



Flexible and permeable education and training systems

Problem statement

The lack of flexible and permeable education and training systems poses a significant barrier to young people not in employment, education, or training (NEETs) as they attempt to re-enter educational pathways or the workforce. Flexible education systems are necessary to adapt learning pathways to the evolving interests, needs, and abilities of learners, while permeability allows for seamless transitions between programmes, sectors, and educational levels. These features are crucial for helping learners realign with their long-term career goals.

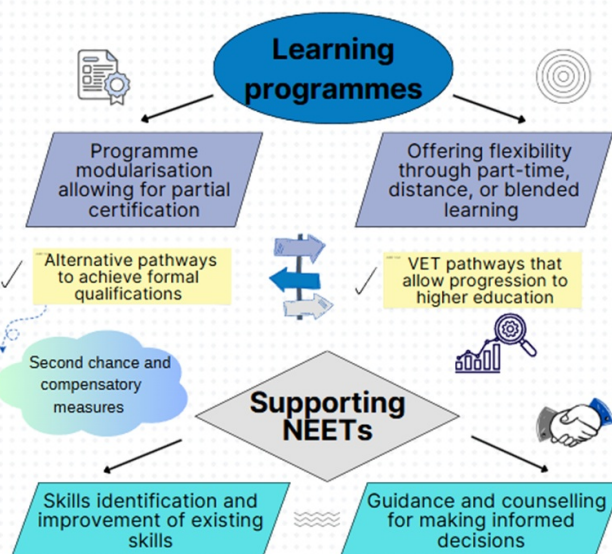
In practice, flexible delivery of learning opportunities is essential for young people whose education has been interrupted, enabling them to complete their studies over an extended period, study part-time, or utilise alternative delivery methods such as online learning and micro-credentials. These options help create inclusive and responsive systems that cater to diverse learner journeys.

For NEETs, flexible education and training options are vital in enhancing employment prospects by providing pathways that align with their individual interests, strengths, and circumstances. Innovative thinking and approaches can better engage and support NEETs, allowing them to develop and apply their knowledge, skills, and talents meaningfully.

Achieving flexibility involves modularising education and qualification programmes into smaller units, facilitating greater movement across educational pathways. This can be supported by credit transfer mechanisms, recognition of prior learning, and opportunities to acquire qualifications outside formal education, such as micro-credentials and professional qualifications. Flexible delivery may include evening or part-time courses, which enable learners to balance education with other responsibilities. Additionally, adaptive pedagogical approaches can empower educators to tailor their teaching methods to meet diverse learner needs, making education more inclusive and effective.

Flexible and permeable education and training systems for NEETs

Adapting learning pathways to changing interests and progression of young people



Beneficiaries

- NEETs in long-term search
- Unavailable due to family responsibilities
- Discouraged and disengaged young people

Addressing the problem

Policy makers and practitioners involved in the design and delivery of measures for flexible and permeable education and training systems may find useful the following tips.

Tip 1: Dividing programmes into distinct blocks

Achieving flexibility can involve modularising education and qualification programmes into smaller units, allowing for greater movement across educational pathways. This can be supported by credit transfer mechanisms and the recognition of prior learning, or even opportunities to acquire qualifications awarded outside the formal education and training system, such as microcredentials, non-statutory (market) or supplementary qualifications, professional/ vocational/occupational qualifications and awards.

Modularisation and partial certification enable learners to pursue learning at their own pace and follow more personalised learning pathways. They can obtain new knowledge, acquire new skills, and upgrade their competences at anytime, anywhere, at any length, from any provider, using both paid or free options, and engage in any form of learning that best suits their needs.

Modular qualifications are also more responsive to changes in the labour market, as they can be more easily updated to reflect emerging needs. In vocational education and training (VET), modularisation supports the accumulation and integration of microcredentials alongside traditional qualifications, including those from different institutions and sectors. This flexible structure not only enhances the portability and relevance of learning but also fosters a sense of achievement with each completed module. For NEETs, these incremental successes can positively reshape their attitudes toward education. Furthermore, modular pathways allow early leavers from education and training as well as NEETs to re-engage with learning and address specific skills gaps without needing to restart entire courses.

Tip 2: Offer alternative routes to achieving a formal qualification

Young people who left school early or find themselves in the category of NEETs need alternative routes to achieving a formal qualification. Strengthening the links between mainstream education and [second chance or compensatory programmes](#) is essential to provide NEETs with opportunities to complete upper secondary education. These connections can enable flexible transitions—such as referrals between alternative and mainstream systems—and support the recognition of learning outcomes achieved outside traditional classrooms. In addition to second chance programmes, other viable routes for NEETs include on-the-job training, the validation and recognition of prior learning which offer more flexible and accessible ways to accumulate credits toward formal qualifications. For NEETs, flexible education and training options can significantly enhance their employment prospects by offering pathways that align with their individual interests, strengths, and circumstances. With innovative thinking, approaches as well as systems, NEETs can be better engaged and supported in developing and applying their knowledge, skills, and talents in meaningful ways.

Tip 3: Ensure that VET pathways accommodate progression

VET can provide NEETs with valuable pathways not only into employment but also into further lifelong learning and career advancement. To support this, education and training systems should facilitate progression from VET to higher education. Strengthening collaboration between VET providers and higher education institutions is crucial to ensuring smooth and successful transitions. Such partnerships are particularly important for NEETs who wish to re-engage with education as a means to achieve their long-term professional goals.

Generally speaking, flexible and permeable education systems enable learners to move within and across education, training and employment. Flexibility refers to the ability of learning pathways to adapt to the evolving interests, needs, and abilities of young people as they progress. Permeability, on the other hand, ensures that learners can move between different programmes, sectors or advance to higher levels of education, helping them to realign with their long-term career goals. In practical terms, flexibility in the delivery of learning opportunities means that young people whose education was interrupted may benefit from an

extended period to complete their studies, the possibility to study part-time, or alternative delivery methods (e.g. online) as well as the use of micro-credentials. These features help create inclusive and responsive systems that support diverse learner journeys.

Tip 4: Ensure that providers can deliver flexible programmes

Flexibility in learning delivery is key. Part-time, distance, and blended learning options—which combine online instruction with traditional face-to-face teaching—can play a crucial role in supporting young people who face external barriers to learning. These flexible formats are especially beneficial for those with caregiving responsibilities, as they allow learners to pursue qualifications through evening classes, remote study, or a combination of both. By accommodating diverse personal circumstances, such approaches can make education more accessible and inclusive for NEETs and other vulnerable youth.

Tip 5: Support NEETs to make informed decisions

[Effective guidance and counselling](#) play a critical role in helping young people build the confidence and motivation to choose and pursue meaningful educational and career pathways. For NEETs in particular, these services offer a space for reflection, enabling them to assess their goals and identify the most appropriate route back into education, training, or employment. Strengthening the connections between guidance and counselling services across the education and employment sectors—especially within both initial and continuing vocational education and training—can support more personalised and flexible learning journeys. This integrated approach helps young people align their educational choices with their long-term aspirations and promotes greater engagement with lifelong learning and career development.

Tip 6: Support NEETs to identify and improve their existing skills and competences




NEETs who are considering a return to education or training can benefit significantly from a skills audit or the development of a learning portfolio. These tools help individuals identify programmes that best match their profiles, strengths, and professional goals. Recognising existing knowledge and skills—whether acquired through previous education, work experience, or informal learning—enables the creation of tailored learning plans that avoid unnecessary repetition of content. The validation of non-formal and informal learning not only provides a more efficient pathway back into education but also helps NEETs rebuild confidence in their abilities and see value in upgrading their qualifications.

Tip 7: Taking advantage of IT tools to increase learning of NEETs

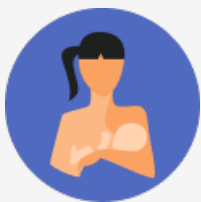
Educational technologies can significantly enhance the learning experience by supporting the development of key competences and transversal skills—such as problem solving skills, digital literacy, communication, and technical proficiency — that are essential in today's labour market. The thoughtful integration of digital tools into education and training not only modernises learning delivery but also helps bridge the digital divide. For vulnerable groups—such as migrant learners, individuals with chronic illness, or those with attention difficulties—digital tools can remove traditional barriers to participation and achievement. By increasing opportunities for interaction, flexibility, and engagement, education technologies promote more inclusive and equitable learning environments and help reduce the risk of educational underachievement and social exclusion.

Expected outcomes

The positive outcomes can be expected at different levels:

		
INDIVIDUAL	INSTITUTIONAL	SYSTEM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of accessible learning pathways through diversification and flexibility, allowing NEETs to balance education with other responsibilities • Improved transversal skills including problem-solving capabilities, digital literacy, communication, and technical proficiency together with the development of key competences building a strong foundation for lifelong learning • Tailored learning solutions meeting the needs of different sub-groups of NEETs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased student engagement and participation from disadvantaged groups • Fostering digital capacities, new teaching methods and adaptability on the provider side • Offering greater flexibility and variety in teaching methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create inclusive and responsive systems that support diverse education and training journeys of young people • Reduced educational inequality and exclusion for those who have not succeeded initially • Improved readiness and adaptability of young people

Related risk factors



Early motherhood

Related resources

Good practices

 Good practice

400+Future

400+Zukunft

400+Future is a low threshold programme that targets young NEETs to support them to re-engage in education and training activities. The programme offers individualised support and practical experience in a variety of vocational fields as well as the opportunity to attain a lower secondary education certificate.

 **Germany**

 Good practice

Comprehensive pathways for the integration of young people

Programme for young people implemented by the cooperative "Jovent" offering comprehensive pathways of guidance, training, social inclusion and labour market insertion.

 **Spain**

 Good practice

Crafts Square

Piazza dei Mestieri

In Italy, 'Crafts Square' offers young people, unemployed young people and adults with an alternative educational offer with a good balance between practical and theoretical courses. The environment created by the 'Craft Square' aims to ensure learners feel understood, supported and valued.

 **Italy**

 Good practice

Go Remote

Unlocking the potential of remote job opportunities

Go Remote is an initiative designed to reduce youth unemployment by offering training, mentoring, and employment opportunities in remote and hybrid jobs.

 **Bulgaria**  **Croatia**  **Cyprus**

 **Finland**  **Iceland**  **Latvia**

 Good practice

Tech Your Future

Dalla formazione al lavoro, crea il tuo futuro

Tech Your Future equips NEETs across Italy with the skills and support to launch careers in high-demand digital professions, offering inclusive training and personalised job placement. By connecting talent with opportunity, the project opens pathways for youth to

 Good practice

DigitHer

DigitHer

DigitHer empowers young women to launch digital careers by addressing barriers to employment and boosting confidence through targeted training and mentorship. By creating a supportive, female-focused learning environment, the initiative helps bridge the gender gap in tech.

thrive in the ever-evolving tech sector.

 [Italy](#)

 [Italy](#)

Publications

 [Publications](#)

NEETs in the digital age

Identifying skills utilisation gaps and the role of upskilling and training

This report aims to examine the level of digital skill utilisation by NEETs, as compared to employed youth, amidst the rapid digital transformation of the labour market. Moreover, it sheds light on the role of upskilling, active labour market policies, and training more generally in predicting NEET status and reducing NEET rates.

 [EU level](#) [International](#)

 [Publications](#)

Education and Training Monitor 2025

Report highlighting progress towards EU-level targets

The 2025 [Education and Training Monitor](#) follows the direction set out by the Union of Skills, the European Commission's overarching strategy for competitive and prosperous education and training systems.

 [EU level](#)

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