuals reside are also a critical factor.

Regarding the latter aspect, there is a high risk that these young people will remain passive observers of life, resigned despite their efforts and goodwill, if they are not provided with the necessary tools to enter the labour market. Furthermore, the more they encounter difficulties in accessing education and employment, the more likely they are to be affected by what is known in the literature as the “scarring effect”¹⁵. This term refers to the permanent consequences of long-term inactivity, such as a heightened risk of future unemployment or reduced income levels due to the gradual obsolescence of their human capital.

¹² Eurofound, *Exploring the Diversity of NEETs*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2016.

¹³ M. Levels, C. Brzinsky-Fay, C. Holmes, J. Jongbloed, H. Taki, *The dynamics of marginalized youth. Not in education, employment, or training around the world*, Routledge Studies in Labour Economics, 2022, p. 41, point out that NEETs are commonly painted as “the most vulnerable among all youth”.

¹⁴ For a recent and detailed analysis of the numerous scientific studies carried out, including bibliography, H. Rahmani, W. Groot, *Risk Factors of Being a Youth Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET): A Scoping Review*, *International Journal of Educational Research*, v. 120, 2023, pp. 1-16.

¹⁵ Cf. K. Ralston, D. Everington, Z. Feng, C. Dibben, *Economic Inactivity, Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) and Scarring: The Importance of NEET as a Marker of Long-Term Disadvantage, Work, Employment and Society*, n. 36, 2022, pp. 59-79.

The long-term NEET status produces negative consequences not only on an individual level but also in terms of the costs a country must bear¹⁶. In addition to the loss of potential earnings and productive capacity, there is also increased expenditure on welfare and social protection.

In general, the waste of youth capital represents a significant obstacle to a country's economic and social growth. Depriving young people of their specific talents and their ability to innovate, while treating them as an “invisible generation”¹⁷, effectively means abandoning any vision of a prosperous future¹⁸.

2. Understanding the High Rate of NEETs in Italy

The high percentage of young NEETs remains a significant concern today. Despite the fact that important steps have been taken over the years to mitigate the phenomenon, the recent “Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024” report, prepared by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), continues to present an alarming picture, highlighting that there is still much work to be done to address the issue¹⁹.

It is important to clarify that, while the proportion of young people who are neither employed nor in education or training in regions such as Arab countries, Africa, and South Asia—already high in itself—has remained largely unchanged over the past decade, more encouraging signs of a reduction have emerged in Europe. Europe is progressively advancing, albeit with regional inequalities, towards the goal of reducing the NEET rate for 15-29-year-olds to 9% by 2030²⁰. Furthermore, the latest Eurostat survey presents a divided Europe: on one hand, there are countries that

¹⁶ According to A. Rosina, *I NEET in Italia. Dati, esperienze, indicazioni per efficacy politiche di attivazione*, StarNet-Network transizione scuola-lavoro, 2020, p. 18, the NEET rate is “considered the main measure of how much a community squanders the potential of the younger generation”.

¹⁷ M. Sacconi, M. Tiraboschi, *Un futuro da precari? Il lavoro dei giovani tra rassegnazione e opportunità*, Mondadori, Milano, 2005, p. 37. Cf., also, A. Rosina, *NEET. Giovani che non studiano e non lavorano*, Vita e Pensiero, 2015, p. 7, which defines NEET as a “spectre” roaming Europe, a kind of “zombie” of our time.

¹⁸ After all, as President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella recently emphasised during the ceremony of awarding the insignia of Cavaliere del Lavoro at the Quirinale on 30 October 2024, “investment in young people represents the future”.

¹⁹ In fact, based on this study, the ILO report “*World Employment and Social Outlook: September 2024 Update*” shows that the incidence of NEETs worldwide decreased only slightly from 21.3 per cent in 2015 to 20.4 per cent in 2024.

²⁰ This ambitious target was introduced as part of the “*European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan*”, adopted in March 2021.

have already reached this target or are close to doing so²¹; on the other, there are countries still facing serious challenges, with NEET rates well above the desired threshold.

Among these countries, Italy ranks near the bottom of the European list, surpassed only by Romania and far behind nations such as Germany, France, and Spain. This is undoubtedly a distressing situation, reflecting the struggles and deep frustration of an entire group, often harshly labelled as lazy, apathetic, or “big babies”²².

The question that arises is straightforward: why is Italy one of the largest “factories”²³ of NEETs in Europe? Although the issue is multifaceted and cannot be fully explored within the scope of this paper, an initial answer can be provided by examining the most recent ISTAT report on the “Education Levels and Employment Performance of Italians 2023”²⁴. This report records a reduction in the NEET rate by nearly 2.9 percentage points compared to 2022, and by 7 points compared to 2021, with the current rate standing at 16.1%.

The survey, while presenting a positive outcome, highlights the influence of educational opportunities on the status of young NEETs. The employment advantage of having at least a diploma is clearly evident, confirming the importance of policies that promote, at a minimum, the completion of secondary education. These data also reveal gender differences. In fact, the female labour market participation rate is closely linked to educational qualifications, with significant disparities: the employment rate of female graduates is 19% higher than that of female high school graduates (4.3% among men), and, among the latter group, it is 25.6% higher than that of women with at most a lower secondary diploma (14.9% among men).

Therefore, it can be argued that the level of education is a fundamental “driver”²⁵ in determining the NEET profile, with educational attainment

²¹ Eurostat, *Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training*, published in May 2024, shows that in 2023 one third of EU countries are already below the target of 9 per cent by 2030: Netherlands (4.8 per cent), Sweden (5.7 per cent), Malta (7.5 per cent), Slovenia (7.8 per cent), Luxembourg (8.5 per cent), Ireland (8.5 per cent), Denmark (8.6 per cent), Germany (8.8 per cent) and Portugal (8.9 per cent).

²² Thus emblematically defined in 2007 by Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, Minister of Economy and Finance, during a hearing in the Chambers.

²³ A. Rosina, *NEET. Giovani che non studiano e non lavorano*, cit., p. 15.

²⁴ Istat, *Livelli di istruzione e ritorni occupazionali - Anno 2023, Statistiche Report*, 2024.

²⁵ T. D’Amico, *NEET in Europa e nel mondo: 289 milioni di giovani al centro delle sfide del nostro tempo*, INAPP Paper, n. 50, 2024, p. 33.

still acting as a significant barrier for women in accessing the formal labour market.

Beyond this aspect, Italy still faces considerable challenges in the areas of education and training. The country's high school dropout rate places it fifth in Europe, with only Romania, Spain, Germany, and Hungary²⁶ having higher rates. This issue is undoubtedly influenced by territorial disparities, as the highest percentages of NEETs are found in southern Italy, particularly in Sardinia, Sicily, Campania, Apulia, and Calabria. This can be explained by the fact that early school leaving is strongly correlated with the socio-economic background of the family: if parents have a low level of education, the incidence of early school leaving is much higher, as young people tend to have limited expectations and little confidence in the value of education²⁷.

Furthermore, Italy's education system lacks a well-structured pathway that provides young people with clear and personalised guidance regarding their future educational trajectory. Often, choices are influenced by external factors, such as the advice of parents or family friends²⁸, who, while well-intentioned, fail to take into account the individual strengths, weaknesses, talents, and aspirations of the young person. Consequently, this results in a high risk of poor educational choices and, ultimately, school dropout.

A substantial rate of school drop-out is often accompanied by a high implicit dropout rate²⁹, that is, the attainment of higher education qualifications without the acquisition of basic skills—again, a challenge particularly affecting young people in southern Italy³⁰. This gap between

²⁶ The reference is to Eurostat data 2022, according to which 11.5% of young people between 11-24 in Italy leave the education system prematurely, almost two percentage points above the European average of 9.6%. A positive figure, despite everything, since the country has exceeded the 16% target set by the European Union for 2020 and aims to reach 9% by 2030.

²⁷ Cf. R. Sicurello, *Preventing school dropout and early leaving from education and training: a school for any and every one*, *Italian Journal of Special Education for Inclusion*, n. 1, 2024, p. 119.

²⁸ Cf. F. Bergamonte, E. Mandrone, M. Marocco, *I canali di ingresso nel mondo del lavoro*, *INAPP Policy Brief*, n. 29, 2022, pp. 1-12.

²⁹ Italy is among the few European countries to have introduced a system of monitoring and census survey of implicit school drop-outs through the "Anagrafe nazionale degli studenti".

³⁰ Although the latest "*Rapporto nazionale Invalsi 2024*" is decidedly encouraging on the front of implicit school drop-out, which drops to 6.6%, the gap between North and South is still too wide. In fact, primary schools in the South struggle more to guarantee equal learning opportunities for all students, with obvious negative effects on subsequent school grades.

the skills acquired and those demanded by the labour market has a direct and negative impact on the employability of young people.

A recent study conducted by EY, titled “School-to-Work Transitions”³¹, further reinforces the importance of adapting the education system to meet the demands of the labour market, emphasising the need for specific interventions to address the skills gap and improve the alignment between labour supply and demand.

In Italy, the transition from school to work is notably prolonged, lasting between two and three years, compared to the European average of less than one year. According to the report’s estimates, 30% of high school leavers will face difficulties during this transition until 2030. Specifically, vocational school leavers are expected to experience the highest rate of mismatch (+94%) among all school types.

Given such a long school-to-work transition period, it is inevitable that many young people “age” during the process³², leading to what can be described as a “lag syndrome”³³. In fact, a prolonged transition limits the chances of entering the labour market through quality, adequately remunerated, and legally regulated employment³⁴.

It is for this reason that many young people, despite having a high level of education, often struggle to find positions that align with their professional expectations³⁵, leading to their exit from NEET status only through emigration or by accepting downward occupational adjustments³⁶.

This brings us to an issue that is particularly pertinent when considering the specificity of the NEET phenomenon in Italy: the concept of “decent

³¹ This is a study presented during the event held on 5 March 2024 “Costruire ponti tra istruzione e lavoro: UPSHIFT for Youth”, organised by UNICEF, Junior Achievement Italia, EY and EY Foundation.

³² Cf. F. Pastore, C. Quintano, A. Rocca, *Una riflessione sulla durata della transizione scuola-lavoro in Italia*, *Scuola democratica*, n. 2, 2021, pp. 274-275.

³³ M. Livi Bacci, *Il Paese dei giovani vecchi*, *il Mulino*, n. 3, 2005, p. 412.

³⁴ Cf. M. Tiraboschi, *Il problema dell’occupazione giovanile nella prospettiva della (difficile) transizione dai percorsi educativi e formativi al mercato del lavoro*, *WP C.S.D.L.E. “Massimo D’Antona”.IT*, n. 38, 2005, p. 9.

³⁵ Cf. A. Salvini, F. Ruggiero, *I NEET, l’Europa e il caso italiano*, *C.S.E. Working Papers*, n. 4, 2016, p. 21; F. Gaspani, *Giovani NEET e mondo del lavoro: una transizione complessa*, *Polis*, n. 3, 2018, p. 294.

³⁶ We can understand why, not infrequently, young people prefer to give up finding employment rather than accept such work “opportunities”. Moreover, this situation accentuates the typically Italian phenomenon of young people staying in families for a long time. Cf. Eurofound, *Becoming adults: Young people in the post-pandemic world*, *Publications Office of the European Union*, Luxembourg, 2024, pp. 31-34.

work.” It is significant to note that Italy has a high proportion of informal or “shadow” economy activities, in which undeclared work proliferates³⁷. Many young people opt to settle for insecure and poorly paid jobs rather than engage in the formal education and training system³⁸.

At the same time, however, this trend increases the risk of young people slipping into petty crime, believing that delinquency may offer better financial rewards than school or formal work.

3. Activation Policies for Young NEETs: The “Youth Guarantee” Experience

Having analysed the key factors exacerbating the NEET issue in Italy, it is now necessary to examine the role of the Youth Guarantee as the main response to the “youth question” in our country³⁹. Established at the European level by the Recommendation of 22 April 2013⁴⁰ and renewed with the Recommendation of 30 October 2020⁴¹, the Youth Guarantee represents the first significant programme introduced in Italy to enable young people who are neither studying nor working to access a quality

³⁷ Cf. report of National Youth Council, *Lost in transition*, cit., p. 14. In particular, it shows that metropolitan NEETs are more active in the informal economy and in participating in social and political networks: 74.8% of NEETs have done “odd jobs” in the last month. In the metropolitan areas, 88.9% of NEETs are involved in informal activities, while in the inner areas the percentage drops to 53.6%.

³⁸ Cf. L. Casano, F. Seghezzi, *I giovani tra mercato e non mercato. Lavoro, competenze e nuove professionalità, Rapporto di ricerca Unipolis-Fondazione ADAPT*, 2021, pp. 44-45.

³⁹ In this respect, it has been considered by S. Ciprietti, *Welfare e lavoro. L’inserimento dei giovani nel mercato del lavoro e la Garanzia Giovani*, Rubbettino Editore, 2017, p. 104 “[...] the first active policy experiment and as an important opportunity to give new impetus to the employment services sector and policies in general. This programme [...] can become a premise for testing a new approach coordinated at the national level and the general basis for an effective and well-structured active policy in Italy that overcomes the existing structural gap in access to the world of employment for the younger generations and guarantees the youngest a pathway to autonomy in work and life”.

⁴⁰ Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on the establishment of a Youth Guarantee (2013/C 120/01).

⁴¹ Council Recommendation of 30 October 2020 on a bridge to work, strengthening the Youth Guarantee and replacing the previous Recommendation of 2013 (2020/C 372/01). It is pointed out that this recommendation first of all provided for the extension of the age limit of the young recipients of the measures from 25 to 29 years, as already envisaged in Italy, implicitly recognising that the transition from school to work and sustainable insertion in the labour market certainly take longer. Furthermore, it highlighted the need for a greater understanding of the characteristics of young NEETs in order to be able to involve them more closely and adapt the interventions to their distance from the labour market.

job, education, or vocational training opportunity within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving the formal education system.

The primary objective of the programme is not simply to secure employment but to foster “employability”—the ability to navigate the labour market and make oneself attractive to employers. This is achieved by offering targeted services at a specific stage in a person’s life cycle⁴². In Italy, to facilitate the achievement of the Youth Guarantee objectives, the “Decreto Letta” (No. 76 of 28 June 2013, converted with amendments by Law No. 99 of 9 August 2013) established a dedicated “Mission Structure.” This structure serves as a forum for collaboration among all the actors involved in the programme’s implementation and was Italy’s interlocutor for presenting the national Youth Guarantee plan to the European Commission in December 2013⁴³, which was subsequently launched in May 2014.

The Youth Guarantee in Italy substantially follows the European Union’s directives. Specifically, after registering on the national portal or on the appropriate regional sites, users wait for a call from a public or private employment service. After the universal reception and intake phase, the process continues with the signing of a “service agreement,” which marks the point at which a personalised, shared pathway is defined, taking into account the individual’s personal, educational, and professional characteristics—assessed through a profiling system—for job placement or re-entry into training and/or education.

The operationalisation of the plan at the financial level is ensured by the “National Operational Programme on Youth Employment Initiative” (PON IOG), which is almost entirely delegated to regional administrations as intermediate bodies responsible for designing and implementing measures at the territorial level.

In this framework, the measures that can be activated are divided into two categories: “measures related to access to the programme and to the definition of the service agreement,” and “measures aimed at offering active labour market policies”. The former includes activities preparatory to young people’s inclusion in the programme, such as reception and

⁴² P. Vesan, *La Garanzia Giovani: una seconda chance per le politiche attive del lavoro in Italia?*, *Politiche Sociali*, n. 3, 2014, p. 492.

⁴³ It should be noted that the “Mission Structure” ceased to function in 2014, delegating its coordination functions to the ministerial level before the takeover of Anpal, whose functions are now assigned to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, having recently been abolished by Prime Ministerial Decree no. 230 of 22 November 2023, with effect from 1 March 2024.

orientation, while the latter encompasses a range of support and integration measures for the labour market, such as specialised training, job accompaniment, extracurricular internships, apprenticeships, civil service, support for self-employment and entrepreneurship, transnational and territorial professional mobility, and employment bonuses.

Following the refinancing of the Youth Employment Initiative and the reprogramming of PON IOG, approved on 18 December 2017⁴⁴, new measures were introduced, including measure 1D, which aims to engage young people furthest from the labour market, training measure 2C, for newly recruited young people, measure 5-bis, which supports geographically mobile traineeships, measure 6-bis, allowing civil service to be carried out in one of the European Union's member states, and measure 9-bis, an employment incentive. Additionally, alongside Axis 1, which is exclusively dedicated to young NEETs, Axis 1-bis was established to promote the job placement of unemployed young people up to the age of 34, regardless of their NEET status, with a particular focus on residents in lagging and transition regions.

Since its implementation in Italy, the Youth Guarantee programme has encountered several difficulties⁴⁵, raising serious concerns about its effectiveness⁴⁶—concerns that have not been dispelled, such that, ten years after its inception, it can be argued that the “challenge”⁴⁷ has largely been lost.

⁴⁴ The reprogramming request was sent to the Commission on 1 December 2017. The amendment of the Operational Programmes is governed by Article 96(10) of Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013. It was approved by Commission Implementing Decision C(2017) 8927 of 18 December 2017 amending Implementing Decision C(2014) 4969.

⁴⁵ Among the initial difficulties is the slowness with which the regions formally approved their implementation plans. Cf. L. Casano, C. Di Stani, L. Petruzzo, G. Rosolen, *Giovani e lavoro: manca la “garanzia”. Il caso di “Garanzia Giovani” e il fallimento delle politiche attive in Italia*, Working Paper ADAPT, n. 155, 2014, pp. 3 ss.; U. Buratti, *Regioni: una fase due ancora incerta*, in U. Buratti, G. Rosolen, F. Seghezzi (eds), *Garanzia giovani, un anno dopo. Analisi e proposte*, ADAPT University Press, n. 43, 2015, pp. 21 ss.

⁴⁶ Cf. M. Tiraboschi, *Una Garanzia che (ancora) non c'è. Le ragioni del cattivo funzionamento di Garanzia Giovani in Italia*, Report di sintesi per Jyrki Katainen Vice-Presidente della Commissione Europea, ADAPT University Press, 2015, pp. 5 ss.; G. Rosolen, F. Seghezzi, *Un anno dopo, al punto di partenza (o quasi): cronaca di un fallimento annunciato*, in U. Buratti, G. Rosolen, F. Seghezzi (eds), *Garanzia giovani*, cit., pp. 5 ss.; P. Vesan, *Lost in implementation? Limiti e prospettive della Garanzia Giovani in Italia*, in F. Maino, M. Ferrera (eds), *Secondo Rapporto su Secondo Welfare in Italia*, Centro Luigi Einaudi, 2015, pp. 265-287; F. Giubileo, *Garanzia Giovani, attuazione e problemi del programma*, *Economia & Lavoro*, n. 1, 2016, pp. 139 ss.

⁴⁷ Echoing D. Fano, E. Gambardella, F. Margiocco, *Garanzia Giovani. La sfida*, Brioschi, 2015.

To understand the reasons behind the programme's lack of success, it is helpful to examine some data from the latest monitoring of the measure⁴⁸. Although young NEETs responded positively to the initiative, with almost 2 million registered users, difficulties became apparent during the transition from intake to inclusion in activation or guidance pathways⁴⁹, particularly for the most vulnerable groups⁵⁰.

In fact, the Youth Guarantee ended up engaging the young people who were most easily employable—those most inclined to take advantage of the opportunities offered—while yielding significantly poorer employment outcomes for groups most distant from the labour market and at high risk of social exclusion without targeted “proximity strategies”⁵¹.

In this context, it is important to note that measure 1D, which aimed to involve young people from households receiving the “Reddito di Inclusione” (REI) and later the “Reddito di Cittadinanza” (RdC), has not been effective in addressing the problem. This failure is largely due to the complex nature of social vulnerability, which extends beyond mere economic factors.

Despite the wide range of active labour market policies provided by the employment services network, the Youth Guarantee programme has essentially become a “Traineeships Guarantee.” In practice, there has been a significant increase in the use of extracurricular traineeships⁵², raising concerns that they have been exploited as a source of very low-cost labour⁵³, given that internships aimed at qualified professionals have often been posted on regional institutional portals⁵⁴.

Moreover, the number of trainees who were actually hired by companies at the end of their internship period remained relatively low, especially in

⁴⁸ ANPAL, *L'attuazione della Garanzia Giovani in Italia. Un bilancio del periodo maggio 2014-dicembre 2022*, 2023; as a complement, ANPAL, *Garanzia Giovani in Italia. Nota quadrimestrale n. 3/2023*, which updates the data to 31 December 2023.

⁴⁹ T. Galeotto, *Garanzia Giovani alla resa dei conti: perché non possiamo parlare di successo*, *Bollettino ADAPT*, 13 June 2023, n. 22.

⁵⁰ S. Ciampi, C. Lion, K. Santomieri, V. Sciatta, *Per un bilancio della Garanzia Giovani. Evidenze dalle valutazioni e sfide di policy*, *Sinapsi*, n. 1, 2023, pp. 112-113.

⁵¹ A. Rosina, E. Marta, D. Marzana, A. Ellena, G. Cerruti, *Intercettare i NEET: strategie di prossimità*, *L'osservatorio Giovani*, 2021, pp. 3 ss.

⁵² Cf. M. De Minicis, *La teoria del programma e l'attuazione della Garanzia Giovani in Italia: il protagonismo dei tirocini*, *Professionalità Studi*, n. 3, 2018, pp. 71 ss.

⁵³ L. Casano, F. Seghezzi, *I giovani tra mercato e non mercato. Lavoro, competenze e nuove professionalità*, cit., p. 62.

⁵⁴ Cf. F. Alifano, *Tirocini extracurriculari nella normativa della Regione Campania: una misura di politica attiva a basso costo*, *Bollettino ADAPT*, 17 October 2022, n. 35.

Southern Italy. This has given rise to the perception that the programme has become a “continuous turnover mechanism”⁵⁵ for traineeships, with minimal costs and no real obligations on companies.

This suspicion is further substantiated by the fact that many of the tasks performed by interns required basic knowledge, similar to what can be acquired through compulsory schooling. This is particularly concerning when we consider that internships should ideally focus on providing clear and high-quality training contributions⁵⁶.

While extracurricular traineeships are one of the measures in place, the programme also includes employment incentives, training pathways, community service, and support for self-entrepreneurship.

Finally, the very low utilisation of the apprenticeship contract in Italy is noteworthy, which is a distinctive and negative anomaly⁵⁷ in comparison to other European countries. Studies have shown that countries that make extensive use of apprenticeships—particularly as a means of facilitating smoother integration between the education and training system and the labour market—tend to experience more success in addressing youth inactivity⁵⁸.

It is believed that the failure of apprenticeships in Italy is largely due to the misapplication of traineeships. Apprenticeships entail more complex bureaucratic and administrative requirements, which impose a greater organisational and financial burden on companies. Consequently, companies often prefer to use extracurricular internships as a “trial period” before offering a formal contract, rather than as genuine training opportunities⁵⁹.

⁵⁵ T. Galeotto, *Garanzia Giovani e tirocini: le ragioni della grande diffusione degli stage extracurriculari*, *Bollettino ADAPT*, 27 June 2022, n. 25.

⁵⁶ It is worth pointing out that the adoption of the incentives under the Youth Guarantee programme didn't have a statistically significant effect in terms of youth employment. Cf. I. Brunetti, A. Ricci, *Programma Garanzia Giovani, occupazione e produttività. Evidenze su dati employer-employees*, *Sinapsi*, n. 1, 2023, p. 99.

⁵⁷ Also Corte dei Conti, *Disoccupazione giovanile: le politiche dell'UE hanno migliorato la situazione? Una valutazione della Garanzia per i giovani e dell'iniziativa a favore della occupazionale giovanile*, Relazione speciale n. 5, 2017, p. 31, had highlighted the anomaly: “employment is the most common destination for “positive exits” in all Member States visited, except Italy, where traineeships account for 54% of these. In all other Member States visited, exits to employment ranged from 64% in Ireland to 90% in France”.

⁵⁸ S. D'Agostino, S. Vaccaro, *L'evoluzione dell'apprendistato in Europa*, *Economia & Lavoro*, n. 3, 2023, pp. 5 ss.

⁵⁹ C. Catalano, R. Fasola, D. Frisoni, T. Galeotto, G. Iacobellis, M. Sacconi, M. Tiraboschi, *Abolire i tirocini extracurriculari*, *Bollettino ADAPT*, 6 December 2021, n. 43.

At the same time, the limited success of apprenticeships can also be attributed to a persistent cultural and structural issue. Despite some progress, there remains a significant difficulty in integrating training and work, resulting in insufficient dialogue between companies and educational institutions⁶⁰. In this context, although apprenticeships have the potential to be an ideal tool for matching labour supply with demand and promoting the development of vocational skills that enhance employability, they continue to be used primarily as a way of reducing labour costs, rather than for their training benefits or to improve labour quality and productivity⁶¹.

For apprenticeships to fully realise their potential, it is essential to adopt a systemic and coordinated approach involving the public sector, educational institutions, and businesses. Only through synergistic collaboration will it be possible to design high-quality apprenticeship pathways that guarantee significant professional development and the acquisition of skills that are truly valuable in the labour market.

Overall, the Youth Guarantee programme has proven inadequate as the sole solution to the NEET phenomenon. This has stimulated important reflections on the need for new models in the design and implementation of activation policies and initiatives to combat this issue. Furthermore, there is a need to identify successful local practices that can be expanded and systematised at the national level⁶². It can be argued that the programme has not only failed to produce the desired outcomes but may

⁶⁰ Cf. P. Tomassetti, *Apprendistato di primo livello e legislazione speciale sul lavoro dei minori: profili critici e prospettive evolutive*, *Variazioni su Temi di Diritto del Lavoro*, n. extraordinary, 2019, pp. 1866 ss.

⁶¹ As pointed out recently in Cnel, *XXV Rapporto Mercato del Lavoro e Contrattazione Collettiva*, 18 April 2024, p. 12.

⁶² According to G. Terzo, *Il terzo settore come driver delle politiche di attivazione dei giovani NEET in un'ottica di "secondo welfare". Alcune riflessioni a margine dell'iniziativa Youth Guarantee*, Paper presented in occasione del XII Colloquio Scientifico sull'impresa sociale, Dipartimento di Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale, Università degli Studi di Trento, 25-26 maggio 2018: "in order to intercept the most vulnerable NEETs, outreach actions must be promoted that adopt a model of intervention that is transversal to the multiplicity of problems to be addressed [...] The reference framework can be provided by the Public-Private-People-Partnership (4P) model that has been effectively adopted in the youth guarantee schemes promoted by Sweden and Finland. It envisages a partnership between all the actors involved in active employment policies - public institutions, social partners, enterprises, third sector - and the beneficiaries, who must actively participate in the definition of their career path". Cf., also, C. Agostini, T. Sacconi, *Una Garanzia per i NEET. Garanzia Giovani in quattro regioni italiane: Calabria, Lombardia, Piemonte e Puglia, Percorsi di secondo welfare*, 2020, pp. 60 ss.

also lead Italy to return at least 160 million euros in unused resources to the European Union, as these funds have not been spent since 2014⁶³.

4. Training and Active Labour Market Policies

The process of significant and profound technological innovation, accelerated by the eruption of an unprecedented health emergency, has brought about substantial changes in the labour market, deeply affecting both the nature of work and its organisation. In fact, there has been an explosion of new organisational models that, on the one hand, challenge the “fixity”⁶⁴ and uniformity of working hours and, on the other hand, give rise to unprecedented “processes of dematerialisation and dispersion of production sites”⁶⁵.

Consequently, this “new production paradigm” alters the concept of place and time in work, creates new professional roles, and demands continually updated skills. These skills can be developed “through public interventions aimed at strengthening the education system, the vocational training system, and harmonising the accumulation of knowledge with work”⁶⁶.

In this context, of particular relevance are the “GOL programme,” the “Dual System”⁶⁷, and the “New Skill Fund”⁶⁸ which have been integrated into the broader “National New Skills Plan.” This plan serves as a strategic coordination framework for updating and qualifying/re-skilling

⁶³ This is the provisional outcome of research by ActionAid and CGIL, *NEET: giovani in pausa. Superare gli stereotipi per costruire politiche pubbliche efficaci*, 2024, p. 9, according to which Italy used only 1.9 billion euro of the resources of the National Operational Programme - Youth Employment Initiative, i.e. 62% of the allocated budget of approximately 2.7 billion euro.

⁶⁴ M. Magnani, *I tempi e i luoghi di lavoro. L'uniformità non si addice al postfordismo*, WP C.S.D.L.E. “Massimo D’Antona”.IT, n. 404, 2019, p. 2.

⁶⁵ P. Bozzao, *Lavoro subordinato, tempi e luoghi digitali*, *Federalismi.it*, n. 9, 2022, p. 106.

⁶⁶ See *Il lavoro che cambia. Digitalizzazione, automazione e futuro del lavoro*, a document prepared by the Ministry of Labour in 2017 and presented on the occasion of the centenary of the International Labour Organisation, p. 2.

⁶⁷ It should be noted that the analysis of the “New Skills Fund” doesn’t fall within the scope of this study, as it doesn’t target young NEETs. For a more in-depth study, see C. Valenti, *La valorizzazione della professionalità nel post-pandemia: nuove opportunità per il dialogo sociale*, *Lavoro Diritti Europa*, n. 3, 2021, pp. 14 ss.; G. Impellizzieri, *Fondo nuove competenze e contrattazione collettiva: una rassegna ragionata*, *Diritto delle Relazioni Industriali*, n. 3, 2021, p. 895 ss.; L.V. Casano, *Formazione continua e transizioni occupazionali*, *Variazioni su Temi di Diritto del Lavoro*, n. 4, 2022, pp. 669 ss.; G. Impellizzieri, *Il Fondo nuove competenze cambia (ancora): al via la terza edizione*, *Bollettino ADAPT*, 9 December 2024, n. 44.

⁶⁸ Adopted by D.M. 14 December 2021, in G.U. no. 307 of 28 December 2021.

interventions aimed at addressing the demand for new skills arising from digital and ecological transitions, in line with Mission 5 (Component C1, Intervention 1.1: Active Labour Policies and Training) of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). Similarly, the recent “National New Skills-Transition Plan”⁶⁹ responds to the need for an effective and stable mechanism to combat skills mismatches, given the crucial role now played by “new skills” in an increasingly digital and green labour market.

Among the three aforementioned key programmes, the GOL introduces a “system reform”⁷⁰ of active labour market policies based on broad and well-known objectives, including the centrality of Essential Levels of Benefits (LEP), the proximity of services, integration with regional active policies and training policies, the construction of a territorial service network, a unified information system, and extensive monitoring activities. The GOL programme is implemented by the Regions and Autonomous Provinces based on the Regional Plans (PAR) approved by ANPAL.

The GOL programme aims to promote the reintegration of individuals benefiting from social safety nets, income support institutions (e.g., *Supporto per la formazione e il lavoro* and *Assegno d’inclusione*, with reference only to the “employable” members among the beneficiaries, who are required to sign a service pact with employment centres), all unemployed individuals regardless of gender, age, and duration of unemployment, workers with very low incomes (working poor), and vulnerable workers, including young NEETs under the age of 30⁷¹.

The programme is based on the customisation of services according to the individual characteristics of beneficiaries. The measures are divided into five pathways: occupational reintegration, upskilling and reskilling, work and inclusion, and collective outplacement.

Examining the results of the measure at a national level, the GOL programme has involved over 2.5 million users, of whom 28.7% are young people. Regional figures vary, with participation rates ranging from a low of 18.2% in Liguria to over 30% in Puglia, Sardinia, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Veneto, and Piemonte. Specifically, young people have primarily

⁶⁹ Adopted by D.M. 30 March 2024, in G.U. no. 120 of 24 May 2024.

⁷⁰ P.A. Varesi, *Una nuova stagione per le politiche attive del lavoro. Le prospettive tra azioni dell’Unione Europea e riforme nazionali*, *Diritto delle Relazioni Industriali*, n. 2, 2022, p. 75.

⁷¹ D.M. 5 November 2021, *Adozione del Programma nazionale per la garanzia di occupabilità dei lavoratori*, in G.U. no. 306 of 27 December 2021, supplemented by D.M. 30 March 2024, *Aggiornamento del programma GOL*, in G.U. no. 120 of 24 May 2024.

benefited from re-employment pathways, as well as further training and retraining. However, the percentage of young people engaged in work integration and inclusion pathways for individuals with complex needs requiring multidimensional support is significantly lower.

This statistic is particularly concerning, as young NEETs under the age of 30 represent 33.6% of those who could have benefited from this type of support, having been identified as vulnerable. Currently, it can be argued that even the GOL programme is struggling to ensure truly personalised pathways for young dropouts. This challenge highlights the need for a shift in approach to more effectively engage and address the needs of individuals in vulnerable conditions, both from an educational and labour market perspective.

If, as it stands, the impact of the GOL programme on young NEETs cannot be considered satisfactory, more positive outcomes emerge from the “Dual System.” This system, which originated as an experiment in 2015⁷² represents the first major national investment initiative aimed at developing first-level apprenticeships. The goal is to integrate the school training system with the labour market, focusing on enhancing school-to-work alternation measures, with particular attention to dual apprenticeship contracts.

The programme aims to facilitate the transition from education to work for young people using three main tools: simulated alternance, enhanced alternance, and first-level apprenticeship (dual apprenticeship). More specifically, simulated alternance involves learning pathways within a training institution, using a simulated experiential context or through visits to productive company environments. Enhanced alternance entails experiential learning in companies or non-profit organisations, either inside or outside the training institution, with a specific focus on involving trainees in the provision of services or production of goods. Dual apprenticeship allows, on one hand, the attainment of an upper-secondary qualification, including IeFP qualifications and diplomas, and on the other, direct professional experience, thereby combining theoretical training with practical experience.

The provisions introduced in 2022 launched a major investment programme aimed at strengthening regional dual pathways and the apprenticeship institution. The programme’s implementation has been entrusted to the Regions, with the primary goal of increasing the number

⁷² The dual system was launched with the reform of the apprenticeship contract discipline with Legislative Decree no. 81/2015 and the subsequent interministerial decree of 12 October 2015.

of participants in Vocational Education and Training (IeFP) and Higher Technical Education and Training (IFTTS) pathways in dual mode. Additionally, the programme seeks to promote the attainment and market viability of “relevant certifications.”

In this context, one of the interventions involves establishing a technological and vocational training chain, consisting of experimental courses in the second cycle of education, training courses at Higher Technical Institutes (ITS Academy), and vocational and technical higher education and training courses (IFTTS)⁷³.

Looking at the results on a national scale, the first monitoring report on the implementation of NRRP Intervention Mission 5 - Component 1 - Investment 1.4 related to the “Dual System” shows positive outcomes concerning the evolution of regional training offerings. A comparison of performance indicators for the 2022-2023 training year with those prior to the launch of the NRRP reveals a significant increase in enrolments in dual-mode IeFP courses (Years I to IV). This increase is particularly evident in the southern regions of Italy, reinforcing the trend of constant growth in the dual system. The system is proving increasingly effective, responding to both the training needs of students and the demands of enterprises directly involved in implementing these measures⁷⁴.

5. Conclusions and Prospects

“Despite the unprecedented opportunities offered by modern Europe, young people encounter difficulties in the education and training system and in accessing the labour market.” The European Commission’s reflection, contained in the “Youth on the Move”⁷⁵, report, aimed at promoting the potential of young people for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth in the European Union, remains dramatically relevant today, more than a decade later. This is particularly true for Italy, which continues to stand out among advanced economies for its lack of effective tools to ensure the full and qualified inclusion of new generations in the labour market.

⁷³ L. 8 agosto 2024, no. 121, in G.U. no. 196 of 22 August 2024.

⁷⁴ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, INAPP, Sviluppo Lavoro Italia, *Attuazione dei percorsi in modalità duale dell’Istruzione e Formazione Professionale (IeFP) e dell’Istruzione e Formazione Tecnica Superiore (IFTTS)*, Report 1/2024.

⁷⁵ European Commission, *Youth on the move. Analytical report*, Flash Eurobarometer Series 319b, 2011.

The NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) phenomenon constitutes a complex challenge that requires a necessarily multidimensional and integrated approach. Reflection must begin with the education system, as it is a key element in defining concrete employment opportunities for young people. Indeed, an effective education system not only promotes the acquisition of knowledge and skills relevant to the labour market, but also contributes to reducing inequalities and fostering social inclusion, thus serving as a pillar for the economic and social progress of a country.

A confirmation of this comes from an international study by Gi Group Holding⁷⁶, which shows that countries that invest more strategically in education, such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, and the Netherlands, are more successful in reducing the gap between school and work. These countries are better at counteracting the NEET phenomenon and supporting young people's entry and permanence in the labour market⁷⁷.

To achieve these positive results, the study emphasises that investments in education must be targeted towards fields of study closely related to the world of work, such as university STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) pathways. Furthermore, it is essential to promote the diversification of tertiary education through the organisation of technical pathways designed to provide immediately applicable skills, which involve companies directly in defining courses and subjects. This ensures alignment between the skills acquired by students and the needs of the labour market.

In this context, it is believed that the ITS Academy can offer a concrete solution to youth unemployment⁷⁸. ITS graduates, who acquire highly specialised skills in the field, are much more likely to find employment than those with bachelor's or master's degrees⁷⁹, as their expertise is highly sought after by companies.

⁷⁶ Gi Group Holding, *Youth and work, a comparative study. How to empower young people to enter and remain in employment and avoid the phenomenon of NEETs*, 2023.

⁷⁷ Despite a gradual improvement in recent years, Italian spending on education and training, at 4.1 per cent of gross domestic product, is still below the European average, with greater investment allocated to primary and secondary education and fewer resources allocated to tertiary education than in other countries. See, on this point, "Education at a Glance 2024" report, edited by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

⁷⁸ Cf. A. Rosina, *Il contributo delle nuove generazioni*, in CNEL, *Rapporto 2024. Demografia e forza lavoro*, pp. 33-34.

⁷⁹ Indire, *Rapporto Nazionale. ITS Academy. Monitoraggio nazionale*, 2024.

Another tool with great potential—but one that is still struggling to take off, although “signs of enhancement”⁸⁰ can be discerned—to reduce the skills mismatch is the first-level apprenticeship. This represents the Italian approach to the German dual system, structured to combine in-company training with vocational education and training provided by training institutions⁸¹. It is believed that institutionalising first-level apprenticeships within the training offerings of agencies providing vocational education, or in technical or vocational school courses, could encourage greater use of them, both by students and companies⁸².

Looking beyond the school-to-work transition, it is also necessary to consider unemployed young people who, after work experience, find themselves forced to look for a new job, often entering the critical area of long-term unemployment. When the main barrier to re-employment is the lack of adequate skills, it becomes crucial to offer them the opportunity to participate in medium- to long-term training courses. Among these, vocational qualification and IFTS courses are valid alternatives to the ITS Academy, as they allow young people to acquire technical and practical skills that are immediately applicable in the labour market.

Finally, learning from past mistakes, it is essential to promote actions aimed at identifying and reaching young people who are furthest from the labour market. This requires implementing strategies that raise awareness in local areas and disseminate knowledge of the opportunities offered by available programmes. These actions must include the active involvement of the third sector, educational institutions, and other local entities, creating collaborative networks capable of effectively reaching young people in more vulnerable situations.

In this context, the “Programma Nazionale Giovani, Donne e Lavoro”⁸³ is an opportunity not to be missed. Part of the active policy reform process implemented by the GOL, this programme is structured around five priorities, the first of which is aimed specifically at promoting the entry of young people into the labour market, with the goal of reducing the NEET rate to 9%.

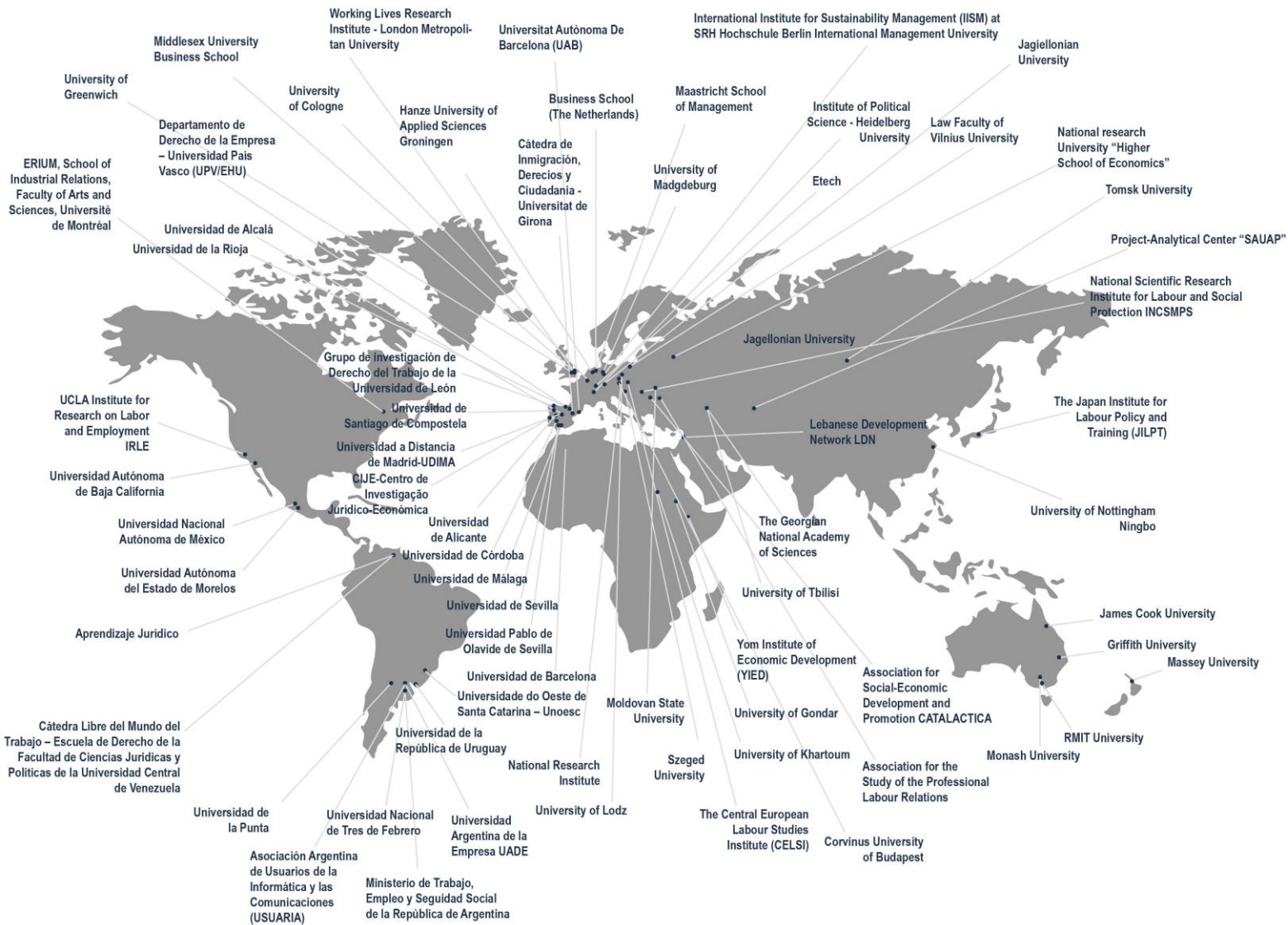
⁸⁰ Inapp, *Segnali di potenziamento dell'apprendistato duale. XXII Rapporto di monitoraggio*, October 2024.

⁸¹ Cf. M.A. Impicciatore, *La formazione per l'occupazione nel mercato del lavoro che cambia*, *Diritti Lavori Mercati*, n. 3, 2020, p. 619.

⁸² E. Cappellini, S. Duranti, N. Faraoni, *L'apprendistato di primo livello vent'anni dopo. Un'analisi del mancato successo del duale all'italiana*, *Storia Democratica*, n. 2, 2024, p. 296.

⁸³ Commission Implementing Decision (EU) C 2022/9030 1 December 2022.

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