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In what way a ‘Guarantee for youth’? NEETs entrapped by labour market policies in the European Union

Effie Emmanouil^a, Georgios Chatzichristos^{b,a}, Andrew Herod^c and Stelios Gialis^a

^aDepartment of Geography, University of the Aegean, Mytilene, Greece; ^bSchool of Political Sciences, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece; ^cDepartment of Geography, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

ABSTRACT

Following the economic crisis of 2008/2009, the European Union developed the Youth Guarantee (YG) Action Plan to tackle youth labour market disengagement by ‘fostering employability’ and ‘removing barriers’ to employment. The current study adopts a Geographical Political Economy approach to analysing the YG’s underpinnings and the conditions that differentiate its application on a regional level to explore whether – and, if so, how – the YG helps young people in the Southern EU to enter the labour market. The article introduces the first comparative, cross-regional investigation of the YG programme, targeting the NUTS-II regions of Spain and Italy. It uses mixed methods, supplementing quantitative analysis with in-depth interviews with key informants. We show that in Spanish and Italian regions the YG is closely entwined with socio-spatial inequality and labour precarity, which is reflected in the growing rates of temporary employment and inactive youth. Crucially, we conclude, such outcomes are not simply the result of the institutional/operational misapplications of the YG, as is often assumed. Rather, these misapplications are systematically reinforced by the mechanics of labour flexibilisation within a recessionary and crisis-prone environment, one whose geographical unevenness means that the YG is playing out in quite different ways in different places.

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1. Introduction

The global financial crisis of 2008/2009 hit the European Union (EU) hard. In its wake, young people have faced significant difficulties entering the labour market, securing decent wages, and keeping jobs. Although this has been the case across the EU, it has been particularly so in Southern EU countries, which have seen substantial increases in youth unemployment and inactivity (Mascherini and Ledermaier 2016; Avagianou et al. 2022). In the context of such rising youth exclusion from the labour market, and following the practice of the United Kingdom (Vancea and Utzet 2018), the Union has adopted the category of ‘Not in Employment, Education or Training’ (NEET) to designate and monitor

CONTACT Stelios Gialis  stgialis@aegean.gr  Department of Geography, University of the Aegean, Mytilene, Greece

these youths' labour market status. Although this classification has been criticised by some for its negative connotations, defining people based upon what they are not (Yates and Payne 2006), it nevertheless has become widely used and a focus for international academic and policy discussion (Thurby-Campbell and Bell 2017).

In response to the growing number of NEETs, in 2013 EU member states committed to implementing a 'Youth Guarantee (YG) Action Plan' geared towards 'ensur[ing] that all young people under the age of 25 ... receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship *within a period of four months* of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education' (European Commission 2013a, 1, our emphasis). The Plan's objectives have been aimed at 'fostering employability and removing practical barriers to employment' (European Commission 2013a, 3). A subsequent 'Reinforced YG', issued in October 2020, raised the age limit for participants to 30, established 'the right to fair working conditions', and stated that 'probation periods should be of reasonable duration and that the abuse of atypical contracts is to be prohibited' (European Commission 2020a, 1).

The EU's initial YG largely drew inspiration from the kinds of youth employment protection and labour market integration programmes that have operated in several northern European countries (like the Scandinavian nations and Germany) since the late 1970s/early 1980s (Escudero and López Mourelo 2017; Kautto and Kuitto 2021). However, with the rise of state workfare policies (Jessop 1993; Samers 2011) and a shift in models of urban governance from redistributive politics to a politics of encouraging greater entrepreneurship on the part of local governments (Harvey 1989), there has been a re-/de-regulation of EU labour markets in recent years. In the process, a supply-side discourse of ensuring youth 'employability' has increasingly come to dominate employment programmes (Peck and Theodore 2000), with 'flexicurity' becoming the new buzzword. Such developments have the potential to undermine longstanding demand-side policy prescriptions regarding youth employment that have historically relied upon using the powers of the state to ensure that sufficient jobs are created for young people to occupy. This is especially significant because, in the Southern EU countries, YG plans seem not to be meeting their objectives (Escudero and López Mourelo 2017). They also seem to have become entangled with mounting labour market precarity and socio-spatial inequality (Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín 2017; Gialis, Gourzis, and Underthun 2018). Whether this is due to the nature of the YG policy framework itself (Alonso et al. 2021) or due to the structural parameters and assumptions within which it is being implemented, however, needs further scrutiny, as answering this question can help in designing better policy.

In light of the above, our paper attempts to assess the YG Action Plan programme by exploring two important questions: 1) have recent efforts to implement YG Action Plans helped young NEETs (that is, people between 15 and 29 years of age) in the Southern EU to enter the labour market?; and 2) what are the conditions that differentiate YGs' implementation on a regional (NUTS-II) level? To do so, we deploy a Geographic Political Economy perspective to understand and deconstruct the initiative's stated objectives, followed by a mixed-methods comparison of the NUTS-II regions of Italy and Spain between 2016–2019.¹ The quantitative analysis identifies disparities and convergencies in YG enrolments between regions, linking these with employment data, whilst the qualitative study complements this through semi-structured interviews

with key informants. The latter reveal some of the deeper reasons why YG policies in both Spain and Italy appear to be falling short in delivering what they promise. As such, our article is one of only a handful of analyses to explicitly address the YG's sub-national implementation (others include: Piqué et al. 2016; Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín 2017; Vesan and Lizzi 2017; Tsekoura 2019; and Strecker, López, and Cabasés 2021). What makes ours different, though, is that – to our knowledge – it is the first comparative, cross-regional evaluation of the YG programme in these two key Southern EU countries. This is important, we believe, because there is presently a lack of regional-level comparative research on YG programmes.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a critical conceptual framework and focuses upon what we perceive to be deficiencies in the YG's proclaimed objectives. Section 3 presents the research design and methodology. Section 4 details our findings, focusing principally upon geographical disparities between YG enrolments and regional NEET and employment figures. We also highlight the structural and socio-political factors that favour or hinder the policy's effectiveness by examining Italy and Spain comparatively. The conclusion includes recommendations for future research.

2. A regionally-sensitive YG conceptual framework

The YG policy framework seeks to involve young people in three key activities: i) schemes of (self-)entrepreneurship; ii) work preparation courses, on-the-job training or waged labour subsidies; and iii) waged employment. Between them, these three aim to increase *employability*, especially for NEETs who lack motivation for work or study and/or resources to transit successfully into the labour market (Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín 2017). A brief examination of the genealogy of the term 'employability' – 'the character or quality of being employable' (McQuaid and Lindsay 2005, 3) – reveals that it was initially widely used in the United Kingdom to drive labour market reforms in the 1980s and 1990s (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). By the 2000s, though, it had become central in policy making around the world (Sinfield 2001), especially concerning labour market restructuring (Laffer 1981).

With regard to encouraging young people into the labour market, demand-side economists have long highlighted the social circumstances contributing to their employability, such as family background and the support networks upon which they can draw, their personal socio-spatial mobility (can they travel to jobs?, are there good educational opportunities provided to them?), as well as exogenous factors like the remoteness of labour markets and macroeconomic stability (McQuaid and Lindsay 2005). However, in the 1980s and 1990s a supply-side interpretation came to predominate (Peck and Theodore 2000; Crisp and Powell 2017), one emphasising that individuals need to better their personal work and other skills in order to improve their 'accessibility to the market' (Hillage and Pollard 1998). This conceptualisation was underpinned by neoliberal principles of work flexibility (Crisp and Powell 2017; Gourzis and Gialis 2019), which primarily suggest that the state's role should be limited to motivating the young into work rather than creating more and better-quality jobs attracting them into it. In this way, both responsibility for finding employment and the financial risks thereof have been increasingly transferred from the state to individuals and households (Avis 2014b). As such, the problem of (youth) unemployment is no longer considered 'a structural condition explained by a lack of *employment* [but] an individual problem caused by a lack of

employability' (Crisp and Powell 2017, 1788). Under these conditions, when workers find themselves either without a job or in precarious jobs this is seen as the result of their own inadequacies rather than a reflection of how labour markets operate.

Significantly, although the supply-side perspective has become an integral part of the mainstream socio-political agenda, the relevant heterodox literature shows that adoption of supply-side policy prescriptions has not led to reduced unemployment (Peck and Theodore 2000). Indeed, such policies have typically only acted as short-term remedies (Strecker, López, and Cabasés 2021). Rather than guaranteeing new, quality jobs in the long term, these policies have largely simply resulted in low-quality and precarious jobs being pursued by ever-better educated workers (Balls and Gregg 1993). The result of such policies, then, has principally been the subsidisation of employers – who do not have to pay (as much) to train their labour forces – and the creation of a *surplus labour force* which is involved in low-waged, short-term jobs (Peck and Theodore 2000). In the Southern EU, marginalised working-class youth form a large part of this working surplus. Therefore, whilst NEETs today appear more employable in terms of their formal academic qualifications (Crisp and Powell 2017), they remain part of what has been eloquently described as, after Marx, the new 'reserve army of labour and the lumpenproletariat' (Avis 2014a, 273–274). In this context, instead of enhancing NEETs' access to long-term, well-paid contracts, supply-side policies often ensnare them in fragile work and social insecurity (Wacquant 2013).

A key aspect of these supply-side policies that is often ignored in the literature is that they are typically more effective in affluent areas with more socio-economic resources and many job vacancies than in those places characterised by structural deficiencies but which actually have a greater need for good jobs (Peck and Theodore 2000). This means that how workers are embedded in place and distributed across space plays an important part in whether they can access employment. Consequently, instead of mitigating inter-regional disparities and social instability, policies that do not take such spatiality seriously can end up reproducing, if not exacerbating, both. Accordingly, how the *socio-spatial fixes* (Harvey 2010; Gourzis and Gialis 2019) in which young workers are embedded create certain barriers to their labour market integration deserves further investigation, especially within the Southern EU where youth unemployment has been rising. Such recognition of the importance of both place and space has important conceptual consequences, especially as the neoclassical economics out of which neoliberal policies have emerged has commonly assumed that social life plays out on the head of a pin, with the allocation of workers to jobs imagined merely to reflect issues of supply and demand and with geographical considerations largely viewed as exogenous to the operation of 'market forces' (see Peck 1996 for more details).

Although a neoclassical orthodoxy has long dominated thinking about how labour markets operate, heterodox and radical approaches (largely developed by geographers) have stressed, however, that labour markets are, in fact, fundamentally – rather than merely incidentally – spatially structured (Massey 1995). Radical geographers like Hadjimichalis and Hudson (2014), for instance, have detailed how growing socio-spatial inequality across the EU has not simply been an unfortunate side effect of but, instead, a central element in European integration, one brought about by locationally-specific deindustrialisation and growing labour market flexibilisation in the pursuit of capital accumulation. Hence, the developed post-industrial regions of East-Central Europe have recently

experienced a growth in technologically-advanced sectors, thanks to various subcontracting schemes implemented by Western European firms. In contrast, outlying – mainly Southern European – regions have been severely affected by the collapse of their core industrial areas or have turned to more precarious employment forms to retain their export competitiveness, as with the ‘Third Italy’ (Hudson 2003). The result is that less-innovative, technologically backward sectors – like construction, retail, and low value-added market services – have come to dominate economies in these less-advanced, peripheral regions (Fana, Guarascio, and Cirillo 2016; Calcagnini, Marin, and Perugini 2021). This dominance will likely ensure future employment decline and reinforce spatially-uneven development across and within countries – there is, in other words, a geographical path dependence for such regions. Whilst this spatial inequality is generally condemned by policy makers, it nevertheless constitutes a fundamental component of the reproduction of capitalism (Hudson 2007; Harvey 2010), a fact that suggests a need to adopt a Geographical Political Economy perspective to understanding policies (like the YG programme) designed to ameliorate NEETs’ situations.

Significantly, for our purposes here, some of the most extreme examples of such spatial inequality can be found in Spain, Italy, and Greece – the first two countries exhibit significant income and poverty differences between their southern and northern regions (Benedetti, Crescenzi, and Laureti 2020) whilst the latter contains only two regions (one of which is its capital region) with a GDP per capita above 75% of the EU average. Furthermore, all Southern EU countries are characterised by the recent growth of flexible labour-hiring practices, especially since the 2008/2009 economic crisis (Gialis and Leontidou 2016) and the implementation of various labour market ‘reforms’ (Pastore 2019). Being, by definition, relative newcomers to the labour market, youth workers in particular have faced an increasingly vicious cycle of precarity, thanks to the common employment practice of ‘last in, first out’, which tends to undermine their access to permanent, well-paid jobs and labour stability (Gialis, Gourzis, and Underthun 2018). Pointedly, the two countries upon which we focus (Italy and Spain) both have substantial youth unemployment, as illustrated through high NEET rates (Piqué et al. 2016), and very high degrees of young people working in temporary and/or low-paid, part-time jobs (O’Reilly et al. 2015). Indeed, their high contribution to the total YG programme enrolment – together with France, they account for 47% of enrollees (European Commission 2018) – makes them important to study, especially as they show a high geographical unevenness across their respective countries in terms of poverty and income inequality (Benedetti, Crescenzi, and Laureti 2020), an unevenness which suggests that the YG policy framework faces significant challenges stemming from how these countries’ economies are organised geographically. Indeed, Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín (2017) have revealed important failures in Spain’s YG policy framework when it comes to improving the labour market integration of young people, failures related to a lack of adaptation to the circumstances of the population most in need of help (Rodríguez-Soler and Verd 2018) and to inherent difficulties in targeting the highly heterogeneous group of NEETs (Strecker, López, and Cabasés 2021). Similarly, Tsekoura (2019) has suggested that Italy’s YG framework offers limited opportunities for the unemployed.

In summary, YG policies seek to enhance entrepreneurship and employability, as the fledgling young employee is presented as an ideal and exemplary worker who is the

driving force for social progress, in contrast to inactive youth, who are viewed as layabouts constituting a serious social problem (Piqué et al. 2016). However, the YG policy framework often ignores the fact that on-the-job training programmes and subsidising firms to hire workers do not necessarily constitute a stepping-stone to regular employment. In addition to frequently being temporary, the jobs created under such conditions may actually impede transition into full-time, well-paid work (Cappellini et al. 2019), given that subsidised public sector employment programmes are often not successful because of their minimal and temporary character (Card, Kluve, and Weber 2010). Thus, although they can potentially improve youthful workers' employability through skill upgrading and networking, they can also have adverse effects, as individuals enrolled in these programmes can end up being stigmatised as 'eternal interns', only ever shifting from temporary job to part-time job and perhaps back again (Cerulli-Harms 2017). Given this, exploring YG's socio-spatial variations in the EU's less-advantaged regions seems important if we are to understand any of the policy initiative's shortcomings and improve the conditions under which such a top-down policy framework is implemented.

3. Research design and methodology

To better understand the quantitative aspects of the YG in Italy and Spain, we comparatively analysed the changing NEET rates (i.e. the share of the total young population who are NEETs) and the figures of the unemployed and inactive NEETs between 2016 and 2019 (up until the COVID-19 pandemic affected labour markets). We also analysed the changes in youth temporary employment and then calculated and mapped regional over-/under-concentrations of YG registrations using Location Quotients (LQs).² First, we calculated LQs for both Italy and Spain separately – denoted as $LQ_{(a)}$ – by dividing the share of the population aged 15–29 enrolled in the YG programme within each nation's regions by the corresponding share of such enrolments nationally (equation 3.1). Second, we calculated *cross-national* LQs – denoted as $LQ_{(b)}$ – by dividing regional YG enrolments by the corresponding share of such enrolments in both countries collectively (equation 3.2). Whereas equation 3.1 showed us regional concentrations within each country, comparing each region to its specific country's national average, equation 3.2 allowed us to see whether particular regions in both countries contained over-/under-concentrations of YGs relative to a broader Southern EU average – that is, it allows for an inter-country rather than intra-country comparative analysis.

Only a selection of the variables analysed is presented in Tables 1 and 2 due to space limitations (the full data series is available upon request). In general, high $LQ_{(a)}$ values (greater than 1.20) indicate a high concentration of YG registrants in a region compared to the national average whilst low $LQ_{(a)}$ values (less than 0.80) indicate a low concentration. The same applies for the values of the $LQ_{(b)}$, which denote over-/under – concentration in relation to the total population of both countries.

$$LQ(a) = \frac{\frac{\text{YG registrations in the region}}{\text{regional 15 – 29 population}}}{\frac{\text{total YG registrations nationally}}{\text{national 15 – 29 population}}} \quad (1)$$

Table 1. Spanish NEET and employment rates. Age cohort 15-29.

Spanish regions/ indexes Time period	LQ(a) 2019	NEET rates		Inactive NEET rates 2016-2019 (%)	Temporary employment 2016-2019 (%)	YG registrants/ NEETs 2019
		2019 (%)	2016-2019 (%)			
Andalusia	1.24	19	-3.7	19.0	11.4	1.5
Aragon	0.95	11.6	-3.2	-1.0	9.7	2.0
Asturias	1.06	17.1	-1.5	30.0	-17.1	1.5
Balearic Islands	0.86	15.6	-4.3	5.0	19.3	1.3
Basque Country	1.01	8.8	-2.6	8.0	12.3	2.7
Canary Islands	1.62	19.9	-0.9	26.0	2.9	1.9
Cantabria	0.86	13.1	-2.5	14.0	18.9	1.6
Castile and Leon	1.08	12.0	-2.8	7.0	2.5	2.1
Castilla-La Mancha	0.95	15.1	-5.2	-14.0	20.0	1.5
Catalonia	0.64	15.1	-1.8	4.0	19.2	1.0
Community of Madrid	0.94	10.6	-4.2	-4.0	20.2	2.1
Extremadura	1.22	20.0	-2.6	-10.0	6.9	1.5
Galicia	1.25	12.3	-3.4	0.0	4.4	2.4
La Rioja	0.66	11.5	-3.3	-8.0	40.6	1.4
Murcia	1.14	15.4	-3.3	-11.0	18.9	1.8
Navarre	0.83	9.0	-5.1	-9.0	24.3	2.2
Valencian Community	0.79	14.8	-2.9	11.0	11.4	1.3

Table 2. Italian NEET and employment rates. Age cohort 15-29.

Italian regions/ indexes Time period	LQ(a) 2019	NEET rates		Inactive NEET rates 2016-2019 (%)	Temporary employment 2016-2019 (%)	YG registrants/ NEETs 2019
		2019 (%)	2016-2019 (%)			
Abruzzo	1.11	22.5	-2.2	-17.3	29.9	0.7
Aosta Valley	1.13	14.7	-3	-3.8	0.6	1.0
Apulia	1.22	29.7	-1.5	14.0	-10.2	0.6
Basilicata	1.43	26	-0.4	5.9	-23.1	0.7
Calabria	0.79	35.1	-3.1	-17.4	4.4	0.3
Campania	0.94	34.3	-1	2.3	-9.7	0.4
Emilia-Romagna	1.13	14.3	-1.4	6.4	18.4	1.1
Friuli Venezia Giulia	1.31	13.7	-4.1	13.3	1.6	1.3
Lazio	0.99	20.7	-1.8	9.7	-13.9	0.6
Liguria	0.68	17.7	0.1	29.9	-14.8	0.5
Lombardy	0.60	14.8	-2.1	7.8	-4.0	0.6
Marche	0.88	15.4	-3.8	-5.3	-9.4	0.8
Molise	1.17	24.7	-1.6	6.6	-20.4	0.6
Piedmont	1.01	16.6	-3.4	-9.5	0.6	0.8
Sardinia	1.87	27.7	-2.8	1.7	-15.6	0.9
Sicily	1.24	38	-0.1	2.4	-27.7	0.4
Trentino-South Tyrol	0.72	12.6	-3.3	-7.2	7.2	0.6
Tuscany	1.41	15.7	-2.3	11.7	4.6	1.2
Umbria	1.04	15.1	-2.6	1.8	-19.3	0.9
Veneto	0.93	12.4	-3.2	-19.7	15.1	1.0

$$LQ(b) = \frac{\frac{\text{YG registrations in the region}}{\text{regional 15 – 29 population}}}{\frac{\text{total YG registrations in both countries}}{\text{total 15 – 29 population of both countries}}} \quad (2)$$

It should be noted that comparing YG registrations with data for NEET rates does present some challenges, since the former data come from an administrative source that does not follow specific statistical quality measures whilst the latter comes from official Labour

Force Surveys. These challenges are largely reflected in the information on YG registrations in Spain, which are cumulative since July 2014 (González Gago 2017). This is because the Spanish YG register does not de-register young people once they have accessed an employment, education or training offer, unless the young person actively requests de-registration. Consequently, it is not possible to know directly the proportion of young people registered in Spain's YG programme relative to the total. Nevertheless, these limitations actually justify the investigation itself, given that the comparison reveals significant shortcomings in the data reliability and monitoring of the policy. At the same time, as a way to address such challenges and to develop a more nuanced interpretation of the quantitative figures, we also conducted in-depth interviews with several key informants, following a 'theoretical sampling' approach. Derived from grounded theory, 'theoretical sampling' has an explicit inductive logic and has been described as 'the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 2). At the same time, all qualitative sampling can be seen as purposive, guided by theoretical predispositions. This suggests that theoretical sampling also has deductive features (for a detailed discussion of this issue, see Coyne 1997). Such a dual perspective underpinned our sampling strategy.

We conducted four semi-structured, anonymised interviews in each country with key informants from national and regional employment centres and from vocational training and research organisations (see Table 3). Specifically, following a process of strategic sampling (Bryman 2017, 463), we catalogued regions' various characteristics and then chose informants from regions with different socio-economic conditions and industrial mixes and with either low or high NEET rates and YG enrolment. Our purpose in so doing was to highlight the structural differences and institutional inequalities found across these two countries' regions. This is crucial for evaluating policy implementation. Although the number of interviews is relatively small, the literature considers this number appropriate for examining a policy framework that is relatively recently introduced, as became evident when two further interviews yielded no additional important categories other than those already elaborated upon by prior interviewees. In addition, theoretical sampling resulted in regionally heterogeneous data collection. However, during our research and the many contacts we made with various local offices in different regions, including southern Spain, we encountered the problem of local offices invariably referring us to headquarters in Madrid for interviews. For this reason, the

Table 3. Profile of experts/key informants, compiled by the authors.

Code of interviewee	Position of interviewee	Location of interviewee	Country of interviewee
It1	Independent trainer and consultant/ Former manager at the Ministry of Labour	Campania	Italy
It2	President of regional employment association	Basilicata	Italy
It3	President and legal representative in training organisation	Basilicata	Italy
It4	Managing Director in research, training, and technical consultancy company	Rome	Italy
Sp1	Researcher in a foundation in social sciences	Basque Country	Spain
Sp2	Employee in public employment service	Catalonia	Spain
Sp3	Employee in an institution for youth	Castile and Leon	Spain
Sp4	Employee in the national body for youth policies	Madrid	Spain

strategic selection of the sample for the present study was ultimately based upon a strategy of snowball sampling. Such snowball sampling often seems to be the most effective strategy when the population is particularly hard to reach (Noy 2008). Accordingly, all key informants were located in the central and northern regions, whilst an absence of informants in the country's southern part suggests that a highly centralised and bureaucratic system of communication focused upon Madrid is practised in Spain and that there is a lack of coordination between central and regional institutions. However, key informants in Madrid were knowledgeable about the situation in southern regions and were thus able to give an overall description of how the YG is implemented throughout Spain.

In terms of interview protocol, we started by presenting the quantitative analysis's results to key informants to stimulate discussion. Accordingly, each interview had four main elements: general issues concerning YG implementation; the policy framework's challenges and achievements; assessment of the YG's institutional/operational structure, from national government to local authorities; and mechanisms impeding efficient implementation. We then systematised and synthesised themes generated in the interviews (Patton 2015) by deploying a constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967), such that every time that new contradicting data emerged we revisited the codes and categories generated in the previous interviews. The initial categories generated in the first interviews proved quite stable, however, indicating once more the rapid theoretical saturation of the research at this early stage of YG implementation.

4. Uneven trajectories of YG implementation and effectiveness

4.1. Regional disparities, inactivity, and the re-enforcement of temporary employment

Our analysis reveals that YG programmes suffer from important inter-regional disparities (see Tables 1 and 2). More specifically, the $LQ_{(a)}$ values for Spain show an over-concentration of YG enrollees in the southern regions of Andalusia ($LQ_{(a)} = 1.24$) and Extremadura ($LQ_{(a)} = 1.22$). Both of these regions have experienced high poverty growth rates and income polarisation (Tirado, Díez-Minguela, and Martínez-Galarraga 2016) and have high NEET rates (19.9% and 20.0% of people aged between 15 and 29 years old, respectively). In the same vein, the remote Canary Islands record the highest YG over-concentration ($LQ_{(a)} = 1.62$) and have one of the highest NEET rates in the country (19.9%). Likewise, the lowest $LQ_{(a)}$ values and low NEET rates are observed in Catalonia ($LQ_{(a)} = 0.63$) and Valencia ($LQ_{(a)} = 0.78$), where NEET rates are 14.8% and 15.1% respectively (see Figure 1a). This is perhaps not surprising, given that the Catalan economy is prosperous, benefitting greatly from industrial activity in the automotive, chemical, food, IT equipment, and tourist sectors, whilst Valencia hosts Spain's third-largest city and one of Europe's busiest ports, through which agricultural goods, marble products, and automobiles (Ford has an assembly plant close by, in Almussafes) are exported. Overall, there seems to be a regionally-sensitive, positive association between YG enrolment and NEET rates, which is explained *prima facie* by key informants as a result of youth unemployment in the southwestern regions most in need of intervention. As a Spanish key informant emphasised, 'where ... young people have very low employment prospects ... there is high enrolment in YG' (Sp4).

As with Spain, so in Italy are inter-regional disparities quite apparent. More analytically, the $LQ_{(a)}$ scores show that southern regions with over-concentrations of YG enrolees are those regions with high NEET rates: Sardinia ($LQ_{(a)} = 1.87$ and NEET rate 27.7%), Sicily (1.24 and 38%), Apulia (1.22 and 29.7%), and Basilicata (1.43 and 26%) all share these common characteristics (Figure 1b). However, the southern regions of Calabria ($LQ_{(a)} = 0.79$ and NEET rate 35.1%) and Campania (0.94 and 34.3%) do not follow the same trend. At the same time, Tuscany and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, both economically prosperous regions (Garofoli 1991), experience high YG enrolments whilst having significantly lower NEET rates. The positive association between YG enrolments and NEET rates, though, seems to be disrupted for these northern Italian regions due to certain local idiosyncrasies, as below further documented.

Whilst we found significant intra-country regional divergences for both Spain and Italy, then, when comparing the two countries with one another we noted a striking divergence in YG registrations between them (as in Figure 2), with the $LQ_{(b)}$ index revealing a significantly higher concentration of YG registrations in Spanish regions compared to Italian regions. This is also reflected in the YG country fiches available from the European Commission (European Commission 2020b and 2020c), where for the 2017–2018 period 30.1% of Spanish NEETs were reached by the YG but only 12.7% of Italian ones were.³ Superficially, this would seem to suggest that Spain's YG programme is working more effectively than is Italy's. However, the fact that the index of being 'in a positive situation 6 months after exit' is similar for the two countries (59.1% for Spain and 61.1% for Italy) shows that the high numbers of YG enrolees in many of the Spanish study regions are not necessarily an indication of success. Rather, as it turns out, these over-/under-concentrations of enrolees reflect instead the different data monitoring and reporting mechanisms between the two countries (as we discuss in more detail in Section 4.2). In turn, this reveals a lack of reliability and internal coherence of data reported in the Action Plan.

Furthermore, what emerges is that in almost all of the Spanish regions with a strong YG participation (high $LQ_{(a)}$) there is at the same time a remarkable increase in temporary

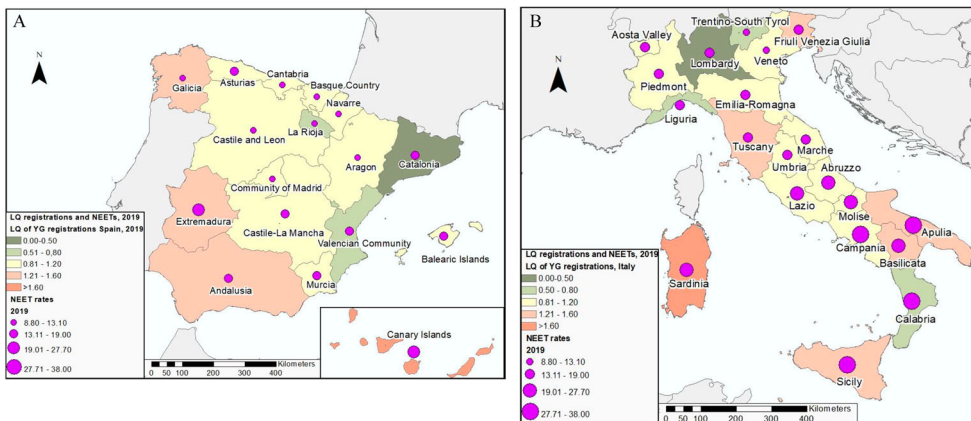


Figure 1. A. Location Quotient index ($LQ_{(a)}$) revealing regional over-/under-concentration of YG registrations, together with regional NEET rates, Spain, 2019 B. Location Quotient index ($LQ_{(a)}$) revealing regional over-/under-concentration of YG registrations, together with regional NEET rates, Italy, 2019.

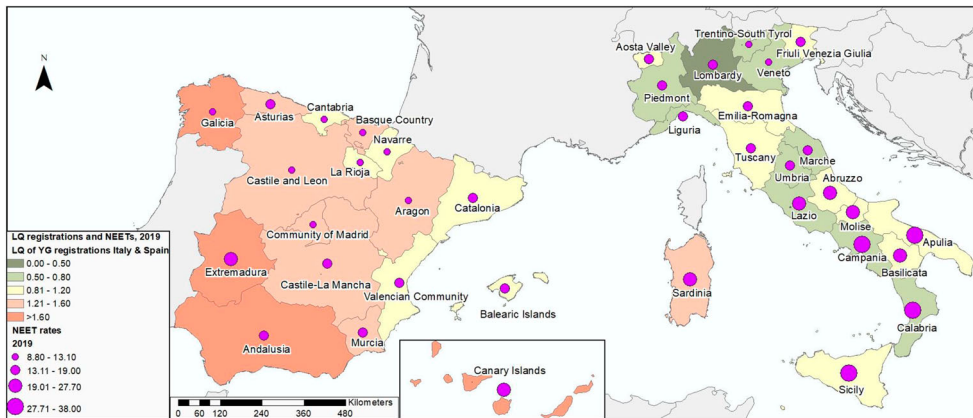


Figure 2. Location Quotient ($LQ_{(b)}$) of over-/under-concentration of YG registrations, calculated for the aggregate of Spain and Italy, and NEET rates, 2019.

employment that is often accompanied by a persistently high share of inactive NEETs. Thus, the Canary Islands, Andalusia, and Extremadura regions showed a significant increase in temporary employment between 2016 and 2019 (2.9%, 11.4%, and 6.9% respectively). At the same time, the Canary Islands and Andalusia have also shown a remarkable increase (26% and 19% respectively) in the inactive NEET population. Extremadura, on the other hand, has experienced a 10% drop. More importantly, in all Spanish regions where YG enrolment rates are higher than in Italy, temporary employment is steadily increasing. The only exception is Asturias (-17.2%), which nevertheless shows the highest increase in inactive NEETs (30.0%), a finding which will be further scrutinised below.

Whilst detecting a strong correlation between YG enrolments and temporary employment would require a statistical testing that goes beyond the scope of this research, data from Spain clearly show a trend towards a positive association between the two. Key Spanish informants confirm this focus on short-term precarious offers, stressing that YG employment opportunities 'last mainly six months and take place mainly in public and non-profit companies' (Sp2). Due to this, these informants are tepid on the YG policy framework's importance, emphasising that 'YG measures have been very ineffective in achieving the aim of providing help for the young people who need good jobs' (Sp4).

Although the data for Italy are more mixed, they do also reveal that all of the (mostly southern) regions that have high YG enrolments have a growth in inactive NEETs that is often accompanied by an increase in temporary employment. Sardinia (1.7%), Sicily (2.4%), Apulia (14%), and Basilicata (5.9%) all face the same trend. In similar fashion to what was revealed above for Spain, the strong presence of the YG programme in these regions both reduces the overall proportion of NEETs whilst increasing the proportion of inactive NEETs. The words of a key informant are quite revealing of this dual process: 'In [northern] regions where the training-work system is in "good shape", the YG is likely to be experienced as a real opportunity for entering the labour market. In the southern regions, the YG may have been seen, in part, ... as an indifferent policy' (It1). The conclusion that we draw from this is that those young people who do not care about the programme seem to be those NEETs who become inactive. In other

words, the programme seems to work best in northern areas that ‘allow [for] real placement opportunities’ (It3). By way of contrast, in the southern regions, where the initiative is most needed, only a small group of NEETs has benefited and the increase in the number of inactive NEETs therein suggests that the YG programme is failing to boost youth employment. These results are consistent with econometric analyses showing that labour market reforms and temporary employment in the Italian South have further increased youth precarity (Liotti 2020). Although it would be oversimplifying to attribute all of this increase to the YG programme, it seems fair to argue, though, that its implementation is in line with the dynamics of labour precarity – that is, precarity leads to greater numbers of NEETs which, in turn, leads to more participation in the YG programme, though failure to secure good jobs then leads to inactivity by many such NEETs, thus calling into question the programme’s utility.

Overall, our analysis confirms the market-driven nature of the policy. It is important to note, however, that although during the recovery period NEET rates were generally high (with some exceptions), as was temporary precarious employment, we cannot necessarily attribute these high levels to the effects of the YG programmes – other factors may have played a role. Nevertheless, given that the YG’s character shapes the potential for long-term labour integration, rather than ‘flexibilising’ precarious youth to make them more employable (Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín 2017) it is possible to see that the YG Plan seems merely to be spawning a perpetual cycle of precariousness, especially in the less-favoured regions (Peck and Theodore 2000). Thus, what we can argue is that whilst we do not know what would have happened if the policy had not been implemented, the market-orientated character of employability adopted by the YG seems only to be maintaining socio-spatial inequalities.

4.2. Deficiencies in implementation and false over performance

Our presentation of the quantitative analysis’s results to key informants stimulated a very instructive set of conversations that revealed that several institutional/operational deficiencies often hinder the functionality of the two countries’ YG programmes. This is so despite the fact that cooperation between national authorities, regional employment agencies, and local businesses is key to helping young people to achieve their goals (European Commission 2013b;). Interestingly, the two countries have some significant similarities when it comes to the YG programme’s application: although both have a national allocation of funds, decisions are made at the regional level, thus ensuring a semblance of regional autonomy. Hence, the Spanish YG is managed by the State Public Employment Service (SEPE), part of the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy, and although the national authorities set the funding allocation, local authorities have a high degree of autonomy in its distribution (Sp1). The situation is more or less the same in Italy, where the YG programme is managed by the National Agency for Active Labour Policies (ANPAL), a body of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. The linkage and collaboration between the different actors involved in the programme are done through the regional Youth Guarantee Portal.

Identifiable institutional/operational deficiencies in the Spanish YG framework appear to be triggered by a lack of coordination, delays in the arrangements of the central information system, complicated application processes, and the lack of a specific outreach

mechanism (Ayllón and Ferreira-Batista 2017). According to informant Sp4, the fragmentation that permeates the Action Plan's institutional/operational structure results in low co-ordination between enterprises and national and regional authorities and 'is something urgent that needs to change in Spain'. At the same time, one public employment service representative from Catalonia (Sp3) pointed to cultural attitudes in stressing that the 'YG was based upon the Scandinavian Nordic countries [but,] for better or worse, we are Mediterraneans ... young people need to be convinced by mediators in order to participate'. Inefficient individualised monitoring of registrants and enterprises along the whole spectrum of the Action Plan's activities were further reasons given for the YG programme's underperformance (e.g. by Sp1). As informant Sp2 opined, in those regions where the YG programme actually works 'the institutions in charge of the post-enrolment implementation have more clear purpose and a better infrastructure for [its] management'

Castille and Leon is one example of good coordination, since an institutional efficiency partially explains the over-concentration of YG registrations ($LQ_{(a)} = 1.08$), which is combined with a low NEET rate (12%). Informant Sp1 suggests that the explanation for these figures lies in the fact that, in collaboration with the Youth Council, the regional authorities there managed to create youth guarantee roundtables that fostered extensive networking which facilitated some really good job offers 'outside the mainstream services' and allowed 'young people [to watch out for other] young people'. Tantalisingly, this innovative initiative that helped lead to higher post-enrolment offers suggests that in those regions where there is efficient mediation and support the YG programme can be helpful. However, this case seems to be one of the few exceptions to the underperformance rule.

The very same institutional/operational deficiencies seem to be at play in the Italian regions. Indeed, several key informants were quite critical of its structure for 'prioritising formal procedures over the real needs of young people and enterprises' (It3) and excluding other 'public and private actors in the design and implementation phase of the programme' (It4). All key informants agreed with the need to 'co-create and implement YG measures in close connection with the [local] productive and business fabric' (It3), given that successful post-enrolment job offers are often the result of extensive 'public and private networking' (It4). In contrast, public employment services have their own timetable, due to bureaucratic schedules (It3), and thus often fail 'to provide an adequate outreach due to a lack of professionalism' (It2). The YG programme, then, seems to be some kind of an 'opportunity not fully exploited', as 'employment services operate in a fragmented manner [and] have poor relations with enterprises' (It1). Ultimately, these institutional/operational fallacies reaffirm the differences between regional labour markets. As It1 noted:

The Italian regions are characterised by diversity in the organisation of employment systems, in the management of employment policies, and in the development of interregional vocational training networks. As a result, there are regions where the level of interaction between institutions, enterprises, associations, etc. is particularly high and others where the system is difficult to develop in an integrated way.

Another important deficiency that has already been noted above is related to the reliability of the Plan's reporting and monitoring mechanisms. At first glance, several

Spanish regional authorities seem to overperform in terms of YG enrolments. However, a deeper look reveals that this first impression is misleading, as such impressive figures largely result from the fact that Spanish authorities do not delete young people once they have an offer of employment, education or training, unless deletion is actively requested. Thus, Spanish YG figures are cumulative going back to July 2014, when the Plan was launched (González Gago 2017). This means that the Spanish registry does not provide information on the current number of registrants but, rather, on the total number over time, which has resulted in an excess of YG registrations over NEET numbers for most regions since 2018 (as in Table 2). In this context, the YG registrations in Spain are (deliberately?) increased, indicating a process that is strategic and not regionally uncoordinated, as is often assumed (European Commission 2018). The national authorities seem to promote such a high YG registration in a top-down fashion: 'Madrid told us that we have to register young people, every young person who registers in the office or who is interested, everybody, has to register with YG' (Sp3). Whilst in some cases regional authorities have resisted these pressures, YG enrolment numbers continue to deliberately increase whilst removals of those who have already accepted an offer or are not interested in participating anymore are not encouraged.

Similarly, the quantitative analysis for Italy presents a conundrum, as the most recent data (2019) indicate that in most of the prosperous regions enrolments are higher than are NEET numbers. Our informants suggested that the reason for this is that southern regional authorities often 'push young people to enrol' in regions other than the ones of their residence, since they are more likely 'to encounter companies [with employment openings] in more affluent regions' (It2). This is due to the fact that 'there is a more efficient application and better job offers in prosperous central and northern regions'. These latter regions' affluence could be attracting young people from southern regions to enrol there, resulting in higher numbers than would otherwise be expected. As a consequence, young people interested in increasing their employability are 'pushed' to enrol closer to the industrial, high-innovation northern regions, thus reaffirming regional inequalities. This results in them potentially adding themselves to the local reserve army of labour as the demand for good jobs often outstrips the supply (Avis 2014a, 273–274). The degree of internal migration spawned by this administrative legerdemain is a major question, although for the time being remains outside the limited scope of this article.

Overall, the above data and interviews throw light upon an important two-way precarity continuum that operates in many regions of the study countries, as young people often move from inactivity and/or unemployment to temporary employment and, sometimes, back again but never secure well-paid, full-time, permanent work. This helps to explain why, despite quantitative data recording high YG enrolments in some regions, several key interviewees underlined that the Action Plan is underperforming in terms of offering long-term integration of young people into the labour market.

5. Discussion

During the 1970s, peripheral regions of the Southern EU experienced the collapse of their key industrial structures (Hudson 2003). In order to maintain their export capacity, some of them managed to activate endogenous dynamics by funding small-scale industries, the

so-called 'Third Italy' being amongst the best known examples (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2014). In fact, pro-market theorists found in some ad hoc regional success stories a remarkable opportunity to perpetuate the absence of institutional interventions in these marginalised regions (Hudson 2007). Guided by these examples, labour market 'flexibilities' have since been promoted in the EU's southern regions (Gialis and Leontidou 2016). However, these regions have proven to be anything but exemplary (Benedetti, Crescenzi, and Laureti 2020). For instance, since the 2000s Spain's southwestern regions have experienced an increase in relative poverty and spatial income polarisation (Tirado, Díez-Minguela, and Martínez-Galarraga 2016). Similarly, in southern Italy the historical trend of weak economic growth compared to northern Italy (Musolino 2018) has recently been reinforced, which has perhaps exacerbated regional disparities due to the loss of human capital, as shown by the recent wave of interregional migration (Fratesi and Percoco 2014). Whilst the political push towards internal migration as a way to connect the unemployed in one region with jobs in another has been central to neoliberal employment policies, decades of migration have not actually reduced unemployment and NEET rates in the southern regions. In both Spain and Italy, the result is that less-innovative, technologically backward sectors – like construction, retail, and low value-added market services – have dominated the regional economies of the South (Fana, Guarascio, and Cirillo 2016; Calcagnini, Marin, and Perugini 2021), thus fuelling further regional disparities and youth disengagement within the countries (Benedetti, Crescenzi, and Laureti 2020).

Influenced by neoliberal economic theory, after the 2008/2009 economic crisis EU policy makers drew upon the example of youth welfare policies established in the Nordic countries and Germany during the 1970s/ early 1980s to develop strategies that, they believed, could mitigate the effects of recession (Escudero and López Mourelo 2017). However, as our analysis of the Action Plans undertaken for Italy and Spain reveals, the track records for successfully moving young people into secure employment through YG programme participation are not great (Thurby-Campbell and Bell 2017). In this regard, although YG programme failures have often been attributed by their designers to inefficiencies in implementation, we would suggest that a major flaw is that, from the outset, their objectives were underpinned by neoliberal assumptions which have largely ignored the geographical context within which they have been implemented – the goals of 'fostering employability' and 'removing practical barriers to employment' seem to have largely ignored issues of inequality and labour market precarity, which vary dramatically across the economic landscape (Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín 2017; Gialis, Gourzis, and Underthun 2018).

From a spatial point of view, the quantitative analysis clearly shows that in both Spain and Italy their southern regions – historically their most underdeveloped regions – have higher concentrations of YG enrollees and higher rates of NEETs, thus confirming the interregional disparities within the two countries. In labour terms, YG registrations in Spanish regions exceed those in the Italian ones and the strong engagement in YG programmes is accompanied with a significant increase in temporary employment for the 2016–2019 period. At the same time, the analysis shows that all southern Italian regions with high YG enrolments have increasing numbers of inactive NEETs. Both dynamics – temporary employment and youth inactivity – actually contribute to increased labour market precarity (Gialis and Leontidou 2016). Whilst some may argue that such dynamics should be

expected during a period of employment recovery (Liotti 2020), the qualitative data quite clearly demonstrate the inadequacy of the Youth Guarantee programmes in terms of improving youths' long-term integration into the labour market. In this regard, it is quite in line with efforts to encourage greater labour market flexibilisation.

In summary, the patterns of NEET inactivity identified in the above analysis, we argue, are not only the result of YG programme underperformance but, also, of assumptions about worker self-improvement that largely ignore the very mechanics of how labour markets actually work. Such assumptions reaffirm spatial inequalities and the potential for young workers to be kept in a perpetual state of precarious employment, at least in the Southern EU countries where economic reality means that secure, well-paid jobs are generally not being created. This reinforces an argument, largely ignored by neoliberal economic theory, that it is not workers' motivations to improve their own employability that creates decent jobs but, rather, it is the nature of capitalist economies that does or does not (Wright 2000) – in other words, if decent jobs are not created, it does not much matter whether young people have the training to do them or not.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have presented an assessment of the Youth Guarantee Policy in the Italian and Spanish regions, offering insights into the assistance that the Policy is providing young NEETs (15-29) in the Southern EU seeking to enter the labour market and the conditions that differentiate its implementation on a regional level. Unfortunately, we conclude, the programmes detailed above, although designed to counter youth unemployment and precarity, may actually be contributing to it. As already highlighted, one criticism concerning how NEETs are categorised has been that they are defined in terms of what they are not, rather than what they are (Yates and Payne 2006). Such categorisation can carry with it a degree of stigmatisation that actually increases precarity. For instance, in Spain such workers are often referred to as 'Ninis', an abbreviation of 'Ni estudia, ni trabaja' ('Neither studies, nor works') that has been used pejoratively by some to describe a generation of young people who are seen to be mooches who are simply draining their parents' resources. By extension, retaining new enrollees even after taking a job perpetuates the stigma of 'eternal interns' (Cerulli-Harms 2017). Similarly, precarity is often created in Italy by pushing young people to register in areas other than their own, making them potential inter-regional migrants in a country of strong family ties that discourage internal relocation (De Rose and Vignoli 2011). These are important socio-cultural issues shaping youth labour market entrance, although they are unfortunately outside the limited scope of this article. For now, though, what remains significant is that the mechanism of YG programme implementation is entwined with precarity through multifaceted dynamics.

The discussion above concerning efforts to engineer labour markets, then, reveals that what at first sight appear to be institutional/functional inefficiencies are, in some ways, actually baked into the YG's policy framework. Despite the challenges arising from regional authorities' data management (such as 'cumulative' registrations in the Spanish records) that may lead to a vague picture about YG programmes' transregional operation, we have nevertheless identified a series of institutional weaknesses in this policy. Top-down planning, non-specification at the regional level, ineffective monitoring, and institutional

fragmentation were all commonly seen by key informants as factors causing inefficiencies. Indeed, the YG programmes' ineffectiveness concerning improving the long-term labour market integration of young people can in many ways be attributed to the temporary (often low-paid or part-time) employment promoted by the policy. Ultimately, our research confirms that the supply-side character of this policy largely accentuates precariousness, whilst at the same time it suffers from institutional and operational flaws. However, we do not intend to 'damn' wholesale this policy, as it could help youth in regions with real labour market opportunities. The question remains, however, at what cost in terms of job insecurity do young people enter the labour market? In this regard, if policies really want to address the problem of youth unemployment then the analytical focus probably needs to shift from *whether* young people enter the labour market to *how* they do so.

Notes

1. Whilst other Mediterranean countries – Greece and Cyprus – are included in our wider research project, they are excluded here due to a lack of regional data. The Spanish possessions of Ceuta and Melilla, located in North Africa, are excluded from the analysis.
2. The Location Quotient (LQ) is a way of quantifying how concentrated a particular sector, occupation or demographic group is in a region as compared to the nation or a wider geographical area. Data for the analysis were drawn from the EU Labour Force Survey, the National Agency for Active Labour Policies (ANPAL) in Italy, and the State Public Employment Service (SEPE) in Spain.
3. Spanish data come from page 8 of 'Youth Guarantee country by country, Spain, October 2020' (<https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=13661&langId=en>); Italian data come from page 8 of 'Youth Guarantee country by country, Italy, October 2020' (<https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=13643&langId=en>).

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