SOCIAL INCLUSION

The Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the Era of Polycrisis

Edited by Francisco Simões, Renato do Carmo, and Bráulio Alturas

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EDITORIAL

The Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the Era of Polycrisis

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Abstract

This thematic issue focuses on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) amid a context of polycrisis. It examines how overlapping global disruptions such as the Covid-19 pandemic or current geopolitical instability have shaped structural inequalities across Europe, including among the most vulnerable groups, challenging the European social model. This editorial emphasizes how the different articles in this issue address EPSR's three core dimensions (equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion) in a context of growing tensions between achieving societal ambitions and the dual digital and green transition, and growing concerns over the EU's increased investment in security and defence, which may undermine social policy commitments. The editors synthesize contributions from the issue, which offer empirical and theoretical insights into labour market activation, digital inclusion, and welfare adequacy. The editorial calls for integrated policy strategies to ensure that social rights remain central to EU governance through 2030 and beyond.

Keywords

digital transition; equal opportunities; European Pillar of Social Rights; fair working conditions; green transition; social protection

1. Introduction

The aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, compounded by the geopolitical instability triggered by the war in Ukraine or the subsequent high inflation rates, has created a multifaceted crisis across Europe. These overlapping disruptions have tested the resilience of national economies and social systems. However, these

systemic shocks are not new. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, Europe has experienced a succession of major disruptions (economic, social, and political), leading some (e.g., Henig & Knight, 2023) to acknowledge that contemporary societies are facing a historical moment of permanent emergency or polycrisis. This situation has produced asymmetric impacts, including from a territorial perspective, by deepening the divide between different regions of Europe, most notably between the North and South and the East and West (Simões, 2022). Southern and Eastern regions, already grappling with structural vulnerabilities, have suffered from additional austerity measures, labour market volatility, and weakened welfare systems. In contrast, Northern and Central European countries have generally demonstrated greater institutional resilience and faster recovery trajectories. However, even in these more robust economies, the pathways to recovery remain uncertain and uneven (Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019).

The successive and global crises of the past 20 years directly question the European social model (ESM). The ESM is a framework that aims at promoting inclusive growth, social cohesion, and equal opportunities across EU member states. Specifically, the ESM stems from key principles, including fair working conditions, access to education and healthcare, and the need to reduce poverty and inequality while ensuring sustainable development and social justice.

The ESM has evolved over decades, rooted in post-World War II welfare state traditions that stressed solidarity, equality, and social protection. Its modern form was shaped significantly by the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017 at the Gothenburg Summit, which established 20 guiding principles for fair labour markets and inclusive welfare systems. The 2021 Porto Social Summit marked a major milestone for the EPSR, setting ambitious commitments and targets for 2030, including reducing poverty by 15 million people (European Commission, 2021).

1.1. The EPSR: A Snapshot

The EPSR vision is anchored on 20 principles (e.g., gender equality, secure and adaptable employment, access to social care) stemming from the Porto Social Commitment and the Porto Declaration (European Council, 2021). Such principles are split into three dimensions: equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. Each of these dimensions relies on an agreed set of headline and secondary indicators, providing, therefore, a framework for monitoring the progress of the social cohesion and social inclusion ambitions across the EU until 2030.

The EPSR's equal opportunities dimension highlights the importance of inclusive education and training systems. Between 2012 and 2024, the EU has made notable progress in some areas of this dimension. These include the reduction of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEETs) by 4.80% to 11.10%, or an increase of tertiary education attainment by 10.20% to 44.70%. However, these aggregate improvements mask significant regional disparities. Southern and Eastern European countries continue to report higher rates of early school leaving from education and training and NEETs, which in turn have cascading effects on other EPSR indicators such as income inequality, labour market participation, and gender equity. Moreover, the expansion of tertiary education has introduced new challenges, including the risk of overqualification and a growing mismatch between educational outcomes and labour market demands (Simões, 2022).

The fair working conditions dimension stresses the importance of accessing decent and meaningful jobs. Important advancements have been achieved in this area as well. The employment rate among those aged 20–64 in 2024 landed on 75.80%, an increase of 8.90% since 2021. In the same period, the long-term unemployment rate in the labour force aged 15–74 fell 3.00%, from 4.90% to 1.90%. Still, the transition from education to stable employment often remains prolonged and uncertain, with many young people cycling through temporary contracts, internships, or informal work arrangements, particularly in rural areas (Simões, 2025). The widespread nature of precarious employment is an additional concern due to its pervasive social implications, as it undermines individuals' ability to access housing or participate fully in society (Carmo & d'Avelar, 2021). Importantly, the prevalence of in-work poverty, preventing upward social mobility or leading to significant scarring effects, further complicates the picture (Mussida & Sciulli, 2025). Thus, access to employment alone is not a sufficient safeguard against economic vulnerability.

The social protection and inclusion dimension of the EPSR focuses on the role of the state in mitigating inequality and ensuring a decent standard of living for all. The figures show some overall improvements in this domain. As an example, the rate of at-risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2024 was 21.00%, compared to 24.00% in 2012. Moreover, the share of children aged less than three years old in formal childcare has increased from 27.10% to 39.20% in the same period. However, these developments contrast with a deadlock on the inclusion of disabled workers in the labour market, a steady increase of self-reported unmet needs for medical care since 2016, or the fact that the reduction of poverty and social exclusion rates (at a yearly average rate of .25%) is modest, to say the least (Eurostat, 2025).

2. Looking Into 2030: The Main Challenges Faced by the EPSR

Nearly five years after the Porto Summit, the EPSR finds itself at a pivotal crossroads. The EU is currently grappling with the challenge of reconciling the demands of the dual transition (digital and green) with its longstanding commitments to social inclusion and cohesion. This balancing act is inherently complex and fraught with tensions. The digital transition, while offering opportunities for innovation and efficiency, also introduces significant risks, particularly through the deployment of artificial intelligence, which is expected to reduce or fundamentally change labour demand in specific sectors. Simultaneously, the green transition, essential for environmental sustainability, entails considerable socio-economic disruptions. These include the displacement of workers in carbon-intensive industries and the widening of social inequalities due to the substantial reskilling or upskilling requirements imposed on the labour force, especially among individuals from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds.

Compounding these challenges is the increasing prioritization of security and defence investments across the EU. Public discourse has raised concerns that such budgetary shifts will undermine the social role of the state, potentially diminishing its capacity to function as a protective mechanism against poverty and exclusion. There is apprehension that these reallocations could impede efforts to foster lifelong learning, skills development, social protection of vulnerable groups (e.g., children, elderly, minorities), or equitable access to the labour market, core tenets of the EPSR and the broader ESM.

The current challenges posed to meet social cohesion priorities coincide with the EU's ongoing deliberations over a new action plan to reinforce the implementation of the EPSR until 2030. As policymakers navigate this multifaceted landscape, the tension between advancing technological and environmental objectives and

safeguarding social rights underscores the need for integrated, forward-looking strategies. Ensuring that the EPSR remains a central pillar of EU policy will require a renewed commitment to inclusive governance and sustainable development that does not compromise social justice.

3. Contribution of the Thematic Issue for the Public Debate: An Overview

The articles featured in this thematic issue offer a comprehensive examination of contemporary social challenges and policy responses through the lens of the EPSR. Importantly, the contributions offered by the different articles cover the highlighted tensions between the evolving dual transition, European security needs, and social inclusion priorities. The different articles address many of the inquiries originally raised by the editors. How are European countries equipping workers with new skills in the green and digital sectors and still meeting employment and activity rates proposed by the ESPR? Are under-skilled and underqualified citizens being left behind in the EU countries? How exactly are new economies emerging from the green and digital transformations and creating new opportunities for people in more peripheral countries and regions? How can states continue to provide a safety net for their citizens in a context of conflict and rising military demands? To address these and other queries, the articles can be organized around the above-mentioned EPSR's three core dimensions.

The first dimension, *Equal Opportunities and Access to the Labour Market*, is addressed through several contributions that examine the structural and digital barriers to employment. Some of the studies highlight the effectiveness of active labour market policies and digital training programmes in supporting long-term unemployed individuals and NEETs. These articles highlight the importance of tailored interventions, particularly in rural and underserved areas, where digital infrastructure and access to training are uneven. The emphasis on digital competencies and pedagogical alignment in education further reinforces the need for lifelong learning strategies that are inclusive and responsive to technological change. The connections between digital transition and employment structures are also a theme featured in this issue. For instance, the issue covers an analysis of how unemployment benefits can moderate the effects of technology-induced employment shifts, suggesting that robust social safety nets are essential to ensure that digitalization does not exacerbate inequality. Socio-economic mobility associated with the work market is also addressed through an examination of the potential of employment growth to reduce poverty, revealing that job creation alone is insufficient without complementary policies in wage setting and social protection. Together, these contributions advocate for a holistic approach to labour market inclusion, one that integrates education, social policy, and economic planning.

In the realm of *Fair Working Conditions*, the issue delves into the role of the social and solidarity economy, migration, and sustainable employment. The analysis of EU strategic documents reveals the latent potential of the social and solidarity economy to tackle challenges such as unemployment and poverty. However, its integration into mainstream policy remains limited. The representation of migrants within the EPSR framework is critically examined, exposing gaps in inclusivity and the symbolic boundaries that shape public discourse and policy. The transition to green and socially sustainable employment is another issue highlighted in this issue that addresses the fair working conditions dimension of the EPSR, emphasizing the need for institutional reform and targeted training to support vulnerable job seekers. These articles collectively call for a reimagining of work, one that is equitable, inclusive, and attuned to ecological and social imperatives.

The third dimension, *Social Protection and Inclusion*, is perhaps the most deeply explored, with contributions addressing homelessness, minimum income schemes, regional disparities, and resilience to disinformation. The barriers faced by individuals without a fixed address in accessing social rights are scrutinized, revealing the limitations of current legal frameworks and the need for more inclusive registration systems. The experiences of LGBTQ individuals in homelessness further highlight the intersectionality of discrimination and social exclusion. Minimum income protection schemes in different countries (Portugal, Spain, and Italy) are critically assessed, with findings pointing to erosion in coverage and adequacy over time. These studies shed light on how policy design and implementation impact youth transitions, financial independence, and intergenerational equity. Moreover, regional disparities in social services are mapped using EPSR indicators, showing that stronger public systems are correlated with lower poverty and exclusion rates. Finally, the resilience of socially vulnerable populations to disinformation is examined, linking welfare state effectiveness to societal preparedness in the face of geopolitical threats.

Across all three dimensions, the thematic issue reveals a complex interplay between policy ambition and lived reality. While the EPSR provides a visionary framework for social rights in Europe, its implementation is uneven and often constrained by national politics, institutional inertia, and socio-economic disparities. The articles collectively argue for a more integrated and responsive approach, one that bridges gaps between legislation and practice, between digital innovation and social inclusion, and between economic growth and human dignity.

4. Conclusion

This thematic issue situates the debate about the future of the EPSR within the context of some of the most pressing challenges facing EU states in the years to come. Relying on both quantitative analyses of large (inter)national datasets and qualitative accounts of marginalized groups, this thematic issue offers nuanced evidence to inform the upcoming ESPR action plan. Collectively, these studies illustrate the multifaceted nature of social inclusion in Europe and the critical role of the EPSR in guiding policy responses. They reveal that despite some significant achievements, important challenges persist in ensuring that all individuals, regardless of background or location, can access opportunities, enjoy fair working conditions, and benefit from comprehensive social protection. The research calls for coordinated efforts across policy domains to address structural inequalities and support inclusive development in the face of digital, demographic, and ecological transitions.

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ARTICLE

Bridging Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Assessment in Digital Education: Ensuring a Constructive Alignment

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Abstract

An individual has the right to a quality and inclusive education and to training throughout their life. This is described in the European Pillar of Social Rights' principles of Education, training, and lifelong learning, and Equal opportunities. Given that digitalization processes are leading to pedagogical change, how this education and training are designed and delivered may be impacted. This article explores the important interplay between pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment in digital education. We begin by discussing the acquisition of digital skills—an important indicator of an individual's capacity to manage transitions— particularly focusing on the Portuguese context. Next, we reflect on how different learning theories and models can be applied in digital environments. In particular, we address the evolving roles of teachers and students, and the relevant pedagogical strategies, and propose the need for an alignment between pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment in digital education. By reflecting on how these aspects can be effectively integrated into the digital learning landscape, this overview provides valuable insights for both practice and policymaking, fostering meaningful and enriching educational experiences in the digital realm.

Keywords

digital education; educational curriculum; learning assessment; pedagogy

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1. Introduction

Digital technology has revolutionized our society, and the education field is no exception (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019). Digital education, generally referred to as the innovative application of digital tools to teaching and learning, has come to prominence over recent decades. Nowadays, teachers, educators, trainers, and students have a great variety of innovative learning approaches and active methodologies at their disposal (e.g., blended or fully online courses; Moreira & Schlemmer, 2020). Consequently, software and digital educational resources have progressively been recognized, not merely as digital tools, but as purposefully designed entities to support teaching and learning processes. Didactic games, digital programs, educational podcasts, videos, tutorials, blogs, wikis, web pages, and other resources encompassing pedagogical materials, stored or made available online, constitute but a few examples (Alexandre et al., 2023; Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2023; Tchounikine, 2011).

When thinking about digital education, related concepts such as digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation must be considered. Digitization refers to the conversion of analogue data and processes into a digital format (e.g., storing educational information and making it digital and accessible), whereas digitalization refers to the use of digital technologies and data that results in something new or that modifies existing activities, processes, or services (e.g., adapting educational processes or services to make them digital). Digital transformation refers to the economic and societal effects of digitization and digitalization (e.g., realignment of educational institutions and organizations to adapt to the growing use of technology and becoming digital; Bloomberg, 2018; OECD, 2014). Thus, the pedagogical use of digital technologies requires a reconceptualization of traditional didactics towards e-didactics. Such a reconceptualization involves effective design and an alignment between learning objectives, content, and assessment, and has the potential to support, enhance, and effectively transform teaching and learning (Kearns, 2012; UNESCO, 2024).

Nonetheless, despite the growing recognition and use of technology in the field of education, curricular reforms related to digital competence are still not a reality for many European countries. Furthermore, teacher-specific digital competencies are absent from many top-level regulations or recommendations (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019). In addition, there are still too few regulations that ensure the quality and diversity of methods employed and little evidence on how digital technology impacts and adds value to learning processes and to education in general (UNESCO, 2024). Therefore, several investments are needed at European and national levels and in both policy and educational domains (Mexhuani, 2025).

Such investments should focus on the development of structured teacher training programs and initiatives that enhance digital competencies. They should also address the integration of digital competence frameworks into initial and continuous teacher education and the implementation of policies that ensure an effective and equitable use of digital tools (Joya et al., 2025). Identifying specific training needs is also essential to the development of tailored initiatives. Such initiatives will equip teachers with the knowledge and competencies needed to critically assess and integrate digital resources, fostering students' digital literacy and critical thinking and ensuring institutional support through guidelines and best practices (Makda, 2025). These measures would help bridge gaps between policy and practice, ensuring a more effective and inclusive digital transformation in education while simultaneously contributing to the increased confidence of educators to teach in digital environments.

Within the European Pillar of Social Rights, paramount for assessing the social and economic conditions of European citizens, one major headline target, consistent with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, refers to the acquisition of skills, namely digital skills (European Commission, 2018). Two principles of the European Pillar are particularly relevant within the context of digital education: Education, training, and lifelong learning; and Equal opportunities. Through quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning, individuals must be able to engage in up- and re-skilling. In doing so they will unlock new opportunities, successfully manage transitions, and fully participate in society. Furthermore, equal treatment and opportunities regarding access to goods and services, namely education and training services, is key to the efficacy and effectiveness of digital education. With equitable access to infrastructure, devices, and digital skills, digital education can serve as a powerful means to bridge educational gaps, by providing remote learning opportunities and quality educational content. This can be particularly relevant in certain geographical areas (e.g., rural) or to individuals from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds.

In relation to this, the development of digital skills is described as a precondition for inclusion and participation in a digitally transformed society and ultimately for high-performing digital (education) ecosystems (European Commission, 2021). In Portugal, a southwestern European country, 56% of the population aged from 16 to 74 had basic or above basic overall digital skills in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024). This constitutes an example of a headline indicator within the Equal opportunities principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights. For the same indicator and during the same time period, northern European countries tended to score higher (Eurostat, 2024).

Importantly, in recent years, a growing number of initiatives and frameworks have emerged at the European level (Cravinho et al., 2022; European Commission, 2018), such as the Digital Competence Framework for Educators (Punie, 2017). Directed towards educators at all levels of education (e.g., early childhood education, higher education, adult education, non-formal education), this framework describes a broad set of digital competencies. When applied to areas such as professional assessment, or in facilitating students' digital competencies, this framework seeks to help professionals in assessing and reflecting on their competencies, and to identify their training needs.

In Portugal, other national initiatives have been developed over recent years such as the Dynamic Digital Competence Reference Framework, launched within the scope of the INCoDe.2030 program (INCoDe, 2019). This framework proposes an instrument for assessing the population's digital skills, based on the European Digital Competence Framework (Punie, 2017), and on the definition of policies, strategies, and education programs.

The Digital Transition Action Plan (Conselho de Ministros, 2021) includes three main pillars of performance. The first pillar refers to the training and digital inclusion of people; the other two pillars refer to the digital transformation of businesses and to the digitalization of the State. More recently, the Portuguese Council of Education issued a set of recommendations providing a systemic overview of digital systems and technologies with the aim of promoting quality learning, safety, equity, and inclusion (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2022). Also, the recently established National Council for Pedagogical Innovation in Higher Education, composed of national and international experts, aims to foster innovative pedagogical practices, recognizing them as fundamental to the development and excellence of higher education in Portugal and thus contributing to the success and well-being of academic communities (Conselho de Ministros, 2024).

Alongside key European and national initiatives, reflecting ambitions associated with sustainability and digitalization, the theoretical and conceptual levels are relevant to the shaping of digital education and training systems—equipping students with new skills and creating new opportunities. The sociocultural perspective is particularly relevant as it accounts for the students' sociocultural context (where learning occurs) as well as their interactions with the digital environment. Furthermore, it helps to frame how digital education environments can provide opportunities for collaboration, interaction, and peer learning (e.g., Picciano, 2017). Nonetheless, in this article we integrate other theories and perspectives—such as socio-constructivism—considering students' active participation in the construction of their learning processes, and reflecting on how technology can support teaching in a move towards meaningful and transformational learning (e.g., Batiibwe, 2019; UNESCO, 2024). Through these lenses, and considering the challenges imposed by digitalization, our main goal is to provide an integrative overview of how pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment can be integrated in digital education. In addition to this integrative overview, this article also situates digital education within European policy goals and within the Portuguese context. Furthermore, it examines the evolving roles of teachers and students in digital environments through multiple theoretical lenses. By providing these insights, this article provides a unique contribution with the potential to inform educators, policymakers, and researchers, and seeks to optimize digital education for more effective and inclusive learning experiences.

2. Pedagogy in Digital Environments: Insights From Learning Theories

Active pedagogies are those that focus on students' autonomy, their character, and their needs, and that involve them in the learning process. Such pedagogies that also make intelligent use of technology to increase learning experiences pave the way to new practices in digital environments (e.g., Freire, 2021; Siemens, 2004). Learning theories are crucial to reflect on pedagogical approaches and the use of technology in education, ultimately having the potential to shape education, training, and lifelong learning (Harasim, 2012; Koukopoulos & Koukopoulos, 2019).

Behaviourism, with its focus on observable behaviour, emerged from a positivist epistemology that emphasizes cause–effect relationships and the study of phenomena in terms of stimulus–response mechanisms. Behaviourism thus highlights how students behave while learning, namely how they respond to certain stimuli that, when repeated, can be evaluated, quantified, and controlled (Gewirtz, 2001; Skinner, 1968). Transposed to digital environments, it can translate into more operative, repetitive tasks, or programmed instructions that do not require individual assessment or judgment but instead imply a focus on the task, on the observation of behaviours, and on the measuring and monitoring of results (Picciano, 2017). Behaviourist principles, such as the implementation of learning sequences in a repetitive way or the provision of immediate and contingent feedback, can be useful to promote positive and effective learning activities in digital environments—for example using quizzes to assess students' knowledge and, based on the provision of automatic feedback, allowing them to proceed to the next section/level (e.g., if answering correctly a certain number of questions), or encouraging them to retry (e.g., if not scoring satisfactorily). Behaviourist principles can be appropriate, for example, within the teaching or training of students with learning difficulties in digital environments (e.g., Bock et al., 2008; Skinner, 1968).

In reaction to the behaviourist emphasis on stimuli and predictive responses, cognitivism highlighted the role of mental schemas and cognitive processes in learning, with a focus on what happens between the

occurrence of the environmental stimulus and the response of the learner. As such, motivation, memory, and the ability to relate newly learned information to previous existing knowledge emerge as key processes, particularly within the digital context (Harasim, 2012). Mayer's cognitive theory of multimedia learning (2008 is an example of how different types of memory are relevant for interpreting and making sense of digitally presented information. Within this perspective, the interdisciplinary nature of learning (e.g., interconnected fields of education, psychology, neuroscience, computing sciences) is promoted in order to further understand (for instance) brain mechanisms and the stages of cognitive development that underlie learning and knowledge acquisition (Harasim, 2012). Applied to digital environments, cognitivism can involve the creation of opportunities for reflection and metacognition through online discussion forums or reflective journals (as examples). Also, it can be particularly interesting as more advanced online software evolves into adaptive, personalized learning applications (e.g., integrating learning analytics; Picciano, 2017). Cognitive taxonomies also reflect how cognitive processes can be used to develop learning objectives, to inform instructional design, or to help students in coding, retaining, and applying information in digital environments. This is achieved while gradually increasing complexity and supporting students as they acquire new knowledge and skills (Bloom, 1984; Gagné et al., 2005; Krathwohl, 2002). From a constructivist standpoint, knowledge is constructed by the individual (Harasim, 2012). Knowledge and learning are seen as complex and occurring through cognitive development and are a mental representation of the external world that arises from individual actions performed towards objects, (e.g., Piaget & Inhelder, 1958). In the digital environment, an example can be the creation of interactive social communities where students, under the guidance of a teacher, solve problems while examining questions, mathematical equations, or case studies that integrate technology. This can be particularly useful for students to co-construct solutions based on critical thinking, in building teamwork experiences, and in developing new skills.

Importantly, social interactions between teachers and students are linked with cultural and cognitive development. When socially and culturally contextualized, learning is described as a major developmental factor itself (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). As such, and from a socio-constructivist perspective, learning in digital environments may involve problem-solving based on shared experiences and mediated by a facilitator—the construction of solutions to such problems is considered the basis of the learning process. This is closely linked with the notion of challenge-based learning, which aims to stimulate students into active participation—towards an educational outcome (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2023).

Creating situations of cognitive challenge in digital environments is thus crucial and involves the establishment of a zone of proximal development where the learner, the teacher, and the problem to be solved coexist (e.g., Lantolf & Xi, 2023; Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding (i.e., support) activities are a means to functionalize the concept of the "zone of proximal development" and can be effectively implemented in digital contexts (e.g., prompting questions, using demonstrations, providing examples), reinforcing reflection and interactive discussions towards the co-construction of solutions (Glassman et al., 2023).

Despite the valuable insights from classical learning theories, major changes in the way knowledge and information flow, grow, and evolve have been imposed by digitalization and have led to the emergence of new insights and perspectives (Harasim, 2012; Picciano, 2017). This shift from learning focused on internal, individual activities to learning within groups and communities, particularly those placed online, was accompanied by large-scale networks with the potential to support educators and students. In turn, these networks have reshaped relational dynamics and highlighted the need to design meaningful learning

situations suited to digital environments (i.e., situations where students can engage, collaborate, and navigate constantly evolving contexts). This was a catalyst for the emergence of connectivism, which emphasises the importance of fostering and maintaining connections to facilitate continuous learning (Bell, 2011; Coelho & Dutra, 2018; Downes, 2008; Siemens, 2004). In fact, the increasing presence of online learning communities and open educational resources has reinforced the role of connectivity in knowledge acquisition, emphasising how digital environments can foster knowledge exchange, co-construction, and adaptability to new information (e.g., Siemens, 2004). Importantly, the ability to see connections between ideas, concepts, and areas of knowledge is thus seen as an essential competency. These are key principles in digital education, applying, for instance, to courses or training initiatives involving multiple students where learning objectives encompass the development and creation of knowledge (e.g., through forums or online collaborative platforms), rather than its dissemination.

Furthermore, Anderson (2008) proposed an integrated theory of online education highlighting three elements that foster successful online learning experiences: social presence; cognitive presence; and teaching presence. Social presence refers to the possibility of having participants in an online learning environment expressing their individuality and establishing personal connections through effective communication and collaboration. Cognitive presence refers mostly to the development of critical thinking and reflection, encouraging students to engage in the exploration of ideas, concepts, and meaningful learning experiences through discussions and problem-solving in the digital environment. Teaching presence involves the crucial role of the teacher in designing, guiding, and supporting the online learning experience through meaningful interactions while providing clear instructions, planned learning activities/discussions, and timely feedback. This integrated perspective implies recognizing teachers and students as two important actors, but also the importance of the interactions between them and of the content, especially when considering the multiple learning tools, formats, and models available in digital environments.

More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic significantly reshaped theory, research, and practice related to educational technology and prompted widespread redefinition across and within countries (Siddiq et al., 2024). While building on past insights, the emergence of new information and perspectives has profoundly influenced how digital education is conceptualized and its future directions. In this context, recent literature reviews have highlighted: (a) the growing recognition of digital agency, emphasizing the need for transformative approaches in technology-enhanced teaching and learning (Siddiq et al., 2024); (b) the increasing adoption of e-assessments in digital education (Ortiz-López et al., 2022); and (c) the expanding diversity of online, hybrid, and blended learning models designed to foster student-centred learning environments (Otto et al., 2024). These practices play a key role in facilitating interactions between students, teachers, and content, while also requiring the development of new cross-curricular competencies (Otto et al., 2024). Therefore, in addition to considering the wide range of learning theories and the knowledge and evidence gained during and after the pandemic, it is essential to examine the role of different learning models and curriculum features in shaping digital education.

3. Learning Models and Curriculum Features in Digital Environments

Besides learning theories, several learning models can be applied to digital education to enhance educators' and students' experiences (Mayes & de Freitas, 2004; Picciano, 2017). In particular, we highlight the potentialities of implementing experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Pimentel, 2007), project-based learning

(Dochy et al., 2003), communities of practice (Wenger, 2000), and individual learning paths (De Smet et al., 2016) in digital education.

In line with the assumption that simple exposure and memorization of a given subject does not necessarily translate into learning, digital environments provide ample opportunities for experiential learning allowing knowledge acquisition in an empirical way through interactive exercises, virtual simulations, or immersive learning experiences that provide students with hands-on experiences. In effect, by engaging in practical and problem-solving activities in digital environments, students can develop their competencies and understanding of specific topics and areas of knowledge in more meaningful and complete ways (Kolb, 1984; Pimentel, 2007).

Similarly, using project-based learning offers students the possibility of working on real-world projects, applying their knowledge and competencies towards solving real-world problems (Jonassen & Hung, 2008; Onyon, 2012). Collaboration tools, online resources, and multimedia content can be used to support students in researching, planning, and executing their projects. At the same time, they are also fostering critical thinking, creativity, and teamwork in digital environments (Dochy et al., 2003).

Communities of practice have the potential to allow students to connect and share their interests and goals, as well as their challenges and reflections, all while collaborating and learning from each other (e.g., Wenger, 2000). In digital environments, this allows the establishment of networks in a natural way. Such networks are anchored in trust, they sustain students' collaboration and involvement, and cultivate creative pedagogies (Cochrane & Narayan, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Discussion forums and virtual classrooms are examples of ways to foster students' sense of belonging, providing opportunities for sharing information while promoting peer-to-peer learning and collective problem-solving.

Individualized learning paths can be adjusted to students' (ranging from individuals to entire organisations) needs, interests, and learning styles. These tailored paths clearly and efficiently guide students from learning goals to outcomes through a plan or a program consisting of different stages such as understanding content in an accessible way, or progressing in certain learning competencies. In digital environments, it can be particularly relevant to provide personalized recommendations, resources, and activities (e.g., based on the analysis of students' data). This allows for adapting learning activities and formats and enables students to progress at their own pace while accessing content that suits their interests and personalities before advancing to more challenging content or activities (De Smet et al., 2016). Artificial intelligence (AI) has played an important role in this field, enabling the development of sophisticated tools, such as intelligent tutoring systems. These systems have the potential to leverage large-scale data analysis to create personalized learning experiences that dynamically adapt to a student's difficulties and progress (UNESCO, 2021).

Relatedly, AI and generative AI are having a significant impact on people's engagement with information, digital technology, and media. This raises concerns about control, human agency, and autonomy over information, decision-making, gender equality, and freedoms in general. As such, user empowerment through media and information literacy as a response to generative AI, which is still in its infancy, needs to be fully deployed and public policymakers should ensure that it is developed properly from the outset (UNESCO, 2024).

The diverse learning models and approaches discussed throughout this article share the underlying assumption that learning is a continuous, bottom-up process driven by experience, which focuses on practical learning and posits the student at the centre of the learning process. In other words, digital environments provide extensive opportunities for students to expand their knowledge and develop their competencies—through involvement in real-world problem-solving and developing projects in which they mobilize information and reach their own conclusions. In addition, they receive immediate feedback, they have the opportunity to share insights with others in a collaborative context, and they are able to focus on a path that leads to solutions and outcomes—which is fundamental to their future learning and work experiences (Jonassen & Hung, 2008; Onyon, 2012).

Importantly, the diversity of pedagogical methods and approaches is relevant to inform and shape curriculum design in digital environments with a view to creating meaningful learning experiences. More and more, students are demanding that their education reflects their own contexts, experiences, and cultures (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2023). The content and the activities included within a curriculum can therefore be adapted and designed to take advantage of the unique features and capabilities offered by technology. This in turn fosters extended collaborations and continuous innovation in pedagogy and information delivery while simultaneously enabling dynamic and interactive learning experiences and personalized pathways (Picciano, 2017).

In effect, the strategies and curriculum features that can be used in digital environments reflect the transactional (i.e., non-linear) nature of learning (Pimentel, 2007). Ensuring that these features are considered when navigating within digital education and incorporating them into formal (e.g., integrating digital pedagogies into school, university, and vocational curricula) and non-formal education initiatives (e.g., promoting lifelong learning, and community-based digital literacy initiatives, in more flexible learning pathways) is key to fostering digital literacy. This has the advantage of allowing an easy adaptation to students' specific needs, personalities, histories, and backgrounds (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2023). Online resources can be integrated into the curriculum or learning activities to provide diverse perspectives, up-to-date information, and multimedia content. Teachers can therefore modify and update the curriculum or their strategies in real-time, addressing emerging topics, incorporating recent events, and responding to students' needs.

Furthermore, flexibility and interactivity are paramount to quality teaching in digital education. Flexibility can be ensured in terms of time, location, and pace of learning, but flexibility is also important to ensure students' autonomy—enabling them to take ownership of their own education process, setting goals and making choices that align with their interests and character (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). In addition, offering a range of interactive features (e.g., timely, personalized feedback and assessment), digital tools and platforms allow students to actively engage in the learning process. Flexible and interactive activities, multimedia resources, and collaborative tasks are key to fostering deeper engagement, critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity (Bates, 2015; Lindquist & Long, 2011).

Considering these features when navigating within digital education and incorporating them into formal curricula, lifelong learning, and modern training programs is key to fostering digital literacy and skills development. Importantly, it equips individuals with the knowledge and competencies needed to navigate an increasingly digitalized world in both critical and responsible ways, while also strengthening employability and resilience in the face of technological advancements (Alexandre et al., 2023; European Commission,

2021). In this sense, frameworks such as that proposed by the European Commission (i.e., focusing on critical thinking, ethical participation, and digital safety) are needed to inform the design of both formal and non-formal educational programs, equipping students with the skills necessary to interact meaningfully and ethically in digital environments (Punie, 2017).

Remarkably, digital education does not merely serve the purpose of promoting students' knowledge and skills. It also fosters social-emotional development and cultural awareness and involves ethical considerations (Buchanan, 2019). Therefore, within a holistic approach, pedagogical and curriculum strategies should address the cognitive, emotional, sociocultural, and ethical dimensions of learning in digital environments (e.g., Pimentel, 2007). As such, careful planning, teacher support, and inclusive design are vital to ensure that the curriculum in digital environments effectively supports meaningful and engaging learning experiences for all. This is particularly important when considering the evolving roles and relationships that shape digital environments (Brey, 2006; Olcott et al., 2015).

4. Teachers and Students: Evolving Roles and Relationships

Digital education facilitates communication, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas, and in doing so enables students to connect, engage, and learn from each other across geographic, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2023). Building horizontal relationships in these environments is crucial to creating inclusive and collaborative learning communities—where teachers and students interact as equal participants. For instance, the Digital Competence Framework for Educators foresees a set of competencies focusing both on educators and students and emphasizing a learner-centred approach to digital education. Here, teachers are pivotal in facilitating and supporting students' digital literacy and the development of competencies within collaborative and empowering learning environments (Otto et al., 2024; Punie, 2017). This, in turn, fosters a sense of shared responsibility, respect, and mutual support and ensures a co-construction of knowledge (Downes, 2008). Moreover, it highlights how both teachers' and students' roles have progressively evolved in digital environments (e.g., Sharma, 2017). As a recent example: Research has suggested the pandemic has impacted teachers' knowledge and beliefs about their teaching practices and roles, with professionals maintaining positive beliefs with regards to digital technology and being able to foresee benefits associated with its use (Brianza et al., 2024).

Within digital environments, teachers are responsible for aligning learning experiences with educational goals and standards but also with students' needs, learning styles, and interests—ensuring coherence and progression in the curriculum (Pelz, 2010). Nowadays, teachers are seen as facilitators, mentors, mediators, and gatekeepers of learning experiences and not simply as sources of knowledge. For instance, teachers design learning activities, promote problem-solving skills, facilitate discussions, and provide feedback to support students' journeys. When leveraging technology effectively, teachers help students to navigate the vast digital resources and information available, promoting the development of information literary skills, which encompasses the reflective discovery of information, an understanding of how information is produced and valued, as well as the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015). Moreover, they encourage and guide students to set learning goals, to analyse and evaluate their progress, and to make informed choices regarding tools, platforms, and the effective use of digital content. As such, teachers enhance the educational experience, supporting active and individualized learning and promoting critical thinking while

also fostering students' autonomy and empowering them to take ownership of their learning process (e.g., Bates, 2015; Sharma, 2017).

Based on a sociocultural perspective, and consistent with socio-constructivism, students' roles have shifted from passive recipients to active participants and co-constructors of knowledge, with their identities and agency playing a crucial role in the learning process (Kumpulainen et al., 2018). Accordingly, students can set goals, seek resources, engage in shared activities and projects, monitor their progress, reflect on their learning experiences, and make connections between concepts and real-world experiences, all while expanding their knowledge in student-centred learning environments (Anderson, 2008; Otto et al., 2024).

Moreover, digital education environments constitute privileged arenas that allow students to connect their cultural identities to their learning experiences, thus fostering a sense of belonging and empowering students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Lindquist & Long, 2011; Roth et al., 2004). Digital environments contribute to more inclusive learning environments by helping students to develop self-regulation, communication, and interpersonal skills. With the integration of digital technologies in education, students also take on the role of digital citizens, developing literacy skills and being able to critically evaluate digital content—responsibly using online resources and engaging in ethical online behaviour (e.g., Buchanan, 2019; Olcott et al., 2015).

Besides teachers' and students' evolving roles, pedagogical relationships have also undergone several changes over time and the use of technology has introduced some unique features (Dias & Rodrigues, 2019). For instance, in digital education, communication through digital platforms, emails, video conferencing, discussion boards, and other emerging platforms or apps influences the nature and frequency of interactions along with their tone, immediacy, and richness (Cole et al., 2019; Wallace, 2003). When analysing communication, particularly during and after the pandemic, some authors noted the importance of recognizing how the material conditions (e.g., connectivity, digital devices) of online interactions influence the students (e.g., body-sensory dimensions). Such conditions shape the didactic environment and how meaningful interactions and relationships are established and maintained in digital environments (Brianza et al., 2024).

Importantly, teacher–student relationships still revolve around a positive environment and around sensitivity, guidance, and support—even if the context and forms of such interactions differ from traditional classroom settings (Cole et al., 2019). A recent report referred to relational pedagogies and to pedagogies of care as prioritising empathy and the development of students in a nurturing, supportive, and equitable environment. Although care has not always been central to teaching, relational pedagogy and pedagogy of care have been progressively recognised as vital within the educational process. They are particularly important in digital environments where they contribute to professional work collaborations and to students' self-esteem and well-being (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2023). Specifically, ensuring a hospitable environment, empathising with students, and responding to their needs can be achieved through teachers' sensitive behaviour, by having open conversations, by applying concepts in practical, real-world situations, and through the provision of personalized feedback. In a related point: Students with a higher perception of a respectful, cooperative, and comfortable environment, and of active learning practices online, may be more engaged in an online course (Cole et al., 2019). These aspects are relevant for reflections on pedagogy and curriculum but are also relevant when considering the specificities of assessment in digital environments, which must be guided by positive interactions and constant communication between teachers and students, towards a culture of success (Cole et al., 2019; Fernandes, 2008).

5. Assessment in Digital Environments: Specificities, Strategies, Principles

Assessment refers to a pedagogical process whose main purpose is to simultaneously help students acquire more knowledge, with greater understanding, and to help teachers improve their teaching strategies and practices (O'Reilly et al., 2005). As such, assessment constitutes an intentional, formally organized, and systematized pedagogical practice with the aim of contributing to positive social transformations (Chuieire, 2008).

Instead of a unified theory of assessment, diverse conceptions of assessment (e.g., more traditional, focused on examining; more technicist, focused on measuring; or more quantitative, focused on classifying or regulating) and distinct traditions (e.g., greater focus on the regulation of learning processes, or on the sociocultural interactions that shape them) have emerged over time (Fernandes, 2008). Establishing a clear pedagogical rationale is an important step towards ensuring quality assessments in digital environments.

Therefore, several pedagogical principles must also be applied in these contexts. Such principles include the clarity of objectives (e.g., following a taxonomy) and evaluation criteria (e.g., rubrics outlining expected standards, for different levels of achievement). Also relevant are the creation of learning experiences offering multiple perspectives (i.e., reflecting students' contexts), the creation of opportunities for interaction and collaboration between students within authentic learning situations (e.g., real-world applications), and the provision of timely and appropriate feedback mechanisms (i.e., embedded within learning activities; O'Reilly et al., 2005).

Feedback, self-assessment, and co-assessment are fundamental strategies for optimizing digital learning processes and assessment and improving teacher practices whilst simultaneously optimizing student learning and growth, reflection, and metacognition (Nicola & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Panadero et al., 2019; Price et al., 2010). Specifically, feedback must be provided when students, individually or in a group, are aware of learning objectives and have time to act on them (i.e., contingent, timely). Enough time should be provided to ensure students understand what they can do to improve, and feedback can be provided either in written format (e.g., in a shared document), orally, or by demonstrating (e.g., in an online class). Importantly, feedback must focus on the task, activity, or process, rather than on the learner, and favour comparison with objective assessment criteria. Assessment criteria must be shared and known by all, enabling use in a positive and constructive way. As such, in digital environments, as in traditional classrooms, it is crucial to ensure an integrated mechanism of feed up, feedback, and feed forward—developing positive relationships based on trust and establishing clear objectives. These mechanisms can focus on tasks, on the process itself, or on self-regulation, and should allow for adjustment, reorganization, and improvement after feedback has been provided (Koumachi, 2021).

Quality feedback practices are those that offer information, opportunities for scaffolding and development of positive beliefs in assessment, but that also facilitate self- and co-assessment (e.g., peer-assessment; Nicola & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Self-assessment allows students to reflect on and evaluate their own work and learning path (for instance, through reflective journals, e-portfolios, or self-assessment questionnaires) with a focus on their development and with the aim of improving their actions and learning processes. Co-assessment, in turn, gives students the opportunity to give and receive feedback and evaluate each other—for example through peer review assignments, discussion forums, and through intervening in a cooperative way in each other's work and providing additional value (Panadero et al., 2019).

These practices, when fairly and adequately implemented in digital environments, through the provision of moments for feedback, discussion, and revision/implementation, reinforce students' autonomy, responsibility, and active roles. Such practices have the potential to contribute to students' increased motivation and to more comprehensive assessments. Importantly, this cannot be done without clear communication about assessment goals and criteria. This should be accompanied by a transparent negotiation of assessment goals, timelines, and conditions or types of activities. This all requires effective mediation with the teacher who acts as a mentor and facilitator of consensus, for instance during peer assessment (e.g., Ferrarini et al., 2019).

Several challenges are typically mentioned when considering assessment in digital education: the need to adapt to new technologies; greater time investment by teachers; physical distance between teachers and students; difficulties in accompanying and assisting students; and/or difficulties in ensuring fairness and security of online assessments (e.g., Kearns, 2012). Frequently, these and other challenges encountered in digital environments require multiskilled or multidisciplinary teams to come up with solutions (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2023). To address these challenges, several strategies and mechanisms have been proposed in the literature—for example, an Academic Dishonesty Mitigation Plan integrating preventive and detection-based strategies has been proposed to enhance the security and integrity of online assessments (Garg & Goel, 2022). Importantly, mitigation strategies require the active involvement of key stakeholders (e.g., platform providers, institutions, educators, and students) and institutional support, towards the development of integrated and secure assessment frameworks (Garg & Goel, 2022). Such strategies may encompass the use of proctoring technologies, plagiarism detection tools, and randomized question banks (Jiang & Huang, 2022).

Relatedly, and beyond extant digital assessment strategies, generative AI is transforming how learning progress is evaluated. AI-generated simulations and scenario-based assessments allow students to engage in interactive problem-solving exercises tailored to specific levels of competence. Also, natural language processing models can generate personalized case studies, discussion prompts, and assessment tasks. All of this can be dynamically adapted to students' responses. In the realm of academic integrity, generative AI is driving the development of AI-assisted verification systems to analyse originality, posing a number of relevant ethical and pedagogical concerns. Although generative AI allows for self-directed learning assessments and for the close interaction of students with educators (e.g., through real-time questioning, argumentation, and reflection), it also requires educators to critically address its implications for fairness, transparency, and meaningful learning outcomes (e.g., Memarian & Doleck, 2023; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Additionally, alternative assessment approaches such as open-book exams and competency-based assessments have been suggested to reduce concerns about academic dishonesty while fostering deeper learning (Hobbins, 2022). Automated and adaptive feedback systems, peer assessment strategies, and learning analytics tools that allow teachers to monitor student progress in real-time, accompanied by structured communication channels (e.g., scheduled check-ins, discussion forums, synchronous feedback sessions), can help bridge the physical distance between teachers and students, while also contributing to enhance effectiveness and equity of assessment in digital education (Kulal et al., 2024).

On a more positive note, there are also a number of advantages that are raised when discussing assessment in digital education. These include the possibility of obtaining automatic classifications and feedback, of implementing adapted tasks and activities, of ensuring greater accessibility, of easier access to learner's data,

or even the inclusion of integrated security measures. Additionally, key formative assessment strategies (e.g., sharing learning intentions and success criteria, using questioning and discussion) and functionalities of technology (e.g., sending and displaying, processing, analysing, or ensuring interactivity) are described as contributing to more effective teaching and learning processes in digital environments (Kaya-Capocci et al., 2022).

Importantly, several key assessment principles must guide the assessment methods and strategies in digital education. Principles of equity (e.g., equal opportunities for the progression of each learner), positivity (e.g., emphasis on the process and on opportunities to practice the knowledge that was built, valuing students' capacities and competencies), improvement (e.g., involving constant readjustment of teachers, students, and of pedagogical strategies), diversity of procedures (e.g., various sources of information and forms of assessment) and stakeholders (e.g., participation of multiple stakeholders, reducing subjectivity), and transparency (e.g., all students aware of the assessment process and its specificities) are a few examples. In addition, a recent model of assessment in digital environments proposes the principles of transparency, authenticity, consistency, and practicability (see Ferrarini et al., 2019). The principle of coherence (e.g., of assumptions and assessment methods) becomes more important in digital education given the need to ensure that teaching and assessment in digital environments are carried out in a continuum (Cruz et al., 2010).

6. Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Assessment: Constructive Alignment in Digital Education

Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment, a concept originally proposed by Biggs (1996), emerged from the combination of constructivist learning theories and instructional design literature. This idea, which can be applied to diverse courses or programs, is particularly relevant within the context of digital education. Constructive alignment refers, for instance, to ensuring coherence between the objectives of a course/program and the expected outcomes (e.g., in terms of students' performance or competencies), to defining curriculum goals that represent a certain cognitive level (e.g., based on learning taxonomies), or to deciding on which teaching and learning activities can better elicit certain performances or competencies.

Constructive alignment also means ensuring consistency between learning objectives, teaching methods, and assessment activities, in line with a learning theory or a combination of learning theories. In effect, assessment is strictly linked to the nature of knowledge and should be adjusted to ensure epistemological coherence (Chuieire, 2008). Given so, from a behaviourist perspective, it can be important to provide assessment activities that ensure immediate feedback and reinforcement as students complete tasks on a digital platform (such as multiple-choice activities). Based on a cognitivist perspective, it can be relevant to assess students' understanding and ability to apply knowledge (for instance through online open-ended questionnaires). From a socio-constructivist standpoint, it will be important to ensure hands-on, interactive online assessment experiences allowing the student to build and regulate their understanding of contents (for example, through self-assessments). According to connectivism, it is appropriate to provide assessment opportunities that allow students to form connections among themselves, but also to form connections with the information and resources available online and to establish networks (for instance, to conduct the assessment of projects developed within communities of learning).

Applying behaviourist and cognitivist approaches to assessments in digital environments can ensure assessment processes that are much more focused on the cognitive aspects and that neglect the more

interactive and relational aspects of learning. By doing so, these assessments can lead to retroactive regulation of learning, where difficulties can only be detected after the teaching-learning process. In turn, socio-constructivist or connectivist perspectives can lead to assessments anchored in communication processes and in the interactions and networks established within the online learning contexts. At the same time, these approaches may neglect more individual (e.g., cognitive) aspects that also influence learning (Fernandes, 2008). Such specificities are important to consider when conducting digital assessments, adjusting to the goals and students' personalities.

Importantly, both socio-constructivism and connectivism share a foundational view of learning as an active, social, and context-dependent process. While socio-constructivism emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge through interaction, scaffolding, and cultural mediation (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2023; Vygotsky, 1978), connectivism extends these ideas into the digital age, highlighting the role of networked learning, where knowledge is distributed across digital connections and social interactions (Coelho & Dutra, 2018; Downes, 2008; Siemens, 2004). As such, both perspectives conceive learning not as an isolated cognitive process, but as emerging through interactions and engagement with others, whether in traditional social settings (as in socio-constructivism) or in technology-mediated environments (as in connectivism). While socio-constructivism focuses on dialogue and peer collaboration, connectivism focuses on digital tools, online communities, and information flowing across networks. The fact that both approaches recognize the learner's active role in knowledge construction and adaptation makes them highly relevant to teaching and learning in digital environments.

Close alignment also needs to be ensured between learning formats, models, and assessment in digital environments. For example, in an online course that combines online and face-to-face formats, assessment can involve a combination of online tests and quizzes and individual or group presentations to promote reflection. Importantly, to assess learning in a meaningful and authentic way in these environments, effective learning models are those that focus more on applying knowledge and competencies to real-world situations through problem-based activities, with the provision of timely, regular, and constructive feedback (Nicola & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Panadero et al., 2019; Price et al., 2010).

Effective approaches to learning and assessment in digital environments are those that are anchored in quality interactions and that meet the specific needs and characteristics of students. As such, it is crucial to implement differentiated learning strategies and assessments, offering a range of options that meet different learning styles and preferences. Adaptive learning activities and assessment tools that adjust the difficulty of exercises and questions are also fundamental. Culturally responsive activities and assessment exercises that consider students' cultural backgrounds and experiences also reinforce the constructive alignment in digital education and contribute to more effective, cohesive, and engaging learning experiences, in line with a sociocultural approach.

Figure 1 provides a summary of the different learning theories discussed, focussing on pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment in digital education. An emphasis is given to the constructive alignment of these theories.
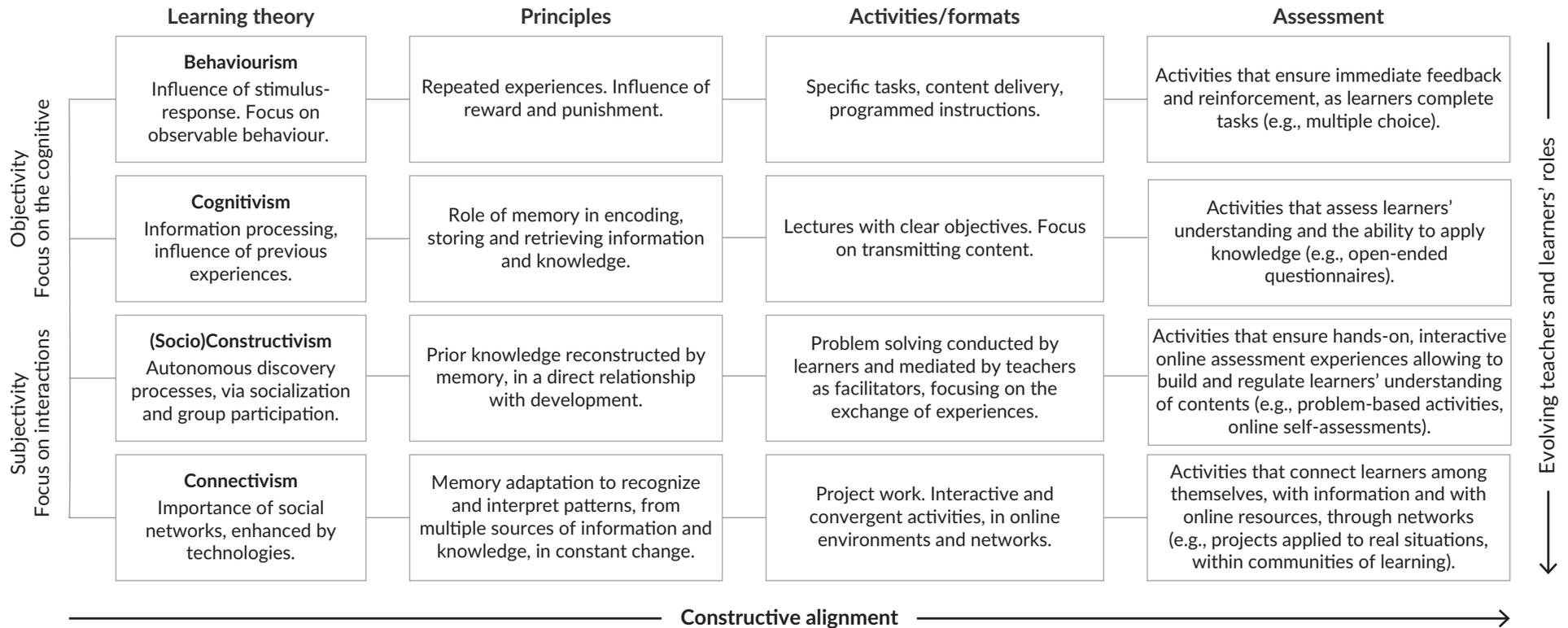
Figure 1. Integrating pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment in digital education.

7. Conclusions and Implications for Practice

The European Pillar of Social Rights, through its principles of Education, training, and lifelong learning, and Equal opportunities, is relevant when reflecting on pedagogical changes imposed by the emergence of digitalization processes. With this in mind, we initially discussed the importance of digital skills and the emergence of different initiatives, both in Portugal and at the European level. Next, we outlined the specificities of pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment in digital education and the significance of integrating them in a continuum to create more cohesive and effective learning experiences. Within this framework, constructive alignment emerges as crucial to guide teachers and institutions towards maximizing the potential of digital education, fostering its effectiveness and meaningful learning outcomes. It is therefore essential for institutions to develop guidelines for designing courses in digital environments, with constructive alignment as a central framework. This approach ensures consistency across the institution's academic programs, aligns technological development with the institution's pedagogical model, and supports the strategic planning of faculty training within a coherent institutional framework. Beyond being a pedagogical tool, constructive alignment can be viewed as a strategic indicator of institutional quality, crucial for ensuring the effectiveness of courses designed in digital environments.

This overview draws attention to several implications. Specifically, we note the importance of adopting learner-centred approaches—approaches that are aimed at meeting students' needs, interests, and learning styles. Furthermore, there is a need to select pedagogical strategies, curriculum content, and assessment methods that resonate with students' interests and needs, thus promoting engagement and motivation (Wenger, 2000). This work also highlights the importance of (a) designing flexible learning experiences that integrate real-world, authentic experiences within the curriculum and assessment; (b) facilitating collaboration beyond physical or disciplinary boundaries; (c) promoting inclusivity and accessibility; and (d) fostering the development of new knowledge and competencies (O'Reilly et al., 2005). To enhance the impact of these initiatives, it is important to ensure their integration into educational programs and alignment with institutional strategies (e.g., internationalization), advancing digital pedagogy at an institutional level and translating this into actionable policymaking initiatives. Taken together, these aspects are crucial for individuals' learning, but also for the acquisition of work-related competencies and for optimizing future work experiences and transitions (Pastore et al., 2021).

As technology continues to advance, embracing these implications at the practice and policymaking levels will pave the way for a future of digital education that is engaging, inclusive, and purposeful—empowering students to thrive in an ever-changing world. Education and training institutions will play an important role here through the creation of courses and programs integrating these features and therefore aligned with the jobs of the future (Alexandre et al., 2023). Guided by an ethically responsible conduct, education in digital environments can ultimately foster global citizenship and the promotion of equal opportunities, thus responding to the changes and challenges imposed by economic and social transformations (European Commission, 2021). To advance the principles outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights, European countries can harness the potential of digital education by strategically investing in digital resources, by prioritizing the development of digital literacy and skills, and by promoting initiatives that seamlessly integrate digital goals into comprehensive social and educational policies. This concerted effort will contribute to the creation of more inclusive societies across Europe.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

Simulating the Impact of Employment Growth on Poverty: Implications for the European Social Targets

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Abstract

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan sets ambitious targets to be achieved by 2030, including reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) by 15 million and raising the employment rate to 78% among the working-age population. This article investigates the extent to which employment growth to the level of the 2030 employment rate target can deliver on the EU's 2030 social target. Departing from key theoretical perspectives, we explore five mediating mechanisms that shape the relationship between employment and poverty, including job distribution across households, job quality, and social protection effectiveness. Our twofold analytical strategy first assesses past trends between employment and poverty indicators and then employs shift-share and regression-based simulations to estimate how different employment growth scenarios may affect the active-age population's at-risk-of-poverty (AROP(a)) and the total population's at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion (AROPE) outcomes by 2030. The analysis confirms that employment growth, though it has a strong effect on poverty, is unlikely to deliver the EU's poverty reduction target without further policy intervention. The full potential of employment growth to reduce poverty depends on, among other things, the distribution of jobs across households. While the EU has long promoted employment as the cornerstone of social inclusion, this article underscores the limits of such employment-focused poverty reduction strategies in the absence of supporting institutional configurations. Policy recommendations align with the European Pillar of Social Rights and call for coordinated action across employment, wage setting, and social protection domains.

Keywords

employment; European Pillar of Social Rights; European social agenda; poverty

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1. Introduction

Employment growth as a driver of poverty reduction has long been an integral part of the strategic vision of the EU (Cantillon & Van Lancker, 2013; Daly, 2006) and of its member states. This notion has been pivotal from the foundational principles of the Lisbon Agenda, which saw the increase in employment levels as one of its primary goals, to the Europe 2020 strategy, and most recently, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan. Adopted in 2017, the EPSR constitutes the EU's most recent flagship social initiative, aiming to improve living standards. Since its adoption, the initiative has served as an overarching conceptual framework for the EU's social initiatives. The litmus test for the EPSR Action Plan's success will, however, be reaching the three headline targets by 2030: to reach an employment rate of at least 78%, to have at least 60% of adults attending training courses every year, and to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) by 15 million.

Common to the approach taken in the EPSR Action Plan and its predecessors has been the framing of employment growth as a primary vector for promoting social inclusion. This reflects both the functional logic of welfare states and the institutional structure of the EU. In the case of the latter, this principle is reinforced by an uneven distribution of competencies: Although recent years have seen noteworthy socialisation of the EU, competencies in the social domain remain limited, especially where social goals are not fortified by binding legal instruments (Akarçeşme et al., 2024).

Although the EPSR has opened up a new political window to confront the uneven status of economic and social policies and advance social themes (Vesan & Corti, 2022) and has created new margins of manoeuvre that the Commission and Parliament have started to exploit (Keune et al., 2023), in terms of the programme's implementation, employment growth remains favoured over social inclusion goals (Aranguiz, 2023). Within the national social agendas of the EU and its member states, employment policies tend to be framed as the principal pathway to poverty reduction. However, the extent to which and under which conditions employment growth specifically can reduce poverty remains theoretically and empirically contested. This article contributes to these debates by asking whether increased employment rates to the level of the 2030 targets alone might lead to the achievement of the 2030 poverty target. In doing so, it derives timely policy implications for the achievement of the 2030 social inclusion target.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the key theoretical frameworks for understanding the employment-poverty nexus and identifies the key mechanisms that mediate the relationship between employment growth and poverty reduction, providing a context-specific conceptual foundation for the simulation modelling that follows. Section 3 reviews the past poverty and employment indicator trends and their interactions across the EU. Section 4 delves into the simulations by first describing the data, the simulation approach, and the methodology; it then presents and discusses the simulation results, drawing out their implications for EU social policy. Section 5 concludes.

2. Conceptualising the Relationship Between Employment Growth and Poverty Reduction

Empirical evidence from the last decades at the EU level shows that progress in reducing the AROPE has not kept pace with the success in increasing employment rates (Cantillon & Vandenbroucke, 2014), thereby

challenging conventional economic assumptions. Economic theories generally indicate that increases in employment and income are negatively correlated with poverty levels which has been supported by both macro-level (Moller et al., 2003; Tudorache, 2019) and micro-level studies (Vaalavuo & Sirniö, 2022). However, efforts to explain the paradox of disappointing poverty trends despite notable employment growth have shown that while there is a negative and significant relationship, the impact varies considerably across countries, time periods, and the poverty measures used (Gábos et al., 2019). To explain this, two theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant: the polarisation of jobs across households, driven by labour market segmentation and social homogamy (the tendency for individuals to partner with others of similar socio-economic backgrounds) and the tension between job creation, adequate social protection, and the controlling of social spending, often framed in the literature as a "social trilemma." As for the mitigating role of the social investment policy paradigm—which has taken a central place in Europe since the early 2000s—the literature has shown that social investments tend to fail to reach the individuals and households that need them most.

2.1. Employment Polarisation

A growing body of research has examined how changes in the distribution of employment across households affect poverty outcomes. Particular attention has been paid to the influence of assortative mating or homogamy (Kalmijn, 1998), and the interplay between employment and family structures. The former helps explain why rising employment rates, especially due to the increased labour market participation of women, have not consistently led to reductions in income poverty (Corluy & Vandenbroucke, 2014; Gábos et al., 2024; Nieuwenhuis et al., 2020; Vandenbroucke & Vleminckx, 2011). In Belgium, Corluy and Vandenbroucke (2014) found that while rising employment rates and changes in household composition between 2005 and 2012 helped reduce poverty, this effect was counterbalanced by growing joblessness polarisation—defined as the growing divergence between the actual and a random distribution of joblessness across households—and an increase in poverty among jobless households.

Labour market segmentation theory (Doeringer & Piore, 1971) provides a second analytical framework for understanding the coexistence of employment growth and persistent poverty. This theory posits that the labour market is divided into a primary segment, characterised by stable, well-paid jobs, with career progression, and a secondary segment that mainly consists of insecure, low-paid, precarious work. In such a segmented labour market, access to jobs is structurally unequal, where "insiders" with higher skills or a previously established strong attachment to work disproportionally benefit from new job opportunities, usually in the primary segment. In contrast, "outsiders," who tend to be disadvantaged individuals, including the long-term unemployed, those with low qualifications, migrants, those with health issues and individuals with caregiving responsibilities, frequently encounter structural barriers (Emmenegger et al., 2012) and remain confined to the usually precarious secondary sector or face complete exclusion from the labour market. While Marx and Nolan (2014) demonstrated that segmentation contributes less to in-work poverty than often expected, homogamy can reinforce employment clustering within certain households.

While the dynamics of segmentation and job clustering explain much of the divergence between employment growth and poverty outcomes, institutional context also matters. Welfare regime typologies (Esping-Andersen, 1990) can help explain cross-country differences. In conservative corporatist regimes such as Germany and Austria, pronounced labour market dualism tends to create divides between secure insiders and insecure

outsiders. Nordic welfare states, by contrast, with their comprehensive safety nets and active labour market programmes, tend to buffer the effects of employment polarisation more effectively and limit precarious work (Crettaz & Bonoli, 2011). During the Great Recession, for instance, social democratic countries were more successful in preventing the concentration of joblessness in already disadvantaged households (Biegert & Ebbinghaus, 2022). However, many regimes have undergone substantial transformations over time, Sweden's shift away from its earlier universalist model being one example (Blomqvist & Palme, 2020).

2.2. Social Trilemma

In light of the "disappointing" poverty trends in Europe, discussions about the potential of tax-benefit systems to reduce income poverty are often constrained by a social trilemma: the challenge of simultaneously promoting employment, ensuring adequate social protection while maintaining work incentives, and controlling social expenditure. Cantillon and Vandenbroucke (2014) drew on this diagnosis to ask the question of whether the distribution upside of the social investment or active welfare state (more people in work, thus fewer people confronted with poverty risks) may have been affected by a distributive downside (more poverty among work-poor households that did not benefit from job growth) that may have been intrinsic to how jobs were created. Arguably, achieving both employment growth, especially among the low-skilled, and adequate social protection for outsiders would have required greater fiscal commitment, suggesting a social trilemma. Cantillon et al. (2015) showed the difficulty of reducing poverty while not discouraging work nor running large public deficits, echoing Iversen and Wren's (1998) social trilemma hypothesis and the "iron triangle" of welfare reform (Adam et al., 2006). When wage floors decline relative to median household incomes (and thus relative to poverty thresholds), increasing transfers for the poor comes at the cost of either jeopardising the hierarchy of incomes at the bottom of the distribution or stronger redistributive effort, if in-work taxes or benefits are also to be increased to maintain work incentives and to avoid in-work poverty. From a somewhat different perspective, the existence of a social trilemma was also suggested in a study of the evolution of minimum wages and minimum income protection for many typical households in EU countries (Cantillon et al., 2020). The interaction between benefit generosity and employment is an important element to consider when evaluating the evolution of the pro-poorness of employment growth and welfare state efforts.

2.3. Social Investment

Since the second half of the nineties, welfare states have undergone a shift toward a "social investment" paradigm emphasising early childhood development, education, lifelong learning, and work–family reconciliation (Hemerijck, 2012; Morel et al., 2012). While uneven, disparate, and not always consistent, outcome indicators suggest this reorientation coincided with an increase in employment and, in many countries, also with a relative increase in new social spending. Plavgo and Hemerijck (2020) found positive effects of social investment policies for families with children. Other investigations, however, tend to show that increasing spending on social services and social investment was not associated with reduced poverty rates (Van Vliet & Wang, 2015). One of the reasons why social investment spending tends to benefit the poor less than higher-income households is that spending on services suffers from the Matthew effect. This is linked to social stratification and the concentration of low-skilled people in workless households (Parolin & Van Lancker, 2021). The Matthew effect is observed in the use of and access to capacitating services such as childcare, leave, lifelong learning, and education. Without robust redistribution and inclusive design, social

investment cannot reach its potential. Therefore, we treat social investment and welfare regime frameworks as providing the institutional and normative context within which the core mechanisms of segmentation and household clustering operate. This approach emphasises the importance of contextual factors such as labour market conditions, features of the welfare state, and normative structures within which the described mechanisms interact, thereby influencing the cross-national variation in the extent to which employment growth might contribute to poverty reduction.

2.4. Mediating Mechanisms

To better understand why employment growth has not consistently led to commensurate reductions in poverty, the literature has identified several mechanisms that may mediate the relationship between employment gains and poverty dynamics (Tóth et al., 2024). These findings highlight the complexity of the employment–poverty relationship, requiring us to adopt a more nuanced analytical lens. Having briefly explored the key theoretical perspectives, we now turn to the interrelated mediating mechanisms (Figure 1) already explored in the literature (Tóth et al., 2024).
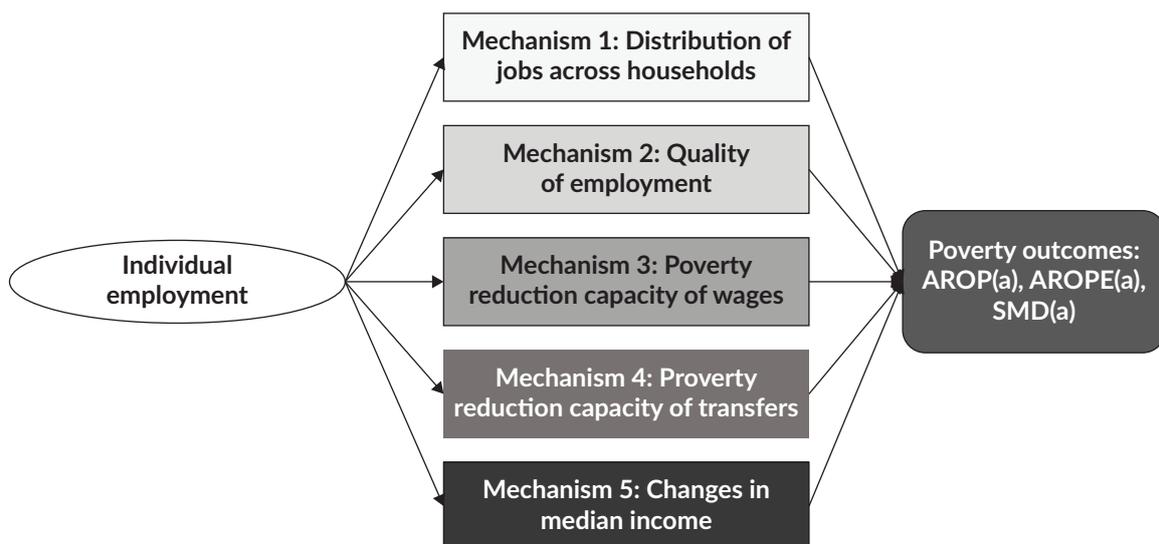
Figure 1. Mechanisms mediating the employment–poverty relationship. Notes: AROP(a) = at-risk-of poverty rate of the active-age population; AROPE(a) = at-risk-of poverty and social exclusion rate of the active-age population; SMD(a) = severe material deprivation rate of the active-age population. Source: Tóth et al. (2024).

2.4.1. Distributions of Jobs Across Households

To the extent that poverty is typically measured at the household level, any anti-poverty effect of employment growth hinges critically on which households benefit from new employment opportunities. The first mechanism mediating the employment–poverty relationship thus pertains to the distribution of jobs across households. If job growth is polarised and thus mainly benefits households that already have multi-earner status while it benefits households with very low work intensity (VLWI) only to a limited extent, then rising employment will not cause commensurate drops in poverty. Evidence on the pre-financial crisis period (Corluy & Vandenbroucke, 2014) substantiates this perspective, indicating that job growth mostly favoured families already engaged in the labour market, while those in VLWI households were generally

overlooked by governmental activation initiatives. More recent comparative studies also confirm this pattern, for they find that the share of individuals living in VLWI households remains a strong predictor of poverty across countries and over time, with increases in the shares of VLWI households closely mirroring increases in poverty, while decreases in the former contributed to poverty reduction (Azzollini et al., 2025; Gábos et al., 2024).

2.4.2. Quality of Employment

Regarding the potential impact of job growth on poverty reduction, the type of employment created is as important as the quantity. If employment growth is primarily driven by part-time, temporary, or otherwise non-standard forms, workers may remain poor despite being employed. Gábos et al. (2024) emphasise how the rise of precarious work in many EU countries has contributed to in-work poverty. Further empirical evidence shows that structural labour market changes increased non-standard and precarious employment, such as part-time, fixed-contract, or pseudo-self-employment arrangements, contributing to labour market polarisation and rising in-work poverty (Alper et al., 2021; Brülle et al., 2019; Vaalavuo & Sirniö, 2022).

2.4.3. The Poverty Reduction Capacity of Wages

The third mechanism pertains to the poverty-reducing capacity of wages. The challenge from an anti-poverty perspective goes beyond simply encouraging individuals to move from dependency to employment. It also requires that employment provides a sufficient income to elevate people out of poverty and ensure an adequate standard of living. Poor households with weak or no labour market attachment, such as single-parent and large families, often live far below the poverty threshold. In those cases, even a job that pays significantly above the minimum wage may not be enough to lift their households out of poverty (Immervoll, 2007; Marx & Nolan, 2014).

Gábos et al. (2024) found that slow growth in minimum wages relative to median income and the persistence of low pay weakened this mechanism in many EU countries. This issue reflects broader structural inequalities, as wage growth has been unequally distributed. Nolan (2018) highlights the significance of fostering low wage growth as a means to alleviate income poverty via economic expansion, whereas Cantillon et al. (2020) emphasise the downward pressure on low wages relative to median household incomes. The impact of minimum wages on poverty reduction has also been widely discussed in the literature (Burkhauser et al., 2023; Collado et al., 2019; Gábos & Tomka, 2022; Gindling, 2018). While higher minimum wages may displace unskilled workers, increasing their risk of poverty, they may also provide stronger incentives for the unemployed to take up work.

2.4.4. The Poverty Reduction Capacity of Social Transfers

Even with employment growth, poverty might persist if the redistributive capacity of the welfare state insufficiently compensates for low income or fails to support those not in work. Evidence shows that redistribution has become less effective in most European countries (Caminada et al., 2012; Leventi et al., 2021), especially for households with VLWI (Akarçeşme et al., 2024). This decline in redistributive capacity has likely contributed to a standstill in income poverty reduction (Cantillon, 2011), further exacerbated by the declining adequacy of minimum income and social protection schemes observed in many EU member

states even before the Great Recession (Causa & Hermansen, 2017; Gábos & Tomka, 2022). Comparative research on minimum income schemes shows a general retrenchment of their adequacy, but also a stronger link between employment and social transfers in the recovery period due to increased conditionality of benefits on work (Knotz, 2018), especially in Central-Eastern member states (Weishaupt, 2011). The difficulty of reducing income poverty through social transfers while not discouraging work nor running large public deficits is exacerbated when wage floors decline relative to median household incomes (Cantillon & Vandenbroucke, 2014; Collado et al., 2019). Higher public social spending is associated with lower income inequality and poverty but tends to benefit the elderly more than the working-age population (Chen et al., 2018; Chzhen et al., 2017; Jaumotte et al., 2013; McKnight et al., 2016).

2.4.5. Changes in Median Income

The fifth intervening factor concerns the trajectory of median income and its impact on relative income poverty thresholds (Jenkins, 2020; Marx & Nolan, 2014), meaning that as median incomes rise, so does the poverty threshold. This has to do with the choice of poverty measurement in the EU, which is relative. This relative measure reflects the EU's normative commitment to social inclusion and the principle that poverty is not just about subsistence but about the ability to participate in society (Atkinson et al., 2002). When incomes near or below the income poverty line do not keep pace with overall income growth, income poverty stagnates or increases. Conversely, during recessions, a decreased threshold may result in reduced levels of relative income poverty.

These five interrelated mechanisms are crucial for understanding why rising employment might not automatically lead to poverty reduction and will be key for our simulation modelling of the potential impact of achieving the employment targets on poverty rates. However, before turning to the simulations, the next section will turn to past empirical trends by examining key social inclusion indicators and tracing employment and poverty trends across EU member states. Special attention is given to the relationship between employment levels and the components of the AROPE indicator.

3. Empirical Trends: Employment, Poverty, and Social Exclusion Pre-2020

While the focus of this article is on future scenarios, it is important to understand past developments in employment and poverty indicators, as well as their interrelationship. In this section, first, we describe the two target indicators of the EU strategies: the employment rate and the AROPE (with its components). Further, we discuss trends in these indicators between 2005 and 2023. Finally, interlinkages between employment and poverty will be briefly discussed.

3.1. Overview of Key Indicators

For the employment rate indicator, employment is measured by the share of the total working-age population (20–64 years of age) who have worked at least 1 hour for pay or profit during the reference week, including contributing family workers. For Europe 2020, the EU-level target was set at 75%, but it was later raised to 78% within the framework of the EPSR and its Action Plan targets for 2030. The European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) serves as the data source for the indicator.

For the measurement and monitoring of poverty, the AROPE indicator was built up as a political compromise, resulting from a long and intensive build-up process of employing EU social indicators in recent decades (Atkinson et al., 2002; Marlier et al., 2007). When introduced, the AROPE was defined as persons who were either at risk of (relative income) poverty, lived in severe material deprivation (SMD), or lived in a household with VLWI (Marlier et al., 2010). Later, the Action Plan of the EPSR modified AROPE to include a new deprivation indicator and expand the age range for the VLWI indicator.

The at-risk-of-poverty rate (AROP), a measure of relative income poverty, is defined as the share of individuals whose income falls below the AROP threshold established as 60% of the median equivalent income of the total population.

The SMD rate was originally defined as the share of individuals living in households deprived of four or more items out of nine necessities for a decent life. This indicator was then modified and renamed the severe material and social deprivation rate (SMSD), referring to the share of those individuals living in households unable to afford seven or more items out of 13.

The VLWI household rate was initially defined as the share of persons living in households where the value of household work intensity was below 0.2, for individuals in the age range 0–59. With the revision of AROPE-2030, the age range was extended to individuals aged 0–64.

The data source for producing AROPE and its components (AROP, SMSD, and VLWI) is the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). These indicators (except for VLWI) refer to the total population, with a small "a" notation in parentheses referring to the active age population (e.g., AROP(a)). Attention is drawn to concerns regarding the quality and reliability of Hungarian income data for the period 2014–2023. Since the submission of this article, Eurostat has withdrawn the Hungarian microdata from its latest release (2019–2024) due to reliability concerns and subsequent revisions. Due caution is therefore warranted when interpreting Hungarian figures.

The assessment of the Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission, 2019) noted strong employment growth despite setbacks during the crisis years, with the employment rate target almost being met before the pandemic. Overall, at the EU level, we witnessed a considerable 5 pp increase in employment among persons aged 20–64 between 2008 and 2020. Some countries were able to surpass their national targets substantially (like Malta, Poland, Lithuania, Czechia, Slovenia, and, to a lesser extent, Germany), while for some of them, the plan proved to be too ambitious. This was the case in Italy, Greece, Belgium, Spain, and, to a lesser extent, Luxembourg, Bulgaria, Austria, and Denmark (see A1 in the Supplementary File).

However, the poverty and social exclusion target was missed, as the decline in AROPE fell short of expectations: The decline in the number of persons affected by AROPE reached only 7.8 million between 2008 and 2020 overall in the EU, as contrasted to the planned decline by 20 million. One of the main reasons for this failure was stagnant AROP (Cantillon & Vandenbroucke, 2014). In their analysis, Tóth et al. (2024) showed that this decline in AROPE from 2008 to 2020 was largely due to reductions in SMD, especially in East-Central Europe, as well as in France, Italy, and Portugal. Conversely, changes in the number of persons affected by AROP contributed negatively to the improvement in AROPE figures in almost all countries, except Greece and Spain.

3.2. Employment Trends, Poverty Dynamics, and Their Interrelationship Across Member States

Figure 2 displays the indicators for the active age population as the direct effects of employment on poverty are better seen by an analysis limited to active age individuals (Cantillon & Vandenbroucke, 2014; Gábos et al., 2019, 2024). A negative association with employment rate and a co-movement with AROPE(a) is visible in the case of the SM(S)D(a) and VLWI(a) rates, while the EU-27 average figures of the relative income poverty measure AROP(a) show little variation in this period. Overall, visual observation of these co-movements at the EU level indicates that trends in AROP did not, or only weakly, reflect employment trends.
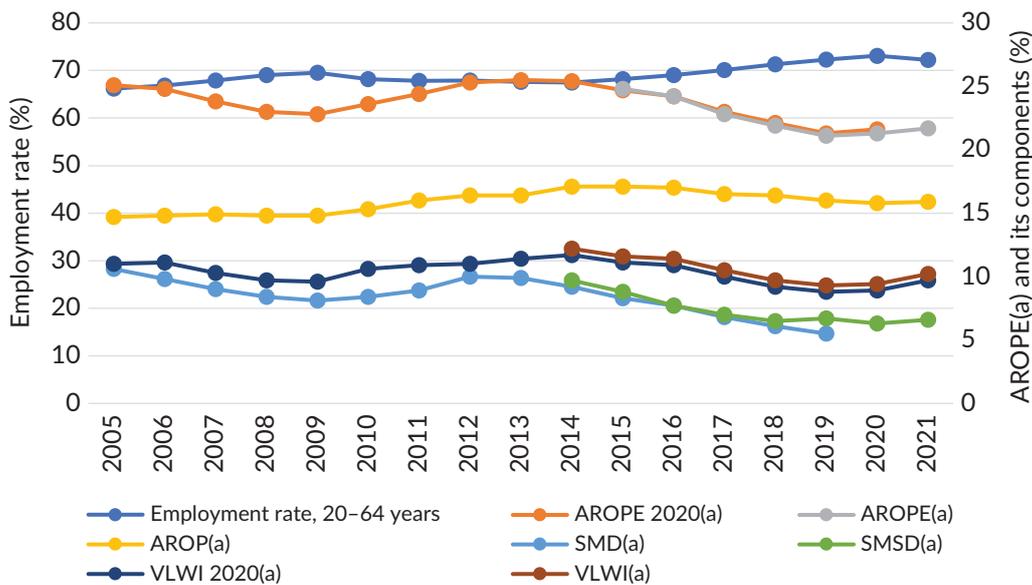
Figure 2. Trends in the employment (left axis), the social target (AROPE) indicator and its components (AROP(a), VLWI(a), and SMSD(a); right axis), active age population (18–64), EU-27 average, 2005–2021. Notes: A detailed explanation of the indicators is provided in the Supplementary File (A2). Source: Eurostat database, retrieved on 31/7/2023.

Tóth et al. (2024) show that, similarly to the EU-27 average presented in Figure 2, a clear mirror trend between employment and AROPE(a) is also observed in the majority of individual countries. The exceptions are France and Luxembourg, where the trends move by and large parallel to each other. In countries where variation in employment is relatively small (Belgium, Finland, and Italy, for example), AROPE(a) trends are also less volatile, but they do not go counter to the mirror. In periods with significant employment growth, AROPE(a) increases occur very rarely (e.g., Hungary between 2011 and 2013, Italy between 2014 and 2017, Malta between 2009 and 2013, and Sweden between 2007 and 2009).

The co-movements of employment rate with AROP(a) are remarkably weaker. However, still, in many member states, the AROP(a) rates mirrored the evolution of the employment rates, especially where employment rates displayed large volatility (e.g., the Baltic States, Ireland, Portugal, or Greece). This was the case in many other countries, too. By contrast, in countries characterised by moderately increasing employment (Belgium, Finland, France, Italy, and Luxembourg), AROP(a) showed similarly stagnant or moderately decreasing trends. In countries with steady employment growth, AROP(a) rates either remained stagnant or declined (i.e., Austria, Czechia, Germany, Malta, and the Netherlands).

Furthermore, a comprehensive correlation analysis between employment rates, AROPE, and its components from 2005–2020 at both the EU and national levels reveals that employment levels and fluctuations were markedly and adversely associated with poverty outcomes, especially among working-age adults. AROPE rates calculated for the total population correlated negatively with the employment rate at a relatively high level (−0.54): An increase in employment was associated with a decrease in the AROPE rate in the period between 2005 and 2020 (see A3 in the Supplementary File). The corresponding analysis restricted to the active age bracket results in an even stronger correlation (−0.61), underlining that there was a positive relationship between employment increase and income poverty reduction.

To better understand the conditions under which the EU's 2030 social inclusion target might still be met, the following section employs simulation-based scenarios.

4. Future Scenarios: The Projected Impact of Employment Growth on Poverty and Social Inclusion Targets

We present a simulation study to explore how different mediating mechanisms such as job allocation patterns, job quality, wage levels, and redistribution effectiveness shape the extent to which rising employment rates can reduce poverty, considering the EPSR's Action Plan targets and building on the conceptual framework and mediating factors introduced earlier. Using shift-share analysis and a regression-based simulation model, we estimated future trends in AROP rates by simulating progress toward each country's 2030 employment target under alternative scenarios, based on varying assumptions about these mediating mechanisms further explained below.

4.1. Methodology: Modelling the Impact of Employment Growth on Relative Poverty

The simulations aim to answer a core policy question: If EU member states achieve their national employment targets for 2030, would this alone, without further policy intervention, lead to the achievement of the 2030 poverty targets? To explore this, we developed multiple scenarios based on different assumptions which aimed to capture the mediating mechanisms identified in the theoretical model in Section 2 (Figure 1). These assumptions varied regarding:

- To whom the new jobs are allocated, aiming to capture Mechanism 1—the distribution of jobs across households;
- Which kinds of jobs are created, reflecting Mechanism 3—the poverty reduction capacity of wages—and also serving as a proxy for Mechanism 2—the quality of employment;
- How poverty within vulnerable groups evolves, serving as a proxy for Mechanism 4—the poverty reduction capacity of social transfers;
- How the poverty line is defined (e.g., fixed vs floating), capturing Mechanism 5—changes in median income.

For our simulations, we used EU-SILC 2019 data (income reference year 2018) for all EU countries for two reasons: It was the baseline year for tracking progress toward the 2030 targets, and it is the last wave unaffected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Later waves are either partially or fully impacted by pandemic-related disruptions in employment, income, and data collection. In particular, the widespread introduction of job

retention schemes such as short-time work significantly altered both recorded employment and income levels. Given the scale and temporary nature of these interventions, and the difficulty of distinguishing short-term pandemic effects from structural trends within the scope of our article, we consider EU-SILC 2019 the most appropriate data source for simulating counterfactual employment scenarios in a more stable pre-pandemic context.

In our simulations, we generally focus on the 20–64-year-old population (denoted by a small "a," e.g., AROPE(a)). However, as the 2030 AROPE target (a reduction of 15 million in the number of AROPE individuals) is set for the entire population, our AROPE simulations are also based on the impact on the entire population. Poverty is primarily measured via AROP, which is a component of AROPE as described in the last section.

4.1.1. Shift-Share Analysis

We assessed the impact of achieving the 2030 employment rate target on poverty outcomes by implementing a shift-share simulation that reweights the active age population across employment status categories (employed, unemployed, inactive) and levels of household work intensity (VLWI, LWI, other work intensity). For each country, the employment gap relative to the EU target was filled by reallocating individuals stepwise, either first from unemployment and inactivity, or from households with VLWI and LWI. The overall poverty rate was then computed as the weighted average of group-specific poverty rates, holding those rates constant or extrapolating 2010–2020 trends (the relevant equations are specified in A4 in the Supplementary File). The four main shift-share scenarios are defined in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the simulation scenarios employing shift-share methodology.

Scenario Code	Sequential Job Allocation Priority	Simulated Employment Growth	Poverty Line	Within-Group Poverty Rate Assumption	Wage Imputation	Predicted Poverty Indicator
(1) SS_UI_Static	1 Unemployed 2 Inactive	To the level of the country–specific 2030 employment rate target (see A5 in the Supplementary File)	Only Fixed is possible with SS	AROP(a) constant within the group	Not possible with SS	AROP(a)
(2) SS_UI_Trend	1 Unemployed 2 Inactive			AROP(a) constant within the group		AROP(a)
(3) SS_VLWI_Static	1 Individuals in VLWI households 2 Individuals in LWI households			AROP(a) trends 2010–2020 continue		AROP(a)
(4) SS_VLWI_Trend	1 Individuals in VLWI households 2 Individuals in LWI households			AROP(a) trends 2010–2020 continue		AROP(a)

Notes: SS = shift-share; UI = unemployed, inactive.

The limitation of the shift-share analysis is, however, that it cannot account for wage dynamics and, hence, disregards the important mechanism of increase in median incomes resulting from job growth. Furthermore, it is not possible to distinguish between individuals' employment chances when simulating employment growth

with this method. Therefore, we followed Marx et al. (2012) and also performed a regression-based analysis to simulate an increase in employment growth by considering more detailed assumptions about the mechanisms described previously.

4.1.2. Regression-Based Simulations

To better account for the nuanced ways in which employment is likely to change in practice, we complemented the shift-share approach with a regression-based simulation. This allowed us to estimate the probability that each unemployed or inactive individual will move into part-time or full-time employment based on their personal and household characteristics. Key variables in this model included age, education, gender, health status, migration background, and family composition. Interactions between characteristics (e.g., gender and parenthood, or gender and origin) allowed for more nuanced predictions. Table 2 summarises the scenarios simulated with this methodology. The multinomial logit model specifications, the variable list, and the key parameter estimates are provided in the Supplementary File (A6, A2, and A7, respectively).

Table 2. Summary of the simulation scenarios employing a regression-based methodology.

Scenario Code	Sequential Job Allocation Priority	Simulated Employment Growth	Poverty Line	Within-Group Poverty Rate Assumption	Wage Imputation	Predicted Poverty Indicator
(5) RB_Float	Top predicted probability	To the level of the country-specific 2030 employment rate target (see A5 in the Supplementary File)	Floating	Dynamic	Predicted Wages	AROP(a) and AROPE
(6) RB_Fixed	Top predicted probability		Fixed		Predicted Wages	AROP(a) and AROPE
(7) RB_Low_Float	Top predicted probability		Floating		Low Wage (2/3 of Median)	AROP(a)
(8) RB_Low_Fixed	Top predicted probability		Fixed		Low Wage (2/3 of Median)	AROP(a)
(9) RB_VLWI_Float	Individuals in VLWI households prioritised		Floating		Predicted Wages	AROP(a)
(10) RB_VLWI_Fixed	Individuals in VLWI households prioritised		Fixed		Predicted Wages	AROP(a)

Note: RB = regression-based.

Each individual in the non-employed population received an estimated probability of moving into part-time or full-time work. These probabilities were then used to rank individuals according to who was most likely to take up newly created jobs if the employment rate increased to the level of the 2030 employment rate target.

In the default simulations (Scenarios 5 and 6), jobs were assigned in order of likelihood: Those among the unemployed with the highest predicted probability were moved into employment first. Alternative versions prioritised individuals in VLWI households, reflecting the mechanism concerning the distribution of jobs across households.

Once new jobs were assigned, we imputed incomes for the newly employed. In some versions, we used predicted average wages based on individual profiles (Scenarios 5, 6, 9, and 10); in a more conservative version, we assumed that all new jobs were low-paid, set at two-thirds of the national median wage (Scenarios 7 and 8). These scenarios helped us to assess how much wages and, implicitly, job quality might influence poverty outcomes.

To understand how employment growth interacts with poverty measurement, we simulated two treatments of the poverty line. In terms of the fixed poverty line, the poverty threshold was anchored at 2019 levels (Scenarios 6, 8, and 10). In terms of the floating poverty line, the poverty threshold was updated to reflect post-simulation median incomes (Scenarios 5, 7, and 9).

In our simulations, the SMSD rate was kept constant when simulating job growth. While increases in employment rates have a direct impact on household work intensity and incomes, the impact on SMSD is indirect and, therefore, difficult to model. Previous attempts substantiate this difficulty and point to the weak predictive capacity of SMD for poverty outcomes in the framework of the Europe 2020 Strategy targets (Ajwad et al., 2013). It is, thus, likely that in countries with a high SMSD rate, our simulations may underestimate the impact of employment growth on AROPE. This is further supported by the evidence that the SMSD component was found to be more responsive to employment changes as well as more highly correlated with the AROPE aggregate than the other two components (Tóth et al., 2024).

Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that our analysis did not establish causal relationships between employment and poverty outcomes. Rather, it modelled their association under various hypothetical allocations of job growth. This means the potential endogeneity between employment status and poverty, where the two may mutually influence each other, was not explicitly addressed. Also, the simulations assumed no behavioural responses from individuals or households. As such, we do not account for potential changes in labour supply incentives, benefit take-up, or eligibility that could result from shifting employment patterns or policy interventions. Finally, labour demand was treated as exogenously fixed in the model. The number of jobs to be created was derived from policy targets without modelling the economic or sectoral conditions under which such job creation might realistically occur. These limitations did not undermine the usefulness of the simulations for policy analysis, but they did underscore the importance of interpreting the results as indicative rather than predictive.

4.2. Simulation Results and Discussion

This section presents the simulation results assessing whether employment growth alone can lead to the achievement of the EU's 2030 poverty and social inclusion target. We examine the projected impact of reaching national employment targets on income poverty, using two complementary approaches: a shift-share simulation and a regression-based simulation.

First, we present the results from the shift-share analysis, which models how changes in the composition of the working-age population across employment or work intensity categories affect poverty outcomes. This approach assumes either fixed or trend-adjusted poverty rates within population groups and allows us to assess the mechanical impact of increased employment under different job allocation strategies.

Second, we report results from a regression-based simulation that estimates individual employment probabilities based on sociodemographic characteristics. This enables a more realistic modelling of job transitions, job quality, and income changes. Together, these simulations provide insights into whether and how much employment growth can be expected to reduce poverty, and under what conditions the impact may be limited or even offset.

The shift-share analysis (see Figure 3) reveals that overall, the AROP(a) rate declines when the employment rate is increased to the level of each country's 2030 target. As expected, countries that are already close to their target employment rates experience only modest reductions in income poverty. The largest decreases occur under scenarios where new jobs are allocated first to individuals in VLWI households (Scenario 3): In this case, AROP(a) drops by up to 8.2 pp in Germany and Cyprus. However, when simulations incorporate the continuation of past AROP(a) trends within VLWI and LWI households (Scenario 4), the projected AROP(a) reductions are generally smaller. This reflects, among other factors, the limited effectiveness of social protection systems in these contexts. In fact, under these trend-based scenarios, countries such as the Netherlands, Slovakia, Germany, Cyprus, Austria, Hungary, and Croatia are projected to have 2030 AROP(a) rates that exceed their 2020 levels, even when job creation is geared towards individuals in VLWI households.
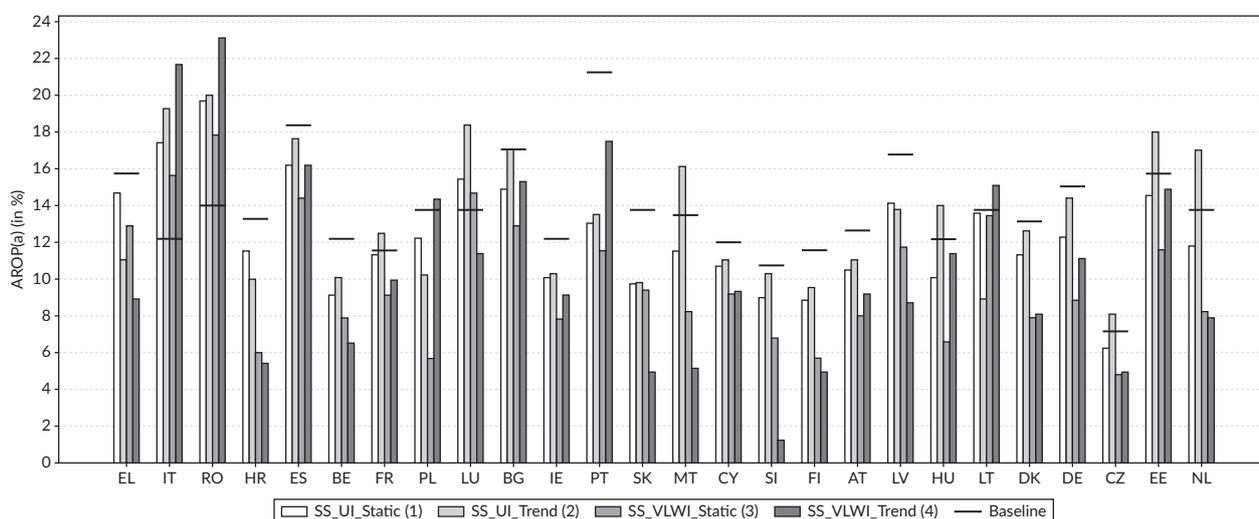
Figure 3. AROP(a) before and after increasing the employment rate to the 2030 country-specific employment rate target for the population aged 20–64 under four scenarios using shift-share, EU-27. Countries are ranked from low to high pre-simulation employment rates. Source: Authors' calculations based on EU-SILC 2019.

The shift-share simulations provide some insights into the structural link between job growth and poverty outcomes. Nevertheless, they depend on simplified allocation procedures and presume stable or trend-adjusted poverty risks across population subgroups. To get a more accurate representation of the nuanced ways in which employment is likely to change in practice, we will now turn to the regression-based

simulations. This approach facilitated us to model the likelihood of individuals entering part-time or full-time employment based on their key demographic and socio-economic characteristics. It also allowed us to simulate income changes more flexibly, including differences in wage levels, which also serve as a proxy for job quality. This section presents the projected poverty outcomes under various regression-based scenarios, including those that test the effects of low-wage employment, job allocation priorities, and different treatments of the poverty line.

Figure 4 shows that when the allocation of jobs is simulated, taking into account the statistical likelihood of individuals moving into employment based on their socio-economic profiles (Scenarios 5 and 6), the impact of employment growth on AROP(a) is generally smaller than in the previous shift-share analyses where jobs were allocated to the unemployed first and then the inactive (Scenario 1), or to individuals in VLWI households (Scenario 3). In high-employment countries, the hypothetical impact is very small, as in the case of Sweden and Czechia, or non-existent, as in the case of Hungary and Denmark. In low-employment countries, the impact remains significant when the AROP threshold remains fixed (Scenario 6). If we assume that the income poverty threshold increases when employment rises (Scenario 5), the theoretical impact of increasing employment rates is, however, negligible (or negative) in more than half of the countries, where the baseline employment is moderate or high. In those cases, a significant impact on AROP(a) is observed only in countries with low baseline employment rates, such as Greece and Spain.
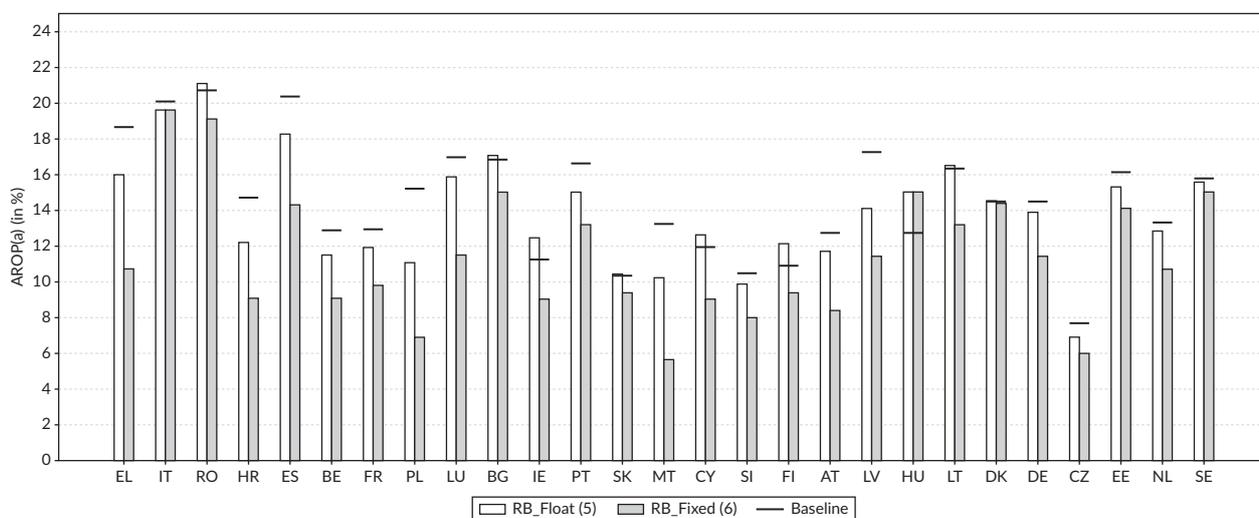
Figure 4. AROP(a) before and after increasing the employment rate to the country-specific 2030 employment rate target for the population aged 20–64 under two scenarios using the regression-based (RB) approach, EU-27. Countries are ranked from low to high pre-simulation employment rates. Source: Authors' calculations based on EU-SILC 2019.

Figure 5 shows the impact of job growth on the number of earners in the household. When jobs are econometrically distributed according to individuals' employment probabilities (Scenarios 5 and 6), the share of households with no earner moving to one-earner households is limited. Moves from no earners to two earners are even less frequent. Most of the changes involve transitioning from a one-earner to a two-earner household, which is most pronounced in Greece (12.77%) among low-employment-rate countries, in Poland (13.71%) among mid-employment-rate countries, and in the Netherlands (8.4%) among high-employment-rate countries. These patterns point yet again to the finding that poverty outcomes may

depend on the job allocation mechanism. Hence, in what follows (Figure 6), we test the sensitivity by allocating jobs to individuals in VLWI households first.
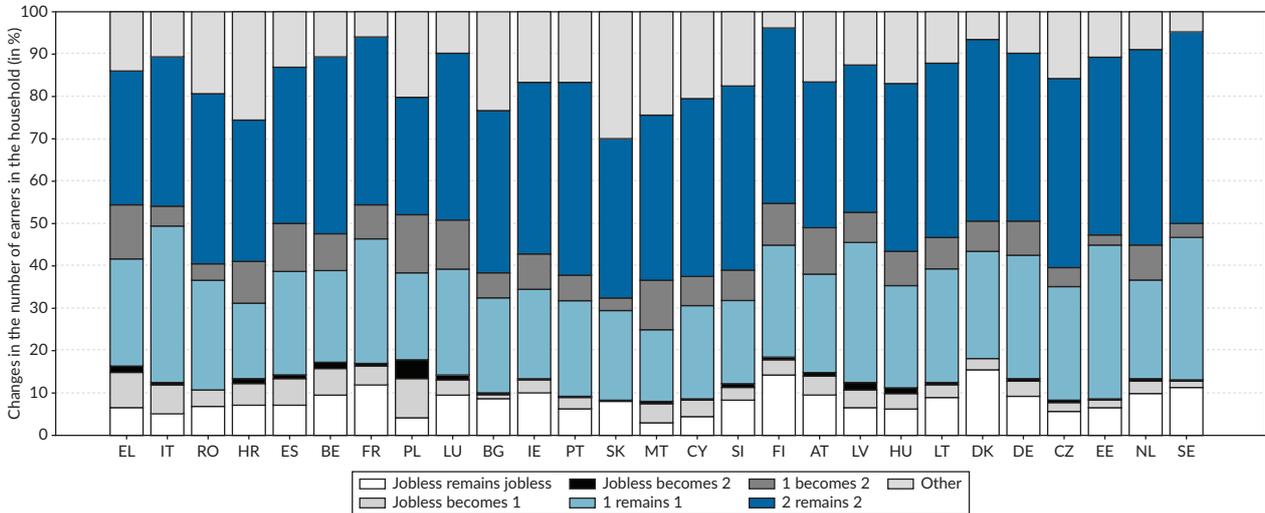

Figure 5. Changes in the number of earners in the household after increasing the employment rate to the country-specific employment rate target for the population aged 20–64 using the regression-based approach, EU-27. Countries are ranked from low to high pre-simulation employment rates. Source: Authors' calculations based on EU-SILC 2019.

Figure 6 shows the simulated AROP(a) outcomes of allocating jobs to individuals living in VLWI households, under both a floating (Scenario 9) and a fixed poverty line (Scenario 10) assumption. In these scenarios, substantial reductions in AROP(a) are observed. This holds for both the fixed and the floating poverty line, suggesting that the poverty-reducing capacity of this targeting strategy is not merely a statistical artefact of shifting thresholds. The likely explanation is that households with no or very low current labour market attachment typically face a compounded poverty risk, and any labour income introduced into such households has a stronger marginal impact on household total disposable income. As a result, allocating jobs to VLWI households can move the entire unit above the poverty threshold, which is less likely in partially employed or multi-earner households, which are more likely to already be above the poverty line. However, besides the allocation of jobs across households, the levels of the imputed wages are also very important.

Figure 7 shows the impact of employment growth on AROP(a) when, instead of using econometrically estimated wage levels (Scenarios 5 and 6), low wages defined as two-thirds of the full-time wage (Lucifora & Salverda, 2011) were imputed (Scenarios 7 and 8). With a fixed poverty line (Scenario 8), the low-wage imputation resulted in either lower or similar rates of poverty reduction compared to the wage imputation following the econometrically estimated wage level (Scenario 5). However, with a floating poverty line (Scenario 7), the AROP(a) results were significantly affected in some countries. Imputing lower wages prevents the poverty line from rising as much as it does with econometrically estimated wages, leading to more favourable poverty outcomes. While we have so far focused on AROP(a) outcomes, the 2030 poverty and social inclusion target is measured by AROPE outcomes (for the total population). In what follows, we thus present the potential impact of employment growth on AROPE.
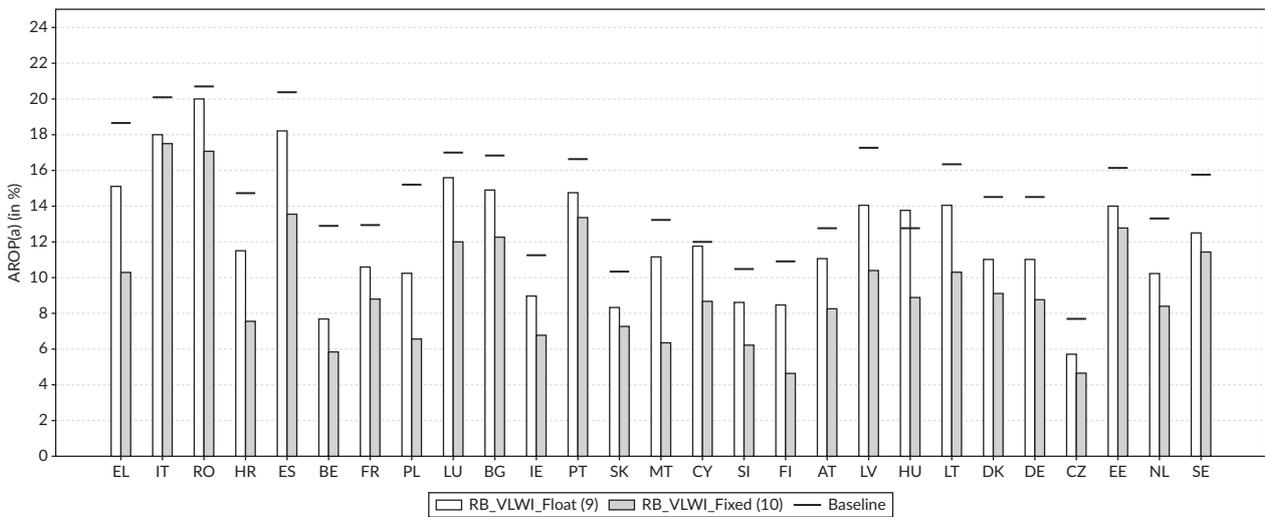
Figure 6. AROP(a) before and after an increase of employment to the country-specific employment rate target for the population aged 20–64 if jobs are primarily allocated to individuals in VLWI households using the regression-based (RB) approach, EU-27. Countries are ranked from low to high pre-simulation employment rates. Source: Authors' calculations based on EU-SILC 2019.
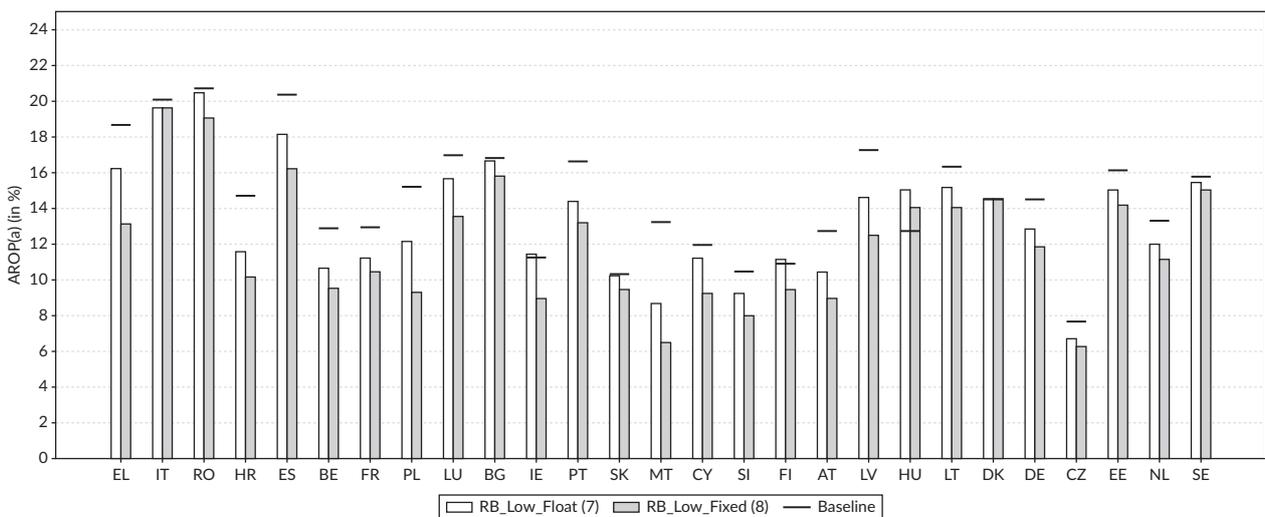

Figure 7. AROP(a) before and after an increase of employment to the country-specific employment rate target for the population aged 20–64 using the regression-based (RB) approach, sensitivity test for changing the imputed wage level, EU-27. Countries are ranked from low to high pre-simulation employment rates. Source: Authors' calculations based on EU-SILC 2019.

Figure 8 shows the simulated effect of employment growth on two out of the three dimensions of AROPE (AROP and VLWI). The results are compared with the national AROPE targets. Assuming that the income poverty thresholds will increase due to employment growth (Scenario 5) and that additional jobs are allocated according to individuals' job chances without affecting the severe material and social deprivation rate, the findings indicate that only six countries, namely Austria, Czechia, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, and Slovenia are projected to meet their 2030 AROPE target. Even under the more optimistic Scenario 6, where the poverty threshold is held constant, more than half of the EU countries still fall short of their 2030 AROPE target.
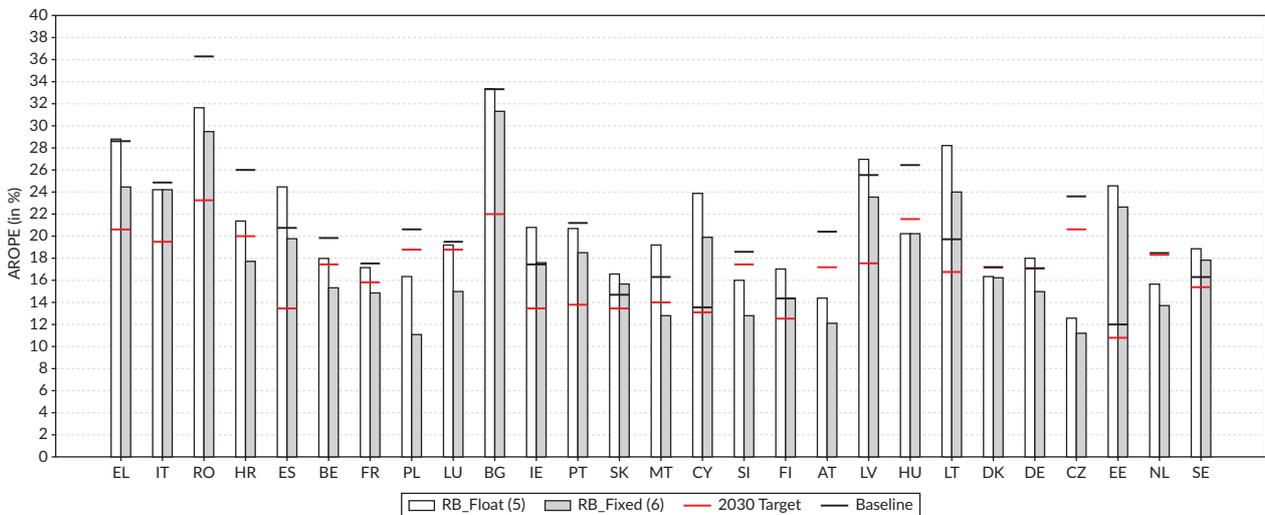
Figure 8. AROPE rates (of the total population) before and after increasing the employment rate of the population aged 20–64 to the country-specific employment rate target using the regression-based (RB) approach, EU-27. Countries are ranked from low to high pre-simulation employment rates. Source: Authors' calculations based on EU-SILC 2019; DE and DK express their targets not in terms of AROPE but in terms of a reduction in the number of people living in VLWI households.

When assessing the EU-wide objective of reducing the number of AROPE persons by 15 million by 2030, including a reduction of 5 million children, the simulations presented the following results: Under the floating poverty line scenario, where median wages increase due to employment growth, as do the poverty thresholds, the number of people at risk is projected to increase by 14,170,773—a significant deviation from the targeted reduction (see A8 in the Supplementary File).

The country-specific contributions to this overall increase varied considerably, with Italy (2,889,353), Spain (2,118,715), Romania (1,643,711), and Poland (1,123,761) showing the largest projected increases, while Luxembourg (2,696), Malta (9,908), and Estonia (53,802) displayed much smaller increases. In the fixed poverty line scenario, the overall projected increase in individuals at risk was notably lower at 2,618,076, though it remained misaligned with the desired reduction. For child AROPE, the relative poverty line scenario simulated a decrease of 895,640 such children, which falls significantly short of the target of five million. Under the fixed poverty line scenario, the projected decrease in children at risk amounted to 3,538,317, which was significantly higher than in the latter scenario, but still insufficient to meet the 2030 target.

Against the background of a renewed commitment to social Europe under the EPSR Action Plan, our results call into question the EU's inherent premise that mainly raising the employment rate will substantially reduce poverty. Instead, our simulations show that the structure and distribution of job gains, as well as larger institutional and demographic circumstances, play a critical role in shaping poverty trajectories among member states. Together with the available empirical evidence, these can offer important political implications. The next section is dedicated to those.

4.3. Policy Implications

The preamble to the EPSR emphasises that reducing poverty and social exclusion through adequate social protection, sufficient income support, and access to essential services remains a top priority. The success of the EPSR thus relies on the identification and implementation of concrete initiatives and measures that bring its substantive principles to life across all areas.

This section translates the simulation findings into a set of policy recommendations. Each recommendation aligns with the core dimensions discussed and is grounded in existing policy debates, notably the EPSR and recent scholarly evidence. While employment remains a key driver of poverty reduction, inclusive growth also requires recognition of the importance of supporting those outside the labour market. Thus, a nuanced strategy must combine inclusive employment growth with robust systems of social protection.

We recognise that the competence for most of these recommendations lies with the member states. However, the EU can play an important role in steering, coordinating, and supporting national efforts through legislation, soft governance tools, and financial instruments. The EPSR, the European Semester, Directives, Recommendations, monitoring, and dedicated EU funds (e.g., the European Social Fund Plus, the Social Climate Fund, and the Just Transition Fund) provide critical levers for incentivising national reforms aligned with shared social goals. This multilevel governance approach is essential given the limited direct EU competence in areas such as wages and labour law.

Our simulation results show that the poverty-reducing potential of employment growth hinges critically on who benefits from new job opportunities. When employment gains are directed toward individuals in VLWI households, the projected reductions in AROP(a) rates are substantially greater than in scenarios where job growth is purely based on employment propensities based on individual socio-economic characteristics. This underscores the need for targeted activation and social investment strategies as well as integrated policy measures that address household-level barriers to employment, including access to childcare, flexible work arrangements, and tailored support for disadvantaged groups. Such efforts align with Principles 4 and 11 of the EPSR, which emphasise active labour market support and work-life balance and should be further encouraged through EU tools like the European Semester and the European Social Fund Plus.

However, increasing labour force participation without improving wage structures and job quality will likely have a limited impact on poverty. In terms of improving wage structures, EU and national policymakers must, in line with EPSR Principles 5 and 6, prioritise the enforcement of fair wages and stable contracts. The Minimum Wage Directive recommends aligning statutory wages with at least 60% of median income, and Haapanala et al. (2023) demonstrate that higher minimum wages and collective bargaining coverage correlate with higher wage floors and lower incidence of low pay. Furthermore, the Minimum Wage Directive appears to have created political and institutional avenues for trade unions and other stakeholders to advocate for increases in minimum wage levels and expanded collective bargaining coverage (Müller, 2024). Nonetheless, political tensions persist: The Danish government challenged the Minimum Wage Directive in Case C-19/23 before the Court of Justice of the European Union, a move later supported by Sweden. This illustrates enduring disputes over the EU's competence in wage setting. Despite legal analyses questioning the Danish government's claim (Aranguiz & Garben, 2021), the advocate general issued an opinion in favour of annulling the Directive. At the time of writing, a final judgement from the Court of Justice of the European Union is still pending.

While the EPSR acknowledges the importance of fair working conditions (Principle 5) and adequate wages (Principle 6), its operational framework and Social Scoreboard fall short of explicitly capturing the quality of jobs created. Piasna et al. (2019) observe that the EPSR merely commits to preventing the abuse, rather than the use of atypical contracts that lead to precarious working conditions, though it does pave the way for at least some regulation on some extreme features of poor job quality. In light of these shortcomings, there is a need to further invest in the refinement of job quality metrics. While there is great variation in terms of the definition and measurement of job quality (Piasna et al., 2019), the headline employment targets might be complemented with indicators on the quality of the working environment, labour market security, and earnings quality (Cazes et al., 2015).

Finally, social protection must be safeguarded and adapted to evolving labour market risks. The effectiveness of redistribution through social transfers has weakened in several member states (Cantillon et al., 2020), highlighting the urgency of reinforcing benefit adequacy. This includes both anchored safety nets for those out of work and in-work benefits for low earners, addressing the EPSR Principles 12, 13, 14, and 20. Furthermore, automation, the green transition, and potential economic shocks threaten job stability and skills relevance, particularly for the low-educated and low-skilled. Member states should anticipate these challenges by scaling up reskilling initiatives and investing in lifelong learning and digital competence, in line with Principles 1 and 3. When combined, these coordinated strategies offer a cohesive and forward-looking framework to ensure that employment-led growth contributes meaningfully to poverty reduction across Europe.

5. Conclusion

Performance vis-à-vis the employment and social targets of the EPSR Action Plan represents a central challenge for the Union. A substantial rise in employment rates in recent years has not been accompanied by a commensurate decline in the AROPE rate, prompting critical questions about how employment growth affects poverty and the prospects of achieving the 2030 social target of reducing the number of individuals experiencing AROPE by at least 15 million.

While the 2020 employment rate target of 75% was not fully achieved at the EU level, 16 countries did meet that target. The number of persons in the EU affected by AROPE fell by 7.8 million between 2008 and 2020, but the targeted decline in that case was 20 million, with some countries seeing substantial reductions but others marked increases. The decline in AROPE was primarily due to falls in the extent of its SMD and VLWI elements, especially in most East-Central European countries, but also in France, Italy, and Portugal, whereas the relative income poverty component was mostly stable or increasing.

This article has demonstrated that an increase in employment was associated with some decrease in the AROPE rate over the period 2005–2020, but relative income poverty responded much more modestly than SMD, VLWI, or the overall AROPE measure.

Investigating the complex and multifaceted nature of the relationship between employment growth and income poverty has highlighted the importance of how additional jobs are distributed across households. The simulation results presented show that for a given level of employment increase, income poverty declines most when job growth reaches VLWI households first, while when the statistical likelihood of

individuals moving into employment is incorporated into the modelling, the impact of job growth on relative income poverty is smaller. The simulations also demonstrate the importance of the quality of jobs/wage levels involved, as well as the social protection support for households who do not benefit from job growth. Simulations integrating key assumptions about mediating mechanisms suggest that with unchanged policies, reductions in relative income poverty will make little contribution to reaching the central 2030 AROPE social target.

The implication is that policies to improve the transmission from employment growth to poverty reduction must be an urgent priority. Employment policies must increase their focus on activating the most vulnerable, requiring intensive job search and related support. Policies at national and EU levels to underpin job quality also need to be strengthened via labour market regulation and minimum wages, collective bargaining, education and training, and encouraging innovation. At the same time, levels of social protection and provision for those of working age need to be safeguarded and enhanced, with particular attention paid to how the green and digital transitions impact the low-educated and low-skilled, which also necessitates targeted and effective reskilling programmes.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
Our analysis is mainly based on EU-SILC Microdata. Access to this data is granted by Eurostat to researchers and institutions upon request. However, some aggregated indicators and metadata are publicly available from the Eurostat online database.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

Gaining Insight Into EU's Social and Solidarity Economy Role via Strategic Policy Documents Analysis

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Issue: This article is part of the issue "The Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the Era of Polycrisis" edited by Francisco Simões (ISCTE-IUL), Renato do Carmo (ISCTE-IUL), and Bráulio Alturas (ISCTE-IUL), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i472

Abstract

This study examined European Union institutions' strategic policy documents and social and solidarity economy (SSE) concepts to gain a bird's-eye view of the topics being dealt with in EU strategies. The research also included assessing the SSE's role (i.e., its presence, absence, and relative importance) in policy and program instruments developed to meet challenges such as (un)employment, poverty, social inclusion, local development, community sustainability, and ecological transitions. Automated text mining techniques were applied to 74 EU policy documents to cluster employment, social affairs, and inclusion policies, and explore the SSE's most critical—or potential—role. The results have important policy implications and suggest future research directions.

Keywords

EU policy; European Union; social economy; strategic policy document; text mining; VOSviewer

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the social and solidarity economy (SSE) has been called upon to support European and national social and employment policies as this economy's organizations have demonstrated to respond to major challenges in innovative ways (Vanderhoven et al., 2020). In *Equality and Non-Discrimination in an Enlarged European Union*, the European Commission (2004a) recognizes the SSE's instrumental role—alongside the European Parliament and national authorities—in advancing the EU's priorities regarding

discrimination. The recently approved Action Plan for the Social Economy also reenforces the SSE's valuable contributions to inclusion and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. The European Economic and Social Committee further reported that the SSE has had a critical role in member states' response to the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting their important provision of personal social services and care (European Economic and Social Committee, 2021; see also Wollmann, 2018).

At the beginning of a new decade of European strategic and funding frameworks, the present study sought to identify the main themes present in EU strategic policy documents and explore the SSE's place in them. The goal was to provide a bird's-eye view of SSE-related topics included in EU strategies, contributing to the policy-making theory. In addition, this research conducted a preliminary assessment of the SSE's role (i.e., its presence, absence, and relative importance) in policy and program instruments responding to challenges such as (un)employment, poverty, social inclusion, local development, community sustainability, and ecological transition.

The analyses focused on key instruments used to design strategies (i.e., resolutions, communications, regulations, directives, recommendations). This study considered both cross-sectoral areas (e.g., the European Green Deal and the Recovery and Resilience Plan) and those more specifically linked to EU social policy, under the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion. By including all the relevant documents, the research could apply an integrated approach to analyze strategic policy rather than a segmented analysis focused on single documents (Garben, 2018).

The large body of printed and digitized documents defining these strategies contained a vast amount of text-based data, which justified the use of automated text analysis to extract important terms and their possible interrelationships. Indeed, one of the key contributions of this study is its innovative use of text mining to analyze a large corpus of EU social policy documents. Unlike traditional qualitative approaches that focus on a handful of texts, our comprehensive method systematically identifies not only the dominant themes but also the notable absence of certain topics—specifically, the SSE. By mapping both the presence and absence of SSE-related terms across a broad dataset, our approach provides robust evidence of its marginalization within EU policy discourse. This dual insight (what is there and what is missing) underscores the value of our methodology in revealing policy gaps that would otherwise remain undetected in smaller-scale studies. Text mining and clustering techniques were applied based on a comprehensive lexicon of SSE-related terms. The results were then subjected to critical analysis and an in-depth review was conducted of each cluster's main documents.

Two research questions were addressed:

> RQ1: How are EU employment, social affairs, and inclusion policies clustered, and which streams have been given the most attention?

> RQ2: To what extent is the SSE present—and how critical is its role—in EU employment, social affairs, and inclusion policies?

By clustering strategic documents' content on employment, social affairs, and inclusion, this study identified the key themes in social policy agendas and emerging concepts, actors, and policy instruments for

implementing change in the EU. The deeper understanding gained through critical analysis of the results contributes to the debate on the SSE's innovative role and the ways that EU policies guide transformative social change (Taylor et al., 2020). These topics are currently receiving special attention due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Zhang et al., 2022), and they proved key to government leaders' commitment to supporting the European Pillar of Social Rights in May 2021.

The text mining techniques applied in this study offered new insights due to the corpus of EU policy documents analyzed and provided intuitive visualization tools for clustering results. The overall findings facilitate the conceptualization of EU strategies on employment, social affairs, and inclusion and clarify the ways the SSE has been conceptualized. These results represent valuable contributions to the current debate regarding how to design effective transformative public policy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Roadmap of EU Social Policy

The evolution of EU social policy provides essential context for understanding the current position of the SSE within the broader policy landscape. Since the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (see Supplementary File, Figure 1), early EU social policies primarily focused on fostering cooperation between member states regarding employment, working conditions, vocational training, and social security. Initial instruments, such as the European Social Fund, were designed to support worker mobility and address basic social needs through collective action focusing more on European employment policy and limiting social policy to cooperation between member states.

Despite a period of economic prosperity and consolidation of the European model, economic progress did not lead to the expected social development, and poverty and social exclusion persisted. The crisis in the 1970s was a turning point in EU social policies and the European Social Fund's reform began. In 1974, the European Council adopted its first social action program, which gave the European Commission a social function and implemented pilot projects and initiatives combating poverty and exclusion. This period marked the beginning of a critical reassessment of the relationship between economic growth and social welfare, laying the groundwork for later policy shifts. The Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers was adopted in 1989, establishing the main principles for the European labor law model and shaping the EU social model's development over the next decade. These initiatives underscore early efforts to integrate social rights into policy, although they did not fully address emerging issues of social exclusion.

In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty, which founded the EU, was extended to include a protocol and an agreement on social policy, again focusing on workers' rights but adding "the integration of persons excluded from the labor market" ("33 years since the EU treaty," 2024). Finally, in 1997, the Treaty of Amsterdam specifically mentioned social exclusion, adding measures to encourage cooperation between member states through exchanges of best practices and promoting innovative ways to combat social exclusion. Such measures, while progressive, highlight the limitations of a framework that struggles to integrate more holistic and solidarity-based approaches.

Since the late 1990s, activation policies have been at the core of different European welfare states. Now, member states tend to develop quite different responses to the same macroeconomic and social problems, but shared tendencies appear in the recent reorientation towards activation. This new EU approach to social policies was further strengthened with the Lisbon Strategy of March 2000. The connection was acknowledged between a trifecta of economic growth, the creation of more and better jobs, and the fight against poverty and social exclusion (Estivill, 2008). The Lisbon Strategy endorsed the human capital approach and focused on individuals as entrepreneurs, thereby establishing European neoliberalism as a strategy (Bernhard, 2010). This strategic pivot, however, inadvertently sidelined alternative paradigms such as the SSE, which emphasize collective welfare over individual entrepreneurship.

Throughout the twenty-first century's first decade, the Lisbon Strategy continued to be a reference point, but it put in jeopardy the more fragile aspects of fighting poverty and social exclusion by putting social inclusion policies in second place (Duplan, 2023). This de-prioritization of social inclusion elements has contributed to the persistent invisibility of solidarity-driven approaches within EU policy discourse.

In 2013, the European Commission launched the Social Investment Package, which highlights the need to update social policies to optimize their effectiveness and efficiency considering demographic change and economic challenges. This initiative invests in policies designed to strengthen people's skills and capacities and support their participation in society, beyond education and work (Nyström et al., 2023). Despite these initiatives, the overarching policy framework continues to favor market-oriented solutions over solidarity-based models.

Despite a growing awareness of the importance of the EU's social dimension, these policies are still handicapped by a lack of commitment, tools, and legal competences needed to ensure their effective implementation and further advances. In 2021, the European Commission's annual State of the Union address highlighted the EU's most pressing challenges, but social service representatives across Europe have observed that social policy issues are once again largely given low priority (de Vries, 2021). This ongoing trend reinforces the need for methodological approaches, such as our text-mining analysis, to systematically uncover and quantify the marginalization of the SSE within EU policy discourse.

2.2. Social Economy as Policy

The SSE is an umbrella concept designating a sector that includes organizations that "have the specific feature of producing goods, services, and knowledge while pursuing both economic and social aims and fostering solidarity" (International Trading Centre, 2017, p. 1). The SSE encompasses both more traditional organizations (i.e., cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, and foundations) and a variety of other formal and informal initiatives that have emerged in recent years framed by the notion of a solidarity economy (e.g., non-profits, social enterprises, fair trade, alternative finance schemes, community groups, and open-source technology). The SSE shares a set of common principles and practices, particularly supporting the primacy of people over profits, the pursuit of collective interests, democratic governance—often self-management, voluntary and open membership, and, potentially, territorial foundations (Third Sector Impact, 2015).

In 1997, the European Parliament launched the pilot project Third System and Employment, which recognizes the SSE's potential regarding employment (Chaves-Avila & Monzon, 2012, p. 96). This

undertaking involved 81 experimental subprojects accompanied by a set of studies that contributed to making the "third system" and the SSE more visible as key actors. European institutions such as the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Economic and Social Committee could no longer ignore this economy, especially regarding employment and social inclusion.

Studies evaluating different public programs, including EU programs, and pilot projects have shown that the SSE contributes to the fight against unemployment, the inclusion of vulnerable groups, and economic and local social development (Castelao Caruana & Srnec, 2013). Considering these findings, European institutions and national governments have acknowledged the SSE's capacity "for correcting significant social and economic imbalances and helping [the EU] to achieve various objectives of general interest" (Chaves-Avila & Monzon, 2012, p. 104). During the Covid-19 pandemic, this economy has been given special attention because of public systems' inability to respond adequately (Santos & Laureano, 2021).

The current study addresses a significant research gap by examining the disconnect between the robust policy rhetoric surrounding the SSE and its minimal integration in EU strategic documents. By systematically analyzing a large corpus of these documents, we aim to quantify both the presence or absence of SSE-related discourse.

Previous studies have often been limited to analyzing a single or a few strategic documents (Carella & Graziano, 2021; Garben, 2018), primarily due to resource constraints and the inherent subjectivity of manual content analysis. In contrast, this text-mining approach allows for a comprehensive and objective examination of a much larger corpus, providing new insights into the policy dynamics that marginalize the SSE.

3. Methodology

In view of a new decade ahead for European strategic and funding frameworks, the current study sought to identify the concepts that define the EU's social policy agenda and the SSE's role within this policy. The text-as-data method was thus applied to EU policy documents. The automated approach avoids limitations imposed by human subjectivity on literature evaluation and categorization while remaining efficient and scalable enough to handle any number of documents (Santos & Laureano, 2021).

Given the large quantity of published and digitized documents defining the current framework of EU social policy, the data selection phase focused on identifying the documents that contain text focused on that topic. Experts in EU strategy were first invited to validate thematic categories for the document search, and a list of documents was developed based on these categories. The four categories defined drew on previous studies (Neamtan & Downing, 2005) and are:

1. Territorial development;
2. Sectoral policies (e.g., the environment, employment, education, health, culture, and housing);
3. Policies supporting target populations (e.g., youths, the elderly, people with disabilities, immigrants, the unemployed, and women);
4. Cross-sectoral policies.

The relevant documents available in each category were listed based on the information available on the EU's official website. This list included, among others, directives, resolutions, proposals, and communications concerning the EU's current social policy framework (i.e., employment, social affairs, inclusion, and cross-cutting issues). The documents were produced by various EU institutions: the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, the DGEMPL, the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Social Protection Committee.

The aforementioned experts were asked to check the list generated for any missing strategic documents and to confirm whether the documents identified as a 'proposal' had already been updated to the definitive version. These specialists' input ensured a comprehensive final list of documents to be included in this study (see Supplementary File, Table 1). Table 2 in the Supplementary File summarizes the absolute frequency of each type of document—in total 74. Communications, reports, and proposals were the most plentiful.

After validating the documents comprising the dataset (i.e., corpus), their contents were analyzed using a text mining procedure in which terms were mapped according to their co-occurrence in the documents and the strength of links between terms. The latter output reflects the number of documents in which two terms occur together. The entire mapping process was completed with VOSviewer software (van Eck & Waltman, 2010, 2017), which selected the most relevant terms by removing non-meaningful words in this research context and organizing the terms into networks. The results facilitated the visualization and exploration of the map of terms appearing in the document dataset (Santos & Laureano, 2021).

The methodological procedure followed is shown in Figure 2 in the Supplementary File.

To understand more fully the SSE's visibility and invisibility in European strategies, a dictionary was defined of SSE-related terms, which were categorized by type of organization (see Supplementary File, Table 3). The text mining technique used the procedure's results to determine exactly how many times each SSE-related term occurred within each document. Finally, significant patterns were identified, and a critical analysis of the findings was conducted.

4. Results

The text-mining technique produced five thematic clusters. All the words in each cluster appear in the same color on the VOSviewer map of the word network (see Figure 1).

4.1. Cluster Profiles

The five clusters in EU policy documents are as follows:

- Cluster 1—Economy (red);
- Cluster 2—Equality (green);
- Cluster 3—Qualifications and Employment (blue);
- Cluster 4—Mistreated Groups (yellow);
- Cluster 5—Care (purple).

Figure showing a network visualization with five clusters:
- Cluster 1 — Economy
- Cluster 2 — Equality
- Cluster 3 — Qualification and Employment
- Cluster 4 — Mistreated Groups
- Cluster 5 — Care
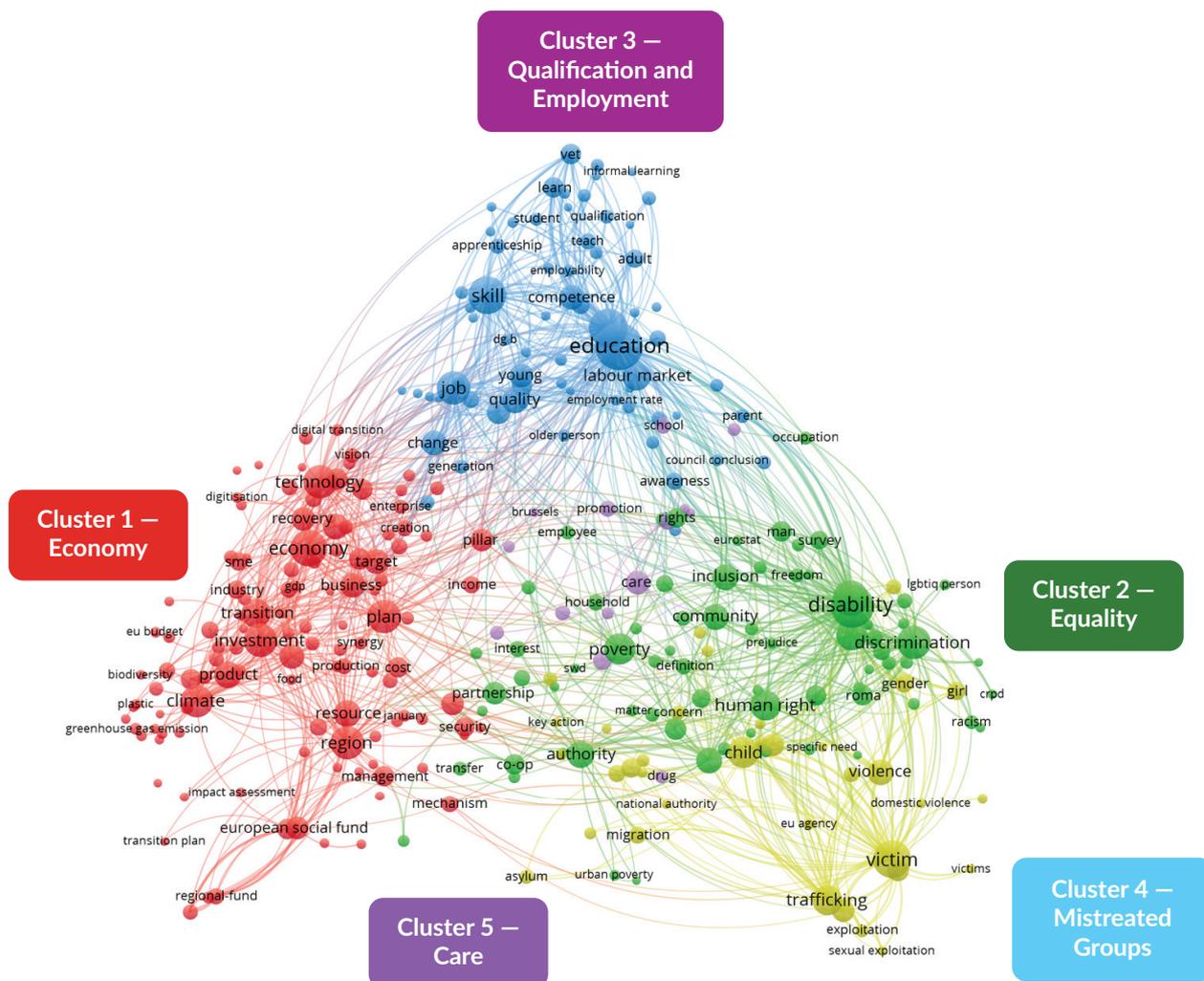
Table 4 in the Supplementary File lists the most frequent terms in each cluster and each term's number of occurrences, as well as example policy documents.

Cluster 1 covers policy documents on economic development and competitiveness. The most notable texts concern the framework of the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the InvestEU Program created in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as green, digital, and just transitions towards climate neutrality. The cluster highlights strategic streams focusing on sustainable infrastructure provision (i.e., sustainable mobility, energy efficiency, and digital connectivity), research, innovation, and digitization, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and social investment and skills, where the SSE is included. SSE tends to be mentioned together with SMEs.

The InvestEU establishes the objective of improving the SSE's access to microfinancing and standard financing to become more competitive and meet the demands of those who need it the most (European Union, 2021). The transition to a climate-neutral economy documents affirm the need to ensure a just, socially fair transition, emphasizing regional interventions without any specific role for the SSE. In the 2020 *Communication on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions*, the SSE is associated with the creation of equal opportunities and jobs for all accounting for 13.6 million jobs in Europe. The SSE's role is also seen as addressing social needs in

education, healthcare, energy transition, housing, and social services delivery, as well as generating jobs "for those furthest from the labor market" (European Commission, 2024b, p. 7).

This cluster also encompasses a reference document on the European SSE's recent categorization as a key driver of economic and social development and as a supplement to existing welfare systems in many member states (EPSCO Council, 2015). While not binding, this document underlines the need to establish and further develop European, national, regional, and/or local strategies and programs that enhance the SSE, especially by favoring integrated, evidence-based policies.

Policy documents covered by Cluster 2 center around the broad idea of a "Union of equality," including strategies regarding disability, racism, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning individuals, Roma people, work inclusion, urban poverty, and the European Pillar of Social Rights' common framework.

To address the inequalities and vulnerabilities these different groups must deal with, EU documents consider a multitude of factors. The latter range from accessibility to build and virtual environments for people with disabilities, access to rights, training, and education, political participation, and access to quality and sustainable jobs. Other factors are ways to tackle discrimination and improve access to social protection, healthcare, housing, essential services, and leisure activities. Barriers' intersectionality is also acknowledged, namely, the intersection of gender, age, racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious characteristics.

Community-based services' importance is underlined, and the SSE's role is highlighted in facilitating labor market inclusion for vulnerable people and promoting diversity in the workplace. The SSE's potential is also acknowledged for being on the frontline in terms of fighting discrimination and integrating marginalized groups into society at large. Most of this cluster's documents further emphasize developing data, monitoring systems, and adequate indicators to provide knowledge that strengthens and promotes evidence-based policy and practice.

Cluster 3's related documents explaining European policies are linked to education and employment as key sources of social inclusion, personal fulfillment, and active citizenship. The main target groups are young people, low-skilled individuals, older workers, migrants, the Roma, women, and the long-term unemployed. Adult and lifelong learning are important topics, as are upskilling and reskilling. The documents focus on promoting access and advancement in labor markets for everyone, including those facing unemployment, restructuring, and career transitions.

The skills and competencies expected of EU citizens and workers are literacy, mathematics, and digital competencies, as well as personal, social, and learning-to-learn proficiencies (e.g., complex problem-solving skills). EU organizations plan to develop a highly skilled, qualified workforce able to respond to labor market needs, especially during green and digital transitions. In addition, this cluster's documents focus on monitoring and ensuring quality education and training systems and increasing innovation in learning environments. To achieve these goals, different public and private sector stakeholders are called upon to take an active part in these systems, including vocational education and training (VET) providers and employers. Specific sectors of activity are mentioned including circular economy and new industrial SMEs.

Policy documents in Cluster 4 are connected to the idea of "preventing and combating" the risks and consequences for crime and harassment victims. Because various groups have limited access to their full rights in the EU, policy instruments have been created to respond to everyone's needs. Target victims include those subjected to gender-based and domestic violence, child, elderly, and sexual abuse, hate crime, terrorism, organized crime, trafficking, and migrant smuggling, as well as crimes against people with disabilities.

Official approaches mostly concentrate on supporting and protecting victims with information, assistance mechanisms, and compensation and on sanctioning offenders. Policy documents commonly argue for integrated, holistic, and human rights-based methods, so "mistreated groups" are discussed in this cluster's documents from a mainstreaming and intersectional perspective. This theme also incorporates the question of awareness-raising regarding different topics mostly to make victims more visible and gather information on—and monitor—varied crimes and harassment in the EU.

Finally, Cluster 5 relates to care, which is the least frequently mentioned area covering terms such as "mental health," "prevention," "intervention," and "drug." VOSviewer's clustering function tends, when dealing with a residual set of documents forming a separate cluster, to identify terms with emerging themes. Mental health and addictions are an outlier within EU policy on employment, social affairs, and inclusion.

The European Framework for Action on Mental Health and Wellbeing addresses the need to make mental health one of the highest priorities in public health agendas. This document argues that, despite significant advancements, much room for improvement remains regarding the quality of mental health patients' support, prevention, treatment, and care. Frameworks for both mental health and drug policies emphasize their cross-cutting nature and thus advocate for the integration of public health, justice, and other policies in areas such as labor, education, and social affairs. One strategy considered essential is to shift away from traditional models of healthcare based on institutional infrastructure—already proved to be outdated and stigmatized—towards more community-based services, though the SSE is not referred to specifically.

4.2. SSE's Visibility in EU Strategy Clusters

Regarding the SSE's visibility and invisibility in European strategies, Table 5 in the Supplementary File shows the relationship between the five clusters and all the SSE-related terms of the dictionary developed for this research. The themes in Clusters 4 and 5 are not closely connected to the SSE which is cited less than 10 times. Cluster 1 has the most mentions of this economy ($n = 1,835$).

Regarding SSE-related terms, the most frequently used in policy documents (see Supplementary File, Table 6) are "social and solidarity economy" ($n = 1,438$) and the closely linked terms "SSE," "social economy," and "solidarity economy." "Co-op" ($n = 529$), "social enterprises" ($n = 242$), and "unions" ($n = 147$) also appear more than 100 times. "Foundations" is absent from the documents, and "mutuals" ($n = 6$) and "non-profit organizations" ($n = 9$) are infrequently mentioned (>10 terms).

The SSE has a significant presence (>10 terms) in 14 of the 74 documents under analysis. In 27 of them, this term does not appear even once. These terms appear frequently in only two documents (>1,000 and >100 times, respectively): *New Technologies and Digitization: Opportunities and Challenges for Social Economy*

and Social Enterprises and *Statute for a European Cooperative Society*. In both cases, the title itself is about the SSE, so, not unexpectedly, SSE-related terms are used multiple times.

The document with the top number of SSE terms ($n = 1,614$) is a 2020 study focused on whether, why, how, and to what extent integrating digital platforms and advanced technologies can affect the design and delivery of new better social, and societal SSE impacts. Referring to case studies, the document specifically discusses SSE digital transitions. The cited study ends with recommendations regarding the need for a common legal form for EU member states seeking to create digital platforms.

The *Statute for a European Cooperative Society* makes a further 412 references to SSE-related terms as it specifically focuses on cooperatives, including what is, how to create, and how to transform a cooperative into a European Cooperative Society. In addition, one EU communication discusses initiatives that create a favorable climate for social businesses, so this document has 72 mentions of SSE terms. The goal is to place the SSE and social innovation at the heart of the EU's concerns to promote a "highly competitive social market economy."

In the fourth position ($n = 60$), another quite generic document concentrates on promoting the SSE as a key driver of Europe's economic and social development. The contents reaffirm how important the SSE is to the European Commission and encourage SSE businesses and social entrepreneurs to become actively involved in the development of EU-wide policies and strategies promoting their sector of activity.

The 14 documents that mention more than ten SSE terms include two (documents no. 2 and 4) that make quite generic references to SSE's role and cooperatives' statutes. Most policy documents (documents no. 3, 5, 8, 12, 13, and 14) are either about social and economic development in the single market and agriculture or the European Pillar of Social Rights. Three documents (documents no. 7, 9, and 11) are about VET systems. Two others focus on specific target groups, namely, people with disabilities (document no. 6) and homeless individuals (document no. 10). Only one (document no. 1) is, specifically, mainly concerned about digital transitions.

5. Discussion and Implications

The above results answer the predefined research questions by showing trends and patterns that can be investigated further. Regarding RQ1, the results reveal the primacy of investment programs and/or funds for climate transition and digitalization. Innovation, economic development, and competitiveness are also high priorities (Cluster 1).

A second significant stream is policies that promote inclusion, equality, and non-discrimination. The idea of a "union of equality" is strongly emphasized, although the complex intersectional barriers to achieving this are recognized. A third stream concentrates on qualifications and employment, especially education, training, and improving skills to ensure target groups' digital and green transition employability. These groups include young people, low-skilled individuals, older workers, migrants, the Roma, women, and the long-term unemployed.

A fourth stream is related to mistreated groups as crime victims. Women, children, and other victims of human rights crimes, such as trafficking, are important targets. A final stream emphasizes policies promoting

healthcare, in particular mental health, and addiction. A vast number of EU regulations and directives are included, and member states' cooperation stands out as a theme.

The results for how the SSE is framed show that, in only 14 of the 74 policy documents analyzed is the social economy a significant topic (>10 terms). Even in these 14, just two have over 100 mentions. While our analysis is cross-sectional and does not directly compare past and present, external institutional developments suggest a shift in SSE visibility. For instance, the legal constitution of the European Parliament Social Economy Intergroup in January 2020, along with the establishment of a dedicated European platform—Social Economy Europe—to represent SSE interests at the EU level, indicates that the SSE is receiving increased recognition. These developments point to greater visibility within specific subsectors (e.g., the social field and the integration of vulnerable groups) and as an emerging employer sector and driver of social innovation.

The most prominent SSE-related terms in policy documents are "social enterprise," "social innovation," and "cooperatives" (i.e., co-ops). "Social innovation" appears associated with entrepreneurship as a key tool for combatting unemployment. The SSE tends to be ignored when economic, technological, innovation, and environmental issues are discussed, and this economy lacks operational mechanisms and tools.

5.1. Policy Implications

Based on our empirical findings that show a limited presence of SSE-related discourse in EU policy documents, our analysis suggests that EU strategic policies might benefit from a more integrated approach. The SSE, public institutions, and administrations need to work together to be better prepared and responsive to societal concerns about employment, social affairs, and inclusion. Future EU strategic policies need to consider the present study's findings regarding a more integrated, holistic approach—rather than fragmented, diffused tactics—to policy design. The SSE should be clearly mentioned in policy documents as a key partner in EU strategies so that this economy and EU institutions can together prepare better for crises. Greater preparedness entails recognizing the SSE's critical role during crises, as well as this economy's varied, ongoing needs. This recommendation was previously made by the European Economic and Social Committee (2021).

The Social Economy Action Plan adopted on 9 December 2021 may be an opportunity to achieve the EU's social goals by putting an inter-organizational system in place that combines all sectors' efforts. The SSE also could now be integrated into EU employment, social affairs, and inclusion strategies. However, this perspective is not yet present in the key actions announced that support the SSE, namely, the EU Social Economy Gateway or the European Competence Centre for Social Innovation.

To avoid creating isolated measures, this action plan should follow the EU's recommendations regarding cooperative strategies in which the three economic sectors (i.e., governments, businesses, and the SSE) co-create inter-organizational networks. This SSE framework would benefit from all the relevant actors' unique experience, thereby achieving social, environmental, and economic goals and improving the SSE's visibility, recognition, and access to finance and markets. EU debates and strategy design need to reflect the SSE's role and the added value it provides to construct a more resilient Europe.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This study provides an up-to-date view of the SSE and the EU policy process, revealing that SSE-related discourse in policy documents is both limited and fragmented (Kendall & Anheier, 1999). Although our cross-sectional analysis does not capture policy evolution over time, this pattern suggests that prevailing theoretical models may underestimate the benefits of an integrated, cross-sectoral approach. Consequently, our findings encourage scholars to reconsider their approach to strategic management in SSE- and EU-related policies. Policy-making theories should evaluate how different sectors interact, as this integrated approach can strengthen the resilience of SSE organizations. Adopting a holistic perspective—viewing policy documents as an interconnected web rather than as isolated artifacts—can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different policy domains interact (Carella & Graziano, 2021). Overall, theoretical studies that fail to treat the SSE as a critical part of constructing a resilient EU could end up proposing inappropriate management strategies for the public sector, businesses, and SSE actors.

5.3. Practical Implications

The current results reveal that the SSE is largely ignored in EU employment, social affairs, and inclusion strategies. It needs to develop a greater capacity for self-promotion to gain more recognition. Its organizations can work together to create mechanisms that facilitate inter-organizational and inter-sectorial collaboration with companies and the public sector during projects and put pressure on the EU to implement strategies that give the SSE a more central role. In addition, businesses' calls for funding supporting corporate social responsibility could favor SSE projects that involve cooperating with other sectors' organizations and promoting all sectors' sustainability and resilience. These projects would thus gain an advantage in terms of attracting funding.

6. Conclusion

The SSE is currently seen as providing social and employment policies and responding to significant social challenges innovatively, but this is not always reflected in EU institutions' policy strategies. The present study found evidence that the SSE has been overlooked in important EU employment, social affairs, and inclusion policy documents.

The analysis covered the contents of 74 directives, resolutions, proposals, and communications produced by various organizations regarding the EU's current social policy framework. Text mining techniques were applied to generate a map of EU policy terms using VOSviewer's co-occurrence algorithm, which revealed five thematic clusters in the documents: *Economy*, *Equality*, *Qualifications and Employment*, *Mistreated Groups* and *Care*. The results show that only 14 of the 74 policy documents in the dataset make significant references (>10 times) to the SSE, and 27 documents (about 36%) fail to mention this economy even once.

This research provided empirically robust evidence that EU strategies overlook SSE organizations' potential as key partners in resolving employment, social affairs, and inclusion issues. Given the SSE's widely recognized critical role in coping with the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic, future policymaking processes must include these organizations when designing and implementing action plans in the relevant areas. However, recent policy documents show that the EU has still not adopted this integrated approach,

preferring instead to continue incorporating the SSE into isolated strategies involving other sectors' organizations (i.e., the public sector and businesses). These findings were subjected to critical analysis to highlight any policy, theoretical, and practical implications, thereby contributing to encouraging more EU resilience strategies that acknowledge the SSE's key role.

6.1. Limitations and Future Directions

The present study underlined the challenges and opportunities of applying text mining techniques in qualitative research and social policy analysis, particularly when a massive volume of data is processed (i.e., Big Data). This approach not only enables the analysis of vast datasets but also uncovers hidden patterns that might be missed by conventional qualitative methods. Automated text analysis combined with non-automated critical analysis of results is an arguably fundamental tool for dealing with the growing number of politically meaningful texts that have spread along different channels over time. In this context, the choice not to include a systematic review of all policy documents could be considered a limitation. However, this exploratory research's main goal was to provide a bird's-eye view of the most relevant documents' content and discuss the EU strategic policies mentioned. Nonetheless, employing a mixed-methods strategy that combines text mining with qualitative content analysis may further enrich our understanding of the evolving policy landscape. The findings should thus be treated as a basis for future studies of specific policies, especially during those periods when strategies are revised, and new strategic documents and action plans developed.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
The data used in this study consists of publicly available strategic documents from the European Union. All documents can be accessed through the official website of the European Union at https://europa.eu.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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ARTICLE

Resilience of Socially Vulnerable Populations to Disinformation in Lithuania: The Role of the Welfare State

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Abstract

The geopolitical context, particularly the ongoing war in Ukraine, underscores the necessity for societal preparedness and resilience against disinformation in Lithuania. This issue is especially important for the Baltic countries, which experience substantial disinformation flows from the Russian Federation. This study aims to investigate the resilience of socially vulnerable people in Lithuania to disinformation, with a specific focus on the role of the welfare state. A representative survey was conducted among the Lithuanian population in 2024 to achieve this aim. The data were analysed using multinomial logistic regression. Resilience to disinformation was measured through statements reflecting the dominant narratives of Russian disinformation. Independent variables included respondents' labor market status, age, income, education, and subjective evaluation of their living standards, providing a comprehensive framework for assessing social vulnerability. The findings reveal that socially vulnerable populations, particularly those with lower socioeconomic status and limited educational attainment, exhibit lower levels of resilience to disinformation. Furthermore, the role of the Lithuanian welfare state in mitigating these vulnerabilities and protecting against poverty appears inadequate.

Keywords

disinformation; hybrid threats; Lithuania; resilience; vulnerable population; welfare state

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic not only posed challenges to the health sector, labor market, and public services but also intensified disinformation flows. Furthermore, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine activated hybrid threats across European countries. Disinformation emerged as a significant tool to undermine trust

in government and destabilize democratic systems in the Baltic countries. In Lithuania, disinformation—often disseminated through online channels in the national language, originating from Russia—targets society with its misleading information. Consequently, enhancing societal resilience to disinformation has become integral to Lithuania's national defence policy. However, resilience to disinformation varies among different societal groups (Dagdeviren et al., 2020; Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2022; Weitzel et al., 2022).

Research has shown that socially vulnerable groups, such as the unemployed, low-income individuals, or those at risk of poverty, single people, and those belonging to specific age groups (e.g., younger or older individuals), are particularly susceptible to disinformation (see Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2022; Weitzel et al., 2022). Trust in government and democracy has been widely recognized as a critical indicator of societal resilience to disinformation and propaganda (Fominaya, 2022; Sternisko et al., 2020). This trust, however, is influenced by various demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

Morkūnas (2022) highlights that, in Lithuania, Russian disinformation has been aimed at increasing the perceived distrust of governments, perceived lack of career possibilities, perceived lack of justice, and perceived imminence of military actions in the region. Research by Martišius (2022), Denisenko (2018, 2020), Keršanskas (2021), Lašas et al. (2020), Vaišnys et al. (2017), and others further elucidates the dynamics of Russian propaganda and disinformation, contextualizing these phenomena within a broader geopolitical landscape. However, these works have not specifically addressed the resilience of socially vulnerable groups to disinformation. This article seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the resilience of socially vulnerable populations in Lithuania to disinformation, with particular attention to the role of the welfare state. The study is structured as follows: First, a review of existing literature on disinformation, trust, and societal resilience is provided; second, an empirical analysis of the resilience of socially vulnerable groups to disinformation and their levels of trust in the government is presented. Finally, the role of the welfare state in fostering resilience is examined.

The contribution of this research is twofold. First, the findings extend the understanding of disinformation by identifying which societal groups are more vulnerable to disinformation narratives and more likely to distrust the government while being receptive to external information sources. Second, the study contributes to welfare state literature and research by exploring the adequacy and effectiveness of welfare policies in ensuring societal resilience, particularly among vulnerable populations.

2. Literature Review

Disinformation is defined as intentionally false information disseminated to harm a nation, increase distrust in governmental institutions, incite fear among the population, and exacerbate social tensions (Freedman et al., 2021). It shares similarities with propaganda, which seeks to manipulate and control public opinion (Humprecht, 2023). The dissemination of disinformation represents an abuse of power, eroding public trust in institutions and the media (Puebla-Martínez et al., 2021). The spread of disinformation, however, depends on specific social, media, and political contexts, as well as the vulnerability of various societal groups to disinformation (Humprecht, 2023).

Given its harmful implications, the pervasive nature of disinformation necessitates strategies to mitigate its spread and enhance societal resilience. Resilience is usually defined as the ability to recover from

disturbances (Bergstrand et al., 2015; Donoghue, 2022; EuropeAid, 2016; Rose, 2004). It is a positive response made by individuals over time in the face of financial, social, or emotional adversity (Batty & Cole, 2010). Debates on resilience in social life pay attention from the individual to the social and from individual actions to creating conditions for them to take place (Estêvão et al., 2017). Structural conditions and path dependency impact the resilience of social subjects (Dagdeviren et al., 2016). According to Dagdeviren et al. (2016), systems that protect individuals through redistribution of wealth and/or protection of income in times of economic adversity are highly relevant to resilience. Feelings of subjective insecurity are also important for resilience (Harrison, 2013). Path dependency is another point in understanding resilience because it is a process in which an initial condition or a development generates a reinforcement mechanism for the emergence of a particular path with particular outcomes (Dagdeviren et al., 2016). Thus, resilience in individuals or households may be a manifestation of structural factors or path dependence reflected in their behavior. Social resilience is observed by examining the positive and negative aspects of social exclusion, marginalization, and social capital. Stress and variability associated with resource dependency are manifest in instability (Adger, 2000). Resource dependency demonstrates the coevolutionary nature of the social and natural systems being examined, with social and economic systems being more or less "resilient" to external physical and social stresses (Adger, 2000). Focusing on the multidimensionality of poverty—or "ways of life"—as an indicator of analysis can help articulate the resources and constraints associated with a specific position in the social structure, shaped by socioeconomic conditions defined by concepts of relative and absolute poverty, as well as by the everyday life practices, evaluations, representations, cultural and social references, and the strategic choices of families and individuals operating within those constraints (Estêvão et al., 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to identify the problem: The lack of resilience for certain individuals may instead be the result of a number of interacting factors such as social exclusion, the efficacy of social support, various prejudices and biases, and different social and personal problems. The second aspect is the intermittent of hardship, and resilience is not a permanent personal attribute but rather a process dependent upon social as well as individual factors (Calado et al., 2020). Social resilience processes result from choices made by reflexive actors with different dispositions. These choices depend on the capacities and powers, including the perception of available resources and the evaluation of the consequences of their alternative use. Access to resources is a central issue in allowing recovery from a crisis, or to live, maintain, or improve living conditions (Calado et al., 2020). Thus, resilience is related to certain types of outcomes (Calado et al., 2020).

Enhancing resilience against disinformation requires assessing how information is evaluated and shared. Bayer et al. (2019) suggest that resilience to disinformation should be understood as the capacity to encounter disinformation, discover the truth, comprehend public matters, and engage in informed decision-making. A critical prerequisite for fostering resilience is the presence of a public discourse, enabling citizens to have a choice in learning a range of perspectives and ideas.

Kont et al. (2024) define resilience to disinformation as the capability that manifests in encounters with disinformation and results in either questioning or recognizing disinformation. This resilience is also reflected in the reluctance to share, like, or comment on disinformation (Humprecht, 2023). Notably, disinformation producers often claim to reveal information allegedly hidden by established news media and politicians (Humprecht, 2023): Extensive use of social media is detrimental to resilience and increases the probability of further dissemination of disinformation.

Resilience differs across societal groups, highlighting the need for academic discourse focused on identifying vulnerable populations and strengthening their capacity to cope with disinformation. The existing literature on resilience in disaster contexts suggests that vulnerability is often defined through poverty criteria. For example, Bergstrand et al. (2015) and Bonati et al. (2023) illustrate that the poor generally have fewer resources and safety nets than the rich.

In the domain of information and communication, vulnerability is conceptualized as the susceptibility of recipients to manipulation—whether intentional or unintentional—by the media disseminating false or inaccurate information. Puebla-Martínez et al. (2021) highlight that individuals unable to recognize misinformation may contribute to its spread by forwarding messages, particularly within social networks. Consequently, cognitive skills, critical attitudes, and digital literacy are essential for evaluating misinformation effectively. Additionally, prior beliefs, ideologies, age, memory capacity, and personality traits influence how individuals assess the credibility of information. The same authors also emphasize that sociodemographic characteristics, including income level, social status, and place of residence, shape perceptions regarding the prevalence and identification of misinformation. Furthermore, studies demonstrate that the level of education significantly impacts awareness and comprehension of hybrid threats, including disinformation (Korauš et al., 2023; Puebla-Martínez et al., 2021). Kirmayer (2024) points out that individuals' worldviews are shaped by their knowledge, expectations, and cognitive priors, which are, in turn, influenced by life experiences such as education and engagement in public discourse. The author further asserts that education regarding institutions (government, law, and healthcare) can foster trust in these institutions.

Psychological dimensions of vulnerability are explored by Pantazi et al. (2021), who argue that default gullibility and epistemic vigilance are important in political information, resulting in people exhibiting excessive gullibility toward inaccurate information and overly vigilant toward truthful information.

Kont et al. (2024) state that attempts to understand resilience will always lead to questions about vulnerability, which is at the opposite end. Kont et al. (2024) differentiate between micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors of influence on resilience to disinformation. At the micro level, political ideology, cognitive processes, and pathologies are considered the prime drivers of vulnerability to disinformation. Researchers (Kont et al., 2024; Kirmayer, 2024, among others) aim to conduct a more comprehensive examination beyond merely assessing varying levels of resilience across different social groups. The key focus of their inquiry is understanding the factors contributing to people's susceptibility to disinformation.

One significant determinant of resilience is trust in news media (Humprecht, 2023). When people distrust traditional media, they are more likely to seek information from alternative sources (Klebba & Winter, 2024). Humprecht (2023) observed the relationship between trust and democratic attitudes. The rejection of democratic values can lead to a lack of trust in traditional sources of information, and this gap can potentially be filled by alternative sources of information that are more susceptible to disinformation. However, the relationship between trust in politicians and willingness to share disinformation is complex (Humprecht, 2023). Trust lies at the heart of disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) because it is ultimately about believing facts or "alternative truths."

Political trust also plays a crucial role in shaping responses to disinformation (Klebba & Winter, 2024). Studies have demonstrated that the extent to which people engaged with Covid-19-related disinformation—

whether by selecting, sharing, or believing in it—was strongly correlated with their mistrust of political institutions (Klebba & Winter, 2024). More broadly, levels of trust in societal institutions influence how individuals select, disseminate, and accept disinformation. Institutional trust in politics refers to the degree to which people perceive core political institutions and actors as credible, fair, competent, and transparent, and its erosion can negatively impact public participation in government-endorsed initiatives (Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024; Klebba & Winter, 2024). For example, if citizens perceive the government as untrustworthy in ensuring redistribution, fostering trust in policy decisions related to economic preferences becomes challenging (Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024).

For Dimdins et al. (2024), political trust can be conceptualized as a general evaluation of the political system and an assessment of specific political actors and institutions. It is shaped by "perceptions of particular qualities" attributed to political actors or institutions, as well as by situational circumstances and contextual factors. It is usually linked to public satisfaction regarding the performance of political institutions, as individuals rely on their subjective well-being as a criterion in evaluating governmental performance (Dimdins et al., 2024). People determine whether they are content enough to support authorities, as they expect political institutions to establish societal conditions conducive to achieving satisfactory well-being. Direct evaluations of the national economic situation and personal household finances are also significant predictors of political trust.

For Uslaner (2012), inequality as a contextual macro-level factor leads to lower levels of trust and creates tensions between more and less advantaged groups. This author also concludes that, besides economic equality, the sense of optimism also acts as a factor of trust. More recently, Bobzien (2023) has stated that individuals feel more politically dissatisfied when they identify inequality because higher levels of income inequality may be associated with higher levels of economic insecurity, which leads individuals to trust less in political institutions. The economically well-off individuals who benefit from inequality have higher trust levels, while economically less well-off individuals—who are put at a disadvantage—have lower trust levels. Citizens assess government performance and consider the responsibilities of politicians and institutions in addressing underlying problems (Kumlin et al., 2024).

A welfare factor is crucial in mitigating low levels of political trust (Uslaner, 2012). Rothstein (2010) argues that welfare state policies contribute to overall trust levels by fostering societal well-being and reducing corruption. Countries with comprehensive, universal welfare systems tend to exhibit lower levels of corruption, higher social trust, and greater overall happiness. In contrast, systems reliant on means-tested benefits are more susceptible to corruption and tend to foster lower levels of both social trust and well-being (Rothstein et al., 2010). Furthermore, dissatisfaction with the welfare state often correlates with broader political distrust (Kumlin, 2007). Research suggests that individuals store and recall information about government performance in a general rather than sector-specific manner, allowing them to form holistic evaluations of the welfare state (Kumlin et al., 2024).

Perceptions of fairness in the distribution of public resources significantly influence citizens' evaluations of policies (Tóth et al., 2022). Such perceptions are shaped by the socio-political context, with empirical findings from the Czech Republic and Slovakia indicating that citizens' assessments of policies and political representatives are primarily influenced by the benefits they receive (Tóth et al., 2022). Additionally, the perceived level of corruption and standard of living are key factors shaping public evaluations of policy outputs (Tóth et al., 2022).

Economic insecurity is another important determinant of political behavior (Vlandas & Halikiopoulou, 2022). Welfare state policies are likely to mitigate the costs and risks associated with belonging to particular social groups, thereby shaping political preferences. Different social groups experience varying levels of economic insecurity, influencing their voting behavior. Economically vulnerable voters, in particular, are more likely to depend on the generosity of social policies (Vlandas & Halikiopoulou, 2022).

Welfare state dissatisfaction tends to correlate with general political distrust (Kumlin, 2007). Kumlin (2002) distinguishes between "nootropic" perceptions—formed through information provided by political elites, experts, and the media—and personal welfare state experiences, which shape individuals' assessments of government responsibility for public agencies and programs. While socio-tropic perceptions are partly the product of personal experiences, direct interactions with welfare state services have a greater influence on overall judgments of the welfare system and political trust. Citizens tend to link the quality of welfare state services not only to the performance of the incumbent government but also to the overall functioning of the democratic system (Kumlin, 2002).

Subjective self-interest, defined as individuals' perceptions of their personal gains from welfare state arrangements and public services, plays a significant role in shaping political trust (Kumlin, 2002). However, studies suggest that socioeconomic status variables—such as social class, education, and income—only moderately explain variations in political trust. Instead, subjective assessments of life satisfaction appear to have a stronger correlation with political trust. Happy people are generally more satisfied with institutions and governance.

While Bauer (2018) did not find evidence that unemployment negatively affects trust in government or satisfaction with democracy, his findings indicate a negative relationship between unemployment and life satisfaction. According to Bauer (2018), the experience of unemployment may affect concrete attitudes toward policies related to unemployment, whereas more abstract attitudes remain largely unaffected.

3. Data and Methods

Our analysis builds upon existing literature that identifies age, education, and labor market status as key factors influencing social resilience in individual and social conditions. To examine the relationship between disinformation and trust in the government and these factors, we utilized data from a representative survey conducted in Lithuania in 2024. The survey was administered by the market and public opinion research company Spinter Tyrimai following the methodology developed by a research team from Vilnius University. The study sample included respondents aged 18 and over, ensuring representation across gender, age, education, social status, and place of residence. Particular attention was given to the inclusion of retirees (aged 64+) and other socially vulnerable groups, including recipients of social assistance, the unemployed, and individuals with disabilities or having children with disabilities. The data was collected using the CAPI and CAWI methodologies. In the CAPI method, interviewers conducted in-person surveys at respondents' homes using a digital questionnaire. The CAWI method involved an online questionnaire accessible via a provided link. Notably, the CAWI approach limited respondents' ability to revise their answers.

This study focuses on identifying social groups that exhibit greater vulnerability to disinformation and lower levels of trust in the government. According to Bayer et al. (2019), our approach examines vulnerabilities

that fake news narratives exploit. Resilience or vulnerability to disinformation has been assessed using the following statements as variables:

1. Sanctions on Russia due to its aggression against Ukraine have not achieved the declared goals and have primarily harmed the Lithuanian population through price increases.
2. Lithuanian politicians care too much about Ukraine and ignore Lithuanian interests.
3. Lithuanian politicians emphasize threats from Russia and the probability of war to evoke fear rather than solving problems related to poverty reduction.

These statements reflect prevalent Russian disinformation narratives, particularly those emphasizing social concerns. Unlike conventional survey questions on disinformation (e.g., those used in Eurobarometer), we used the above statements as our effort aimed to measure respondents' resilience/vulnerability to external disinformation attacks from Russia. The socioeconomic context issues Russia uses to confront the official line of the Lithuanian government to support Ukraine against Russia's aggression. These narratives reflect the manipulation of socioeconomic issues and seek to reveal societal doubts about the government's politics. The narratives have attributes to the definition of disinformation: falsity, intention to strategic manipulation, and impact on society (Bayer et al., 2019). Similar narratives are defined in other sources or research (see, for example, EUvsDisinfo, 2024; also, Janeliūnas, 2024). Lithuanian public media provided explanations about the economic situation, the causes of inflation, and the importance of supporting Ukraine in the country from the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Trust in the government was measured by asking whether the Lithuanian government would care for all citizens during security crises and extreme situations by using the following statement as a variable: "The Lithuanian government will be able to care for all its citizens."

To analyze these variables about different social groups, we categorized respondents based on the following criteria:

- Education: Three groups were defined: (a) secondary education or lower, (b) non-university higher education, and (c) university-level higher education.
- Personal income amount per month: Income was classified into three categories: (a) below EUR 600 (poverty line), (b) between EUR 601 and EUR 2000, and (c) above EUR 2001.
- Employment status (active/inactive): Respondents were categorized as either "Active" (employed or self-employed) or "Inactive" (unemployed, retired, students, or those unable to work due to disability or other reasons).
- Subjective evaluation of living standards: Respondents self-assessed their living standards as (a) very good or good, (b) neutral, or (c) very bad or bad.
- Age groups: Three categories were established: 18–34, 35–65, and 65 and older.

All selected independent variables align with prior research findings discussed in the preceding section. To assess vulnerability to disinformation and identify groups with lower trust in the government, we employed a multinomial logistic regression model, which is particularly suited for categorical variables.

3.1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The survey sample was designed to ensure a balanced gender distribution, with 46% male and 54% female respondents. The age range spanned from 18 to over 80, with the largest proportion falling between 30 and 69 years, each age bracket contributing roughly 16%. Educational attainment varied, with 25.5% holding a university degree, 18.9% having completed secondary education, and 18.2% possessing vocational training. Regarding employment status, 50.2% of the respondents were employed in salaried positions, while 10.3% were self-employed and 3.6% were business owners. Retirees comprised 30.8% of the sample, with 5.9% being unemployed and 4% being students. Household income per family member spanned a broad range, with the majority earning between EUR 301 and 1100 per month. A small percentage (2%) reported income below EUR 200, while only 0.7% earned more than EUR 3001. The primary sources of household income were wages (69.4%), pensions (32.9%), and earnings from individual or business activities (15.6%).

4. Findings

This study examines the relationship between disinformation, trust in the government, and various socioeconomic factors, including education, income levels, labour market activity, and subjective assessments of living standards. To contextualise the multinomial logistic regression results, this section provides a brief discussion of these indicators in the Lithuanian context. Lithuania has made significant efforts to align its national policies with the principles outlined in the EPSR. Established in 2017, the EPSR encompasses 20 principles designed to ensure fair working conditions, social protection, and inclusion, thereby promoting social equality across Europe (European Commission, 2023). Lithuania's commitment to the EPSR is particularly relevant given its historical and socioeconomic challenges, such as high levels of poverty and youth unemployment. However, the implementation of the EPSR in Lithuania encounters several obstacles, including the absence of direct enforcement mechanisms and a binding legal framework, which limits its function to that of a policy agenda (Carella & Graziano, 2021).

4.1. Education

Education, training, and lifelong learning constitute the first principle of the EPSR. Although Lithuania has achieved a relatively high secondary education attainment rate (96.4% among individuals aged 20–24 in 2022), persistent challenges remain in addressing youth unemployment and aligning educational outcomes with labour market demands. In 2023, the unemployment rate among young people (aged 15–24) stood at 12.4%, notably higher than the general unemployment rate of 6.4% (National Policies Platform, 2024). This disparity underscores the need for more targeted policies facilitating the transition from education to employment. Additionally, disparities in access to quality education and training persist, with rural areas significantly lagging behind urban centres.

4.2. Income and Poverty

Recent policy trends indicate the Lithuanian government's commitment to expanding public social services and increasing social benefits to reduce poverty. This commitment is reflected in a gradual increase in social benefit allocations and a rising share of GDP devoted to social expenditures. However, despite these efforts, Lithuania remains below the EU average in terms of social expenditure, allocating only 18% of its GDP to social

protection in 2021, compared to the EU-27 average of 28.7% (Eurostat, 2024b). Between 2012 and 2022, the relative poverty risk in Lithuania consistently hovered around 20% (Valstybės duomenų agentūra, 2024), with the rate of people at risk of poverty reaching 20.6% in 2023. This data indicates an insufficient social protection system for vulnerable populations. Historically, Lithuania has exhibited one of the highest poverty risk levels in the EU, reflecting its low-funded welfare state that follows the Baltic model (Greve, 2022). While reports on EPSR implementation suggest progress in poverty reduction, income inequality remains critical (Eurostat, 2024a). Lithuania's income inequality ratio stood at 6.4 in 2022, among the highest in the EU (Valstybės duomenų agentūra, 2024). Furthermore, although approximately 20% of the Lithuanian population is at risk of poverty, only 2–3% of those affected receive social support, resulting in high non-take-up rates. According to EPSR projections, the non-take-up rate for monetary social assistance is expected to decline from 22.4% in 2017 to below 10% by 2030 (European Commission, 2022a).

4.3. Subjective Evaluation and Trust

Data from the European Social Survey (2018) indicate that Lithuanians report moderate levels of life satisfaction, with an average score of 6.5 out of 10, consistent with broader trends observed in Central and Eastern Europe (Eurofound, 2020). Previous research identifies distrust in institutions as a defining characteristic of Lithuanian society (Kovács et al., 2017; Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2009). Aidukaitė (2009) attributes this phenomenon to the legacy of communism, which has shaped public perceptions of government responsibility and institutional trust. Low governmental trust is prevalent in Eastern European countries due to historical governance failures and ongoing economic challenges (Aidukaitė et al., 2016; Kuitto, 2016). According to the independent public opinion research company Vilmorus, in September 2024, 46% of the Lithuanian population distrusted the government, whereas only 17.4% expressed trust (Vilmorus, 2024). Eurobarometer data similarly highlight low trust levels in national governance, averaging 50% between 2017 and 2021 (European Commission, 2022b). Additionally, in 2023, the average trust score among individuals aged 16 and older in the EU was 5.8 (on a scale from 0 to 10), whereas in Lithuania, it was only 4.3 (Eurostat, 2024a).

4.4. Employment Status: Active vs Inactive in the Labour Market

The EPSR sets a target employment rate of at least 78% for individuals aged 20–64 by 2030. However, in Lithuania, unemployment significantly correlates with a poverty risk; in 2022, 51% of unemployed individuals fell below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold (Valstybės duomenų agentūra, 2024). Over the ten-year period, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for unemployed individuals remained persistently high, fluctuating between 50.5% and 62.6%, which underscores the structural vulnerability of this group. Figure 1 illustrates the at-risk-of-poverty rate among unemployed persons in the EU from 2014 to 2023, based on Eurostat data. Eligibility for unemployment benefits in Lithuania requires at least 12 months of employment within the preceding 30 months. Benefits are provided for a maximum of nine months, with gradual reductions. In March 2024, the average unemployment benefit stood at EUR 546.2, rising to EUR 596.6 by November 2024 (Social Insurance Fund in Lithuania, 2024). However, the at-risk of poverty threshold in 2023 was EUR 566, indicating that unemployment benefits often remain insufficient for financial security. The EPSR action plan aims to raise the minimum unemployment social insurance benefit from EUR 149.39 in 2021 to at least the minimum consumption needs level by 2030.
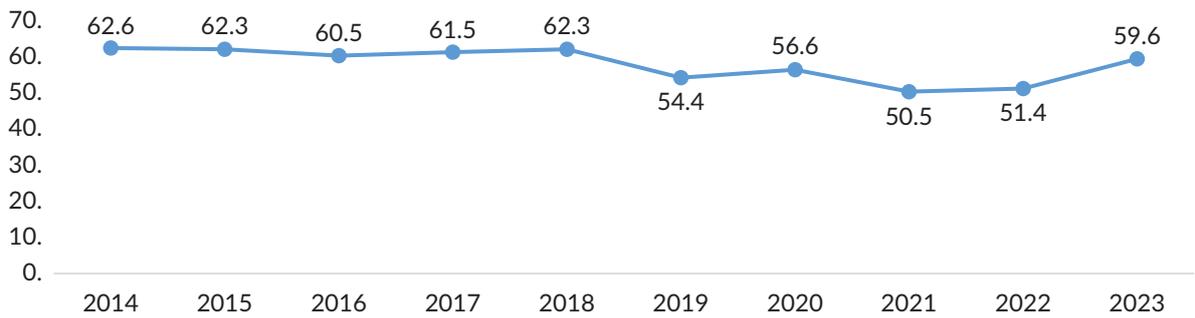
Figure 1. At-risk of poverty rate of unemployed persons in Lithuania (2014–2023).

Following the nine-month unemployment benefit period, individuals may qualify for social assistance if they remain unemployed. Social assistance in Lithuania is calculated based on state-supported income levels, which amounted to EUR 176 as of 1 January 2024. The monthly social assistance benefit for a single resident equals the difference between 1.1 times the state-supported income per person per month and the actual income of that person. For households, this calculation considers 100% for the first member, 90% for the second, and 70% for each additional household member. In 2024, the average monthly social assistance benefit was approximately EUR 152 (SADM, 2024), leaving many recipients at continued risk of poverty.

The following paragraphs examine the multinomial logistic regression model, which utilizes the previously defined variables. The final model is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Pearson's Goodness of Fit test yields a value of 0.827, indicating a good model fit. The likelihood ratio test suggests that the active/inactive variable is statistically insignificant (see Table 1).

Our primary focus is the evaluation of the statement: "Sanctions on Russia due to its aggression against Ukraine have not achieved the declared goals and have primarily harmed the Lithuanian population through price increases" (see Table 2).

Table 1. Likelihood ratio tests: "Sanctions on Russia due to its aggression against Ukraine have not achieved the declared goals and have primarily harmed the Lithuanian population through price increases."

Effect	Age groups	Active/inactive	Subjective life standard evaluation	Education	Income groups
Sig.	0.006	0.334	0.001	0.005	0.008

The findings indicate significant variations in public perception based on education, age, and self-assessed living standards. Using *totally disagree* as the reference category, the results suggest that individuals with secondary or lower education are 2.7 times more likely to *totally agree* with the statement than those who *totally disagree*. The probability of young respondents (18–34) choosing *totally agree* is nearly 60% lower than those selecting *totally disagree*. Similarly, respondents who evaluate their living standards as good or average are 70–80% less likely to *totally agree* than *totally disagree* (see Table 2).

While younger respondents (18–34) and those with a positive subjective living standard assessment are less likely to select *agree* over *totally disagree*, individuals in the lower-income group exhibit a 4.7 times greater likelihood of choosing *agree*. The probability of selecting *totally disagree* is highest among the average-income

Table 2. Parameter estimates for the statement: "Sanctions on Russia due to its aggression against Ukraine have not achieved the declared goals and have primarily harmed the Lithuanian population through price increases."

Group	B	Exp(B)	Sig.
Totally agree			
Age (18–34)	−0.865	0.421	0.009
Subjective living standard evaluation (good)	−1.731	0.177	< 0.001
Subjective living standard evaluation (average)	−1.171	0.310	< 0.001
Education (secondary and lower)	1.029	2.798	< 0.001
Agree			
Age group (18–34)	−0.733	0.481	0.015
Subjective living standard evaluation (good)	−1.362	0.256	< 0.001
Education (secondary and lower)	0.638	1.892	0.013
Income group (lower than at-risk of poverty line)	1.561	4.764	0.001
Income group (average)	1.404	4.072	0.002

group, though slightly lower than that of the lower-income group. Furthermore, respondents with secondary or lower education are 1.8 times more likely to choose *agree* than *totally disagree* (see Table 2).

Assessment of this statement shows education's role as a condition for critical thinking, which is emphasized in the resilience against disinformation literature. Age is another factor revealed in this case; the younger cohort appears more resilient to this type of information, likely due to their higher life satisfaction and, certainly, their experience of being born and raised in a democratic society, or less personal experience and more nootropic perception, as it is defined by Kumlin (2002).

The likelihood ratio test suggests that the active/inactive and age group variables are statistically insignificant (see Table 3).

Table 3. Likelihood ratio tests: "Lithuanian politicians care too much about Ukraine and ignore Lithuanian interests."

Effect	Age groups	Active/inactive	Subjective life standard evaluation	Education	Income groups
Sig.	0.342	0.692	0.001	0.001	0.011

Note: Age groups and activity status are statistically insignificant.

The probability of selecting *totally agree* is significantly lower for individuals with a good (approximately 80%) or average subjective living standard evaluation (approximately 65%). Conversely, secondary or lower education and higher non-university education increase the probability of choosing *totally agree* rather than *totally disagree* by approximately 2.2 times (see Table 4).

Similarly, respondents from the lower-income group are 3.3 times more likely to choose *agree* over *totally disagree*. Individuals with secondary or lower education exhibit a 3.1 times greater likelihood of choosing *agree*, while those with higher non-university education have a 2.1 times higher probability of agreement. Good and

average subjective living standard evaluation reduces the probability of agreement with a statement compared to the reference group (see Table 4).

This statement shows that groups with limited resources, low subjective assessment of living standards, and lower education are the main factors to agree with. Social exclusion and a lack of care from the government show how welfare clients evaluate welfare state efforts in Lithuania. The finding sounds similar to the conclusions of Adger (2000), Harrison (2013), and Estêvão et al. (2017).

Table 4. Parameter estimates for the statement: "Lithuanian politicians care too much about Ukraine and ignore Lithuanian interests."

Group	B	Exp(B)	Sig.
Totally agree			
Subjective living standard evaluation (good)	−1.771	0.170	< 0.001
Subjective living standard evaluation (average)	−1.047	0.351	< 0.001
Education (secondary and lower)	0.790	2.203	< 0.001
Education (higher non-university)	0.832	2.298	< 0.001
Agree			
Subjective living standard evaluation (good)	−1.147	0.318	< 0.001
Subjective living standard evaluation (average)	−0.411	0.663	< 0.001
Income group (lower than at-risk of poverty line)	1.213	3.364	< 0.010
Education (secondary and lower)	1.146	3.145	< 0.001
Education (higher non-university)	0.747	2.111	< 0.001

The final model is <0,001. Pearson's Goodness of Fit is 0,362, which means it fits well.

The likelihood ratio test suggests that all variables are statistically significant (see Table 5).

Table 5. Likelihood ratio tests: "Lithuanian politicians emphasise threats from Russia and the probability of war to instill fear, rather than solving problems related to poverty reduction."

Effect	Age groups	Active/inactive	Subjective life standard evaluation	Education	Income groups
Sig.	0.001	0.035	0.001	0.001	0.012

Note: All our selected independent variables are statistically significant.

Young age (18–34) and good and average subjective living standard evaluations reduce the probability of choice to *totally agree* over *disagree* by 50–60 percent. While secondary and lower education increases the probability (1.8 times), and higher non-university education contributes (2 times) to the choice of *totally agree* instead of *disagree* (see Table 6).

The probability of agreeing with the statement increases up to 3.6 times among the low-income group. The probability that the respondents with secondary and lower education will agree with the statement rather than disagree with it increases by 1.8 times (see Table 6).

Table 6. Parameter estimates for the statement: "Lithuanian politicians emphasise threats from Russia and the probability of war to instill fear, rather than solving problems related to poverty reduction."

Group	B	Exp(B)	Sig.
Totally agree			
Age (18–34)	−0.775	0.461	0.006
Subjective living standard evaluation (good)	−1.700	0.183	< 0.001
Subjective living standard evaluation (average)	−0.958	0.383	< 0.001
Education (secondary and lower)	0.518	1.678	0.025
Education (higher non-university)	0.738	2.092	0.002
Agree			
Age (18–34)	−0.707	0.493	0.003
Subjective living standard evaluation (good)	−1.094	0.493	< 0.001
Education (secondary and lower)	0.610	1.841	0.002
Income (lower than the at-risk of poverty line)	1.303	3.681	0.003

Low redistribution, persistent risk of poverty, and about a fifth of the population having lived at risk of poverty during the last ten years—these are factors influencing the assessment of this statement. Especially then, the statement "Lithuanian politicians emphasise threats from Russia and the probability of war to instill fear rather than solve problems related to poverty reduction" evaluates people who are faced with poverty. This finding aligns with Dagdeviren et al.'s (2016) conclusion that the discourse of resilience must be viewed within the context of the social conditions in which it arises.

The final model is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), which predicts the dependent variable *trust in the government* better than the intercept-only model. The Pearson's Goodness of Fit value is 0.538, confirming a good model fit. Pearson's chi-square test is not statistically significant.

The likelihood ratio test suggests that the education and income group variables are statistically not significant (see Table 7).

Table 7. Likelihood ratio tests: "The Lithuanian government will be able to care for all its citizens" (during security crises and extreme situations).

Effect	Age groups	Active/inactive	Subjective life standard evaluation	Education	Income groups
Sig.	0.004	0.017	0.001	0.320	0.345

Note: Education and income are statistically insignificant, while age, activity status (active/inactive), and subjective life standard evaluation are significant variables.

The probability of disagreement is 1.9 times higher among young respondents (18–34) compared to those who *totally agree*. In contrast, active individuals are 30% less likely to choose *disagree*, while those with good and average subjective living standards are more likely to disagree with the statement (see Table 8).

Our measurement of trust in the government confirms the opinion of the younger cohort and, again, the significance of the subjective material situation on trust. The finding confirms Harrison's 2013 conclusion that feelings of subjective insecurity are also important for resilience.

Table 8. Parameter estimates for the statement: "The Lithuanian government will be able to care for all its citizens" (during security crises and extreme situations).

Group	B	Exp(B)	Sig.
Disagree			
Age group 18–34	0.677	1.967	0.001
Active population	−0.403	0.668	0.016
Subjective evaluation of living standard (good)	0.706	2.026	< 0.001
Subjective evaluation of living standard (average)	0.781	2.184	< 0.001

5. Conclusions

This study underscores the intricate interplay between resilience to disinformation and social vulnerabilities experienced by socially vulnerable groups in Lithuania. Socially vulnerable populations, particularly those with lower socioeconomic status and limited educational attainment, exhibit lower levels of resilience to disinformation. Additionally, those dissatisfied with their living standards tend to exhibit lower trust in the government. In contrast, younger individuals and those with higher subjective evaluations of their living standards show more excellent resistance to disinformation and highlight the importance of economic security and personal well-being, which is critical in fostering trust and resilience. Our findings confirm the sociological understanding of resilience, which looks at it as a process from the lens of social structural conditions (Batty & Cole, 2010; Calado et al., 2020; Dagdeviren et al., 2016; Donoghue, 2022; Estêvão et al., 2017). Kumlin's (2007) conclusion is that welfare state dissatisfaction correlates with general political distrust. As well as Shu et al.'s (2020) concept of disinformation, the content of disinformation, in many cases, is highly sensationalized, seeking to affect the reader. In our research, disinformation focuses on economic issues and government responsibility, which are the outcomes of welfare state performance and can be negatively evaluated by welfare state clients.

Lithuanian welfare state efforts to protect against poverty and reduce economic insecurity are still insufficient. Our research revealed that lower-income groups and those at risk of poverty are disproportionately affected by disinformation, as economic hardships often amplify disappointment, distrust, and openness to alternative and often false narratives. Addressing economic disparities through enhanced social security measures and poverty alleviation policies is essential to strengthening societal resilience to disinformation (Bobzien, 2023).

Education is a significant factor in shaping resilience to disinformation (Korauš et al., 2023; Puebla-Martínez et al., 2021). Individuals with secondary or lower education are notably more likely to accept disinformation narratives, revealing a pressing need for targeted interventions in education. Enhancing critical thinking and media literacy across all education levels could significantly bolster the public's ability to assess information and reduce susceptibility to manipulation critically.

The role of the welfare state is central to mitigating economic and lower education vulnerabilities. While Lithuania has made progress in aligning its policies with the EPSR, persistent challenges such as high poverty and income inequality undermine its capacity to foster resilience. Expanding welfare provisions and addressing gaps in social protection are essential steps toward reducing societal vulnerabilities, building trust in governmental institutions, and enhancing resilience against disinformation.

This research also emphasizes the critical need for a holistic approach to combating disinformation in Lithuania. Effective strategies must address the intersection of economic, educational, and social vulnerabilities, focusing on fostering trust in institutions. Policymakers should prioritize inclusive welfare policies, invest in educational programs that promote media literacy, and implement public awareness campaigns to mitigate the spread of disinformation. By addressing these challenges comprehensively, Lithuania can enhance its societal resilience and safeguard its democratic values against external threats.

6. Limitations of Research

We used to measure resilience against the disinformation statements reflecting the main narratives of Russian disinformation used during the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The assessment of these statements can have multiple causes, including ideological beliefs, path dependency, distrust of the government in the context, etc. We did not reveal various factors and focused mainly on welfare and subjective feelings about it in this context. Therefore, different times and choices of measurement of resilience against disinformation can impact findings. As Bayer et al. (2019) stated, measuring disinformation's impact and attributing causality with certainty under non-laboratory circumstances is nearly impossible.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Homeless People: The Role of Discrimination and Family Rejection

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to compare the causal factors in the loss of housing between the LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ populations. One hundred and twelve questionnaires were collected from LGBTQ people and 93 cases from the non-LGBTQ population in the region of Madrid, Spain. Using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), the variable of sexual orientation and gender identity predicted significant differences in the causal factors related to the loss of housing. The findings refer to maintaining housing ($p < .005$), family problems and/or break up of the couple ($p < .010$), change of place of residence ($p < 0.010$), and expulsion from the home directly related to gender orientation and identity ($p < .005$ and $p < 0.01$). Except for expulsion from the home due to discrimination in the LGBTQ group, gender orientation and identity do not generate, but do intensify, the situation of losing housing.

Keywords

gender identity; homelessness; LGBTQ; sexual orientation

1. Introduction

Among the homeless, minorities according to orientation and gender identity are more frequently exposed to greater oppression and violence (Shelton & Bond, 2017). Some differential features of this minority compared to other homeless people are the greater health risks, the greater degree of difficulty in accessing assistance services, the higher levels of discrimination, and the greater adversity in their life stories (Dias et al., 2025; Gattis, 2013; Rew et al., 2005). Regarding diversity according to gender orientation and identity, some studies identify the most vulnerable populations as those with the highest visibility and the lowest capacity to comply with gender standards (Begun & Kattari, 2016; Rew et al., 2005).

Several studies have highlighted the lack of quantification and the overrepresentation of this minority in research on homelessness (Begun & Kattari, 2016; Gattis, 2009; Hughes, 2009; Nakamura et al., 2017; Shelton & Bond, 2017). Although there is a lack of data on the prevalence of this population, studies indicate that the LGBTQ group among the youth constitutes an overrepresented quantity, standing at between 20% and 40% in the United States (Gattis, 2013; Shelton, 2015). Studies focusing on young people show greater overrepresentation and greater adversity in their life trajectories. The coincidence between the beginning of the construction of gender identity at an early age and the occurrence of expulsion and discrimination has been highlighted (Ecker, 2016; Gattis, 2009, 2013; Shelton & Bond, 2017). Ecker (2016) points out that the data on abuse is three times higher compared to the heterosexual population. On the contrary, the needs of the elderly population have been linked to the greater severity of health problems and discrimination in relation to age.

Following the proposal of the European Federation of National Organizations Working With the Homeless (FEANTSA), studies of homeless people distinguish three aspects of interest: entry or causes related to the housing loss and habitual residence, duration or length of time spent without housing, and exit or alternatives to their current situation (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Edgar et al., 2007). This study focuses on the entry phase. This section is relevant because it serves to investigate relevant aspects linked to the prevention and adaptation of intervention policies aimed at homeless people in the early stages.

Based on the literature review, four types of causes that generate the loss of main housing can be differentiated: structural and discrimination reasons, socio-relational reasons, institutional causes, and personal problems. Within Europe, Spain is the country with the second highest unemployment rate (15.3%), and the indicator "at risk of poverty and/or exclusion" (AROPE) related to poverty and social exclusion is higher than the European average, at 26.6% (Eurostat, 2020a, 2020b). Furthermore, Spain has higher rates of home ownership (77.1%), exceeding the EU-19 average (66.1%). Similarly, among the population living in rented accommodation, 42.1% have difficulties in meeting housing costs, while in the EA-19 this figure stands at 24.9% (Eurostat, 2020a).

The loss of housing due to sexual orientation and gender identity has been explained by virtue of its multiple and intersectional nature. Explanations motivated by sexual orientation and gender identity interact with other explanations that address educational level or age (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014). The effect that gender orientation and identity have on explaining discrimination and family conflicts is highlighted (Fraser et al., 2019; Rosario et al., 2012). The interaction with other factors, such as ethnicity, is also highlighted. Specifically, there is an interrelationship between the multiple systems of oppression, explained by issues that are connected to racism, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia.

Structural problems encompass various reasons associated with a lack of income and employment problems. Unemployment or lack of qualifications can lead to housing instability and homelessness (Edgar et al., 2007).

Institutional problems refer to the lack of housing after leaving institutions (prisons, juvenile centers, women´s centers, or institutions linked to health care). Other aspects include the lack of suitable housing on offer to individuals, the lack of available resources, and the lack of coordination between the different services responsible for providing accommodation (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Edgar et al., 2007). Mental health and addiction problems, as well as long-term illnesses or disability, act as triggers, along with

the economic and social resources available to individuals and the support received from the social protection system. A higher risk of anxiety and depression (Misedah-Robinson et al., 2024) has been identified, as well as in substance use and addiction, in minorities based on gender orientation and identity (Fraser et al., 2019). The greatest risks to physical and mental health are caused by sexual practices and the greater difficulty in accessing healthcare resources (Rew et al., 2005). Furthermore, housing resources are not adapted for LGBT people (Rew et al., 2005). In addition to these barriers, there are problems of discrimination motivated by disapproval of their behavior (Gattis, 2013).

Problems of discrimination in society include different areas, such as employment, medical care, or perception in the community. In relation to housing loss, problems of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity have been related to family rejection. In this respect, the family is the area in which these people experience the highest levels of discrimination and rejection. Numerous studies highlight childhood abuse and high levels of stigma, based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Fraser et al., 2019; Shelton & Bond, 2017).

Socio-relational problems help explain the loss of housing due to the breakdown of family relationships and social isolation. These cases include aspects such as abuse from parents or partners, separations, problems of gender violence, parental abandonment, or the death of parents (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Edgar et al., 2007). Family breakdown and discrimination within the family have been linked to the disclosure of gender identity (Fraser et al., 2019). Some studies have pointed to the effects of discrimination and violence experienced within the family of belonging (Shelton & Bond, 2017). In addition, other studies have pointed to a higher probability of being expelled from the home for these reasons (Rew et al., 2005). In other examples, forced abandonment of the home leads to greater instability in housing and greater exposure to problems of physical and sexual abuse.

Given that there may be differences between different countries and sociocultural environments, the objective of our study has been to determine whether the sexual orientation and gender identity of homeless people living in the region of Madrid, Spain, determine differences in the different types of causal factors that contribute to homelessness: structural factors, health and lifestyle, relational factors, and discrimination. Studying these aspects may be useful for proposing specific intervention measures adapted to this population.

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Sample

The study population was the homeless population of the region of Madrid, Spain. First, a multi-stage quota sampling was chosen for the region of Madrid. Most of the previous representative studies on homeless people have been carried out in the region of Madrid, Barcelona, or the Basque Country, and are assumed to be representative of the case of Spain (Cabrera Cabrera & Rubio Martín, 2009; Roca et al., 2019; Sales i Campo, 2016; SIIS, 2019). The data provided by the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) indicate that the sociodemographic characteristics of the study population are very similar in the Community of Madrid and in Spain as a whole (INE, 2005, 2012). A stratified sample was then considered, proportional to the number of places by the type of housing in which the people had spent the previous night. Given that

some accommodation only admitted LGBTQ people, the result was a higher number of respondents from this group. Despite this, the sample size was sufficient to establish the comparison according to sexual orientation and identity. This decision is justified by the underrepresentation of this population in sources of information. In addition, it is necessary to point out that the study was planned to have enough cases to carry out a statistical analysis of the LGBTQ collective, which presents greater difficulty in obtaining information.

All subjects were over 18 years of age. In addition, the ETHOS definition (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Edgar et al., 2007) has been used to address the issue of homelessness: (a) living in a public space (homeless); (b) sleeping in a shelter and/or being forced to spend the rest of the day in a public space; (c) staying in service centers or shelters (hostels for homeless people that allow different models of stay); (d) living in women's shelters; (e) living in temporary housing reserved for immigrants; and (f) living in supported housing offered by institutions that do not require a lease.

Table 1 describes the characteristics of the research sample. For the elaboration of the conglomerates, the sample was stratified by place of housing. The number of homeless people estimated by the INE (2018) in the region of Madrid was taken as a reference. Taking as a reference the figure of 3532—the latest official figure at the time of the study design—the sampling error was calculated for the finite population (less than 100,000 people).

Table 1. Description of the sample.

Universe	Homeless people in the region of Madrid
Geographical scope	Spain
Information gathering procedure	Structured face-to-face survey
Sampling	Quota sampling
Sample size	205 valid surveys; 112 LGBTQ and 93 non-LGBTQ
Level of confidence	95% K = 1.96; p = q = 0.5
Sampling error	Total: 6.6% assuming it was a probability sample LGBTQ = 9% Non-LTBI = 9%
Gathering period	September 2018, November 2018
Analysis software	SPSS version 23

2.2. Data Collection

Prior to the collection of the information, a pretest evaluation was carried out to make improvements to the design and the order of the questionnaire. The questionnaires were administered in sessions previously arranged in the housing facilities and the social intervention programs. These sessions were carried out under the coordination of a member of the research team. In these sessions, the objectives of the study were presented, along with instructions on how to fill in the questionnaire and answer any questions from the respondents. The self-administered questionnaires also included information about the study, instructions on how to fill them in, the voluntary nature of participation, and the anonymity of the responses.

Participants gave their consent for the data to be included in the analysis. Given the anonymous nature of the responses, and following Spanish data protection legislation, approval by an external committee was not necessary. In addition, the interviews with people in public spaces were conducted in person by the research team. These subjects were recruited in collaboration with volunteer and social intervention programs.

2.3. Measurements

An ad hoc questionnaire was used (Giménez-Rodríguez et al., 2019) based on the questionnaire proposed by Marpsat and Firdion (2000) for the study on homelessness carried out by the National Institute of Statistics (INSEE) in France. This is a pioneering study on homelessness, as it covers the entire national population. These questions about the causes of homelessness have been used in other national and international studies related to the homeless and their experiences of losing their homes (INE, 2012; SIIS, 2019).

The sociodemographic and classification variables include sex, sexual orientation, age, last place of residence prior to losing the home and highest level of education attained. By recoding the first two variables, the two comparison groups are constructed: (a) homeless LGBTQ population and (b) non-LGBTQ homeless population. The questions on sexual orientation are not uniform (Ecker, 2016). In our case, we followed the procedure of Gattis (2013), which provides most response options regarding gender identity. Likewise, an open response category was provided to collect all possible options. Table 2 shows the recodings made.

Table 2. Recoding of the independent variables.

Variable	Recoded levels
Gender (1)	LGBTQ homeless
Sexual orientation (2)	Not LGBTQ homeless
Age (3)	Under 34 years old
	34–54 years old
	Over 54 years old
Level of education (4)	Primary and no education
	First and second stage secondary
	Higher education
Last place of residence (5)	My own home
	Other

Explanation	
1	Q.37: Please indicate the category with which you most identify: man; woman; transgender man; transgender woman; intersexual
2	Q.38: Could you indicate what you consider to be your sexual orientation?
	R: heterosexual; gay; lesbian; bisexual; pansexual
3	Q.1: Age (numerical variable)
4	Q.11: What is the highest level of education you have completed?
	R: no studies; primary; secondary stage 1; secondary stage 2; higher education (vocational training, university degree, or postgraduate degree)
5	Q.8: Before you became homeless, could you tell me which of the following places you lived in?
	R: In my own home; with relatives; with friends; in a boarding house, hostel, or similar; in a shared room or flat; in prison; in the hospital; in a children's home; as a refugee; other

The variables relating to the loss of housing can be considered in at least three types of explanation: structural, health, and socio-relational. The response categories are dichotomous (yes/no). In the analysis of variance carried out, some questions were eliminated (see Section 3) due to the low response rate: gambling, psychosocial health problems, and leaving an institution.

2.4. Data Analysis

A hypothesis contrast was carried out using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to verify the normal distribution of the dependent and independent variables in the sample. The normal distribution of the continuous variables analyzed was rejected ($p < 0.005$), so non-parametric tests for two groups, such as the Mann-Whitney U test, were used. In addition, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to evaluate differences in variables with more than two items (age and level of education).

Subsequently, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was applied, as this aims to identify the main effects and interaction effects between multiple independent variables and is useful for knowing when some groups differ from others. MANOVA analysis is designed with multiple dependent variables (outcomes) operating simultaneously and is therefore considered a multivariate test (Field, 2016). A 4-factor MANOVA was used, in which four variables were evaluated for each of the causes of housing loss (Figure 1).

Independent variables	Dependent variables
LGBTQ Age Educational level Last accommodation	**Structural problems** 1. Labor problems 2. Financial problems 3. House maintenance **Health and lifestyle** 4. Use of alcohol and other drugs 5. Free will 6. Health 7. Psychosocial health 8. Game **Relational problems and discrimination** 9. Family problems and/or break-up of a relationship 10. Change of place of residence 11. Leaving an institution and lack of family support network 12. Problems in the support networks 13. Expulsion from the home due to LGBTQ discrimination

Figure 1. Causal analysis model.

Different authors have differentiated between the various causes that lead to the loss of housing and the problems derived from the period without accommodation (Fraser et al., 2019). The FEANTSA scheme was followed to specify the different trajectories that lead to the loss of housing (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Edgar et al., 2007). In this respect, three types of problems are differentiated: structural, health and lifestyle, and relational and discrimination problems.

A total of 60 analyses were carried out, 10 analyses per six different classifications in terms of independent variables. The results presented include those in which the most significant evidence was obtained. The calculations were made for three levels of significance: 99.9%, 95%, and 90%. Previously, χ^2 and Fisher's exact tests were applied to check for significant differences between variables.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Comparison Between Study Groups

Table 3 presents the distribution of the socio-demographic variables that have been considered independent in the study population. The variables of gender, sexual orientation, and last place of residence show significant differences between the two groups. In relation to the gender variable, the LGBTQ population

Table 3. Demographic characteristics according to sexual orientation and identity variables.

	LGBTQ		Non LGBTQ		Coef.	Sig.	Chi-Square	Df	p-value
	N	%	N	%					
Gender type									
Male	65	58	72	77.4	.367	.000	31.870	3	0.000
Female	15	13.4	21	22.6					
Transgender male	9	8	0	0					
Transgender female	20	17.9	0	0					
Intersexual	3	2.7	0	0					
Sexual orientation									
Heterosexual	27	24.15	93	100	.609	.000	120.575	4	0.000
Gay	49	43.8	0	0					
Lesbian	11	9.8	0	0					
Bisexual	22	19.6	0	0					
Pansexual	3	2.7	0	0					
Age									
Under 34 years old	41	36.6	25	26.9	.115	.255	2.730	2	0.255
34 to 54 years old	46	41.1	40	43					
55 and over	25	22.3	28	30.1					
Level of education									
Primary and no education	26	23.2	33	35.5	.134	.155	3.732	4	0.155
Secondary (first and second stages)	56	50	39	41.9					
Higher	30	36.8	21	22.6					
Last place of residence									
My own home	30	30.4	40	43	.131	.060	3.527	1	0.042
Others	78	69.6	53	57					

group was distributed as follows: men (58%), transgender women (17.9%), women (13.4%), transgender male (8%), and intersex (2.7%). In the non-LGBTQ group, there is a large majority of men (77.6%) compared to women (22.4%), with a similar pattern to the homeless population in the national survey (INE, 2012), with 77.4% men and 22.6% women. The variable *sexual orientation* in the LGBTQ group is distributed between gay (43.8%), heterosexual (24.15%), bisexual (19.6%), lesbian (9.8%), and pansexual (2.7%).

Differences were observed with respect to the last place of residence, with 69.6% of LGBTQ subjects coming from residential situations other than their own home (family home, rooms or flats, different types of institutions, and others). This issue in the LGBTI group has been confirmed in the literature reviewed (Fraser et al., 2019; Rosario et al., 2012; Shelton, 2015; Shelton & Bond, 2017). No statistically significant differences were found in relation to age groups ($p = 0.255$) and educational level ($p = 0.155$).

Table 4 shows the distribution of structural, health and lifestyle, and relational variables in the LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ groups. Significant differences were only obtained for the variable *expulsion from the household due to sexual orientation*. 32.1% of the LGBTQ homeless group identified with this issue.

To calculate the effect size, G Power 3.1., a software belonging to the University of Düsseldorf, was used with values above 0.80, based on recommendations from other social science studies (Cohen, 1998; Faul et al., 2007). Differences between groups and their relationship to effect size were as follows: non-LGBTQ homeless ($n = 93$) and LGBTQ homeless ($n = 112$) samples, with an effect size of .921.

Table 4. Causes of loss of housing, according to sexual orientation and identity.

	LGBTQ		Non LGBTQ			
	N	Average %	N	Average %	Mann-Whitney U	Sig.
Labor (1)	55	49.1	52	55.9	4853.5	.333
Economic (2)	58	51.8	55	59.1	4825	.239
Residential (3)	14	12.5	9	9.7	5061	.525
Alcohol and other drug use (4)	15	13.4	14	13	5177	.903
Free will (5)	3	2.7	5	5.4	5067.5	.322
Health (6)	11	9.8	11	11.8	5103	.645
Psychosocial (7)	7	6.3	10	10.8	4973	.246
Gambling (8)	2	1.8	1	1.1	5171	.674
Break-up of a relationship (9)	36	32.1	30.1	28	5101	.755
Change of residence (10)	40	35.7	30	32.3	5028	.604
Leaving an institution (11)	37	2.7	2	2.2	5180	.808
Support networks (12)	1	0.9	0	0	5161.5	.362
Expulsion from the home for reasons of sexual orientation and sexual identity (13)	36	32.1	0	0	3590	.000

Table 4. (Cont.) Causes of loss of housing, according to sexual orientation and identity.

Explanation	
1	Work-related problems: job loss, change in working conditions
2	Financial problems: lack of money, denial of financial aid, savings running out.
3	Problems related to maintaining the previous home: eviction, termination of the rental contract, rent increase, etc.
4	Problems with alcohol and/or other drug use: they threw him out of the house, he spent all his money, etc.
5	Own volition: because he/she decided to, free choice of lifestyle.
6	Health problems: chronic illnesses, disability, hospitalization.
7	Psychosocial health problems: loss of confidence, self-esteem.
8	Gambling-related problems: compulsive gambling, spending the family money, being thrown out of the house for this reason.
9	Family problems and/or break-up of a relationship: family violence, domestic abuse, separation from a partner, death of family members, family breakdown.
10	Change of place of residence. Problems related to the lack of "papers" and/or the need to start from scratch after having emigrated to another country.
11	Leaving an institution and the non-existence or absence of a family network: prison, juvenile center.
12	Problems with foster care: sanctions for misconduct, rules considered too strict, schedules, pets, etc.
13	Expulsion from the home directly linked to reasons of discrimination against LGBTQ

The variable *expulsion from the household in relation to gender orientation and gender identity* did not meet the homoscedasticity criterion ($p < .01$). The result of the box test for the rest of the variables ($p < .005$) allowed us to accept the test of equality of variances-covariances. Thus, the variability between the two groups did not differ.

3.2. MANOVA

A 2 (LGBTQ) X 3 (age) X 3 (educational level) X 2 (last place of residence) analysis was carried out to verify the main effects of these factors and the interaction effects for the ten causes of housing loss. Three blocks have been differentiated: structural, health and lifestyles, and relational and discrimination. For reasons of space, only those results that are statistically significant are presented. Regarding interaction effects, only those in which the LGBTQ variable acts together with other demographic or classification variables have been discussed. Also, their importance has been interpreted in terms of the value of the Eta Square.

3.2.1. Structural Causes

Table 5 shows the influence of structural problems on housing loss. Age acted as the main effect in the variables of housing maintenance (F = 3.264; $p < .05$) and economic problems (F = 2.343; $p < .10$), with a small effect size (Eta-Squared standing at 4.5% and 3.6%, respectively).

The interaction between the variables of educational level X last place of residence X LGBTQ X Age was significant in explaining the loss of housing due to economic problems (F = 4.012; $p < .05$), with an Eta-Squared of 4.5%. In addition, the interaction between LGBTQ X Age had a significant effect in explaining housing

maintenance problems. This confirms the findings of other studies (Fraser et al., 2019; Gattis, 2013; Rosario et al., 2012; Shelton & Bond, 2017). Those problems were related to the loss of housing due to eviction, the end of the rental contract, or an increase in the price of rent (F = 3.197; $p < .05$), with a small effect size (Eta Squared = 3.6%). Finally, the interaction between the variables of educational level X last place of residence X LGBTQ X Age was significant in explaining the loss of housing for work-related reasons (F = 2.493; $p < .10$), with an Eta-Squared of 2.9% (small effect size).

On the one hand, the loss of housing for work-related reasons was associated with the age group over 54 years old (66%), one's own home as the last place of residence prior to the loss of housing (63.5%), non-LGBTQ gender orientation and identity (55.9%) and secondary levels of first and second stage (55.8%). On the other hand, the loss of housing for economic reasons was related to the age group over 54 years (66%), non-LGBTQ gender orientation and identity (59.1%), the recoded item in which the rest of the types of housing are grouped (56.5%) and primary education and no education (55.9%). Finally, the loss of housing caused by difficulties in maintaining housing affected the variables of sexual orientation, identity, and age. The results analyzed affected the population under 33 years of age (12.1%) and the LGBTQ group (12.5%).

Other studies have investigated the effects of age concerning the structural causes that lead to the loss of housing. On the one hand, in the Spanish context, evidence has been found of the tendency of older people to lose their housing for economic and employment reasons (INE, 2012). On the other hand, there is also evidence of a higher frequency of younger people with cases linked to housing maintenance problems (Mayock & Parker, 2020; Mitsdarffer et al., 2023). This is mainly due to a lack of family support (Collins, 2000). Finally, no evidence has been found in the literature regarding the greater difficulty for the non-LGBTQ population regarding losing housing for work and economic reasons. However, a greater difficulty for the LGBTQ population and its effect on the younger age cohorts regarding losing housing for reasons of stability has been detected (Gattis, 2013).

Table 5. Structural problems as causes of housing loss.

	Wilks' lambda	Labor		Economic issues		Housing maintenance	
		F (sign)	Eta-Squared	F (sign)	Eta-Squared	F (sign)	Eta-Squared
Main effects							
Age	1.898		—	2.343 (.099)	2.6%	3.264 (.040)	3.7%
Interactions							
Last place of residence X age	1.637	3.637 (.028)	4.1%		—	4.291 (.015)	4.8%
Level of education X last place of residence X LGBTQ X Age	1.476	2.493 (.085)	2.9%	4.012 (.019)	4.5%		—
Level of education x Residence	1.583		—		—	3.522 (.031)	4%
LGBTQ X Age	1.691		—		—	3.197 (.004)	3.6%

3.2.2. Health and Lifestyles

Table 6 shows health problems and lifestyle issues as causes of homelessness. Age acted as the main effect on the variable of alcohol and other drug use (F = 3,000; $p < .10$), with a small Eta-Squared value of 3.4%, indicating that age does not account for a large variation in substance use. Age was the only variable that was marginally significant.

The four-variable interaction (educational level X last place of residence X LGBTQ X age) is statistically significant ($p = 0.017$) for alcohol and/or other drugs, with a moderate effect size of 6.8%. This could mean that the relationship between age and alcohol/drug consumption varies depending on education level, LGBTQ status, and housing conditions, among other factors.

The interaction between education level and housing is statistically significant ($p = 0.036$) for will to act, with a small effect size of 3.8%. While the percentage of variance explained is relatively small, it indicates that willingness or motivation to act depends on the combination of education level and housing.

Individuals with primary education or no studies have the highest alcohol consumption (25.48%). Alcohol consumption significantly decreases among those with secondary education (8.40%). There is a slight increase in alcohol consumption for the next category (9.80%). These data indicate there is a negative correlation between education level and alcohol consumption. As education level increases, alcohol consumption generally decreases, though there is a minor uptick at the highest level. This suggests that higher education may be linked to lower alcohol use, possibly due to greater awareness of health risks.

Individuals living in their own home have a lower alcohol consumption rate (12.30%) compared to those in other types of housing (14.50%). People who own their homes may have a more stable lifestyle, which could contribute to lower alcohol consumption. In contrast, those in other housing situations might face different socioeconomic or environmental factors that influence alcohol use.

Table 6. Health problems and lifestyle issues as causes of homelessness.

	Wilks' lambda	Alcohol and/or other drugs		Will to act		Health status		Psychosocial Health	
						F (sign)	Eta-Squared	F (sign)	Eta-Squared
Main effects									
Age	1.898	3.000 (.052)	3.4%	—	—	—		—	
Interactions									
Level of education X last place of residence X LGBTQ X age	1.612	3.100 (.017)	6.8%	—		—		—	
Level of education X residence	1.583		—	3.378 (.036)	3.8%	—		—	

Non-LGBTQ individuals have a higher alcohol consumption rate (14%) compared to LGBTQ individuals (13.40%). Nevertheless, the difference is relatively small, but it suggests that alcohol consumption does not vary significantly based on LGBTQ identity. However, further statistical tests would be necessary to determine if this difference is statistically significant.

The results of the analyses did not confirm the findings of other studies reporting an increased risk of homelessness among sexual minorities, consistent with health problems, psychosocial health, or increased substance and alcohol abuse (Ecker, 2016; Gattis, 2013). However, a higher risk of substance use has been detected in older people with lower educational levels, which is consistent with the literature (Fajardo-Bullón et al., 2019; Padgett et al., 2006).

3.2.3. Relational Problems and Discrimination

Table 7 shows relationship problems and discrimination as causes of becoming homeless. Regarding the main effects, age (F = 3.906; p = .021) indicates a statistically significant effect, with a small effect size (Eta-Squared = 4.4%). In relation to discrimination based on sexual orientation and identity, age (F = 4.735; p = .009) explains a small portion of the variation (small effect size: Eta-Squared = 5.3%), whereas LGBTQ (F = 24.752; p = .000) shows a highly significant effect, with a moderate effect size (Eta-Squared = 12.8%). Hence, being part of the LGBTQ community significantly influences experiences of discrimination.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is higher among LGBTQ people (32.1%) compared to the non-LGBTQ population (0%). Likewise, this reason is more frequent in the cohorts under 33 years of age (25.8%), with a decrease in the 34–54 year-old cohort (14.8%), and a reduction of up to 20.1 points in the 55 years and over cohort (5.7%).

Problems arising from having to maintain residence affect LGBTQ people to a greater extent (35.7%) than non-LGBTQ people (32.3%). In turn, a change of residence affects more those under 33 years of age (45.5%). It decreases by 10.6 points for those aged 34 to 54 (34.9%), and by 16.9 points for those over 54 (18%).

Finally, relationship breakdown and family problems are explained to a greater extent by gender orientation and identity, more frequently in the LGBTQ population (32.10%), and are also more prevalent in those under 33 years of age (34.8%). Prevalence is lower in the 34–54 age group (27.9%) and in those over 54 years of age (32.10%).

The results highlight the importance of discrimination based on gender orientation and identity as a causal factor in the loss of housing (Shelton & Bond, 2017), especially among young people. These problems of discrimination are related to issues of family conflict and problems. The constant change of place of residence confirms the findings of Ecker (2016) regarding problems of housing instability. These problems are identified in the literature both with migratory processes and with young people who experienced sudden departures from home because of their gender orientation and identity. Finally, the results referring to family conflicts confirm the research carried out by other authors (Ecker, 2016; Gattis, 2009; Shelton & Bond, 2017). In these studies, young people who belong to sexual minorities are more exposed to family conflicts with their family of origin.

Table 7. Relationship problems and discrimination as causes of becoming homeless.

	Wilks' lambda	Residence		Family problems and/or relationship breakdown		Discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity	
		F (sign)	Eta-Squared	F (sign)	Eta-Squared	F (sign)	Eta-Squared
Main effects							
Age	1.898	3.906 (.021)	4.4%	—		4.735 (.009)	5.3%
LGBTQ	2.877	—		—		24.752 (.000)	12.8%
Interactions							
Level of education X last place of residence	1.583	—		3.120 (.046)	3%	—	
LGBTQ X Age	1.691	2.773 (.065)	3%	2.309 (.088)	4%	4.204 (.016)	4%
Last place of residence x age	1.637	—		2.945 (.055)	3%	—	

3.3. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this research point to the differences experienced in the loss of housing depending on sexual orientation and identity. The findings highlight the importance of relational problems, discrimination, and housing stability, which highlight the specific needs of sexual minorities among the homeless population.

To respond to relational problems, it has been proposed to focus on specific aspects such as family communication, counselling, or the evaluation of family dynamics (Gattis, 2013). In our research, relational conflicts in younger people are more frequent, which is consistent with other previous studies, which propose the development of family therapies with young people who are expelled from their homes or the development of negotiation skills for family members (Gattis, 2013).

Discrimination has been linked to problems of homophobia and the need to develop appropriate professional practice (Côté et al., 2023; Gattis, 2009). The main recommendations focus on training professionals to develop adapted care in the early stages. These findings are more important given the lack of awareness in the professional environment of the specific needs of this population (Begun & Kattari, 2016; Ormiston, 2022). Training in counseling and sexual identity is part of the professional skills training in the degree of Social Work.

There are other studies that have pointed out relational problems among the young population. Shelton and Bond (2017) delve into the development of interventions aimed at this segment of the population with respect to gender affirmation. These interventions aim to respond to problems of discrimination within the family and gender affirmation before the family and caregivers. In addition, the young population presents greater instability in housing. Following Shelton and Bond (2017), these problems are caused by family rejection, among other reasons. Furthermore, difficulties in terms of stability have been detected as a reflection of problems of abuse and discrimination (Rew et al., 2005).

The findings obtained suggest further investigation into different areas of study. In relation to conflicts and relationship problems, findings in other research point to the worst levels of communication in sexual minorities both with family and with partners (Gattis, 2013).

Further research is needed into the internal differences in sexual orientation and gender identity minorities. In this regard, the literature indicates that there are subgroups that experience a higher risk of discrimination than others, motivated by greater disapproval (Begun & Kattari, 2016; Gattis, 2013). With the intention of continuing to delve deeper into theories of discrimination and the impact of migration, it is necessary to incorporate other variables related to place of birth (mainly country or geopolitical group). Finally, other studies point to the importance of going deeper, through the development of specific scales, into those areas in which problems of stigma and discrimination are experienced (Kidd, 2007; Shelton, 2015).

3.4. Strengths and Limitations

The findings reflect the importance of the variable sexual orientation and gender identity in understanding the differences in the reasons that lead to the loss of housing. In addition, they serve to justify specific measures of social intervention. This study also included a good sample size and good fieldwork.

Gender assignment in the transgender population is an aspect that appears in other studies (Gattis, 2009). Assignment by observation (dress, gestures, physical appearance, or language) is often limited and misleading, as it ignores the complexity and life of these people (Ansara, 2010; Ecker, 2016). To address this issue, neutral and respectful language was used in the subjective assignment of gender identity (Ansara, 2010). Only in those cases of manifest transsexuality in the interview and the assignment to the binary gender (man and woman) was it decided to consider it within LGBTQ orientation and identity.

One limitation of this study is that a cross-sectional design was used to study the loss of housing. A longitudinal design would have made it possible to compare those who remain without housing and those who managed to get out of this situation. Another limitation is the use of retrospective questions and the difficulty of specifying the order and importance of the causes that lead to the loss of housing (Nakamura et al., 2017; Rosario et al., 2012). In addition, to delve deeper into these aspects, a total of 10 in-depth interviews were conducted that were not detailed in this research, considering sexual orientation and gender identity, origin, place for accommodation, or reasons that lead to the loss of housing.

It would have been interesting to analyze the distribution of the dependent variables according to each collected category of sexual orientation and gender identity separately, but there were some categories with such a small number of individuals that it would have made multivariate analysis difficult. Therefore, we opted to recode into a single variable with LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ categories. This can be further studied with larger population samples.

It is necessary to delve deeper into sexual behaviors and the demands for accommodation that are not met when housing is lost. On the one hand, specific trajectories have been detected referring to "survival sexual practices" in the early stages (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2009; Rosario et al., 2012). On the other hand, different authors point out the importance of access to safe and adequate accommodation as an aspect that enhances autonomy and security (Begun & Kattari, 2016; Gattis, 2009).

4. Conclusion

The findings of our study confirm the differentiation presented by the LGBTQ population concerning the structural, socio-relational, and discrimination aspects that condition homelessness. The first cause of loss of housing considered by LGBTQ people is expulsion from the home because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Unlike other studies, the existing differences in relation to health and lifestyles have not been confirmed. Finally, the analyses carried out also point to some findings not detected in the literature, mainly the lesser influence that sexual orientation and gender identity have on labor and economic problems.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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ARTICLE

Governing the Digital Transition: The Moderating Effect of Unemployment Benefits on Technology-Induced Employment Outcomes

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Abstract

The digital transition shapes work in numerous ways. For instance, by affecting employment structures. To ensure that the digital transition results in better employment opportunities in terms of socio-economic status, labour markets have to be guided appropriately. The European Pillar of Social Rights can be the political framework to foster access to employment and tackle inequalities that result from the digital transition. Current research primarily examines scenarios of occupational upgrading and employment polarisation. In the empirical literature, there is no consensus on which of these developments prevail. Findings vary between countries and across different study periods. Accordingly, this article provides a theoretical explanation for the conditions under which occupational upgrading and employment polarisation become more likely. Further, this article examines how the use of information and communication technology (ICT) capital in the production of goods and services affects the socio-economic status of individuals and, more importantly, whether unemployment benefits moderate this effect. Methodologically, the article uses multilevel maximum likelihood regression models with an empirical focus on 12 European countries and 19 industries. The analysis is based on data from the European Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS), the European Union Level Analysis of Capital, Labour, Energy, Materials, and Service Inputs (EU-KLEMS) research project, and the Comparative Welfare Entitlements Project (CWEP). The results of the article indicate that generous unemployment benefits are associated with occupational upgrading. This implies that educational and vocational labour market policies need to be developed to prevent the under-skilled from being left behind and to enable these groups to benefit from the digital transition. Consequently, it is not only the extent to which work involves routine tasks or the skills of workers that determine how technological change affects employment, but also social rights shape employment through unemployment benefits.

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1. Introduction

The digital transition has a substantial impact on employment (Balsmeier & Woerter, 2019); in particular, it poses a major threat to fair working conditions, the second dimension of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). Important headline indicators of this dimension are employment and unemployment rates. The extent to which the digital transition leads to changes in employment and unemployment has distributional implications. This is the case because equality of opportunity in the labour market can be reduced for people with low(er) levels of qualifications, and because labour markets and welfare states are important factors for social stratification (Esping-Andersen, 1990). There is a risk that under-skilled citizens are being left behind, further aggravating existing inequality, hampering their social participation, or reducing socio-economic status (SES) for lower- and—potentially—medium-SES individuals. Against this background, the present article touches on issues of distributive fairness arising from changes in the employment structure. It addresses how labour markets can be guided in the right direction to ensure social inclusion and fair employment opportunities during and in spite of the upheavals caused by the digital transition.

Overall, the digital transition is expected to shape labour markets by affecting job creation and destruction. In their seminal paper, Frey and Osborne (2017) conclude that through the digital transition it is likely that 47% of occupations are potentially automatable through computerisation in the US. However, others, such as Arntz et al. (2017), conclude that this scenario overstates the automatability of jobs, as there is substantial task heterogeneity within occupations. When this task heterogeneity is considered, the authors conclude that the automatization risk drops to only 9% of jobs.

Fears of technological unemployment are not new, but current hypotheses about how the digital transition will affect employment suggest that while jobs will change, work itself is unlikely to end. Evidence from socio-economic literature indicates that, overall, technological change does not destroy more jobs than it replaces (Autor, 2015; Cords & Prettner, 2022; Gartner et al., 2019). In this sense, the scenarios of occupational upgrading and employment polarisation propose two different scenarios for the future of employment and its implications for fair working conditions. Both scenarios describe how the distribution of jobs could change due to digitalisation and imply that the impact of new technologies on employment will differ for different kinds of workers.

Occupational upgrading or the skill-biased technological change (SBTC) hypothesis predicts disproportionate employment growth in better-paid and higher-skilled occupations at the expense of lower-paid and lower-skilled occupations (Card & DiNardo, 2002; Fernández-Macías & Hurley, 2017). The underlying assumption is that information and communication technology (ICT) is skill-biased, which assumes that ICT increases the relative productivity of high-skilled workers, who tend to be better at using new technologies. Consequently, job creation tends to focus on better-skilled workers, as demand for such workers rises with their increase in productivity. Changes in the employment structure are therefore driven by the skill requirements of jobs (Mondolo, 2022).

Employment polarisation or the routine-biased technological change (RBTC) hypothesis states that job growth takes place for high-paid and low-paid occupations but decreases for medium-paid occupations (Autor, 2015; Fernández-Macías & Hurley, 2017; Goos & Manning, 2007). This hypothesis assumes that job tasks can be divided inter alia into routine and non-routine tasks. According to the RBTC hypothesis, medium-skilled jobs disappear relatively to lower- and higher-skilled jobs because those jobs contain more routine tasks. For this reason, digitalisation is assumed to be routine-biased, meaning that labour-intensive routine tasks can be more easily replaced by digitalisation. This is the case as with technological improvements and decreasing prices for computer capital over time, ICT becomes relatively cheaper in comparison to repetitive labour (Mondolo, 2022; Sebastian & Biagi, 2018). Thus, ICT is not considered to be an adequate substitute for non-routine tasks.

While both scenarios differ in their predictions regarding the effect of the digital transition on employment, they also differ regarding their effects on social inclusion and fair working conditions. On the one hand, occupational upgrading could lead to an overall increase in SES among the employed, but at the expense of less labour market participation or unemployment of lower-skilled workers. On the other hand, employment polarisation could lead to more inequality as medium-skilled and routine-intensive jobs are substituted by digital technologies, while ensuring the labour market participation of lower-skilled workers. In any case, both scenarios require social policy measures if the employment structure changes, and certain jobs become relatively less existent. For instance, educational and vocational labour market policies targeted at those adversely affected by the digital transition may be necessary to ensure their social participation and prevent a decline in their SES. This is also relevant from a societal perspective as a low SES is associated with negative effects on health outcomes (Evans & Kim, 2010; McMaughan et al., 2020), lifetime pensions (Shi & Kolk, 2023), the likelihood of criminal behaviour (Baker et al., 2023), or reduced political participation (Nelson, 2023). Consequently, it is essential to understand how employment changes.

The goal of the EPSR to provide good employment with fair working conditions is therefore contingent upon the analysis of how job creation can be influenced and how welfare states adapt to changes in labour demand for worse-off workers. Fostering a scenario of occupational upgrading aligned with upskilling of workers could ensure that fewer individuals are left behind. This is especially the case as the labour market is for work-dependent individuals the main allocator of SES in market-based economies.

Research on the technology–employment nexus examining the role of labour market institutions has mainly focused on the role of unions (Haapanala et al., 2023; Kristal & Cohen, 2017). Focusing empirically on unemployment benefits provides new insights, as unemployment benefits consider individuals independently of union membership. Further, unemployment benefits can be more easily governed by the state than union behaviour in bargaining processes.

This article investigates the extent to which the generosity of unemployment benefits moderates the relationship between ICT capital and employment. Further, it addresses the question of why heterogeneous results on occupational upgrading and employment polarisation are reported, and consequently explains under which conditions one or the other is more likely to occur. The central argument is that unemployment benefits, as a part of social rights, moderate the effect of ICT capital on employment and respectively SES. This is the case because these benefits affect the labour market behaviour of employers and employees.

The contribution of this article is threefold: First, it offers a theoretical explanation for why empirically occupational upgrading and employment polarisation are observable. Second, by focusing on unemployment benefits, it extends the literature on the role of institutions in the relationship between employment and technology. Third, the use of multilevel models broadens the methodological scope. To the best of my knowledge, such models have not been employed to examine the relationship between ICT capital and SES subgroups measured by International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI-08) scores. Moreover, it uses time-varying indicators for labour market institutions in this relationship. This article extends the literature as it measures employment with ISEI-08 scores. For instance, previous papers have considered prestige scales (Ulfsdotter Eriksson et al., 2022). While prestige scales and ISEI-08 scores are related, they measure different things. Prestige scores are measures for the popularity of an occupation and the ISEI-08 score measures the cultural and economic resources that are typical for incumbents of a certain occupation (Ganzeboom et al., 1992).

The article is structured as follows: The next section provides an overview of the literature related to this article. Section 3 presents the research question and develops the argument, followed by the presentation of the hypotheses. Sections 4 and 5 describe the data and the empirical strategy. Section 6 presents the results. The article concludes with Section 7, which provides a discussion and a conclusion.

2. Related Literature

The contribution of this article is related to the literature on the effects of technology on employment, with particular focus on the role of labour market institutions in this process. The article starts with the observation that the literature comes to different conclusions about whether occupational upgrading or employment polarisation has taken place, depending on the selected countries and time spans. Based on these heterogeneous results, this article examines whether unemployment benefits as labour market institutions (Checchi & García-Peñalosa, 2008) influence the conditions under which employment polarisation or occupational upgrading occur. For a systematic literature review on the link between technology and employment, consider Mondolo (2022). The literature review indicates that technology affects employment outcomes and that there are various theories and mechanisms that explain this relationship. However, it also states that the evidence for which theory or mechanism is correct is inconclusive, also depending on the unit of analysis. Further, Mondolo (2022) states that labour market institutions can be moderators in the relationship between technological change and employment. Oesch (2013, p. 110) argues this is the case because labour market institutions determine the wage floor and influence whether low-skilled jobs increase in number.

On the one hand, evidence that RBTC leads to employment polarisation can be found in several articles. Initially, the argument that technology increases job growth at the margins of the employment distribution was proposed by Autor et al. (2003). In their study, the authors find that computerisation is associated with less labour input of routine-manual and routine-cognitive tasks while increasing labour input of non-routine cognitive tasks in the US. Further, Goos and Manning (2007) find that from the 1970s to the 1990s a pattern of job polarisation is observable in Britain. This evidence was further supported by Goos et al. (2014) who show that job polarisation within and between industries is present in 16 European countries in the period of 1993–2010. Moreover, Michaels et al. (2014) find evidence for employment polarisation due to ICT use in nine European countries, the US, and Japan from 1980 to 2004. Finally, Fonseca et al. (2018) use firm

census data to report for Portugal that they find employment polarisation in the second half of the period of 1986–2007 in terms of wages and employment.

On the other hand, there is literature contesting the claim of employment polarisation. Oesch and Rodriguez Menes (2011) find evidence for occupational upgrading in the period of 1990–2008 in Britain, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland. Moreover, Oesch and Piccitto (2019) state that employment polarisation is rather a myth as they find again clear evidence for occupational upgrading in Germany, Spain, and Sweden, and partial evidence for occupational upgrading in the United Kingdom during the time span of 1992–2015. Further, Ulfsdotter Eriksson et al. (2022) find in their gender-based analysis evidence for occupational upgrading for women but employment polarisation for men in Sweden from 1997 to 2005. In a similar direction, Murphy and Oesch (2018) find evidence for occupational upgrading that is driven by higher educated women in Ireland and Switzerland from 1970 to 2010. Lastly, Alasoini and Tuomivaara (2023) provide evidence that employment polarisation does not hold in Finland from 2013 to 2018.

Another strand of literature relevant to this article considers the role of other labour market institutions, such as unions, in the relationship between technology and employment. Kristal and Cohen (2017) find in their article that rising wage inequality in the US—typically associated with occupational upgrading—is rather explained by a decline in union strength and the reduced real value of minimum income than by the computerisation of workplaces. Haapanala et al. (2023) discuss in their study the moderating effect of union density on technological unemployment in 27 European countries and the US from 1998 to 2019. They conclude that higher union density goes hand in hand with a larger reduction in industry-sector employment for younger workers and workers with lower secondary education in the case of more robot use. Further, they find that in countries with low union density, the unemployment rate falls more strongly as robot exposure increases. This result allows the conclusion that technological change is not beneficial for all types of workers to the same extent.

Despite unions representing a pivotal institution to express workers' interests and organizing bargaining power, they suffer from an insider–outsider problem, meaning that their effect could be limited to the workers the corresponding union is representing (Jansen & Lehr, 2022; Lindbeck & Snower, 2001). Further, union density declined in the last decades, leading to a weaker representation of workers' interests in many European countries (Vachon et al., 2016). This implies that it may not be sufficient to consider trade unions alone when assessing the role of labour market institutions in the employment–technology nexus. Accordingly, this article examines whether other labour market institutions, like unemployment benefits, have a moderating effect on technology-induced employment outcomes.

In a similar direction, Fernández-Macías (2012) presents evidence for both employment polarisation and occupational upgrading in Europe. This can be explained via labour market institutions, as they shape the allocation of labour through regulations such as minimum income, health regulations, and unemployment protection. Fernández-Macías (2012) concludes that changes in employment patterns coincide with institutional clusters like Continental, Scandinavian, and Southern Europe. Other literature related to institutions, such as Oesch (2015), argues that welfare-state regimes also play an important role in technological unemployment. The article suggests that there is evidence of clear occupational upgrading in Denmark and Germany, with a more polarised version of upgrading in Britain, due to the expansion of high- and low-end service jobs. Oesch (2015) states that these results are explained through an interaction

between welfare regimes and labour supply that drives these employment changes. It is assumed that welfare states shape employment creation and social classes, as argued by Esping-Andersen in *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990). The current article builds on the argument put forward by Oesch (2015).

This article emphasises that it is especially the generosity of unemployment benefits that affects labour demand and supply. As welfare regimes are rather static concepts, this article uses time-varying indicators like the generosity of unemployment benefits as part of social rights. In accordance with Kunißen (2023), it is assumed that although welfare states are an important variable in explaining how technology affects employment, it is more accurate to focus on single indicators. The reason why single indicators are more precise than welfare regimes is that they allow us to specify which aspects of welfare states lead to a certain result. Thus, the interpretation that welfare states influence an outcome lacks clarity. To be more exact, it is necessary to find answers to why welfare states can explain variance and how explanatory mechanisms work (Kunißen, 2023, p. 68).

Considering these heterogeneous results, this article contributes to the ongoing puzzle of why employment polarisation and occupational upgrading are observable and elaborates on the conditions that make one or the other more likely to occur. The central argument of this article is in line with other authors that state labour market institutions like unions or welfare states are relevant factors in explaining the effect of technology on employment. However, this article makes a novel contribution by arguing that the generosity of unemployment benefits as part of social rights is an important variable for assessing the impact of technology on employment.

3. Research Questions, Argument, and Hypotheses

Based on the literature, the two research questions of this article are:

1. Why do we empirically observe occupational upgrading in some countries' labour markets, while we see employment polarisation in others?
2. To what extent does the generosity of unemployment benefits moderate the relationship between the use of ICT capital in the production of goods and services and labour market outcome measured by ISEI-08 scores during the period 1998–2019?

To explain the heterogeneous findings in the literature, I argue that it is not only the extent to which work contains routine tasks, or the workers' skill set, that determine how technological change affects employment, but also the institutional setting shapes employment patterns through social rights. Following Marshall (1950, p. 11), social rights, as a part of social citizenship, can be described as access to a minimum level of economic protection in relation to a given society's living standard. Because capitalist society is based on inequality of opportunity, wealth, and income, Marshall states that social rights become necessary to maintain democratic principles of equality (Turner, 2001, p. 190).

Based on Marshall's understanding and in line with Esping-Andersen (1990), in this article it is assumed that unemployment benefits are part of social rights as they de-commodify workers and therefore provide the means to live independently of work while receiving these benefits. One could argue that social rights can be considered as an equivalent to possessing means of production, as they enable an existence independent of wage labour. In other words, unemployment benefits are part of social rights as they make individuals less

dependent on market incomes. However, it should be noted that unemployment benefits only de-commodify workers if they are covered, they fulfil the eligibility criteria, and they take up the benefits.

Unemployment benefits as part of social rights explain variation in technology-induced employment outcomes because they affect the labour market behaviour of individuals and companies. Individuals' motivation to participate in the labour market consists of obtaining economic resources and fulfilling their job preferences given their set of individual restrictions. The motivation for companies to create jobs is to maximise profits by optimising inputs such as capital and labour. Unemployment benefits influence job creation because (a) they protect workers from selling their labour to the first best job they find and are in that sense a job-search subsidy—Gangl (2006) and Biegert (2017) provide evidence that unemployment benefits reduce job mobility into the low-skill sector and reduce unemployment through better job matching—and (b) they influence the minimum standards and reservation wages that companies must meet or exceed to hire workers, as argued by Marinescu and Skandalis (2021). Although job search models imply that higher reservation wages lead to more unemployment, higher reservation wages could also increase the quality of the remaining jobs in terms of SES. In accordance with this claim, Nekoei and Weber (2017) find that extending the duration of unemployment insurance leads workers to find jobs that pay higher wages. In sum, unemployment benefits could influence job creation as they make labour supply relatively more expensive in relation to capital use and consequently affect a firm's incentives to replace labour with ICT capital. As a result, unemployment benefits as part of social rights do not only allow individuals to be less work-dependent but also have an impact on labour demand and supply.

If unemployment benefits protect workers from selling their labour to employment opportunities that lead to low pay, insecure employment, or low SES, companies will have to respond as their demand for such labour will not be met. In that sense, unemployment benefits can be understood as a job search subsidy, as they reduce the individual need to accept the first best job they find. Consequently, companies will instead seek to create jobs that lead to higher SES to incentivise workers to work for them, as the workers' reservation wages increase with more generous unemployment benefits. Additionally, if the use of ICT capital leads to higher productivity gains for better-skilled workers, there are additional incentives to create higher SES jobs. Overall, this leads to occupational upgrading, as jobs associated with low SES are replaced by medium and high SES jobs. I thus hypothesize:

> H1: More generous unemployment benefits are associated with occupational upgrading in the relationship of ICT-capital use and ISEI-08 scores, ceteris paribus.

If unemployment benefits offer insufficient protection to workers, they are more likely to sell their labour to the first best job they can find. Companies have less incentive to create jobs that lead to higher SES, as workers have lower reservation wages and are therefore more easily available for lower SES jobs. Hence, firms create jobs with low SES because it is relatively cheaper to use labour than ICT capital as workers are more easily available for low SES jobs. If the use of ICT capital is routine-biased, then in the absence of generous unemployment benefits, companies have even fewer incentives to create medium-skilled jobs. In sum, this leads to employment polarisation because the absence of generous unemployment benefits fosters further polarisation. Hence, I hypothesize:

> H2: Less generous unemployment benefits are associated with employment polarisation in the relationship of ICT-capital use and ISEI-08 scores, ceteris paribus.

4. Data

This article examines whether the effect of ICT capital on SES for different SES subgroups is moderated by the generosity of unemployment benefits and whether the results indicate that occupational upgrading or employment polarisation is more likely. The analysis is based on 12 countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the UK) and 19 NACE Rev. 2 industries (A–S) in the time span of 1998–2019. The NACE Rev. 2 industries T (activities of households as employers) and U (activities of extraterritorial organisations) are not included because there is no data on ICT capital for these industries available in the European Union Level Analysis of Capital, Labour, Energy, Materials, and Service Inputs (EU-KLEMS) data. The analysis is restricted to persons who are employed and belong to the working population aged 18–65. Four data sources were used to account for all needed variables.

First, measures for individual SES and the corresponding covariates are obtained from the European Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) provided by Eurostat (2024). The data contain information on all national labour markets in the EU and are used to estimate key labour market metrics for each member state. As the target population of this article is the working population, the data are suitable for this analysis. EU-LFS includes information on the main job of the respondent based on International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) codes. Depending on the year of the survey (prior to or after 2008), these codes are coded as three-digit ISCO-08 or ISCO-88 codes. Further, the codes were used to derive the ISEI-08 score for each respondent with the Stata user-written command *iscogen* (Jann, 2019). Therefore, the main dependent variable in the analysis is the respondent's ISEI-08 score.

The ISEI-08 score ranks occupations based on corresponding values for income earned and education required to be employed in a certain occupation (Ganzeboom, 2010). It measures the attributes of occupations that translate an individual's education into income by maximizing the indirect effect of education on income and minimizing the direct effect (Ganzeboom et al., 1992). The ISEI-08 score is derived from ISCO codes and is based on data from 200,000 cases, covering information on education, occupation, and personal income in 42 countries (Ganzeboom, 2010). The index attributes a scale on a range from 10 to 90 and is a continuous measure for the SES of an individual. The main reason for using ISEI-08 scores as the main dependent variable is that it allows to a greater extent to account for the variability in SES between occupations.

Second, the Comparative Welfare Entitlements Project (CWEP) dataset was used to obtain measures for the generosity of social rights regarding unemployment benefits (Scruggs, 2022). This dataset offers quantitative information on the development of welfare institutions in 33 democracies around the world (Scruggs & Ramalho Tafoya, 2022). The data focus on the non-spending features of major public social insurance and calculate the generosity of welfare programs. The data source is used as it aims to replicate Esping-Andersen's (1990) *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*'s decommodification index and can be understood as an update for social citizenship indicators, measuring the generosity of unemployment insurance as part of social rights (Scruggs & Ramalho Tafoya, 2022). Further, the CWEP data allow international comparison and consider that welfare generosity can vary over time. Since the article argues that the generosity of unemployment benefits is an important institutional factor in the labour market behaviour of work-dependent individuals and firms, the data are appropriate to answer the research questions. The unemployment generosity index for each country and year is based on the following intuitive criteria of the benefit: (a) the replacement rates, (b) the duration of benefits receipt, (c) the needed qualifying

period, (d) the waiting days to receive the benefit, and lastly (e) the benefit coverage. Based on these criteria, a welfare generosity score is composed by creating a z-score for each characteristic using the mean and standard deviation by country and year. The index for the selected countries ranges from 3.75 to 15.27. Figure 1 shows the development in generosity of the unemployment benefits over time for the considered countries, where changes within welfare states become evident.
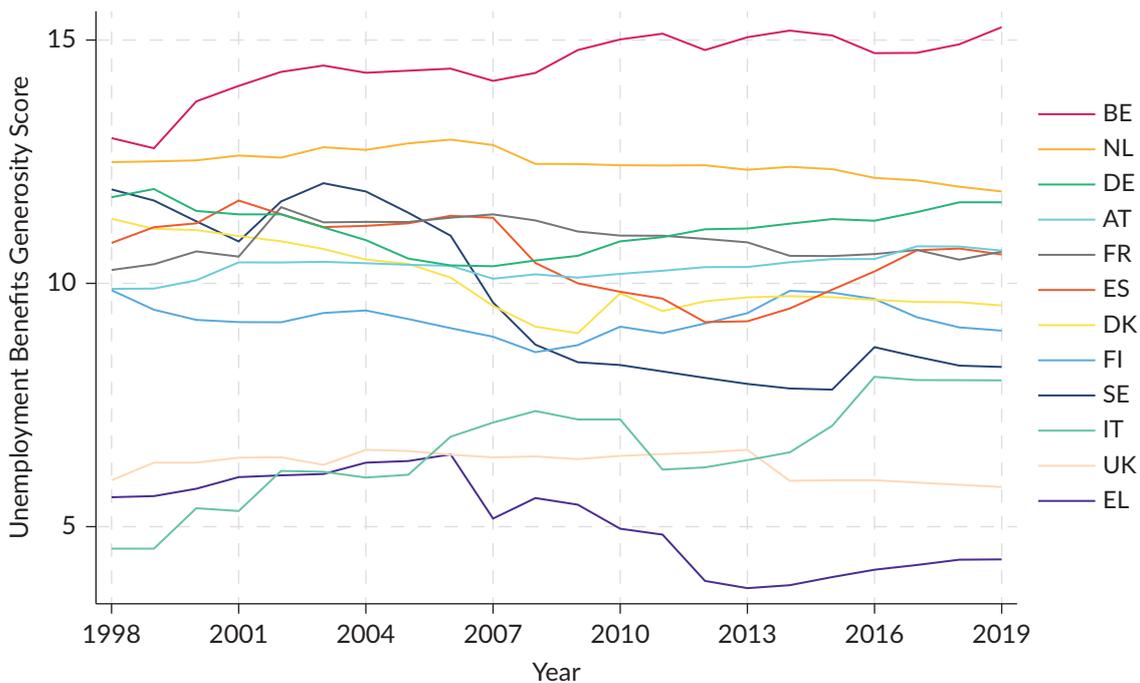
Figure 1. Unemployment benefits generosity scores from 1998 to 2019 in the countries under consideration. Source: Author's own illustration based on CWEP data.

Third, the statistical module on capital accounts from the EU-KLEMS (release 2023) data was applied to measure the use of ICT capital in the production of goods and services in 19 different NACE Rev. 2 industries. EU-KLEMS data are collected from EU countries and provide detailed information on a range of economic indicators, including growth, productivity, employment creation, capital formation, and technological change at the industry level for all EU member states (Bontadini et al., 2023). The data are used to derive a proxy variable for ICT capital that measures approximately the extent to which different industries in different countries use ICT to produce goods and services. This variable is created as proposed by Gschwent et al. (2023), where ICT capital is based on tangible and intangible assets, namely (a) computer hardware (tangible), (b) telecom equipment (tangible), and (c) computer software and databases (intangible). To obtain the ICT-capital indicator, a new variable was created by adding the three assets. Each asset is measured as the net worth of the capital stock, in millions of national currencies, which are harmonized across countries. In the next step, the ICT-capital stock was divided by the value of all other assets that are used in the production of goods and services and the result was multiplied by 100. This was done to obtain a measure that shows the percentage of all assets within an industry that can be classified as ICT capital. As the analysis relies on cross-sectional data, the chained volume series based on the 2015 values is used to account for price changes over time. Figure 2 illustrates differences in capital use over time for the NACE industries considered. The figure indicates that the NACE Rev. 2 industries J (information and communication), K (financial and insurance activities), and M (professional, scientific, and technical activities)

are the industries with the highest share of ICT-capital use in 2019. Further, the graph shows that the use of ICT capital varies considerably among industries over time.
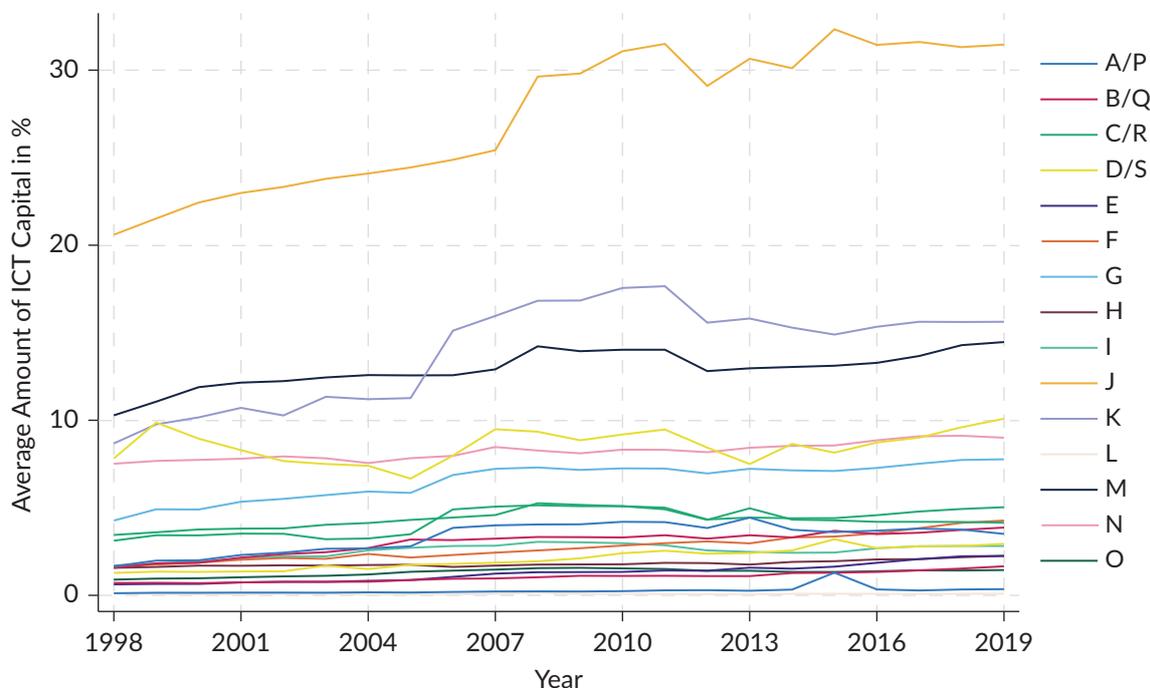
Figure 2. Average amount of ICT capital in NACE Rev. 2 industries as a percentage of all assets in all considered countries from 1998 to 2019. Notes: Letters are abbreviations for the following industries: A (agriculture, forestry and fishing), B (mining and quarrying), C (manufacturing), D (electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply), E (water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities), F (construction), G (wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles), H (transportation and storage), I (accommodation and food service activities), J (information and communication), K (financial and insurance activities), L (real estate activities), M (professional, scientific and technical activities), N (administrative and support service activities), O (public administration and defence; compulsory social security), P (education), Q (human health and social work activities), R (arts, entertainment and recreation), S (other service activities). Source: Author's own illustration based on EU KLEMS data.

Finally, OECD data are used to obtain variables that consider a country's real economic growth and GDP per capita. The model controls for economic growth, as the investment decisions of private and public firms in ICT capital may be different during economic crises than in boom years. If less economic growth reduces investments in ICT capital, this could confound the relationship between digital capital, unemployment benefits, and SES. Additionally, the full model controls for GDP per capita as the effect of ICT capital on SES might differ depending on a country's prosperity. Therefore, the variables "annual real GDP growth" and "GDP per capita in US dollars per person, PPP converted at current prices" are added from the OECD data (OECD, 2024a, 2024b).

5. Empirical Strategy

In a first step, I compare the cumulative distribution functions of ISEI-08 scores in 1998 and 2019 to check for employment shifts between these two points in time. Next, I calculate regression models to account for the specific effects of unemployment benefits and ICT capital on SES for different subgroups. To be more precise,

the article applies linear multilevel maximum likelihood regression models with random intercepts. Due to the theoretical assumption that there is dependence of observations between individuals who work in the same country and industry, the article assumes a nested data structure. Further, from a theoretical perspective, it is not expected that the magnitude and direction of the effects of unemployment benefits differ between country-specific industries. This is the case as the analysis assumes that the protecting effect of generous unemployment benefits is equal among the considered clusters. Therefore, multilevel models with random intercepts are reasonable for this analysis. The complete model looks as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
\text{ISEI Score}_{ij} = \ &\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Sex}_{ij} + \beta_2 \text{Age}_{ij} + \beta_3 \text{Urbanisation}_{ij} + \beta_4 \text{Citizenship}_{ij} + \beta_5 \text{Education}_{ij} \\
&+ \beta_6 \text{Part Time Work}_{ij} + \gamma_1 \text{Unemployment Generosity}_j + \gamma_2 \text{ICT Capital}_j \\
&+ \gamma_3 (\text{Unemplyoment Generosity} \times \text{ICT Capital})_j + \gamma_4 \text{Real GDP Growth}_j \\
&+ \gamma_5 \text{GDP per capita}_j + \varepsilon_{ij} + U_{oj}
\end{aligned}$$

In this regression equation, i indicates the individual respondent and j the country-specific NACE Rev 2. industry, β_0 stands for the country-specific intercept, ε_{ij} represents the individual-level error term, U_{oj} represents unobserved country effects, β_n represents the regression coefficients of the corresponding covariates, and γ_n represents the regression coefficient of the corresponding level-two variable. All calculations were performed using Stata version 18.5.

The model predicts an individual's SES based on ISEI-08 scores. Further, the model controls on the individual level for the respondent's sex, age, degree of urbanisation in place of residency, citizenship, educational level, and if the respondent is part-time employed. These variables are selected because the literature indicates that (a) women work more often in occupations that lead to lower pay than men (Manning & Petrongolo, 2008), (b) income changes during the life course (Toczek et al., 2021), (c) better-paid jobs demanding more skills are concentrated in urban areas (Rouwendal & Koster, 2025), (d) non-natives tend to work in lower SES occupations (Fullin & Reyneri, 2011), (e) higher education enables access to higher SES jobs (Ganzeboom et al., 1992), and (f) part-time workers tend to suffer from part-time penalties in terms of income or promotions (Bardasi & Gornick, 2008; Deschacht, 2017). The main explanatory variables, the generosity of unemployment benefits and the amount of ICT capital, are found on the second level. No problematic correlation between the independent variables is found.

Sex is coded as a dummy variable, taking the value 1 if the respondent is female. Age is a continuous variable ranging from 18 to 65 years. However, it should be noted that in the Dutch EU-LFS data, age is reported only in categories. To overcome the problem of different scales for the age variable, the midpoint of each Dutch age category is combined with the single-year age variable. The urbanisation variable indicates whether the respondent lives in a city, town or suburb, or in a rural area, the latter being the reference category. Citizenship is a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent holds a foreign passport. The education variable indicates the respondent's highest educational attainment and distinguishes whether the respondent completed tertiary, upper-secondary, or lower-secondary education, with lower-secondary being the reference category. Lastly, the part-time work dummy variable indicates whether the respondent is employed part-time.

From a theoretical perspective, RBTC and SBTC make different predictions about the impact of ICT capital on the employment structure. Therefore, the original sample is divided into three terciles of respondents with low ($x \leq 34$), medium ($34 < x \leq 49$), and high ($x \geq 50$) ISEI-08 scores. The division allows us to examine if the

effect of the main independent variables varies across socio-economic groups. If digital technologies do not favour all groups to the same extent, then we should observe effect heterogeneity of ICT capital across these groups. In the case of occupational upgrading, the results should suggest that ICT capital increases ISEI-08 scores across all subgroups. In contrast, the scenario of employment polarisation would imply that ICT capital increases ISEI-08 scores of individuals in the high SES group and decrease ISEI-08 scores of individuals in the medium and low SES groups.

As stated, I assume a nested data structure consisting of two levels. Country-specific industries are created by grouping country with NACE Rev. 2 identifier variables. Due to changes in the NACE classifications in 2008, NACE Rev. 1 classifications are converted into NACE Rev. 2 classifications for observations prior to 2008 by using a crosswalk table. The table is manually created and is based on a correspondence table provided by the European Commission (2008, p. 47). However, as the industry structure changes over time and new industries emerge, it is not possible to convert all NACE Rev. 1 into NACE Rev. 2 classifications. To check whether the analysis is sensitive to changes in the NACE classification, I repeat the analysis only for the period between 2008 and 2019, where no conversion of classifications is necessary. By using a subset of the data, the results show that they are not sensitive to the conversion. Hence, in sum, the analysis is based on 12 countries and 19 NACE Rev. 2 industries which leads to 228 (12 × 19) country-specific industries. The literature indicates no clear evidence on the number of clusters needed for reliable estimates when computing multilevel models. However, using Monte Carlo simulation, Bryan and Jenkins (2016, p. 19) show for linear models that at least 25 clusters are required to ensure the validity of the results.

6. Results

Figure 3 shows descriptively the cumulative distribution of ISEI-08 scores in 1998 and 2019. Overall, the graph indicates a right shift of the distribution, especially for individuals of medium and high SES. This indicates that in comparison to 1998, there is a trend of occupational upgrading in 2019. Consequently, the aim of the multivariate analysis is to check if occupational upgrading is associated with ICT capital and the generosity of unemployment benefits.

The multivariate analysis consists of seven models that are displayed in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 presents four of these models. The first is the empty model with no predictors. Model 1 introduces only control variables at the respondent level. Model 2 extends the first model by including measures for ICT capital and generosity of unemployment benefits. Finally, model 3 builds upon model 2 by adding the level two control variables. In the following, I display the formal specifications of the partial models:

$$\text{ISEI Score}_{ij} = \beta_0 + \varepsilon_{ij} + U_{oj} \quad \text{(Empty model)}$$

$$\text{ISEI Score}_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Sex}_{ij} + \beta_2 \text{Age}_{ij} + \beta_3 \text{Urbanisation}_{ij} + \beta_4 \text{Citizenship}_{ij} + \beta_5 \text{Education}_{ij}$$
$$+ \beta_6 \text{Part Time Work}_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij} + U_{oj} \quad \text{(Model 1)}$$

$$\text{ISEI Score}_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Sex}_{ij} + \beta_2 \text{Age}_{ij} + \beta_3 \text{Urbanisation}_{ij} + \beta_4 \text{Citizenship}_{ij} + \beta_5 \text{Education}_{ij}$$
$$+ \beta_6 \text{Part Time Work}_{ij} + \gamma_1 \text{Unemployment Generosity}_j + \gamma_2 \text{ICT Capital}_j$$
$$+ \varepsilon_{ij} + U_{oj} \quad \text{(Model 2)}$$

$$ISEI\ Score_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Sex_{ij} + \beta_2 Age_{ij} + \beta_3 Urbanisation_{ij} + \beta_4 Citizenship_{ij} + \beta_5 Education_{ij}$$
$$+ \beta_6 Part\ Time\ Work_{ij} + \gamma_1 Unemployment\ Generosity_j + \gamma_2 ICT\ Capital_j$$
$$+ \gamma_3 Real\ GDP\ Growth_j + \gamma_4 GDP\ per\ capita_j + \varepsilon_{ij} + U_{oj} \quad (Model\ 3)$$
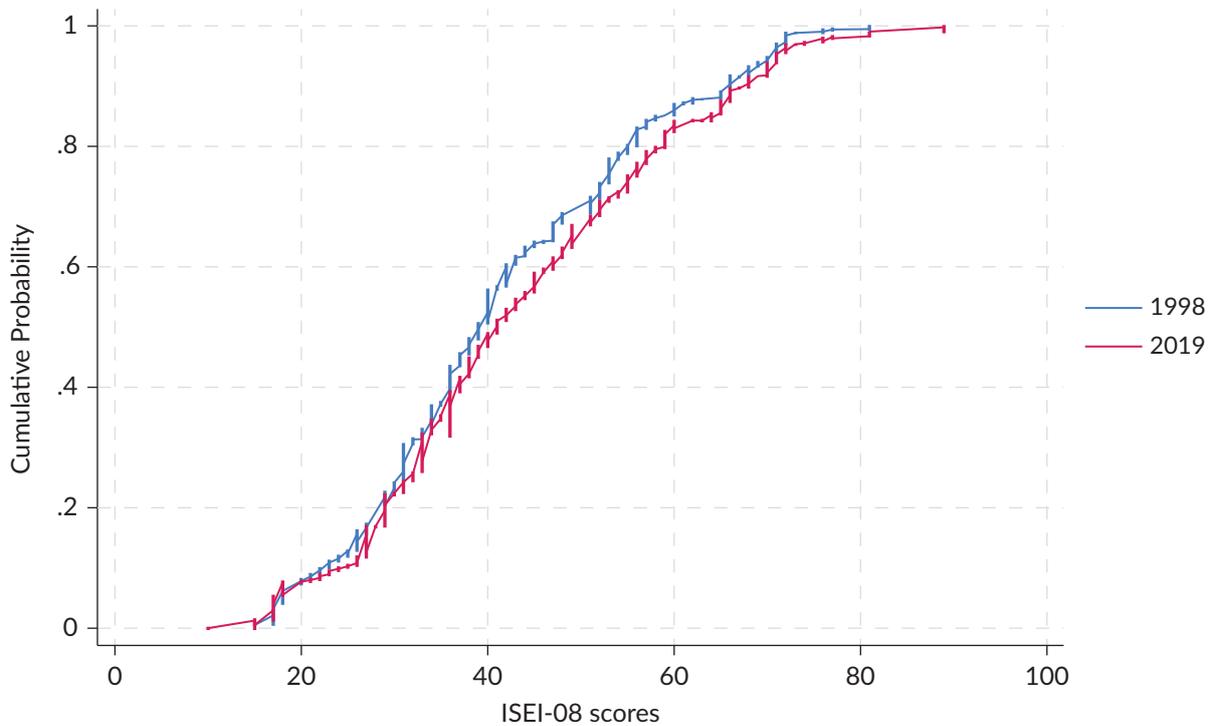
Figure 3. Cumulative distribution functions of ISEI-08 scores in the years 1998 and 2019 for the entire sample. Source: Author's own illustration based on EU-LFS data.

The empty model with no explanatory and control variables indicates an interclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of 0.2995. This leads to the conclusion that 29.95% of the variance in respondents' ISEI-08 scores can be explained by differences due to country-specific industries. The model is calculated to check if the assumption of dependence of observations is met. As indicated in the literature by Peugh (2010), it is assumed that multilevel models are appropriate if the ICC estimate is above zero and the design effect is higher than two. According to Peugh (2010, p. 91), the design effect captures the effect of independence violations on estimates of standard errors and further estimates the multiplier that is necessary to impose on standard errors to compensate for negative bias that arises from nested data structures. Both criteria are fulfilled in the empty model.

Model 1 indicates that the control variables perform as expected and that it is reasonable to include them in the full model. All variables are significant at the 1% level. More precisely, the model shows that (a) being female is associated with a lower ISEI-08 score than being male, (b) with each year of age, the ISEI-08 score increases, (c) compared to a rural location, ISEI-08 scores increase in more urban areas, (d) foreign passport holders are associated with a lower ISEI-08 score than local residents, and (e) part-time workers are associated with a lower SES than full-time workers. Further, the ICC in the model indicates that, even after including level one covariates, 22.35% of the variance in the respondents' ISEI-08 scores can be explained by differences due to country-specific industries.

Table 1. Multilevel random intercept regression models predicting ISEI-08 scores for the entire sample.

	Empty Model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Sex (ref: Male)				
1: Female		−1.902 ** (0.006)	−1.902 ** (0.006)	−1.902 ** (0.006)
Age		0.091 ** (0.000)	0.092 ** (0.000)	0.093 ** (0.000)
Urbanization (ref: Rural)				
1: Towns & suburbs		0.933 ** (0.007)	0.939 ** (0.007)	0.952 ** (0.007)
2: Cities		1.885 ** (0.007)	1.883 ** (0.007)	1.868 ** (0.007)
Citizenship (ref: Native)				
1: Foreign		−3.975 ** (0.012)	−3.965 ** (0.012)	−3.919 ** (0.012)
Education (ref: Lower secondary)				
1: Upper secondary		5.365 ** (0.007)	5.376 ** (0.007)	5.404 ** (0.007)
2: Tertiary		19.139 ** (0.008)	19.162 ** (0.008)	19.209 ** (0.008)
Work status (ref: Full time)				
1: Part time		−3.768 ** (0.007)	−3.762 ** (0.007)	−3.745 ** (0.007)
Unemployment benefits			0.158 ** (0.004)	0.111 ** (0.004)
ICT capital			−0.102 ** (0.002)	−0.002 (0.003)
GDP per capita				0.000 ** (0.000)
Real GDP growth				0.021 ** (0.001)
Intercept	44.013 ** (0.596)	32.092 ** (0.416)	31.158 ** (0.446)	32.150 ** (0.420)
R^2 level one	–/–	0.3486	0.3279	0.3467
R^2 level two	–/–	0.5187	0.4447	0.5067
ICC	0.2995	0.2235	0.2474	0.2261
N	19,917,152	19,917,152	19,917,152	19,917,152

Notes: ** and * denote statistical significance at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels; standard errors are reported in parentheses; pseudo-R^2 values are based on Snijders and Bosker (1994).

The second model shows for the whole sample that the more generous unemployment benefits are, the higher the ISEI-08 score of an individual is. An increase of unemployment generosity by one score point increases the ISEI-08 score by 0.158 points, ceteris paribus. Further, the results indicate that the higher the share of ICT

capital on all assets within a country-specific industry, the lower is the SES of an individual. An increase of ICT capital in relation to all other assets by one percentage point decreases the ISEI-08 score by −0.102 ISEI-08 points, ceteris paribus. Both effects are significant at the alpha 1% level. The covariates perform similarly to the previous model. The Snijders and Bosker pseudo-R^2 values indicate that the model explains 32.79% of the variance on the individual level and 44.47% of the variance on the country-specific industry level.

In contrast to the previous model, model 3 indicates insignificant results for ICT capital if economic growth and GDP per capita are considered in the analyses. This could be because ICT capital is measured in relative terms. However, there may be a threshold effect, meaning that investments must meet a certain threshold in absolute numbers (independently of other production assets) to have an impact on SES. For instance, such effects are found in articles that consider the role of technology imports on employment (Bouattour et al., 2024). The effect of unemployment benefits on SES remains positive and significant at the 1% level. The level-one covariates show similar results as in the previous models. Further, the model indicates that an increase in GDP per capita by one unit decreases SES and shows that an increase in economic growth by one unit increases SES among the whole population. As the SBTC and RBTC hypotheses make different predictions about how various groups of workers are affected by the digital transition, the subgroup analysis is presented next.

Table 2 contains the main results of this article. This table shows the results of the full model for the subgroups and the corresponding interaction effects. Model 4 contains the results for individuals with low SES, model 5 the results for individuals with medium SES, and model 6 shows the results for individuals with high SES.

The analysis of the interaction effects for the different subgroups reveals that unemployment benefits have a moderating effect on the relationship between ICT capital and SES. Models 4, 5, and 6 indicate for each subgroup of workers a negative main effect of unemployment benefits on SES and a negative main effect of ICT capital on SES. However, the interaction effect between generosity of unemployment benefits and ICT capital is positive for each subgroup and significant at the 1% level. In other words, the results show that in a setting of generous unemployment benefits, an increase of ICT capital leads to a higher SES than in a setting of ungenerous unemployment benefits. However, the magnitude of the effect is relatively small in comparison to the level one covariates. For all models, Wald tests were conducted to check if the inclusion of an interaction term was necessary. The Wald test was significant for all three models, implying that it is useful to include the interaction term in the model. Further, the results show for each subgroup that the Snijders and Bosker pseudo-R^2 values are higher for level two than for level one. Moreover, the model explains the most variance for individuals with high SES. Figures 4, 5, and 6 display the interaction effects for each subgroup by predicting the SES of a respondent depending on the amount of ICT capital and the generosity of unemployment benefits in a country-specific industry.

The displayed interaction effects in Figure 4 show that depending on the generosity of unemployment benefits, a larger share of ICT capital can either reduce or increase ISEI-08 scores. More precisely, they indicate that in a setting of generous unemployment benefits, a larger share of ICT capital leads to an increase in ISEI-08 scores for the subgroup of low SES. The results also suggest that in a setting of less generous unemployment benefits, larger shares of ICT capital reduce ISEI-08 scores for workers with lower SES. This implies that depending on the generosity of unemployment benefits, both occupational upgrading and employment polarisation can be observed.

Table 2. Multilevel random intercept regression models predicting ISEI-08 scores for different subgroups.

	Model 4: Low SES	Model 5: Medium SES	Model 6: High SES
Sex (ref: Male)			
1: Female	−0.813 **	1.452 **	−1.440 **
	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.006)
Age	−0.018 **	0.010 **	0.035 **
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Urbanization (ref: Rural)			
1: Towns & suburbs	0.037 **	0.011 **	0.446 **
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.008)
2: Cities	0.128 **	0.053 **	1.161 **
	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.007)
Citizenship (ref: Native)			
1: Foreign	−1.395 **	−0.603 **	0.875 **
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.016)
Education (ref: Lower secondary)			
1: Upper secondary	1.142 **	0.926 **	0.370 **
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.012)
2: Tertiary	1.661 **	2.287 **	5.659 **
	(0.007)	(0.005)	(0.012)
Work status (ref: Full time)			
1: Part time	−0.994 **	−0.201 **	−0.676 **
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.009)
Unemployment benefits	−0.103 **	−0.067 **	−0.091 **
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.006)
ICT capital	−0.042 **	−0.055 **	−0.105 **
	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.006)
Unemployment benefits x ICT capital	0.006 **	0.004 **	0.012 **
	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.001)
GDP per capita	0.000 **	0.000 **	0.000 **
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Real GDP growth	−0.019 **	0.007 **	−0.020 **
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Intercept	26.870 **	38.152 **	55.166 **
	(0.212)	(0.114)	(0.157)
R^2 level one	0.0701	0.1482	0.1500
R^2 level two	0.1073	0.3282	0.4356
ICC	0.3409	0.1945	0.0788
N	6,822,227	6,262,962	6,831,963

Notes: ** and * denote statistical significance at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels; standard errors are reported in parentheses; pseudo-R^2 values are based on Snijders and Bosker (1994).
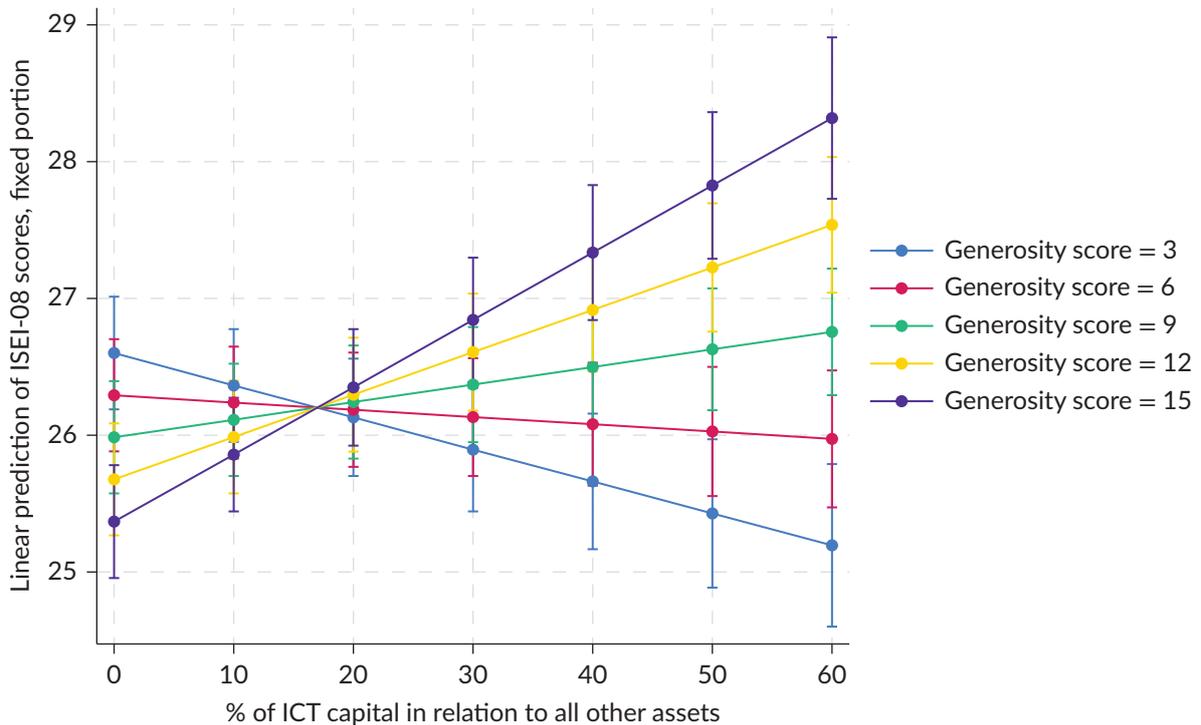
Figure 4. Predicted ISEI-08 scores with 95% confidence intervals for individuals with low SES. Notes: Prediction is based on generosity of unemployment benefits, amount of ICT capital, and the interaction term; higher generosity scores mean that unemployment benefits are more generous.

The interaction effects displayed in Figure 5 suggest that, in a setting of generous unemployment benefits, larger amounts of ICT capital tend to stabilise ISEI-08 scores instead of increasing them. However, the results imply that, in the absence of generous unemployment benefits, more ICT capital significantly reduces the ISEI-08 scores of individuals with medium SES. In other words, the interaction term suggests that ISEI-08 scores decline less at a given rate of ICT capital use when unemployment benefits are generous. Thus, generous unemployment benefits prevent a steeper decline in SES due to ICT-capital use. Regarding the entire employment structure, the results could mean that employment polarisation becomes more likely if unemployment benefits are less generous.

The interaction effect displayed in Figure 6 indicates, for individuals with a high SES, that more use of ICT capital increases ISEI-08 scores in a setting of generous unemployment benefits, while reducing it in a setting of less generous unemployment benefits. Hence, more generous unemployment benefits also improve the SES of individuals who already have a high SES. This result suggests that generous unemployment benefits could also further increase the ISEI-08 scores of individuals with a high SES, making occupational upgrading more likely. However, given the previous two graphs, the results also imply that ICT capital reduces SES in the absence of generous unemployment benefits, regardless of the considered groups.
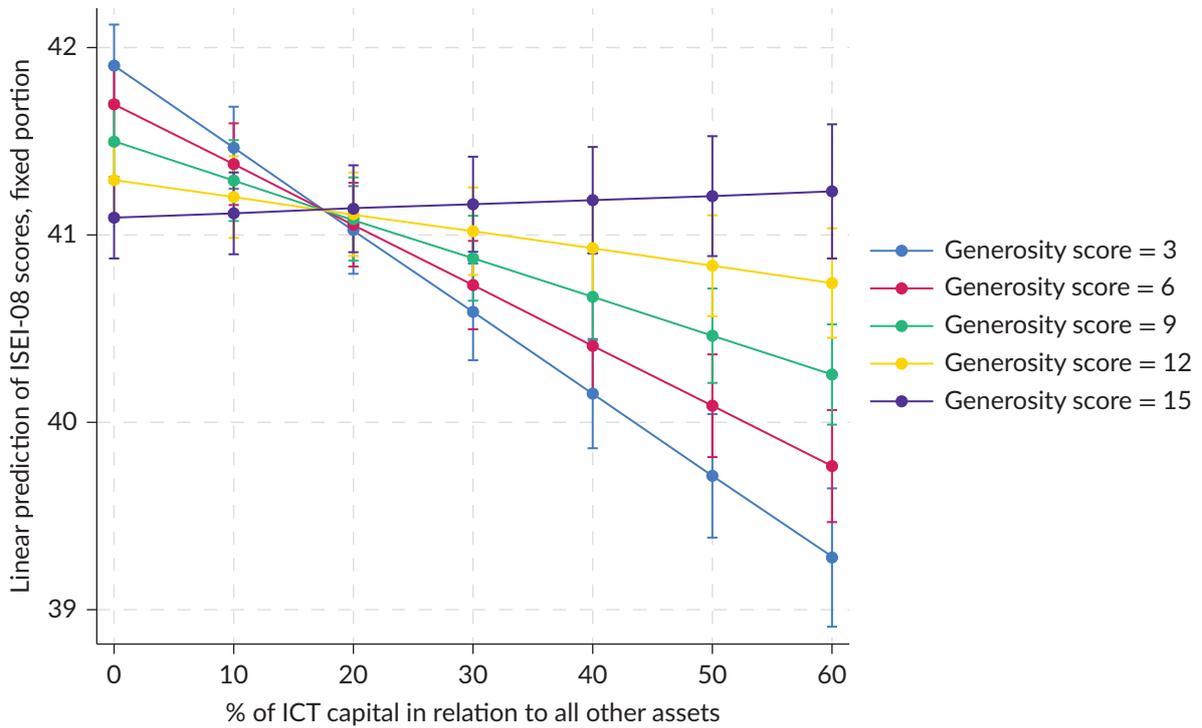
Figure 5. Predicted ISEI-08 scores with 95% confidence intervals for individuals with medium SES. Notes: Prediction is based on generosity of unemployment benefits, amount of ICT capital, and the interaction term; higher generosity scores mean that unemployment benefits are more generous.
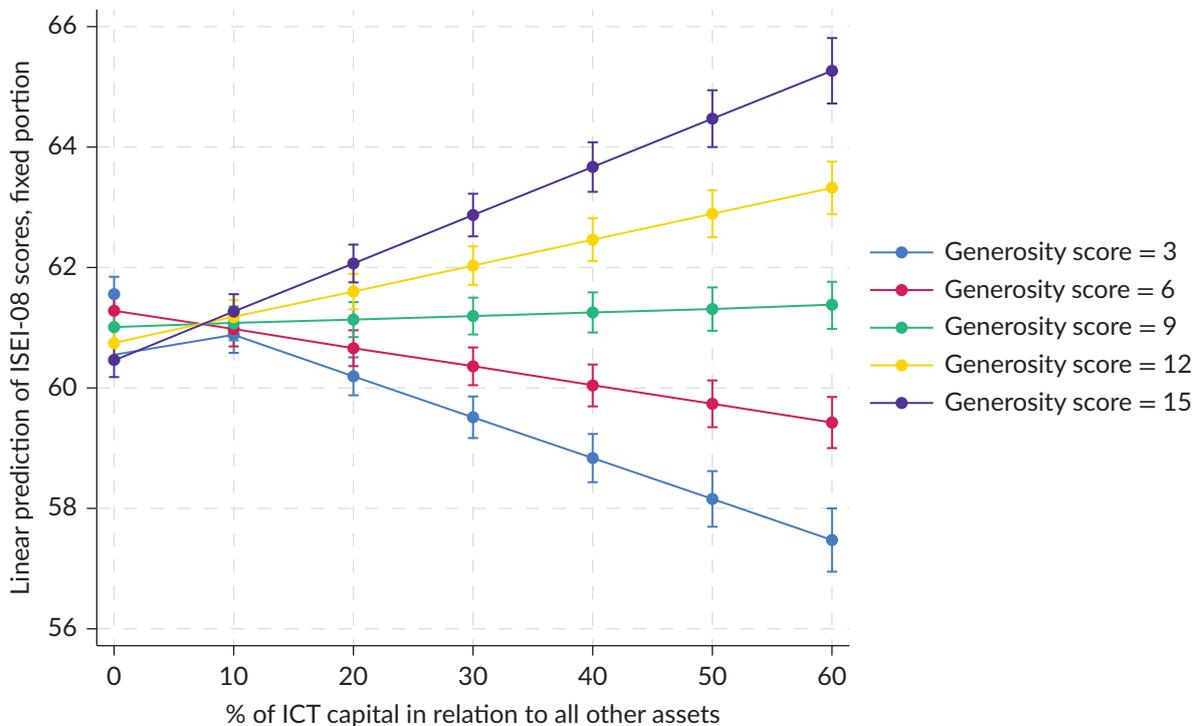

Figure 6. Predicted ISEI-08 scores with 95% confidence intervals for individuals with high SES. Notes: Prediction is based on generosity of unemployment benefits, amount of ICT capital, and the interaction term; higher generosity scores mean that unemployment benefits are more generous.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

By using multilevel models with random intercepts, this article investigated how ICT capital affects the SES of individuals depending on the generosity of unemployment benefits as part of social rights. The analysis is based on 12 European countries and 19 industries in the period from 1998 to 2019. In summary, the results indicate that generous unemployment benefits can hinder employment polarisation and lead rather to occupational upgrading, considering the results of the subgroup analysis. Related to the research questions, the results indicate that unemployment benefits as part of social rights could explain why heterogeneous results are observable empirically, if the institutional setting is insufficiently considered. Additionally, the results allow the interpretation that the generosity of social rights moderates the relationship between ICT capital and ISEI-08 scores in the selected countries and industries from 1998 to 2019. The results also suggest that in a setting of generous unemployment benefits, more use of ICT capital is rather associated with occupational upgrading, which confirms H1. This is due to the significance of the found interaction effects between the generosity of unemployment benefits and the use of ICT capital in the production of goods and services. However, H2 cannot be fully confirmed as the results indicate that within all SES groups, more ICT capital decreases ISEI-08 scores in the absence of generous unemployment benefits. If H2 were correct, the result would indicate a positive regression coefficient of ICT capital independently of the generosity of unemployment benefits for the high-SES group.

The results are consistent with the literature on the effects of institutions in the relationship between technology and employment. In line with Haapanala et al. (2023), Kristal and Cohen (2017), Oesch (2015), and Fernández-Macías (2012), who argue that unions, welfare state regimes, or institutions in general influence the technology–employment nexus, this article finds that the generosity of unemployment benefits mitigates how technology affects employment patterns. Accordingly, the EPSR can be a tool to foster social inclusion by shaping the job structure in such a way that the labour market allocates better jobs to work-dependent individuals.

The results are also in line with other authors who consider the effects of welfare benefits on employment. As argued by Gangl (2006), who finds that unemployment benefits prevent downward occupational mobility, this article finds that generous unemployment benefits can hinder reductions in SES due to technological change. Further, Biegert (2017) confirms that unemployment benefits can be seen as a job search subsidy leading to better job matches, which this article also argued in relation to the digital transition.

There are also some limitations to the results of this article. First, the values for the dependent variable, ISEI-08 scores, are based on three-digit ISCO-08 and ISCO-88 codes, since in the EU-LFS data, four-digit codes are not provided. Using four-digit ISCO codes has the advantage of increasing the accuracy of ISEI-08 scores, as those codes show a greater variety in values than three-digit ISCO codes. Second, a limitation of using EU-LFS is that it is a repeated cross-sectional dataset. This dataset is not suitable for longitudinal analysis, as individuals are not tracked over time. Hence, the use of panel data would increase the validity of the findings in terms of causality. Third, Eastern European countries are not part of this analysis, as CWEP data for those countries is not available in the considered timespan. This may reduce the external validity of the findings beyond the countries and industries considered. Given the distinct historical and socio-political past of Eastern European countries in comparison to other EU countries, this could affect the generalisability of the results.

Future research should also take other welfare state benefits into account. Although unemployment benefits are an important part of social rights, they do not cover all aspects. If recipients drop out of unemployment insurance by reaching the maximum period of entitlement, or if people are not eligible for unemployment benefits (for example, if a person does not fulfil the minimum period of employment for receiving the benefit), then the generosity of minimum income schemes is central to individual employment decisions, especially for individuals with low to medium SES. This may also explain why the found moderating effect is the highest for the high-SES group.

Moreover, from a political economy perspective, it should be noted that the effect of the digital transition on national labour markets could depend on a country's integration into global value chains (GVCs). For instance, the literature indicates that the value along GVCs is not added equally, and instead so-called smile curves are observable. Smile curves indicate that higher value is added at the margins than in the middle of GVCs (Meng et al., 2020). This could also affect job creation, as the demand for labour may differ depending on a country's position in a product's GVC.

The obtained results lead to several conclusions regarding the goals of the EPSR and its implementation. First, the results imply that the impact of the digital transition on employment can be influenced by granting social rights, such as unemployment benefits, to work-dependent individuals. According to the theoretical considerations, the results imply that unemployment benefits influence the labour market behaviour of firms and employees. Hence, the EPSR could be the charter that enables policymakers to intervene in the relationship between technology and employment. Second, if the goal of the EPSR is to provide good employment, then also additional political measures are necessary to ensure that the worse-off are not left behind. For instance, while opting for a scenario of occupational upgrading can increase the SES among the employed, further educational or vocational policies could be needed to upskill individuals who cannot keep pace with the requirements of more skill-demanding jobs. Otherwise, the employment rates of those groups might be reduced. In this regard, there is evidence in the literature that generous unemployment benefits might also lead to more investment in workers' skills by themselves, as they are more likely to take risks in investing in their human capital (Sjöberg, 2008). However, upskilling measures are also limited in their capacities and especially the long-term unemployed could require additional targeted support. Third, from a European perspective, Figure 1 shows that the generosity of unemployment benefits differs among European countries. Accordingly, the digital transition might reinforce existing inequalities between European countries in regard to employment outcomes. If differences in benefit generosity lead to diverging employment trajectories (namely occupational upgrading and employment polarisation), then this could also affect further socio-economic inequalities like wages or employment security that result from different occupational structures. But let us end on a note of optimism. While the digital transition affects employment, there are ways to govern this transition, which could mitigate the negative impact of new technologies on employment.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

This study uses data from Eurostat's EU Labour Force Survey, 1998 to 2019, 18 January 2024 (https://doi.org/10.2907/LFS1983-2022); data access can be requested from Eurostat. EU-KLEMS data are publicly available at the Luiss Lab of European Economics website (https://euklems-intanprod-llee.luiss.it). CWEP data are available after a short registration at https://www.cwep.us. OECD data are also publicly available at the OECD Data Explorer (https://data-explorer.oecd.org). The responsibility for all conclusions drawn from the data lies entirely with the author.

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ARTICLE

The (Non)Place of Migration? The European Pillar of Social Rights and the Representations of People with a Migration Background in Portugal

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Abstract

Recognising migration as a defining feature of contemporary society and politics, this article critically uses the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) as an analytical framework and examines how it relates to migration. Although migration is intrinsically linked to every dimension of the EPSR, we argue that it is largely absent from this framework. Moreover, while existing literature has explored various factors shaping public attitudes toward people with a migration background (PMB) and migration policies, little is known about how PMB represent these issues. Based on 73 semi-structured interviews conducted in Porto, Portugal, this study fills that gap by analysing their perspectives on EPSR principles and on recent migration policy changes in the country, which have become less inclusive. Our findings show that framing migration as a crisis reinforces material and symbolic borders, which PMB simultaneously contest and internalise.

Keywords

European Pillar of Social Rights; European Union policy; migration; Portugal

1. Introduction

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) is an initiative established by the European Union to reinforce its commitment to social justice and equality. It sets out twenty principles and rights that serve as a reference framework to guide member states in enhancing equal opportunities, labour market access to all, fair working

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and living conditions, gender equality, and social protection and inclusion. This framework has faced significant challenges in the aftermath of a pandemic crisis, amid the war in Ukraine and other global conflicts, and as radical right movements, parties, and governments gain traction worldwide. Those at risk of being left behind face growing social, economic, and political marginalisation, deepening existing inequalities. Among these groups, people with a migration background (PMB) face specific challenges in accessing social rights.

Regulating migration from "third-country nationals" and their access to welfare has become a cornerstone of the policy discourses of the EU and its member states (Devitt, 2023; Natter et al., 2020; Scarpa & Schierup, 2018). This article discusses how the dimensions of the EPSR are tackled through migration policies, focusing on Portugal—a member state that has recently undergone significant changes in this domain.

As Portugal celebrates the half-century of the revolution that ended 48 years of dictatorship and established democracy, the country is undergoing significant political shifts, notably the rise of the far-right and the normalisation of extremist movements that had previously remained less visible in the public sphere (Carvalho, 2023). The new political landscape has led to divisive debates over migration and public demonstrations against PMB, marking a departure from Portugal's historically welcoming stance. The ongoing restructuring of migration policy has raised concerns among NGOs, signalling potential setbacks in measures aimed at the inclusion of PMB. This shift contrasts with previous approaches that viewed integration as a comprehensive and essential process, encompassing various sectors such as education, employment, and healthcare (Oliveira & Peixoto, 2022).

This article examines the representations of PMB regarding their migration expectations and lived experiences in Portugal, with particular attention to processes of social inclusion, within the broader context of ongoing social and political transformation and the guiding framework provided by the EPSR. The argument develops as follows. First, we provide an overview of theoretical perspectives on migration research, politics, and policies, with an emphasis on the EU and Portugal. Second, we outline the research methodology, based on qualitative interviews and employing the EPSR as an analytic lens for thematic analysis. We then present the collected data reflecting PMB accounts of their migration experiences and representations of ongoing policy changes. Finally, we conclude with key reflections on the findings, highlighting the need to reaffirm and concretise the social pillar of European policies in the sphere of migration.

2. A Brief State of Migration Research

2.1. The Politics of Migration

This section situates the present analysis within key debates on the politics of migration, focusing on how migration regimes and related discourses shape the lived experiences of PMB. It problematises how migration policies function not merely as administrative tools but as "constitutive" forces (Delitz, 2024) that produce social hierarchies, define who belongs, and construct and manage the figure of the migrant Other.

The notions of migration regime and border regime provide critical frameworks for understanding how migration and border control are intertwined with the dynamics of capitalism. These regimes function not only as systems of control but also as strategic instruments that shape capitalist economies, labour markets, and the class relations they produce, which are often racialised (Mezzadra, 2011).

Border regimes institutionalise, regulate, push back, or deter migratory movement through law, securitisation, and technologies (Everuss, 2023; Kukreja, 2023). Beyond border control and the decision of who to admit into the national territory, migration regimes entail the distinction between citizens and non-citizens and who does and does not have access to social rights. In recent years, rising xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment have intensified both the visibility and the normalisation of exclusionary practices. These regimes not only manage borders and legal categories but also enact forms of organised violence—both symbolic and material—on migrant bodies. This violence renders migrant lives permanently precarious, positioning them as simultaneously needed and unwanted, and reinforcing their status as racialised and disposable Others within the dominant political imaginary. The violence of Europe's borders further illustrates how such violations become tolerated, even expected, when racially coded borders function as constant reminders of the exceptionality built into Europe's proclaimed values of universal human rights and legal equality (Lindberg, 2024; Sajjad, 2022).

In Europe, these regimes are shaped by global power structures created over centuries of colonial and post-colonial relations, which differentiate between the following categories of PMB (Grosfoguel et al., 2015): (a) "colonial/racial subjects of Empire" who are domestic "minorities" that were historically colonised and now live within the coloniser country, remaining at the bottom of racial/ethnic hierarchies due to a long history of racialisation and subjugation (e.g., descendants of colonised populations); (b) "immigrants," typically of European descent, who are racialised as "white" and become part of the dominant population (e.g., Euro-Australians, Euro-Africans, Eastern Europeans); and (c) "colonial immigrants" from peripheral regions not directly colonised by the metropolitan country, but racialised similarly to colonial subjects, facing the extension of existing racist discourses onto them (e.g., nationals from Bangladesh or Nepal living in Portugal). Even when they achieve formal citizenship, colonial/racial subjects and colonial immigrants often remain subjugated, "policed in their communities, incarcerated in large numbers, discriminated against in housing and labour markets, etc." (Grosfoguel et al., 2015, p. 643). These categories illustrate how colonial legacies and racialisation enact "selective and differential inclusion" (Mezzadra, 2006), producing fragmented legal statutes for PMB and normalising structural violence.

2.2. Crises and Migration

Contemporary migration politics takes place in a context of multiple global crises: the crisis of global capitalism, global labour relations, global gender relations, global race relations, global ecology (Bieler, 2025). Crises are intrinsically linked to migration dynamics: They influence migration flows (Bermudez & Brey, 2017; Marques et al., 2021), shape the attitudes of host countries and their populations, and drive political responses (Devitt, 2023; Formenti et al., 2019; Mainwaring, 2014; Mezzadra, 2011), thus impacting the lives of PMB.

In terms of policies, the main determinants of the shifts toward more restrictive immigration policies are economic crises and rises in unemployment, the influence of public opinion, and the radical right (Devitt, 2023). Negative public attitudes toward immigration, which tend to increase at times of crisis, may prompt governments to signal control by promoting stricter policies to control "unwanted" forms of immigration—those whose contribution to the receiving state may be difficult to quantify (Wright, 2014).

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the impacts of the crisis on PMB. They faced an elevated risk of infection due to a range of structural vulnerabilities, such as higher incidence of poverty, overcrowded housing conditions,

and high concentration in jobs where physical distancing is difficult. PMB also experienced disproportionately adverse effects on labour market participation due to generally less stable employment conditions and an overrepresentation in those sectors most affected by the pandemic (OECD, 2020).

The narrative of a "migration crisis" portraying immigration flows as beyond government control is often framed through discourses of exceptionalism, wherein unwanted PMB are cast as invaders, using familiar imagery of floods and unsecurable borders (Mainwaring, 2014, p. 114).

2.3. Migration Policies and the EPSR

The evolution of European migration policies illustrates a transition from labour-focused approaches in the 1960s towards a securitised and supranational governance framework (Costa, 2022). Key milestones include the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), which reinforced EU-level migration governance, the Schengen Agreement (1985) for free movement, and the Lisbon Treaty (2007), which clarified shared competencies between the EU and the member states. The European Pact on Immigration and Asylum adopted in 2008 has sought to harmonise migration management, recognising its economic contributions while reinforcing mechanisms such as the Return Directive and the operations of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). Its successor, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, risks undermining the fundamental rights of PMB, as stricter border controls, expanded detention, and externalised migration management raise concerns, and the focus on returns threatens asylum protections and procedural safeguards (Carrera & Cortinovis, 2019; FRA, 2022). These developments unfold in a context where national migration policies are increasingly shaped under the pressure of European directives (Mezzadra, 2006).

The EPSR, established in 2017, asserts the need to enhance social rights and strengthen the social dimension across all EU policies. Its twenty principles and rights are grouped into three main areas: more and better jobs; skills and equal opportunities; and social protection and inclusion (European Commission, 2021). Migration appears only laterally in this framework, as it is mentioned briefly and instrumentally in reference to retaining third-country nationals already in the EU, attracting skilled third-country workers to address Europe's ageing and shrinking population, and including PMB among under-represented groups to ensure they participate in the labour market to the maximum of their capacity. The place of PMB in the EPSR is, then, in tackling labour shortages, attracting talents, and enhancing employability.

2.3.1. Migration Policies in Portugal: Tensions Between Apparent Openness and Structural Challenges in Rights Implementation

Portugal has historically been a country of emigration, with immigration surpassing emigration only in recent years (Pires et al., 2023). As a recent destination country, the number of foreign residents grew from approximately 100,000 in the 1990s (about 1% of the total population) to around 400,000 by 2017, rising to above 1.6 million in 2024—representing 15% of the population (according to official data from SEF and AIMA).

The country's migration policies reflect a dual approach of openness and control, characteristic of Southern European migration regimes (Costa, 2022). Such an approach has been praised for its openness, tolerance, and "inclusionary path" (Oliveira & Peixoto, 2022), consistently ranking high on the Migration Integration

Policy Index (Solano & Huddleston, 2020) and low on the IESPI scores that measure for immigrant exclusion from social programmes (Koning, 2024). Notably, it shifted from being the second most exclusionary country in the 1990s to the second most inclusionary in 2015 and 2023 (Koning, 2024; Oliveira & Peixoto, 2022). According to Oliveira and Peixoto (2022), this inclusionary trajectory is largely explained by the predominantly post-colonial nature of immigration inflows, which involved relatively limited cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity—aligning with the notion of "colonial subjects" (Grosfoguel et al., 2015).

Among Portugal's special migration mechanisms is the mobility agreement within the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP), composed of formerly colonised territories. Approved in 2021, the agreement led to an amendment to Portugal's immigration law, integrating the commitments established under the CPLP Agreement into national legislation, enhancing mobility and freedom of movement within the CPLP.

At an institutional level, until 2023 the High Commission for Migration was the national agency responsible for promoting equal treatment based on racial or ethnic origin. Its mandate included collaborating in developing, implementing, and evaluating sectoral and cross-cutting policies related to the integration of PMB and ethnic minorities. Other instruments and measures for the integration of PMB are the municipal plans for migrant integration, Portuguese language courses, and employment support programmes like the Immigrant Professional Integration Offices.

Nevertheless, systemic challenges have persisted, as widely documented in scientific literature and highlighted by NGOs, reflecting gaps between the normative and legal framework and its practical application (Oliveira, 2023; Padilla & França, 2020; Topa, 2016). Key difficulties include procedural delays, limited institutional knowledge from local officials and health services, barriers in accessing housing, healthcare, and education, multiple forms of discrimination, particularly in employment, language acquisition issues, lack of childcare, and problems with recognition of qualifications and experience (Oliveira, 2023; Peixoto, 2019). Despite the inclusive migration policy, Portugal has struggled to implement legally defined rights, revealing discrepancies between policy ambition and practical enforcement—what may be described as a gap between rich policies and poor practices (D. Lopes & Vicente, 2024).

Additionally, the country tends to demonstrate a systemic tolerance toward informality and irregular migration (Costa, 2022; Formenti et al., 2019), as well as towards structural discrimination and stereotyping based on ethnic and racial origin (Almeida et al., 2023; D. Lopes & Vicente, 2024), while measures to combat discrimination and racism remain limited (Padilla & França, 2020). Kilomba (2022) states that Portugal is a country that denies or even glorifies its colonial history. Other authors argue that the structural nature of racism in the country has paved the way for the consolidation and normalisation of openly racist discourses in recent years (Almeida et al., 2023).

In line with the literature (Hutter & Kriesi, 2021), as the number and diversity of PMB in Portugal have grown substantially in recent years, migration has also become a highly politicised issue, particularly in light of a now notable presence of "colonial immigrants" from peripheral regions that were not directly colonised as a whole by the country (Grosfoguel et al., 2015) and are not Portuguese-speaking, such as the Indian subcontinent (for example, 6.6% of the total immigrant stock is from India and 4.3% from Nepal; see AIMA, 2024).

In 2023, a new Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA) was created, replacing the former High Commission for Migration and the Immigration and Borders Service (SEF), with the latter's policing functions reallocated to other national security and police entities. This institutional reform aimed at de-securitising the state's approach to international migration by distinctly separating migration management from internal security considerations (Sousa, 2024). However, AIMA's dual mandate of managing both border control and non-discrimination initiatives presents significant challenges, as these areas are often difficult to reconcile and resources are disproportionately allocated to border enforcement (D. Lopes & Vicente, 2024).

These changes have coincided with the election of a right-wing government in March 2024 and the rise of the far-right as Portugal's third largest political force—growing from a single seat in 2019 to 50 out of 230 in 2024—marking a significant shift in the country's political landscape and a move toward less inclusive migration policies. Recent policy changes suggest a tightening of migration governance, including increased bureaucratic barriers for legal residence, stricter criteria for family reunification, and growing political and institutional emphasis on border control and security. One of the immediate actions of the newly formed government was to revoke the "expression of interest" mechanism, a pathway to residence permit for non-EU citizens employed in Portugal (Decree-Law No. 37-A/2024). The decision ended a key regularisation tool for PMB, justified by claims that it triggered a knock-on effect attracting more immigrants (Costa, 2025). From 2010 to 2023, this mechanism allowed eligible individuals to initiate legalisation from within Portugal; under the new rules, applications must now be made from abroad prior to entry. Another ongoing policy change is restricting the access of non-resident foreigners to the National Health System. As in other European countries, Portugal has seen a reinforcement and proliferation of borders, reconfigured across diverse sites such as neighbourhoods, the labour market, healthcare, prisons, and state offices where membership and nationality are certified and reasserted (Formenti et al., 2019).

3. Methods

This exploratory study is developed within the framework of the MIGAP Project—MigrA(c)tion in Porto, aimed at understanding the experiences of PMB residing in Porto and examining their challenges in the migration and inclusion process. Porto was chosen due to its rapid demographic changes and growing migrant diversity. It recorded the highest percentage growth in migrant population among all municipalities, with a 52.8% increase compared to the previous year (AIMA, 2024). It is also marked by rising far-right demonstrations and attacks against PMB, highlighting tensions between national policies and local integration efforts—making it a key site to examine the gap between policy and practice.

The study is guided by the research paradigm of constructionism, which shapes the research design, data collection, and analysis. Rather than viewing participants' experiences as objective facts to be extracted, we seek to understand their narratives as socially and contextually constructed—emerging through language, interaction, and structural positioning (Parker, 1998). We also acknowledge the significance of our positionalities in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Yip, 2024). As Global North researchers, with varying proximity to migration experiences, we are not neutral observers. Our social locations influence field access, trust dynamics with participants, and narrative interpretation. To address this, we engage in continuous reflexivity through field notes, team discussions, and critical examination of power asymmetries in knowledge production.

3.1. Participants

A total of 73 interviews were conducted with PMB in Porto: 42 women (57.5%) and 31 men (42.5%), aged between 19 and 63, with an average age of 35, consistent with national data (AIMA, 2024). Most participants are from South America (34.3%) and Central America (30.1%), followed by Africa, North Africa, Asia, and Europe. Brazilian nationals constitute the largest group (31.5%). Accounting for nearly half the sample, 35 participants belong to CPLP countries. In terms of education, most participants ($n = 43$) had completed or were pursuing higher education, while 24 had completed secondary education and two had basic education. Regarding employment status, 48 participants are working (65.8%).

3.2. Procedures

Following ethical research and data protection principles, participants were recruited through convenience sampling via social media and partner organisations, based on a set of eligibility criteria: being a third-country national (non-EU); being a resident or former resident in Porto or surrounding municipalities; aged 18 or older; fluent in Portuguese, Spanish, English, or French; and living in Portugal for between three months and five years. These criteria were chosen to focus on newcomers and third-country nationals who are structurally positioned at the margins of the European citizenship regime, who often face heightened legal, bureaucratic, and symbolic exclusion and are especially impacted by migration policies in their access to rights, services, and social belonging. The criteria also ensure that participants had recent migration experiences within Portugal while reflecting the linguistic diversity and regional specificity of the Porto metropolitan area. Snowball sampling was used to expand the participant pool, as participants referred others who met the inclusion criteria, aiming for maximum sample diversity.

A semi-structured interview script was used, translated into Portuguese, English, French and Spanish. It was divided into two sections: the first addressing the research topics and the second focusing on the participant's biographical data. The script served as a flexible guide, allowing adaptation based on the interviewee's responses and context.

Interviews were conducted between May and July 2024, either in person or online, depending on participants' convenience. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. To ensure anonymity, a coding system was used, combining the interview number, gender, and initials of the country of birth. For example, [P38hAng] refers to interview no. 38, with a male (*homem*) participant (h) from Angola.

3.3. Data Analysis

Each interview was fully transcribed and analysed following a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as developed by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2022, 2024). The analysis was primarily guided by theory, drawing on key concepts from the literature review and the main axes of the EPSR to interpret participants' narratives on social rights, integration, and policy implementation. At the same time, inductive insights emerging from the data were integrated into dialogue with prior knowledge, allowing for a dynamic and situated analytical process. This blend of deductive and inductive engagement is consistent with the flexible and iterative nature of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researchers engaged deeply with the transcripts, following RTA's six-phase process: (a) familiarisation with the data; (b) generation of initial codes; (c) generating initial

themes; (d) developing and reviewing themes; (e) refining, defining and naming themes; and (f) writing up the analysis into a coherent narrative. Themes were actively produced through our reflexive engagement with the data, attending to the nuanced, contextual, and sometimes contradictory ways in which PMB experience social rights and belonging.

4. Findings: The Paradoxes Between the Spirit of the EPSR and Practice as Perceived Through Migration Policies in Portugal

The interviews capture diverse perspectives from PMB of various profiles concerning their migration experiences in Portugal. The RTA framed by the EPSR identified three main themes—(a) more and better jobs; (b) skills and equal opportunities; (c) social protection and inclusion—and a set of subthemes (cf. Table 1). While recognising participants' agency, the findings are analysed with an emphasis on macro-structural factors and a constructionist analytical lens.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Subthemes
More and better jobs	The expression of interest: a gateway to opportunity
	The expression of interest: collapse of a pathway
Skills and equal opportunities	The reputation of being a welcoming country
	Special statutes for attracting new talent
Social protection and inclusion	Perceived crisis and calls for restriction
	Bureaucratic borders and gatekeepers
	Colonial discourses and expectations of subservience

4.1. More and Better Jobs

This theme is composed of two subthemes. Overall, it reflects how access to employment and legal regularisation in Portugal are deeply shaped by policy mechanisms—most notably, the expression of interest procedure. Participants view access to work not only as a means of financial stability but also as a pathway to social inclusion and legal recognition. The first subtheme explores the central role of the expression of interest, which is widely perceived as a crucial entry point for migrants seeking to regularise their status and integrate into the labour market. The second subtheme examines the impact of the procedure's discontinuation, which introduces new layers of uncertainty and frustration. For many, the removal of this policy measure signifies a reversal of earlier inclusion efforts and raises concerns about future migrants' ability to access stable employment and legal status.

4.1.1. The Expression of Interest: A Gateway to Opportunity

The expression of interest procedure is a key instrument enabling access to employment and legal residency. Participants describe this mechanism as accessible, efficient, and emblematic of Portugal's welcoming stance and willingness to attract and integrate migrant labour:

There was something called an expression of interest, and people could come if they wanted to work. And then he said: "This is what I'm going to do." [P60mVen]

Participants who entered through the expression of interest describe the mechanism as central to their ability to regularise their status and build a life in Portugal:

Here in Portugal, you enter, you can submit an expression of interest and look for a job. I've already done this, and now I have everything in order. [P27hCol]

The mechanism is framed as part of a broader narrative of opportunity, aligning with the EPSR's framing of migrants as contributors to economic development.

Honestly, we are the ones paying taxes. [P69mEqu-Por]

However, this inclusion is also described as conditional—tied closely to one's productivity, employability, and bureaucratic navigation skills.

4.1.2. The Expression of Interest: Collapse of a Pathway

This sense of opportunity, however, is also shaped by urgency and fragility. The recent discontinuation of the measure is perceived as a betrayal of the initial openness that had defined their migration experience, generating feelings of uncertainty, frustration, and concern for others hoping to follow the same path.

Many view its removal as a rupture in the promise of legal and economic integration. For those who had successfully regularised their status through the mechanism, there is a sense of having "just made it"—but also concern for future arrivals:

The removal of the expression of interest law has harmed many immigrants. People like me arrived here and, thanks to this law, I was able to submit my application, legalise my status quickly, and integrate into society. I found work, secured my own place, studied Portuguese, and handled essential tasks like opening a bank account—everything depended on that document. For future immigrants who want to build a life here, it won't be as easy. It's going to be much, much harder. I think I'd be one of the lucky ones. [P55hVen]

While the expression of interest initially supported the EPSR goals, its collapse reflects how labour market access and regularisation mechanisms remain vulnerable to political and economic shifts, often leaving PMB in a vulnerable situation.

4.2. Skills and Equal Opportunities

The second theme explores how participants interpret the EU's commitment to "building a Union of Equality" considering their expectations and lived experiences in Portugal. Although this commitment is embedded in the EPSR and broader EU policy discourse, participants' accounts reveal a growing mismatch between these ideals and their everyday realities—particularly in the context of recent political and administrative shifts in Portugal.

Two subthemes emerge from participants' discourses, expressing a contrast between the EPSR's discourse of opportunity and equality and the lived experiences marked by systemic inconsistencies, bureaucratic barriers, and growing disillusionment. The first subtheme examines the gap between participants' expectations of Portugal as an "open door" and the various challenges they encountered. The second subtheme focuses on mechanisms that function as pull factors, related to "attracting new talent," such as the international student status.

4.2.1. The Reputation of Being a Welcoming Country

This theme describes how participants engage with the EPSR's promise of "new opportunities for all" and reflect on Portugal's perceived openness as a migration destination. The perception of Portugal as "the friendliest country in Europe" [P24hCRi] appears to play a significant role in migration decisions. Participants often describe Portugal as more welcoming than other European countries, citing its simplified regularisation procedures, positive international reputation, and the relative ease of accessing documentation:

> Portugal makes it easier to obtain proper documentation. [P65mCol]

> We knew that Portugal is one of the friendliest countries in terms of migration. And I always thought that it was better to do everything correctly. They told me: "If you go to Spain, you can work in the black economy and eventually obtain papers, but the process takes about three to four years." [P27hCol]

From the perspective of PMB, the decision to migrate is influenced by both rational and emotional factors, shaped by a combination of migrant-centred and structural factors (Oliveira et al., 2017), as well as favourable economic dynamics (Costa, 2025) and the migration policies (Dervin et al., 2011) of the host country. A migration policy perceived as more accessible and welcoming appears to be a key factor in PMB selecting Portugal as a destination:

> I've heard a lot of people talk about Portugal as a country that has opened its doors to all nationalities. So that's what prompted me to plan the trip directly to Portugal. [29hArg]

The country's reputation of openness has both a relational dimension—where the Portuguese are seen as welcoming—and a practical one—as Portugal facilitates legal documentation. However, amid ongoing policy and administrative changes, many participants reflect on how Portugal, once perceived as an "open door," is shifting toward more restrictive and exclusionary approaches. Their accounts of increasingly bureaucratic, opaque, and unequal processes challenge the notion of a union grounded in equality and fairness.

One participant expressed concern about the consequences of these changes, particularly regarding housing conditions and undocumented migrants:

> Now that immigration has been restricted, some people are living here legally, while others remain undocumented. There are houses rented legally with proper contracts, but inside, many people without legal status are staying—some might even be involved in criminal activities, though we don't really know. This situation should be investigated. In some cases, 20 to 21 people are living in a single house. The owner rents it legally, but in an unofficial way, there might be as many as 50 people staying there. [P61hInd]

These experiences are not merely logistical barriers but also *symbolic borderings*, where migrants are made to feel contingent, undeserving, or invisible within the very system that claims to protect equality. These patterns are not anomalies but expressions of a system that produces differentiated access to rights based on race, class, origin, and legal status (Kukreja, 2023; Mezzadra, 2011).

Finally, the theme reveals a deeper tension: While the EPSR projects an inclusive, rights-based vision for Europe, participants' lived experiences highlight the limitations of that vision as it is mediated by national policies shaped by austerity, administrative bottlenecks, and shifting political priorities. The idea of a "Union of Equality," in this sense, emerges less as an experienced reality and more as an aspirational discourse—one that many migrants find increasingly difficult to reconcile with their daily encounters with exclusion, delay, and uncertainty. The interviews suggest a growing perception that Portugal's migration policies have become increasingly restrictive.

One participant articulates a strong and empowered stance against the tendency to border restrictions, asserting that migration will persist despite such measures:

> To understand people, you have to listen to them. You can't just close the doors, remain silent, and walk away. The process of globalisation that began…is not going to stop. Authorities may try to limit it, control it, or even suppress it, but the desire for change, the aspiration to seek something better, will continue to exist in people. So, the real question is whether we choose to approach it with humanity or not. And that is why it is a political issue, in my opinion. [P15mBra]

4.2.2. Special Statutes for Attracting New Talent

The discursive alignment between the EPSR's goal of "attracting new talent" and national policy mechanisms, such as the expression of interest, reflects the instrumental framing of PMB as tied to labour market utility and economic performance. While this framing may facilitate access to residency, it simultaneously constrains full social and political belonging by linking rights to productivity. It is often dependent on employability, legal literacy, and timing.

Education-based entry routes, particularly through scholarships and international student statutes, are framed as pathways to legal stability. In higher education, the special competition for international students applies to non-Portuguese nationals holding either a qualification granting access to higher education in the country of origin or a Portuguese secondary diploma (or equivalent). Several interviewees report entering Portugal through this international student statute, often benefiting from scholarships.

This pathway appears to have facilitated both the arrival and legalisation of international students, particularly due to the support provided by the Embassy during the pre-migration phase:

> You apply for a student visa, submit all the required documentation to the Embassy, and they issue the student visa. I entered Portugal with a student visa—no work visa, no CPLP visa, just a student visa. They give you a deadline—six months, if I recall correctly—to go to SEF, now AIMA, and apply for a residence visa, making the transition. [P58mBra]

Yet these routes often benefit individuals with higher cultural capital or stronger institutional support, and participants frequently contrast their relatively smooth processes with the challenges faced by their family members, particularly spouses, who, not benefiting from this special status, face significantly greater challenges in obtaining legal residency.

4.3. Social Protection and Inclusion

The EPSR promotes an ideal of universal social protection and inclusion, aligning with Portugal's traditionally inclusive approach to migration policy. However, there is a persistent gap between rich policy frameworks and their implementation (D. Lopes & Vicente, 2024). Against the backdrop of recent political and institutional shifts in Portugal, participants' experiences reveal that access to rights is less straightforward than expected, with the EPSR principles appearing increasingly as a blurred mirage. This final theme reveals how social integration and inclusion remain partial, fragmented and unequal, as evidenced across three subthemes. The first emphasises the migration crisis narrative, based on perceptions of overload and rising calls to restrict PMB access, indicating a rupture in the political and social consensus on immigration. The second subtheme expresses how bureaucratic borders and gatekeeping undermine inclusion. The third reflects on internalised colonial discourses and their influence on processes of symbolic self-assimilation.

4.3.1. Perceived Crisis and Calls for Restriction

A complex tension emerges in participants' narratives: while they recount personal and systemic challenges, they also echo dominant public discourses portraying Portugal as facing a "migration crisis" and calling for stricter border controls. This internalisation of mainstream rhetoric contrasts with moments in the interviews where strong support for openness and inclusive policies is expressed. Consistent with data on Portuguese nationals—42% of whom overestimate the number of PMB in the country (R. C. Lopes et al., 2024)—participants also tend to overestimate the size of the PMB population:

> Portugal is a small country, isn't it? I think we're already a bit overwhelmed....Portugal kept its doors open to everyone, and a lot of people came in. But we don't have the capacity to support everyone. I mean, we're a population of 10 million, right? And I don't know how many immigrants there are—maybe more than 2 or 3 million. [P52hVen]

Some participants reproduce dominant narratives about migration "overload" and the need for stronger border controls. This ambivalence illustrates how internalised discourses of "deservingness" operate even among those who are structurally marginalised. For instance, many participants, from diverse backgrounds, reproduce the dichotomy between the "good migrants" who come to work and integrate, and "bad migrants" who allegedly contribute to insecurity or strain public systems. These distinctions align with broader societal tendencies to individualise structural problems and reinforce racialised hierarchies, even within migrant communities.

Participants also express their agreement with the fact that the Portuguese system is ill-equipped to handle the current level of immigration: "The country itself has a lot of immigrants and cannot cope with all the immigrants it has" [P59hBra]. This view is frequently accompanied by the belief that it is essential to regularise the status of migrants already residing in Portugal and potentially tighten immigration policies for future arrivals:

I would legalise those already here....I would close the door, as it was before...and then I would legalise...those who are already here...offering them...qualifications...and then I would reassess the issue of entry. That's how I think today, because...Portugal has become very...overloaded. [P46mBra]

This is in line with a populist rhetoric disseminated over recent years that frames the previous migration approach as a policy of "wide-open doors." As Costa (2025) shows, the rise of openly anti-immigration discourse has reshaped Portugal's political landscape, eroding the historical consensus on immigration policy while fuelling social tensions and the polarisation of public debate. This shift appears to influence how both nationals and PMB perceive migration, as reflected in several participants' narratives and emotional responses.

4.3.2. Bureaucratic Borders and Gatekeepers

Through a reflexive reading of participants' narratives, a recurring concern emerges around recent structural shifts in migration policy, which are widely perceived as amplifying conditions for precariousness and irregularity. Participants frequently describe experiences of administrative inaccessibility, long delays, uncertainty, and complexity of the regularisation process. These accounts reveal how institutional failures undermine migrants' sense of security, dignity, and trust. Such narratives suggest that structural inefficiencies not only actively sustain vulnerability, fuelling informal economies and increasing the risk of exploitation:

We were calling and calling because the only way you can get an appointment is through a call. So we were calling all day. I remember that I made more than 1000 calls in just one day, 1000, and it was unbelievable. I made more than 1000 attempts...that day and I didn't get any [reply]. So it was really frustrating because we were looking for that, but we didn't get it. We also saw people that work for that and say they get [an] appointment for you. [P08mHon]

Participants also express frustration over the inefficiency and lack of clear communication from AIMA:

Some changes were implemented recently, and they were communicated effectively. However, I wish they were more transparent about their intentions instead of creating uncertainty and doubt about what will happen. Additionally, there needs to be a greater capacity to address inquiries. You can call AIMA and send emails all day yet never receive a response. They should increase the capacity of their staff and improve their system because, given the number of people arriving in the country, the current setup is simply not sustainable. [P02hHon]

Another participant discourse draws attention to perceived systemic inconsistencies, particularly regarding disparities in how applications are processed:

I see that the problem is not on my hand—it's with AIMA. They always say the system isn't working. Sometimes they tell you that your case is still being processed, while others have already received their residence permits. And you just wonder: What exactly is going on? [P19hMar]

The sense of institutional arbitrariness leads participants to rely on paid services from lawyers or unofficial intermediaries to navigate the system, in the face of the closing of the system and bureaucratic complexity:

> With the transition from SEF to AIMA, things became much more difficult. It caused me a lot of anxiety because I never imagined I would find myself in a situation where I was undocumented. And yet, I remained in that situation for a year....After several failed attempts, three months passed, then six months, and eventually, I decided to hire a lawyer—something that many people do. Since SEF was no longer assisting me, I had no other choice but to pay for legal help. [P06hBra]

Other participants describe the necessity of informal payments to obtain essential documents:

> To get my NISS and NIF, I had to pay. If you don't pay, they simply won't issue them. So, we had to do it as well. [P19hMar]

> To get an appointment, I had to pay someone. [P58mBra]

Regarding another policy measure—the special status granted to individuals from the CPLP—participants' narratives generally portrayed the initiative as a positive step. However, this feeling was often accompanied by frustration stemming from the practical challenges associated with its implementation. Several participants' narratives seem to question the policy's actual impact on integration, arguing that the legal status it confers offers limited tangible benefits. Instead, they highlighted how it reveals the persistence of bureaucratic barriers that continue to hinder full social inclusion:

> If they grant you the right to migrate, why is it so difficult to legalise your status? And why was the CPLP created if, with CPLP status, you can't do much? It's a right that isn't fully guaranteed. My sister-in-law had to return to Brazil without being able to legalise herself or her children. So, this right isn't truly ensured. [P06hBra]

Some participants also noted a lack of awareness and knowledge among officials in public services, private companies, and other institutions:

> The CPLP residence permit is an official document, a valid one, right? But when you present it, you sometimes face challenges. Some institutions are well-informed, while others are not. [P47hAng]

> I really noticed a lack of information....Many people, including companies and public organisations, didn't know what CPLP status was when it was presented to them. [P01mBra]

One of the consequences of the shift from a policy described as an "inclusionary path" (Oliveira & Peixoto, 2022) to a more restrictive one appears to be a diminished possibility of realising the inclusion envisioned in the EPSR. In fact, and in line with the literature on border regimes, there are increasing indications that restrictive migration and integration policies not only limit access to rights but also actively reproduce exclusionary dynamics, reinforcing social and spatial boundaries. In addition to borders functioning as mechanisms for regulating the movement of goods and people—particularly those whose mobility can be commodified (Monteiro, 2022)—new forms of commodification are emerging, especially through the role of

intermediaries. The reliance on intermediaries to navigate these complex systems further exacerbates inequalities among PMB, as not all individuals possess the financial means to afford such services, thereby deepening hierarchies within migrant populations. Thus, the border seems to be a mechanism that perpetuates the ongoing precarity of people in transit (Monteiro, 2022).

4.3.3. Colonial Discourses and Expectations of Subservience

The concept of the Other and the process of othering are widespread and deeply embedded in social relations. Participants describe difficulties integrating beyond work environments and express feeling socially excluded from the broader Portuguese community:

> It's very difficult to connect with Portuguese people outside of work contexts. [P68mCol]

This division between "us" and "them" is also incorporated by PMB, helping to explain how they may come to view newcomers as "them," thereby positioning themselves as part of the "us." Such a shift can function as a strategy for aligning with the mainstream group, sometimes resulting in cautious or ambivalent discourses that distance them from more recent migrants. However, while some participants express apprehension about new arrivals, others view migration as an ordinary aspect of life—so commonplace that it warrants no special attention.

Several participants express the belief that some people "come with a desire to work, I am one of them, and to try to grow, to make the country they are in grow. Others, supposedly, come with these negative behaviours" [P44mAng]. They argue that the latter negatively impact those who have come to Portugal with the intention of contributing positively and seeking legitimate opportunities for a better life. One participant expresses disapproval of an incident involving compatriots in a Portuguese city:

> The Timorese unfortunately brought a bad name to our country, doing….I don't know, what they did is a disgrace, they went to fight there in Fátima, at midnight. I don't know if you saw it on the news. [P41mTim]

Another participant voiced concern that not all PMB arrive with constructive intentions, emphasising that such behaviour negatively affects the entire PMB community:

> Not all people come looking for a better future. Not all people come to work, to take their families forward. Not all. They come looking to do other things. The bad. It's already happening in many parts of Porto….They steal. I've already heard that on August 24th, the Moroccans were stealing a lot. So, it's complicated. And it affects everyone. We—who came to work to look for a better future. [P37hCol]

Some participants demonstrate internalised perceptions of assimilation, a phenomenon widely discussed in the literature. Often linked to the American "melting pot" ideal, assimilation policies seek to create a unified nation and integrate PMB by erasing cultural differences and promoting cultural homogenisation. However, such approaches are widely criticised for reinforcing segregation and marginalisation rather than genuine inclusion (Rocha-Trindade, 2015). European migration policies have been characterised as aligned with an intercultural model that values cultural diversity not as a threat but as a source of mutual enrichment and

social cohesion (Rocha-Trindade, 2015). While the EPSR reflects this model principles, it does not explicitly address interculturality in the relations between nationals and PMB.

However, discourses of subservience or voluntary assimilation, as described by Monteiro (2022), continue to shape the experiences and identities of PMB. These discourses reinforce the symbolic function of borders as dividing lines—not only geographically, but also culturally and racially. A key example of this is the persistent division between the white majority and the racialised Other, echoing Fanon's reflections on how colonial subjects internalise whiteness as a condition for social acceptance. In contemporary migration and integration contexts, this dynamic is reflected in the expectation that PMB must conform to dominant cultural norms and behaviours to be granted recognition and access to rights—thereby reproducing hierarchies under the guise of inclusion. This internalisation is evident in the words of a participant who expresses the need for migrants to strictly adhere to host country norms:

> You must arrange the migrants together. You must tell them. They must not be like that. They must respect the rules and regulations of Portugal. You must respect the Portuguese. You must respect their laws....So, it shouldn't be like that....You shouldn't keep a knife in your bag....And I'm in Portugal, do you understand? I must be a part of the Portuguese citizens, I must support the laws and rules and regulations....I don't want to cause any problem which gives a bad name to migrants. [P72hBan]

This is a common sentiment expressed throughout history towards refugees or migrants:

> The "developed" host countries expect the refugee to play his role well: to show gratitude for the hospitality, to make vows of eternal love for the host country, and to be willing to go and live in one of the deserted villages in an equally deserted interior, from where the nationals have already fled, and to declare on television that everything is better than his homeland. (Justo, 2021, p. 10)

PMB often internalise the need to adopt the hegemonic discourse of conformity, positioning respect for host country laws and norms as a moral duty, while implicitly distancing themselves from others perceived as non-compliant.

5. Final Remarks

Although migration is a secular and universal phenomenon, it remains marginal in the EPSR, where it is addressed primarily through the lens of labour market utility and economic value. This non-place is particularly troubling, given that the EPSR represents a pivotal moment in reintroducing social issues to the European agenda. Our study highlights how Portugal is consolidating a trend, already visible in recent years, toward a more restrictive and controlled migration policy, reflecting a broader pattern observed across several member states. The persistent framing of migration as a crisis is contributing to the reinforcement of both material and symbolic borders.

This study contributes to national and international debates by shedding light on how the principles of the EPSR are perceived and experienced by PMB living in Porto. It fills a gap in Portuguese research by focusing on migrants' perspectives on EU rights frameworks and ongoing shifts toward less inclusive policies and brings a Southern European voice into critical discussions about the exclusions embedded in EU social policy.

Our findings are context-specific and interpretative, providing a situated understanding of how broader policy frameworks are experienced, negotiated, and contested in the everyday lives of PMB. The findings align with the literature on border regimes, illustrating how closure policies reinforce precariousness, exclusion, and reliance on paid intermediaries. As such, this analysis provides important insights for future research and the development of more inclusive migration policies. The representations discussed stem from PMB, who reflect on Portugal's evolving political approach to migration. Although scientific research on migration is often sidelined in policymaking (Natter & Welfens, 2024), we argue that an informed and evidence-based approach is essential to shaping future migration policies. In an era of polycrisis, marked by multiple, intensified, and interdependent global challenges, it is crucial to question the prevailing societal models. It is particularly urgent to reaffirm and concretise the social dimension of European policies.

This study has some limitations, considering its non-representative sample, which did not capture the full diversity of PMB in Porto. Convenience sampling, primarily through social media and community contacts, may have introduced bias and limited the range of perspectives. Future research should consider more systematic sampling methods to improve diversity and strengthen the robustness of findings.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ARTICLE

Skilled Transitions: Digital Training Programmes as Active Labour Market Strategies in Rural Portugal

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Abstract

The transition from school to work in rural areas presents distinct challenges compared to urban environments, shaped by constraints on spatial mobility, limited employment opportunities, insufficient training provision, and cultural expectations, particularly concerning gender roles. The Covid-19 pandemic and the expansion of remote work initially appeared to mitigate some of these barriers for digitally literate individuals with access to adequate infrastructure. However, many young people in rural areas lack the necessary digital skills and reliable internet connectivity to engage in remote employment, rendering digitalisation a potential obstacle rather than a facilitator of labour market integration. As a broader socio-economic process, digitalisation has the potential to expand employment and training opportunities for young people. The pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital tools by public employment services, requiring significant adaptation by both service providers and users. In response, the Portuguese government has implemented a strategic framework encompassing training programmes and internships aimed at unemployed individuals with at least the minimum level of mandatory education. Despite the benefits of digitalised services, rural NEETs (persons not in employment, education, or training) frequently require more personalised, in-person support to navigate labour market barriers effectively. This study adopts a comparative approach to examine two active employment programmes targeting unemployed young adults in rural Portugal: one centred on remote digital training and the other on digital upskilling through internships. Through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with public employment services technicians, mentors, and NEETs aged 25–30, the findings underscore the relevance of these interventions, particularly for highly educated NEETs experiencing skills mismatches.

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1. Introduction

The digital transition has significantly altered the job market, necessitating increasingly specialised technological competencies. This phenomenon (which is amplified by automation and digitalisation) has generated new opportunities, but it presents considerable challenges also, particularly regarding social and economic inequalities. These transformations render it essential to implement public policies that foster digital empowerment and ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups—namely women, young NEETs (not in employment, education, or training), and workers in rural areas. Portugal faces a particularly daunting scenario concerning the digital skills shortage, which impacts not just the competitiveness of the ICT sector, but also the employability of a substantial portion of the population. To address these gaps, the Portuguese government has initiated innovative strategies under the Digital Transition Action Plan and INCoDe.2030, with the Young + Digital and UPSKILL—Digital Skills & Jobs programmes being particularly noteworthy.

The Young + Digital programme is specifically aimed at young adults between the ages of 18 and 35 who are at risk of exclusion from the job market and the education system, promoting essential digital skills. The UPSKILL programme is aimed mainly at unemployed or underemployed adults, often between the ages of 25 and 40, offering advanced technical training in areas such as programming, cybersecurity, and systems management. Although both programmes are aligned with European priorities in terms of digital transition and inclusion in employment, it is important to stress that both Young + Digital and UPSKILL go beyond the traditional framework of the Youth Guarantee in that they cover a wider age range than that of the original target group (15–29-year-olds). This distinction is relevant in order to avoid conceptual confusion regarding the target audience and the policies underlying each initiative. Nevertheless, and given the context of late adulthood transitions that is typical in Southern European countries (Parada, 2021), we consider these programmes to be perfectly aligned with the aims of the Youth Guarantee. Both stand out due to their public–private collaboration model, which ensures a close link between the training provided and the concrete needs of companies. However, despite the progress made, the results from both initiatives reveal persistent challenges. For instance, certification rates remain relatively low, pointing to significant barriers throughout the training path, including financial difficulties and gaps in pedagogical support. In addition, gender inequalities endure, with women being under-represented in technical fields like programming and cybersecurity, although they have a stronger presence in areas related to digital communication and design. This situation highlights the need for ongoing efforts to address these disparities.

The Young + Digital and UPSKILL initiatives gain increased significance amid a noticeable disconnect between the competencies acquired through training programmes and the actual requirements of the job market. This incongruity underscores the need to integrate lifelong learning policies with broader economic strategies that, simultaneously, enhance employability and foster the creation of skilled positions. Given that digitalisation can either provide tools for the empowerment of young people or be a source of exclusion for those lacking digital skills (Eurofound, 2024b), there is a need to better understand how digital training programmes work on the ground. This article therefore explores the ramifications of these programmes as tools for digital inclusion and professional retraining in Portugal, attempting to clarify how they reconcile supranational policy pressures with

local contingencies. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data (including secondary data and policy examination, as well as interviews and focus groups with coordinators and participants) in 2023, the analysis delineates effective practices, identifies limitations, and highlights areas in need of improvement. The objective is to ascertain the extent to which these public policies have proven effective in advancing digital inclusion and employability, thus yielding valuable insights for the formulation of future training programmes and contributing to the international discourse on this topic. The article begins with a literature review section looking at lifelong learning, followed by a review of European policies in the field of youth employment. After a methodological section, we analyse the two case studies of Young + Digital and Upskill. Finally, we provide some insights informed by the previous comparison.

2. Lifelong Learning, Employment, and Digitalisation: The New Knowledge Triad

The transition towards knowledge-based economies necessitates a consistent effort to provide ongoing skills development. This is essential to maintain economic growth, competitiveness, social cohesion, and equitable opportunities (Holford et al., 2023). Boeren (2016) emphasises that lifelong learning has become a "guiding principle" for wider engagement in diverse aspects of life, namely through its association with human capital and the development of a skilled workforce able to meet the performance demands of the knowledge economy. Hence, lifelong learning participation is seen as supporting people in adapting to new technologies and societal shifts (James et al., 2022), and most of all, enhancing their employment opportunities. This emphasis on economic productivity has led to a shift in the policy discourse from employment to employability (Clancy & Holford, 2023, p. 42).

Lifelong learning policies often prioritise addressing perceived deficiencies within the school system, as evidenced by high dropout rates, subpar learning outcomes, and skill mismatches (Holford, 2023), in a discourse that underscores the significance of continuously updating skills to meet the requirements of the evolving global economy. This deficit approach, however, tends to place the responsibility for adapting on the individual, aligning with the post-Fordist work ethic, which demands that individuals cultivate themselves as productive subjects to meet the demands of the labour market (Farrugia, 2022). For the same author, this process highlights the subjectification function of work. This concept emphasises how work shapes individuals' identities and aspirations, potentially contributing to their acceptance of precarious working conditions and exploitation, particularly for those in vulnerable positions, such as vulnerable youth. On the other hand, to consider individual agency as the sole factor determining lifelong learning participation overlooks the significant role of other dynamics at play. From a sociological perspective, structural factors impact participation in second-chance programmes and lifelong training. Educational attainment, gender, income, location, and occupation significantly influence participation patterns. This is especially relevant in the case of rural NEET youth, who often face several barriers to education and labour market participation related to mobility, limited training options, and few employment vacancies (Simões & Erdogan, 2024). Institutional and delivery aspects, such as course modes and lack of flexibility, may also hinder training participation, as well as the absence of financial or workplace incentives. Finally, the lack of accessible and relevant information on learning opportunities may be also a significant barrier, particularly for those who are not engaged in relevant social networks (Roosmaa & Saar, 2017).

Despite its potential benefits, framing lifelong learning as an activation policy presents several challenges. Policies frequently prioritise the supply of skills while neglecting the demand side of the labour market

(Albert et al., 2021). This can lead to an overemphasis on training for specific jobs that may become obsolete as technology evolves. Finally, some authors point out that lifelong learning may function as a disciplinary technology, compelling individuals to conform to the demands of flexible capitalism, at the expense of their own aspirations and agency (Biesta, 2006; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021). This view suggests that lifelong learning may reinforce existing power structures and limit opportunities for personal and social transformation. Contrary to this trend, Boeren (2016) highlights a shift from a "compensation" model of adult education, aimed at addressing educational deficits, to an "accumulation" model, where learning is seen as a means to enhance existing skills and knowledge. This shift has implications for understanding the motivations and participation patterns of different social groups.

The case of digital skills is paradigmatic of both instrumental and intrinsic learning rationales. In an era of rapid technological advance, digital literacy has become a crucial skill for young adults, not only for entering the workforce, but also for participating in society at large (Eynon, 2021; Richardson & Milovidov, 2019). The World Economic Forum predicts significant job displacement and creation due to technology, highlighting the need for professionals to adapt and learn new digital skills (Littlejohn, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic has further accelerated the shift to online working, emphasizing the urgency of digital skill development (Vieira & Ribeiro, 2022). Research shows that individuals with higher literacy levels are more likely to engage in LLL activities, showcasing the interconnectedness between foundational skills and lifelong learning participation (Desjardins, 2015; OECD, 2015). Despite the growing emphasis on digital skills, there are challenges in effectively integrating them into lifelong learning programmes (Ribeiro et al., 2024). For example, massive open online courses (commonly known as MOOCs) often replicate traditional pedagogical approaches instead of leveraging the unique possibilities of digital platforms (De Freitas et al., 2015). The "emergency remote learning" experience of the Covid-19 pandemic stressed even further the lack of digital competencies faced both by teachers and students regarding distance learning and the use of technology (Bartolic et al., 2022). More recently, the advent of large language models is impacting education in all sectors, with little awareness of its dangers and workings (Gupta et al., 2024; Markauskaite et al., 2022). In Portugal, according to the most recent OCED survey of adult skills (OECD, 2024), around 14% of workers consider themselves to be overqualified (OECD average: 23%), but also underqualified (OECD average: 9%), that is, they consider their academic qualification to be above or below the level typically required by their current job. Around 7% of workers mention that some of their skills fall short of what is required by their jobs (OECD average: 10%) because they need to improve their computer or software skills (35%), followed by their organisational or project management skills (32%). Finally, 41% of workers mentioned they are mismatched in terms of their field of study, because the highest academic qualification they hold was not relevant to their job. While companies and markets increasingly demand these skills, the speed of digitalisation requirements may hinder learner engagement and limit opportunities for developing effective digital skills. Despite this, measures to meet the demand for them have never been as strong, particularly at the European policy level.

3. Digitalisation in European Union Employment Policies

Digitalisation has brought several challenges to the labour market, affecting the volume of jobs, how people perform them, and, ultimately, how employment is conceptualised (Charles et al., 2022). By 2025, it is expected that 85 million jobs may be displaced due to shifts in the balance of labour between humans and machines, as projected by the World Economic Forum. At the same time, 97 million new jobs are expected to emerge,

better suited to the evolving interplay between humans, machines, and algorithms (World Economic Forum, 2020). The impact of digitalisation will be experienced through changes in the nature and content of jobs in an increasingly transformed work environment. Such challenges, allied to the demographic demands of ageing, require public and political responses able to provide both high-quality education for young generations and effective measures targeting lifelong learning for older ones (Dimian et al., 2018)

European countries have implemented various public policies and programmes to promote digitalisation and its integration into the labour market, to cope with its rapid pace (Charles et al., 2022). Through these initiatives, the EU aims to enhance digital literacy, foster innovation, and create a labour market that is resilient and adaptive to the demands of the digital age (European Commission, 2020). The EU has set a target to ensure that 80% of adults acquire basic or higher digital skills by 2030. In 2023, the Netherlands (83%) and Finland (82%) were the leading countries in digital proficiency. Romania (27.7%) and Bulgaria (35.5%) had the lowest shares, and Portugal (56%) was in mid-table (Eurostat, 2024).

To support EU goals, the concept of digitalisation in European employment policies has been operationalised by means of a strategic and multifaceted approach that integrates digital tools, technologies, and skills into labour market frameworks. It is to be enabled by addressing workforce needs, digital skills development, youth and workforce reskilling and lifelong learning programmes, the promotion of ICT professions, business digital transformations, and public service modernisation, ensuring alignment with the aims of the European Union's Digital Decade 2030 (Eurofound, 2024a; Eurostat, 2024). The EU goal is to employ at least 20 million ICT specialists by 2030 (Eurostat, 2024), through initiatives like the Digital Europe Programme, coding and STEM education in school curriculums to prepare younger generations for ICT careers, and the Digital4Her programme, which seeks to close the gender gap in ICT professions.

One of the EU's key initiatives is the European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness, and Resilience, launched in 2020 (European Commission, 2020). This agenda aims to support the acquisition of digital and green skills, essential for the future labour market. It focuses on promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all EU citizens, with specific attention to those who are at risk of being left behind due to rapid technological changes. The agenda includes initiatives to improve the quality and relevance of skills training, digital education, and the recognition of skills acquired through informal or non-formal learning. A significant component of this agenda is the promotion of digital literacy across all age groups, particularly for adults and disadvantaged groups, ensuring that all workers are equipped to thrive in a digital economy (European Commission, 2020).

In parallel, the Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027) is another important EU programme that directly addresses the integration of digitalisation in education and employment (European Commission, 2021). It outlines the EU's strategy to improve digital education and training systems to meet the needs of the digital transformation, focusing on enhancing digital literacy, the development of digital competencies, and fostering the use of digital tools in education to improve teaching and learning in schools, higher education institutions, vocational training centres, and adult learning programmes (Krisztina, 2023). It also encourages the development of digital skills training for workers, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence, data analysis, coding, and cybersecurity (European Commission, 2021; Krisztina, 2023).

Additionally, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) plays a vital role in supporting lifelong learning and digital skills development (European Commission, 2021), providing financial resources to EU member states to implement programmes that foster education, employment, and social inclusion (European Commission, 2021; Hoffmann, 2021). Many of the projects funded by the ESF+ focus on reskilling and upskilling workers, particularly in response to digital transformation. This includes support for digital training programmes aimed at enhancing the employability of workers in sectors that are increasingly dependent on digital technologies. The ESF+ funds initiatives to support training in digital skills for workers in industries affected by automation and digitalisation, as well as vocational education and training programmes that emphasise digital competencies (European Commission, 2021; Hoffmann, 2021). Emprego+ Digital is an example of a Portuguese upskilling programme, included in the National Initiative for Digital Skills e.2030 (Portugal INCoDe.2030; INCoDe2030, 2024), targeting more than 25,000 workers in traditional industries with a focus on adopting digital tools, since 2020 (Portuguese Public Services Portal, 2020; IEFP, 2025a).

The Youth Guarantee is another EU initiative which aims to ensure that all young people under 30 receive a quality offer of employment, education, or training within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education (European Commission, 2013). It is financially supported by the Youth Employment Initiative and targets regions with high youth unemployment rates (that is above 25%; European Commission, 2022). Digital skills are an integral part of this programme, which provides young people with opportunities to develop their digital competencies through internships, apprenticeships, and training programmes. The Youth Guarantee supports the upskilling of young workers and addresses the challenges that NEETs face, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (European Parliament, 2010; Tosun et al., 2019).

The Erasmus+ programme, traditionally known for supporting student mobility, has increasingly focused on digital skills, vocational training, and lifelong learning by enabling adults, including workers across Europe (European Commission, 2024a). It helps individuals gain the necessary skills to adapt to the digital economy through mobility opportunities and learning exchanges in areas such as technology, entrepreneurship, and digital innovation (European Commission, 2024a; Nogueiro et al., 2022)

The EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum also contains provisions to support the integration of immigrants into the workforce, with a particular focus on enhancing their digital skills to improve their employability (European Commission, 2024b) through training and reskilling programmes.

It is also important to highlight the EU's continuous work on the digitalisation of public services, through the E-Government Action Plan 2016-2020 to improve their accessibility and efficiency (European Commission, 2016). By 2030, all key public services for businesses and citizens are expected to be fully online (Eurostat, 2024, p. 202).

Overall, the EU's public employment policies and programmes presented in this article emphasise lifelong learning and digitalisation as key pillars of a competitive, inclusive, and resilient workforce, contributing to the development of digital skills, reskilling, and upskilling initiatives that ensure workers remain adaptable in an increasingly digital labour market. While challenges like the digital divide and skill obsolescence remain, the opportunities for innovation and inclusion far outweigh the barriers. By leveraging digital tools effectively, Europe and other regions can foster a resilient workforce prepared for the future of work.

4. Methodology

The data presented in this article were collected as part of the research project Track-In: Public Employment Services Tracking Effectiveness to Support Rural NEETs (ID No. 2020–1–0011), funded by EEA and the Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment. Between 2012 and 2024, the project established a multimethod approach to develop case studies, comprising documental analysis, focus groups, secondary statistical data analysis, and interviews with relevant stakeholders in employment and youth mediation services.

In this article, we used some of the data collected as part of the Portuguese case study, focusing on two national digital training programmes geared towards employability. The analysis was based on semi-structured interviews with five public policy experts and programme coordinators, complemented by documentary and statistical analysis, whose sources we indicate in each case study. Given the uneven and diverse nature of data collected for both case studies, where internal data was crossed with publicly available statistics, and clarified with interviews, we consider that it is best to present the data in narrative form. We recognise that the presentation of these case studies could benefit from a more robust methodological systematisation, as proposed by Yin (2009), namely through the explicit definition of the units of analysis, the description of the sources of evidence used, and the application of triangulation and cross-validation techniques. Adopting a more structured approach—including cross-analysis matrices—construction of chronologies and thematic categorisation would not only make the research process more transparent but would also strengthen the internal validity of the results. This will be a line of development to consider in an extended version of the study or in future work based on the whole empirical base.

The aim of our study is to ascertain the extent to which these public programmes have proven effective in advancing digital inclusion and employability, thus yielding valuable insights for the formulation of future training programmes and contributing to the international discourse on the topic. For this purpose, we focused on two Portuguese programmes aimed at enhancing employment through digital skills, as our case studies: the Young + Digital programme: Capacitation in Digital Skills; and Upskill, a digital retraining programme tailored to market needs.

Data were collected and analysed through: (a) public websites research and internal documental analysis and (b) semi-structured interviews and exploratory analysis. Although some interviews were conducted in a specific regional division of the employment centre, the data were analysed at the national level. In the following sections, we will present both case studies, introducing each programme and the corresponding data analysis. Regarding the latter, we combine documentary analysis with the exploratory analysis of the interviews, as both inform each other reciprocally.

5. Case Study 1: The Young + Digital Programme—Capacitation in Digital Skills

The Young + Digital programme was created by Government Order 250-A/2020, October 23. Its aim is to place Portugal at the forefront of those countries best prepared to address the challenges and changes inherent in a global transition, ensuring that it results in greater equity and inclusion of citizens, in an increase in competitiveness of the economy and in the creation of value by the business fabric, in a scenario that is intended to assist recovery in economic activity. Because of the pandemic, it became necessary to ensure adequate and rapid public policy responses for professional training, as instruments for promoting

employability and training assets in strategic areas, such as the digital area, aimed at specific audiences, such as young adults, who were the most adversely affected in the labour market. Young + Digital is a programme that operates in mainland Portugal (the islands have their own autonomous governments and employment strategies) and is aimed at young people who are unemployed and have completed or almost completed at least upper secondary education. The courses have a maximum duration of 300 hours, and each participant is entitled to a training grant, food subsidy and personal accident insurance. The programme was designed to meet current and prospective needs of the labour market, as part of public vocational training policy, aiming to develop skills in digital technologies and applications (such as programming languages like Java, .NET, Python, and Web, cybersecurity, social media management, digital commerce, and data analysis), providing better job qualifications, and strengthening the professional skills of young adults with a view to improving their employability (IEFP, 2025b). It is part of the Youth Guarantee framework in Portugal.

5.1. Data Analysis

For the document analysis, data were collected from the IEFP services and the Observatório das Competências Digitais. The interviews (*N* = 4) were conducted between October 2022 and March 2023. Table 1 offers the details on the interviewees.

Table 1. Interviewees from case study 1.

Interviewees	Date
I1. Executive Director of the National Plan for the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee Programme	21 October 2022
I2. Specialised civil servant employed in the Employment Centre of Faro	03 March 2023
I3. Specialised civil servant employed in the Employment Centre of Faro	03 March 2023
I4. Deputy Director of the Centre for Employment and Vocational Training in Faro	03 March 2023

In her interview, Ana Neves, former Executive Director of the National Plan for the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee Programme (I1), mentioned that the Youth Guarantee does not have policies exclusively in the area of labour, but also in economy and higher education. She also said that the Youth + Digital programme has been successfully implemented and has been growing:

> The Youth + Digital programme this year will see a huge increase [in enrolled students]. For example, just to [give you] an idea, in 2021, we had 843 [people enrolled], so around 850 young people enrolled and, this year in September 2022, we have almost 1000. (I1)

In fact, and according to data published by the Directorate of Education and Science in 2024 (Observatório das Competências Digitais, 2024), there has been a considerable increase in the number of registrations in the programme. The profile of trainees is mostly female, and these seek training in customer relations and social network management as top preferences. Statistical data was provided by the Directorate of Science and Education, and classified as applications on the one hand and concluded certified training on the other.

Between 2021 and 2023, the Young + Digital programme registered 18,801 applications, with the gender ratio remaining constant at 64% women and 36% men. This female predominance is remarkable, considering that women have always been underrepresented in technological fields. However, when analysed by training area,

significant differences emerge, indicating that the choice of training pathways continues to be influenced by gender roles. The total number of enrolments fluctuated during this period: 6,540 participants in 2021, 5,686 in 2022, and 6,575 in 2023, which represents a recovery after a decline. This evolution may be due to changes in the courses offered, demand from candidates, or external factors related to the job market.

Courses such as Digital Commerce–Business Strategy and Social Network Management (henceforth Digital Commerce) are characterised by a strong presence of women. The former recorded 4,852 registrations, of which 69% were women, while the latter attracted 5,678 participants, of which 72% were women. These areas reflect interests often associated with communication and management, jobs traditionally attributed to women. In contrast, technical areas such as cybersecurity and programming continue to be dominated by men. In cybersecurity, the proportion of men was 59.4% in 2021, 68.8% in 2022, and 60.3% in 2023. In programming languages, the proportion of men was 60%, which highlights the challenges of including women.

Despite the progress made in areas such as UX/UI design, where the proportion of women has reached 65%, women are still under-represented in technical fields. Specific strategies, such as awareness-raising campaigns, are needed to promote the presence of women in technical professions. In summary, although the programme has promoted the inclusion of women in the digital sector, it faces challenges in technical areas that require greater efforts to achieve equality and a shift in digital skills.

Concerning those who finish the Youth + Digital training courses, a descriptive analysis is presented focusing on gender-specific trends between 2021 and 2023 and the ratio between the number of registrations and certificates per training area. In total, 4,631 certificates were issued over this period, which corresponds to an average certification rate of 24.6% compared to the total number of registrations—18,801. The certification rate for women, who represent 64% of registrants, was slightly lower (24%) than for men (26%). These figures reflect a discrepancy that can be attributed to various factors, including the specificities of the training programmes and possible barriers to completion for women.

Analysis of the data provided by the Observatório das Competências Digitais by training areas reveals significant trends. Training programmes with the highest number of overall registrations, such as the Digital Commerce course, also saw a significant number of certificates issued, albeit with moderate completion rates. In the Digital Commerce course, the certification rate was 25% of the 4,852 students enrolled, while in social media management courses it was 27% of the 5,678 students enrolled. In both areas, women continue to predominate among graduates, although to a lesser extent than their weight in total enrolments. On the other hand, technical courses such as cybersecurity have seen higher certification rates among men. In 2023, for example, 16.2% of those enrolled were certified, with 17% of men completing the course, compared to 15.5% of women. In the case of programming courses such as Python and Java, completion rates were even lower, with significant differences between the genders, indicating the difficulty women have in completing them. In summary, while the programme shows success in engaging women in digital domains, the data suggests that strategies to support completion may be the key to equalizing certification rates between genders and improving the overall impact of the programme.

On March 3, 2023, interviews were conducted with two specialised civil servants employed in the Faro Employment Centre, working in the areas of labour market management and professional training and guidance, and with an interlocutor for the Youth Guarantee initiative. They mentioned that the profile of

most candidates who come to the Employment Centre are less well qualified young people who are completely discouraged, maladjusted, unmotivated, uninformed, and not looking for work. These technicians mentioned the existing difference between unemployed young people holding a degree, who are better informed, with a greater degree of openness and perspective, and people with the 9th grade: The latter are seasonal unemployed who sometimes find jobs in the informal economy, through undeclared work. The Youth Guarantee initiative was created to lower the youth unemployment rate and incorporated some Employment Centre measures such as Young + Digital.

According to the interviewees, one of the major flaws of this programme was that there is no follow-up after its conclusion and no integration in the labour market, which can lead to demotivation:

> A person finishes a dual certification training, for example, and then ends up having no professional experience in that area. And they come back again, almost to the initial trajectory....I think that what is missing for them is to have practical experience and have some employability....It's just one more training programme for the person to add to their curriculum. (I2)

On March 3, 2023, an interview was conducted with Dra. Ana Sofia Delgado, Deputy Director of the Centre for Employment and Vocational Training in Faro, who heads two qualification training centres in Faro and in Albufeira. Regarding the Youth + Digital programme, she suggested that the training areas which are defined by ANQEP are those best suited in terms of trainee demand in the region and in the whole country, since the programme is administered online. According to her:

> Because we are talking about an audience that already has a degree or a secondary level. Therefore, what they are looking for is always something more. And, lately, we started trying to cover the area of cybersecurity, data analysis, which are areas that seem to us that, at the moment, are in much greater demand in the job market. Someone who has such a tool in hand will find it easier to get a job. (I4)

This programme is promoted on the internet and social media by each Employment Centre, and the selection is made through a list of people who subscribe to its services. According to her, the early take-up was very good, even though there was a reduction at the end of 2021, as noted in our quantitative analysis. However, a systematic appraisal of the programme is still lacking. Apart from the evaluation of each module by means of a form which trainees complete at the end of each module, there is no procedure for carrying out a statistical analysis of the data:

> We do, effectively, in all training actions, at the end there is a form filled out in which the trainee evaluates the training and the trainer. No processing is carried out on this data...there is no analysis that compiles all this information and makes a general assessment of the actions as a whole. Nor for this, not for any other programme. (I4)

6. Case Study 2: Upskill—A Digital Retraining Programme Tailored to Market Needs

The UPSKILL programme is the Portuguese government's strategic response to the challenge of training professionals to respond to the growing demand for digital skills in the labour market. Launched in 2020, the programme is part of the Digital Transition Action Plan and INCoDe.2030, and stands out for its promotion

of digital training, social inclusion and employability. With a model that incorporates professional retraining and public–private collaboration, UPSKILL has played a central role in strengthening the information and technology sector, and is seen as a "flagship" (or pilot) programme by the IEFP. Although the programme is part of digital reskilling policies aligned with European youth employment strategies, it is important to stress that most participants fall outside the typical age range associated with the definition of "young" (15–29-year-olds). With an average age of 32 and a range between 25 and 40, the applicability of this programme under the Youth Guarantee should be interpreted with caution, and this is a limitation that must be taken into account in the analysis. Quantitative data from this case study was ceded by the National Programme Coordinator, Manuel Garcia, and our only interview concerning UPSKILL was with him.

UPSKILL is designed to meet the needs of a changing labour market and a social fabric in search of new opportunities. On the one hand, it aims to fill specific skills gaps in the IT sector, one of the most dynamic and most difficult to recruit for in Portugal. On the other hand, it promotes the integration of unemployed or underemployed individuals, offering them an opportunity to retrain in areas of high demand. The scope of the programme is reflected in the diversity of participants, including graduates from areas such as the social sciences and humanities. In our interview in 2023, Manuel Garcia, pointed out that:

> We have success stories of participants from non-technological areas, showing that motivation and the programme model are more decisive than academic training. (I5)

The programme is organised into two phases. The first consists of theoretical and practical training, lasting between six and nine months, given at higher education institutions. The content covers specific technological areas such as Java and .NET programming, ERP systems management and cloud computing. The training areas are selected by the participating companies, ensuring that the content is tailored to their needs, also including introductory modules designed to reinforce basic skills such as algorithmics, logical reasoning and mathematical concepts, ensuring that all participants have the necessary foundations to progress. The second phase consists of a 3-month practical work-based training course (FPCT), carried out in companies, allowing trainees to apply the knowledge they have acquired in a professional environment. This phase reinforces integration into the labour market and gives participants the opportunity to gain practical experience in real-life situations. The importance of the face-to-face component was emphasised by the coordinator:

> Face-to-face work not only fosters concentration, but also develops essential skills for collaborative work, which are indispensable in business dynamics. (I5)

The programme also stands out for its rigorous selection process, which guarantees the quality of the training and alignment with market needs. This process includes psychometric tests, language skills assessments (with a minimum level of English B2) and interviews carried out by IEFP technicians in partnership with the participating companies. The companies not only identify the most critical training areas, but they also have an active role in choosing the trainees and commit to hiring at least 80% of the participants who successfully complete the programme. This approach not only reduces the misalignment between the skills on offer and the demands of the market but also encourages ongoing collaboration between companies and higher education institutions. Another relevant element is the offer of a training grant, equivalent to the national minimum wage, allowing candidates in precarious financial circumstances to participate without jeopardizing

their family income. This benefit has been crucial in attracting candidates who might otherwise face insurmountable economic barriers, especially those who are already in precarious employment.

Over the course of three editions, UPSKILL has filled a total of 1,717 vacancies, with more than 15,000 applicants. The programme covered 20 technological areas and was implemented in 11 regions of the country, promoting an inclusive territorial distribution. The first edition (2020–2021) had 430 places, spread over 26 training actions, involving 38 companies. The second edition (2021–2022) saw a significant expansion, with 802 places in 50 training actions, with the participation of 64 companies. The third edition, which began in 2022 and is still under way, has 485 places in 30 actions, involving 31 companies. The data reflects a clear attempt at decentralisation, with actions taken in Bragança, Castelo Branco, and Faro, among others. This strategy is to eradicate inequality, by offering training to people in regions that have been neglected in terms of training. The network of polytechnic institutes plays a key role here, given their wide geographical dispersion and vocation for more practical teaching.

UPSKILL participants' profiles are quite diverse, with most participants being between 25 and 40 years old: The average age is 32. In the third edition, 71% of the participants were Portuguese, 24% were Brazilian and 5% came from other countries such as EU citisens and the PALOP (African countries with Portuguese as official language). As for employment status, 67% were unemployed, which shows the programme's goal of assisting people to gain employment. Gender balance is a central dimension in UPSKILL, with women representing 44% of those enrolled in the third edition. However, important disparities persist. Despite the relatively balanced proportion of enrolments, the transition to the next stages reveals inequalities. Among those approved for interviews in the third edition, 61% were men and only 39% women. These differences point to additional barriers faced by women in technological fields. Between 2021 and 2023, the average certification rate was 24.6%, highlighting significant challenges for many participants in completing the training. In terms of gender, men had a slightly higher certification rate (26%) compared to women (24%).

Analysis by training area reveals even more pronounced disparities. In technical paths, such as Cybersecurity, men accounted for most certificates issued. In 2023, 17% of men successfully completed this course, compared to 15.5% of women. In programming languages such as Python and Java, certification rates were even lower for women, suggesting specific technical or structural challenges. On the other hand, areas such as UX/UI Design stood out for their greater female participation, with 63.6% of women enrolled in 2023. This path, which combines technology and creativity, seems to attract a more gender-balanced audience. The more general areas, such as Productivity Tools and Collaboration, also showed a more equitable distribution, with an average certification rate of 26% in 2023.

The involvement of companies is, in fact, one of the central pillars of the UPSKILL model. Not only do they define the training areas, but they also take part in the selection process and commit to hiring at least 80% of the trainees who successfully complete the programme. However, despite the solidity of this structure, the impact analysis reveals significant weaknesses. Furthermore, despite the companies' commitment to employability, there is no systematic data on the actual number of people hired or on the sustainability of these jobs in the medium term. This lack of longitudinal evaluation makes it difficult to make a rigorous assessment of the programme's effects on participants' career paths. If UPSKILL is to be truly considered a good practice in public digital empowerment policies, it will be essential to invest in monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that follow the beneficiaries' path, before and after the training, in order to capture

its effective impact in terms of employability and social inclusion. According to Manuel Garcia, this commitment is essential to the programme's success:

> Companies see UPSKILL as a practical solution for bridging skills gaps, which creates a virtuous cycle between training and employability. (I5)

However, the financial sustainability of the programme remains a challenge. Implementation depends on a balance between public and private funding, and a long-term strategy is needed to ensure the continuity and expansion of the model.

Despite progress, UPSKILL faces challenges in including under-represented groups. Women in technical fields and older participants continue to face significant barriers. Awareness campaigns and mentoring programmes can be effective tools for greater equity in access to and completion of training. Manuel Garcia emphasised the importance of targeted strategies:

> We need not only to attract more women into technical fields, but to ensure that they have adequate support to progress and successfully complete training. (I5)

Another point to consider is improving certification rates. In addition to reinforcing follow-up during training, it is essential to adjust content and methodologies to better meet the needs of participants. The interview with Manuel Garcia provided an important qualitative perspective on the programme behind the scenes, highlighting the central role of companies in all phases of UPSKILL, from the identification of training areas to the integration of trainees. He also stressed that:

> The programme not only empowers participants technically, but also develops fundamental transversal and social skills, creating a transformative experience for many. (I5)

UPSKILL demonstrates how public policy can transform structural challenges into opportunities, while responding to the needs of the labour market and individual aspirations. The public–private collaboration model, combined with the focus on inclusion and territorial cohesion, positions the programme as a relevant example both in Portugal and internationally. However, the results also highlight areas for improvement. The inclusion of under-represented groups, financial sustainability and increasing certification rates are challenges that require ongoing attention. With a more tailored approach to the specific needs of the participants, UPSKILL has the potential to further expand its impact, consolidating itself as an essential tool for the digital transition in Portugal.

7. Discussion

The Young + Digital initiative aims to equip young unemployed individuals with essential digital skills to improve their employability. It combines online and in-person training, offering financial support mechanisms, including grants and subsidies. However, the programme faces significant challenges, such as the lack of follow-up mechanisms after training, low certification rates averaging 24.6%, and gender imbalances in technical areas. Women dominate fields like social network management and digital commerce, while men are more present in technical domains such as cybersecurity and programming.

Another key issue is the limited connection between training outcomes and practical job market integration, leading to demotivation among participants who cannot transition smoothly into employment.

In contrast, the UPSKILL initiative addresses the labour market's evolving needs through a two-phase approach: an initial theoretical training period, followed by a practical internship phase within companies. This structure ensures alignment with market needs, as companies actively participate in selecting training areas and candidates. The programme also emphasizes financial support, territorial inclusion, and alignment with industry standards. Despite its strengths, UPSKILL also faces challenges, including gender disparities in technical fields, relatively low certification rates, and concerns about financial sustainability. Women, while participating in UX/UI design and productivity tools courses, remain underrepresented in programming and cybersecurity. The programme, however, benefits from strong collaboration between public institutions and private sector companies, which ensures better integration into the labour market for its participants.

Both initiatives align with EU employment public policies and reflect the goals set under frameworks such as the European Skills Agenda, the Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027), and the Youth Guarantee. These policies emphasise digital literacy, lifelong learning, and employability as central pillars of a competitive workforce. Additionally, both initiatives benefit from financial support mechanisms like the ESF+, which promotes reskilling and upskilling across the EU. However, financial sustainability remains a challenge, particularly for UPSKILL, which relies heavily on a mix of public and private funding.

The EU's focus on addressing gender imbalances in ICT fields and reducing the digital divide is also mirrored in both programmes. While there has been some success in increasing women's participation in digital training, significant barriers persist, especially in technical fields such as programming and cybersecurity.

Structurally, both initiatives face systemic challenges, including low certification rates, limited follow-up mechanisms, and the absence of robust evaluation frameworks to measure long-term impact. For Young + Digital, the lack of systematic labour market integration pathways limits its overall effectiveness. In contrast, UPSKILL shows stronger integration outcomes due to direct company involvement, but scalability and sustainability remain areas of concern. In a broader context, these two initiatives illustrate how European lifelong learning and employment policies translate into national strategies for digital upskilling and reskilling. From a lifelong learning perspective, both programmes align with the shift towards an "accumulation" model of adult education, aiming to enhance existing skills and knowledge. However, due to their emphasis on digitalisation, although the training programmes aim to empower, they can also be seen as mechanisms to help individuals adapt to the evolving digitalised labour market, hence functioning as a "disciplinary technology."

8. Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the critical role of digital upskilling initiatives in enhancing youth employability within the context of evolving labour market demands, filling the role of lifelong learning in practice. However, as demonstrated by the Young + Digital and UPSKILL initiatives, structural challenges persist, requiring targeted policy interventions to improve programme efficacy and long-term impact.

First, the establishment of comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks is essential to systematically assess training outcomes, track employment transitions, and measure the long-term career trajectories of participants. Without robust data collection and impact assessment mechanisms, it remains difficult to determine why there are reduced completion and certification rates in both programmes and to implement necessary improvements. Future policies should mandate the integration of longitudinal tracking systems to provide insight into employment retention, skill utilisation, and career progression.

With regard to inclusion and diversity, targeted mentoring and awareness initiatives should be developed to address gender disparities in digital and technical fields. As both initiatives show, women remain underrepresented in cybersecurity, programming, and other STEM-related domains, despite their active participation in digital commerce and UX/UI design. Policies should promote gender-inclusive pedagogical approaches, mentorship networks, and awareness campaigns aimed at dismantling stereotypes and encouraging female participation in high-demand technical sectors. Likewise, the inclusion of rural and NEET populations must be prioritised by adjusting training formats to accommodate the mobility, economic, and scheduling constraints that were pointed out by some programme directors. Digitalisation alone is insufficient if access barriers persist for individuals in remote areas who lack the necessary infrastructure or support to engage in such programmes. Hybrid learning models, mobile training units, and regionally adapted curricula may enhance accessibility and inclusivity, as some Track-In project good practices initiatives have shown.

Moreover, post-training follow-up mechanisms are essential not only to facilitate the transition from training to employment but also to monitor the evolution of the jobs created. Career coaching, job placement services, and employer-matching platforms should be systematically integrated into training initiatives to support participants in securing sustainable employment. The lack of structured post-training support currently limits the effectiveness of these programmes, leading to demotivation and underutilisation of acquired skills.

Both initiatives require clear financial sustainability strategies to ensure long-term viability and scalability. While European funding mechanisms such as the ESF+ provide crucial support, over-reliance on external funding sources poses a risk to programme continuity. Governments should explore diversified funding models, including employer co-financing schemes, social impact investment, and performance-based funding structures to enhance financial resilience. As much as the strengthening of public–private partnerships is crucial to ensuring that training programmes are successful and lead to paid employment, these partnerships should also aim for training cost sharing. Employers should be involved not only in curriculum design and the selection of candidates but also subsidise the tailored training they seek. This investment may also release more public employment services resources to create other lifelong learning programmes that are less market driven but may also satisfy individual and societal needs.

By addressing these challenges, digital capacitation initiatives such as Young + Digital and UPSKILL can serve as effective instruments for labour market integration, lifelong learning, and economic resilience, aligning with broader European employment and digital transformation strategies.

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ARTICLE

Accessing Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups Without an Address

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Abstract

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) underscores the importance of ensuring access to rights and services for marginalized groups. However, in many European countries, access to social rights depends on prerequisites often unattainable for vulnerable groups. A critical barrier is the requirement to provide proof of address, a condition that disproportionately affects people experiencing homelessness (PEH). While the Homeless Bill of Rights recognizes the right to a postal address as a potential remedy to this issue, empirical research suggests this right remains largely inaccessible in practice. Furthermore, the literature highlights that welfare conditionality increasingly restricts access to social rights, as the imposition of stringent eligibility criteria and punitive measures for non-compliance disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups. This study investigates the intersection of legal and sociological perspectives on access to social rights for individuals without a fixed abode, focusing on one case study: "the reference address." This alternative registration enables PEH to meet the proof-of-address requirement for social benefits in Belgium. Moreover, this study assesses how this policy aligns with international human rights standards, including the European Social Charter (ESC) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and whether it adequately meets the needs of their target group. Based on the evaluation of both the "law in books" and "law in practice," a comprehensive review of the reference address is necessary to address discrepancies both in legislation, and between legislation and implementation, to consider less stringent conditionality, and ensure an inclusive procedure containing effective legal remedies.

Keywords

access to rights; homelessness; no fixed abode; social rights; vulnerable groups

1. Introduction

1.1. Homelessness as a Case Study in the Failure to Access Human Rights

Homelessness represents an extreme manifestation of poverty and exclusion in Europe and highlights violations of a wide range of interconnected human rights, including the right to housing, healthcare, education, work, and even life (Otto & Lynch, 2004). People experiencing homelessness (PEH) face significantly reduced life expectancy, violence, criminalization, and systemic stigma, compounded by barriers tied to their lack of an official address, which limits their access to social rights and political participation.

Homelessness is therefore the result of human rights violations and a cause of further infringements. Conceptualizing homelessness as a human rights issue clarifies the state's responsibilities and strengthens the enforcement of its obligations to protect and uphold fundamental rights (Lynch & Cole, 2003). Moreover, employing a human rights framework—in which marginalized groups are empowered to assert legal claims against the state for failing to fulfil its responsibilities—moves the discourse beyond a traditional "welfare" framework based on charitable provision from a compassionate society (Lynch & Cole, 2003).

Homelessness is also a constitutional issue, as European welfare states are constitutionally obligated to ensure social protection and housing. Although these welfare systems are designed to mitigate vulnerabilities, the persistence of homelessness highlights systemic shortcomings and reflects broader societal failures rather than individual circumstances alone. Social protection and housing are matters of public interest, and when these systems fail, the state may be held accountable (Vonk & Katrougalos, 2010). This recognition is further reinforced by the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), endorsed by all EU member states, which explicitly establishes the right to housing, assistance for PEH, and access to essential services as fundamental social rights.

From a sociological perspective, homelessness is known to result from the interplay of structural factors such as housing market dynamics and welfare state retrenchment, rather than personal circumstances alone (Somerville, 2013). The shift from universal welfare provisions to more conditional, means-tested systems has created gaps in social protection, leaving those in precarious situations without adequate support (Dwyer, 2004, 2019; Reeve, 2017). Moreover, the criminalization and stigmatization of PEH reinforce their marginalization, as punitive policies—such as public space restrictions—frame homelessness as a form of deviance rather than a social justice issue (Wacquant, 2009).

Alongside being a systemic failure, a violation of human rights, and a constitutional issue, homelessness is also a matter of internal state organization. In most EU member states, the implementation of public and social policies affecting PEH and homelessness policies specifically are designed at the national level but implemented at the local level, requiring a system of multi-level governance in which different governments collaborate. Due to decentralized governance, municipalities have increasingly become gatekeepers in the implementation of human rights. This is especially relevant in the context of the EPSR, which emphasizes that access to housing and essential services must be ensured through coordinated efforts across governance levels. Local authorities have thus become pivotal actors in bridging the gap between rights on paper and rights in practice (Claessen et al., 2024; Durmuş, 2020).

1.2. Homelessness in Belgium

In Belgium, there is no central homelessness department. Homelessness-related policies are fragmented across federal, regional, and municipal levels, making coordination difficult. Historically, housing and social policies have evolved independently, further complicating the development of a unified approach (De Decker, 2004). This challenge is compounded by the absence of a unified definition of homelessness, with political, public, and private actors each applying their own definition (Schepers et al., 2017). For example, the Flemish Centers for General Welfare adopt a broad definition that emphasizes personal, relational, and social vulnerability (Van Menxel et al., 2003). In contrast, the most widely recognized federal legal definition describes a homeless person as someone without their own housing, lacking the resources to secure it, or temporarily staying in a shelter or with friends or family until permanent housing becomes available (FOD Kanselarij van de Eerste Minister, 2014). As with most Belgian definitions, this one primarily focuses on the absence of physical shelter, overlooking the broader spectrum of homelessness. However, international frameworks and academic research adopt a more comprehensive perspective by using the European ETHOS and ETHOS Light typologies, which classify homelessness into multiple categories. These include individuals living without a roof (e.g., rough sleepers), without a house (e.g., those exiting institutions), in inadequate conditions (e.g., extreme overcrowding), or in insecure housing (e.g., temporarily staying with family or friends). In this study, we adopt the ETHOS typology to conceptualize homelessness, acknowledging its capacity to capture the multidimensional and complex nature of housing exclusion and precariousness (FEANTSA, 2005).

Like many European countries, Belgium has seen rising homelessness rates. In Flanders alone, more than 20.000 people are estimated to experience homelessness, including 6,300 children (Mertens et al., 2025). This accounts for 0.3% of the regional population and 32.0% of all the recipients of social integration income in the region. Street counts in Brussels also show a rising trend, with over 7,000 individuals experiencing homelessness recorded in 2022 (Bruss'help, 2022). Consistent with international homelessness research, homelessness in Belgium is highly complex, involving individuals from diverse backgrounds, living situations (Hermans et al., 2024), and both short- and long-term trajectories (Robben & Hermans, 2024).

1.3. Reference Address

A registered address is essential for accessing social rights, including unemployment benefits, health insurance, and child allowances. Registration in the population register is not only an eligibility requirement; it also affects the continuation of social benefits and the amount of social benefits, which depends on household composition. To address the challenges faced by those without a fixed address, several European countries have introduced alternative registration mechanisms, such as the ProxyAddress in the UK, domiciliation in France, and the letter address in the Netherlands. These systems differ in terms of accessibility, legal enforceability, and the degree to which they facilitate access to social rights (Robben, 2024a). This study focuses on the "reference address" in Belgium. Notably, Belgium is one of the few European countries that has institutionalized such a system as a legal mechanism to ensure access to social rights for people without a fixed abode.

The reference address is an exception to standard population registration and provides administrative anchorage for individuals without a fixed address. It safeguards and facilitates the access to social rights.

While the reference address does not in itself grant automatic access to other social rights, it enables beneficiaries to meet registration-related eligibility requirements. In the context of homelessness, two types of reference address exist. The first type is a reference address for PEH at a local welfare agency, or public centre for social welfare (PCSW), available in every Belgian municipality. The second is a reference address at another person's residence, allowing a PEH to register at the home of a family member or a friend. Both types are introduced in the Population Register Law of 1991 and further interpreted by the Royal Decree of 1992 and a series of Circulars (in 1997, 1998, 2006, and 2023). The most recent Circular aims to streamline and clarify differing interpretations of these rules, but it contradicts certain provisions of the Law and Royal Decree, potentially creating ambiguity in the implementation of the federal legislation at the local level. Interestingly, circulars normally serve solely as an interpretation of the law and only legally bind the administration.

There is a lack of publicly available data, which contributes to a limited general understanding of the reference address. Existing records indicate that nearly 20,000 individuals claimed a reference address in 2018 (National Register, 2023), and most of them utilized this reference address for extended periods (Robben & Hermans, 2024). Conversely, point-in-time counts suggest that only one in four PEH utilize or require a reference address (Robben, 2024b, based on Hermans et al., 2022, 2023, 2024).

1.3.1. Conditions

PEH must meet three eligibility conditions to qualify: They must be experiencing homelessness due to financial hardship, they must not be currently registered, and they must apply through a PCSW. For a reference address at a private residence, written consent from the host is additionally required. To retain the reference address, beneficiaries must continue to meet the eligibility criteria, maintain contact with the PCSW by reporting at least once every three months, and must demonstrate a local connection to the PCSW. Furthermore, the scope of application of the reference address is limited to individuals residing in Belgium who qualify for registration in the population register (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, 1991, 1992a, 2023).

1.3.2. Procedure

Figure 1 outlines the key steps involved in obtaining a reference address (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, 1992b, 2023). First, a PEH must apply for a reference address at the PCSW in the municipality where they currently reside. Such a local connection is generally established based on previous residence, family ties, or access to services in the area. Second, the PCSW conducts a social investigation to determine the applicant's eligibility, which includes an assessment of their financial situation and their residency status. This places a significant burden of proof on the applicant, requiring them to provide documentation from shelters or social workers verifying their homelessness. Third, the eligibility assessment is reviewed by the PCSW board, which makes the final decision. If the conditions are met, the PCSW grants the reference address. The decision is then communicated to the applicant and forwarded to the municipality. Fourth, before completing the registration, the municipality verifies whether the applicant has an existing main residence registration. If the applicant is still officially registered at an address that no longer reflects their actual living situation, the municipality must initiate an administrative removal procedure to deregister them. Finally, once all verifications are complete, the municipality officially registers the applicant in the population register at the reference address. If the PCSW denies the application or if the municipality refuses to register the reference address, the applicant
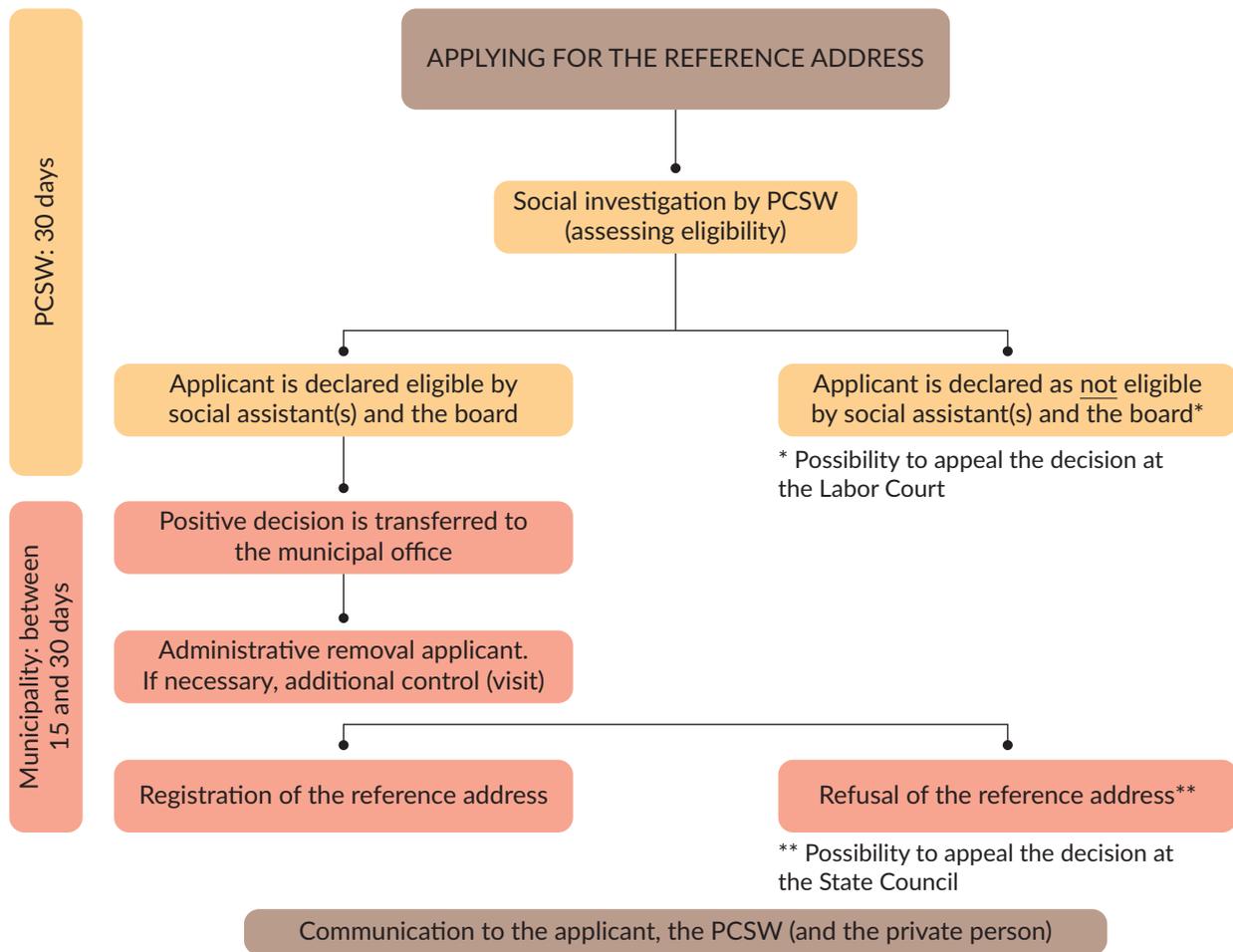
Figure 1. Application procedure for a reference address. Source: Robben (2024b, p. 20), based on FOD Binnenlandse Zaken (2023, p.7).

has the right to appeal respectively before the Labor Court or the Council of State. According to the 2023 Circular, this procedure applies to both types of reference addresses. However, prior to 2023, a PEH applying for a reference address with a natural person could apply directly to the municipality, bypassing the procedure before the PCSW.

1.3.3. The Reference Address as a Legal and Sociological Concept

As previously mentioned, registration is a prerequisite for eligibility for certain social benefits. The reference address is therefore a legally and sociologically interesting concept. Legally, it is interesting because it enables one's formal registration and shows that there can be a distinction between "domicile" (where one officially stays) and "residence" (where one actually stays), or the person's location in theory and practice respectively. Furthermore, both legislation and legal doctrine explicitly classify the reference address as a form of social assistance (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, 2023; Ministerie van Sociale Zaken, Volksgezondheid en Leefmilieu, 1998), while simultaneously it is also a civil law concept. The classification as social assistance is also interesting because the accessibility of the reference address has repercussions on access to other social rights requiring registration. Sociologically, the reference address is interesting, because registration confers administrative "inclusion." Conversely, lacking a (reference) address means one is administratively

"excluded" or invisible, potentially resulting in discontinued social benefits (Robben, Pierre, & Hermans, 2023). Thus, while the reference address functions as a formal, legal, "administrative address," for administrative purposes, it is more than a bureaucratic step towards registration—it is a foundational element of an individual's legal identity and rights.

Although a handful of studies have recently examined the reference address in Belgium, including its possibilities and shortcomings (Robben & Hermans, 2021), mechanisms behind its non-take-up (Robben, Roets, et al., 2023), and the administrative burdens that hamper access (Robben et al., 2024), all of these studies are sociological in nature. Apart from one legal study describing the legislation on the reference address (Devriendt, 2024), there is a notable absence of legal analyses on this matter, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of the full implications of the reference address, especially from a human rights perspective. In this article, we explore access to a reference address, and thus to social rights for individuals without a registered address, through both legal and sociological perspectives. By looking into the reference address as a case study, we assess how this specific homelessness policy aligns with international human rights standards.

2. Methodology

2.1. International Framework

This study aims to provide insight into international standards on social rights and their requirements for guaranteeing access to social rights. These standards are crucial for understanding the obligations of states to protect and fulfill the social rights of PEH. The study analyzes the right to social assistance according to the European Social Charter (ESC) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Both instruments have monitoring bodies (respectively, ECSR and UNCESCR) that issue rulings in individual complaint procedures and report on mandatory self-assessment reports submitted by member states. Additionally, both instruments have a broad scope of application, in contrast to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which is only applicable to member states when they implement EU Law. Furthermore, they have a long-established tradition, unlike the relatively new European Pillar of Social Rights, which has fewer interpretative documents and largely covers the same social rights.

For this study, relevant decisions and reports on access to social assistance are selected and examined. Regarding the ESC, all decisions concerning Article 13 that contain the terms "access," "homeless," "fixed address," "abode," or "domiciliation" are analyzed. Additionally, country reports from the last ten years containing any of these terms and the statements of interpretation on Article 13 are examined. Country reports are included because they allow us to identify key aspects and they offer nuances on how the provisions are interpreted, particularly regarding aspects not yet addressed in individual decisions. For the ICESCR, all General Comments and Statements on social security (which includes social assistance) and discrimination are studied. Furthermore, all individual decisions concerning Article 9 and all European country reports are analyzed.

2.2. Data Analysis

This method integrates both sociological and legal perspectives to comprehensively assess the policy in question. The socio-legal analysis will examine how this policy aligns with international human rights standards and evaluate its effectiveness in meeting the needs of the target group. While the international human rights standards provide a robust foundation, there may be gaps in their application to specific local contexts. This is where the legal perspective (policy in theory) meets the sociological perspective (policy in practice). For this, we analyze the conditions of the policy and assess it against the international human rights standards while reviewing relevant empirical research. This is done through a desk study. For the legal perspective, legislation on the reference address is gathered through Belgian legislative databases and subsequently analyzed. Since this study solely evaluates the reference address, no other forms of social assistance are examined.

2.3. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the framework is based solely on the ESC and the ICESCR. While these are the most general social rights instruments with monitoring bodies that interpret their often vague and broad provisions, the evaluation might differ slightly if other instruments were included. Furthermore, the framework itself is limited, as only general concepts can be derived for some aspects, which are open to interpretation. Second, the framework only considers access to social assistance, as Belgian legislation explicitly classifies the reference address for PEH as a form of social assistance. However, some aspects of the reference address are so closely tied to the civil law concept of the population registry, e.g., the scope of application, making it impossible to evaluate them against the framework. Third, while both instruments are legally binding, the monitoring bodies' decisions are not enforceable. Moreover, the obligations in the framework are often framed as goals to be progressively realized. This study aims to delineate the requirements set out by human rights instruments and to assess the current legislation, without examining potential state responsibility or the enforceability in case of non-compliance. Fourth, the aim of this study is not to comment on the role of a registered residence in social rights but rather to evaluate access to the reference address, which in turn facilitates access to other social rights.

3. Analysis

According to the human rights instruments studied, social assistance benefits must comply with four criteria in order to be accessible: minimal conditionality, an accessible procedure, equal access, and a right to appeal. We will analyze each of these criteria from both a legal and a sociological perspective. Subsequently, they are applied to the Belgian case, to assess both the law in the books and the law in practice.

3.1. Conditionality (in Theory)

According to the international framework, social assistance should be subject to minimal conditions. To assess this, four key elements are considered. First, the main criterion for granting social assistance should be the existence of a sufficiently urgent and serious need (*CEC v. The Netherlands*, 2013; *ICJ and ECRE v. Greece*, 2021; *ERRC v. Bulgaria*, 2009). Eligibility should be based on the individual's need, lack of sufficient resources, and inability to obtain the necessary resources independently. The UNCESCR (2016b)

ruled that need is interpreted too narrowly if an income below the subsistence level is considered sufficient. Second, any additional eligibility condition must be reasonable and aligned with the goal pursued by the condition, such as finding a long-term solution for the applicant (*ICJ and ECRE v. Greece*, 2021; ECSR, 2021). Third, social assistance may not be limited in time (*ICJ and ECRE v. Greece*, 2021). If a person remains in need, they should not lose access to social assistance simply because they have already received it for a certain period. A reference address should therefore not be automatically limited in time but should remain available for as long as the person meets the eligibility conditions. Fourth, the eligibility conditions must be clearly and transparently formulated, and generally applicable (*FEANTSA v. The Netherlands*, 2012; UNCESCR, 2015b). However, the international framework does not specify when a condition meets these criteria. This study assumes that a system is non-compliant with international standards if the wording of the conditions is vague, allowing room for interpretation and resulting in large differences in practice depending on who applies the conditions.

To qualify for a reference address, an applicant must meet three eligibility conditions: experiencing homelessness according to the federal definition (Condition A), not being registered (Condition B), and applying for social assistance (Condition C). In principle, no other conditions may be required, but case law demonstrates that additional conditions are often imposed (Interfederal Combat Poverty Service, 2018). Furthermore, to retain the reference address, beneficiaries must also comply with additional conditions (Condition D). What follows is a description and legal analysis of each condition.

3.1.1. Condition A: Experiencing Homelessness

Applicants must demonstrate they are experiencing homelessness. This involves two key elements: (a) not having stable housing of their own and (b) the lack of housing is caused by a lack of resources (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 2023). "Own housing" refers to a private dwelling or a place for personal use. It does not require exclusive use, ownership, or tenancy. "Sofa surfers" or individuals temporarily staying with friends or family are, thus, also considered to lack their own housing, even if they reside at the same address where they have a reference address with a natural person. However, the definition of "temporary stay" is often contested. To assess its temporariness, PCSWs must consider a reasonable period. Legislation indicates that a stay of several months may be deemed temporary (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, 2023). Additionally, the lack of housing must be caused by a lack of financial means. PCSWs must assess the applicant's actual financial situation, without predefining a maximum income threshold or excluding those who receive social security benefits or employment income. If the lack of housing is not due to financial reasons, the applicant is deemed ineligible.

Overall, this condition reflects the needs-based assessment and generally aligns with the international framework, but some remarks can be made. A broader interpretation of "means" could more accurately reflect the applicant's needs by considering factors like the shortage of affordable housing or lack of skills to secure housing independently. Also, the lack of income thresholds may result in cases where an income below the subsistence level is deemed sufficient, which is inconsistent with international standards. Finally, not all forms of homelessness—as defined by the ETHOS typology—are eligible. Legally, this is not problematic, as certain individuals may still be registered provisionally (e.g., those living in unconventional dwellings) and may therefore not require the administrative anchorage a reference address provides.

3.1.2. Condition B: Not Being Registered in the Population Register

The reference address is only accessible to applicants without a registration in the population registry and without the possibility of being registered at another residence. However, the recent 2023 Circular provides nuance to this condition. On the one hand, it tightens the condition by requiring the completion of an administrative removal procedure before registering a beneficiary at their reference address. Previously, a simple change of address sufficed for obtaining a reference address with a natural person when the applicant's current registration was outdated and no alternative was available (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, 1991, 1992a; Ministerie van Sociale Zaken, Volksgezondheid en Leefmilieu, 1998). We find, in the light of the international framework, that requiring administrative deletion may be excessive, especially since it was not required before for obtaining a reference address with a natural person and since the objective pursued is unclear. On the other hand, the Circular eases the condition by allowing PCSWs to grant a reference address while the applicant is still registered elsewhere. Although the reference address only takes effect after administrative removal, this may prevent a gap between the outdated registration and the registration at a reference address.

3.1.3. Condition C: Applying for Social Assistance

According to the Royal Decree of 1992 and the 2023 Circular, PEH must apply for social assistance or a subsistence allowance to the PCSW to obtain a reference address. We interpret this—often confusing—requirement as a "pseudo-condition" which in reality functions as a procedural step. As the reference address itself constitutes a form of (preventive) social assistance, the requirement is in principle met simply by applying for a reference address at the PCSW. It remains unclear whether this pseudo-condition applies to a reference address with a natural person, but since this type of reference address also requires an application with the PCSW (see Section 3.3), the pseudo-condition is in theory also fulfilled automatically.

3.1.4. Condition D: Retaining a Reference Address

To retain a reference address, beneficiaries must continue to meet the eligibility conditions and report to the PCSW at least once every three months—even when the reference address is with a natural person (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, 2023). This reporting requirement constitutes an additional condition. For reference addresses with the PCSW, the additional condition is considered reasonable in light of international standards, as it ensures beneficiaries regularly collect their mail, which is one of the purposes of the reference address. However, this reasoning does not hold for a reference address with a natural person. In such cases, failure to report on time may, despite continued eligibility, result in termination of the reference address and necessitate reapplication. This condition may be considered excessive according to the international framework. Additionally, a general obligation to cooperate also applies; the 2023 Circular allows PCSWs to terminate a reference address if the beneficiary is entirely uncooperative, although the specifics of this requirement are unclear. Further additional conditions depend on the type of reference address. With a natural person, the consenting individual must retain their registration. If they withdraw consent or change their registration, the reference address is discontinued. With the PCSW, the beneficiary must retain a local connection. If the beneficiary moves to another municipality, the PCSW may discontinue the reference address instead of referring it to the competent PCSW, potentially leaving a gap in the

beneficiaries' social protection without their knowledge (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, 2023). No time limitation exists, beneficiaries may retain a reference address as long as they continue to meet the conditions, which is compliant with the international framework.

3.2. Conditionality (in Practice)

From a sociological perspective, welfare conditionality has been a topic of considerable debate and research. Scholars have explored how welfare provisions have shifted beyond rights-based programs towards conditional entitlements (Cox, 1998), and how this conditionality affects various segments of society, particularly vulnerable groups (Dwyer, 2019). Research indicates that welfare conditionality often results in disproportionate outcomes for marginalized populations, such as PEH (Reeve, 2017; Veasey & Parker, 2022). Instead of automatically granting social benefits, citizens now need to actively earn their entitlement by meeting certain conditions. Imposing conditional requirements on social rights, such as means-tests or residency assessments, discourages vulnerable individuals from claiming them. Frontline welfare workers often demand hard-to-obtain proof of eligibility, which can deter potential claimants (Bennett, 1995). This verification process can become particularly burdensome for PEH, who lack a stable address to collect documentation or receive postal mail (McCarthy et al., 2015). Furthermore, over the years, conditional requirements have become stricter, making it increasingly difficult for vulnerable groups to comply, especially those lacking social, physical, cognitive, or financial resources (Watts et al., 2014).

Glancing at the reference address, the conditional logic is clear: It is not automatically granted to persons considered—or who consider themselves—homeless. PCSWs assess whether the claimant meets the conditions through a social investigation, and monitor whether they still meet the conditions once it is granted. Robben (2024b) demonstrated that this is not a linear process, as multiple actors are involved, each of whom may hold a different interpretation of the definition of homeless (Condition A), the necessity of administrative deletion (Condition B), and the requirement to apply for (additional) social assistance (Condition C). The stringent conditions for obtaining or retaining a reference address in Belgium often come with additional, sometimes unlawful, local requirements, such as actively looking for a job or (social) housing (Robben, Roets, et al., 2023).

The homeless definition (Condition A) used here does not cover all ETHOS categories, resulting in interpretative issues. A qualitative analysis of interviews with professionals revealed that the definitions used differ among social workers and across PCSWs. As a result, individuals may be refused a reference address if they do not fit the specific social worker's or PCSW's interpretation of homelessness (Robben, 2024b). Rita et al. (2023) emphasized that policies targeting PEH often require applicants to substantiate their homelessness by demonstrating the precariousness of their situation. Consequently, social workers tend to assess the eligibility of individuals sleeping rough more quickly than those who are "sofa surfing," leading to disparities among beneficiaries with equally valid needs (Osborne, 2019; Rita et al., 2023). Moreover, certain poverty organizations advise beneficiaries to describe their living situations as more precarious than they actually are, to increase the likelihood of being granted a reference address (Robben & Hermans, 2021).

The administrative deletion (Condition B) has been demonstrated to jeopardize individuals' access to social rights. Being removed from the registry leads to administrative exclusion and undermines the principle of

universal coverage in civil registration (Robben, Pierre, & Hermans, 2023). A significant group appears to be administratively excluded: approximately 14,000 people in Brussels are de-registered annually, of which a small fraction of 2.8% is due to international relocation (Moriau et al., 2024). For some PEH, administrative deletion occurs without their knowledge, when the municipality initiates a verification procedure and finds that the registered address no longer reflects reality. However, requiring administrative deletion for obtaining a reference address can have serious consequences for applicants, even when followed shortly by re-registration at a reference address. Once removed from the register, official documents such as one's identity card and driving license become invalid, and individuals face significant bureaucratic obstacles in proving eligibility for essential services. Moreover, the procedure has been criticized for being slow and inefficient, often leaving individuals without official residence status while awaiting their reference address or even unaware of their deregistration until they lose benefits (Robben & Hermans, 2021).

Applying for social assistance (Condition C) is another condition that is often perceived as unclear. For example, the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) describes this requirement as an initial step towards accepting formal support. They discovered that various PCSWs expect applicants to actively participate in improving their own circumstances (VVSG, 2019). The VVSG recommends imposing conditions to support PEH and closely monitor beneficiaries to provide the most suitable assistance. However, certain PCSWs impose additional conditions to obtain a reference address that beneficiaries cannot or find difficult to meet, such as active job-seeking, applying for (public) housing, debt mediation, and staying sober (Robben & Hermans, 2021). Although well-intentioned in theory, this approach can lead to the exclusion of certain groups in practice, such as those who avoid seeking help or those with negative prior experiences with the PCSW (Robben, Pierre, & Hermans, 2023).

Overall, the eligibility criteria are perceived as vague and open for interpretation, which is one of the myriad factors contributing to the non-take-up of the reference address (Robben, Roets, et al., 2023). In this context, social workers of the PCSW must balance different roles: supporting beneficiaries, monitoring their eligibility, and enforcing sanctions—by refusing, terminating, or threatening to terminate the reference address (Robben et al., 2024).

To sum up, the eligibility criteria for the reference address exhibit shortcomings both in law and in practice. While the legislation broadly aligns with international standards, as the eligibility criteria reflect a needs-based assessment, practical implementation reveals inconsistencies. PEH often feel compelled to exaggerate their situation, while some actors demand excessive proof, indicating an overly stringent application of the "needs" criterium that contradicts the intended framework. As noted earlier, some of the additional legal criteria and those imposed by PCSWs and social assistants may contravene international standards. Although these additional requirements aim to facilitate long-term solutions, they risk being arbitrary and unreasonable. Finally, the clarity and transparency of the legislation fall short of international expectations, both from a legal and sociological point of view. Discrepancies between the latest Circular and higher-ranking legislation generate uncertainty, while vague legislative language fosters confusion and inconsistent interpretation in practice, potentially leading to procedural malpractice and inequitable access to essential services.

3.3. Procedure (in Theory)

The international framework emphasizes the importance of the procedural dimension of social assistance (ECSR, 1969; *FIDH v. Belgium*, 2013). However, due to the limited number of decisions addressing this aspect, only general concepts can be derived. First, decisions regarding allocation must be made in a transparent and consistent manner (*FIDH v. Belgium*, 2013). A sufficiently clearly defined and codified procedure is a positive indication of compliance with this requirement. Second, the procedure may not be overly complex (UNCESCR, 2019), though case law does not clarify what this entails in practice. We assume it refers to a minimal initiative required from applicants. Third, states must progressively eliminate practical and administrative obstacles within the procedure (UNCESCR, 2016a), though this obligation remains somewhat hollow due to the principle of progressive realization. However, if new legislation introduces additional obstacles, it is inconsistent with the international framework.

The procedure for obtaining a reference address is outlined above (Figure 1). The following section discusses several procedural challenges. The first challenge concerns the local connection criterion, as applicants must apply to the competent PCSW. Generally, this refers to the PCSW of the applicant's usual place of residence (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken 2023; Ministerie van Volksgezondheid en Gezin, 1965). However, this is specifically challenging for highly mobile groups such as PEH, who often do not have a usual place of residence. For PEH, as an exception to the general rule, the actual place of residence at the time of application determines the competent PCSW. The legislation, however, does not clearly distinguish between the "usual" and "actual" place of residence, complicating the determination of the competent PCSW (Van Leuvenhaege, 2020). To verify the applicant's presence in the municipality at the time of application, PCSWs conduct a social investigation, which requires minimal cooperation from the applicant. The burden of proof regarding the local connection is therefore shared between the applicant and the PCSW. If, after this investigation, a PCSW deems itself incompetent, the applicant must provide additional proof of their connection to the municipality. If the PCSW still considers itself incompetent, it must transfer the application to the PCSW it considers competent.

A second challenge relates to the role of the PCSW. There is confusion regarding its role, especially in cases involving reference addresses with a natural person (Devriendt, 2024). Before 2023, PCSW involvement was not mandatory. Applicants seeking a reference address with a natural person could bypass the PCSW and apply directly to the municipality. However, the 2023 Circular now requires PCSW involvement in all cases. This intervention is said to benefit PEH, as they often not only need an official address but also support in other areas, such as housing, financial, medical, and social support. The PCSW conducts a comprehensive social investigation into the applicant's situation and ensures follow-up of the case. Following this social investigation, PCSWs may grant other social assistance benefits, when they deem them necessary to allow beneficiaries to live in human dignity.

A third challenge concerns the role of the municipality. The municipality handles the official registration of the reference address, but two main issues arise. First, the municipality can refuse registration—even if the PCSW approved the reference address—if it believes another (provisional) registration is possible. If so, the municipality may instead register the applicant at what it considers to be their main residence. The 2023 Circular lacks clear guidelines on this matter, particularly regarding stays with friends or family lasting between three and six months, leading to potentially discretionary decisions by the municipality. Second, if an applicant is still registered at a previous address, the municipality must complete the administrative deletion procedure

before registering the reference address. This involves verifying the applicant's presence at the old address (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, 1992b, 2023). The new Circular of 2023 sets a one-month deadline for this process, but this period is suspended during the residence investigation, potentially prolonging the procedure.

As only general principles are derived from the international framework, a comprehensive legal assessment is not possible. Nonetheless, our legal analysis conducts a brief evaluation of some notable aspects. First, despite the attempt of the 2023 Circular to unify and clarify procedural elements, ambiguities remain. These arise in part from discrepancies between the Circular and higher-ranking legislation (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken 1991, 1992a). Second, with regard to the complexity of the procedure: initiating the allocation procedure depends on the initiative of the PEH, but beyond that, PEH are only required to cooperate with the PCSW during the social investigation. Following a positive decision, the PCSW directly communicates the decision to the municipality, which proceeds the registration without requiring further action from the applicant. From a legal point of view, the complexity of the procedure thus complies with the international framework.

3.4. Procedure (in Practice)

In contrast, the practical implementation of the procedure reveals numerous challenges. First is the local connection criterion, a contentious issue. PEH often exhibit high mobility, leading PCSWs to declare themselves incompetent and subsequently refuse or revoke reference addresses. This practice has been criticized by scholars, especially concerning its application in shelters (Planije & Tuynman, 2013). PEH are also frequently redirected between PCSWs due to insufficient evidence of residence in a specific municipality. In 2018, the Interfederal Combat Poverty Service noted that some PCSWs limit homeless registrations for budgetary or political reasons, actions deemed unlawful. These practices can lead to jurisdictional disputes among PCSWs regarding applicant responsibility. Moreover, PCSWs often fail to forward applications, leaving applicants uninformed about the appropriate PCSW to approach. This results in individuals being deprived of a reference address and, consequently, their social rights (Robben, Pierre, & Hermans, 2023).

Secondly comes the procedure, and how PEH experience applying for a reference address. Applicants encounter substantial administrative hurdles. The application process for a reference address is more onerous than standard address registrations, often involving lengthy forms requiring detailed personal histories (Robben et al., 2024). The requirement of a social investigation poses a significant barrier, particularly for "care-avoiders" who are deterred by mandatory PCSW involvement. The ambiguous scope of these investigations exacerbates this issue.

Thirdly comes the role of PCSWs in practice. As noted, the PCSW's involvement is now mandatory for all applicants. This imposes heavy demands on social workers, leading to high caseloads and operational strain. Their tasks include eligibility assessments, social investigations with unclear parameters, ongoing follow-ups, guidance, and verification for both types of reference addresses. These investigations can be particularly demanding, requiring evaluations of applicants' broader socio-economic contexts. PCSWs involvement presents additional challenges with "care-avoiders." These individuals, wary of institutional oversight, may forgo applying for a reference address, complicating social workers' efforts to engage with them. Furthermore, the obligation to monitor beneficiaries—through regular contact, quarterly reporting, and condition verification—adds to the workload (Robben, 2024b; Turpin et al., 2021). While intended to offer

comprehensive support, these follow-ups demand significant administrative and interpersonal effort, especially with vulnerable individuals possessing complex needs. Elevated caseloads, combined with these intensive responsibilities, can lead to burnout among social workers and diminish the efficacy of PCSW interventions. This risks creating a cycle where beneficiaries receive less personalized attention, undermining the system's intended purpose.

To sum up, while the procedure mainly complies with the international framework from a legal point of view, practical implementation presents a contrasting reality. The existence of a codified procedure and regulations identifying the competent PCSW is insufficient if enforcement is inconsistent or discretionary. Although the legislation may not formally breach international norms—given the relatively low threshold for procedural barriers—the practical implications cannot be ignored. Sociological research indicates that PCSW involvement can deter care-avoiders from seeking assistance, suggesting that the expanded role of the PCSW constitutes an additional barrier. This development contradicts the broader goal of progressively removing administrative obstacles. When taking into account both perspectives, it becomes clear that the procedure does not fully adhere to the principles embedded in the international framework.

3.5. Equal Access (in Theory and Practice)

International standards require equal access to social rights, both in law and in practice. (Un)equal situations must be treated (un)equally, unless a reasonable and objective justification exists (*ERRC v. France*, 2009; *FIDH v. Belgium*, 2012; *USB v. Italy*, 2018). Therefore, a (lack of) difference in treatment must pursue a legitimate aim, be proportionate, and be necessary for the promotion of welfare within a democratic society. Furthermore, the international framework also underscores that social assistance must be accessible regardless of a person's (place of) residence. States must ensure equal territorial coverage and, where regional disparities exist, implement measures to progressively reduce them (UNCESCR, 2013, 2022). Minimum standards for local authorities serve as a positive indication of compliance with the framework.

The existence of a reference address with a natural person and one with a PCSW raises the question of whether each type's beneficiaries have equal access. The legislation remains unclear on whether both types of reference address should be considered comparable or incomparable. On the one hand, both types are treated differently, as the territorial incompetence of the PCSW only leads only to an automatic reassignment of the competent PCSW in case of a reference address with a natural person and to a termination in case of a reference address with a PCSW (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, 2023). However, both situations may be considered comparable according to the 2023 Circular, given the equal PCSW involvement. The absence of justification and the existence of less onerous alternatives may render this differentiation discriminatory. On the other hand, the Population Register Law of 1991 and the 1992 Royal Decree distinguish between both types of reference address, which implies their incomparability. Despite this presumed incomparability, both types are treated identically in the 2023 Circular in terms of PCSW involvement, administrative removal, and procedural aspects. The application of identical rules to both without providing justification may result in an unjustified lack of differentiation. Concerning equal territorial access, it must be noted that the same legislation applies uniformly across the territory and that the Circular of 2023 aims to establish minimum standards for implementation. However, empirical studies conducted before 2023 indicate that significant disparities persist in the practical implementation of the reference address, casting doubt on the effectiveness of existing measures in ensuring equal access to administrative anchorage.

From a sociological perspective, the mere existence of a formal legal guarantee does not ensure substantive equality in access to social rights. Structural inequalities, bureaucratic gatekeeping, and the discretionary power of local authorities can create significant implementation gaps, leading to the de facto exclusion of PEH from essential services (Somerville, 2013; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Moreover, PEH face additional stigmatization and systemic bias in interactions with social service providers, leading to inconsistent application of the legal framework across municipalities (Wacquant, 2009).

To sum up, an assessment of the Belgian legislation shows that it is not entirely compliant with the framework. First, both types of reference address are simultaneously considered incomparable by the Population Register Law of 1991 and the Royal Decree of 1992. They are treated equally by the 2023 Circular, which considers them comparable, yet remain unequally treated in some aspects. Second, while from a legal point of view the access to a reference address is independent of the PEH's place of residence, in practice, significant disparities exist across municipalities and among social assistants in implementing the legislation. The discretionary nature of administrative decisions and local disparities create hidden barriers that systematically disadvantage PEH. Moreover, the ambiguities within the 2023 Circular raise concerns about its capacity to ensure uniform application of the legislation. This results in unequal treatment of individuals in similar situations in practice, thus failing to meet the requirement of equal coverage according to international standards. Recognizing these structural factors and legal ambiguities is crucial in assessing whether legal compliance with international standards leads to effective social inclusion or merely reflects a formalistic legal ideal disconnected from reality.

3.6. Right to Appeal (in Theory and Practice)

To comply with the international framework, individuals must have the right to appeal any negative decision regarding social assistance (*EUROCEF v. France*, 2015; *FEANTSA v. The Netherlands*, 2012). This appeal should take place before an independent judicial body, capable of ruling on the case's merits. For the appeal to be effective, applicants must be informed of their right to appeal and the procedures involved (*FEANTSA v. The Netherlands*, 2012). This requirement is met if the negative decision mentions the possibility of appeal and provides instructions on how to proceed.

The Belgian legislation (FOD Binnenlandse Zaken, 2023; Ministerie van Justitie, 1967) adheres to these requirements. Individuals can contest any unfavorable decision by the PCSW at the Labor Court, which has the authority to rule on the case's merits. Moreover, if the PCSW denies a reference address, it is legally required to inform the applicant about the appeal procedure, the timeframe for lodging an appeal, the required format, and the competent court. Notably, the Labor Court in Belgium is considered more accessible than other judicial bodies (Van Eeckhoutte, 2014; Van Hiel, 2019). Initiating proceedings involves fewer formalities and does not require advance payment of procedural costs. In social assistance cases, it suffices to submit a simple message of disagreement to the court registry (Van Limberghen, 2024). Additionally, a public prosecutor in social affairs participates in these cases to ensure equality between the socially insured and social security institutions, such as the PCSW (Verhaegen & Vandersteene, 2024). The public prosecutor prepares the case, gathers information, and, if necessary, conducts investigative measures. Applicants may also be represented by relatives or representatives of social organizations, not exclusively by lawyers.

Despite the Labor Court's accessibility, practical barriers persist. Research indicates that socially excluded groups, including PEH, are more likely to encounter barriers in accessing legal services (Buck et al., 2005), and justice in general. This involves digital barriers, complexity, lack of information, financial barriers, and limited access to legal aid or representation (Teremetskyi et al., 2021). PEH, in particular, are known to be victimized, yet rarely seek help through the justice system. Berti (2010) demonstrated that PEH perceive the law as a force that applies against them, rather than working for them. Regarding the reference address, applicants may remain unaware of their right to appeal if they are not adequately informed by social assistants, for instance when their request is (unlawfully) denied informally without a formal written decision.

To sum up, compliant with the international framework, Belgian legislation provides for the right to appeal adverse decisions through the Labor Court, which is designed to be accessible and supportive of applicants. However, practical challenges, such as informal refusals without formal notification, and the myriad of barriers PEH face in accessing justice, can impede individuals' awareness of their appeal rights, thereby undermining the system's overall effectiveness.

4. Conclusion

The reference address in Belgium is a rather unique alternative registration mechanism for PEH without a fixed abode. This system enables such vulnerable groups to retain access to social rights. While recent sociological studies have examined this reference address system (e.g., Robben, 2024b; Robben, Roets, et al., 2023), there remains a notable gap in comprehensive legal analyses, particularly from a human rights perspective. This article aims to bridge that gap by employing both legal and sociological lenses to assess access to the reference address system, as it further affects access to social rights for a particularly vulnerable group.

Our findings indicate that the current system does not fully align with international human rights standards, neither in legislation nor in practice. Several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis.

First, discrepancies are found both in the "law in the books" and the "law in practice." Inconsistencies between circulars and formal legislation contribute to confusion. Circulars typically provide more detailed interpretations than higher-ranking legislation; however, the most recent circular introduces new rules. The binding nature of circulars applies primarily to administrative bodies, leaving beneficiaries in a precarious position regarding enforceability. The potential for future circulars to introduce additional conditions or new guidelines underscores the need for legislative clarity and stability. Studies have shown that the system's complexity is often unjustified and that existing circulars may exacerbate rather than mitigate these challenges. From a sociological perspective, this legal and bureaucratic complexity contributes to a system that often excludes those it is meant to serve (Robben, 2024b). Moreover, the complexity of the current system places an undue burden on social workers, who must navigate intricate legal frameworks while fulfilling their roles as support providers. This dual responsibility can result in inconsistent application of rules and may inadvertently disadvantage applicants. Social workers must strive to obtain the best possible care for their beneficiaries, while navigating legislative uncertainty. This also raises questions about the extent to which social workers can be regarded as human rights actors, and how they can or should respond to laws and policies that hinder their ability to work in line with human rights principles (Dibbets et al., 2021). Furthermore, the fragmented regulation leads to contradictions. For example, the legislator

simultaneously considers the reference address with a natural person and with the PCSW as comparable but treats them differently, and as incomparable but treats them similarly.

Second, the system's design inherently excludes certain groups, such as individuals who avoid institutional care or non-EU migrants and refugees who remain unreachable by authorities and lack alternatives. This exclusion renders individuals administratively invisible, exacerbating their marginalization and vulnerability (Robben, Pierre & Hermans, 2023). In sociological literature, this reflects bureaucratic mechanisms that classify individuals into "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, often leaving the most precarious populations without access to essential rights (Lister, 2007). The reliance on restrictive definitions of homelessness further contributes to the exclusionary nature of the system, highlighting the need to adopt more inclusive, scientifically recognized frameworks, such as ETHOS, within formal legislation.

Third, the international framework presents inherent limitations in evaluating the reference address system. One challenge lies in the dual nature of the reference address, which functions both as a form of social assistance and as a civil law concept. Its connection to population registry regulations—particularly its role in defining eligibility and procedural requirements at the municipal level—further restricts the scope of evaluation. A second challenge is that the framework itself relies on broad principles derived from international standards, rather than detailed, context-specific criteria. As a result, legal assessments alone are insufficient; sociological research on the lived experiences of affected individuals remains essential. Furthermore, even when assessment is possible, the framework sets a relatively low threshold on some aspects, requiring only the progressive realization of rights. This makes it difficult to establish clear violations, except in extreme cases, thereby limiting opportunities for individuals to enforce their rights.

Fourth, a key sociological concern is the interplay between legislation and implementation, particularly how administrative discretion transforms procedural requirements into exclusionary barriers. The local connection requirement, for example, is often treated as a substantive condition rather than a formality, leading to unjustified rejections. Similarly, the burden of proof is frequently misapplied. Legally, applicants have a duty to cooperate with the PCSW rather than bearing the burden of proof. However, in practice, this duty is often interpreted so broadly that it effectively becomes a burden of proof for applicants, contradicting the legal framework. These practices raise concerns about the balance between administrative procedures and the rights of the individuals they are meant to protect.

Fifth, our analysis highlights the importance of evaluating both legislation and implementation in light of the international framework. Ensuring access to social rights through compliant legislation is meaningless if the legislation fails to ensure proper implementation in practice. This is particularly relevant for the reference address, which serves as a gateway to other social rights for PEH. Addressing the existing issues is not only a legal matter but also a matter of political choices.

Reflecting on policy recommendations, our analysis underscores the need for a comprehensive review of the reference address system to comply with international standards and to better respond to the needs of PEH. Legislative clarity should be achieved by harmonizing administrative circular(s) and formal legislation, and by reforming conditions that allow for inconsistent interpretations. A critical review of which additional conditions are necessary and reasonable is also essential. The legislator must scrutinize the distinctions and similarities between reference addresses linked to a natural person and those linked to the PCSW. Another

suggestion is to introduce a reference address with a legal entity for PEH, without PCSW involvement, as is already the case for mobile population groups, such as Roma. Only by removing administrative barriers and ensuring consistent implementation of legislation can the protection and promotion of social rights be guaranteed for all, regardless of housing status. The study therefore highlights the commitment to ensuring access to essential services for all EU citizens, as established in the EPSR. Our findings suggest that addressing structural barriers, including bureaucratic inefficiencies and legislative complexity, is key to realizing the EPSR's objectives.

Future research on access to social rights for PEH remains necessary, encompassing both the reference address and the broader role of registration. Regarding the reference address, further studies should prioritize examining access to justice and the right to appeal for vulnerable groups such as PEH. Additionally, further research must explore the decoupling of access to social rights from registered residence requirements, which currently presents an administrative obstacle, and the adoption of more inclusive approaches, as recommended by the UN Committee (UNCESCR, 2011, 2015a). Moreover, the implementation and stringent regulation of the reference address are closely linked to the significant implications of cohabitation status on social benefits, necessitating future research on how housing situations affect these benefits. However, even if access to social rights becomes independent of a registered address, reference addresses will likely remain necessary as they also serve other legal and sociological functions. Further interdisciplinary research on policies targeting PEH, such as the reference address, is crucial to ensure that such policies are aligned with the needs of PEH.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
This study is based exclusively on publicly available legal instruments, case law, and institutional reports. No new datasets were generated or analyzed.

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ARTICLE

The Erosion of the Portuguese Minimum Income Protection Scheme

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Abstract

While minimum income protection (MIP) is central on a European level, as demonstrated by the European Pillar of Social Rights, national policies display huge variations, reflecting different domestic guidelines and political and socio-economic dynamics. The literature has shown that the adequacy of MIPs and their role in social protection systems varies significantly, not only between countries but also over time. However, as most studies adopt large-*N* comparative perspectives, it is not possible to identify whether policy changes affect the programs' generosity or how. This article bridges this gap by taking Portugal as a specific case study and examining the degree of generosity of its MIP—the Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI), later renamed Social Insertion Income (SII). GMI/SII has outlasted other schemes and is unique within the Southern European welfare regime, partly because, since it started, it has undergone several transformations, which have impacted its ability to provide adequate coverage. The article applies a hypothetical simulation approach to assess the impact of policy change on the generosity of GMI/SII over time. The results demonstrate that alterations introduced over time have had negative effects on different aspects of the adequacy of GMI/SII—and to varying degrees.

Keywords

generosity; hypothetical simulations; minimum income protection; policy change; Portugal

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1. Introduction

Minimum income protection (MIP) has been a key part of European social policy during the last three decades. While some countries had already adopted MIPs—i.e., France—the European Council Recommendation 92/441/EEC on common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social assistance was the first step in urging member states to recognize the "basic right of a person to have sufficient resources and social assistance to live in a manner compatible with human dignity" (European Council, 1992, pp. 46–48). Further, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union of 2000, which became legally binding and a part of EU law with the Lisbon Treaty, recognised the right to social and housing assistance as a form of ensuring a decent existence and introduced social inclusion into the European policy agenda (European Commission, 2010). This was reaffirmed by the EU2020 strategy, which included an ambitious EU poverty reduction target, and the European Semester, with a thematic focus on minimum income that emphasised the importance of adequate minimum income support (European Commission, 2010). More recently, the Interinstitutional Proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) explicitly recognised the right of individuals to have an adequate minimum income at all stages of life (European Council, 2017). The EPSR plays a key role in setting and funding the agenda for social rights, particularly in countries with limited budgetary capacity. However, the wording of the principles is often too broad and difficult to translate into action. Besides, as there is considerable variation between welfare states in Europe, MIPs face obstacles in the translation and implementation of the convergent objectives assumed at the supranational level (Greve, 2023; Hermans et al., 2023; Pereirinha & Pereira, 2023; Petmesidou et al., 2023).

These policy recommendations have contributed to the widespread adoption of MIPs across EU member states (Wang et al., 2018). MIP schemes constitute a last resort safety net that safeguards a minimum standard of living for households that have no market or social insurance income, essentially preventing their descent into extreme poverty. Yet, the adequacy of these programmes and their role in the overall social protection system were found to vary significantly between member states (Pereirinha et al., 2020; Vandenbroucke et al., 2013). The combination of EU guidelines with differing domestic realities has been the main contributor to the architectural diversity of MIP schemes. This is clearly illustrated by the distinct pathways of the four countries traditionally pooled together when considering the Southern European experience with minimum protection. While Portugal pioneered the implementation of a nationwide MIPS in 1996, Greece adopted one 20 years later. In Italy and Spain MIPS are managed at the subnational level and reveal varying levels of adequacy within the same country across different regions (Natili, 2019; Pereirinha, 2021).

This article focuses on the adequacy of the Portuguese MIP scheme. In particular, it addresses the question of how policy change affected the benefits of the Portuguese MIP scheme in the period 2010–2023. The Social Insertion Income (SII)—formerly known as the Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI)—is the nationwide flagship MIP scheme. Since its genesis, Portugal has undergone various periods of crisis and recovery (e.g., the 2008 financial crisis, Covid-19, cost-of-living crisis). Portugal stands out from other Southern European countries in that it is the only country with a long-term national MIP, which has remained in force and been relevant as a protective measure during the multiple and diverse crises that the country has gone through. These crises, combined with political reconfigurations, have led to the introduction of numerous changes to the programme (Caleiras & Carmo, 2024; Cantante et al., 2020; Pereirinha, 2021; Rodrigues, 2012). In particular, it is necessary to assess whether the Portuguese MIP was successful in addressing the needs of its distinct

beneficiaries (e.g., households with children, single households, couples, etc.) during these periods. This is achieved by comparing the evolution of the generosity of MIP in Portugal against various social minima, such as the poverty threshold, minimum wages, and reference budgets.

Whilst this study looks into a specific case, it provides insights into the wider debate on adequate social protection systems. Although previous studies on adequacy focus primarily on cross-national comparisons, attributing differences in generosity to design features of MIP schemes, they mostly fail to address the relation between policy change and the generosity of these schemes. This article contributes to the knowledge on the effects of social policy change and the generosity of MIPs by exploring how the former impacts the latter in the context of the evolution of the Portuguese MIP scheme.

2. MIPs Adequacy: An Overview

Principle 14 of the EPSR explicitly mentions that "everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to receive adequate minimum income benefits ensuring they live with dignity at all stages of life, and effective access to enabling goods and services" (European Commission, 2018). Besides, EPSR identifies benchmarking as a key tool to support social policy and has developed a framework specifically directed at minimum income benefits for the working-age population. This framework agrees upon two indicators that can be used to measure the adequacy of minimum income benefits, namely: (a) the net income of a minimum income beneficiary as a share of the poverty threshold (smoothed over three years) and (b) the net income of a minimum income beneficiary as a share of the income of a low wage earner (a person earning 50% of the average wage). They provide a basic understanding of the poverty alleviation effects of MIP benefits and their relation to the average income of low-wage earners, thus contributing to our understanding of activation.

The at-risk-of-poverty threshold (AROP60) is defined by Eurostat as 60% of the median equivalised net disposable income (Eurostat, 2023). Since it uses an equivalence scale, this indicator is sensitive to household size and composition and the effects of economies of scale within households. The definition of poverty as a percentage of median income draws on the conceptualisation of poverty agreed upon by the European Council in 1975 (Eurostat, 2013):

People are said to be living in poverty if their income and resources are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living considered acceptable in the society in which they live. Because of their poverty, they may experience multiple disadvantages such as unemployment, low income, poor housing, inadequate health care, and barriers to lifelong learning, culture, sports, and recreation. They are often excluded and marginalised from participating in activities (economic, social, and cultural) that are the norm for other people and their access to fundamental rights may be restricted.

Essentially, the AROP60 is based on the concept of relative poverty, which describes circumstances in which people cannot afford to actively participate in society and benefit from the activities and experiences that most people take for granted. Although it provides some clear analytical advantages in terms of comparability across and within countries, this indicator has received many criticisms. Drawing on the poverty definition adopted by the European Council presented above, there is no evidence that an income above 60% of median equivalised wages is sufficient to live a life of human dignity considered acceptable by society (Goedemé et al., 2018). Additionally, since the relationship between wages and the prices of goods and services differs

across and within countries, it should be expected that the threshold for living a life of human dignity should also vary. Further, since the AROP60 is a purely income-based indicator, it does not directly account for the actual cost of goods and services necessary for individuals to meet their basic needs and to fully participate in society. This is particularly relevant when the AROP60 is used to assess the adequacy of MIPs during highly inflationary periods, since low-income households face significantly higher effective inflation rates and are less equipped to deal with sharp increases in their cost of living (Charalampakis et al., 2022). Ultimately, these issues raise questions regarding the legitimacy of an arbitrarily defined poverty threshold and its usefulness in assessing the adequacy of minimum income (Borgeraas & Brusdal, 2008).

The budget standards literature offers an alternative approach to addressing some of these issues. Reference budgets are illustratively priced baskets of goods and services that reflect the minimum resources that people need to participate adequately in society (Penne et al., 2016). This approach to defining a minimum standard of living has clear advantages when compared with the AROPE60. Since RB methods are based on public and expert opinion, they often reproduce what is a socially accepted standard of living in a given society at the moment of inquiry. Additionally, reference budgets are easily updated to reflect the current price of living through the Consumer Price Index.

The potential of reference budgets to define a minimum standard of living is clearly recognised in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy. As part of the Social Investment Package of 2013, the European Commission proposed the use of reference budgets as an instrument to assist in the design and monitoring of adequate income support across member states (Storms et al., 2014). Projects such as ImPRovE (2012–2016) and, more recently, the Pilot Project for the Development of a Common Methodology on Reference Budgets in Europe (2014–15) greatly contributed to the effort of devising a common method to develop comparative reference budgets across member states that allow for a clearer contextualisation of poverty indicators and monitoring of social policy (Cussó-Parcerisas et al., 2018). In Portugal, work in this field has been led primarily by Pereirinha et al. (2020), with the most recent reference budget estimates being in 2014 (Pereirinha et al., 2017).

3. The Portuguese MIPs Timeline

The history of social minima in Portugal started as early as 1974, with the creation of the social pension aimed at the elderly who were economically vulnerable, as well as the implementation of a minimum wage. However, it was not until 1996 that the Portuguese MIP was created, during a Socialist government. The implementation of the GMI began with an experimental 1-year phase, but the programme was extended to the entire population and became a new entitlement the following year. The GMI was designed as a cash benefit targeting households facing economic deprivation, regardless of their contributory status, and aimed at satisfying basic needs. It included a formal agreement to participate in a social insertion programme. The benefit levels were calculated based on the household composition using an equivalence scale. Households were considered to be economically deprived when their cumulative income was less than: 100% of the social pension up to the 2nd adult; 70% of the social pension for each subsequent person aged 18 and over; and 50% of the social pension for each child aged under 18. Thus, the GMI was dependent on the level of the social pension, which in turn mirrored the minimum wage.

In 2002, the newly elected right-wing coalition—composed of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Popular Party (CDS-PP)—renamed it and introduced major changes to the programme, especially to its "social

insertion" component. First, the income considered to determine the benefit level was linked to the average income received during the previous 12 months. Second, if the beneficiary or any of the members of the household got a job, 50% of the income earned from work was deducted from the benefit. Additionally, to control abuse and fraud, the principle of a non-automatic renewal after one year was introduced. Essentially, this reform made the now-renamed SII more restrictive and reduced the level of generosity that had been experienced since 1997, which is clearly evidenced by the drop in the number of beneficiaries in the following years (Figure 1). There was also an attempt to narrow eligibility by increasing the age limit from 18 to 25 based on the premise that SII could act as a disincentive for young people to join the labour market, but this proposal was denounced by the Constitutional Court. In 2005, with the return of the Socialist Party (PS) to power, there was a reversal of some of these rules: The household income (previous month), and the automatic renewal of the benefit were reverted.

Later, in 2010, the PS government adopted a new law (DL no. 70/2010), aimed at harmonizing the formula used to determine means-testing across all social benefits and expanded the sources of income considered in the calculation. Two major changes were brought to the SII with this reform: (a) a more comprehensive definition of income was adopted, which included non-monetary income categories, and (b) the adoption of the OECD equivalence scale that reduced the weight of the second adult to 0.7.

In 2012, prompted by the pressure for fiscal consolidation from Troika (2011–2014) embraced by the PSD/CDS-PP government (2011–2015), a new decree (DL no. 133/2012) doubled down on the changes introduced in 2010. First, it reintroduced the principle of non-automatic renewal. Second, it established a threshold for immovable assets above which individuals were no longer entitled to receive SII. Finally, it introduced the OECD modified equivalence scale that reduced the weight of the second adult to 0.5 and the
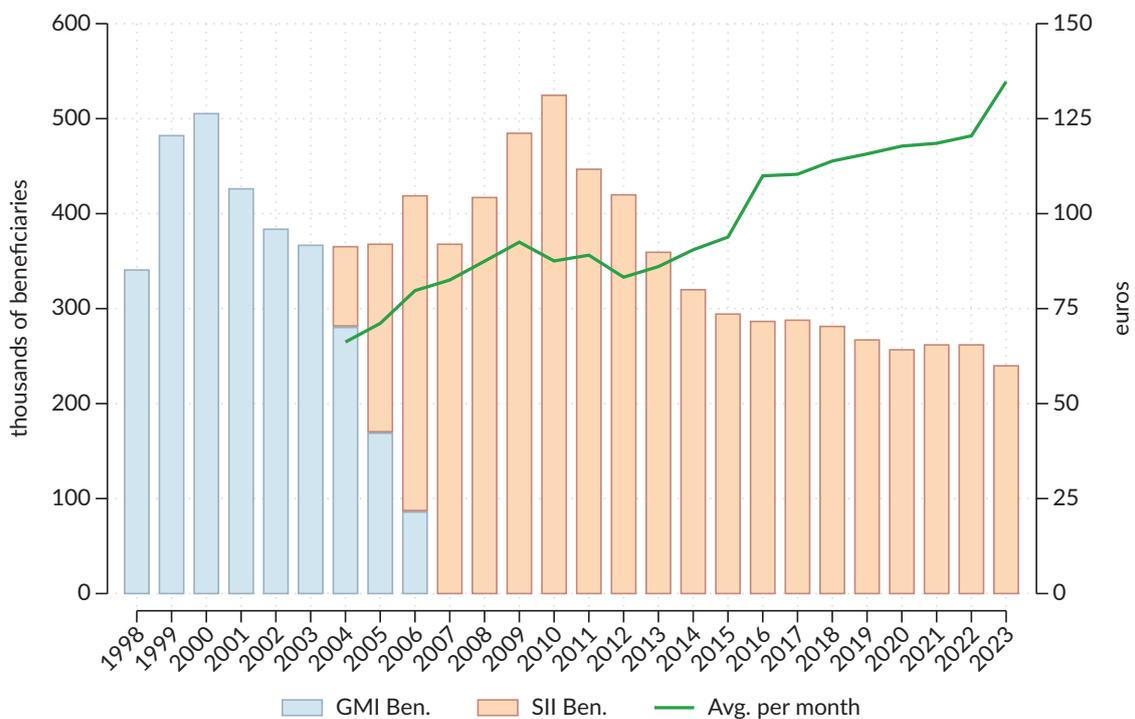

Figure 1. GMI/SII timeline: Number of beneficiaries and average monthly benefit amount. Source: Own production using data from II/MTSSS (n.d.).

weight of children to 0.3. One of the most important changes was the indexation of SII to 45.208% of the Social Support Index (SSI)—since 2007, instead of indexing social benefits to GMMR, the SSI was used as a reference. While the SII was frozen up to 2016, its indexation was downgraded to 43.173% of the SSI in 2013 (DL no. 13/2013). These alterations reinforced the transitory nature of the SII, making it even more restrictive.

At the end of 2015, following a motion of censure, the newly elected PSD government was replaced by an unprecedented governing solution led by PS with the support of the left—the Communist Party, Verdes, and Bloco de Esquerda. This platform had promised to revert the decisions made during the period of structural adjustment, particularly those that directly affected social policies. Consequently, the SII was revised again in 2016 (no. 1/2016), leading to a reversal of the equivalence scale back to the original OECD equivalence scale, which meant the weight of additional adults was set again at 0.7 and each child at 0.5. Further, the reform restored 25% of the cut applied in 2013 with the indexation of the SII to 43.173% of the SSI. In 2017 (Portaria n.º 5/2017), an extra 25% of the cut was reinstated to the value of the SII and the indexation was uprated to 43.634% of the SSI. In 2019 (Portaria n. º 22/2019), the reference value of SII was downgraded to 43.525% of SSI.

During the pandemic, and later in response to high inflation, some ad-hoc measures were adopted, such as one-off cash payoffs. Although these measures were replicated a few times, they did not generate new entitlements or changes to the design of the SII. Thus, the last significant modifications to the structure of the benefit occurred in 2016. From that point forward, the value of the SII has essentially been fluctuating in line with the indexation rules and, therefore, the value of the SSI.

4. Data and Methodology

This study applies a hypothetical simulation approach to assess the adequacy of the SII in Portugal between 2010 and 2023. For this purpose, it uses the EUROMOD (Sutherland & Figari, 2013) tax-benefit microsimulation to calculate legal guaranteed incomes for five standard family units: a single adult (S), a couple (C), a single parent with one child (S1C), a couple with one child (C1C) and a couple with two children (C2C). The precise assumptions that justify the choice of family units can be found in Marchal et al. (2019). SII benefit amounts and disposable incomes are calculated for each family unit using the Hypothetical Household tool in EUROMOD (Hufkens et al., 2019). Since we are assessing the adequacy of the SII, all adults are considered to be inactive—out of the labour market and not entitled to unemployment benefits or unemployment assistance—thus ensuring all households are entitled to SII. However, it is important to note that, for eligible households—i.e., households with children—SII income can be complemented with income from other benefits, such as family allowance. This is important since it clearly shows the articulation between different benefits within the Portuguese Social Security System.

Our study uses three indicators to assess the evolution of the adequacy of the SII in Portugal during the period between 2010 and 2023:

1. Equivalised SII as a percentage of the at-risk-of-poverty threshold (AROPT60) to measure the capacity of the SII to reduce poverty. For this purpose, we used the annual at-risk-of-poverty threshold (60% of median equivalised income) published by EUROSTAT (2023, ilc_li01).

2. Equivalised SII as a percentage of equivalised DISPY of a household equivalent in terms of composition where all adults are wage earners earning the legal minimum wage (MiNWG) to measure the capacity to reduce inequalities between those in the labour market, at the bottom of the income distribution, and the beneficiaries of the SII.
3. Equivalised SII as a percentage of reference budgets to measure the capacity of the SII to ensure a life of dignity and social participation in society.

Each of these indicators measures a different aspect of adequacy and therefore should be used complementarily to provide a more granular assessment of the adequacy of the SII. This approach allows us to explore the advantages of each indicator and provides a more comprehensive assessment of the various dimensions of adequacy of the Portuguese MIPs. The reference budgets used in this article are "borrowed" from the research project by Pereirinha et al. (2017). This project uses a set of assumptions for the identification of hypothetical family units and their respective expenditure that should be taken into account, namely:

- Active-age females and males are 42 and 40 years old respectively.
- Underage females and males are two and 12 years old respectively.
- All individuals reside in Vila Franca de Xira, enjoy reasonably good health, and their extended family and friends live in the same region. They can use the public transportation network and are free of debt. They do not regularly produce or receive any goods for free.
- Active-age individuals work outside of their immediate area of residence.
- Children aged two years old attend nursery school, where parents pay a monthly fee that varies according to the level of household income.
- Children aged 12 years old attend state school.
- The family home is an apartment rented at market prices on the second floor of a 4-floor story building. The apartment has one living room, one kitchen, one bathroom, and a number of bedrooms adequate to the size of the family unit, such that there is no overcrowding, with access to electricity and water networks.

To ensure comparability between reference budgets and the incomes simulated, the same assumptions have been used for generating the hypothetical households in EUROMOD. Further, since reference budgets in Pereirinha et al. (2017) are estimated for 2014, this study uses the Consumer Price Index to update the various items in the baskets for the timeline considered in this article (2010–2023). The reference budgets used are shown in Figure 2 and described in the Supplementary File, Table 1.
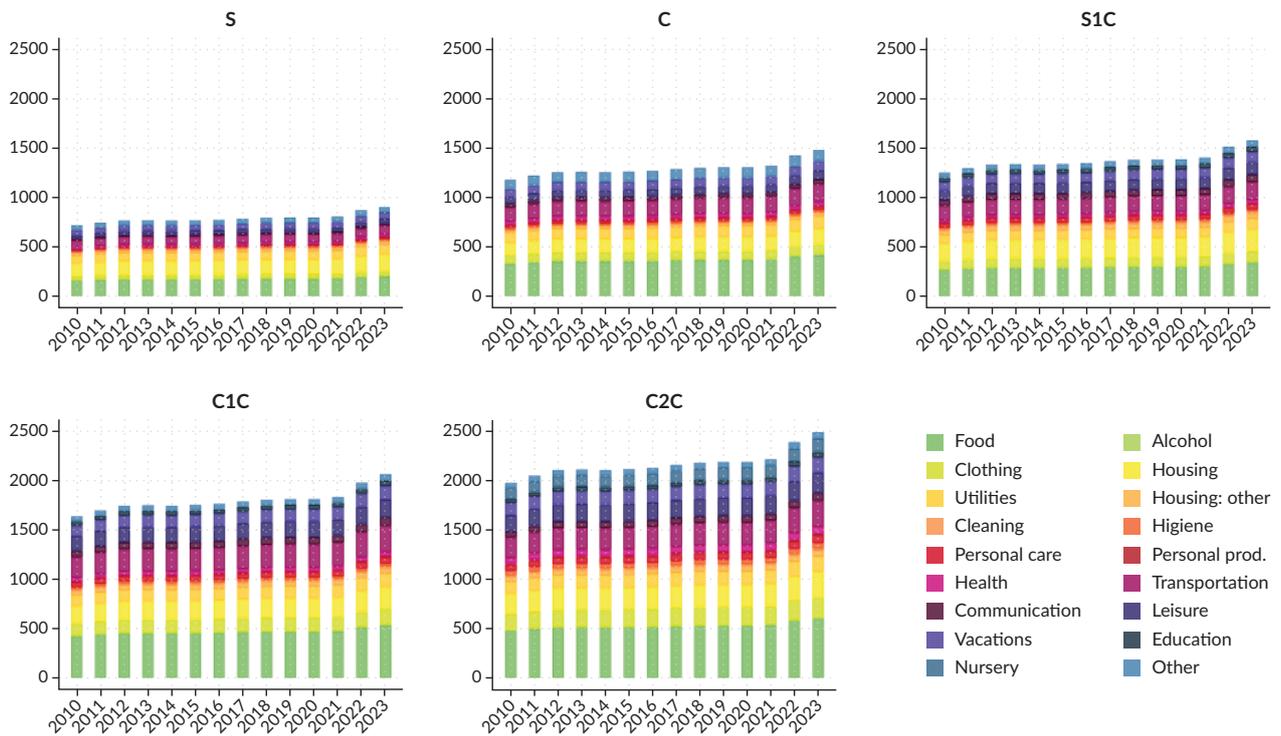
Figure 2. Reference budgets by type of expenditure per household type (2010–2023). Source: Own calculations using data from Pereirinha et al. (2017) and Portuguese National Statistics Institute (INE, 2024).

5. The Adequacy of the SII

In this section, we provide a comparative analysis of the adequacy of the SII in Portugal across different types of households, while accounting for different dimensions, such as relation to poverty, inequality, and social participation.

5.1. Poverty Reduction

Figure 3 presents a comparative analysis of the SII as a share of the AROP60 for different types of households between 2010 and 2023. The results reveal a deterioration of the SII in relation to the AROP60. During the period under assessment, the SII as a share of the AROP60 declined from 60%-80% in 2010 to approximately 40% in 2023. Although we find some heterogeneity, larger households appear to have a better relationship between SII and AROP60.

5.2. Inequality

Figure 4 presents the comparative analysis of the SII and equivalised DISPY as a share of MiNWG. Similarly to what was observed for the AROP60, there is a considerable deterioration of the SII in relation to the MiNWG. In the case of S1C households, the SII as a share of the MiNWG declined from over 90% to less than 40%, clearly illustrating a considerable decrease in the capacity of the SII to reduce inequalities.
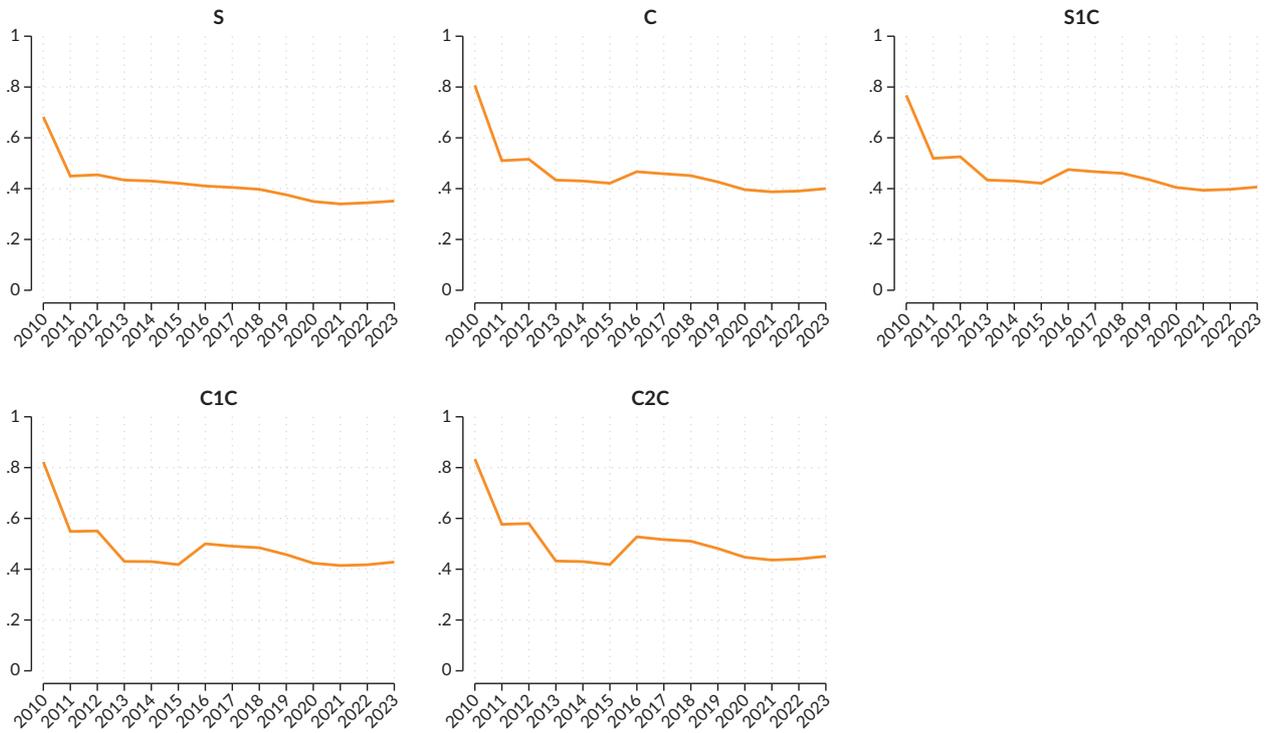
Figure 3. Equivalised SII as a percentage of the AROPT60.
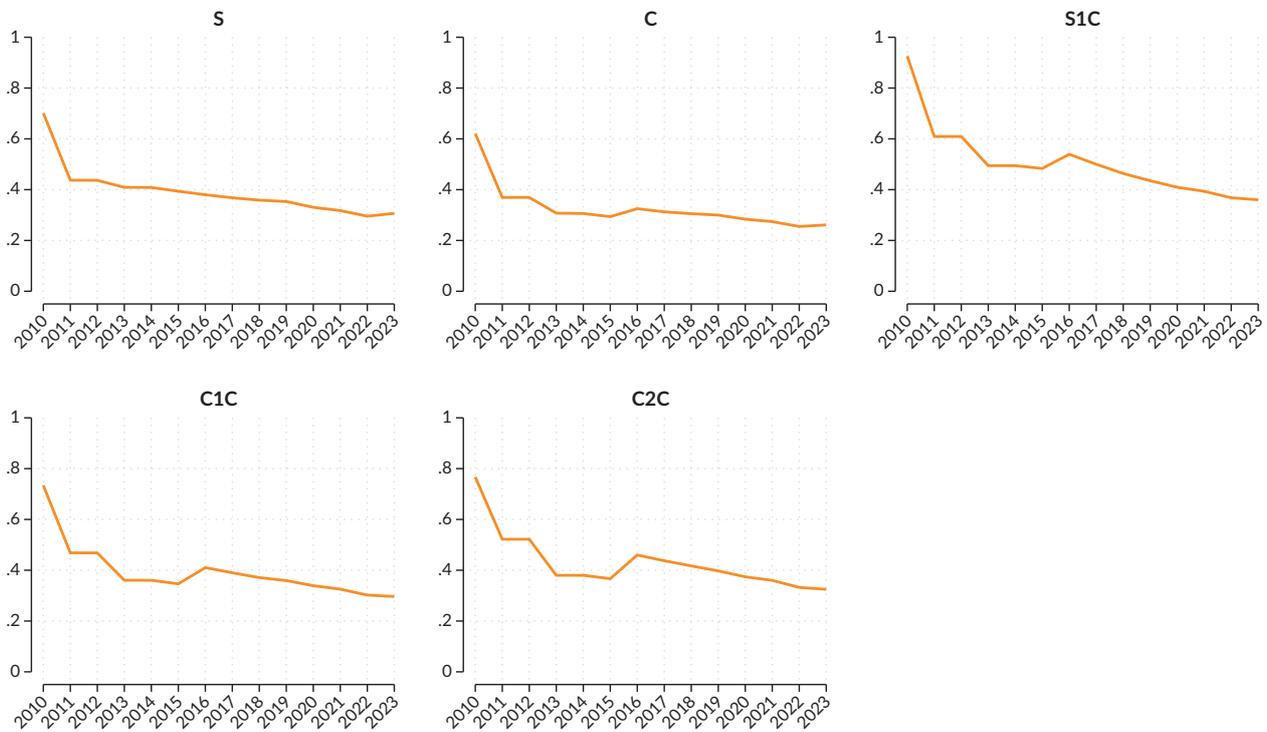
Figure 4. Equivalised SII as a percentage of the MiNWG.

5.3. Social Participation

Figure 5 presents the comparative analysis of the SII and equivalised DISPY as a share of household-specific reference budgets. In general, over time, SII has covered approximately 20% of reference budgets for nearly all households. Although there is some fluctuation, this is mainly due to design features changing over time. Overall, we do not identify an observable declining trend between SII and reference budgets. Comparing households, Single households seem to have a better relationship between SII amount and reference budget (i.e., expenditure).
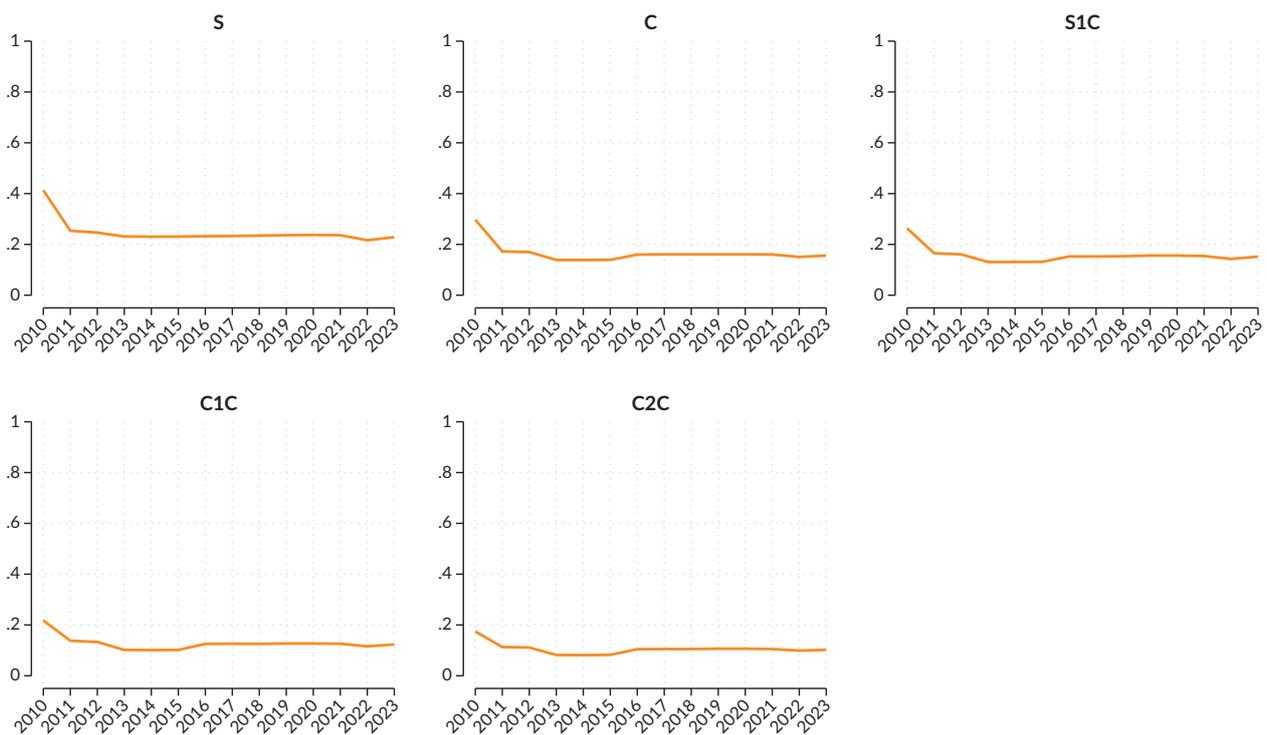
Figure 5. Equivalised SII as a percentage of the Reference Budgets.

6. Discussion

The articulated analysis of these three measures illustrates the impact and the limitations of the SII in its capacity to mitigate poverty, reduce inequality, and promote social participation among different types of households. Overall, we find a progressive erosion of the SII in relation to the poverty threshold and the minimum wage. This erosion reflects the inability of the SII to accompany the evolution of median income and minimum wages, which decreased its capacity to reduce poverty and inequality at the bottom of the income distribution during the period 2010–2023. Surprisingly, the SII seems to remain relatively constant overtime in relation to reference budgets. However, it is important to note that although a clear downward trend was not found, the SII provides a far smaller share of the respective household reference budget in most cases—approximately 20%.

When considering differences across households, the SII is more generous towards households with children. This is clearly illustrated in the comparison with the AROP60 indicator, where nearly all households, regardless

of household composition have the same share—approximately 40%. However, it is important to note that, when comparing SII support with household-specific reference budgets, single households are better off. This occurs because reference budgets have their own equivalence scales that are derived according to the increase in expenditure of an additional household member that does not coincide with the equivalence scales used to calculate equivalised income. This seems to suggest that when considering expenditure, SII does not accurately reflect economies of scale within households, particularly affecting the social participation of households with more than one person and, in particular, with children.

As shown in Figure 6, in terms of the trajectory of the SII, there are two policies that had a marked impact on the adequacy of the benefit across all measures under analysis. First, the introduction of a more comprehensive definition of income that included non-monetary income in 2010 led to a considerable decline in the generosity of the SII and its capacity to address poverty and inequality. Second, the adoption of the OECD modified equivalence scale, which assigns a reduced weight to the second adult and children in the household, also clearly affected (although to a lesser degree), the generosity of the SII in the period 2013–2015. Although the equivalence scale was restored to its previous values, the broader definition of income became a permanent design feature of the scheme leading to an equally permanent loss of generosity.

In addition, the switch from minimum wage indexation as an uprating mechanism also had a clear impact on the adequacy of the SII. According to our argument, this contributes to an increase in inequality between the beneficiaries of last-resort social assistance and workers at the bottom of the income distribution. Moreover, according to the "glass ceiling" argument, the increase in the level of social assistance benefits is often conditioned by the minimum wage (Cantillon et al., 2020). For a considerable period, during the Troika
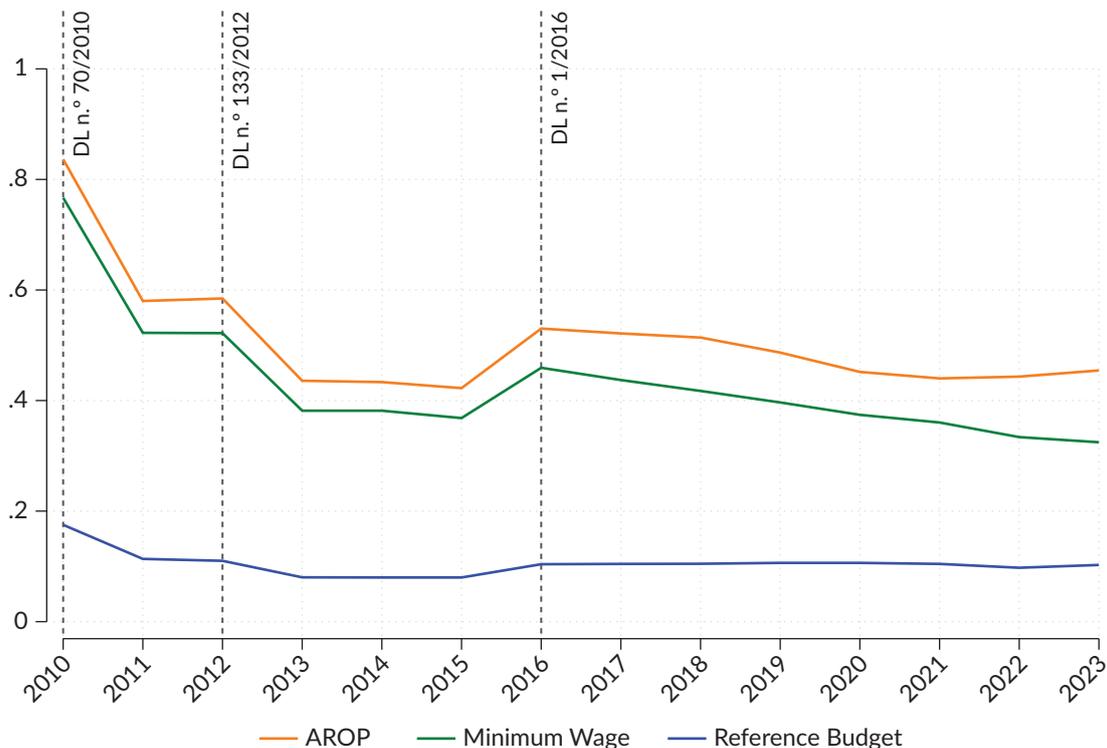
Figure 6. Evolution of indicators for C2C affected by law changes over time.

period, wage floors were kept artificially low, which in turn, affected the uprating of the SII. In the past five years, minimum wages have increased approximately 30%. Meanwhile, SII levels have not accompanied this rise. Essentially, this shows that the switch from a minimum wage indexed uprating mechanism to an SSI-based uprating mechanism has had a profound effect on the potential adequacy of the SII, particularly since the SSI has not increased at the same rate as the minimum wage in the last few years.

For the above-mentioned reasons, it is crucial that we stop and reverse the process of erosion of the SII. In particular, it would be desirable to halt the growing gap between the value of benefits and the minimum wage by changing the SII in order to ensure that it appropriately responds to the needs of families with different profiles.

7. Conclusion

The introduction of a nationwide GMI in 1997 marked the expansion of MIPs to a wider group of people. The transformation of the programme into SII, its indexation to the SSI, and the reforms it underwent during the structural adjustment period led to a reduction of its coverage and increasing inadequacy. As the article shows, the SII has changed in terms of its generosity and has been shaped by economic crises and political changes. During austerity, the programme benefits were cut and more restrictive eligibility criteria were introduced, reducing its adequacy and coverage. Since 2015, following the change in government, there has been a partial recovery of generosity through the reinstatement of previous criteria, unfreezing of measures, and a slight increase in the benefits. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the SII was subject to emergency measures, including flexible access, automatic renewal, and again a slight increase in benefits. This increase continued during the inflationary crisis, although it was insufficient to cope with the rising cost of living and to overcome the structural challenges of the programme. During this period, the SII was also confronted with extraordinary measures, which were implemented in the meantime, but were ad hoc and one-off, an explicit political recognition of the programme's weaknesses in providing a sufficient and adequate response.

Indeed, our results show a significant decoupling between the SII and the social minima between 2010 and 2023, largely due to changes in social policy caused by exogenous factors. Overall, we see a declining relationship between the SII and various social minima in Portugal, which clearly indicates an eroding trend in the adequacy of MIP in Portugal. The effects of the reforms are visible over time. In particular, the change to a less generous equivalence scale used in the calculation of disposable income for the means test of the SII is observed in all the ratios calculated. The equivalence scale of the SII does not accurately reflect economies of scale within households. This can be seen from variations in SII ratios across households. For households with children, the articulation between the SII and child-related benefits and allowances ultimately provides a higher level of protection. However, in terms of equivalised amounts, this higher level of protection is still lower than for single households.

In sum, the analysis carried out highlights the shortcomings of the SII as a safety net of last resort and points to the need to calibrate the minimum income policy in order to make it more effective and in line with economic and social realities, particularly in the context of inflation, increases in the minimum wage and changes in household composition. The results obtained here call for future studies of greater scope and depth.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen, Denmark).

Data Availability

This article uses synthetic data produced using the Hypothetical Household Extension (HHoT) in EUROMOD. The HHoT project used to create the households can be shared upon request.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Navigating Independence: Minimum Income Schemes and Youth Transitions in Southern European Welfare States

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Abstract

This article examines the interplay between decommodification and defamilisation within minimum income schemes (MIS) in two Southern European countries: Spain and Italy. While decommodification highlights the degree to which individuals can sustain a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation, defamilisation emphasises the extent to which individuals can achieve autonomy and well-being independently of support from their families. Both concepts are critical in understanding youth transitions to adulthood in societies where living with one's parents until one's thirties and delayed family formation are prevalent. In Southern Europe, where the average age of leaving the parental household is significantly higher than the European average, the family functions as a filter of conditionality, mediating access to social protection and reinforcing intergenerational dependencies. Our research investigates how the design and implementation of MIS shape the ability of young people to achieve financial independence and self-sufficiency, particularly during critical life transitions. Young individuals in these contexts face heightened exposure to socioeconomic risks, delayed independence, and limited access to adequate social protection. Using a qualitative approach, we analyse 21 biographical interviews with young people across the two countries who are beneficiaries of the benefit, have applied for it, or have been refused it. This enables us to examine how MIS frameworks influence young people's independence, perpetuate intergenerational imbalances, and exacerbate age-related vulnerabilities. Using defamilisation as a lens, we provide new insights into how social policy interacts with familial structures, shaping the trajectories and experiences of Southern European youth.

Keywords

autonomy; decommodification; defamilisation; independence; minimum income protection; Southern European welfare states; youth transitions

1. Introduction

When designing social policies, welfare states have clear target profiles and protect some groups more effectively than others (Natili & Jessoula, 2019). In this sense, Southern European welfare states, despite reforms implemented in recent years, remain largely unchanged (Vesan, 2015). They are still identified as "unemployment welfare regimes" (Gallie & Paugam, 2000), which prioritise the needs of the elderly population at the cost of young people's concerns (Esping-Andersen & Sarasa, 2002). They are also characterised by a unique combination of strong familism, limited state intervention, and deep-rooted structural inequalities (Ferrera, 2005; Saraceno, 2006). These distinct traits, in addition to the consequences of precarious and atypical employment and income inequalities, hinder young people's labour market presence. Moreover, their social security systems rely heavily on family networks to provide support, creating significant intergenerational dependencies and placing a disproportionate burden on households to address social risks (Graham, 1995; Hamilton et al., 2014). Social assistance benefits, such as minimum income schemes (MIS), play a crucial role in reducing these inequalities. Designed as a safety net for those suffering severe economic hardship, they should aim to redistribute resources and address the vulnerabilities of marginalised groups (Fineman, 2010). However, these policies have been progressively transformed into instruments to promote labour market participation (Moreira, 2008) and fail to account for generational imbalances and unequal access to opportunities, education, and employment (Arrigoni et al., 2016). Moreover, according to Frazer and Marlier (2016), the activation approach of most European MIS may contribute to a cycle of dependency on welfare programmes and family networks rather than empowering individuals to overcome challenges and achieve self-sufficiency.

Following these considerations, we propose an exploratory analysis of the Italian and Spanish MIS as recently introduced last-resort safety net benefits to examine the extent to which social citizenship is guaranteed for young people. We propose the following research questions: How do MIS affect the ability of young people to achieve and sustain (financial) independence and empowerment in Italy and Spain? To what extent do these policies enable young people to be independent (i.e., not to have to rely on their families)?

MIS primarily target poor and hard-to-employ individuals as a generalised category, rather than addressing specific subgroups such as young people. This approach neglects the condition of one of the most vulnerable new social groups: young people who face heightened risks of poverty and exclusion due to precarious labour markets and limited social protection. However, due to the structure of the Italian and Spanish welfare states, young people are often not recognised as full social citizens, and find themselves in a paradoxical situation: they are considered adults when it comes to meeting eligibility criteria, yet they remain dependent on their families within the broader familistic system. We build on Orloff's (1993) theory of decommodification and apply it to the situation of young people to conceptualise MIS as a tool for them to achieve material and economic independence from their families and reduce their reliance on employment. We add the concept of defamilisation to this framework to assess the extent to which MIS foster young people's self-sufficiency and financial independence from family support (Lister, 1997). We propose a two-country comparison (Spain and Italy) and apply a qualitative approach based on biographical life course interviews with young MIS recipients, claimants, or potential beneficiaries. The cases analysed share features in terms of welfare state structures, policy experience, and the socioeconomic circumstances of young people. However, the two welfare systems differ in terms of the role they assign to MIS and their approach to social assistance. It can also be seen that in the absence of comprehensive

policies aimed at young people, MIS have become an improvised means for them to navigate economic insecurity, and serve as a pathway towards defamilisation.

The article is structured as follows: First, the theoretical framework provides an overview of the conditions in place in Italy and Spain during young people's transition to adulthood, emphasising the risks and challenges characterising this critical life phase. Next, we present our case selection, which focuses on Spain and Italy as representative examples of Mediterranean welfare states. We then provide a detailed explanation of our methodology, followed by two sections that represent the core of the article: an analysis of our results (Section 5) and a discussion of our findings, including their implications for policy and future research (Section 6).

2. Theoretical Framework

In her critique of Esping-Andersen's version of the power resources scheme, Orloff (1993) highlights the importance of considering how decommodification may affect individuals who are traditionally excluded from the labour market. In other words, when social benefits are to be considered as a tool to decommodify labour and provide workers with income from outside the market, these policies need to take into account the barriers faced by certain individuals when attempting to break into the labour market.

Young people, for example, may view employment as a means to achieve material and economic independence from their families and as a crucial step for transitioning to adulthood (Chevalier, 2016). However, their employment patterns are increasingly shaped by labour market challenges and poor career prospects. This situation is particularly acute in countries such as Italy and Spain, due to the rise of temporary, involuntary part-time, and gig contracts (Canon et al., 2014; Van de Velde, 2008). At the same time, most social benefits are based on labour market participation, either on a contributory basis (unemployment benefits) or through labour market participation strategies (MIS). Such characteristics reflect the cultural familism embedded in Mediterranean welfare policies, which still prioritise the protection of male workers with stable, long-term contracts (Lohmann & Zagel, 2016; Moreno Mínguez, 2018; Vesan, 2015). Meanwhile, families are left with the responsibility to mitigate the adverse social and economic effects suffered by certain social groups (Korpi et al., 2013; Leitner & Lessenich, 2007; Saraceno & Keck, 2010). Moreover, structural age-based disparities in rights and entitlements often delay the full recognition of young people as social citizens, reinforcing the family's mediating role and the intergenerational financial dependency of family members (Chevalier, 2016). This situation is also reflected in the late age of leaving home in both countries: 30.3 years on average in Spain and 30 in Italy, compared to the European average of 26.4 (Eurostat, 2023). This delay stems from concerns about prolonged precariousness during the transition from education to employment (Van de Velde, 2008) and difficulties in accessing suitable and affordable housing (Beyers & Goossens, 2008; Laudani et al., 2014). Thus, "transitional markers" to adulthood are no longer synchronised: Finding a job may not correspond to leaving the parental home or starting a family. Moreover, these transitions may be temporary, leading to "yo-yo transitions" (Stauber & Walther, 2002), where young adults return to the family home for periods to be supported by their parents.

In this context, drawing on pertinent literature in the field (Chevalier, 2016; Van de Velde, 2008), we apply Orloff's (1993) concepts of "defamilisation" and "decommodification" to explore the experiences of young people regarding their transitions into adulthood. This framework enables us to examine how welfare

strategies can support various social groups in achieving socially acceptable living standards independently of their families (Lister, 1997), thereby expanding Orloff's original focus. However, in countries such as Italy and Spain, a lack of comprehensive youth policies often leads individuals to rely on MIS as an improvised mechanism for coping with economic instability. Indeed, these schemes can have defamilisation and decommodification effects by supporting young people's financial independence and transitions out of the parental home. Yet their effectiveness is often limited, as social policies frequently fail to adequately address underlying vulnerabilities (Bonvin et al., 2023). These vulnerabilities are conceptualised here as universal and structurally embedded conditions, shaped by unequal access to the resources required to cope with risks, rather than as individual weaknesses or a synonym for poverty (Fineman, 2010). Moreover, vulnerability involves both external risks (e.g., economic shocks) and internal capacities to respond to them—capacities often shaped by social policy when welfare norms impose rigid life course expectations and fail to reflect young people's life-course trajectories (Chambers, 2006; Widmer & Spini, 2017). In Southern Europe, young people face heightened social and economic risks but are often excluded from full welfare citizenship. We argue that Italian and Spanish MIS frameworks fail to recognize youth vulnerability by imposing age limits, family-based criteria, and behavioural requirements that are poorly aligned with young people's lives; this forms the core of our critique.

3. Justification of Case Studies

MIS are means-tested monetary benefits designed to reduce poverty and social exclusion for working-age individuals. Initially, these policies were passive social safety nets that provided unconditional support to individuals with incomes below the national social minimum and who were ineligible for other forms of protection (Natili, 2019; Peris-Cancio, 2021). However, the Great Recession brought "a period of declining resources" (Natili, 2019, p. 25), resulting in MIS becoming less protective and more workfare-oriented (Natili, 2020; Soler-Buades, 2024). In this context, the Italian and Spanish MIS can be considered important policy reforms that have been implemented in recent years under specific socioeconomic conditions in two major Southern European countries (Offredi R., 2025). Differences may be revealed in how policies are implemented and how these differences affect young people's access to minimum income protection, with the degree of defamilisation and decommodification incorporated within each policy possibly leading to varying effects on young beneficiaries.

Indeed, Spain and Italy share features in terms of their welfare state structures and political, institutional, and social contexts (Ferrera, 1996; Pavolini et al., 2015). They face a paradox of "a high concentration of poverty and weak and fragmented anti-poverty measures" (Saraceno, 2006, p. 102), attributed by Ferrera (1996, 2005) to the "Mediterranean welfare model." A Catholic religious culture and non-institutional actors also play fundamental roles in shaping Italian and Spanish social policy design (Natili & Jessoula, 2019). In the case of MIS, this is evident in the family-oriented nature of eligibility criteria and the role assigned to the family as a substitute for institutional support (Saraceno, 2006). Decentralised activation policies further restrict the state's capacity to enact ambitious reforms, such as MIS, while the limited operational capabilities of street-level bureaucrats raise concerns about the effectiveness of these measures (Saraceno, 2006; Soler-Buades & Ferraioli, 2025).

Despite their similarities, the role of MIS in Italy's welfare system and the approach to social assistance adopted there differ from the Spanish case. In Italy, the citizenship income (CI), approved in 2019, was a

central element of the 5-Star Movement's electoral platform and aimed to transfer wealth from the upper to the lower classes (Favero, 2020). The initiative gained backing in southern areas, where high youth unemployment and poverty are prevalent, since the CI was described as a "fundamental active labour policy measure to ensure the right to work" (Italian Government, 2019). However, persistent challenges in implementing labour and inclusion strategies linked to the CI led to public criticism and its eventual replacement after the 2024 change of government (Italian Government, 2023).

The two new schemes, Inclusion Allowance (ADI) and Training Employment Support (SFL), were designed following a political decision to reduce public spending in this area by tightening their conditionality design (Gori & Bertoluzza, 2023). They subsequently targeted highly specific social groups: households with children, the over-60s, and disabled individuals for the first scheme, and people in vocational and training courses for labour market entry or re-entry for the second (INPS, 2024).

This aligns with the categorisation of the Italian MIS as sanctionary policies that are close to the protective model: Characterised by low protection, moderate generosity, and inclusiveness, they also feature strict activation requirements primarily related to job seeking (Natili, 2020; Soler-Buades, 2025). This article analyses the experiences of young people with both the CI and the SFL to explore the extent to which policy trajectories (towards increased stringency) and reforms have influenced young people's access to income protection. We exclude the ADI because it targets households with caregiving responsibilities, which would divert the focus of this study.

Spain reveals more complex regional variations in terms of minimum income protection (Martínez Buján, 2014). The minimum vital income (IMV) was established in 2020 amid the Covid-19 health crisis and was the result of complex political negotiations. It was quickly established as a subjective right to reduce dependence on annual budgets and political shifts. Additionally, it aims to serve as a unifying measure to address the disparity between wealthier and poorer regions while upholding effective regional practices (Peris-Cancio, 2021). It is a non-contributory means-tested scheme aimed at promoting the social inclusion of people living in vulnerable conditions through their participation in strategic (employment-related) itineraries (Spanish Government, 2021). And it is this feature that differentiates the Spanish MIS from the Italian one, configuring the Spanish scheme as an inadequate MIS characterised by a minimal degree of protection, alongside weakly developed inclusion services (Offredi R., 2025; Soler-Buades, 2025).

Since Spain has a regional approach to minimum income protection, our analysis includes the Catalan guaranteed citizenship income (RGC) as an example of a regional scheme. This was approved by the Catalan Parliament in 2017 following the Popular Legislative Initiative that underscored public demand for the replacement of the minimum insertion income, which had been in force since 1997 (Ballesteros, 2019). The RGC is a subsidiary benefit for people who are eligible for other kinds of income protection and includes two economic benefits: a basic unconditional payment and a "supplementary activation and inclusion benefit" (Autonomous Community of Catalonia, 2017). While the first is intended as a general safety net, the second is linked to compliance with a specific social inclusion and labour market participation plan (Autonomous Community of Catalonia, 2017). Although the basic and supplementary benefits appear to be structured as two separate benefits, the latter has a considerable influence on the overall RGC received, since its amount is always included in the total RGC allocated (Ballesteros, 2019). This interdependence makes it difficult to clearly separate the two benefits, leading to the identification of the RGC as a protective

MIS—a scheme that combines limited protection with a solid workfare approach to promote labour market participation (Natili, 2020).

Thus, the cases of Italy and Spain offer valuable comparative material as they share similarities in MIS implementation timelines at the national level, while showing certain differences in generosity, inclusiveness, protection, and activation strategies (Table 1). Furthermore, the two countries are often cited as emblematic cases of persistent shortcomings in MIS coverage and adequacy (Ayala et al., 2021; Busilacchi & Fabbri, 2024). The case of young people in the the two countries highlights this issue and allows for a nuanced comparison of how MIS address their needs and expectations, also considering the effects of policy amendments on young people's social protection. Indeed, today's youth transitions differ from those of previous generations and more privileged youth cohorts, both within and outside these countries. Unlike their predecessors, who often experienced a linear path into adulthood through stable employment, housing, and family formation, today's Southern European youth face fragmented and uncertain trajectories. While the Mediterranean welfare model disproportionately allocates resources to older age groups (Natili & Jessoula, 2019), younger populations bear the socio-economic consequences of past crises without the institutional buffers that their elders enjoyed (Woodman & Bennett, 2015). Consequently, young people in Spain and Italy navigate transitions shaped by systemic underinvestment, weak social assistance, and conditional MIS that rarely account for the fluid and precarious realities of their lives. However, recent macro-level evaluations have shown the limited effectiveness of MIS in other European contexts (Almeida et al., 2022; European Commission, 2023; Frazer & Marlier, 2016), indicating that these problems are not unique to Southern Europe. Hence, by focusing on the experiences of young beneficiaries, this study offers a complementary perspective that confirms and problematises these policy-level assessments, highlighting how structural limitations manifest across welfare models.

Table 1. Main components of MIS in Italy and Spain.

	CI (Italy)	SFL (Italy)	IMV (Spain)	GCI (Catalonia)
				Subsidiary to the national MIS
Financial coverage	Up to EUR 6000 per year per household, adjusted according to the corresponding equivalence scale factor	EUR 350 per month for a single person	EUR 604.21* (2024) *Full annual amount of non-contributory pension for a single person, divided by twelve	EUR 778.49* per month from 1/01/2025 (basic benefit + supplementary activation and insertion benefit) *Based on the full amount of the Catalan Sufficiency Income Indicator
Duration	7 months maximum	12 months maximum. Payable only once the person begins attending courses/internships	As long as the situation of documented economic vulnerability persists	As long as the situation of need can be documented, and all requirements are met. It requires renewal every two years
Compatibility with employment	YES (under specific rules)	Only when the work-related income does not exceed the threshold established to claim the SFL	YES (under the employment-incentives regulations)	Only if the claimant works part-time and is a single parent, belongs to a large family, or is over 55 years old and complies with other specific requirements* *Beneficiaries who secure full-time jobs can receive the activation benefit for six months afterwards
Beneficiaries				
Household level	All members of a household who are registered as part of the family unit	All members of a household who are registered as part of the family unit and live in the same house	A group of individuals who reside at the same address and are linked by marriage, civil union, or familial relationships up to the second degree	A group of individuals who have family ties up to the second degree of consanguinity or affinity
Individual level	One member of the household aged 18 to 67	Individuals aged 18 to 59 from households that do not qualify for the ADI	One household member aged at least 23, or 18 in specific cases	One member of the household aged at least 23, or 18 in specific cases
Administrative requirements	Italian citizen or citizen of another EU country; legal residence for at least 10 years, with the last 2 years being continuous and uninterrupted	Italian citizen or citizen of another EU country; Legal residence for at least 5 years, with the last 2 years being continuous	Legal residence for at least 1 continuous and uninterrupted year	Continuous and effective residency in Catalonia for the 24 months prior to the RGC claim

Table 1. (Cont.) Main components of MIS in Italy and Spain.

	CI (Italy)	SFL (Italy)	IMV (Spain)	GCI (Catalonia) <u>Subsidiary to the national MIS</u>
			Accessibility criteria	
Further household requirements	Individuals aged 18 to 26 who live outside their parents' household are considered part of it if they are unmarried, with no children, and not economically independent	Interruption of cohabitation in the household is recognised only in cases of absence from Italy for at least two continued months or a total of four months within an 18-month period	Individuals under 30 must demonstrate at least two years of independent living from their parents, guardians, or foster parents	When multiple household members qualify for the benefit, priority is given to the one with the lowest income or no income
Education requirements	Individuals aged 18 to 29 must demonstrate that they have fulfilled Italian compulsory education* or attend any courses necessary to complete it *Education received up to the age of eighteen for a minimum of ten years to achieve an upper secondary or vocational qualification	Same as for CI	Nothing contemplated	Nothing contemplated
Unemployment Requirements	Unemployment occurring within twelve months before claiming the CI must not be the result of voluntary resignation, except for cases of "justified resignation"	Same as for CI	Nothing contemplated	Individuals who have resigned voluntarily or have received compensation upon dismissal within the 12-month period before claiming the benefit are not entitled to it
Financial and monetary thresholds	Maximum annual indicator of equivalised economic conditions (ISEE) of EUR 9,360	Maximum annual indicator of equivalised economic conditions (ISEE) of EUR 6,000 (adjusted by the corresponding equivalence scale factor)	Situation of economic vulnerability (based on household composition and number of members)	Lack of earnings, income, or economic resources to meet basic needs* for at least two months before the RGC claim, throughout the application process, and while the benefit is being received *According to the threshold established by the IRSC

Table 1. (Cont.) Main components of MIS in Italy and Spain.

	CI (Italy)	SFL (Italy)	IMV (Spain)	GCI (Catalonia) <u>Subsidiary to the national MIS</u>
		Accessibility criteria		
Financial and monetary thresholds	Equivalised Income no higher than EUR 6,000	Nothing contemplated	Monthly computable income at least 10 euros lower than the monthly benefit	No other real estate property other than the primary dwelling
	Individual financial assets below EUR 6,000 and a real estate property valued less than EUR 30,000 (excluding the family's primary dwelling)	Same as for CI	Net wealth valued at less than three times or more than the benefit corresponding to one beneficiary	No entitlement to any public or private benefits for permanent residential services related to social or health needs
		Behavioural requirements		
	Declaring availability to work and signing the Employment Plan within 30 days of the benefit being allocated	Declaring availability to work (online) and signing a Digital Activation Pact	Registering as a jobseeker within 3 months of receiving the IMV grant	Registering as a jobseeker at the regional Public Service for Employability and informing relevant authorities of any change
	Undergoing vocational training for at least 6 months	Contacting the Employment Centre within 30 days of online declaration to sign a (detailed) Personalised Service Pact (PSP)	Participating in inclusion strategies promoted by the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration	Never refusing a suitable job offer, voluntarily leaving a job, or requesting personal leave
	Accepting the first suitable job offer received* *(a) coherent with the beneficiary's experience and competencies; (b) no more than 50/80 km or 80/100 minutes away from their home; (c) compensated with a salary at least 10% higher than the CI and not below the established minimum wage	Engaging in training programmes linked to the PSP and the National Programme for Guaranteed Employability of Workers (GOL). Informing the relevant authorities at least once every ninety days	Complying with additional obligations established by further legislation and the relevant local authorities	Maintaining legal residence in Catalonia for the duration of the benefit. Interruptions in continuity may be authorised if communicated in advance and do not exceed one month in a 12-month period
	Participating in projects for the public good for a minimum of eight and a maximum of sixteen hours per week	Signing up with at least three entities authorised to act as intermediaries for LM insertion		Signing and adhering to the Individual Plan for Labour Market insertion or Social Inclusion

4. Methodological Approach

This study assesses the extent to which MIS facilitate the capacity of young people to attain and maintain socioeconomic independence from their families (Biggart & Walther, 2005; Van de Velde, 2007). Methodologically, we adopt a qualitative approach, conducting a two-country comparison (Spain and Italy), which is particularly well-suited to our research aims as it enables in-depth exploration of the social dynamics and individual experiences that shape young people's trajectories. This approach has also proven effective for identifying differences and similarities that can inform theories applicable to broader contexts (Coller, 2005). We consider that biographical interviews are particularly apt for grasping both the subjective and structural elements of young people's life courses, enabling insights not only into their daily challenges and coping strategies but also into their broader aspirations and meaning-making processes (Masoni & Villa, 2021).

In particular, we conducted qualitative fieldwork between December 2021 and July 2024, combining online and in-person biographical interviews with MIS beneficiaries and claimants, and with others whose claims had been refused, all aged 18–35. Recruitment was achieved through online platforms (social media, forums, discussion groups, etc.) and snowball sampling. Table 2 summarises the key characteristics of the participants.

Biographical life course interviews were selected for their ability to draw out detailed personal stories, providing a thorough evaluation of individual experiences as "direct witnesses" (Yin, 2009). This approach also enabled key dimensions of social integration to be included—such as education, work, family, consumption, and relationships, as well as access to services—that are critical in shaping, supporting, or potentially obstructing young people's paths to autonomy (Masoni & Villa, 2021). Interviews were conducted in Italian or Spanish, recorded, and transcribed using Transkriptor software. The transcripts were subsequently translated into English for analysis and to include illustrative quotes. The questions were adapted based on individuals' responses to obtain detailed and personal narratives about their experiences with MIS, capturing the nuanced ways in which structural conditions, policy design, and individual agency intersect in shaping young people's independence (Bichi, 2002; Lozares Colina & Verd, 2016). We included individuals who had applied for, were receiving, or had been refused the benefit to explore the barriers they encountered in accessing income protection and the factors that helped them achieve socioeconomic independence. The challenges encountered during fieldwork included participants' reluctance to discuss their experiences with MIS, often due to feelings of shame or confusion regarding their benefit status.

Interview transcripts were coded using a combination of deductive and inductive strategies. Initially, a coding framework was developed based on the literature and research questions, focusing on themes such as independence, barriers to access, administrative burden, stigma, and support networks. During the coding process, attention was paid to recurring patterns and salient quotes that exemplified key dynamics or revealed unexpected aspects of the young people's experiences. We approached their narratives as situated reactions that reflect individual positions within social structures by employing a dual analytical lens (Poth, 2018): First, we strove to understand participants' subjective perceptions—how they interpret their experiences, develop coping strategies, and make sense of institutions and actors; and second, we attempted to detect cross-cutting patterns and divergent trajectories across contexts, following an abductive reasoning approach that supports theoretical generalisation (Masoni & Villa, 2021; Swedberg, 2014). The use of direct quotes in the article serves to illustrate these themes and to centre the voices of young people, whose perspectives are often underrepresented in policy debates.

Table 2. List of interviewees.

	Interviewee	Age	Gender	Place of residence	Place of birth	Educational Background	Job situation	Benefit
Italy	CA	28	F	Cagliari	Cagliari	University	School Secretary	CI*
	CO	33	M	Bologna	Basilicata	University	Delivery worker	CI
	EC	32	F	Turin	Turin	University	Public Sector worker	CI
	FR	32	M	Bologna	Apulia	University	Library staff	CI
	JE	30	F	Turin	Turin	NA	Unemployed	CI/ADI
	NO	24	M	Turin	Turin	NA	Gardener	CI (never granted)
	KA	35	F	Turin	Peru	Vocational training	Carer (informal sector)	CI
	CE	33	F	Padua	Naples	University	School worker	CI
	AL	33	M	Turin	Out Turin	University	Unemployed	CI
	LE	28	M	Messina	Messina	University	NA	CI
	AT	34	M	Turin	Turin	University	Salesman (under SFL)	CI/SFL
	EK	33	F	Turin	Tuscany	Secondary Education	Electrician (under SFL)	CI/SFL
Spain	ML	35	F	Madrid	Extremadura	Secondary Education	Part-time Actress	IMV
	MO	29	M	Barcelona	Bangladesh	NA	Shop worker	RGC
	JO	29	M	Barcelona	Murcia	University	Trainee Tax Inspector	IMV (never requested)
	NU	35	F	Greater Madrid	NA	NA	Photographer	IMV (waiting for response)
	LI	33	F	Barcelona	Colombia	University	Unemployed	IMV + RGC
	AD	30	F	Badalona	Nigeria	University	Cleaner	IMV
	QM	30	M	Barcelona	Lleida	NA	Lighting shop worker	RGC
	NA	33	M	Barcelona	Morocco	Unfinished University	Food deliverer (social sector)	IMV (never granted)
	RI	26	M	Barcelona	Madrid	Secondary Education	Unemployed	RGC (suspended)

5. Results

5.1. Life and the Opening of Countless Doors

According to Van de Velde (2008), Italian and Spanish youth are considered children who are dependent on their families until quite a late age. This experience is akin to living in a "luxury hotel," where cohabitation with parents constitutes a long-term strategy against precariousness. The narratives from our interviewees differ. Many see dependence on their families as a burden because "a person who no longer wants to have ties with her/his family cannot afford it" (CA, 28, Italy). Or are upset by the stigmatised rhetoric that labels them as *vagos* (lazy people) and *mammoni* (older children who are still highly attached to their parents and economically dependent on them). RI's words are illustrative in this context. At 26, he lives in Barcelona with his uncle, who has a 78% visual impairment, to assist him in his daily activities. Although this arrangement offers RI a place to stay 'for free,' he often mentions his desire for independence:

> I'm frustrated because I see peers my age who have successfully managed to [leave the family home]....[While] people on television or the internet say that those of us in my situation are there because we want to be.

For most interviewees, employment should be the path to financial independence and the means to being considered "proper adults." However, their aspirations collide with the type of employment they can access: their narratives reveal experiences of consistently precarious work and instances of exploitation. This was true both for those seeking employment while completing their studies and for those entering the labour market upon graduation. Some, such as FR and LE, two young Italians aged 32 and 28, perceived a mismatch between university degrees and job opportunities. This disparity led to frustration over their inability to leverage their educational skills in the labour market, while also becoming a reason to claim income protection. Many others narrated their challenges in finding a job that would offer them some stability. This was the case of CE, a 33-year-old woman from Naples living in Padua (Italy), and AD, a 30-year-old woman from Nigeria living in Badalona (Spain). The first struggled with "fraudulent contracts" in the food industry:

> Throughout my life, about 12–13 years, I've worked as a waitress....This means that when I had a contract, it reported fewer tasks and hours than I actually worked. These contracts were fraudulent because they were intentionally designed to create a façade of compliance in case of inspections.

The second suffered from undefined working hours in the cleaning sector:

> Sometimes you have a job that requires you to work on Saturdays under an 8-hour daily contract. [One day], the employer asks you to work seven hours and make up that extra hour on Saturday. [Suddenly], you are working an additional five hours on Saturday and another five on Sunday [even if you should not be]. I dislike that because when you need the job, you have no choice.

Another interesting case is internships. According to JE, a 30-year-old woman and mother of two living in Turin, these are offered as formal jobs to younger job seekers regardless of their work experience. This situation reduces young people's ability to achieve long-term financial and social stability, compelling them to keep searching for new employment opportunities:

> We get only internship offers....But it makes no sense: I am 30 and I have to do a fourth bartending internship, while I'm already specialised in it....Who needs it more, me or him? The employer. Because during that time, he pays nothing. You've been useful to him. Then he fires you to hire another intern.

In this sense, some interviewees expressed significant concern about their inability to access social rights. For NO, a 24-year-old gardener, non-standard employment meant "working for several years with an off-the-books full-time contract" that offered "no insurance, access to social benefits, or contributions towards a retirement pension." This is a situation that exacerbates young people's dependency on their parents' social security, but it also undermines their role as full social citizens "because you are *il boccia* [just a kid], as we say in Turin." The inability to access social rights due to precarious employment also has a gender dimension. Six female interviewees mentioned having at least one child, but only two managed to return to work after their pregnancies. They all faced difficulties in finding suitable salaries and working conditions that were adaptable to their other responsibilities. Their experience illustrates a form of double discrimination—as young people and as women with caring responsibilities—and highlights the heterogeneity existing within the category of youth. It also reminds us how these two categories should be regarded as overlapping "new social risk groups," which expose a significant part of the population to multiple marginalities (Bonoli, 2005).

The motivations leading our interviewees—and many other young people—to seek income support reflect their aspirations to be independent of their families. Initially, they pursue stable employment to achieve economic security. However, when precarious working conditions hinder rather than support their independence, MIS becomes a viable alternative, especially during ongoing work-study transitions. As Chevalier (2016) notes, the extended duration of education contributes to the destandardisation of life paths, with some young people entering the labour market before completing their studies, and others returning to education after beginning work. As mentioned above, young people are not a homogeneous group, and many lack access to family support, further justifying the need for income protection. As a result, individuals like KA, a 35-year-old Peruvian living in Turin, may seek assistance from MIS to resume their studies when these cannot be reconciled with employment:

> I had to quit my job because the course [as an assistant carer] was full-time, so I did not have time to go to work. When I enrolled, I asked if I could follow the course only in the morning or the afternoon....It was impossible because there were no more places free. So I either took the full-time option or I lost the opportunity.

5.2. Benefits That Are Difficult to Access and Difficult to Continue Receiving

The way MIS are designed strongly shaped interviewees' experiences with social protection, with many people highlighting unclear and complex eligibility criteria, particularly around income and financial status. JO, a 29-year-old from Spain, could not access the IMV because he was officially registered at his parents' address. On paper, this made him ineligible, even though he needed support while preparing for an unpaid public exam with the National Tax Agency. In Spain, individuals must be over 23 to claim the IMV independently, and those under 30 must prove two years of independent living unless exempted. A similar situation exists in Italy, where individuals aged 18–26 who live apart from their parents are still considered part of the parental household if unmarried, childless, and financially dependent. Financial independence is

determined by an ISEE (indicator of equivalised economic conditions) above a set threshold—something many young people do not achieve. EK, a 33-year-old we interviewed in Turin while receiving the SFL and training to become an electrician, faced this barrier despite living independently:

> I've been lucky compared to people a few years younger than me....I've been living by myself since I was 21, but I didn't reach the [minimum] income threshold to [be considered] fiscally independent every year. A set of regulations now stipulate that [if you do not have that] you are reintegrated into your parents' household despite not cohabiting with them.

In this sense, the criteria linked to household composition reflect the family-based approach embedded in Spanish and Italian MIS. This creates significant challenges for youth like JO and EK in accessing income protection. Additionally, it restricts young individuals' ability to claim social benefits when they reside in shared accommodation. AD (30, Spain), for instance, was turned down for the IMV because she could not demonstrate that she had no family ties with her flatmates.

When discussing strategies to promote labour market participation, interviewees reported mixed experiences. In both countries, many felt that labour market activation policies failed to provide access to quality employment, defined as work that was stable, well-paid, and meaningful. This was particularly true for women in their thirties with childcare duties, such as LI (Spain) and JE (Italy). Both had completed various training courses and internships, but felt that their efforts were fruitless. As JE (Italy) reflected:

> We cannot compensate with one salary what we [she and her husband] receive from ADI or CI. Together, we were earning EUR 1,200 or EUR 1,300. Plus, there were jobs lasting two or three months....Who can guarantee that after those two/three months, I will be able to pay the rent or provide for my children?

The narratives of these women further highlighted the disconnection between training programmes and job placements, as well as the actual demands of local job markets. In the case of LI (Spain), this meant taking "several Catalan courses...including public classes offered by the local administration." However, she also knew that these courses would not help her find employment, as they did not provide the formal diploma that employers consistently require. Furthermore, most interviewees felt frustrated that these programmes failed to consider their skills and aspirations. This sentiment was especially evident when the level of commitment expected from them did not correspond to proper compensation, as AL, a 33-year-old living in Turin, mentions:

> [The course] would have taken up a lot of my time, although it would have been good to have, but it was....I don't know how to put it, I was supposed to devote 40 hours a week to a training course to get...300 euros.

Another feature influencing young people's experiences in this context is the apparent inadequacy of MIS in supporting the work-studies trajectories of individuals with higher educational backgrounds. EC and AT, for example, are two "highly educated professionals" aged 33 and 34, living in Turin. Both felt overlooked by the system because the services designed to assist with job searches never worked for them. AT, in particular, had requested the CI, hoping to receive "a job offer," yet he reported being disappointed that he never got "a single sign of interest in him or in his profile." For EC, this situation could be attributed to the difficulties that employment centres face in effectively "placing" youth with her type of profile in the labour market, as most programmes tend to focus on lower-skilled individuals. Conversely, MO, a 29-year-old highly skilled assistant

chef from Bangladesh living in Barcelona, mentioned that he could never take advantage of the courses offered because he had already completed most of them or already possessed the necessary experience to work in restaurants.

In conclusion, the design and implementation of MIS often deny support to many young people, reflecting a broader disregard for their specific needs and lives:

> [The benefit] does not act in a preventive manner to avoid young people failing....It does not break the cycle of intergenerational poverty; actually, it probably enhances it....Because if you get into training, the courses offered do not give you qualifications, so they [can] keep you in the poorly paid and insecure workforce. (EC, 32, Italy)

5.3. Inadequate Allocations: Enough to Survive, But Not to Live On

Evidence from Italy and Spain suggests that while MIS alleviate short-term financial distress, the sums allocated remain insufficient to ensure meaningful financial independence. They are criticised for their inability to meet beneficiaries' essential needs, particularly in the face of rising living costs. Interviews underscore this inadequacy, with beneficiaries frequently reporting that the financial support provided by MIS is barely sufficient for survival, let alone for achieving self-sufficiency. One respondent in Italy noted: "To survive, it was enough; but not to live" (FR, Italy), highlighting the fundamental gap between subsistence and economic security. In Spain, that sentiment was echoed: "At least it was enough for food" (MO, 29, Spain). However, while the low amounts they had been allocated forced some interviewees to seek alternative sources of income, sometimes through informal or precarious work, as in the case of LE (28, Italy), in other cases, receiving the benefit represented an opportunity to pursue their education. As CO, a 33-year-old Italian living in Bologna, explained:

> Actually, the reason I claimed [the MIS] at the time was that I wanted to graduate, to dedicate myself more seriously to my studies, so I'd left my job and was using the citizenship income as my main source of income.

These accounts show that while MIS helps reduce the pressure to accept precarious work, it does not free young people from market dependency. Many still take on informal or low-paid jobs that do not ensure long-term stability. The limited support they obtain keeps them trapped in cycles of precarity, undermining decommodification. In Spain, although MIS lacks strict time limits, young people often feel anxious due to bureaucratic delays and frequent eligibility reviews. MO, for instance, said: "One time they reduced my benefits, saying they detected that I had some work, but it wasn't true; I had none." This instability exacerbates financial insecurity, making it difficult to plan for or pursue higher education and secure stable employment.

Beyond market dependency, another critical dimension of economic adequacy is defamilisation: the extent to which MIS enables young people to be financially independent of their families. This aspect is particularly relevant in the context of housing costs and access to healthcare, as interviews highlighted how both dimensions significantly impact the ability of young beneficiaries to live outside the parental home. Housing costs in both Italy and Spain present substantial barriers to financial independence. In Spain, high rental

prices have made it nearly impossible for young people to move out of family homes. As JO (29, Spain) articulated:

> It is practically impossible for young people to become independent before the age of 23—and before 30 or 25—due to the price of rents.

Even when young beneficiaries receive MIS, the support is often insufficient to cover rent and other living expenses. For example, NA, a 33-year-old Moroccan man living in Barcelona, shared that his monthly rent is 1030 euros, so "nothing is left for me." The situation in Italy mirrors this trend, as high housing costs mean that even recipients of MIS struggle to afford to live independently. For CE (33, Italy), this meant "only paying the rent" and having "100 [euros] left." Without substantial financial assistance, young people are compelled to rely on their families for housing, thereby undermining the schemes' defamilisation objective.

Healthcare costs also play a crucial role in determining financial independence. Many beneficiaries report that while MIS provide some degree of economic relief, it does not enable them to cover health-related expenses adequately, leading to continued reliance on their families for support. However, some interviewees highlighted that MIS had a positive impact on their ability to afford necessary medical care. As CE (33, Italy) stated: "I felt more at ease buying medications that I wouldn't have bought before, going for check-ups."

While MIS does offer some help in covering health costs and may play a role in supporting defamilisation, it seems to fall short of guaranteeing complete financial independence. This situation impacts not only individuals' material well-being but also their mental health. The narratives of LE (28, Italy) and QM (30, Spain) highlight this perspective from opposite positions: For LE, the limited support obtained through the CI "was a source of peace of mind" whereas for QM, receiving the RGC brought on feelings of anxiety and insecurity, as it created a sense of dependence on "someone or something."

Difficulties in accessing MIS are worsened by challenges in navigating digital platforms. Although many young beneficiaries are digitally literate, they often have to deal with unclear information, technical glitches, and bureaucratic delays. These issues undermine their autonomy and cause heightened uncertainty. Nevertheless, they also promote resilience, as some turn to social networks or informal channels for help. Thus, while digitalisation can enhance independence, systemic inefficiencies often reinforce precarity, both economically and psychologically. Overall, findings indicate that while MIS in Italy and Spain offers crucial financial support, its limitations prevent it from delivering full decommodification or defamilisation.

Young beneficiaries often find themselves in a space between dependency and self-sufficiency, without a clear path to long-term financial stability. The benefits offered by these schemes help alleviate immediate financial distress, but do not provide a foundation for long-term independence. In terms of decommodification, the insufficient help provided by MIS forces many young people to engage in informal or precarious employment, limiting their ability to fully detach from market dependency. Regarding defamilisation, high housing and healthcare costs continue to push young individuals to rely on their families, preventing them from achieving complete independence. While some beneficiaries have leveraged MIS to pursue education or better employment opportunities, the overall inadequacy of these schemes means that financial independence remains largely unattainable.

6. Conclusions

This research presents a comparative analysis of qualitative data, highlighting the often-overlooked perspectives of young people. Through in-depth interviews, the study provides insights into how disadvantaged youth in Italy and Spain perceive and navigate their social circumstances across varied economic, institutional, and cultural contexts. This allows a nuanced understanding of their experiences and coping strategies with MIS at the regional and national levels, giving a voice to a frequently underrepresented group. The analysis of these policies in Italy and Spain reveals a complex landscape of support for young people's financial independence and empowerment, within which there are several interconnected factors that influence the schemes' effectiveness. While MIS aim to provide a safety net, their implementation and outcomes present significant challenges for young individuals. Although MIS in Italy and Spain do offer some support, they fail to effectively empower young people to achieve sustainable financial independence. Independence is conceptualised as a benchmark in the transition to adulthood (Corijn & Klijzing, 2001). By independence, we meant the residential and financial independence from the family unit (Unt et al., 2021). The strong familial welfare model in Southern European countries, particularly Italy and Spain, has significant implications for young people's independence and social citizenship. The familistic perspective inherent in these welfare systems may perpetuate a cycle where young people struggle to establish themselves independently, and are obliged to continue to rely on family support well into adulthood (Unt et al., 2021).

MIS schemes are limited by inadequate funding, strict conditionality, and poor alignment with labour market conditions, neglecting the diverse needs of young people. While young beneficiaries recognise some benefits of the schemes, structural shortcomings undermine the effectiveness of MIS in supporting their financial independence and long-term empowerment. For instance, many interviewees found eligibility criteria ambiguous and difficult to fulfil, particularly regarding proof of income and financial status. The family-based approach for determining eligibility often prevents young individuals from accessing benefits, restricting their ability to claim social protection and highlighting a tension between familial dependency and individual independence. Thus, the extent to which the MIS under analysis foster defamilisation, i.e., the capacity of individuals to achieve (financial) independence and cease to rely on family support, is limited. Scales that use household income rather than individual economic circumstances reinforce young people's dependence on their families. This is particularly evident in cases where young individuals have already achieved economic independence in practice but remain legally tied to their parental household. Additionally, individuals living in shared accommodation or those with complex family situations face additional barriers to accessing these benefits. Furthermore, these schemes are often unable to cover basic needs, forcing many young people to supplement their incomes through informal or precarious employment. This, in turn, limits the decommodification effect of MIS. MIS often fails to cover essential costs—especially housing—hindering young people's ability to live independently. Since eligibility is tied to household rather than individual income, MIS exclude many economically independent young people. As a result, individuals who live alone or in non-traditional households face barriers to accessing support, which reinforces economic instability and dependence on family structures. Nonetheless, MIS provide minimal financial stability and offer short-term relief, which enables some beneficiaries to defer immediate labour market entry in favour of education or personal development. While the financial relief afforded by MIS can ease economic anxiety and support young people in pursuing educational or professional goals, complex bureaucratic procedures pose significant mental health challenges. Navigating multiple institutions,

unclear responsibilities, and debt risks often compel young people to seek informal or precarious work. Moreover, inadequate levels of benefits, high living costs, and administrative instability constrain the capacity of MIS to promote long-term financial independence. Moreover, MIS increasingly emphasise training and educational requirements to receive support, excluding those who are unavailable, unwilling, or unable to participate in educational programmes (Bonvin et al., 2023). Indeed, activation policies associated with MIS often fail to match the skills and aspirations of young beneficiaries, particularly those with higher education. Some interviewees expressed frustration with training programmes and job placements that did not align with their qualifications or career goals. The relationship between MIS and work is complex. Many young beneficiaries feel compelled to work informally or to under-report income to maintain their benefits. Hence, they manage their daily lives by developing their systems of preferences and combining multiple resources while they receive the benefit (Meo & Moiso, 2020). This situation creates a precarious balance between continuing to receive benefits and seeking stable employment, potentially trapping young people in cycles of informal work and benefit dependency. Instead of serving as a bridge to quality employment, the activation measures attached to MIS often perpetuate cycles of precarious work and underemployment, and fail to fully shield beneficiaries from labour market uncertainties.

Today, social policies are often framed as productive investments with long-term returns, such as training or employment schemes (Bonvin et al., 2023). However, the very design of MIS, their temporary nature, and the constant requirements one needs to fulfil to be granted (and continue to receive) the benefit generate instability for young people, limiting their capacity to plan ahead, pursue education, or secure stable employment.

In conclusion, while MIS in Italy and Spain offer some level of support, they fall short of effectively empowering young people to achieve sustainable financial independence. The picture outlined portrays a generation of young people who lack the necessary tools to achieve adult status and be recognised as full-fledged social citizens (Chevalier, 2016; Meo & Moiso, 2020). Additionally, interviews reveal that vulnerable young recipients often do not behave as policymakers expect them to. Social policies typically define vulnerable categories and design social interventions based on definitions of what constitutes a problem and what does not. This ultimately imposes normative and behavioural expectations on beneficiaries (Widmer & Spini, 2017). Our findings point to the need for MIS to better reflect the realities of young people's lives. This means recognising their autonomy beyond assumptions about the households they belong to and ensuring that support schemes provide not just income, but also realistic pathways out of precarity, without reinforcing dependency. Instead, to truly support young people in achieving and sustaining financial independence and empowerment, it is crucial to redesign MIS with a more holistic understanding of young people's experiences and aspirations.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

Data Availability

Part of the data supporting the findings of this study was derived from the following resources available in the public domain: the *Official Gazette of the Italian Republic* (http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it) and the *Official State Bulletin of the Spanish Government* (https://www.boe.es/legislacion). Other data are not publicly available as they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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The Effectiveness of Active Labour Market Policies for Long-Term Unemployed Jobseekers in Flanders

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Abstract

Despite the fact that many European countries in the post-pandemic period exhibit relatively low unemployment rates similar to the late 2010s, population ageing and labour shortages urge European policy-makers to increasingly aim to also activate the remaining hard-to-employ unemployed such as long-term unemployed groups. In the context of transitions to sustainable development and digitalization, a socially inclusive activation requires a wide array of activation programmes (including training, internships, or job search assistance), but also monitoring of whether such programmes are effective for more vulnerable population subgroups. Therefore, this study applies dynamic propensity score matching and hazard models to population-wide administrative data for all long-term unemployed jobseekers in Flanders (Belgium) between 2015–2022 to study their enrolment and the effectiveness of participation in a wide range of active labour market policies (ALMP) provided by the Flemish public employment service: labour market orientation, job search assistance, application and job interview training, and human capital programmes. Our findings highlight the continued enrolment of long-term unemployed jobseekers in activation policies, demonstrating continuous support for labour market (re-)entry. Additionally, the positive effects of participation on employment outcomes emphasize the importance of expanding and tailoring activation measures to ensure equitable opportunities for long-term unemployed jobseekers.

Keywords

active labour market policy; Flanders; long-term unemployment; programme evaluation

1. Introduction

The activation of working-age population subgroups has been a consistently high-ranked aim on European policy agendas for decades. In recent years, this aim has been complicated by the overlap of three contextual

challenges. First, despite the fact that many European countries in the post-pandemic period exhibit relatively low unemployment rates similar to the late 2010s, European governments face severe long-term challenges related to population ageing, such as labour shortages and high costs of pensions and health care. Second, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) proclaimed in 2017 includes the ambition to promote inclusive labour markets with labour market opportunities also for more vulnerable subgroups. This increased emphasis on social inclusion implies that the "success" of activation policies should not only be evaluated against their general effectiveness, but also based upon the degree to which programmes create opportunities for hard-to-employ unemployed individuals. Third, the current context of transitions to sustainable development and digitalization illustrates the importance of EPSR principles geared towards lifelong learning and training in order to gain a vanguard position in these transitions whilst updating skill sets across all segments of the labour market to prevent patterns of social exclusion as the transitions to sustainable development and digitalization unfold.

As a consequence of these challenges, policy-makers increasingly invest in the activation of more vulnerable subgroups, such as long-term unemployed individuals. Their labour force participation is of utmost importance in the context of population ageing and labour shortages, but also to prevent social exclusion and poverty, risks which become more threatening in case of skill deprivation during the transitions to sustainable development and digitalization. However, despite the large body of academic literature evaluating the effectiveness of a wide array of activation programmes (including training, internships, or job search assistance; Boone & Van Ours, 2004; Card et al., 2010, 2017; Martin, 2015), our understanding of the extent to which such programmes are effective for long-term unemployed groups remains relatively limited (Card et al., 2016, 2017; Eppel et al., 2024). A meta-analysis of 106 programme estimates across high-income countries suggests that the impacts of activation programmes are larger for long-term unemployed groups than for short-term unemployed groups, particularly for programmes geared towards human capital and job search assistance (Card et al., 2016). However, researchers conducting meta-analyses highlight the small sample size of studies specifically focussing on long-term unemployed groups (Card et al., 2016), which has led scholars to call for more empirical studies on the effects of active labour market policies (ALMP) for long-term unemployed individuals (Eppel et al., 2024). Furthermore, tentative findings from meta-analyses across countries are likely to mask considerable heterogeneity between countries, as the effects of ALMP are likely to depend on contextual features such as employment protection or unemployment benefits (Benda et al., 2020), or the degree of work–family reconciliation (Nieuwenhuis, 2022). As a result, the available state-of-the-art literature would benefit from comprehensive case studies assessing the effectiveness of active labour market programmes for long-term unemployed groups. Another limitation in the literature is that most contributions evaluate a specific training programme in a given country or region. In contrast, few studies evaluate multiple subtypes of ALMP in the same context (Gerfin & Lechner, 2002; Kasrin & Tübbicke, 2024; Lechner et al., 2011), let alone focussing specifically on long-term unemployed groups.

Benefitting from population-wide administrative data for all long-term unemployed jobseekers in Flanders (Belgium) between 2015–2022, this study applies dynamic propensity score matching and hazard models to examine their enrolment and the effectiveness of participation in a wide range of programmes provided by the Flemish public employment service. We make three key contributions to the literature. First, we provide a comprehensive case study that examines both the uptake and the effects of a wide range of programmes for long-term unemployed individuals. This study takes a holistic approach by investigating the full range of

supply-side actions available through public employment services, including labour market orientation, job search assistance, application and job interview training, and human capital development. Moreover, conducting the study within a single context—Flanders (Belgium)—enables a more straightforward comparison of the performance of these programmes. This is particularly valuable as it isolates the potential impact of the specific national or regional institutional contexts (Benda et al., 2020; Nieuwenhuis, 2022).

Second, the study adopts an individual-level longitudinal perspective, tracking the cumulative effects of participation in activation programmes over both the short and medium term. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of how the benefits of programme participation accumulate over time. Additionally, besides taking the perspective of a jobseeker who participates in a given programme, we also address the potential disadvantages faced by long-term unemployed individuals who do not engage with activation measures. This comparative analysis helps to clarify the broader effects of exclusion from such policies and highlights the risks of non-participation.

Third, the Belgian case study provides a relevant laboratory for examining the impact of ALMP among long-term unemployed individuals. Belgium offers a distinctive context due to its labour market characteristics, with features such as relatively high minimum wages and generous unemployment benefits, which influence the labour market structure. Unlike labour markets with lower minimum wages (e.g., the USA or the UK), sources of vulnerability on the Belgian labour market are less likely to materialise in working poverty, yet are more likely to include segmentation between insiders with stable careers and outsiders with structurally high risks of unemployment or living off means-tested benefits. This context is for instance illustrated by relatively high levels of long-term unemployment in comparison to the EU average (Eurostat, 2025), particularly among disadvantaged groups, such as low-skilled individuals or those with a non-European migration background (Maes et al., 2019; Noppe et al., 2018; OECD, 2016). Additionally, the Belgian context provides an interesting case study as a relatively high proportion of its GDP is allocated to ALMP, particularly in the Northern region of Flanders (Card et al., 2016; Federaal Planbureau, 2020; OECD, 2019), making it a relevant setting for evaluating the effectiveness of these policies. The context of high spending on ALMP and significant labour market segmentation presents an important opportunity to understand how active labour market programmes can mitigate the risks of long-term unemployment and social exclusion.

In addition to the aforementioned three main contributions to the scholarly literature, the empirical findings of this study also bear policy relevance in two respects. First, a detailed documentation of the degree to which long-term unemployed jobseekers still enrol in the different programmes under consideration provides an indication of whether these groups are being served by the public employment service. Low enrolment might inspire policy-makers to investigate the underlying reasons and remediate potential barriers to participation. Second, in the context of contemporary overlapping challenges related to population ageing and labour shortages, the objective to develop more inclusive labour markets, and the impact of transitions to sustainable development and digitalization on the skills required by employers, policy-makers tend to consider further expanding the demand-based ALMP studied in this article. Such a strategy of expansion hinges on findings evidencing positive effects of participation on employment entry, and indicating disadvantages connected to non-participation, such as provided in this study.

2. Background

The activation of unemployed jobseekers in Belgium is a regional authority. In Flanders, the Northern and Dutch-speaking region of Belgium which populates 6,821,770 out of a total of 11,763,650 legal Belgium inhabitants in January 2024, unemployed individuals must register as jobseekers with the Flemish public employment service as soon as possible. This registration is crucial to receive unemployment benefits, access employment support, such as job search assistance or training and internship opportunities, and benefit from financial aids (e.g., discounted train tickets for job interviews). Jobseekers are expected to actively search for jobs and engage with relevant offers. Non-compliance with the public employment service's expectations, such as failing to attend appointments or respond to job offers, can result in sanctions, including the reduction or loss of unemployment benefits, which are otherwise not limited to a certain duration of unemployment. This implies that in most cases, offers to participate in activation programmes can only be declined in agreement with the caseworker, and that declining offers without agreement is likely to result in sanctions. However, it should be noted that—although the overwhelming majority of long-term unemployed jobseekers have already participated in multiple programmes in their first year of unemployment—participation in programmes cannot be considered mandatory across the board, as jobseekers themselves are always left with choices between different strategies to re-enter employment. Caseworkers of the public employment service can initiate several potential actions to activate unemployed jobseekers, which are divided into four main categories. First, labour market orientation includes providing information on the labour market and job opportunities, and helping jobseekers develop realistic job goals. The second category of actions is labelled job search assistance, which includes vacancy notifications (an algorithm automatically matches vacancies to jobseekers' profiles, or caseworkers manually notify jobseekers), but also regular appointments and set goals to be achieved by the jobseeker at set times. Third, human capital programmes include a wide range of training programmes, which mostly provide the opportunity to acquire an occupation-specific skill set through classroom training sessions and/or internships at the workplace. Fourth, application and job interview training includes advice and training specifically geared to application and job interviews, as well as mandatory interviews obliging unemployed jobseekers to participate in interviews selected by caseworkers, followed by evaluation.

Much like in other high-income countries, ALMP have been a central point of focus amongst policy-makers for many decades in Flanders, yet the objectives of such policies have undergone a shift in recent decades (Bonoli, 2014). Historically, substantial cohorts of working-age baby boomers resulted in a surplus of labour supply relative to demand, which prompted policy-makers to primarily concentrate on activating unemployed groups receiving unemployment benefits, and focusing on unemployed profiles that were considered easiest to activate. However, with ageing populations in many high-income countries, manifested by the retirement of baby boomers and smaller cohorts entering the labour market, a substantial number of unfilled job vacancies is now likely to persist, even in the case of low unemployment levels. The remaining group has been documented to be highly selective, and exhibits a high degree of long-term unemployment (i.e., at least one year). As illustrated in Figure 1, the long-term unemployment rate (i.e., the percentage of all unemployed persons who have been unemployed for at least one year) is consistently higher in Belgium in comparison to the EU average throughout this study's observation period (2015–2022). The Flemish region—which typically exhibits a lower unemployment rate—also displays a relatively low long-term unemployment rate in 2015, yet above EU-average levels thereafter. This position results from a gradual increase between 2015–2018 and a more rapid rise in the long-term unemployment rate in 2021,
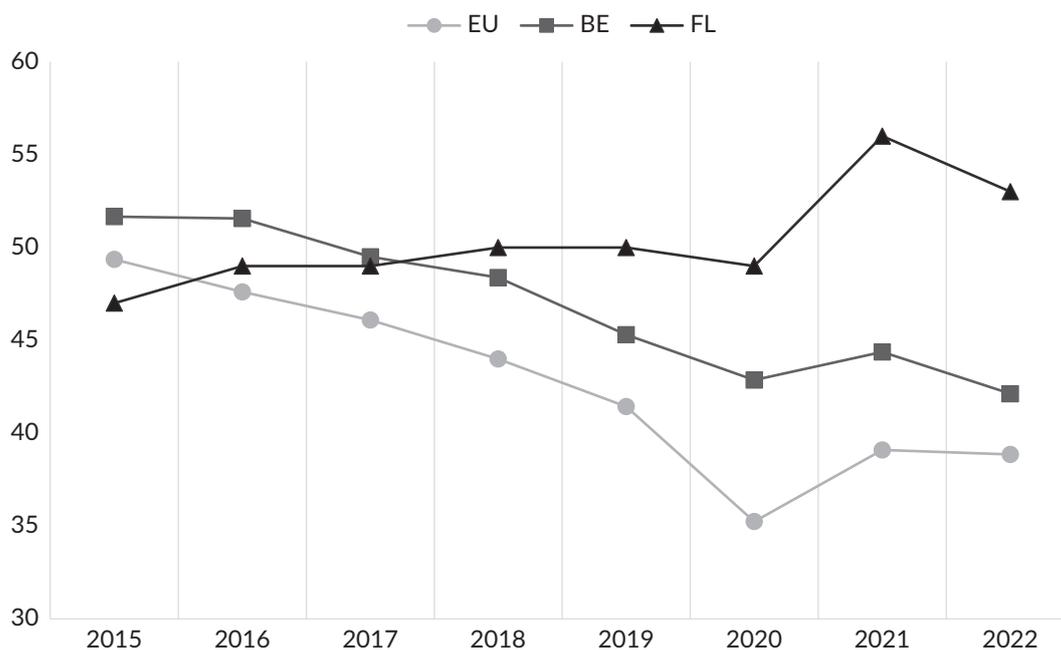
Figure 1. Long-term unemployment rate: EU average (EU), Belgium (BE), and Flanders (FL), 2015–2022. Sources: Eurostat (2025) and VDAB (n.d.).

which is likely to be related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The overall high proportion of long-term unemployment in Flanders highlights the importance of evaluating ALMP specifically for this group.

3. Theory

This section puts forward potential theoretical mechanisms through which participation in the programmes under consideration might affect subsequent employment entry amongst long-term unemployed jobseekers. It is important to note that we adopt a theoretical model which is limited to the factors that are targeted by the programmes considered. This implies that we focus on human capital, job search behaviour, and jobseekers' and employers' attitudes. As a result, this section does not provide a holistic account of the wide range of potential determinants of employment entry amongst long-term unemployed jobseekers, which presumably includes many factors which cannot directly be influenced by programme participation (e.g., health, childcare needs, regional mobility; e.g., Nieuwenhuis, 2022). We argue that such a partial theoretical account of the determinants of employment entry is justified as we aim to evaluate the impact of participating in activation programmes targeting specific mechanisms leading to employment entry.

One of the most notable supply-side barriers is the overrepresentation of low-educated and/or low-skilled individuals among the long-term unemployed (Lallukka et al., 2019; Tasci & Ozdemir, 2006). These groups tend to face significant challenges in securing employment due to a lack of qualifications, experience, or skills that are often demanded by employers. Furthermore, motivational issues, such as the gradual shift in expectations as unemployment continues over an extended period, can exacerbate these challenges (De Witte et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2014). Another important factor is the lack of knowledge about institutional processes and ineffective job search behaviours, which can further hinder re-employment efforts (Kanfer et al., 2001; Moynihan et al., 2003). In addition, a frequently discussed demand-side barrier is the negative signal long-term unemployment sends during the recruitment process. Employers often view long-term

unemployment as an indicator of potential inefficiency, lack of motivation, or lack of employability, making it harder for these individuals to secure job interviews (Bonoli & Hinrichs, 2012; Oberholzer-Gee, 2008).

The aforementioned, non-exhaustive, list of barriers to employment illustrates that activation measures at least bear the potential to stimulate long-term unemployed jobseekers' entry into the labour force not only through increasing human capital, but also by enhancing job search behaviour and potentially by affecting jobseekers' and employers' attitudes. Consequently, developing hypotheses regarding the potential impact of different ALMP requires the integration of multiple theoretical frameworks, taking into account the perspective of the long-term unemployed jobseeker and potential employers. Given the diversity of programmes evaluated in this study, it is clear that the theoretical mechanisms behind the potential effects of these programmes vary depending on their nature and objectives.

First, regarding *labour market orientation* programmes, we draw upon the theory of planned behaviour to hypothesise on their potential impact on entry into employment. The theory of planned behaviour (e.g., Liu et al., 2014) states that the intention to perform an action is influenced by individual attitudes, prescribed social norms, and perceived personal control. Orientation programmes potentially affect all three of these components. With respect to the jobseeker's attitude to seeking a job, providing information and particularly the development of attainable career ambitions are likely to help jobseekers overcome negative feelings of insecurity and discouragement as their (new) job search ambitions are validated by a professional caseworker. Furthermore, interactions with the caseworker might also counteract potential exposure to social norms against seeking work for some jobseekers and instil positive attitudes towards looking for a job. Regarding personal control, perceived self-efficacy is also potentially enhanced in labour market orientation programmes through the validation of realistic career goals by a caseworker. Available literature indicates that jobseekers' job search attitudes and perceived self-efficacy positively affect job search behaviour and outcomes (Kanfer et al., 2001; Moynihan et al., 2003). However, unlike other programmes, these orientation programmes do not include components which increase the objective skill set of a jobseeker. We assume that participation in labour market orientation programmes is relatively unlikely to induce negative effects on job acceptance due to increased reservation wages, given the strong focus on choices in terms of sector, occupation, and working conditions which are considered realistic from the public employment service's point of view. As a result of these mechanisms, we hypothesize:

> H1: Exposure to labour market orientation measures will positively affect the transition from long-term unemployment to employment.

Second, with respect to *job search assistance and job application or interview* programmes, the presumed increased intensity of the job search under the impulse of these programmes is assumed to improve the efficiency and productivity of the job search process. Regarding the potential impact of job search assistance, it should be noted that vacancy notifications might both increase the efficiency of the job search process, and increase jobseekers' selectivity in accepting job offers in the case they have more opportunities than they realised before being exposed to job search assistance. However, this potential negative effect on entry into employment is assumed to be unlikely as job search assistance also includes regular appointments and job search goals which are strongly monitored by public employment service caseworkers. The latter is assumed to prevent long postponements of entry into the labour force due to changes in reservation wages throughout the job search process. Consequently, we hypothesize:

> H2: Exposure to job search assistance will positively affect the transition from long-term unemployment to employment.

Job application and interview programmes potentially positively affect the transition to employment as jobseekers are provided tools to persuade potential employers, whereas reservation wages should remain similar as job application and interview training, unlike vacancy notifications in job search assistance, does not as such impact jobseekers' assessment of the range of labour market opportunities. As a result, we hypothesize:

> H3: Exposure to job interview training will positively affect the transition from long-term unemployment to employment.

Focusing on *human capital* programmes, we hypothesize that such programmes which provide occupation-specific skill sets can significantly increase the likelihood of long-term unemployed individuals re-entering the labour market for two main reasons. First, according to human capital theory, individuals can enhance their productivity and earning potential by investing in their education and skills (Becker, 1962, 1964). These investments increase their marginal productivity, which refers to the additional value an individual can contribute to production through improvements in their education, skills, or experience. This increase in productivity positively impacts not only task proficiency and efficiency, but also creativity, innovation, and adaptability in the workplace. From a human capital perspective, programme participation might mitigate the negative effects of long-term unemployment due to missed opportunities for skill development, as well as the potential erosion of previously acquired skills due to a lack of practice and updating of knowledge (Shi et al., 2018). Second, in line with signalling theory, we suggest that participation in human capital programmes also influences employers' perceptions of long-term unemployed jobseekers. When making hiring decisions, employers face uncertainty due to asymmetric information, where they struggle to assess candidates' true qualities and future productivity. As a result, employers rely on observable characteristics, such as participation in training or educational programmes, to infer unobserved attributes (McCormick, 1990; Spence, 1973; Weiss, 1995). Although signalling may play a lesser role in later stages of hiring, when more information becomes available, it is critical in shaping the first selection of candidates for job interviews. In fact, research has demonstrated that long-term unemployment, all else being equal, often signals lower employability, which can significantly reduce the chances of progressing to an interview (Bonoli & Hinrichs, 2012; Eriksson & Lagerström, 2006; Oberholzer-Gee, 2008). However, signalling theory also suggests that participation in labour market programmes can positively alter these perceptions, especially for long-term unemployed individuals. This participation can help counteract the negative stereotypes and stigma associated with long-term unemployment (Liechti et al., 2017), thereby improving their chances of being selected for further stages in the recruitment process. As a result of the aforementioned mechanisms, we hypothesize:

> H4: Exposure to human capital programmes will positively affect the transition from long-term unemployment to employment.

4. Data and Methods

4.1. Data

We use administrative data from the Flemish public employment service for the period 2015–2022, which includes the entire population of long-term (i.e., at least one year) unemployed individuals residing in Flanders. More specifically, these data provide longitudinal information on a monthly basis for 357,464 individuals who have been long-term unemployed at least once between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2022. Individuals may experience long-term unemployment more than once between 2015 and 2022. As a result, we record 422,510 spells in which an individual is classified as long-term unemployed. The data also include an indicator for entry into employment (i.e., worked more than 10 days in a given month), as well as variables that denote participation in the ALMP under consideration. This enables us to examine the impact of programme exposure on subsequent employment entry for all long-term unemployment spells. In the following, we discuss the methodology in an intuitive and accessible manner. A detailed formal discussion of the dynamic propensity score matching and event history methodology used is available in Wood and Neels (2024).

4.2. Dynamic Propensity Score Matching

This study aims to evaluate activation programmes available for long-term unemployed jobseekers on a one-by-one basis, which implies that we compare a group who took part in a programme to those who did not participate in that given programme. Simply comparing the employment outcomes of long-term unemployed jobseekers who were exposed to a given activation measure with the respective outcomes of jobseekers who did not experience the given measure is typically inappropriate. Participants in activation programmes tend to exhibit specific characteristics that can positively or negatively influence their labour market prospects compared to non-participants. Without adjusting for these differences, comparing labour market outcomes between the two groups could lead to biased conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the activation measure. If participants already possess a more favourable labour market profile, the programme's effectiveness may be overestimated. Conversely, if the activation measure targets individuals with weaker labour market profiles, the programme's effectiveness may be underestimated if no adjustment is made for this difference. To address this, this study uses dynamic matching techniques to construct a "statistical twin" for each participant in the activation programme. A statistical twin is an individual who, based on all observable characteristics that influence labour market outcomes, closely resembles a participant.

Participation in activation measures can begin at different times, and the dynamic nature of programme participation means that the group who participated during the observation period cannot simply be compared with an arbitrary group of non-participants. The timing of participation is influenced by a selection process based on unemployment duration, which must be accounted for in the evaluation. Individuals with more favourable labour market profiles tend to be unemployed for shorter periods, which negatively affects their likelihood of participating in activation measures. This mechanism demonstrates that the probability of entering employment, through unemployment duration, impacts the likelihood of participating in activation programmes, while the evaluation seeks to measure the reverse effect: the impact of participation on the likelihood of employment entry, given the individual's profile. Since entry into activation measures can occur at different times, Sianesi (2004) developed a dynamic matching model that compares individuals who enter

a programme at a specific point in time with a similar group of long-term unemployed individuals who have not yet participated (Wood & Neels, 2024; Wood et al., 2024). For each activation measure, we compare individuals who enrol in a given month (e.g., month 13 since registration as unemployed) with a similar group who have not yet participated in the programme considered at that time. Matching is carried out separately for the four categories of programmes.

Due to the large set of characteristics in which the participant group may differ from the non-participant group, individual matching based on all combinations of observed characteristics is not feasible due to cell frequency limitations. Therefore, propensity score matching techniques are typically employed (Rosenbaum & Rubin, 1983). Propensity scores represent the probability that a long-term unemployed jobseeker, given certain profile characteristics, will enter the activation measure at different time points since the start of their unemployment. These probabilities are estimated using a probit regression using the nearest-neighbour algorithm with replacement (results using other matching algorithms will be discussed in the robustness checks). All treated individuals are on common support, resulting in a match for all treated jobseekers. Since propensity score matching aims to correct for selection bias by comparing participants with non-participants who had a similar chance of entering the programme, the quality of the matching can be assessed by comparing the distribution of observed characteristics of participants before and after matching with the control group of non-participants (see Section 5.2).

We include four groups of indicators into the propensity score matching models, all of which are likely determinants of both participation in activation measures and subsequent transitions to employment. First, a group of socio-demographic variables is included, which have all been found to be associated with both participation in ALMP programmes and employment (Maes et al., 2019, 2021; Noppe et al., 2018; OECD, 2016; Wood et al., 2017). In addition to age and sex, we include origin (distinguishing Africa, America, Asia, Belgium, EU-13, EU-14, European Free Trade Association and UK, other European countries, and other non-European countries), region (i.e., 24 administrative regions typically including one large city), educational level (distinguishing primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, vocational secondary, higher vocational, bachelor, and master degrees), and knowledge of Dutch (distinguishing none, little, good, very good, and no registered information).

Second, we consider characteristics of the unemployment episode, as such characteristics might also affect both enrolment in the programmes considered, as well as subsequent employment. We include the type of jobseeker, distinguishing those eligible for unemployment benefits, graduates, those eligible for means-tested or disability/illness benefits, students, voluntarily registered jobseekers (not eligible for benefits), and those excluded from unemployment benefits (i.e., due to sanctions). The motivation to control for this variation is that these groups are likely to vary considerably in the opportunity and/or motivation to enrol into an activation programme, but also exhibit differential hazards of employment entry. In addition, we also include the calendar year in which the unemployment spell began, which controls for the fact that both the enrolment into activation programmes and employment entry depends on period changes (e.g., economic cycles, or the introduction or expansion of activation programmes; Wood, 2024; Wood et al., 2024). Similarly, we control for the month in which the unemployment spell began, as enrolment into activation programmes and employment entries exhibit seasonal variation. Failing to control for period and season effects could entail bias in the estimated effects of activation programme participation on subsequent employment entries (Wood et al., 2024).

Third, we include a set of variables that capture the jobseeker's labour market history, as available literature indicates that previous labour market outcomes are an important predictor of future outcomes in terms of ALMP participation and employment (e.g., so-called scarring effects), and therefore is considered vital as a factor in evaluations of programmes such as this study (OECD, 2020). This set of twelve continuous variables indicates the number of days in the last two years that the individual was employed, worked via temporary employment agencies, unemployed, voluntarily registered as a jobseeker, engaged in part-time education, receiving means-tested benefits, receiving disability or illness benefits, subject to a sanction by the public employment service, a student, an intern, an asylum seeker appealing status, or was exempt from activation for family or social reasons. The choice to include indicators that also cover domains other than the labour market history per se is motivated by the fact that labour market positions of long-term unemployed jobseekers are routinely documented to be intrinsically related to other life domains and social issues such as benefit dependence and poverty, family dynamics, migration, and social isolation (Amuedo-Dorantes & Serrano-Padial, 2010; Krug et al., 2019; Pohlan, 2024; Wood & Neels, 2024).

Fourth, we also include indicators for participation in activation measures in the year preceding the observation period (i.e., during the first 12 months of unemployment). These four indicators capture the number of days an individual was exposed to labour market orientation programmes, job search assistance, job application and interview training, and human capital programmes. By including these variables, we account for prior exposure to activation measures, which may influence an individual's subsequent exposure and employment outcomes. This helps to control for potential biases stemming from prior engagement with such programmes and ensures that the observed effects are not confounded by earlier programme participation, as available literature routinely identifies relatively long-lasting effects of programme participation (e.g., Card et al., 2017).

4.3. Hazard Models

In order to address the effectiveness of exposure to the four different activation measures, we compare the subsequent hazards of entering employment between long-term unemployed jobseekers who participated in a given measure (i.e. "treated"), and a matched control group of individuals who were not (yet) exposed (i.e. "control"). The treated and control groups are followed until a transition is made into employment or censoring occurs due to inactivity, death, emigration, reaching age 65, or the end of the observation window on 31 December 2022. Individuals in the matched control group are not censored in case of enrolment in other activation programmes. A discrete-time hazard model (see Equation 1) estimates the hazard of entering employment accumulated within a month $H(t)_i$) as a function of the time since the start of programme participation or selection into the matched control group T (baseline, cubic effect), exposure to the programme P, and interactions between programme participation and the baseline hazard function. In this equation, $q(t)$ is the conditional probability of entering employment for individual i in quarter t since entry into the programme (or matching) among individuals who had not entered employment prior to quarter t. Due to the complementary log-log link function, exponentiated parameter estimates represent hazard ratios.

$$H(t)_i = -\ln\left[1 - q(t)_i\right] = e^{\hat{\alpha}}.e^{\hat{\beta}T_i}.e^{\hat{\beta}T_i^2}.e^{\hat{\beta}T_i^3}.e^{\hat{\beta}P_i}.e^{\hat{\beta}P_iT_i}.e^{\hat{\beta}P_iT_i^2}.e^{\hat{\beta}P_iT_i^3} \tag{1}$$

To better understand the cumulative effects of participation in a given activation programme, we compare the cumulative incidence of the transition to employment for jobseekers who participated in a given programme

to the cumulative incidence of their matched control group (Maes et al., 2021; Wood & Neels, 2024; Wood et al., 2024). The cumulative incidence of the transition to employment over time describes the proportion of individuals who, at a given point in time, have transitioned from long-term unemployed to employed during the observation period. While the cumulative incidence function shows the portion of the population at risk that has exited from the initial state during the observation period, it does not necessarily imply that these individuals remain permanently in employment. For re-entrants into long-term unemployment, it is possible to further examine their re-entry into activation measures and their subsequent transition from these measures into employment.

5. Results

5.1. Exposure to Activation Programmes Amongst Long-Term Unemployed Jobseekers

Before discussing the results regarding the effectiveness of participation in different activation programmes, Figure 2 illustrates the extent to which long-term unemployed jobseekers are exposed to these programmes (i.e., one minus the proportion remaining without participation (S(t))). The figure shows the percentage of individuals who, since becoming long-term unemployed (i.e., after one year of unemployment), have participated in the given types of activation programmes. The figure clearly indicates that long-term unemployed jobseekers do indeed come into contact with the activation measures under consideration. This indicates that—even though the overwhelming majority of long-term unemployed jobseekers have been exposed to activation measures in the first year of their unemployment spell—the public employment service continues to invest resources in long-term unemployed jobseekers' (re-)entry into the labour force.

After 11 months of follow-up in long-term unemployment (i.e., the 24th month of unemployment), the percentage of jobseekers who have participated in at least one activation measure since reaching one year of unemployment ranges between 17% and 25%. Additional analyses (which are not presented in detail here) show that, contrary to previous findings for all jobseekers (i.e., not selecting long-term unemployed jobseekers; see Kasztan-Flechner et al., 2022; Wood & Neels, 2020), there is no significant variation in participation in activation measures by age, gender, or education level, and only limited variation by origin,
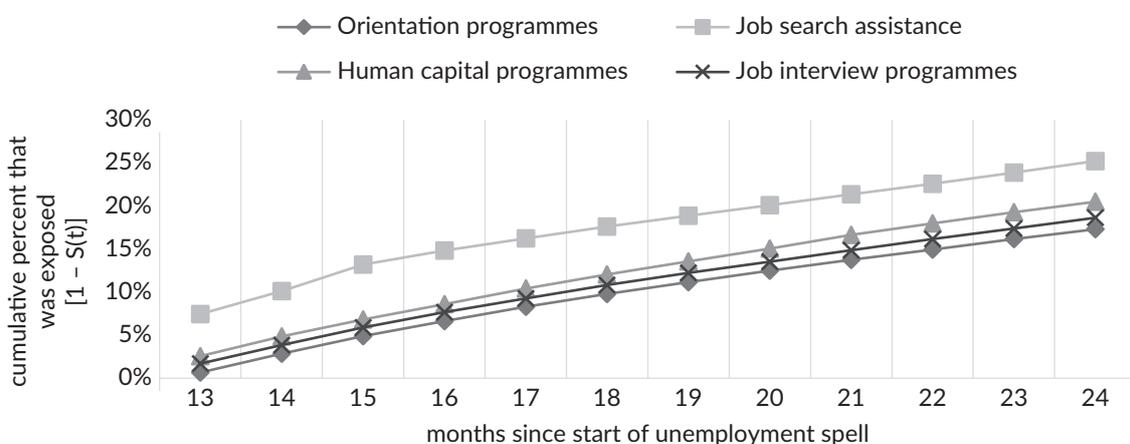
Figure 2. Long-term unemployed jobseekers' exposure to active labour market programmes, 2015–2022, Flanders.

with no clear patterns emerging by region or origin (e.g., European vs. non-European). This suggests that, when focussing on the already selective group of long-term unemployed jobseekers, these demographic characteristics no longer play a major role in determining entry into activation measures.

5.2. Results of Matching

Table 1 illustrates the extent to which a balance was achieved between the groups of participants who start participating in a given measure at a given duration of long-term unemployment, the unmatched control groups (column "Without matching"), and the matched control groups (column "With matching"). Values in highlighted cells indicate a poor balance in the distribution of observed characteristics, implying that the participants and the control group—and presumably their probabilities of transitioning into employment— cannot be directly compared. Comparing the columns "Without matching" and "With matching" clearly shows that problematic values frequently arise when no matching is applied, whereas the matching

Table 1. Results of dynamic propensity score matching models: balance of covariate indices by activation measure and duration of long-term unemployment.

	Labour market orientation				Human capital programmes			
	Without matching		With matching		Without matching		With matching	
Duration[1]	Rubin's B	Rubin's R	Rubin's B	Rubin's R	Rubin's B	Rubin's R	Rubin's B	Rubin's R
1	66.3*	0.67	13.5	0.91	61.3*	1.26	10.6	0.92
2	52.2*	0.41*	12.4	0.95	57.1*	1.37	11.3	0.95
3	50.2*	0.32*	14.3	1.10	54.3*	1.42	11.4	1.12
4	46.6*	0.40*	13.6	1.07	59.6*	1.76	12.1	0.98
5	48.8*	0.39*	12.6	1.08	54.2*	1.54	14.8	1.10
6	42.9*	0.40*	15.1	1.04	58.6*	1.51	14.0	0.94
7	42.1*	0.42*	18.6	0.95	68.5*	1.50	18.4	0.97
8	43.5*	0.34*	15.7	1.32	70.9*	1.75	23.5	0.82
9	46.6*	0.29*	18.4	0.98	59.4*	1.96	22.9	0.86
10	44.4*	0.43*	18.9	1.00	54.2*	1.49	20.0	0.92
11	44.9*	0.39*	20.3	1.14	55.4*	1.30	21.6	0.97
	Job search assistance				Job interview training			
	Without matching		With matching		Without matching		With matching	
Duration[1]	Rubin's B	Rubin's R	Rubin's B	Rubin's R	Rubin's B	Rubin's R	Rubin's B	Rubin's R
1	144.6*	0.34*	12.6	1.02	56.9*	0.38*	9.3	1.01
2	152.5*	0.35*	21.0	1.05	56.4*	0.35*	11.0	1.09
3	111.1*	0.52	15.2	1.09	57.3*	0.35*	11.7	1.11
4	93.2*	0.61	12.0	1.06	51.8*	0.34*	12.9	1.09
5	79.4*	0.69	13.2	1.04	52.9*	0.33*	15.0	1.08
6	70.6*	0.63	13.7	1.00	54.4*	0.34*	11.2	0.99
7	66.5*	0.70	14.1	1.11	52.5*	0.27*	13.5	1.13
8	63.4*	0.65	15.4	1.08	57.5*	0.33*	14.2	1.09
9	57.2*	0.70	19.3	1.16	55.9*	0.26*	15.2	1.10
10	58.8*	0.66	18.2	1.04	53.0*	0.42*	21.5	1.00
11	53.2*	0.73	20.2	1.17	57.2*	0.41*	17.6	1.01

Notes: Rubin's B and R are indicators of balance between the group that starts an activation measure and the control group; Rubin (2001) states that a good balance is achieved if B is lower than 25 and R is higher than 0.5 and lower than 2; Duration[1] = duration in months since the start of long-term unemployment (i.e., duration since the 12th month of unemployment).

procedure effectively succeeds in generating a group of non-participants who—in terms of the observable characteristics included in the matching process (see the methods section)—are comparable to the group of long-term unemployed individuals who entered the considered activation programme.

5.3. Identified Effects of Activation Measures

Figure 3 illustrates the effect measurements for four types of activation programmes in terms of (a) average marginal effects of participation on the monthly hazard of employment entry (Figures 3a, 3c, 3e, and 3g), and (b) cumulative incidence of employment entry (Figures 3b, 3d, 3f, and 3h). Estimated hazards of employment entry for groups of participants and matched non-participants are illustrated in the Supplementary File (Figure 5). With respect to participation in labour market orientation programmes, long-term unemployed jobseekers who started such a measure had higher chances of transitioning to work in the following years compared to those in the matched control group (Figure 3a). The effect of participation gradually diminishes over time, but remains statistically significant. After 48 months of observation, the difference between the remaining long-term unemployed in both groups is minimal. However, it is crucial to note that the absence of a difference at the end of the observation period does not imply that the programme was ineffective. Rather, it suggests that the remaining participants who, despite their involvement, had not exited unemployment by the end of the observation period, did not show further benefits compared to those in the matched control group. Figure 3b shows how the advantage for participants builds up cumulatively over time since the start of the programme. After eight months, 28.0% of the matched control group had transitioned to work, while 31.5% of those who participated in the orientation activation programme made the transition. After 24 months, the cumulative incidence for both groups was 54.4% and 63.4%, respectively. At longer durations, this advantage stabilises due to the relatively small additional advantage for participants.

Regarding job search assistance, Figure 3c illustrates that long-term unemployed individuals who participated in this programme during the first 11 months of long-term unemployment also exhibit subsequent higher chances of transitioning to work compared to the matched control group. These differences are statistically significant, and the advantage for participants exhibits a pattern and magnitude similar to the results for labour market orientation programmes. Towards the end of the observation period, the difference in the exit probabilities between the participants and the matched control group approaches zero, indicating that the advantage has disappeared. Figure 3d demonstrates how the cumulative incidence of employment entry increases more rapidly for participants in job search assistance compared to the matched control group. After eight months, 31.6% of participants had transitioned to work, compared to 25.1% in the control group. After 24 months, the cumulative incidence for both groups was 60.5% and 51.8%, respectively.

Regarding application and job interview training, Figure 3e shows that the group who participated in these activation measures during the first 11 months of long-term unemployment had significantly higher chances of transitioning to work. This advantage for participants exhibits a time-patterning similar to the aforementioned results for labour market orientation programmes and job search assistance, yet the magnitude of the estimated effects is considerably larger. It should be noted that the greater estimated effect size does not necessarily imply that application and job interview training is more effective than the other activation programmes under consideration, as these measures are presumably also taken for different profiles of long-term unemployed jobseekers. Similar to the results for the orientation and job search

assistance measures, the findings for job application training indicate that the benefit for participants approaches zero towards the end of the observation period. This suggests that long-term unemployed jobseekers who participated in job application and interview training but had not transitioned to work after a substantial period might benefit from entry into follow-up measures more than is currently the case. Figure 3f illustrates the difference in cumulative incidence—the proportion that transitioned to work—over time. After eight months, 28.9% of the matched control group had made the transition to work, compared to 46.9% of those who participated in job application and interview training.
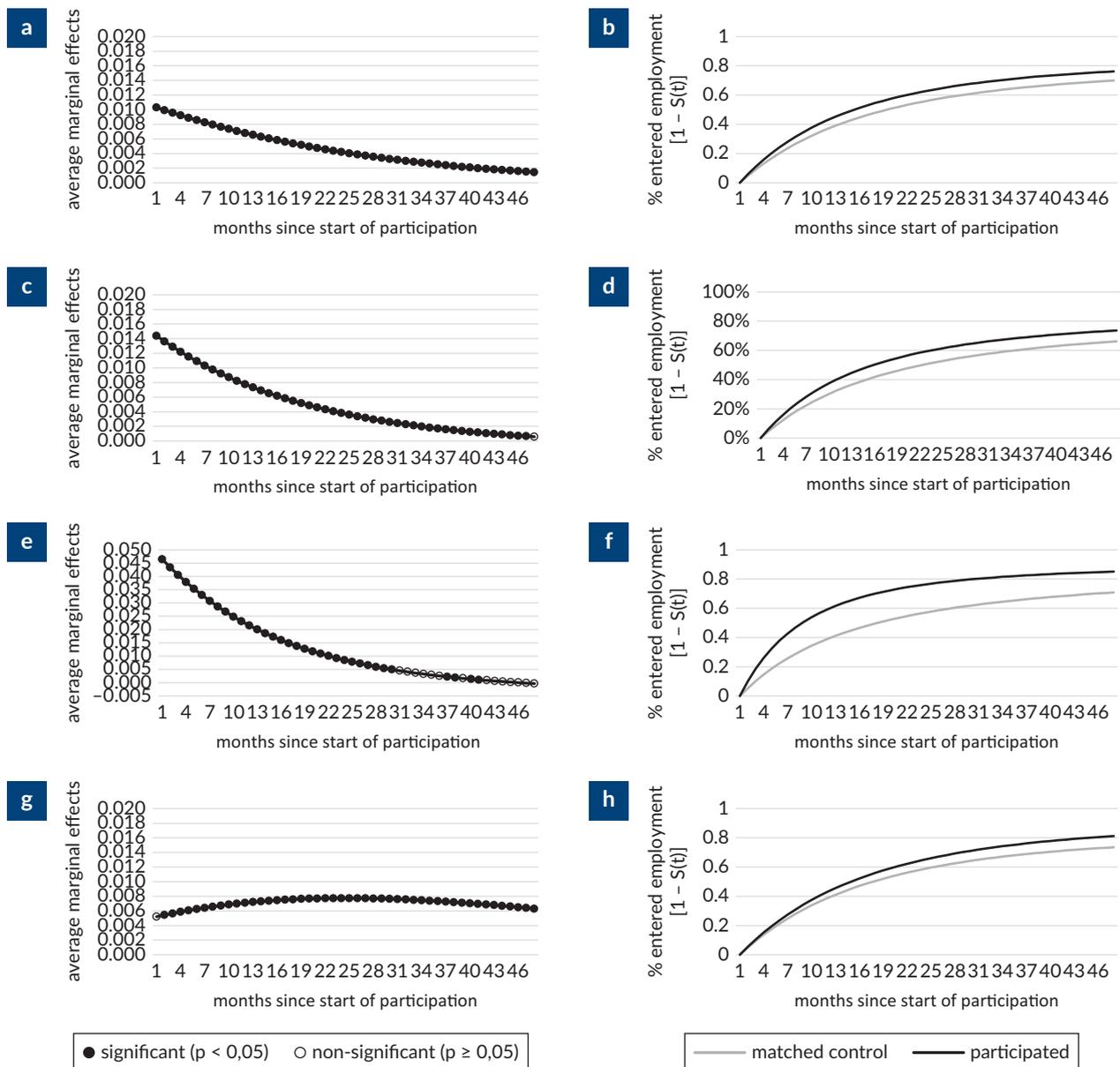
Figure 3. Estimated advantage of ALMP participation on employment entry compared to matched non-participants: (a) average marginal effects of labour market orientation programmes; (b) cumulative incidence of labour market orientation programmes; (c) average marginal effects of job search assistance; (d) cumulative incidence of job search assistance; (e) average marginal effects of application and job interview training; (f) cumulative incidence of application and job interview training; (g) average marginal effects of human capital programmes; and (h) cumulative incidence of human capital programmes.

Finally, Figures 3g and 3h present the results for activation measures focused on human capital development. As with the previous measures, long-term unemployed jobseekers who engaged in human capital programmes consistently showed higher hazards of transitioning to work. Findings reveal that, unlike the other activation measures, the advantage for participants in human capital programmes is not concentrated at lower durations since programme start. This implies that long-term unemployed individuals who participated in these measures had a significantly higher chance of exiting unemployment throughout the entire observation period. Notably, no "lock-in" effects were observed for human capital programmes. Previous research on jobseekers (i.e., not restricted to long-term unemployed jobseekers) typically finds that participation in human capital programmes initially leads to negative effects, often interpreted as temporary reductions in time invested in job search while participating in training (e.g., Wood et al., 2024). There are two possible explanations for the absence of a lock-in effect. First, the start of participation itself may generate positive effects, such as increased motivation or inspiration to return to work, even in the case a human capital programme was not completed (yet). Second, it is possible that the matched non-participants do not benefit compared to new participants who are locked into a human capital programme, due to their very low chances of exiting unemployment after more than one year of unemployment.

5.4. Is Non-Participation Detrimental to Employment Entry for Non-Participants?

The previous results consistently demonstrated that the group participating in an activation measure within the first 11 months of long-term unemployment experienced an advantage in terms of employment exit chances in comparison to their matched counterparts who did not yet participate. However, it remains unclear what the potential effect of the different activation measures is for *all* long-term unemployed jobseekers. In other words, the question remains whether long-term unemployed jobseekers who did not participate in a given programme experience a disadvantage which is equivalent to the advantage identified amongst participants. The positive effects of activation measures do not necessarily imply that the group who, in our observation, did not participate in a particular activation programme would have experienced similar benefits had they participated in that programme. This is due to the fact that the analysis focuses on the labour market outcomes of participants, comparing them to statistical twins, with the latter being very similar in all observable characteristics. This implies that non-participants with somewhat different profiles—who are less often used as statistical twins—are underrepresented in the analysis. As a result, the analyses discussed thus far do not provide a representative picture of the labour market outcomes for all long-term unemployed individuals who did not participate in an activation programme. Consequently, we also focus on the outcomes for all non-participants and, ultimately, match each non-participant with a statistical twin who did participate in that specific activation measure.

Figure 4 illustrates the estimated disadvantage that non-participants experienced by not engaging in an activation programme, compared to a matched set of participants. Each graph displays two lines. The black line shows the advantage that participants gained from participating in a specific activation programme (see Section 5.3). The grey line represents the results of the analysis where non-participants form the basis for matching, and the outcomes for this group are compared to the outcomes of matched participants who did engage in the respective programme. This line provides a representative illustration of the disadvantage experienced by non-participants due to their lack of participation at the time of matching. Regarding labour market orientation programmes and training related to job applications and interviews, the disadvantage experienced by non-participants closely approaches the advantage experienced by participants (Figures 4a
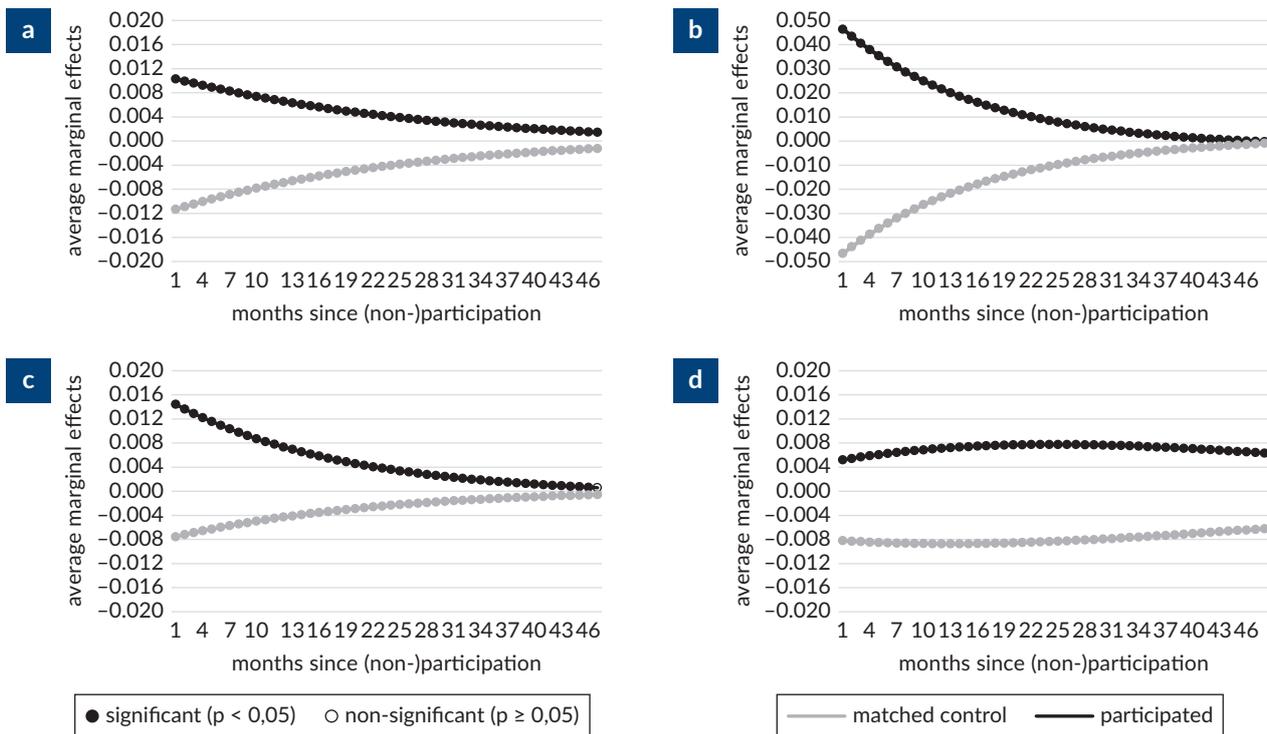
Figure 4. Estimated advantage of participation on employment entry compared to matched non-participants (grey), and estimated disadvantage of non-participation on employment entry compared to matched participants (black): (a) labour market orientation programmes; (b) application and job interview training; (c) job search assistance; and (d) human capital programmes.

and 4b). This finding suggests that scaling up investments in such programmes targeting all long-term unemployed jobseekers would be similarly effective.

Regarding job search assistance and human capital programmes, the results indicate a clear difference between the advantage participants experience in terms of employment entry (relative to matched non-participants) and the disadvantage non-participants face (relative to matched participants). Regarding job search assistance (Figure 4c), the disadvantage for non-participants is roughly half of the advantage for participants. Therefore, it would be erroneous to conclude that all long-term unemployed jobseekers would equally benefit from participation as the group of long-term jobseekers that these programmes currently reach. The implication of this finding is that if participation in this type of activation programme were to be encouraged also for profiles with lower chances of engaging (e.g., profiles most capable of finding a job independently), the overall effectiveness might decrease, but would still remain positive. In contrast, regarding the effect of non-participation in human capital programmes, we reach the opposite conclusion (Figure 4d). The disadvantage related to non-participation for the group that did not engage is larger than the benefit for participants. This implies that if profiles with lower chances of entering human capital development programmes today were to participate, they might derive a greater advantage in terms of employment entry than the group of participants that these programmes currently reach. This result at least suggests that there is unrealised potential in either expanding human capital programmes or targeting participation to those who would benefit most from them.

5.5. Robustness Checks

Finally, two robustness checks were performed. First, as the usage of Caliper or kernel matching entails similar substantive findings, we chose to present the simpler nearest-neighbour approach. Second, given that participants in the activation measures considered can start participation in the first 11 months since the start of long-term unemployment, we also assessed whether the estimated effects vary depending on the timing of participation. However, in contrast to previous findings for (long-term) unemployed jobseekers (i.e., not restricted to long-term unemployment; e.g., Goller et al., 2021; Lechner & Wiehler, 2013), this was not the case.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Policy-makers are increasingly investing in the activation of long-term unemployed groups due to their critical role in addressing low unemployment rates, population ageing, and labour shortages, as well as their vulnerability to social exclusion and poverty. Participation in activation programmes might facilitate the employment entry of long-term unemployed jobseekers, which limits the aforementioned vulnerabilities and allows them to reap the benefits of other commodified services such as formal childcare and parental leave in Belgium (Kil et al., 2015; Marynissen et al., 2021; Wood & Marynissen, 2019). However, while there is a significant body of research on the effectiveness of activation programmes in general, there is limited understanding of their specific impact on long-term unemployed individuals. Meta-analyses suggest that the effects of ALMP are generally larger for long-term unemployed groups, especially those focused on human capital and job search assistance, but the small sample size and lack of studies specific to this group call for more empirical research. Moreover, the effectiveness of such policies is likely to vary across countries due to contextual factors, and comprehensive case studies are needed to assess the impacts of various activation measures in long-term unemployment contexts. Benefitting from population-wide administrative data for long-term unemployed jobseekers in Flanders (Belgium) from 2015–2022, this study addresses these gaps by using dynamic propensity score matching and hazard models to assess the enrolment in and the effectiveness of four activation programmes among long-term unemployed individuals: labour market orientation, job search assistance, application and interview training, and human capital development.

Three take-home findings emerge from our empirical results. First, long-term unemployed jobseekers continue to enrol in different types of activation programmes. This indicates that the Flemish public employment service continues to invest resources in long-term unemployed jobseekers' (re-)entry into the labour force, which aligns with the EPSR goal that unemployed individuals have the right to continuous activation support and training. Notably, in contrast to previous research among unemployed jobseekers without a specific focus on long-term unemployed jobseekers (Kasztan-Flechner et al., 2022; Wood & Neels, 2020), we find no significant variation in participation in the considered activation programmes by age, gender, or education level, and only limited variation by origin, with no clear patterns emerging by region of origin. This suggests that activation opportunities for long-term unemployed jobseekers are relatively socially inclusive in Flanders (Belgium), which is an explicit EPSR target.

Second, we find positive effects of participation in all four activation measures considered on the entry into employment amongst long-term unemployed jobseekers. This finding is in line with the available literature (Card et al., 2016; Goller et al., 2021), and at least suggests that participation in activation programmes helps

long-term unemployed jobseekers to overcome well-documented barriers to employment, by enhancing their human capital (Lallukka et al., 2019; Tasci & Ozdemir, 2006), which might also strengthen confidence and enhance the motivation to start the search process to find a job (De Witte et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2014), a process which is supported by enhancing institutional knowledge and search strategies in the activation programmes considered. Additionally, the identified positive effects of programme participation on employment entry also suggest that the potential mechanism in which employers interpret long-term unemployment as an indicator of potential inefficiency, lack of motivation, or lack of employability (Bonoli & Hinrichs, 2012; Oberholzer-Gee, 2008), might be weakened by participation in activation programmes that enhance productivity and support jobseekers to manage signals during hiring processes.

Third, our findings indicate that expanding the four activation programmes considered in this study (i.e., labour market orientation, job search assistance, application and interview training, and human capital development) would be beneficial to enhance the employment prospects for long-term unemployed individuals. Our results not only show positive effects of participation on employment entry, but also indicate that non-participants would benefit in the case of enrolment. Hence, activation programmes still have positive effects for long-term jobseekers. Moreover, the finding that the negative effect of non-participation among the long-term unemployed individuals who did not participate in human capital development is in the short term slightly higher than the benefit for participants, underscores that scholars and policy-makers should pay attention to underlying barriers for participation in such activation programmes.

Our findings are particularly relevant in light of the first and fourth EPSR principles. Principle 1 of the EPSR emphasizes the right to quality education, training, and lifelong learning to enable individuals to acquire skills that foster societal participation and successful labour market transitions. Our findings underscore that the Flemish public employment service provides continuous support for long-term unemployed individuals, ensuring that they can develop and maintain the skills needed for re-entering the labour market. This aligns with the EPSR's call for inclusive education and training opportunities for all, especially vulnerable groups like the long-term unemployed. Furthermore, Principle 4, which highlights the right to active support for employment, emphasizes the importance of timely, personalized assistance for jobseekers. Our results show that participation in activation programmes significantly enhances employment prospects for long-term unemployed individuals, supporting the EPSR's principle that personalized, tailored support should be provided to improve employment or self-employment outcomes. The lack of significant variation by age, gender, or education level in participation further suggests the socially inclusive nature of the activation measures for long-term unemployed jobseekers in Flanders, reinforcing the notion that everyone, regardless of background, should have access to opportunities for social and economic integration through ALMP.

Finally, we discuss four limitations and corresponding avenues for future research. First, regarding the identification of causal effects of programme participation on long-term jobseekers' likelihood of entering employment: While propensity score matching is a powerful technique for generating statistical twins to serve as a comparison group for those who engage in an activation measure, the method has limitations. The primary limitation is that the accuracy of the estimate for the difference between participants and their statistical twins in terms of employment exit depends on the available data. This is referred to as the "condition of independence" in econometrics. This assumption means that all factors influencing both participation in an activation programme and the subsequent hazard of employment entry must be observed in the data. This, however, is rarely fully the case. There are often additional factors on which participants

may differ from their statistical twins, which could also affect employment outcomes. Consequently, the estimates in this report are only approximations of the causal effect of programme participation, conditional on the characteristics used in the dynamic matching. This limitation contrasts with randomized controlled trials, where participants and non-participants only differ in terms of exposure to the activation programme (Bollens, 2007).

Second, building upon our theoretical interpretations of effectiveness, a fruitful pathway for future research would be to measure the presumed mediators in the different programmes and model the relationship between programme participation (e.g., general classroom training), mediating variables (e.g., motivation), and job search outcomes (e.g., employment entry). The longitudinal linked register data used in this article did not provide sufficient information to do so, yet it would strengthen our theoretical interpretations of effectiveness.

Third, despite the fact that this article reports both the estimated effect of participation in activation programmes, and the estimated disadvantage of not participating in the group that was observed not to do so, it is noteworthy that such estimates do not necessarily provide an accurate indication of the effectiveness of activation programmes in the future. ALMP effectiveness is likely to be influenced by period effects in terms of policy design features and investments, but also other contextual factors such as economic cycles (Card et al., 2010) and other policy domains (e.g., childcare; Nieuwenhuis, 2022). As a consequence, further studies explicitly considering period changes in ALMP investments, uptake, and effectiveness are likely to contribute to our understanding of the activation of long-term unemployed jobseekers (e.g., Wood, 2024).

Fourth, as this study aimed to provide a one-by-one evaluation of the main categories of activation programmes, possible avenues to further increase the level of detail include further unpacking the groups of activation programmes in more specific categories, and studying the effects of sequential or parallel participation in different programmes.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

Black Entrepreneurship and DEI: Profiles and Challenges of African Descendant Entrepreneurs Within the Portuguese Ecosystem

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Abstract

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are essential for creating healthy and competitive innovation ecosystems where individuals and organisations thrive through equal access to resources and opportunities. Based on the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and the National Entrepreneurial Context Index (NECI), this article seeks to identify the personal and business profiles of African descendant entrepreneurs in Portugal and place their experiences within the understudied national ecosystem and its stakeholders. The research examines socio-demographic patterns, entrepreneurial trajectories, and business dynamics through a mixed-methods approach spanning three phases: stakeholder identification and netnography, an online survey of 200 entrepreneurs, and five focus groups with 40 stakeholders. Most entrepreneurs are young, educated, and driven by the desire for independence, solving community problems, and sustainable development. However, their start-ups are typically in early stages, with limited focus on digitalisation and technological innovation, often emerging from strategies of emancipation and resilience against labour market disparities and work–life imbalance. Support received remains significantly below the national average—particularly in acceleration, incubation, and access to traditional funding—with notable disparities based on origins and gender. Structural inequalities persist and mainly affect PALOP women. Stakeholders' DEI efforts and influence on Black entrepreneurship vary across socio-political, market, and community ecosystem dimensions. Findings reveal gaps in entrepreneurs' digital and business literacy and their underrepresentation in decision-making roles within stakeholders' bodies. Conclusions emphasise the need for greater visibility of Black entrepreneurship experiences, inclusive governance, and capacity-building tailored to different stages of business development rather than target groups, along with stronger collaboration between entrepreneurial support organisations (ESOs).

1. Introduction

Over the past 15 years, Europe has faced crises and growth that have reshaped its socio-political, economic, and cultural landscapes. Democratic institutions and civil society have been challenged by financial and health crises, border conflicts, climate change, demographic shifts, migrations, rising poverty and precarious employment, the rise of populism and far-right parties, rapid technological innovation, online networks, digital transformation, and disinformation, leading to "glocal" effects in platformised and datified societies (Becker et al., 2024; Castells, 2002; Faghih & Forouharfar, 2022; Vesan & Corti, 2022). While crises can inspire innovation, entrepreneurship, and collaborative resilience (Christensen, 2015; Goldstein, 2012; Schumpeter, 2013; Sharma et al., 2024), they often worsen structural inequalities and further marginalise vulnerable groups (Aceytuno et al., 2020; OHCHR, 2018). Since 2000, entrepreneurship as a driver of regional and economic growth has increasingly received support from the EU, the European Council in Lisbon, the Green Paper on Entrepreneurship, and the Entrepreneurship Action Plan (Commission of the European Communities, 2003; European Commission, 2004). It remains a key focus of EU Strategy 2020, linked to the Digital Agenda's aim of revitalising the European economy and the Agenda for New Skills and Jobs aimed at continuously enhancing firms' and citizens' competences in the digital realm, employment, and entrepreneurship. Europe's Platform Against Poverty's recommendations focus on human rights, emphasising capacity building and fairer income distribution. The EU Strategy for 2025 includes measures aimed at a green and digital future, setting priorities and key deliverables related to sustainable development and digitalisation in the context of the dual transition. Measures include the New Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR; see European Commission, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2021a), which outlines strategies to strengthen the social model and modernise policies (Rainone, 2020); the Digital Transformation Competitiveness Compass 2025, which features the EU Start-Up and Scale-Up Strategy to empower entrepreneurs by improving access to capital; and the Union of Skills, which seeks to ensure all workers have access to the education and training necessary to adapt to technological, demographic and sectoral changes. Beyond governance, the European Commission aims to encourage open innovation and impact entrepreneurship, aligning with the SDGs, to catalyse systemic change within the Union and beyond. Its actions include funding programmes, promoting schemes, and supporting entrepreneurship-led job creation, including for disadvantaged groups.

The United Nations Resolution 68/237 of 2013 proclaimed the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024). As the Black Lives Matter movement grew worldwide, the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (2020–2025) and the European Parliament have consistently urged member states to combat individual and structural racism (European Parliament, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). Empowering Black communities involves promoting their safety, self-expression, autonomy, and power through support for education, living and working conditions, and cultural initiatives. The role of entrepreneurship in advancing new socio-economic growth models based on networks and intangibility is pivotal (Holford, 2019; Rodrigues & Franco, 2021). This underscores the importance of aligning technological innovation with a sustainability

agenda (Bibri & Krogstie, 2017), encompassing human dignity, equality, resource optimisation, digitalisation, smart cities, and sustainable development. Sustainability, as traditionally conceptualised, comprises economic, environmental, and social dimensions, and includes culture as the fourth overarching pillar (Sabatini, 2019). Literature demonstrates that aligning business strategies with SDGs, ESG principles, and social responsibility can deliver significant benefits (Li et al., 2021).

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are vital for healthy and prosperous innovation ecosystems, which comprise individuals and organisations within their environment. Ideally, ecosystems are featured by the representation of diverse identities and backgrounds, equitable resolution of systemic barriers, and the provision of customised resources and opportunities that enable all individuals to achieve equally meaningful outcomes. This approach respects and empowers living creatures and nature, fostering a sense of belonging, active engagement, and evolutionary collaboration.

This article focuses on the Portuguese innovation ecosystem, which has made significant investments in entrepreneurship development, achieving notable sector dynamism on an international level and one of the highest average numbers of start-ups per capita in Europe (Eurostat, 2018–2019; Leitão, 2009; Portugal Digital, 2021). Literature highlights the characteristics of activities led by both Portuguese and international citizens, based on multiple factors and pathways (Christopoulos et al., 2024; Couto, 2024; Guerreiro et al., 2016; Peixoto, 2008). The research aims to address the lack of knowledge surrounding Black entrepreneurship and DEI in Portugal by mapping the profiles and experiences of entrepreneurs of African descent within the ecosystem. The article's research questions are: What are the individual and business profiles of African descendant entrepreneurs working in Portugal? Who are the relevant stakeholders in the national ecosystem and how can they influence Black entrepreneurs' experiences? To address these questions, a multi-phase mixed methodology, anchored to the EPSR (European Commission, 2017b, 2021a) and to National Entrepreneurial Context Index (NECI) factors devised by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM; Hil et al., 2024), analyses the social and economic conditions of 200 entrepreneurs, self-identified as Black people of African descent, framing their experiences within the national ecosystem and the sphere of influence of its stakeholders.

2. Theoretical and Contextual Background

2.1. Nuanced Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship involves creating businesses, entering markets, or transforming industries to generate wealth and promote socio-economic development through innovation and strategic resource use (Schumpeter, 2013). This sociocultural phenomenon is influenced by structural and contextual factors (Guerreiro et al., 2016), and research explores its application across diverse areas such as business, social innovation, culture, and media, considering both its human and market dimensions. Entrepreneurs combine personal traits, creativity, problem-solving skills, and various resources to develop solutions across multiple sectors and ecosystems, influencing both economic and social spheres (Baptista & Leitão, 2009).

Employer enterprise dynamics (Sarmento et al., 2013) and Entrepreneurial Employee Activity (Hil et al., 2024) enable the assessment of entrepreneurial activity levels. According to the GEM, "potential entrepreneurs" are developing business ideas, "nascent entrepreneurs" are setting up their businesses, "new

business owners" launched their venture in the last 3.5 years, and "established business owners" have a longer market presence (Figure 1).
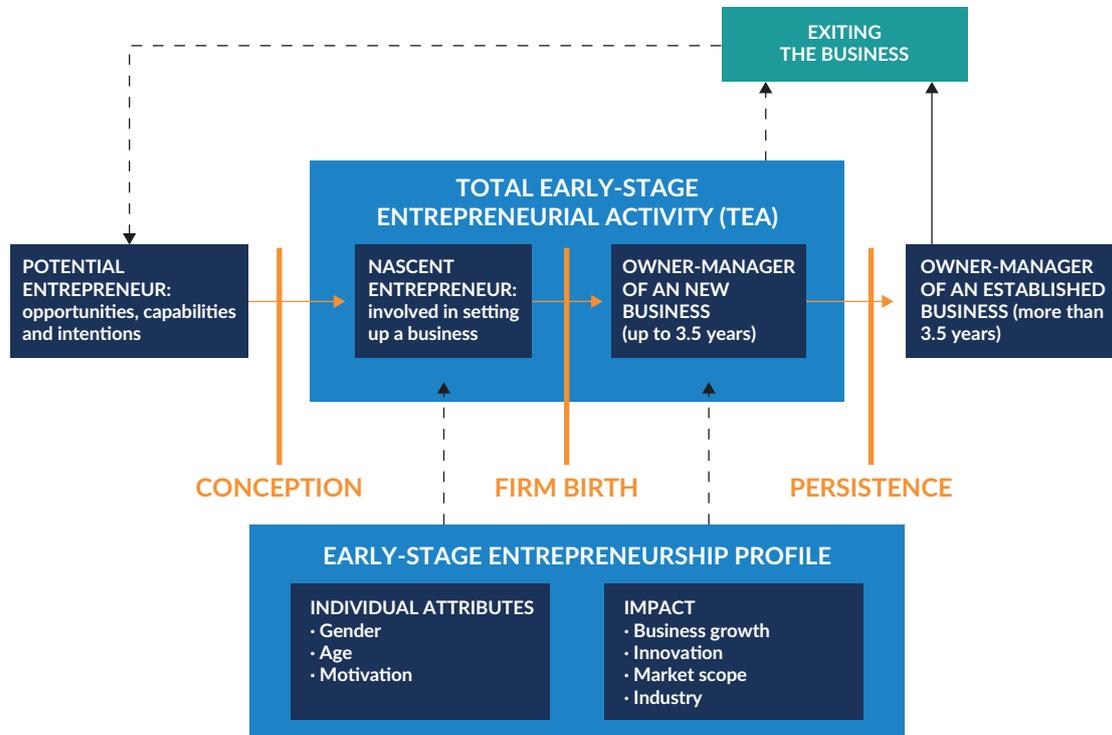
Figure 1. Entrepreneurial process related to total early-stage entrepreneurial activity and entrepreneurs' profiles. Source: Hil et al. (2024, p. 34).

The GEM, pointing that during the 2009–2011 and pandemic crises the levels of "entrepreneurial activity typically fell, but then recovered" while "economies varied widely in their levels of support for new businesses," devised the NECI to assess entrepreneurial ecosystems across multiple national economies, setting contextual conditions reported in Table 1 (Hil et al., 2024, pp. 25–96). Ecosystems have diversity, competitiveness, and success levels depending on the quality of interactions between stakeholders, individual attributes, and contextual factors (Hil et al., 2024, p. 33).

Drawing from the stakeholder approach, literature posits that different elements shape contextual factors and intends to understand the intertwined relationships between socio-political, market, and community ecosystem dimensions, which are populated by stakeholders with different sources of economic, social, symbolic capital, and levels of cooperative or threatening potential (Miah et al., 2025). The ecosystemic perspective on entrepreneurship emphasises the roles of specific stakeholders (Christopoulos et al., 2024; Ekwulugo, 2006) and explores business creation dynamics through indicators such as value and employment, generation, competitiveness, collaboration, knowledge transfer, and wider socio-economic conditions (Miah et al., 2025). Despite a rise in entrepreneurial activity across Europe, its innovation ecosystems still face unequal access to knowledge, funding, and resources, which disproportionately impacts women, less educated individuals, and racialised groups (Extend Ventures, 2020; OECD, 2010; Ramos, 2013; Ward, 2015).

At the individual level, literature examines entrepreneurial profiles, personality traits, and motivations, which are shaped by values, culture, and socialisation processes (Caetano, 2014; Schumpeter, 2013). Age, gender, and education are key socio-demographic variables in the discussion about propensity towards entrepreneurial practice. The debate about the correlation between higher education attainment and improved entrepreneurial attitude, profitability, and success (Guerreiro et al., 2016; Malheiros & Padilha, 2010) emphasises the importance of empowerment, capacity-building, and equality within tailored educational approaches and initiatives. Demographic factors and motivations also influence strategic choices, willingness to innovate, and acceptance of digital technologies (Plečko et al., 2023). Therefore, entrepreneurship depends not only on technical and soft skills but also on psychological and social factors, which vary across countries and social groups. Literature addressing DEI examines diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunities, requiring attention to socio-cultural aspects as well as differences among entrepreneurs' profiles, interests, and professional trajectories (Couto, 2024; Guerreiro et al., 2016; Hout & Rosen, 2000), often focusing on women, youth, minorities, and the unemployed (Dinis & Helms, 2000; Goffee & Scase, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2022). Providing opportunities involves not only allocating resources but also establishing supportive socio-cultural structures that tackle issues of safety, work–life balance, and mental health. Entrepreneurial activity is started "by opportunity" or "by necessity" (O'Donnell et al., 2024). The former involves people capable of using innovation to meet societal and market needs by creating new solutions that improve their living conditions; the latter is driven by the urgent need to generate income, often among unemployed or migrant people.

Entrepreneurial trajectories observed in Portugal fall into five categories: (a) qualified entrepreneurship, involving privileged individuals with greater economic, cultural, and social capital; (b) entrepreneurship for work–life balance, mostly female-led initiatives, seeking autonomy and flexibility; (c) entrepreneurialisation of a previous occupation, as an alternative to unsatisfying paid work; (d) emancipatory entrepreneurship, often solo ventures supported by public funds led by disadvantaged people; and (e) family entrepreneurship, which continues existing businesses supported by prior knowledge and experience (Guerreiro et al., 2016, pp. 76–78).

Diverse origins and life experiences are sometimes condensed into broad concepts such as immigrant, minorities, or ethnic entrepreneurship. Literature originates from the US, demonstrating how, in contexts where socio-economic conditions and discrimination influence dignity, fair employment, and the market, less privileged groups develop specific skills such as experimentation, flexibility, risk management, and networking based on solidarity, effectuation behaviour, and entrepreneurial traditions. Entrepreneurship among people of African descent is often referred to as "Afro" or "Black entrepreneurship" (De Amartine & Queiroz, 2022; Rezende et al., 2018), indicating both the identity of the entrepreneurs and the purpose, sectors, and offerings of their businesses. The Black Lives Matter movement reinforced the genuine socio-economic demand, moving beyond US initiatives like Black Money, which focus on wealth distribution, favouring consumption and investment in African descendant ventures, establishing empowerment and a strategic reversal of power structures. In Europe, the discourse on Black entrepreneurship is mainly framed through social development, migrant inclusion, and micro-entrepreneurship, yet it lacks data on business and demographic profiles, as well as local and diaspora investments (De Amartine & Queiroz, 2022; Ekwulugo, 2006; Extend Ventures, 2020; Ward, 2015). Little is also known about Black entrepreneurship in Portugal, which is observed through activities of women, qualified migrants, or so-called typical sectors such as fashion, food, local shops, cleaning, and care services (Baganha et al., 2016; Rezende et al., 2018).

2.2. African Descendant People and Entrepreneurship Evolution in Portugal

Since 1975, the mobility of people between Portugal and the five former colonies—Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe; the Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP)—has been framed within the phenomena of e/immigration between nation-states (Seabra et al., 2016).

During this initial period, despite a relatively low presence of foreign citizens, there was a significant increase and diversification of African immigration, with 76% coming from PALOP, due to "essentially two factors: our colonial past and our historical and cultural relations; and the country's economic growth promoted largely by public investment and the attraction of foreign investment" (Baganha et al., 2016, p. 116, as cited in Seabra et al., 2016, p. 70).

Since 1981, the Law of Citizenship (No. 37/81) determined *jus sanguinis* in Portugal (Diário da República Portuguesa, 1981), even after 1996, when the PALOP, Brazil, and Portugal founded the community of Portuguese-speaking countries (the CPLP). The Organic Law No. 2/2006 included *jus soli* in specific cases, and in 2025, Parliament is discussing a revision of the Law of Citizenship. Thus, African descendant people born in Portugal were considered foreigners, emphasising their invisibility "in the national legal framework or as a specific group outside immigrant groups" (OHCHR, 2018, p. 16), representing:

> The only example of a fully constituted generation of descendants, in volume and form....a category that brings together several tens of thousands of individuals, not only children aged 0–14, but also many young people aged 15–29, some of whom already have their children born in the country. (Machado & Matias, 2006, p. 3)

The impact of different phases of African immigration over three decades is analysed, focusing on the educational trajectories of children and youth by ethnic origin, age, gender, and birthplace. In Portugal, the rise of the African immigrant population (70,112 in 1991 and 75,456 in 2001) and its subsequent decline (67,260 in 2011) coincided with increased (1999–2001) and then reduced (2001–2011) access to higher education among African-descendant youth. Their schooling paths were often less linear, with higher failure rates, lower performance, and a strong tendency toward vocational tracks (Seabra et al., 2016, pp. 83–90, 191). In the mid-2000s, the decrease of PALOP citizens in Portugal (95,000, accounting for only 4.2% of the population) was explained by the acquisition of Portuguese citizenship and emigration due to the economic crisis (Padilla & Ortiz, 2012). PALOP descendants are recognised as drivers of the labour force, local socio-communitarian development, and ethnic entrepreneurship (Lemos, 2019; Oliveira, 2019), but also as the main victims of racist discrimination (Gomes, 2019; Raposo et al., 2019). In 2021, despite a 40% increase in foreigners living in Portugal, only 5,4% of the entire population (542,165 out of 10,343,066) held a foreign nationality (INE, 2021). Africans make up 18%, and of those, 90,5% (97,542) are from PALOP (Angola: 31,556; Cape Verde: 27,144; Guinea Bissau: 15,298; São Tomé and Príncipe: 10,024; Mozambique: 4,283).

Although the resolution on Intersectional Discrimination in the EU calls for reliable and comparable equality data (e.g., disaggregated by gender and ethnic origin), and even if Portuguese institutions gather information about local citizens or descendants from PALOP living in Portugal (Gabinete de Estratégias e Estudos, 2019), the National Census does not collect data on ethnic or racial origins (INE, 2023), following an approach that avoids recognising immigrants as ethnic minorities but as foreigners (OHCHR, 2018).

Attempting to bridge gaps, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (EUFRA) conducts surveys in 13 countries on Immigrants and Descendants of Immigrants, selecting sub-samples of people of African descent based on eligibility criteria (self-identifying as "person of African descent or a Black person," over 15 years of age, residing in the country for at least 12 months, in private households; EUFRA, 2023, pp. 11–12).

The *Being Black in Europe Report* surveyed 518 people in Portugal: 95% are foreign-born or immigrants, and 46% are Portuguese citizens living in the country for an average of 22 years (EUFRA, 2023). The majority have completed secondary education and are engaged in paid employment, predominantly in elementary occupations (43% of women and 19% of men, compared to 31% and 8% in the national population). They earn lower wages than the general population, with gender disparities: rates are significantly higher among men than women. Portugal has one of the three highest employment rates (81.8%), and the employment rate for respondents of African descent exceeds that of the overall population. Job insecurity is higher than in the general population, with men more exposed than women (80% versus 30%). The risk of overqualification is greater for African descendants compared to the overall EU-27 population, regardless of citizenship, although it is lower for those who are nationals.

An analysis of the evolution of attitudes towards self-employment and entrepreneurial practice in Portugal (2000–2012) shows that, until 2010, favourable macroeconomic conditions resulted in high early-stage business rates, mainly driven by men and young people (Dinis & Helms, 2000). During the austerity period, however, these rates stabilised due to the "entrepreneurship practice as a refuge effect solution" (Couto, 2017, p. 80). Within the OECD, Portugal was an outlier because of its high proportion of micro-businesses created for subsistence, which have little impact on growth and employment (Baptista & Thurik, 2007, p. 75).

Between 2009 and 2013, public policy aimed to support SMEs financially for mergers and acquisitions, enhancing their competitive capacity and internationalisation, by strengthening equity capital through venture capital instruments (Leitão, 2009; Sarmento et al., 2013). Entrepreneurship education was limited until 2015 but has grown over the past decade through formal and informal training provided by universities, schools, academies, and accelerators (Fayolle & Redford, 2014; Imaginário et al., 2016). During this time, Portugal became a thriving innovation centre for entrepreneurship and start-ups, ranking 12th in the top 100 emerging ecosystems (Portugal Digital, 2021) and 20th out of 39 European economies (Global Innovation Index, n.d.). Law No. 21/2023 of 25 May defines the legal concepts of "start-up" and "scale-up," establishing the regime for recognising such status and the eligibility criteria (Diário da República Portuguesa, 2023). The ecosystem is evolving quickly, attracting international projects and stakeholders to thriving hubs, increasing foreign investment and business incorporation. The start-up per capita rate (13%) exceeds the European average, with 0.9% of all companies being 4,719 start-ups, employing 26,000 (0.7% of total workers), mainly in ICT, software, marketing, and compliance, with wages higher than the national average (StartUp Portugal Portugal, 2023). At the national level, both total employment (4.98 million) and self-employment (698,900) increased; among foreigners, 67.2% are employees (compared to 78.3% of nationals), 14% are self-employed (compared to 9.3%), and 14.3% are business owners (compared to 10.3%; INE, 2021).

Research on national impact investments depicts the ecosystem as an extensive network of players from different sectors, clustered according to their stakeholders' roles. Public institutions, private organizations, NGOs, and civil society groups operate as investors/donors on the supply side; others act as intermediaries,

entrepreneurial support organisations (ESOs)—incubators, accelerators—and consultants, influencing the focal entrepreneurs' group on the demand side (see Christopoulos et al., 2024, p. 7970). The weakness of contextual factors, such as tax regimes, public venture capital, and policy support, is emphasised by experts (StartUp Portugal Portugal, 2022). While some migrants also face additional difficulties due to legal and cultural barriers (Coutinho et al., 2008; Peixoto, 2008), discrimination and exclusion (Ramos, 2013), public initiatives such as the European Social Fund for Portugal Social Innovation, Startup Voucher, Startup Visa, and expat tax breaks, along with private support, strengthen the ecosystem environment (Christopoulos et al., 2024; Maduro et al., 2018; Paço & Ramos, 2018; StartUp Portugal, 2023).

Available data lacks completeness, often being inconsistent with the current scenario (Góis & Marques, 2018), nor does it fully represent African descendant entrepreneurs since they can be either national or foreign citizens. We aim to study these profiles, contextualising them within the national ecosystem, following the framework (Table 1) that combines EPSR's principles and NECI factors (see the Supplementary File 1, Annex III).

Table 1. Research framework.

EPSR principles	NECI contextual factors
1. Education, training, and life-long learning	D1–2. Entrepreneurial education at school; post-school
3. Equal opportunities	I. Social and cultural norms
	G1–2. Ease of entry: Market dynamics; burdens and regulations
4. Active support for employment	C. Government entrepreneurial programmes
5. Secure and adaptable employment	G1–2. Ease of entry: Market dynamics; burdens and regulations
6. Wages	A2. Ease of access to entrepreneurial finance (impacting wages and hiring)
8. Social dialogue and involvement of workers	B1. Government policy—Support and relevance
12. Social Protection	B2. Government policy—Taxes and bureaucracy
20. Access to essential services	H. Physical infrastructure
	F. Commercial and professional infrastructure

Source: Own elaboration from European Commission (2017a, 2017b) and Hil et al. (2024).

3. Methodology

To address research questions about African descent entrepreneurs' personal and business profiles and their place within the national ecosystem, the research design employs a mixed-method approach across three phases, triangulating data gathered through netnography, online questionnaires, and focus groups.

3.1. Stakeholder Mapping

The first step aims to identify and categorise the most relevant stakeholders supporting Black entrepreneurship. Using keywords from the literature, Boolean searches were conducted on Google.pt (Cardoso & Sepúlveda, 2025). Manually collected data (name, description, links) was organised and expanded through netnography (Kozinets, 2014)—systematic observation of websites and immersion in thematic digital communities on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn—and content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Over 200 entries were manually validated, labelled, and categorised, then aggregated into stakeholder groups across three ecosystem dimensions (Miah et al., 2025). A summary is available in the Supplementary File, Annex I. To maximise reach and reduce information lack/loss, invitations to participate were sent via direct message. Twenty-three stakeholders responded positively, providing information and supporting the three research phases.

3.2. Survey Design and Data Collection

Based on the research framework (Table 1), a bilingual (Portuguese/English) questionnaire was developed using Google Forms to collect data on entrepreneurs' demographics, business conditions, and challenges (Supplementary File, Annex II). Based on GEM criteria, the survey includes different questions depending on the business stage, distinguishing between "potential businesses" called business ideas and "nascent," "new," and "established" businesses (Hil et al., 2024, p. 32), referred to as business ventures.

From July to September 2022, the survey was distributed online via the researchers' networks and the 23 supporting stakeholders. A total of 200 valid responses were collected from entrepreneurs who identified as African, Black, or of African descent (European Commission, 2021b, 2021c). Although data collection included non-binary categories, the discussion of findings, supported by SPSS, adopts a binary approach to gender and origin (PALOP and non-PALOP) to emphasise relevant differences.

3.3. Focus Groups and Thematic Analysis

Five online focus groups were conducted between 2022 and 2024, using convenience sampling from previous phases, involving 50 people who represent stakeholders and entrepreneurs. Of the 40 participants (see Table 2), 27 are of African descent, primarily from PALOP, and this overrepresentation of the group compared to the actual ecosystem is notable. Guided discussions were held, recorded, anonymised, and transcribed for thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Miles et al., 2019). The triangulation of results allows for mapping stakeholder positions across the ecosystem dimensions (Freeman, 2010; Miah et al., 2025), facilitating inferential conclusions.

Table 2. Focus-group description.

Focus group	Stakeholder group	Participants
1	Entrepreneurs	12 Portuguese-speaking
2		8 English-speaking
3	Investors	1 public
		4 private
4	ESOs	4 RNI incubators/accelerators (1 public)
		1 Venture builders (private)
5	ESOs Community related stakeholders	5 Universities & hubs (4 public, 1 private)
		1 Media (private)
		2 NGOs
		1 Aggregators
		1 Informal networks

Note: RNI = National Incubators Network.

4. Findings Discussion

4.1. Entrepreneurs' Profiles

The socio-demographic profile and motivations for becoming entrepreneurs, ranked by mention rate, are summarised in Table 3. Reflecting representative data, the sample is predominantly female. Entrepreneurs are younger (average 35) than the national population (47), the EUFRA sample (44), and all foreigners in Portugal (37; EUFRA, 2023; INE, 2024). They have higher education: 76% completed tertiary, 26% secondary, compared to 22% of African descendants and 30% of the EU-27 population with tertiary education (EUFRA, 2023).

African descendant entrepreneurs obtained university education mainly in management, finance and accounting (32%), marketing and sales, or computer science/ICT (30%), which are core fields for starting a business (Nwankwo et al., 2011; Ward, 2015). Other STEM degrees have lower rates: engineering (17%), economics/mathematics (14%), law (5%), medical sciences/health technologies (2%). This may relate to job opportunities, secure employment preferences, and attitudes towards entrepreneurial risks, rather than a lack of such specialised fields among the broader population. A professor of entrepreneurship from a public university explains:

> I had some students of African descent, and after graduation, most seek secure, well-paid jobs—often being the first in their families to earn a degree—and prefer going abroad due to low salaries in Portugal. Entrepreneurship appeals to some, but it's seen as too risky. Those who pursue it need extra support: exposure to the ecosystem, bootcamps, accelerators, mentors, and start-up experience. They must learn networking as if Portugal were a global stage, but it's difficult: They need safer spaces to try and learn from their mistakes; however, overcoming cultural barriers is challenging. (I. 43, female)

A private investor notices:

> A certain homogeneity in their universities of provenance….Fortunately, more diaspora and second-generation youth are reaching university, but a clear trend is emerging. Top entrepreneurs and unicorn founders often come from elite, Ivy League-like universities, even in Portugal. This seems more about networking opportunities than education quality. Students gain access to key introductions, internships, idea testing, and pitching to corporate juries during their academic journey. This is gold! (I. 27. male)

Local language skills support integration and business growth (Coutinho et al., 2008), but English remains essential in international ecosystems. One third (33%) of entrepreneurs speak only one language (80% Portuguese, 20% English), while 67% speak two or more (74% speak both Portuguese and English, 8% speak African languages, and 26% speak three or more languages). Language dominance is linked to cultural and social capital, which are partly influenced by heritage. When asked about their origins, African descendants mention twelve different countries. The majority (81%) have origins from (at least one of) PALOP. The remaining 19% mention Brazil and the US, followed by Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Congo, Egypt, and Kenya.

Considering nationality as an important factor for fiscal matters, access to funds, resources, and support, it is noteworthy that 56% are Portuguese and only 19% have dual citizenship. PALOP citizens account for 45%, followed by Brazilians and North Americans.

Table 3. Sample description (*N* = 200).

Indicator	Variable	%
Gender	Women	54%
	Men	45%
Age	18–24	9%
	25–34	48%
	35–44	28%
	45–54	12%
	55+	3%
Education	High school	10%
	Professional	14%
	Bachelor	49%
	Master	24%
	PhD	3%
Origin	PALOP countries	81%
	Non-PALOP countries	19%
Nationality	Portuguese	56%
	From one PALOP country	45%
	Other	18%
Main motivations	Financial independence and self-employment	96%
	Address problem in society/community	89%
	Driven by interest, passion, and challenge	72%
	Address market opportunities	32%

Regarding motivations, the pursuit of financial independence is the dominant, recalling the "emancipatory entrepreneurship" typology (Guerreiro et al., 2016). However, this is strongly linked to the aim of contributing to positive change and addressing significant issues for both local and global societies. Only a third see market opportunities as a driving force. In both focus groups, entrepreneurs discussed entrepreneurship as a means of empowerment, not only for themselves but also for the community they feel connected to and wish to represent:

> It doesn't matter if you're local or a foreigner! We are Black people! This doesn't mean that we want to open a hair salon or make *catchupa*. We're here to make things better for us and this goes beyond social entrepreneurship....I work with the expat community, she works with women's self-esteem, she runs an app for self-employed manage their finances, and he's the first Black guy in green energy in the country. We're here to work hard and show that it's possible—to pave the way for the future, to set good examples, and to get recognised as entrepreneurs: Black, but, first of all, entrepreneurs. (I. 2, non-PALOP, female)

Corroborating evidence (EUFRA, 2023), entrepreneurs are often focused on generating positive impacts, SDGs, and business solutions that address glocal issues, such as reducing waste or school absenteeism, circular economy practices in fashion, and AI systems and applications that support migrants' rights to access visas and healthcare. They prioritise sustainability practices over economic performance, confirming a significant shift in mindset among those creating new businesses in today's challenging world (Hil et al., 2024).

Low rates for motivations such as "become rich" (9%) and "family tradition" (2%) may suggest dual meanings. Considering the influence of generational wealth, affected by the racial wealth gap and the challenges faced by African descendant families in building wealth in Portugal and across Europe, these findings could be linked to social image bias when discussing money outside of wealthy families. Alternatively, they may reflect a desire for social redemption from traditional business stereotypes associated with entrepreneurship driven by necessity. However, this does not diminish the importance, need, or broader role of family support as a factor enabling access to entrepreneurship (Guerreiro et al., 2016).

4.2. Entrepreneurial Activities and Working Conditions

Out of 200 entrepreneurial activities, we identified 35% as potential businesses or ideas, while the remaining 65%, amounting to 131 ventures, are new and established businesses. Consistent with national trends, entrepreneurial activities are concentrated in the Lisbon area (64%), and most respondents (84%) live in the capital (INE, 2021; StartUp Portugal, 2023).

Only 39% are fully dedicated to their entrepreneurial activities. Of the 61% engaged part-time, 2% are students, 11% are unemployed, and 87% have another occupation, but only 45% hold a fixed contract. Concerning their approach to side jobs, over 70% of part-time entrepreneurs work in fields unrelated to their entrepreneurial pursuits, preferring to earn a salary elsewhere. Only a few follow the "entrepreneurialisation of previous occupations," capitalising on skills and resources accumulated from past professional experiences (Guerreiro et al., 2016, p. 77):

> It's easy for me because I do consultancy in my field—I work remotely when I want. It's great financially, but awful when it comes to taxes. Too much bureaucracy. I had accounting headaches. (I.11, non-PALOP, female)

> I prefer not to leave my job, it's around 35 hours/week. I have a contract, it's good for my family, but it's also good for my business because I found many clients and contacts there, it's feeding one from another for now. (I.7, PALOP female)

> I left gradually. I met my co-founder at my old office...we made a plan. When things started moving forward, we decided to quit, one after the other, for money reasons. We had bills to pay, you know? Having two jobs became impossible. And honestly, having a boss while trying to be your boss was hard. (I.5, PALOP male)

The following analysis focuses on 131 business ventures, which are centred on the provision of intangible goods, illustrating their distribution across activity sectors (Figure 2). However, this only partially aligns with

national ecosystem trends oriented towards advanced technologies (StartUp Portugal, 2023). Overall, 64% solely offer services and 28% sell physical products. The dominant business model focuses on final consumers (61% B2C, 15% D2C). In contrast with European investment trends favouring scalable models, here B2B accounts for 27% and B2G for 5%.
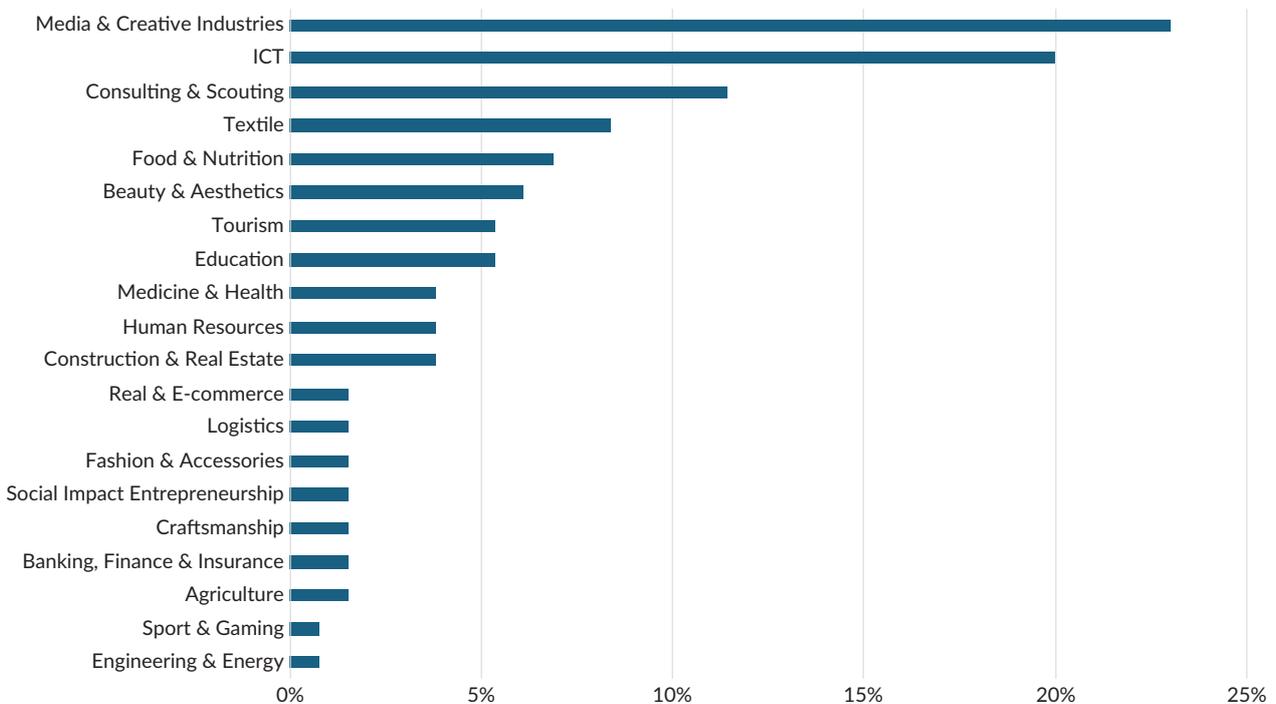
Figure 2. Ventures' distribution for activity sectors ($n = 131$).

The Covid-19 crisis temporarily boosted new business creation, despite 31% of African descendants in Europe facing uncertainty and income loss (Aceytuno et al., 2020; EUFRA, 2023; Faghih & Forouharfar, 2022). Most Black businesses (58%) began during the pandemic, only 22% before 2018, highlighting challenges like job loss, bootstrapping from savings, and following strong motivation to fulfil their purpose.

Answers regarding the business model and development reveal inconsistencies, suggesting that over 5% of respondents lack basic entrepreneurial knowledge, which affects their approach to the field. Nearly 20% responded with 'I do not know' to key questions, highlighting a clear need for more information and support. This is supported by the fact that 69% of entrepreneurs do not participate in incubation or acceleration programmes, often after unsuccessful applications. Only 45% of the 131 business ventures received some early-stage support (Figure 3). Notably, 11% accessed incubation or acceleration programmes, a very low rate compared to the national and international average of 40% (10x10 & Google for Startups, 2020; StartUp Portugal, 2022).

Regarding dedication and income generation, it is evident that 60% of business owners work full-time, compared to 39% of the entire sample. Focus groups emphasise that the capacity for and decision-making regarding full-time dedication depend on external factors, such as market conditions and the support of ESOs, as well as regulatory, fiscal, and political policies. Other variables include personal circumstances related to financial resources, family support (Guerreiro et al., 2016), and mental health:
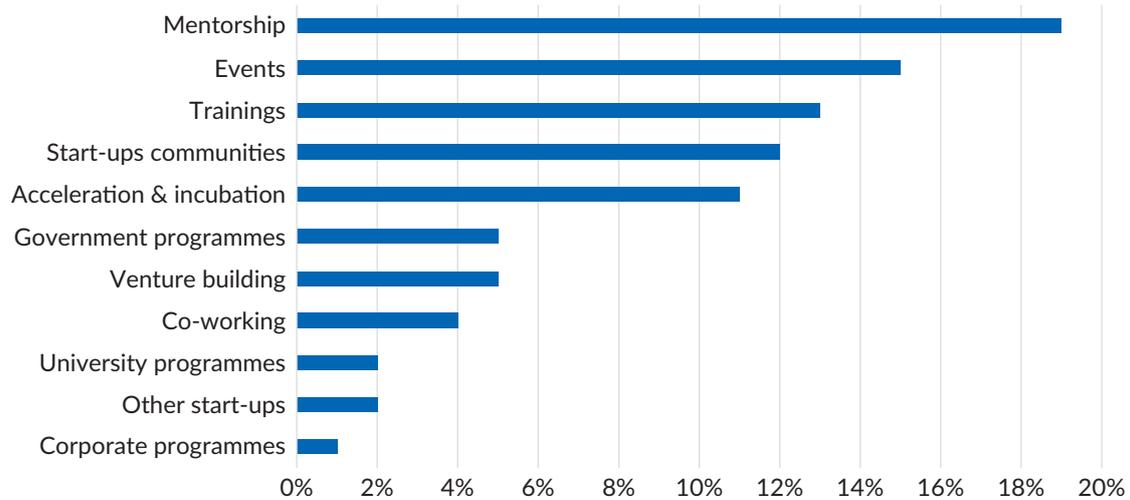
Figure 3. Distribution of support received at businesses' early stages (*n* = 131).

> My life is kind of doing a night part-time at IKEA, doing a full-time as a start-up founder, because my brain and WhatsApp are always switched on, I also do an almost full-time as a father, sometimes I try to sleep. (I.3, PALOP male)

> Some say that freedom matters most. But I say it loud: as an entrepreneur, it's ridiculous to stay in this job if you're earning less than minimum wage. Stop if you can't make enough to live; it's not healthy. (I. 2, non-PALOP, female)

> A representative of private ESO states: we should be proactive,...at a very early stage, entrepreneurs deserve more support...to each of the 10 start-ups participating in our acceleration programmes, we provide a small grant...800 euros is better than nothing for those who are trying to focus on that entirely. (I. 26. male)

Regarding start-ups' team sizes and employment capacity, 26% of businesses are run by solo entrepreneurs, 55% employ between 2 and 5 people, and a fifth have more than 6 team members (8% with over 10 people). On average, each business has 4.3 employees, which is below the national start-up average (6) and the overall company average (8; see StartUp Portugal, 2023). Looking at the gender composition of founding teams: 41% are mixed, 35% are all female, and 25% are all male. This could be a promising indicator, considering Portugal registered the highest number of mixed-gender founding teams concluding deals between 2018 and 2022, compared to other European markets (Atomico et al., 2022).

The average wage (around 1,300 euros) of our sample is also lower than the national average for start-ups. Among a wide range of declared amounts, solo entrepreneurs report earning less than those with teams. In the first two years of operation, Black businesses tend to adopt a project-based approach, using temporary contracts. However, attracting and retaining talent is crucial for growth, and entrepreneurs prioritise this highly. Recruitment criteria are primarily based on professional and technical skills, although diversity remains a key value:

I don't hire her because she's Black but if two profiles are equally good, matching all requirements, I give the job to someone who usually has less chances to get it in this field. I want to open opportunities for people like me to occupy new roles in the market. (I.8, PALOP, female)

We are a multicultural team focused on responsibility, diversity, and efficiency. We don't do favours—people deserve fair salaries, stability, and responsibility. I even cut my salary to retain talent. It was tough, but my duty. Then we optimised processes, raised funds, expanded production abroad, and grew again. (I.5, PALOP, male)

4.3. Challenges and Needs

Table 4 highlights the main challenges faced by 200 Black entrepreneurs, especially those related to Portugal as a location for establishing business ventures. All focus groups reaffirm concerns about the excessive bureaucracy of public and private services and the ineffectiveness of domestic regulation, supporting the findings in the literature (Baptista & Leitão, 2009; Caetano, 2014; OECD, 2010; Oliveira, 2010; Rodrigues & Franco, 2021).

Table 4. Main challenges for business development ($n = 200$).

Top challenges		Top challenges in Portugal	
Management issues	57%	Access to finance	56%
Secure funding	56%	Bureaucracy of public & private services	45%
Effective marketing plan	38%	Domestic regulation & bureaucracy	38%
Customer acquisition and sales	29%	Customer acquisition and sales	28%
Go to market strategy	28%	Small market size	19%
Internationalization	21%	Competition	17%
Innovation & development	21%	Rapid changes in market conditions	13%
Pitching	20%	EU regulation & bureaucracy	12%
Cash-flows	20%	Talent acquisition	10%
Optimise margins	17%	Intellectual property issues	9%
Personal reasons	16%	Digitalization	7%
Balance social impact and profit	15%	IT security	2%
Lack of mentorship	14%		
Talent acquisition	14%		
Regulation	10%		

Fundraising challenges include finding the right investors (46%), limited investment options (30%), small networks (33%), preparing documentation (28%), and building scalable models (20%). Although 30% reported having access to entrepreneurial finance, the main sources are friends and family (49%), bootstrapping (41%), public programmes/loans (23%), banks (18%), and grants/prizes (13%):

This is very common at the early stage of a start-up's lifecycle: before other fundraising, it's good to [secure] capital from less traditional investors…it's also a sign of reliability and guarantee. (I. 29, incubator, male)

Although 76% attended university, no support from this source is reported. Fewer than 10% access corporate funding, venture capital, or business angels, which is significantly lower than the national funding rates of 61% from VC and 37% from BA (StartUp Portugal, 2022). Our findings are not surprising to investors, who discuss the lack of entrepreneurs' literacy, private sources, and support from public institutions:

> Eventually, there are issues about training and knowledge on how the [public funding] tools and products that we offer work....This [African descent entrepreneurs] distrust and lack of familiarity with investment remind me of the beginning of the Portuguese ecosystem. It seems there is a sort of delay in the information flows...gaps or distance between sender and receivers. (I.53, public, male)

Regarding the positive correlation between participation in acceleration or incubation programmes and securing investment, findings confirm that, among the 11% of business ventures that participated in these programmes (Figure 4), the investment rate is higher (50%) than the overall cohort's rate (30%). Proportionally, investment by VC and BA increases (by 6% and 2%), while the rates of bank loans (−10%), government loans (−14%), and corporate funds (−3%) decrease. Bootstrapping (−17%) and informal investors (−16%) decline significantly, although there is greater adoption of digital crowdfunding. The scenario reveals some tensions between fundraising goals and confidence in achieving them. Even if 70% plan to raise funds within 12 months, the uncertainty is widespread, especially high (85%) among less experienced founders. When asked how being an entrepreneur of African descent influences the ability to raise capital, 76% remained neutral, 17% responded negatively, and 7% positively. Regarding DEI issues, some distrust becomes apparent. Out of 200 entrepreneurs, 35% have high confidence in Portugal's capacity to build a more diverse and equitable ecosystem, while 31% gave a neutral response and 15% a negative one. Of those who express the highest level of confidence, 80% are dedicated full-time to a business venture, while of those who express the lowest level, 94% are potential business owners, and 41% are full-time.

The focus group setting fostered mutual trust, enabling entrepreneurs to share their experiences of overt and covert discrimination. Some complain about the lack of procedures or documentation tailored to their profiles, while others feel that their presence was either instrumental or invisible:

> Social moments, like big events, in which you are invited, but only as attendee not as speaker....They offer discounts to participate but never invite you as a speaker about equality or your business. (I.12, non-PALOP, female)

> It happened to me...for the group's picture, you are always welcome, so they can look cool, cosmopolitan, and inclusive...then...during rooftop conversations...there was an external investor asking how many Black founders are here? They said: NONE! Forgetting that I was there just beside them...it's bad and sad (I.4, non-PALOP, male)

> It depends on the place; people make places. During the [private organisation] acceleration program, we were all female entrepreneurs, two of us Black, a white man as the Jury. I felt gender equality was baseline, without [the] embarrassing circus about race. (I.16, PALOP, female)

> As a fellow, with my white teammates at [public organisation] and just me at [private organisation], it's hard to explain, but I can feel the different treatments. (I.13, PALOP, male)

Experiences reveal ongoing ecosystem challenges, showing that true systemic diversity goes beyond formal statements. Inclusivity also means providing support and equality to access relevant information, stages, programmes, and funds. Focus groups emphasised, especially to potential and nascent entrepreneurs, the crucial role played by NGOs, collectives, and media in providing support. Artists and leaders advocate for the empowerment of Black and migrant communities through entrepreneurship as both a practical and symbolic tool.

4.4. Origins

Our sample is composed of 162 entrepreneurs from PALOP and 38 from non-PALOP (Table 5). Dual nationality is most common among the first cohort (19%) due to the acquisition of Portuguese citizenship. In comparison, only 11% of non-PALOP have two citizenships, one of which is always English or North American.

Table 5. Differences between cohorts.

Variables	Indicators	Origin	
		PALOP	Non-PALOP
Sample distribution		81%	19%
Gender	Women	56%	46%
	Men	44%	54%
Education	Secondary & professional level	17%	0%
	Tertiary level	83%	100%
Nationality	Portuguese	43%	8%
	PALOP country	37%	—
	Dual Portuguese/PALOP	19%	—
	Brazil	1%	32%
	US	—	30%
	Non-PALOP African country	—	19%
	EU27 not PT	—	11%
	Other	—	8%
Motivations	Financial independence and self-employment	97%	70%
	Address fundamental problem in society/community	87%	100%
	Driven by interest, passion, and challenge	73%	74%
	Address market opportunities	39%	22%
	Become rich	9%	11%
	Family tradition	1%	7%
Business development stage	Ideas	36%	27%
	Business ventures	64%	72%
Dedication	Full-time	55%	78%

Table 5. (Cont.) Differences between cohorts.

Variables	Indicators	Origin	
		PALOP	**Non-PALOP**
Business Model*	B2G	6%	4%
	Mixed	13%	11%
	B2C	47%	19%
	B2B	18%	59%
	D2C	16%	7%
Team size	Average	4,5	7
Participation*	Incubation or acceleration	45%	55%

Notes: *N* = 200, where: **n* = 131, PALOP = 162 (*104), non-PALOP = 38 (*29).

Representing most of our sample, PALOP descent entrepreneurs are responsible for 86% of ideas, and 79% of all business ventures. Despite these numbers, their business models are mainly B2C, focusing more on physical products (69%) than services (58%), with lower online presence and digital business components. Out of 131 sampled ventures, this cohort leads 91% of all B2C, 89% of D2C, and 86% of B2G, but only 54% of all B2B.

Proportionally, non-PALOP entrepreneurs are more educated, full-time dedicated, and moved by "qualified" profile's motivations (Guerreiro et al., 2016). Being created mainly by Brazilians and North American citizens, 60% of their business ventures are based on the B2B model, oriented to service provision for international markets with a stronger online presence (Plečko et al., 2023), with strategies that better fit into consolidated national ecosystem priorities. Non-PALOP participated more often in international acceleration programmes, essentially securing assets and funding, also from international sources. Regarding the possibility of improvement in national ecosystem equality, they show higher confidence, representing only 13% of those with a neutral opinion and 12% of those with a negative opinion. Their overall experience is better: 43% said it's good or very good, while only 24% of PALOP entrepreneurs rate it that way.

4.5. Female Entrepreneurship

Out of 108 surveyed women, 75% are under 44 years old, and 76% have a tertiary education. All are motivated by financial independence and passion. Over 90% address social problems, but only a third seek market opportunities (vs. 87% of men). Many female businesses are new (42% started during the pandemic), solo-run (39%), and part-time (36% vs. 57% of men), reflecting ambition and interest in entrepreneurship but also struggles for autonomy, work–life balance (Dinis & Helms, 2000; Guerreiro et al., 2016). Almost all interviewed relate to overload, associated with thriving in the business world, with doubled effort to stand as an African businesswoman, mum, or girlfriend. Looking for mutual support, they prefer homogeneous teams (64%), followed by mixed teams (39%), compared to men (respectively 49% and 51%). Female-led businesses are less digital, mostly B2C, focused on physical products and creative "Afro" industries, like fashion and beauty (De Amartine & Queiroz, 2022). Facing the same challenges, 71% plan to raise funds but have the lowest confidence level. Support at an early stage is minimal, and 57% had little to no support:

> Less than 1% of Black entrepreneurs secure funding, but the figure falls to 0.5–0.2% for Black women. (I.35, investor)

Though women represent 44% of those who raised capital, their access rate to formal funding (VC, bank loans) is half that of men, relying less on bootstrapping or friends/family due to stigma. Moreover, PALOP female entrepreneurs tend to be younger and less supported. Non-PALOP women are older, more qualified, often full-time in digital services, and benefit from prior experience and early-stage support. Cultural and social factors explain experiences of discrimination:

> Distances between Anglophone and Lusophone mindsets regarding Black women's place in the world...but even harder is to see how in Portugal the treatment is different if you speak English, maybe American, they smell money and pretend to consider you as they will never do with women from Guinee or Cap Vert, who still clean their office every day. (I. 2, non-PALOP, female)

4.6. Ecosystem

Mapping stakeholders, we identify 13 relevant groups for Black entrepreneurship populating the national ecosystem's dimensions (Supplementary File, Annex I). Figure 4 illustrates these dimensions and overlaps, as well as the cooperative or threatening roles of major stakeholders, from the perspective of entrepreneurs of African descent.

The socio-political dimension includes international and national public bodies, such as ANI, AICEP, and PT Ventures, which promote DEI but lack tailored programmes and African descent representatives. IAPMEI, an agency linked to the Ministry of Economy with a central role in promoting the innovation ecosystem, supports cooperation initiatives such as the EurAfrican Forum.

StartUp Portugal leads the national network of public hubs and collaborates with the National Incubators Network (RNI) in the market. Aiming to foster ecosystem DEI, it partners with many stakeholders such as RNI, venture builders, and aggregators, co-providing access to networks, training, and international events.
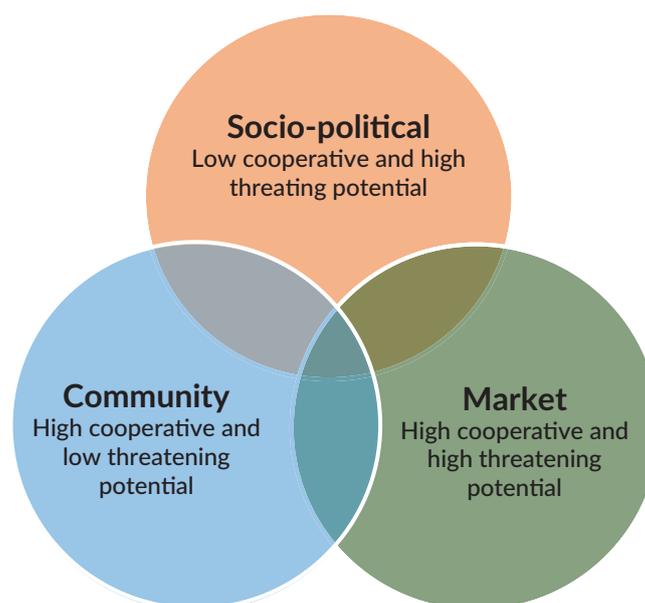
Figure 4. Portuguese African descent entrepreneurship ecosystem dimensions.

The market dimension is more diverse, comprising private and public companies, universities, and ESOs that train and support Black entrepreneurs. ESOs constitute the largest group, including 137 RNI members, and facilitate entrepreneurial journeys by integrating DEI practices and promoting representation of African descendants, albeit to a limited extent. Investors are essential players in Black entrepreneurship; however, the sole representative of African descendants originating from PALOP is based abroad.

At the intersection of market and community, tailored boutiques provide services such as capacity-building, consulting, pre-seed funding, and international opportunities. Platforms also play a crucial role here, offering physical, online, and symbolic spaces for resource aggregation (commercial venues, client access, capacity building, and networking tailored to people of African descent), along with some paid services. The community dimension includes media, cultural outlets, prominent figures, NGOs, and informal networks active in racialised spaces.

5. Conclusions

The research profiles Black entrepreneurship, applying a survey based on ESPR principles and NECI factors to 200 people from 12 countries, working in Portugal. The sample is mainly young, educated, and female, but profiles and experiences differ according to origin and gender (Goffee & Scase, 2015; Malheiros & Padilha, 2010). PALOP women make up the majority, but also face the most challenges due to structural inequalities.

The country's notable entrepreneurial dynamic is reflected in the high tendency towards these activities. However, 35% are potential businesses, and many ventures were launched as pandemic "refuge solutions," highlighting the emerging phase of Black entrepreneurship and possible "difficulties in transitioning to levels of more stable and prolonged activity" (Couto, 2017, p. 88). Following discussions about workforce precarity, discrimination, and exclusion (Aceytuno et al., 2020; Coutinho et al., 2008; OECD, 2010), findings show that often entrepreneurship is an emancipatory choice or a forced alternative for African descendants to unqualified and unsatisfactory work (Guerreiro et al., 2016; Marques et al., 2022). Beyond the pursuit of autonomy, emotional wellbeing, and self-realisation (Guerreiro et al., 2016), Black entrepreneurs aim to impact their communities by addressing problems through a sustainability lens (Bibri & Krogstie, 2017). However, their ventures are not entirely suitable; many are poorly digitalised and lag in innovation, being underrepresented in high-growth tech sectors, where ecosystem opportunities are expanding (Eleftheriadou et al., 2021; Paço & Ramos, 2018; StartUp Portugal, 2023). Business models and strategies need enhancement to address challenges typically faced by early-stage start-ups, such as the links between entrepreneurial activity and precarity, overload, and resilience, as well as those specifically highlighted by findings, like management and funding issues or wages below the national average. Only 11% of Black ventures have accessed acceleration or incubation programmes, which are essential for growth (10×10 & Google for Startups, 2020). This disparity versus ecosystem trends links to poor communication, lack of business literacy, and so-called invisible barriers that hinder information, investment readiness, and venture development.

Non-PALOP entrepreneurs access these programmes more frequently. Proportionally, non-PALOP entrepreneurs are more often fully dedicated to ventures that exhibit higher levels of digitalisation and investment readiness. This cohort shows greater satisfaction and hope in a more equitable development of the national ecosystem. Their optimism might reflect existing targeted programmes for international

start-ups and digital nomads, but also a problematic social divide. Entrepreneurs' reported experiences signal wealthier expat communities living in isolated bubbles. Even Black entrepreneurs, especially Anglophones from richer countries, felt they received preferential treatment compared to Lusophone peers, due to instrumental and social convenience reasons, which perpetuate prejudices and complex neo-colonialist biases.

African descendant entrepreneurs were asked to rate their satisfaction with their experience, with 58% describing it as negative or merely acceptable. Only 29% give a positive or very positive rating, which is considerably lower than the national benchmark of 44%.

Women of African descent face specific barriers, including disproportionate work–life burdens, reduced decision-making power, and financial influence (Goffee & Scase, 2015). They demonstrate strong motivation but have lower confidence and expectations, seeking more established solutions and greater representation via mentorship and leadership opportunities. Ventures often rely on female cooperation and informal support networks, with limited support, usually through gender-focused programmes. Perceived systemic barriers still restrict equitable access to resources, networks, skills, and reputation, requiring psychological strength for navigating reality (Couto, 2017). This aligns with SDG 5 and the broader historical moment of transformation (Guerreiro et al., 2016), characterised by the urgency for greater recognition and support from the market and institutions.

Ecosystem diversity, competitiveness, and success depend on the quality of stakeholder interactions and contextual factors (Hil et al., 2024, p. 33). Findings indicate that equality issues persist within the ecosystem, highlighting that systemic diversity remains an objective to pursue beyond statements and institutional portrayals. Nevertheless, success stories exist and serve as inspirational examples. Some entrepreneurs act as mentors and willing investors. Our mapping of ecosystem stakeholders includes institutions, collectives, and individuals. It shows progress in awareness and sensitivity towards DEI and modest representation of people of African descent. However, decision-making roles and public funding continue to be largely inaccessible. Some ESOs, especially within RNI, demonstrate efforts to uplift Black entrepreneurs, but trust and competitiveness across the ecosystem still require improvement. Main barriers in the socio-political dimension persist, including bureaucracy, fiscal, legal, and cultural challenges, particularly related to Decent Work and Economic Growth, Industry Innovation and Infrastructure, and Reduced Inequalities (SDGs 8,9,10).

Market dimension analysis highlights the central role of ESOs and how national and international investors' opinions diverge regarding ecosystem challenges. The former points to a pipeline problem, meaning opportunities exist but aren't pursued by Black entrepreneurs due to knowledge gaps. The latter calls for protocols to promote diversity, proactive outreach, and strategies to reach underrepresented groups, as practices already gaining traction in Europe. Highlighting digital and business literacy, access to investor networks, and market readiness as the most pressing needs, a key recommendation is to support entrepreneurs in navigating the dual transition by equipping them with the technical and socio-cultural knowledge needed to operate in current international ecosystems. ESOs must leverage both formal and informal education (Fayolle & Redford, 2014; Imaginário et al., 2016) and promote broader collaboration while maintaining their organisational focus and strengths. Stakeholders share responsibility for developing skills in digital technologies, market strategies, and business knowledge. Additional areas for capacity building include digital communication, branding, public relations, strategic planning, and network cultivation.

Stronger integration between schools, universities, and hubs—through training, internships, mentoring, and direct exchanges—can enhance access to resources, support business development, and increase ecosystem impact. Organisations must move beyond performative DEI statements by truly integrating diversity into governance, team composition, and leadership roles. Future initiatives should avoid rigid segmentation based on DEI. Instead, programmes could incorporate inclusion through transparent selection criteria and diverse capacitation levels, while actively listening to the unmet needs and voices of Black entrepreneurs.

Market players and ESOs are also encouraged to collect disaggregated data on self-identification (see Deralroom and StartUp Portugal) to enhance analysis of representativity and to advocate for greater efforts from larger public institutions in this area. This study aims to develop inclusive stakeholder engagement strategies that foster fairness, participation, and cooperation among diverse groups within innovation ecosystems (Christopoulos et al., 2024; Freeman, 2010; Miah et al., 2025). However, it has limitations in that it does not permit statistical generalisation, instead providing an overview of the understudied Portuguese case. This study aims to develop inclusive stakeholder engagement strategies that promote fairness, participation, and cooperation among diverse groups within innovation ecosystems (Christopoulos et al., 2024; Freeman, 2010; Miah et al., 2025). It also has limitations, as it does not permit statistical generalisation but offers an overview of the Portuguese understudied case. The lack of disaggregated official data restricts thorough mapping and international comparison. The sample size can be increased. Future research could analyse graduates' trajectories, their transition into entrepreneurship, and universities' roles in supporting venture-building to understand pathways to success and inclusion better. The potential business rate, or evidence about differences by origin and gender, provides a baseline for broader inferential analysis, logistic regression, and longitudinal studies on venture development and market changes in Portugal.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

This study was partially funded, between 2022 and 2023, by F-360, a private agency that works in the field of advocacy and entrepreneurship, which is relevant to the content of the article. A research contract and protocol were established and signed, including complete acceptance of the university's ethical code. F-360 contributed and has been involved in the research phases 2 and 3, namely in data collection, while researchers conducted analysis and text writing for the present article independently. After the data collection for phase 3, in 2024, I started a part-time professional collaboration, concerning the content of the article, with a private organisation, an ESO member of RNI, that serves the public good purpose of free entrepreneurship training. I preserve my autonomy and impartiality as a university-integrated researcher, developing my work out of office hours, programming, and installations. Both organisations appear listed among 200 organisations in the Supplementary File, Annex I, but are not explicitly mentioned in the article text, nor might they be at an advantage from the research findings.

Data Availability

Upon specific request to the author, anonymised and aggregated data may be made available for consultation.

LLMs Disclosure

No LLMs tools were used.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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ARTICLE

Youth Life Chances and the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in Lithuania

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Abstract

This article examines the subjective perceptions of life chances among Lithuanian youth (aged 18–35) within the framework of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). It explores key dimensions such as education and employment opportunities, housing conditions, financial independence, and overall well-being. The research builds on Weber's (1994) concept of life chances and integrates theoretical perspectives from life course theory, employment security, socioeconomic stratification, and intergenerational mobility. Using data from a nationally representative 2023 survey ($N = 1209$), we construct life chances indexes to assess variations across sociodemographic groups, including differences in age, gender, education, regional disparities, and employment status. The findings reveal significant inequalities in youth life opportunities, highlighting the impact of economic stability, family background, and institutional support. While financial security and stable employment emerge as central concerns, the study also shows that political and geopolitical factors play a less significant role in young people's perceptions of their prospects. These insights contribute to ongoing discussions on social inequality and stratification, as well as youth policy, and offer recommendations for enhancing the implementation of the EPSR at national and regional levels. By identifying key determinants of youth life chances, the study informs policies aimed at reducing social inequalities, improving access to education and employment, and fostering economic and social inclusion.

Keywords

life chances; life opportunities; Lithuania; social inequalities; youth; youth inequality

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1. Introduction

The life chances of young people are shaped by a complex interplay of social, economic, demographic, and individual factors. Socio-economic changes in recent decades have brought substantial transformations in the life trajectories of young people (Chesters, 2024; Urbaniak, 2014). Over recent decades, globalization, technological advancements, shifting labor market structures, and neoliberal economic policies have transformed the pathways young people take in education, employment, and personal development. These changes have led to increasing individualization of youth transitions, with traditional milestones such as stable employment, financial independence, and family formation becoming less predictable and more fragmented. Researchers highlight the individualization and destandardization of youth life courses, where transitions into adulthood, from education to the labor market, and into family and partnership formation lack stability (Brazienė et al., 2024a; M. Gebel, 2020). Neoliberal policies, emphasizing market-driven reforms and the reduction of state intervention, have reshaped education systems and labor markets, creating both opportunities and challenges for young people. These policies often prioritize skills training and employability but may also exacerbate inequality by restricting access to quality education and stable employment, especially for less privileged youth (Chesters, 2024; Grotowska-Leder et al., 2022). In response to social and economic changes, labor market challenges, and transformations, an increasing number of young people remain in education longer, opting for secondary, vocational, and higher education to secure professional success and personal fulfilment. This has led to delayed entry into the labor market, postponed family formation, and prolonged residential autonomy (Baranowska-Rataj et al., 2017; Brazienė, 2019; Brazienė et al., 2018). The constant flux, relativity, difficulty in consolidating values and capital, and a prevailing sense of uncertainty—characteristic of liquid modernity—have contributed to a growing trend among youth to postpone adult decisions, social commitments, and the adoption of socially accepted roles (M. Gebel, 2020; Grotowska-Leder et al., 2022; Urbaniak, 2014).

In recent decades, primarily due to declining birth rates, migration, and other demographic processes, the number of young people in Lithuania has been steadily decreasing (Brazienė et al., 2024a). These intensive demographic changes have resulted in the current young generation being significantly smaller than previous youth cohorts in Lithuania. At the beginning of 2022, all youth age groups accounted for only 18% of the total population in Lithuania, compared to 28.6% in 2000—a decrease of more than 10 percentage points. Objective youth life chances in Lithuania differ markedly between major cities and remote rural regions. In urban centers, like the capital city Vilnius (and to some extent Kaunas or Klaipėda), youth enjoy better access to quality education, diverse jobs, and public services, whereas those in peripheral areas face more limited opportunities (Brazienė et al., 2024a). For example, rural students tend to have poorer educational outcomes and fewer chances for higher education—only 53% of rural secondary students pass at least three state exams, compared to 65% of urban students, and rural youth are more likely to attend non-university colleges, which leads to lower earnings and higher unemployment later (OECD, 2023).

As a theoretical background for this study, we employ Weber's life chances theory (Weber, as cited in Grusky, 2001), which allows us to determine an individual's class and to predict relevant social actions, based on life chance differentiation in terms of positive and negative privileges in class situations (Anikin et al., 2017). Weber's life chances theory was further developed by different scholars. Giddens (1973, pp. 130–131) sees life chances as "the chances an individual has for sharing in the socially created economic or cultural 'goods' that typically exist in any given society." Breen (2019) suggests viewing inequality in the distribution of life

chances through the lens of the possession of market-relevant assets. Summarizing the insights of previous research, the life chances of young people (Weber, as cited in Grusky, 2001; see also Cho & Brand, 2019; Munro, 2019) are treated in this research as opportunities for young people to achieve their goals depending on their socioeconomic status.

A systematic review of the scientific literature allowed the identification of key research directions, relevant to life chances, including youth education and schooling (Chesters, 2024; Dilytė-Kotenko, 2024), youth transitions to adulthood and life course perspectives (Buchholz et al., 2011; Vosylis, 2017), social mobility and intergenerational transmission of social inequalities (Breen, 2019; Bourdieu, 1984, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Neagu et al., 2024), youth transition from education to employment (Brazienė, 2020; Matsumoto & Elder, 2010), and youth living conditions and housing security (Baranowska-Rataj et al., 2017; Brazienė, 2019; Brazienė et al., 2018; Filandri & Bertolini, 2016; Filandri & Olagnero, 2014; S. Gebel et al., 2022).

Weber's concept of life chances, Bourdieu's theory of capital, and life course approaches (Brady & Gilligan, 2018; Jones et al., 2019), among others, offer contrasting explanations of youth life chances. For example, while Weberian theory highlights the role of structural position in accessing economic and social resources, Bourdieu's perspective emphasizes the accumulation of various forms of capital (economic, social, cultural) and their conversion into life chances and opportunities, which is particularly relevant in understanding youth inequalities in post-Soviet societies like Lithuania. Life course theory, by contrast, provides a temporal and biographical lens to interpret how transitions and trajectories are influenced by institutional settings and social risks.

Youth life chances and success have profound implications for the overall social well-being of society. In recent years, scholars, social policy experts, and practitioners have increasingly focused on youth-related research. However, youth life chances remain an underrepresented topic in theoretical, scientific, and practical discourse, with limited dedicated research. This study contributes to the relevant research on youth inclusion in Central and Eastern Europe while also shedding light on unique regional and institutional aspects in Lithuania. Our findings validate and extend some international research (e.g., confirming the importance of stable employment and financial security for youth success; see, among others, Baranowska-Rataj et al., 2017; M. Gebel, 2020). The purpose of this article is to analyse the subjective attitudes towards life chances (education and employment opportunities, housing provision, housing conditions, etc.) of Lithuanian youth aged 18–35 in the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

1.1. Lithuanian Welfare State and the EPSR

The EPSR, adopted in 2017, provides a framework for fair and inclusive social policies across the EU. Together with the welfare state, it highlights the crucial role of social policies in shaping youth life chances. The welfare state plays a significant role in providing education, employment support, social protection, and healthcare. Access to quality education and vocational training enhances young people's financial independence prospects. Active labor market measures, such as youth employment schemes, internships, and minimum wage regulations, contribute to addressing youth employment insecurity. Social protection mechanisms, including unemployment benefits, housing support, and family allowances, assist young people in navigating financial instability. Additionally, free or affordable physical and mental healthcare services ensure that young people can maintain their well-being, a factor our study identified as highly important.

Lithuania has been actively implementing the EPSR to enhance youth opportunities in education and employment. The Action Plan of the National Youth Policy 2023–2027 highlights youth social inclusion and the successful integration of youth into the labor market and education system. Efforts include promoting quality education and training, supporting secure and adaptable employment, and ensuring access to social protection. These measures aim to provide young people with the necessary skills and opportunities to thrive in the labor market, thereby contributing to the broader EU targets set for 2030 (European Commission, 2021).

A key initiative is the Youth Guarantee program 2013, which aims "to ensure that all young people under the age of 25 years 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" (Council of the European Union, 2013, p. 2). The program has made significant progress by improving partnerships with stakeholders, adopting a one-stop-shop approach, enhancing NEET (not in employment, education, or training) profiling systems, and expanding tailored services for various NEET groups. However, despite these advancements, challenges persist in engaging young NEETs and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the schemes introduced (Krauledaitė & Brazienė, 2025).

2. Methodological Approach

A quantitative research strategy was applied for the analysis of youth life chances, and data from the representative survey research carried out by the authors in 2023 in Lithuania were used. Our research instruments were the insights of researchers, methodological literature (among others, Babbie, 2013; Bryman, 2008), and standardized questionnaires and scales (the EU-SILC, the EUROSTUDENT project waves 7 and 8, the 2019 ISSP Inequality Module V, etc. (Brazienė et al., 2024b; Brazienė & Vyšniauskienė, 2023). Survey research aimed to empirically investigate life chances focused on (a) individual and family characteristics, (b) parents' family characteristics and status, (c) learning, study, and training opportunities, (d) work, employment, and career opportunities, (e) income, and (d) material autonomy (housing, financial and decision-making power, etc.; see also Brazienė et al., 2024a). A total of 1209 respondents aged 18–35 participated in the survey.

In this article, we are focused on the attitudes of the Lithuanian youth on life chances, as well as factors that have an impact on life chances. We have thus developed two scales that allow us to measure these subjective attitudes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Quality characteristics of the measurement scales.

Scales	N^{items}	Cronbach's α Coeff.	KMO and Bartlett's Test	Explained variance
Subjective evaluation of life chances	15	0.937	0.941 (*sig. p* < 0,001)	61,2%
Factors that have an impact on life chances	17	0.925	0,931 (*sig. p* < 0,001)	63,6%

For the measurement of life chances, we employed a 5-level Likert scale. As for the data analysis, we employ descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and logistic regression.

3. Research Results

Youth life chances are significantly influenced by political, social, and economic contexts, as well as the place of residence (e.g., urban vs. rural), environment, family, and household. During our research, respondents assessed the impact of family and individual factors, material well-being, the political environment, and other influences. The research revealed that the financial and economic aspects of life chances are highly important for young people, particularly a salary that meets their needs and material well-being (see Table 1). It is important to note that respondents tended to emphasize the impact of individual, family, or community-level factors on youth life chances (Brazienė & Vyšniauskienė, 2023). In their opinion, geopolitical factors—such as the war in Ukraine, the Covid-19 pandemic, or the broader geopolitical environment—were considered less significant (see Table 2).

Table 2. Life chances factors (subjective assessment; $N = 1209$).

	%			M	Sd.
	Completely disagree, disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Completely agree, agree		
Family and good family relations, family life	13,4	7,0	**79,6**	4,10	0,967
Supportive social environment (good relations with parents, relatives, and friends)	16,9	6,2	**76,9**	4,04	0,929
The number of children	35,0	15,8	**49,2**	3,41	1,084
Material welfare	15,5	5,1	**79,4**	4,11	0,912
Work and employment safety	17,0	5,0	**78,0**	4,04	0,877
Satisfying salary	14,2	5,9	**79,9**	4,19	0,951
Health conditions in general	14,5	5,1	**80,4**	4,21	0,922
Psychological condition	16,3	5,5	**78,2**	4,14	0,939
Community life	31,1	7,5	**61,4**	3,69	0,867
Political stability and environmental safety	26,6	9,4	**64,0**	3,75	0,968
Trust in government and political institutions	34,0	12,9	**53,1**	3,51	0,990
Political freedom	27,8	9,2	**63,0**	3,72	0,965
Equal opportunities and non-discrimination	25,0	9,0	**66,0**	3,80	1,015
Climate and geography	30,3	10,3	**59,4**	3,64	0,962
Covid-19 pandemic	40,0	17,2	**42,8**	3,30	1,060
War in Ukraine	35,3	15,1	**49,6**	3,42	1,094
Geopolitical environment	13,4	7,0	**79,6**	4,10	0,967

The study also highlighted that respondents consider health and psychological well-being to be very important. Additionally, it is interesting to note that young people were not inclined to emphasize political freedom or trust in the government and the country's political institutions.

Factor analysis was also applied to analyse the data. Using factor analysis, out of 17 primary items, three life chances indexes were extracted. The created indices meet the requirements of interval scales and normality conditions, allowing the application of various statistical methods (including parametric ones) without significant restrictions. As shown in Table 3, three indices were distinguished: the immediate environment

index, the state political stability index, and the global factors index. These indices essentially reflect different levels of life chances: micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

Table 3. Composite indices of factors affecting youth life chances.

Primary items	Explained variance (%)	L/ɪᴛᴛ
Stability of the closest environment scale (index)	63,6	
Material well-being		.792
Satisfying salary		.790
Health conditions in general		.785
Family and good family relations, family life		.781
Work and employment safety		.769
Supportive social environment (good relations with parents, relatives, and friends)		.730
Psychological condition		.683
The number of children		.393
State political stability scale (index)		
Political freedom		.761
Trust in government and political institutions		.740
Political stability and environmental safety		.725
Equal opportunities and non-discrimination		.632
Community life		.620
Climate and geography		.583
Global factors scale (index)		
War in Ukraine		.847
Covid-19 pandemic		.813
Geopolitical environment		.725

The ordinal logistic regression analysis method was applied to the data. The objective of the regression model was to determine the impact of sociodemographic factors on life opportunities. The regression model was applied to both individual variables and constructed indices (scales). The analysis results indicate that men rate their ability to become financially independent lower than women, but this difference is not statistically significant (p-value = 0.080). In terms of age, the younger group (18–24 years old) rates their financial independence prospects significantly higher compared to the older group (30–35 years old).

Regarding education, respondents with secondary education rate their financial independence opportunities significantly lower compared to those with higher education. Statistically significant model results show that younger respondents (18–24 years old) are more likely to view their chances of starting a business favourably, compared to the reference group (30–35 years old). Similarly, respondents with only primary education tend to rate their opportunities to have and raise children more favourably, compared to the reference group of young people with higher education.

Men are more likely to disagree that overall health condition affects their life chances, compared to the reference female group. Additionally, respondents with lower levels of education (primary, basic, secondary,

and vocational education) are also more likely to disagree that general health status has an impact on their life opportunities, compared to those with higher education.

Men are also more likely to disagree that political stability and environmental security influence their life chances, compared to the female group. Similarly, respondents with secondary and vocational education are more likely to disagree that political stability and environmental security affect their life opportunities, compared to those with higher education.

Additionally, men are more likely to disagree that material well-being affects their life chances, compared to women. Respondents with lower levels of education (primary, basic, secondary, and vocational education) are also more likely to disagree that material well-being has an impact on their life opportunities, compared to those with higher education. For further analysis, a multiple linear regression (stepwise method) was applied. The goal of the regression model was to determine the effect of sociodemographic factors on youth life chances. The regression model was constructed for the material life chances index (scale). Tables 4 and 5 present the independent variables that have a statistically significant relationship with the dependent variable.

Although some variables correlate with each other, strong collinearity is not a problem in this model. The variance inflation factor (VIF) values are relatively low (< 5), indicating that the independent variables are not excessively related to one another. This model demonstrates that marital status, education, and age influence how young people evaluate their material life chances. Higher education is associated with a more positive evaluation of material life chances, whereas older youth tend to evaluate their material chances more negatively.

The R^2 values are relatively low (0.021, 0.027, and 0.034), meaning that in this model, the independent variables (marital status, education, age) explain only a very small portion of the variation in the evaluation of life chances.

The results of descriptive statistics revealed that Lithuanian youth rate the safety of their living environment and opportunities for quality leisure time the most favorably. The statement regarding opportunities to start a business received the least agreement ($M = 3.08$) and the highest share of negative evaluations (28.4%). This indicates that starting a business in Lithuania is perceived by young people as either difficult to achieve or risky. Similarly, opportunities to secure suitable housing were also rated rather unfavorably ($M = 3.35$). This may be related to challenges in the housing market, such as high prices, the requirement for an initial down payment, or limited income (see Table 6).

Table 4. Ordinal logistic regression results: "How do you evaluate your life chances?"

Model	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Correlations			Collinearity Statistics	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	3.698	0.66		56.409	.000	3.569	3.827					
What is your marital status?	.128	.029	.144	4.426	.000	.071	.185	.144	.144	.144	1.000	1.000
2 (Constant)	3.447	.125		27.658	.000	3.202	3.691					
What is your marital status?	.118	.029	.132	4.041	.000	.061	.175	.144	.132	.131	.978	1.022
What is your highest level of education?	.063	.027	.078	2.371	.018	.011	.116	.097	.078	.077	.978	1.022
3 (Constant)	3.764	.173		21.722	.000	3.424	4.104					
What is your marital status?	.141	.030	.158	4.635	.000	.081	.200	.144	.151	.150	.899	1.113
What is your marital status?	.087	.028	.107	3.098	.002	.032	.142	.097	.101	.100	.877	1.140
What is your highest level of education?	−.017	.006	−.095	−2.629	.009	−.029	−.004	−.007	−.086	−.085	.807	1.239

Table 5. Perceived life chances based on the material factors model summary.

Model	R	R Square	R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.144[a]	.021	.020	.775
2	.163[b]	.027	.024	.773
3	.184[c]	.034	.031	.770

Notes: (a) Predictors: (Constant) What is your marital status?; (b) Predictors: (Constant) What is your marital status? What is your highest level of education?; (c) Predictors: (Constant) What is your marital status? What is your highest level of education? Please specify your exact age.

Table 6. Subjective assessment of life chances (aged 18–35; $N = 1209$).

	%			M	Sd.
	Very negatively, negatively	Neither negatively, nor positively	Very positively, positively		
To work and earn	57,7	31,3	57,7	3,63	1,006
To become financially independent	52,4	31,8	52,4	3,53	1,087
To get suitable accommodation	46,0	32,2	46,0	3,35	1,166
To study	60,3	30,9	60,3	3,71	0,970
To develop professionally (Professional development)	63,8	27,5	63,8	3,77	0,780
To travel	55,9	31,3	55,9	3,61	1,056
To start a business	34,3	37,3	34,3	3,08	1,111
To create a partnership/family	63,3	26,7	63,3	3,78	0,775
To have and raise children	52,0	33,3	52,0	3,54	1,037
To volunteer	51,9	35,9	51,9	3,53	1,022
To take care of your health	60,5	30,5	60,5	3,72	0,974
To maintain a healthy lifestyle	54,5	35,2	54,5	3,72	0,974
To receive quality health services	53,3	33,5	53,3	3,55	1,054
To spend quality leisure time	65,4	27,1	65,4	3,82	0,955
To feel safe in living environment	69,6	24,4	69,6	3,91	0,929

Factor analysis was also applied to the data. From our primary items, two life chances indexes (scales) were extracted. The constructed measurement scale demonstrated a high level of internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.937. The developed indices met the requirements for interval scaling and normality assumptions, allowing for the application of various statistical methods, including parametric tests (see Table 7 for details). In the first set of survey questions, two distinct factors were identified, explaining 61.2% of the data variance (KMO = 0.941, Bartlett's test of sphericity $p < 0.001$). This indicates that the overall correlation matrix significantly differs from zero. The identified indices reflect material well-being, social well-being, and psychological health (see Table 7).

Mean comparison tests (ANOVA) were conducted for the established factors. A statistically significant difference emerged in the first factor (material well-being index/scale) based on gender. The Z-scale difference was 0.21 points, and the t-test confirmed a statistically significant difference between means

Table 7. Life chances composite indexes.

Primary items	Explained variance (%)	L/ITT
Material wellbeing scale (index)	**61,2**	
To work and earn		.734
To become financially independent		.751
To get suitable accommodation		.779
To build a partnership/family		.538
To have and raise children		.612
To develop professionally		.549
To study		.573
To start a business		.708
To travel		.708
Social welfare and psychological health scale (index)		
To take care of your health		.556
To maintain a healthy lifestyle		.815
To receive quality health service		.836
To spend quality leisure time		.741
To feel safe in a living environment		.746
To volunteer		.647

($p < 0.001$). The factor was less pronounced among men, indicating that men are less likely to positively evaluate their life opportunities to secure material well-being.

A statistically significant difference was also observed in the first factor (material well-being) across different age groups. As there was no statistically significant probability that the variances were unequal and the data distribution was normal, the ANOVA test was applied. The analysis indicated a statistically significant probability that at least two group means differed (ANOVA, $p < 0.01$).

The most notable differences were between the 18–24 age group and the 30–35 age group, as well as between the 18–24 and 25–29 age groups. According to the post-hoc LSD test, both mean differences were statistically significant ($p = 0.002$ and $p = 0.004$, respectively). The 18–24 age group's mean differed by 0.225 Z-scale points from the 30–35 age group and by 0.207 Z-scale points from the 25–29 age group. This means that individuals in the 18–24 age group assessed their life chances to achieve material well-being more negatively compared to those in the 25–29 and 30–35 age groups.

3.1. Regional Disparities of Youth Life Chances in Lithuania

To determine whether place of residence (county) affects how young people in Lithuania evaluate their life chances, an ordinal logistic regression was applied. This method is suitable for analyzing an ordinal dependent variable. The model compares the influence of different counties on the probability of selecting a particular response regarding life chances. In the presented analysis, the dependent variable is ordinal (i.e., how young people evaluate their life chances on a 5-point scale from very poor to very good or from

strongly disagree to strongly agree). The independent variable—county of residence—is nominal, as it consists of different categories (various counties).

Not all counties' youth evaluate their employment and earning opportunities equally. The evaluations of youth from Alytus, Marijampole, Siauliai, Telsiai, and Utena counties are statistically significantly lower ($p < 0.05$) compared to the reference Vilnius (capital) county. This means that young people from these counties rate their employment and earning prospects lower than those from Vilnius County. However, there is no statistically significant difference between Kaunas, Klaipeda, and Taurage counties and Vilnius County, meaning that youth in these counties rate their work and earning opportunities similarly to those in Vilnius County.

Additionally, youth from Alytus, Panevezys, Siauliai, and Telsiai counties are more likely to disagree with the statement that job and employment security influence their life opportunities compared to those from Vilnius County. Youth from Alytus, Panevezys, Siauliai, and Telsiai counties also tend to disagree that a salary that meets their needs affects their life opportunities compared to Vilnius county youth.

Similarly, young people from Alytus, Kaunas, Panevezys, Siauliai, and Telsiai counties are more likely to disagree with the statement that overall health status influences their life opportunities compared to youth from Vilnius county. Moreover, youth from Alytus, Panevezys, and Siauliai counties are less likely to agree that trust in the government and political institutions impacts their life opportunities, compared to Vilnius county youth. However, Taurage county youth are statistically significantly more likely to agree that trust in the government and political institutions affects their life opportunities, compared to those in Vilnius.

Compared to Vilnius county youth, those from Kaunas, Klaipeda, Panevezys, Taurage, and Telsiai counties are more likely to agree with the statement that having political connections is important for achieving success in life. Similarly, compared to Vilnius county, youth from Klaipeda, Marijampole, Panevezys, Siauliai, and Taurage counties are more likely to agree that a person's ethnicity is important for achieving success in life.

4. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on a single cross-sectional survey conducted in 2023, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships or examine changes in youth perceptions over time. Second, the study focuses primarily on subjective evaluations of life chances, which provide important insights into young people's self-perceived opportunities but do not capture objective indicators such as income, employment stability, or housing tenure. As such, the results may not fully reflect structural constraints or disparities. Third, while the regression models reveal statistically significant associations, the relatively low R^2 values suggest that unmeasured factors—potentially psychological, institutional, or cultural—may play a more substantial role in shaping young people's perceptions. Finally, although the survey is nationally representative, regional nuances and qualitative dimensions of youth experience may not be fully captured through the applied quantitative approach.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The research findings demonstrate that youth life changes are significantly influenced by the social and economic contexts, as well as individual and regional factors. The welfare state plays a crucial role in shaping

these opportunities by providing access to education, employment support, social protection, and healthcare. The study findings show that young people prioritize financial security, stable employment, and material well-being, which are directly influenced by welfare state policies. These aspects are directly linked to welfare state policies, which ensure access to education and training, implement labor market policies to address youth employment insecurity, provide social protection such as unemployment benefits and family allowances, and guarantee access to healthcare services.

At the same time, the study reveals that young people are less likely to emphasize political freedom or trust in government institutions. This suggests that while welfare provisions are essential, there is a perceived disconnect between government policies and the realities faced by youth. Strengthening trust in institutions and ensuring that welfare measures are effectively implemented at all levels of governance remains a key challenge.

The EPSR provides a policy framework that aligns with the factors influencing youth life opportunities identified in the study. The EPSR emphasizes equal opportunities, access to the labor market, fair working conditions, and social protection. It promotes education and lifelong learning, active support for employment, secure and adaptable jobs, access to healthcare, and housing assistance. The research findings reinforce the relevance of these principles, particularly in ensuring employment stability, fair wages, education accessibility, and comprehensive healthcare services, including mental health support.

Regional inequalities in youth life opportunities, as highlighted in the study, reflect disparities in employment prospects, financial security, and trust in government institutions. Certain regions demonstrate lower confidence in the impact of job security, adequate salaries, and overall health conditions on life opportunities. These disparities suggest that while the welfare state and the EPSR aim to provide equal opportunities, their implementation varies across regions. Addressing these inequalities requires targeted policies, such as the Youth Guarantee initiatives and EU structural and investment funds, which support education, job creation, and regional economic development.

The findings indicate that young people value immediate environmental factors, such as family, financial well-being, and employment security, over broader political or geopolitical influences. This underscores the importance of strengthening welfare policies that directly affect youth's daily lives, ensuring that support mechanisms reach those who need them most. Policies that align with the EPSR's principles, such as investments in education and vocational training, improved labor market access, enhanced mental health support, and more inclusive decision-making processes, can significantly improve youth life chances.

To create a more inclusive society where young people have equal chances to succeed, it is essential to strengthen welfare policies and fully implement the EPSR. This requires enhancing employment support measures, ensuring accessible and quality education, addressing regional disparities in economic opportunities, and fostering greater trust in political institutions. By aligning welfare state policies with the EPSR's principles, governments can contribute to a more equitable future where all young people, regardless of their background or place of residence, can achieve financial independence and social well-being.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ARTICLE

Regional Disparities in Spanish Social Services: An Empirical Assessment Through the European Pillar of Social Rights

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Abstract

Our study aims to develop the set of key indicators proposed by the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan for Spain's 17 autonomous regions, presenting results for the year 2023. Additionally, the article examines whether significant regional differences exist among the Action Plan's main indicators, controlling the level of development of the public social services system in each autonomous community. An indicator framework was constructed for each of the 17 Spanish autonomous communities (units of analysis), including (a) the intensity of protection provided by public social services, measured through the Social Services Development Index, and (b) the three main dimensions of the EPSR, assessed through 17 variables. Data sources for these indicators were drawn from official Spanish institutions as well as social organizations. The statistical analysis model employed a combination of parametric and non-parametric procedures to ensure methodological robustness and data triangulation. Results indicate that lifelong learning and employment rates in Spanish regions remain below the European targets set for 2030. Conversely, digital skills among the adult population and the percentage of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) have either surpassed or are close to European standards. The study concludes that regions with a "strong" public social services system exhibit significantly lower risks of poverty and social exclusion among the general population, as well as expanded opportunities for young people.

Keywords

European Pillar of Social Rights; regional analysis; social policies; social services; Spain

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1. Introduction

Processes of transformation and change in our societies never come one at a time. A given set of social circumstances at a certain time is usually shaped by broader, cyclical social dynamics. Crises tend to overlap, as we can also see in Southern Europe. In most cases citizens become aware that they are dealing with a crisis after catastrophic events reveal people's fragility within manufactured systems and structures. The collapse of the international financial system, much like a colossal pyramid scheme, coincided with an unprecedented level of private debt in Spain. Systematic failures to enact electoral programs and the corruption of political parties generated political instability in the governance of institutions, triggering the surge of what has been called "anti-politics." A decade of cutbacks in social and health spending worsened the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, further straining public health systems in unimaginable ways (Fronek & Smith Rotabi-Casares, 2021). The rains of 29 October 2024 in Spain, which devastated 78 municipalities in three different regions of the country, killing 232 people and generating billions of euros in damages, were an environmental and human catastrophe handled by regional governments that deny climate change and have no interest in investing to prevent and address the consequences of a phenomenon whose existence they do not acknowledge.

Decades of "polycrisis" are leaving a generational scar that it is difficult to manage socially: more inequality, more poverty (even among the employed), fewer opportunities to exercise rights, weaker protection systems, and a notable increase in vulnerability for environmental reasons. Hence, it is essential to design global political strategies for economic and social development, as well as expand protection to assist people in situations of greater vulnerability and promote changes in economic, political, and social systems that lead to social justice and peoples' rights. Established in 2017 and 2021 respectively, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and its Action Plan establish a global framework of a legal nature—what has been called the European social model—guiding the actions of governments and social dialogue in the fields of labor, equal opportunities, and social protection and inclusion. The Action Plan set three measurable goals associated with the main indicators for the EU as a whole: (a) reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and exclusion by 15 million and manage (b) for at least 60% of the adult population to participate in training activities annually and (c) at least 78% of the population ages 20 to 64 to be employed.

To follow its evolution and progress, a framework of social indicators (main and secondary) was established and can be found in Eurostat (2025). The Social Scoreboard features key indicators on social inclusion and employment in the EU and their status, but does not establish the "acceptable" goals and objectives at the regional level, nor are these indicators linked to the development of specific policies. The data is interesting because it shows, in a disaggregated way, the trends in the EPSR's social indicators, but it does not include the expected result; that is, as it does not include the goal each country or region is supposed to achieve, it is difficult to measure how far or close it is to its objective.

This article proceeds based on a critical analysis of the social impacts of the last crises in Spain, their mechanisms and political responses, and envisions the EPSR as the legal framework guiding the European social model at a global level after the start of the economic recovery. This work refers to and elaborates on the main social indicators table for Spain's 17 regions, citing state statistical sources and identifying, by region, the degree to which the public social services system is developed. The article shows that there is a relationship between the degree of social services development and some EPSR indicators, explaining their meaning and impact on social policies.

2. From *Austericide* to the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism: Social Transformations in Southern European Countries

2.1. The Impact of Austerity Policies (2011–2020) in Southern Europe

The impact of the 2008 financial and economic crisis was very uneven across the EU, varying regionally. The countries of southern Europe (Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece) had to deal with the consequences of the collapse of the international financial system proceeding from different starting lines, but with a common denominator: the sovereign debt crisis in a context of economic contraction and drastic reduction in GDP, which made it necessary to intervene and bail out their economies. Governments accepted the debt crisis management measures put forward by the EU, which involved structural adjustments, namely reductions in public spending to guarantee the payment of at least debt servicing and wage restraint. The aim was fiscal consolidation (reduction of the deficit through cuts in public spending) and bank restructuring (credit flowing to the productive economy) to generate economic growth, create employment, and reduce debt.

The "suits" were tailor-made; the economies of Greece and Portugal were financially bailed out and the measures were heavily policed by what was dubbed the Troika (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund). Spain received a partial bailout of its financial system. These governments adjusted the application of the measures following their different ideological orientations, social conflicts, political traditions, and transformations in the internal party system.

What was the impact of these austerity measures on Southern European citizens? From a critical perspective, some authors argue that these austerity measures did not generate economic growth (or debt reductions), but resulted in longer periods of economic contraction (Diani & Kousis, 2014; Tulumello et al., 2020). A long time would pass before job creation could be considered constant (especially among young people) due to the lack of public investment (Marques & Hörisch, 2020) and, in the case of Spain, to labor market deregulation policies that made hiring and dismissals precarious and limited wages (Fernández-Albertos & Kuo, 2016). Meanwhile, the lack of public investment in strategic knowledge-based sectors, for example, inhibited the transformation of local low-added-value production models (Méndez et al., 2016).

It seems irrefutable that, during the application of austerity measures, social inequalities, poverty, and social exclusion increased significantly (González-Pérez, 2018; Pineira-Mantiñán et al., 2018; Pinto & Guerreiro, 2016), especially affecting people in situations of previous vulnerability, but also families with greater care burdens, whose structures and stability were greatly affected (López-Andreu & Verd, 2020; López Peláez & Gómez Ciriano, 2019; Verde-Diego et al., 2020). Closely linked to situations of impoverishment and exclusion was the housing crisis, especially in large cities, where evictions and gentrification were not halted during the application of austerity measures (Lestegás et al., 2018; Pato & Pereira, 2016).

Simultaneously, the state cut investment in social protection systems as part of its austerity measures. Health and education were the systems that suffered the most cuts, directly affecting the quality of services (Matsaganis, 2020) and the well-being and rights of citizens, especially the most vulnerable (Del Pino & Ramos, 2018), generating, in the long term, a notable increase in social and territorial inequalities (Del Pino & Pavolini, 2015). Access to social benefits and services also suffered, which negatively impacted social cohesion and the protection of the most vulnerable sectors of society (Graziano & Hartlapp, 2019;

Mateo-Pérez et al., 2015). According to Noguera (2019), the impact on younger generations was particularly intense, due to the near-complete absence of social benefit coverage.

Discontent grew among citizens, eroding trust in public institutions and generating changes in party systems. Despite attempts by governments to convince the population of the benefits of austerity (Fonseca & Ferreira, 2015), citizens perceived governments and international organizations as responsible for the crisis, which weakened democratic legitimacy and fueled Euroscepticism (Freire et al., 2014). Citizen protests generated a social climate of repulsion towards austerity and cuts (Altiparmakis & Lorenzini, 2018; Della Porta, 2012; Martínez-Román & Mateo-Pérez, 2015), subsequently facilitating the emergence of political parties that capitalized on social discontent (Castillo-Manzano et al., 2017). The crisis of traditional parties and cases of corruption contributed to aggravating citizens' disillusionment with institutional political action (Fortes & Urquizu, 2015), bolstering right-wing and far-right-wing populist movements, which now wield significant electoral and government power.

The question that citizens continue to ask today is whether or not there was an alternative to austerity, if a scenario characterized by departures from the Troika's suggestions for the countries of Southern Europe may have been possible. According to some authors, such as León and Pavolini (2020), the answer is yes. In fact, there were differences in the way the cutbacks were applied in Italy, Greece, Portugal, and Spain (Ioakimidis et al., 2014). The most important social impacts occurred in Greece and Spain, countries whose governments radicalized both their spending cuts and their discourse. In any case, the austerity policies implemented in Southern Europe not only prolonged the economic crisis but also exacerbated social inequalities and generated profound political unrest. The effects of these measures have reconfigured welfare systems, social dynamics, and politics in the regions.

After the decade of *austericide*, millions of people witnessed their situations of vulnerability become structural, and the social well-being of several generations disappeared, in part due to the political decisions of governments that cut social spending, weakening and dismantling public protection systems. What the EU saw was the de facto end of the European social model as it had been historically understood until that time.

2.2. The EPSR and Social Services

The EPSR was announced by the European Parliament at the Gothenburg Summit of 2017 to strengthen social and labor rights in the EU by promoting equity and social convergence among member states (European Commission, 2017). That year, according to the World Bank (2025), the economy of the EU grew by 2.8% year-on-year: Portugal grew by 3.3%, Spain by 2.9%, Italy by 1.6%, and Greece by 1.5%. For Southern European countries, the recession seemed to be behind them, but austerity measures would continue to be implemented through strict fiscal discipline until March 2020. At that time, the EU allowed increases in public deficits and debt to cope with health and social protection expenses derived from the Covid-19 pandemic and implemented financial tools to cover them. Since April 2024, the EU has featured new economic governance models whose fiscal rules are the same as those from the 2011–2019 period: Public deficits must be less than 3% and public debt must not exceed 60% of GDP (Unión Europea, 2024).

The EPSR embraced the objective of strengthening the battered European social model, responding to the economic and social challenges of the moment derived from the impact of the financial crisis (Gómez Urquijo,

2021) and the consequences of structural adjustments. The EPSR set forth 20 key principles organized in three dimensions: equal opportunities and access to the labor market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. Although it is a non-binding framework, it served as a guide for the formulation of national policies and the marshalling of European funds for social investment (Dura, 2024). The EPSR Action Plan was established in 2021 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2021). The Action Plan was a European Commission initiative that set forth a series of actions that the entity promised to adopt during its term, building on actions already undertaken since the announcement of the EPSR in 2017.

For some authors, such as Corti and Vesan (2023), the EPSR is having a significant impact on the redefinition of the welfare state in Southern European countries, especially in Spain, Italy, and Greece, where economic crises strained social safety nets. With the support of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the European Social Fund Plus, and ERDF Funds, structural reforms are being promoted that include the modernization of the labor market, investment in education, and the improvement of social protection systems that will at some point clash with the new fiscal rules.

According to Hemerijck (2022), the shift from an austerity strategy to a social investment one has been central to the reorientation of social policies. The EPSR has promoted the expansion of labor rights, the implementation of guaranteed minimum incomes, and the improvement of pension systems, which, at least in theory, has made it possible to strengthen the social fabric and social cohesion. Gómez Urquijo (2021) writes that the EPSR has helped consolidate and expand post-austerity social services in Spain, especially in areas such as care for dependent persons, subsidized housing, and guaranteed minimum incomes. However, these conclusions require more up-to-date studies of the impact of investment on citizens, especially on the most vulnerable individuals and groups, considering the context of regional inequalities.

3. Objectives, Hypothesis, and Methodology

3.1. Objectives and Hypothesis

This work has the general objective of examining the system of the main indicators proposed in the EPSR Action Plan for Spain's 17 autonomous communities, presenting the main results for 2023. This data may serve as a starting point for a subsequent trend analysis advancing the application of EPSR principles. Additionally, we aim to verify whether there are significant regional differences between the Action Plan's main indicators by controlling the degree of development of the public social services system. Identifying what those differences are, and where they are occurring, could help shape programs and policies in social services regionally.

We hypothesise that the main EPSR monitoring indicators in Spain's 17 regions will not meet the targets set by the EU for 2030, and these differences will be greater in regions that have less developed public social services system.

3.2. Methodology

The EPSR Action Plan sets out three objectives related to employment, skills, and social protection. To determine states' progress, or lack thereof, and their degree of compliance with the goals set by the EU, the Action Plan includes a scoreboard that analyzes trends and performance. This enables the Commission to monitor progress towards the implementation of the Pillar's principles as part of the framework established for the coordination of policies and instruments in the context of the European Semester (European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2021). The Action Plan distinguishes between main (17) and secondary (31) indicators, grouped into three dimensions: equal opportunities (six main indicators), fair working conditions (four), and social protection and inclusion (seven). The 17 main indicators are those analyzed in this article.

The Spanish state is administratively divided into 17 regions (autonomous communities) for which all the main indicators proposed by the Action Plan have been identified (see Table 1). The statistical sources consulted are from official state agencies (different studies) and reports from third-sector organizations that use their own survey and statistical data, or official ones. Of the 17 indicators, 14 have 2023 as their reference year, two have 2022, and in one case the last available data is for 2020. Working with data disaggregated by regions makes sense within the structure of public protection systems in Spain since social protection competencies are mostly transferred to the autonomous communities. This structure of the social state means that to gauge the global impact on citizens of social investments, policies, and their instruments, the data must be analyzed in a disaggregated manner.

The social services public system in Spain is delegated to the autonomous communities by 17 different social services laws (in the absence of a coordinating national law) and features different types of professional interventions related to risks to life and the social vulnerability processes that people suffer (Peláez Quero et al., 2024; Peláez Quero & Pastor-Seller, 2025). Together with public health, the education sector, and the pensions system, they are central to the welfare state. Because they are local services, they are the first line of defense against exclusion, attending to the needs and rights of individuals and families in different areas. Assisted people face situations of dependency or disability, (are) children at risk, and/or deal with addictions, gender violence, homelessness, and/or the impact of their own economic situation or that of their families.

In the 40 years since the implementation and development of the public social services system in Spain, significant territorial disparities can be observed (EAPN, 2021). Theses differences are empirically verifiable (Asociación Estatal de Directoras y Gerentes de Servicios Sociales, 2024). The development of social services in each autonomous community can be measured with a synthetic index (IDS-DEC), which includes three dimensions: rights and political decision (8 indicators), economic relevance (3 indicators), and coverage (11 indicators; see Table 1). The IDS-DEC ranges from 0 to 10 (with 0 indicating *no development* and 10 indicating *excellence*). The regions have been grouped according to their social services development into three main categories:

- Weak development (2,37–4,84): Aragon, Cantabria, Valencia, Galicia, Madrid, and Murcia;
- Moderate development (4,86–5,33): Andalusia, Balearic Islands, Canary Islands, Castile la Mancha, Catalonia, and Extremadura;
- Strong development (5,74–7,44): Asturias, Castile-León, Navarre, the Basque Country, and La Rioja.

For the creation of these groups, the average IDS-DEC value was prioritized, as well as the existence of a homogeneous number of cases in each category. The data correspond to the year 2023.

Table 1. Dimensions, indicators, and sources.

	Dimension	Indicator/variable	Source
EPSR	Equal opportunities (%)	People aged 25–64 who have received training over the last four weeks	INE (2025d)
		Early abandonment of education/training in the population group aged 18–24	
		Inequality (S80/S20)	
		Population without digital skills (aged 16–74)	INE (2020)
		Young people aged 15–29 who neither study nor work.	Ministerio de Educación, Formación Profesional y Deportes de España (2022)
		Activity rate gender gap (male/female)	INE (2025a)
	Fair working conditions	Employment rate	INE (2025d)
		Unemployment rate	
		Long-term unemployment rate	
		Growth in gross disposable income per household pc-2021/22 (%)	INE (2025b)
	Social protection and inclusion	People at risk of poverty or social exclusion (%; Europe 2030 target)	INE (2025c)
		Children and adolescents at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion (%), as per 2022 data	EAPN-ES (2023)
		Poverty reduction after social transfers (excluding pensions; %)	EAPN-ES (2024)
		Employment gap between persons with/without disabilities (activity rate; %)	INE (2023)
		People facing high housing expenses (%)	INE (2025d)
		Children under the age of three in public nurseries (%)	Authors' own calculations, drawing on Educabase (2023)
		Population with unmet health care needs (%)	INE (2025)
DEC	IDS-DEC	Social Services Development Index (0–10 points)	Asociación Estatal de Directoras y Gerentes de Servicios Sociales (2024)
	Rights	IDSS (rights) (out of 1.5 points)	
	Economic	IDSS (economic) (out of 3)	
	Coverage	IDSS (coverage) (out of 5.5)	

A data matrix has been developed consisting of 17 cases (autonomous communities—rows) and 21 columns (variables). The descriptive tables were created using Microsoft Excel software. For multivariate statistical analysis, the SPSS V.29 and R program was used.

The heterogeneity of the data sources used, as well as their availability, constitutes a limitation of this study. Only official sources and reports derived from them were employed, but not all indicators are published with

the same frequency, methodological rigor, or level of territorial disaggregation. These asymmetries in data availability and quality may affect regional comparability and should be considered when interpreting the results. The data matrix is available to the scientific community as a Supplementary File on the article's website.

4. Results

4.1. Main EPSR Indicators in Spain

Tables 2 and 3 present the main indicators for the 17 regions of Spain in terms of equal opportunities, decent working conditions, and social protection and inclusion found in the EPSR Action Plan.

The Action Plan sets concrete targets for 2030 in six indicators and for all the EU countries. Regarding lifelong learning (EO1) the data for the Spanish regions falls far short of the European target for 2030 (EO1EU = 60%). However, when looking at the digital skills of the adult population (EO4) and the percentage of young people who neither study nor work (EO5), the data for the Spanish regions have exceeded or are very close to the European standard for 2030 (EO4 = 20%; EO5 = 9%). Regarding the employment rate (FWC1), the data for the regions of Spain again, falls far short of the European target (78%), in some cases exceeding 30 points

Table 2. Main EPSR indicators in Spain: Equal opportunities and fair working conditions.

Region	EO1	EO2	EO3	EO4	EO5	EO6	FWC1	FWC2	FWC3	FWC4
Andalusia	15.1	16.9	1.8	14.7	10.8	5.9	46.8	18.2	6.2	5.8
Aragon	16.2	10.8	2.4	9.9	7.9	4.3	53.6	8.6	3.0	5.1
Asturias	16.1	10.5	1.7	13.2	6.0	5.4	44.0	12.1	5.7	5.8
Balearic Islands	14.0	18.0	1.0	15.6	9.8	5.1	57.1	10.3	2.1	11.5
Canary Islands	15.6	14.7	1.5	14.1	8.1	5.3	50.2	16.1	6.7	8.7
Cantabria	18.4	7.3	1.8	10.5	8.4	4.6	50.4	8.1	2.6	5.7
Castile-Leon	16.1	10.3	1.7	11.5	9.4	5.1	48.8	9.7	3.5	4.9
Castile L. M.	14.1	16.6	1.4	12.6	12.4	5.0	50.8	13.2	4.7	5.7
Catalonia	14.1	14.8	1.6	13.1	8.3	5.0	55.8	9.3	3.1	5.8
Com. of Valencia	18.0	15.0	1.2	12.9	9.0	5.6	51.6	12.8	4.2	6.3
Extremadura	15.7	9.9	2.5	13.5	11.5	4.6	46.0	17.4	6.6	5.1
Galicia	16.0	9.1	2.0	11.2	7.6	4.4	47.8	9.7	3.4	6.2
Madrid	16.7	11.4	0.8	10.8	8.2	5.3	57.0	10.0	3.8	6.5
Murcia	15.8	19.2	1.3	13.8	12.9	4.5	52.0	12.8	3.6	5.1
Navarre	18.0	6.5	1.3	11.6	8.0	5.5	52.9	9.9	3.1	6.1
Basque Country	18.2	6.7	2.6	8.8	7.6	5.0	52.5	7.7	3.1	6.6
La Rioja	13.5	9.7	2.5	12.0	9.9	4.6	53.4	9.4	2.7	5.6
EPSR 2030 Goal	**60**	**N.T.D.**	**N.T.D.**	**20**	**9**	**N.T.D.**	**78**	**N.T.D.**	**N.T.D.**	**N.T.D.**

Notes: EO1: percentage of people aged 25–64 who have received training over the last four weeks; EO2: early dropout (%) from education/training in the 18–24 population age group; E03: percentage of population without digital skills (ages 16 to 74, as per 2020); E04: percentage of young people aged 15–29 who neither study nor work (as of 2022); EO5: activity rate gender gap (%, men/women); EO6: Inequality (S80/S20); FWC1: employment rate; FWC2: unemployment rate; FWC3: long-term unemployment rate; FWC4: percentage of growth in gross disposable income per household pc-2021/22; N.T.D.: no target defined.

(Asturias, Extremadura, Galicia, Castile-León). For social protection and inclusion indicators, the Action Plan notes that it is important to continue increasing the number of children under the age of three in daycare, but does not set a measurable goal.

Table 3. Main EPSR indicators in Spain: Social protection and inclusion.

Region	SPI1	SPI2	SPI3	SPI4	SPI5	SPI6	SPI7
Andalusia	37.5	43.3	19.0	46.1	8.7	14.3	2.6
Aragon	20.4	26.2	25.0	45.3	7.6	17.5	2.6
Asturias	25.0	40.1	22.0	43.2	6.5	18.3	3.1
Balearic Islands	20.6	27.0	26.0	45.6	14.5	15.4	1.1
Canary Islands	33.8	47.8	28.0	47.8	8.6	10.6	2.2
Cantabria	22.0	21.3	33.0	31.9	6.8	19.3	2.3
Castile-Leon	22.4	26.8	21.0	37.0	6.9	17.6	2.4
Castile L.M.	31.7	38.9	22.0	39.4	6.7	18.1	2.5
Catalonia	21.2	27.5	25.0	44.2	9.6	21.7	2.5
Com. of Valencia	29.6	32.2	24.0	42.1	8.8	15.0	2.8
Extremadura	32.8	38.9	27.0	39.6	4.7	25.9	1.7
Galicia	25.5	24.7	23.0	46.8	4.8	21.9	2.3
Madrid	19.4	23.4	21.0	41.4	9.1	20.9	2.7
Murcia	30.5	41.3	29.0	39.2	6.0	8.7	1.7
Navarre	17.2	25.2	18.0	40.2	9.1	21.2	3.0
Basque Country	15.5	20.4	29.0	33.2	5.9	21.9	1.9
La Rioja	21.8	21.0	17.0	40.9	5.5	18.7	3.4
EPSR 2030 Goal	**Reduce by 15 million people (EU-wide)**	**Increase coverage (no specific %)**	N.T.D.	N.T.D.	N.T.D.	N.T.D.	N.T.D.

Notes: SPI1: percentage of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Europe 2030 target); SPI2: percentage of children and adolescents at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion (as per 2022); SPI3: percentage of poverty reduction after social transfers (excluding pensions); SPI4: employment gap between persons with/without disabilities (%, activity rate); SPI5: percentage of people facing high housing costs; SPI6: percentage of children under the age of three in public nurseries; SPI7: percentage of the population with unmet health care needs; N.T.D.: no target defined.

4.2. The Regional Development of Social Services in Spain and the EPSR

The average degree of social services development in Spain, according to the IDS-DEC, is 5.2 points out of 10 ($n = 17$; $SD = 1.2$; Rank = 5.1). According to the Asociación Estatal de Directoras y Gerentes de Servicios Sociales (2024), this average value could be considered to reflect a "moderate level of development," according to its scale. At the regional level, nine regions are below the state average and eight are above it, but none manage to achieve an *excellent* rating (starting at 7.5 points). Based on the average data in the regions, "weak" development of the public social services system has been assigned to averages between 2.4 and 4.84; "moderate" development has been assigned when the average value ranges from 4.85 to 5.33; "strong" development has been assigned when it ranges from 5.34 to 7.44.

The general model (Table 4) indicates that among the regions that have "strong," "moderate," and "weak" social services systems there are significant differences in the main EPSR indicators: continuous training, abandonment of adult education/training systems, young people who neither study nor work, unemployment rate, and risk of poverty and exclusion.

Table 4. Homogeneity of variances, general ANOVA model, and results of the Kruscal-Wallis test.

Variables	Homogeneity of variance (Levene's test)		ANOVA		Kruscal-Wallis	
	Levene	Sig	F	Sig.	Chi-Squared	Sig.
EO1	1.441	0.27	4.216	0.037*	7.72	0.021*
EO2	1.279	0.309	5.237	0.02*	6.437	0.04*
EO3	0.476	0.631	.731	0.499	1.381	0.501
EO4	0.299	0.746	5.915	0.014*	7.387	0.025*
EO5	0.074	0.929	1.724	0.214	3.251	0.197
EO6	0.912	0.424	1.186	0.334	2.162	0.339
FWC1	0.699	0.513	.275	0.764	0.365	0.833
FWC2	4.855	0.025**	4.411	0.033*	5.077	0.079
FWC3	4.631	0.029**	1.998	0.172	1.995	0.369
FWC4	7.691	0.006**	1.304	0.302	0.447	0.8
SPI1	1.94	0.18	3.913	0.045*	4.426	0.109
SPI2	0.123	0.885	2.961	0.085	5.531	0.063
SPI3	0.184	0.834	1.593	0.238	2.782	0.249
SPI4	0.201	0.82	1.762	0.208	3.014	0.222
SPI5	0.908	0.426	1.200	0.33	1.236	0.539
SPI6	1.639	0.229	0.4	0.678	1.005	0.605
SPI7	0.895	0.431	2.083	0.161	3.251	0.197

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; statistically significant differences in a 95.5% confidence interval; the differences between at least one of the groups are statistically significant; ** $p < 0.05$, the variances are not homogeneous.

Table 5 shows the results of the analysis of the differences between the groups of the IDS-DEC variable with respect to the EO1, EO2, EO4, and SPI1 variables. The FWC2 variable is excluded from the post-hoc analysis of the ANOVA model (Scheffé) because it does not feature non-homogeneous variance. The SPI1 variable is included precisely because it meets the homogeneity of variance criterion.

In regions where social services have a "strong" degree of development, there is less early abandonment of training in the population group comprised of those between the ages of 18 and 24, fewer young people aged 15 to 29 who neither study nor work, and a much lower percentage of people at risk of poverty and exclusion. In contrast, in regions where the public system of social services is weaker, people aged 25 to 64 receive more training than in the other regions.

Table 5. Analysis of mean differences by groups (Scheffé post-hoc test).

Scheffé	Groups (degree of social services development)		Difference in averages	Sig.
Percentage of people aged 25–64 who have received training over the last four weeks (EO1)	Weak	Moderate	2.08	0.045*
		Strong	0.47	0.837
	Moderate	Weak	−2.08	0.045*
		Strong	−1.61	0.157
	Strong	Weak	−0.47	0.837
		Moderate	1.61	0.157
Percentage of early abandonment of education/training aged 18–24 population group (EO2)	Weak	Moderate	−3.01	0.309
		Strong	3.39	0.263
	Moderate	Weak	3.01	0.309
		Strong	6.41	0.020*
	Strong	Weak	−3.39	0.263
		Moderate	−6.41	0.020*
Percentage of people aged 15–29 who neither study nor work (2022) (EO4)	Weak	Moderate	−2.41	0.032
		Strong	0.09	0.993
	Moderate	Weak	2.41	0.032*
		Strong	2.51	0.034*
	Strong	Weak	−0.09	0.993
		Moderate	−2.51	0.034*
Percentage of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Europe 2030 target) (SPI1)	Weak	Moderate	−5.03	0.311
		Strong	4.18	0.469
	Moderate	Weak	5.03	0.311
		Strong	9.22	0.046(*)
	Strong	Weak	−4.18	0.469
		Moderate	−9.22	0.046(*)

Notes:* $p < 0.05$; statistically significant differences in a 95.5% confidence interval.

5. Discussion

Policies of austerity and spending cuts led to retrenchment with regards to social policies. The cuts focused on health services, followed by education, but also had a strong impact on social services. The cutback was close to EUR 1.5 billion (Del Pino & Fernández, 2019), such that social services, already unable to cope with the inflationary demand, struggled even more to do so with increasingly dwindling resources.

Thus, the cuts applied to the social services system were significant, with a drop of 0.1% of GDP since 2010 and 0.2% since 2015, not recovering the initial position of 0.5% of GDP until 2020, stabilizing after the Covid-19 pandemic, until the last data from 2023. Third-sector social action organizations took on a particularly relevant role in directly addressing the needs of the most vulnerable. Due to cuts in public funding, many organizations were forced to shoulder responsibilities previously lying with the State and public administrations (Pape et al., 2016), redefining the relationship between citizens and public social protection systems.

Some authors, such as Verde-Diego et al. (2022), expanding on previous work by Pastor-Seller et al. (2019), have shown the impacts of the crisis on the social service system and its professionals. They also speak of a

process of "dismantling" this system in keeping with austerity policies. One observation worth noting is their assertion that the worsening of the system's conditions and structure was not due so much to the crisis itself, and increases in demand, as it was to political decisions.

The Social Services Development Report by the Asociación Estatal de Directoras y Gerentes de Servicios Sociales (2024) details the behavior of investments in social services. It shows that there was a trend towards a reduction in the proportion of GDP spent on social services, although spending increased in absolute and relative terms (for example, per capita spending and spending by local authorities have increased). In any case, the growing trend in the percentage of GDP allocated to Social Services that started in 2014 (when the cutbacks peaked) was interrupted in 2020. There has been no recovery of social spending on social services in response to and in proportion with the economic recovery (nor in the rest of the social protection areas). What is especially serious is limited outlays, half a point below the EU average.

This must be understood within the context of the evolution of inequality in Spain. Although the issue of increasing inequality is a global one (with a tendency for high incomes to grow at the expense of medium and medium/low incomes, (Chancel, 2022), in Spain this problem is more acute. The progressive polarization between high- and low-status occupations, and a decline in middle-status ones, is a reality across the continent (Cirillo, 2018), but the rigidity of the Spanish labor market exacerbates this dynamic even more (Consoli & Sánchez-Barrioluego, 2024). This is one of the reasons why Spain is the fifth most unequal country in the EU27, after Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania (Ayala, 2022).

This inequality grows in recessionary cycles, and only decreases slightly during periods of prosperity. In fact, structural inequality is estimated at around 32 points on the Gini coefficient, a situation in which we find ourselves in 2023 (Bandrés Moliné, 2023; Ministerio de Derechos Sociales, Consumo y Agenda 2030, 2023), which, as Ayala and Cantó (2022) indicate, entails a significant risk of inequality becoming chronic in certain social strata, vulnerable to ending up depending on social services.

There are studies that qualify the situation of inequality by considering more than households' disposable income, including their access to social rights and social benefits. This is what is called expanded disposable income, and it reduces the GINI coefficient by several points. Recent studies (EAPN-ES, 2024) estimate that, if these transfers did not exist, 42.6% of the population would be at risk of poverty (almost eleven million people). In any case, applying the expanded disposable income, and compared to the EU countries most like us (EU15), we would remain in the same position of inequality, but it would be lower and very similar to that of Germany, for example, falling below that of Italy and Great Britain (Bandrés Moliné, 2023).

This is a relevant issue, as it directly affects the capacity of Spanish social protection to reduce inequality through its social transfers. We recognize that Spain is not a benchmark country in terms of its social policies, which are clearly subsidiary (De Lucas, 2020). If we focus on the most vulnerable sectors, the target of social services, we find that the capacity of social transfers in Spain to reduce the risk of poverty is 1.2 points lower than the EU27 average. Moreover, if we look at the impact achieved by social transfers in the EU27, it is 35.29%, compared to 27.66% in Spain (Ministerio de Derechos Sociales, Consumo y Agenda 2030, 2023).

The point is that, even though Spain is always below the EU average in terms of social protection spending, due to significant income inequality, social benefits have a greater impact on reducing inequality. Moreover, among

these benefits, social services are the most progressive but their limited volume hampers their redistributive potential (Bandrés Moliné, 2023).

In this way, it is understood that, although social transfers mitigate inequality levels, our country falls far under the EU27 average in terms of its most serious expression—poverty—which in 2023 stood at 21.4% across Europe but at 26.5% in Spain (with the third highest figure, after Romania and Bulgaria). In the EU15, Spain ranks last, behind Greece, at 26.1% (EAPN-ES, 2024).

6. Conclusions

The EPSR can constitute an opportunity to increase the protective effect of Social Services and develop them more consistently throughout Spain. Taking as a reference the main indicators of the EPSR Action Plan, differences are observed between Spain's different regions, especially in the indicators related to equal opportunities and social protection. Regions with more developed public social services systems tend to exhibit lower levels of poverty and social exclusion among the general population, as well as more favorable conditions for young people.

The monitoring of the EPSR Action Plan's main indicators as key elements for the orientation of social policies in Spain calls for analyzing regional differences and the degree to which social services are developed regionally. Investment in public policies and, especially, social services, is essential for the enjoyment of public and social rights. Their implementation and development explain national problems, as well as the major regional differences, not only interpretable based on greater or lesser regional GDPs.

The implementation of the policies necessary to develop the EPSR in Spain faces several challenges. One of the main ones is the fragmentation of competences between the different levels of government, which hinders a uniform application of social policies and coordination (Martinez et al., 2025). The EU having a coordinated social policy framework is indispensable. In addition, the sustainable financing of social services remains a point of debate, especially in the context of high public debt and fiscal constraints (Corti & Vesan, 2023). The coming years will be key in ascertaining the impact of the EPSR on social policies and social protection systems in Spain. On the horizon of the political and economic cycle, the control of public spending and reductions in public debt are, once again, key elements of European economic governance. The rise of political parties condemning policies designed to promote equality, diversity, and social justice (that is, everything that the EPSR represents) is a reality that should not be ignored, as the price that citizens would pay is extremely high.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset and analytical matrix used in this study are openly available in Zenodo (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15188256) and provided as supplementary material.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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ARTICLE

NYNA NEETs and Digitalisation: How Many Challenges on the Horizon?

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Abstract

The strong increase in digitalisation due to the Covid-19 pandemic changed many aspects of people's lives, making it possible to overcome physical barriers, accelerate the simplification of many tasks, and facilitate access to information. Nevertheless, not all segments of the population benefit(ed) from these services in the same manner, therefore increasing social inequalities. The most disadvantaged struggled with access to digital tools; the low-educated struggled due to problems connected with the use of these tools; and those living in rural areas due to the limited availability of a fast broadband connection. Individuals not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) are usually over-represented among people with these personal characteristics, reinforcing the need to support their digital inclusion for active participation in the labour market. This article focuses on NEETs aged 25–29 years who identified as "not young, not adults" (NYNA), to verify if a wide use of digital tools is associated with a more active approach to feelings and actions taken to access the labour market. Data used in this study are based on a survey conducted within the EEA grant project Track-In: Public Employment Services Tracking Effectiveness in Supporting Rural NEETs and refer to the Mediterranean countries of Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Findings suggest the importance of digital competencies in enhancing socio-emotional skills—key mediators being the capacity to front situations and "trait self-control"—with the area of residence as moderator, which emphasises the need for region-specific interventions for rural NYNA NEETs.

Keywords

digital competencies; digitalisation; labour market; rural NYNA NEETs; socio-emotional skills

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1. Introduction

Recent years have been marked by challenging socio-economic events worldwide, with Europe being particularly affected. These crises have exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, further widening gaps between countries. Informed by the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), which provides a comprehensive framework for evaluating the social and economic conditions of European citizens, this study aligns with its overarching dimensions of equal opportunities and access to the labour market and social protection and inclusion (European Commission, 2017). These dimensions, encompassing several key principles, are crucial to understand the broader challenges faced by disadvantaged populations, particularly youth and children.

Despite progress in reducing early school leaving and NEET (not in education, employment, or training) rates over the past decade, Southern and Eastern European countries continue to experience persistently higher levels of youth disengagement from both education and the labour market. These educational and employment disparities are exacerbated by factors such as the prevalence of precarious work conditions and high unemployment rates, particularly among younger populations (International Labour Organization, 2024).

Furthermore, the dual transition towards green and digital economies has introduced new complexities, in addition to these challenges (UNICEF, 2024). While some regions, such as Northern and Central Europe, may be adapting more rapidly to these transformations, others, particularly Southern and Eastern Europe, face significant obstacles in ensuring that young people are equipped with the necessary skills to engage with emerging societal demands (European Investment Bank, 2021). This misalignment between evolving demands (e.g., labour market requirements) and the skills (e.g., digital competencies) of vulnerable groups, such as "not young, not adult" (NYNA) NEETs (Caroleo et al., 2020; Pastore et al., 2021), raises critical questions regarding social inclusion and the ability to meet the European Union's long-term employment and sustainability objectives (Maucorps et al., 2023).

Given these socio-economic challenges and aiming to contribute to the ongoing discourses intersecting inequality, employment, and social protection, this study examines the role of specific structural inequalities related to digitalisation and digital competence, considering the domains of education, employment, and social protection. Specifically, we delve into the digital competencies of and internet use by NYNA NEETs and verify the association with some emotional skills that the labour market considers even more important for employability. We also aim to verify whether significant differences arise in digital and socio-emotional skills based on the degree of urbanisation of the subjects' place of residence. If, on the one hand, digitalisation can connect people living in remote areas by removing distance, on the other hand, people living in rural areas experience major difficulties in connecting due to the less frequent availability of a fast connection. Compared to the current literature, as a step forward, we believe that the proposed model is the first attempt to study the association between digital competencies and socio-emotional skills in a particular segment of the population—NEETs aged between 25 and 29 years and identified as NYNA (Caroleo et al., 2020; Pastore et al., 2021)—and the impact of the level of urbanisation on this association. Individuals in this age group require the attention of specific research and policymaking, as individuals with these characteristics may have completed formal education but struggle to establish stable employment. Moreover, unlike younger NEETs, NYNA NEETs may face greater psychological and/or economic pressures and risk long-term economic exclusion (Caroleo et al., 2020; Pastore et al., 2021) and increased gaps in socio-emotional and digital competencies.

The application of partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM)—which is discussed in more detail below—draws on a well-established body of scientific literature and helps evaluate the proposed indicators, some of which could have significant implications in the future. The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the different constructs connected to digital competencies, socio-emotional skills, the capacity to front situations, and trait self-control, and presents the hypotheses tested in this study. Section 3 concerns data collection, methodology, and data analysis. Section 4 discusses the results, further research and practical implications, and the main limitations of the study. Section 5 presents a brief conclusion of the article.

2. Digital and Socio-Emotional Skills: Pathways for NEETs

2.1. Key Skills for NEETs: Digital Competencies

Digital competencies are fundamental in the current labour market, especially as economies become more digitised. Framed as a person's ability to use digital tools and platforms effectively across various domains, such as information retrieval, communication, content creation, and problem-solving (Calvani et al., 2008; van Laar et al., 2017), these competencies are more than just technical knowledge, encompassing the ability to critically engage with and create content on digital platforms. Being capable of using ICTs effectively is essential not only in everyday life—for instance, in learning, entertainment, and leisure—but also in developing professional competencies, which are crucial in an increasingly digital world (Charles et al., 2022; Tomczyk, 2024). Basic digital competencies, acquired through formal, non-formal, and informal education systems, encompass knowledge, abilities, and attitudes necessary for using e-services typical of digital citizens, while also providing the foundation for building professional digital competencies (Hämäläinen et al., 2021; Pettersson, 2018), crucial for successful integration into the labour market (Bejaković & Mrnjavac, 2020).

In this regard, different frameworks have emerged, proposing various areas of digital competence that may be relevant in diverse societal domains. Professional engagement and the use of digital resources are examples of such key areas (Redecker & Punie, 2017). The former involves leveraging digital technologies for communication, collaboration, and professional development, such as participating in online learning communities or using digital tools for institutional communication. The latter encompasses skills such as selecting, creating, and sharing digital content while critically assessing the credibility of sources, understanding licensing requirements, and ensuring accessibility. As such, mastering such digital competencies is essential for navigating the evolving digital landscape and enhancing professional efficacy, ensuring active participation in a digitally-driven world.

In contrast, the absence of digital competencies could be a key factor contributing to the disadvantage of certain groups. Especially for young people (Haddon et al., 2020; Mascheroni et al., 2020), this lack of competence may hinder their ability to fully benefit from the opportunities provided by today's information society and the increasingly digitised labour market. This is even more challenging for NEETs, for whom digital competencies can be the key to bridging the gap between social exclusion and active labour market participation (Neagu et al., 2021), mostly for those living in rural areas (Simões & Marta, 2024). The literature highlights that young people in rural areas or from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack the essential digital competencies to engage fully with the labour market (Simões, 2024; Simões & Marta, 2024), which

increasingly relies on online job searches, remote work opportunities, and digital training programmes (OECD, 2024). The lack of digital literacy has been identified as a key barrier preventing these individuals from accessing employment and educational opportunities, thereby perpetuating social inequalities (Matli & Ngoepe, 2021). However, digital literacy is not only a matter of technical skills; it also involves critical thinking, adaptability, and resilience.

2.2. Key Skills for NEETs: Socio-Emotional Skills

Engaging with digital tools can promote problem-solving abilities and build self-efficacy in individuals, which can enhance their confidence in handling various social and professional situations. These cognitive and emotional skills overlap with those associated with socio-emotional skills, such as self-regulation, stress management, and interpersonal communication (Carlotto, 2015), which enable individuals to understand and manage emotions, establish positive relationships with others, and make responsible decisions (Goleman, 2009; Wheeler, 2016). The distinct existing frameworks for socio-emotional skills tend to provide structured approaches to our understanding of how these abilities contribute to personal and professional development, especially through adaptability, effective communication, and emotional regulation.

There is growing consensus in the literature that socio-emotional skills constitute a multidimensional and endogenous construct, encompassing traits and behaviours that evolve through life experience and learning (Kankaras & Suarez-Alvarez, 2019; OECD, 2024). OECD's socio-emotional skills framework, for instance, categorises these skills into domains like emotional regulation (e.g., stress-resistance), collaboration (e.g., empathy), engaging with others (e.g., sociability), and task performance (e.g., self-control), seeking to provide understanding on how they can influence employability, active citizenship, health and well-being (OECD, 2024; see also Kankaras & Suarez-Alvarez, 2019). Following this framework, Kankaras and Suarez-Alvarez (2019) present socio-emotional skills as endogenous personal abilities that are reflected in consistent patterns of thinking, emotions, and behaviour. Such skills are cultivated through both formal and informal learning experiences and play a crucial role in influencing socio-economic outcomes throughout a person's life. Research indicates that socio-emotional skills, which develop and evolve, especially during adolescence, have significant effects on various key areas of life, including academic success and overall well-being (Chernyshenko et al., 2018). These skills are flexible and can be influenced by a wide range of individual and contextual factors (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2020).

One socio-emotional ability crucial to dealing with everyday events is the capacity to front situations (Luthans et al., 2006). This can be defined as the capacity to face challenging, stressful, or emotionally charged situations with resilience, composure, and adaptive coping strategies. It is often related to emotional regulation, problem-solving, and the capacity to maintain a positive or neutral mindset in the face of adversity, involving a combination of psychological traits and skills essential to one's successful integration and permanence into the labour market (Bonanno et al., 2004).

Also important and highlighted by OECD within the framework of socio-emotional skills is the trait of self-control, defined as the endogenous ability to "avoid distractions and focus attention on the current task in order to achieve personal goals" (OECD, 2024). This involves regulating one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours over time, especially when faced with temptations or the urge for immediate gratification (Baldwin et al., 2018; Paschke et al., 2016). Thus, "trait self-control" is a cornerstone of effective functioning

in numerous life dimensions, such as academic achievement, health behaviour, financial stability, mental health, social relationships, career success, and overall life satisfaction (Hagger et al., 2019; Lippman et al., 2015). By developing this self-control, individuals can create more fulfilling lives, handle stress better, achieve greater success, and experience improved physical and mental health (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Hagger et al., 2013). The interconnection between trait self-control and other life areas underlines its importance in shaping a person's trajectory over time, which is particularly relevant for success in the labour market, especially among youth and entry-level workers (Heckman et al., 2006; Kautz et al., 2014; Lippman et al., 2015). Studies show individuals with higher trait self-control tend to be more productive, perform better in their roles, work well under pressure, and handle unexpected challenges with more resilience; ultimately fostering higher wages and greater labour success (Heckman et al., 2006; Lippman et al., 2015).

Socio-emotional skills are therefore essential endogenous skills in the context of labour market engagement, as they influence how individuals cope with stress, deal with social challenges, and communicate effectively, all of which are key factors for long-term career success (Wheeler, 2016). For NEETs, socio-emotional skills can be the difference between active participation in the labour market and continued marginalisation (Ellena et al., 2021). Research consistently demonstrates that socio-emotional skills are critical for employability (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Heckman et al., 2018; Loayza et al., 2021). They help individuals to interact positively with colleagues, employers, and public employment services (PES) professionals. Furthermore, these skills are closely linked with resilience and coping strategies, which allow young people to handle rejection or failure when job-seeking and deal with the ups and downs of entering the labour market (Heckman et al., 2018).

In our conceptual model, socio-emotional skills are, thus, theorised as endogenous personal abilities that condition individuals' effectiveness in the labour market and in social integration more broadly. However, in the empirical component of this study, this latent construct is proxied through two observed indicators: (a) one reflecting the individual's self-perception regarding their ability to manage complex social situations and (b) another related to the presence of supportive social networks. We acknowledge that these indicators capture partial aspects of the broader construct. Nevertheless, we consider that together they provide a meaningful proxy for socio-emotional capacities relevant to labour market engagement, especially for vulnerable youth populations, such as NEETs.

2.3. Digitalisation and the Role of internet Usage

The aforementioned insights also do the groundwork for another important dimension of digitalisation and its relationship with socio-emotional skills: the intensity of internet usage (intensity of use). This is a multifaceted variable that measures how frequently, and for how long, an individual engages with digital platforms. It includes the use of the internet for education, job searching, social media interaction, entertainment, and self-improvement (Blaszczynski, 2006). Research suggests that higher internet usage correlates with better access to resources such as online job markets, remote learning opportunities, and networking (Davis et al., 2020), making it an increasingly key tool for facing the challenges of being NEET (Neagu et al., 2021). Simultaneously, studies have shown that low-intensity internet usage is often associated with lower engagement in educational or job-seeking activities, particularly among rural NEETs (Szpakowicz, 2023). Nevertheless, the mere presence of the internet does not automatically lead to the development of skills. Rather, it is the nature and type of activities that individuals engage in online, as well

as the tools they use, that are key determinants of digital competencies and socio-emotional skills (Gutiérrez Ángel et al., 2022).

Intensive internet usage can expose individuals to new social and cultural contexts, facilitating greater emotional and social awareness. Digital platforms, such as social media or online forums, offer opportunities to practice communication, empathy, and relationship-building skills, which are essential aspects of socio-emotional development (Waytz & Gray, 2018). Additionally, digital platforms can provide emotional support networks that may enhance self-regulation, self-confidence, and the ability to navigate social challenges (Hodges et al., 2020). This is particularly important to face the labour market challenges, as such digital tools have the power to increase individuals' self-efficacy and confidence and assist in building the capacity to confront situations by providing resources, coping mechanisms, and communities that offer guidance and emotional support (Pretorius et al., 2019). Online learning platforms, for instance, encourage individuals to develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills, while providing a sense of accomplishment and progress (Abuhassna et al., 2020).

While internet access provides a means for individuals to acquire and refine digital competence and subsequent key socio-emotional skills, it is the purposeful use of the internet, such as engaging with educational content, learning to use software tools, or participating in online collaboration, that fosters the development of these competencies (Gutiérrez Ángel et al., 2022).

The ability to face challenges, solve problems, and deal with stressful situations effectively (i.e., the capacity to confront situations) is particularly important for NEETs when navigating the barriers to employment and education (Luthans et al., 2006). Also important is the ability to regulate impulsive behaviours, resist distractions, and maintain focus on long-term goals, which means having the capacity for self-control (Duckworth et al., 2019). In the context of NEETs, self-control is crucial for staying motivated and engaged in the job-search process. Without sufficient self-control, NEETs may experience difficulty in following through with tasks, delaying gratification, and adhering to structured programmes like job training or career development activities (Mawn et al., 2017).

The internet, while a potential source of distraction, can also be used as a tool for improving self-control. For instance, online goal-setting tools and productivity apps can help individuals track their progress, stay motivated, and delay immediate gratification for long-term benefits. Studies show that individuals with higher self-control are more likely to use the internet productively, while those with lower self-control may engage in distracting activities that detract from their labour market engagement (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

The potential of online tools for positive socio-emotional development and, consequently, for individuals to be better equipped to face labour market demands is clear. Excessive internet usage may, however, also result in negative social-emotional outcomes, such as social isolation, addiction, and reduced face-to-face interactions, which can hinder the development of empathy, social skills, and emotional intelligence (Klimenko et al., 2021; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

In sum, while the intensity of internet usage can enhance socio-emotional skills, this effect depends on how and for what purpose the internet is used and the territorial and socio-cultural context in which individuals live (Tomczyk, 2024). In more urbanised areas, greater access to high-speed internet, educational facilities,

and employment opportunities may enable individuals to use the internet more effectively (Tomczyk, 2024; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014), thereby enhancing their capacity to confront situations and increase their chances of successful labour market participation (Charles et al., 2022). In contrast, rural areas may experience more significant barriers to digital engagement, potentially dampening the positive impact of self-control (Simões & Marta, 2024; Tomczyk, 2024).

2.4. The Present Study

Overall, the interaction between digital competencies, socio-emotional skills, and internet usage plays a crucial role in determining the engagement of rural and non-rural NEETs with the labour market. Digital competencies are foundational to overcoming barriers to employment (Charles et al., 2022; Tomczyk, 2024), while socio-emotional skills facilitate more effective engagement with labour market institutions (Wheeler, 2016). Intensity of internet usage can have both positive (Waytz & Gray, 2018) and negative (Klimenko et al., 2021) consequences on these skills, depending on how the internet is used. Furthermore, self-control and the capacity to confront situations are critical for ensuring that digital tools are used productively and effectively in navigating labour market challenges (Duckworth et al., 2019; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Finally, the degree of urbanisation of the place of residence may play a significant role in determining how these factors influence labour market participation, with rural areas facing additional challenges in fully benefiting from digital tools (Simões & Marta, 2024; Tomczyk, 2024). By filling the identified gaps in the literature regarding NYNA NEETs, digital competencies, internet use, and the role of urbanisation, our article provides an important contribution to the field. Further, addressing these disparities will be key to enabling rural NYNA NEETs to actively participate in the labour market.

Consistent with the framework mentioned above, we consider the following relationships and corresponding hypotheses:

1. Socio-emotional skills and intensity of internet use: It is suggested that a balanced approach to internet usage may be key. On the positive side, using the internet for online learning or career development can help NEETs strengthen socio-emotional capacities relevant to facing labour market challenges. Thus, we hypothesise: There is a significant relationship between the *intensity of use* and *socio-emotional skills* (H1).
2. Socio-emotional skills and capacity to front situations: It is suggested that increased capacity to front situations is associated with increased levels of socio-emotional skills. Thus we hypothesise: There is a significant relationship between *capacity to front situations* and *socio-emotional skills* (H2).
3. Socio-emotional skills and trait self-control: We hypothesise that higher levels of trait self-control are associated with increased socio-emotional skills. Thus, there is a significant relationship between *trait self-control* and *socio-emotional skills* (H3).
4. Socio-emotional skills and digital competencies: The main thesis we want to demonstrate is that NYNA individuals with higher digital competencies are likely to be more confident and effective in social interactions, which is crucial for building relationships with PES and engaging in job search processes. Thus, we hypothesise: There is a significant relationship between *digital competencies* and *socio-emotional skills* (H4).
5. Trait self-control and capacity to front situations—mediators: We investigate the mediating effects that *digital competencies* might have on *socio-emotional skills* via *trait self-control* and *capacity to front situations*. To do so, we hypothesise:

H5a: trait self-control presents a mediating role between digital competencies and socio-emotional skills.

H5b: The capacity to front situations presents a mediating role between digital competencies and socio-emotional skills.

6. Urban vs rural: Since the place where the individuals grew up can strongly affect their cognitive and non-cognitive skills' development, this article has also included the rural group variable (0 for urban and 1 for rural) as a treating construct for moderating effect to evaluate eventual significant differences in the two clusters. Based on this, we hypothesise: The area of residence significantly affects the relationships with *socio-emotional skills* (H6).

3. Data Collection and Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

Data for the analysis come from a survey conducted within the activities of the EEA grant project TRACK-IN—Public Employment Services Tracking Effectiveness in Supporting Rural NEETs. The project started in 2021 and involved the following countries: Bulgaria, Estonia, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, and Spain. The survey was conducted between November 2022 and January 2023. Although the target population was initially only rural NEETs aged between 25 and 29 years old, it was subsequently extended to include young people living in urban areas of the same age. The questionnaire was administered with the help of PES, social networks, and some influencers. It involved, therefore, mainly, but not only, those registered with the PES. The software used for questionnaire administration was Qualtrics. Before starting the survey, respondents gave their consent to the treatment of the data provided. However, the statistical team conducting the survey ensured the anonymisation of the responses. Indeed, personal information allowing the identification of the respondents was removed from the dataset and replaced by a progressive number. In total, 4,273 NEETs participated. Almost all of them were registered with the PES (96%).

Young people in the 25–29 age class were also identified as NYNA to indicate this specific stage of the individuals' life, where young people usually have already completed their education and approached the labour market. In this age class, being NEET is a more critical situation compared to young people aged under 25, because it is usually associated with people who have already experienced failures in approaching the labour market (exception made, of course, for those remaining for longer in education). Research shows that repeated failures in the job search during this period strongly predispose them to the inactivity trap or long-term unemployment (Caroleo et al., 2020; Pastore et al., 2021).

In this article, we restricted the analysis to the Mediterranean countries of Italy, Portugal, and Spain, with a total of 2,618 NEETs. The reasons for this focus are the low response rate of the other countries and the higher homogeneity of Italy, Portugal and Spain compared to them. They come mainly from Spain (75%), followed by Italy (18%) and Portugal (7%). The majority of them can be defined as "pure NEETs," in the sense that they declared they were unemployed or inactive for discouragement (77%); 17% of them defined themselves as caregivers, while the residual 6% were almost equally divided between those who declared having health problems (2.86%) and those who were engaged in no paid work. There is a slight prevalence of women (59%) in comparison with men (41%).

The countries included in the analysis all had a significant share of NEETs. Indeed, at the EU-27 level, the share of the NEETs in 2023 was 11.2%. In the countries analysed, it ranged from 16.1% in Italy to 8.9% of Portugal, with Spain staying in the middle with 12.3%. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants across rural and urban areas by country.

Table 1. Participants distribution across rural and urban areas by country.

Country	Group 1 (Urban = 0)	Group 2 (Rural = 1)
Italy	187	282
Portugal	106	69
Spain	982	992
	1275	1343

The questionnaire included many sections. Besides one on socio-demographics and another investigating respondents' interaction with the PES, other sections analysed their expectations for the future, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. Finally, another section aimed at studying the respondents' digital competencies; the intensity of internet use and the main reason for this use. Based on these latter questions, we developed our framework of analysis, synthesised in Table 2.

3.2. Methodology and Data Analysis

This study utilises the PLS-SEM algorithm to analyse both structural (inner) and measurement (outer) models (Hair et al., 2021b; Sarstedt et al., 2022). The outer model investigates the relationships between manifest variables (MVs) and their associated latent variables (LVs), while the inner model focuses on the interactions among the LVs. PLS-SEM is represented by a set of matrix equations derived from a specific path diagram that depicts the relationships across various dimensions. This approach provides a systematic framework for examining relationships between multiple constructs, even in complex models, and for exploring connections among LVs. PLS-SEM considers a different approach from the covariance-based SEM-LISREL and was selected for this study due to its compatibility with the research problem, hypothesis, and predictive focus, making it a dependable method for the proposed analysis (Hair et al., 2021a). In PLS-SEM, a normalisation process is essential to convert indicators into dimensionless values, as the dimensions involve different units and scales. Among the available normalisation techniques, this study adopts the min-max normalisation method, as proposed by Khalid et al. (2020) and Mazziotta and Pareto (2018).

Social scientists often develop statistical models under the assumption that the effect of an independent (exogenous) variable on a dependent (endogenous) variable remains constant. Actually, PLS-SEM can evaluate differences to differences in the assumed causal-effect network linking the LVs or differences at the structural level: this involves differences in the magnitude of the structural coefficients (i.e., the path coefficients).

An important analytical task in studying path models is examining "moderating effects" (also known as "interaction analysis"). These effects represent the influence of a third variable on the relationship between an independent and a dependent variable. Basically, moderating effects can be analysed using two primary approaches, depending on the nature of the moderator variable: group comparisons (or multi-group analysis), in which categorical variables (like gender) can be used to identify two or more clusters, and moderator constructs (or moderating effects), in which the moderator indicator is treated as a latent variable.

An additional relevant PLS-SEM feature refers to the "mediation analysis," in which a (mediator) construct intervenes between two other constructs. The evaluation of indirect paths (that originate from the possible causal relationships between the manifest variables and various LVs not directly connected and that can impact the PLS-SEM EFFICIENCY)—or indirect effects—can reveal useful insights to verify the relationships in the PLS-SEM (Quintano & Mazzocchi, 2020). In general, a crucial difference between interaction and mediation analysis is that the moderator variable does not depend on the exogenous construct, while—with mediation—there is a direct effect between the exogenous construct and the mediator construct (Hair et al., 2021b; Memon et al., 2019).

Table 2 presents the dimensions involved in the current analysis, their descriptions, and their usage in PLS-SEM. Several dimensions (see the table footnotes) initially included in the PLS-SEM were excluded from the subsequent analysis due to weaknesses related to the model assessment.

Table 2. Latent constructs, variables composing these constructs, codes, and description.

Latent construct	Variables code	Description
DIGITAL COMPETENCIES (Exogenous)	easy_info_online* compare_websites*	Easy for me to find information online *** Usually I compare websites ***
	easy_info_job_opp*	It is easy for me to find information about job opportunities ***
	course_info_online	I should pass a course on how to search for information on the internet ***
	diff_keywords**	It is difficult for me to decide which keywords are best for finding information on the internet ***
	diff_true_info**	Sometimes, it is hard for me to verify information ***
INTENSITY OF USE (Endogenous)	internet use reason*	Reasons you use internet***
	internetuse*	How long a day do you use internet in minutes? ***
	internetacc*	Can you use internet on the mobile phone? (yes, no)
	Phone*	Do you have a mobile phone? (yes, no)
	giga	Can you use mobile data unlimited? (yes, no)
	snetwork	Account on social network (yes, no)
CAPACITY TO FRONT SITUATIONS (Endogenous)	engage	I can always solve complex problems if I try hard enough ***
	obstacle	If someone objects to me, I can find the means and ways to achieve what I want***
	focus_obj	It's easy for me to stick around and achieve my goals ***
	unexpect_events	I am convinced that I can effectively cope with unexpected events ***
	manage_unexpect	Due to my ingenuity, I can behave in unforeseen situations ***
	manage_diffic	When faced with difficulties, I can remain calm, because I can count on my abilities to cope ***
	problem_solution	When I run into a problem, I can usually find a solution***
	manage_anything	I can usually deal with everything that happens***

Table 2. (Cont.) Latent constructs, variables composing these constructs, codes, and description.

Latent construct	Variables code	Description
TRAIT SELF CONTROL (Endogenous)	fear_to_fail**	I'm afraid of failure ***
	lack_trust**	I don't trust the system ***
	inferiority**	I feel inferior to the others ***
	fault**	I feel guilty ***
	forget**	I forget what I have to do ***
	unable_job**	I feel like I can't find a job ***
	post_pone**	I procrastinate on important decisions and tasks ***
SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS (Endogenous)	my_comp	The competencies I have are attractive in the labour market ***
	my_network	I have a network of contacts that I can use to get a new job ***

Notes: *This indicator was discarded from the subsequent analysis because it demonstrated weaknesses associated with the model evaluation; ** this indicator was reversed since it was originally inversely polarised; *** the question statements are answered on a five-point Likert-type scale; depending on the question, the following options were given to the respondents: 1 = *completely disagree*, 5 = *completely agree*; 1 = *it does not matter at all*, 5 = *very important*; 1 = *very bad*, 5 = *very good*.

In the PLS-SEM, the path diagram establishes the theoretical framework and identifies the constructs considered in the PLS-SEM analysis: one exogenous determinant and four endogenous variables, among which attention is paid to the effects on the socio-emotional skills. Since PLS-SEM lacks a universal fitting function for quality assessment, evaluating the model using various fit indices is crucial. Figure 1 shows the path diagram.
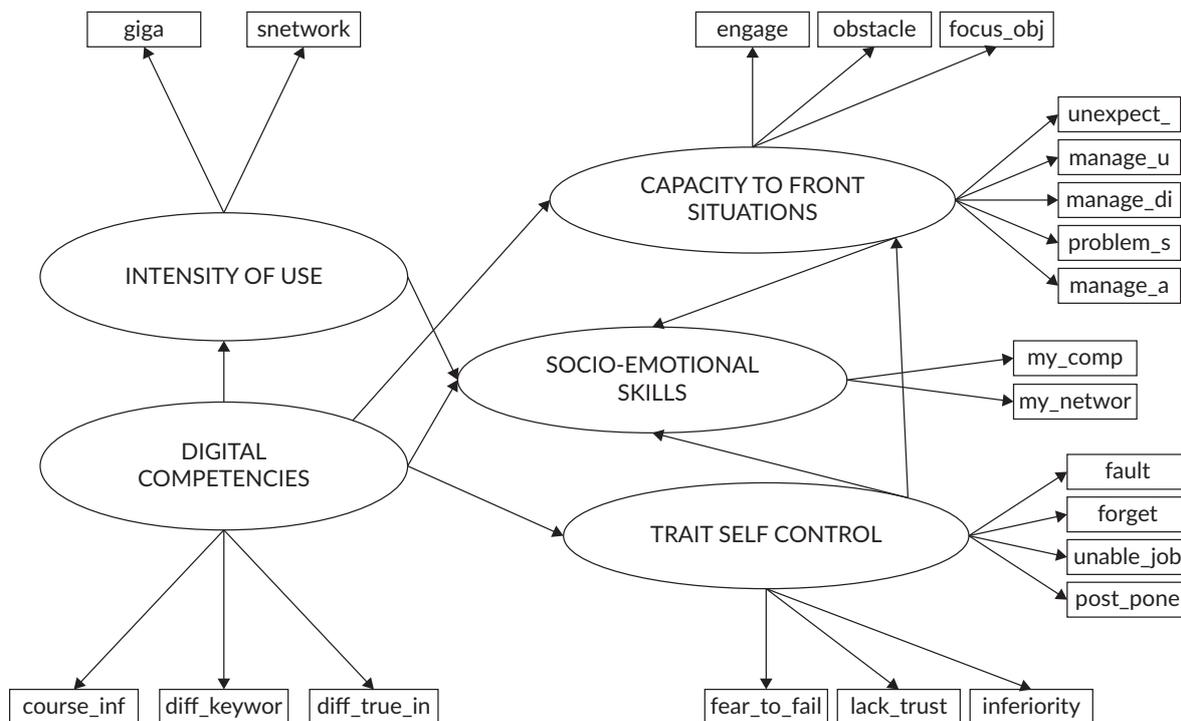

Figure 1. Path diagram: PLS-SEM path modeling (PM).

As previously mentioned, each PLS-SEM consists of two components: the measurement (outer) model, which explores the relationship between manifest variables and their associated LVs, and the structural (inner) model, which looks at the relationships between the LVs themselves (Kaplan, 2009). Specific validations are required to identify systematic structures in complex systems with numerous variables. Since PLS-SEM lacks a global fit function for evaluating its goodness, assessing the model using several fit indices is important. Table 3 outlines checks for the homogeneity and unidimensionality of the constructs based on three main indices: Cronbach's α, Dillon-Goldstein's ρ (or Jöreskog's ρ, also known as composite reliability ρ), and PCA eigenvalues. These measures confirm the validity of the model assumptions. Moreover, Table 2 shows the average variance extracted (AVE) to assess convergent validity, with the AVE for each construct exceeding 0.50, indicating that each construct accounts for at least half of the variability in its observed variables. Table 2 also displays the outer estimations, where all loadings are positive and statistically significant. Several variables initially included in the model were excluded from the analysis due to insignificant loadings. Additionally, to ensure consistency with the other indicators in the measurement model, the manifest indicators for trait self-control had their original scale reversed (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016). The relative goodness of fit index (GoF) is 0.25 (Tenenhaus et al., 2005). The cross-loadings—that reflect the loadings of indicators with their respective constructs to confirm that the shared variance between a construct and its indicators exceeds that with other constructs—present satisfactory results, which have not been reported in the current article but are available on request. For additional insights on the usage of cross-loadings and different approaches to discriminant validity metric measures, see, among others Hair et al. (2021b), Henseler et al. (2015), Mazzocchi et al. (2024), and Radomir and Moisescu (2019).

Table 3. Block unidimensionality, overall model quality, and outer estimations.

Latent variable	Dimensions	Cronbach's alpha; D.G. rho (PCA); Eigenvalues; Average variance extracted (AVE)	Loadings	Standard error	Confidence interval (95%)
DIGITAL COMPETENCIES (Exogenous)	course_info_online	0.806; 0.886; 2.164, 0.499; 0.336; 0.717	0.810	0.135	(0.362; 0.995)
	diff_keywords		0.868	0.181	(0.08; 0.936)
	diff_true_info		0.862	0.021	(0.766; 0.848)
INTENSITY OF USE (Endogenous)	Giga	0.066; 0.682; 1.034, 0.966; 0.515	0.876	0.013	(0.831; 0.891)
	Snetwork		0.511	0.015	(0.829; 0.891)
CAPACITY TO FRONT SITUATIONS (Endogenous)	Engage	0.885; 0.910; 4.481, 0.840, 0.629, 0.543, 0.467, 0.400, 0.342, 0.298; 0.559	0.630	0.033	(0.681; 0.847)
	Obstacle		0.633	0.028	(0.744; 0.878)
	focus_obj		0.665	0.021	(0.583; 0.675)
	unexpect_events		0.825	0.017	(0.594; 0.663)
	manage_unexpect		0.819	0.017	(0.630; 0.700)
	manage_diffic		0.814	0.011	(0.802; 0.847)
	problem_solution		0.797	0.010	(0.794; 0.835)
	manage_anything		0.765	0.010	(0.789; 0.837)

Table 3. (Cont.) Block unidimensionality, overall model quality, and outer estimations.

Latent variable	Dimensions	Cronbach's alpha; D.G. rho (PCA); Eigenvalues; Average variance extracted (AVE)	Loadings	Standard error	Confidence interval (95%)
TRAIT SELF CONTROL (Endogenous)	fear_to_fail	0.839; 0.880; 3.596, 0.914, 0.664, 0.580, 0.492, 0.401, 0.353; 0.507	0.754	0.012	(0.761; 0.819)
	lack_trust		0.521	0.011	(0.734; 0.791)
	Inferiority		0.818	0.015	(0.721; 0.787)
	Fault		0.793	0.023	(0.464; 0.556)
	Forget		0.659	0.009	(0.799; 0.837)
	unable_job		0.708	0.011	(0.770; 0.821)
	Exogenous		0.695	0.018	(0.610; 0.697)
SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS (Endogenous)	my_comp	0.425; 0.777; 1.270, 0.730; 0.634	0.759	0.013	(0.685; 0.737)
	my_network		0.658	0.015	(0.660; 0.721)

As for structural coefficients, Table 4 shows the results for assessing the significance of the path coefficients.

Table 4. Inner estimations: Path coefficients and multigroup comparison.

Structural effects	Global model Path coefficient	Group 1 Path coefficient (Urban = 0)	Group 2 Path coefficient (Rural = 1)
Effects on INTENSITY OF USE			
DIGITAL COMPETENCIES	0.039	0.031	0.054
CAPACITY TO FRONT SITUATIONS	0.034	0.093	−0.008
TRAIT SELF CONTROL	−0.026	−0.029	−0.051
Effects on CAPACITY TO FRONT SITUATIONS: DIGITAL COMPETENCIES	−0.106	−0.086	−0.116
Effects on TRAIT SELF CONTROL: DIGITAL COMPETENCIES	0.059	−0.053	0.142**
Effects on SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS			
DIGITAL COMPETENCIES	0.122*	0.129	0.119
INTENSITY OF USE	0.077*	0.006	0.123**
CAPACITY TO FRONT SITUATIONS	0.166*	0.129	0.205**
TRAIT SELF CONTROL	−0.212*	−0.226	−0.0188

Notes: *The coefficient is significant at the 0.01 level; ** the difference between the path coefficients in Group 1 and Group 2 is significant at 0.1.

According to the results presented in Table 4, concerning the section "effects on *socio-emotional skills*," the evidence suggests that, in the global model, three path coefficients—*digital competencies*, *intensity of use*, and *capacity to front situations*—are positive and statistically significant. Therefore, when evaluating improvements in the indicators within these latent blocks, this positive relationship supports the model's validity in tracking the level of *socio-emotional skills*. The *trait self-control* construct has a significant and negative impact on the *socio-emotional skills*. This negative relationship was expected, considering that this

latent construct includes indicators that were originally inversely polarised because they negatively impacted *socio-emotional skills*. These indicators were then reversed so as not to affect the validity of the PLS-SEM model. *Socio-emotional skills* include two control variables, *my_comp* and *my_network*, and both positively affect this endogenous construct, and their positive correlations confirm the consistency of the analysis.

Assuming that several relationships in the *socio-emotional skills* might depend on people living in urban rather than rural areas, this article examines whether the relationships in a structural model differ across multiple groups, based explicitly on the *rural* variable. Therefore, *rurality* was investigated as a moderator variable in structural relationships. Concerning this kind of heterogeneity investigation, PLS-SEM offers several approaches, and the main methods consider permutation and bootstrapping approaches. The latter is considered in the current research, assuming that a significance level (alpha) of 0.1 is enough to display significant differences in path coefficients. Table 3, in addition to the whole sample (Global) results, shows the path coefficients for 'Group 1' and 'Group 2.' The results indicate that the path coefficients are significantly different between the two groups (at the 10% level) when considering the direct effects on *socio-emotional skills* of *intensity of use* and *capacity to front situations*, meaning that the *rural* moderator variable reveals significant differences in NEETs' behaviours in rural and urban areas.

In order to analyse indirect effects in addition to direct effects, the mediational hypothesis is that the *capacity to front situations* and *trait self-control* might mediate the relationship between *digital competencies* and *socio-emotional skills*. In SEM, there are several methods to test whether a mediating variable significantly mediates the relationship between an independent variable (IV) and a dependent variable (DV), and some of them refer to the Sobel Index (Sobel, 1987), the Delta Index, and Bootstrapping (Mehmetoglu & Venturini, 2021). Table 5 shows that the indirect effect *digital competencies* and *socio-emotional skills* via the *capacity to front situations* is −0.018 and the three procedures—Sobel, Delta, and Bootstrapping—for testing the significance of this indirect effect show that it is statistically significant. The approaches of Baron and Kenny (1986) and Zhao et al. (2010) to testing mediation confirm that *capacity to front situations* partially mediates the effect of *digital competencies* on *socio-emotional skills*. Specifically, the ratio of the indirect effect to the total effect (RIT) value is equal to $0.018/0.104 = 0.170$, meaning that about 17.0% of the effect of *digital competencies* on *socio-emotional skills* is mediated by the *capacity to front situations*.

In the same way, Table 5 shows that the indirect effect of *digital competencies* and *socio-emotional skills* via *trait self-control* is statistically significant and equal to −0.013, with about 11.0% of the effect of *digital competencies* on *socio-emotional skills* being mediated by *trait self-control*.

Table 5. Significance testing of (standardised) indirect effect.

Statistics	Sobel	Delta	Bootstrap	RI: Indirect effect/Total effect Ratio of the indirect effect to the direct effect (RID)
Capacity to front situations				
Indirect effect	−0.018*	−0.018*	−0.018*	0.170
Standard error	0.004	0.004	0.004	0.145
Trait self-control				
Indirect effect	−0.013*	−0.013*	−0.013*	0.114
Standard error	0.004	0.004	0.004	0.103

Note: *The coefficient is significant at the 0.01 level.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the relationships between various factors, including digital competencies, intensity of internet usage, capacity to front situations, trait self-control, and their effects on socio-emotional skills. The investigation of the interaction between these factors is critical in navigating labour market challenges (Tomczyk, 2024; Wheeler, 2016). Digital competencies are foundational to overcoming barriers to employment (Charles et al., 2022; Tomczyk, 2024), while socio-emotional skills facilitate more effective engagement with labour market institutions (Wheeler, 2016); and the intensity of internet usage influences these competencies and skills in both positive (Waytz & Gray, 2018) and negative ways (Klimenko et al., 2021). Furthermore, self-control and the capacity to confront situations are critical for ensuring that digital tools are used productively and effectively in navigating labour market challenges (Duckworth et al., 2019; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Finally, determining engagement with the labour market refers to the crucial role of belonging to rural and non-rural NEETs (Simões & Marta, 2024; Tomczyk, 2024). Building upon this literature, suggesting a potential relationship between digital competencies, socio-emotional skills, intensity of internet usage, self-control and the capacity to front situations, and considering NEETs in urban and rural areas, the authors established six hypotheses and used the PLS-SEM algorithm to test them (Hair et al., 2021b; Sarstedt et al., 2022).

The path diagram established a clear theoretical framework and examined one exogenous determinant (*digital competencies*) and four endogenous variables (*intensity of use*, *capacity to front situations*, *trait self-control*, and *socio-emotional skills*) with a particular focus on socio-emotional skills. Since PLS-SEM does not provide a universal global fit function, we used multiple fit indices to evaluate model quality, including Cronbach's α, Dillon-Goldstein's ρ, and AVE, which confirmed the model's validity. The high AVE values for each construct indicate that the LVs explained more than half of the variance in their observed variables, further supporting the construct validity of the model. The measurement model showed strong reliability, with all manifest variable loadings being positive and statistically significant. This was confirmed by the cross-loadings, which demonstrated that the shared variance between a construct and its indicators exceeded the variance shared with other constructs, indicating adequate discriminant validity. Below, each hypothesis is addressed based on the findings of the PLS-SEM analysis.

Firstly, it was hypothesised that there is a significant relationship between the *intensity of use* and the *socio-emotional skills* (H1). The results from the PLS-SEM analysis confirm that the *intensity of use* has a positive and statistically significant relationship with *socio-emotional skills*. This supports H1, suggesting that increased internet usage is associated with higher levels of socio-emotional skills. This finding aligns with previous research that has highlighted the role of digital engagement in fostering social and emotional development, particularly in contexts where individuals actively engage with online platforms to develop communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Waytz & Gray, 2018).

Secondly, there was the suggestion that there is a significant relationship between *capacity to front situations* and *socio-emotional skills* (H2). H2 is also supported by the data. The path analysis revealed a positive and significant relationship between the *capacity to front situations* and *socio-emotional skills*. As such, individuals who are better equipped to face challenging situations tend to exhibit stronger socio-emotional skills. This result underscores the importance of coping strategies and emotional regulation as key components of socio-emotional development, which are crucial for managing interpersonal interactions and handling stress effectively.

Third, it was hypothesised that there is a significant relationship between *trait self-control* and *socio-emotional skills* (H3). Results indicate that *trait self-control* has a significant negative relationship with *socio-emotional skills*, which might initially seem counterintuitive. However, this negative relationship was expected due to the nature of the self-control indicators, which were originally reversed to align with the model. The reverse scoring was necessary because these indicators, when not reversed, negatively impacted socio-emotional skills. Therefore, while the relationship is negative, it reflects a methodological adjustment rather than a fundamental contradiction to the hypothesis. In this context, lower self-control appears to correlate with higher socio-emotional skills, aligning with theoretical perspectives suggesting that certain aspects of self-control might hinder emotional and social development (Stavrova et al., 2022).

Fourthly, a test was carried out to discover if there is a significant relationship between *digital competencies* and *socio-emotional skills* (H4). H4 is strongly supported, as *digital competencies* were found to have a significant and positive relationship with *socio-emotional skills*. This indicates that individuals with higher levels of *digital competencies*, including the ability to navigate digital environments effectively, are more likely to possess enhanced *socio-emotional skills*. This finding is in line with studies suggesting that digital literacy contributes to the development of essential emotional and social capabilities, such as communication, empathy, and self-regulation, which are increasingly important in the digital age (Waytz & Gray, 2018).

The following two hypotheses focused on the mediating role of trait self-control and capacity to front situations: H5a (*trait self-control* presents a mediating role between *digital competencies* and *socio-emotional skills*) and H5b (the *capacity to front situations* presents a mediating role between *digital competencies* and *socio-emotional skills*).

For H5a, the mediational analysis confirmed that *trait self-control* partially mediates the relationship between *digital competencies* and *socio-emotional skills*. The indirect effect of *digital competencies* on *socio-emotional skills* through *trait self-control* was statistically significant, with approximately 11.0% of the effect mediated by *self-control*. This suggests that self-control plays an important role in how digital competencies influence socio-emotional outcomes, as individuals with higher digital competencies might develop better self-regulation abilities that, in turn, positively impact their socio-emotional skills.

H5b is also supported, with *capacity to front situations* found to partially mediate the relationship between *digital competencies* and *socio-emotional skills*. The indirect effect via this mediator was statistically significant, accounting for about 17.0% of the total effect. This highlights the importance of coping mechanisms in mediating the impact of digital competencies on socio-emotional skills. In other words, individuals who possess stronger digital competencies may be better able to confront and manage challenging situations, which in turn enhances their socio-emotional skills.

Finally, it was hypothesised that the area of residence significantly affects the relationships with *socio-emotional skills* (H6). H6 was partially supported by the findings. The moderation analysis revealed significant differences in path coefficients between individuals living in rural and urban areas, specifically concerning the effects of *intensity of use* and *capacity to front situations* on *socio-emotional skills*. This indicates that the area of residence—rural versus urban—moderates the relationship between these variables and socio-emotional outcomes. Rural NYNA NEETs exhibited different patterns of socio-emotional skill development compared to urban NYNA NEETs, which suggests that regional factors such as access to

resources, social support, and educational opportunities may play a critical role in shaping socio-emotional development. The significant differences found in the path coefficients support the need for tailored interventions that consider geographic and contextual factors.

In sum, the findings of this study provide robust support for the hypotheses related to the relationships between digital competencies, internet usage, self-control, capacity to front situations, and socio-emotional skills. The structural model used in this study highlights how NYNA NEETs with higher digital competencies tend to be more confident and effective in social interactions, which is crucial for building institutional relationships within the labour market and engaging in job search processes. The mediating roles of trait self-control and capacity to front situations were confirmed, further enhancing our understanding of how digital competencies influence socio-emotional development. Additionally, the moderation effect of rurality underscores the importance of considering geographic context when designing interventions aimed at improving socio-emotional skills. The study demonstrates that rural and urban NYNA NEETs face distinct challenges in terms of the relationships between these factors. Rural NYNA NEETs appear to experience more significant hurdles in fully utilising digital tools, likely due to geographic and infrastructural limitations. This disparity underlines the necessity of tailored interventions for rural youth to help them bridge the digital divide and develop the socio-emotional abilities needed to participate in the labour market effectively.

4.1. Implications for Research, Practice, and Policymaking

This article contributes to the literature on NEETs by showing how digital competencies and socio-emotional skills, influenced by internet usage, can shape labour market outcomes. It underscores the importance of addressing the unique challenges faced by rural NEETs and advocates a balanced approach to internet usage that fosters both technical and socio-emotional growth. Rural NEETs face more barriers, which suggests that geographic location is a significant moderating factor in labour market engagement and that rural youth may need additional support to fully benefit from digital tools and socio-emotional skill development. Importantly, the proposed model in this article presents itself as the first to study the association between digital and socio-emotional skills in a particular segment of the population, such as NYNA NEETs, showing the effect of the degree of urbanisation on this relationship.

Our findings offer valuable guidance for future research and practical applications in educational and social interventions aimed at improving socio-emotional skills. Policies aimed at improving labour market participation among NEETs should focus on enhancing digital competencies and socio-emotional skills, especially for rural youth. Interventions should consider not only improving internet access but also fostering self-control and the ability to manage demanding situations to help NEETs navigate the labour market successfully. This seems to be even more relevant for territories facing significant obstacles in ensuring that young people are equipped with the necessary skills to engage with emerging societal demands, such as Southern European countries like Italy, Spain, and Portugal (European Investment Bank, 2021). To bridge the rural-urban divide, public policies should promote capacity-building programmes and tailored support mechanisms that ensure NEETs in remote areas can fully participate in the constantly evolving labour market.

Finally, the variables explored in this study—digital competencies, trait self-control, capacity to front situations, intensity of internet use, and socio-emotional skills—are highly relevant for PES. These constructs

can inform tailored support strategies, diagnostic tools, and individualised intervention plans. For instance, assessing digital competencies and socio-emotional skills could help PES professionals better understand the readiness and support needs of NEET youth, allowing for more personalised vocational guidance or digital training programmes. Moreover, trait self-control and the capacity to front situations may help identify behavioural or motivational barriers that impact employability, particularly in long-term disengaged youth.

4.2. Limitations

Regarding the limitations of this study, firstly it is important to note that the sample sizes across the participating countries varied significantly, which makes it more difficult to draw broad conclusions. Secondly, due to the very small sample sizes in some of the participating countries, we were unable to perform country comparisons, despite recognizing that the socio-economic circumstances of NYNA NEETs are likely to vary significantly across different countries. Finally, due to the difficulty in accessing the target group, we had to employ non-probability sampling techniques.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on the complex interplay between digital engagement, emotional regulation, and socio-emotional development. It demonstrates that high digital competencies are positively related to socio-emotional skills, which are crucial for labour market engagement. Digital tools can enhance social interactions, especially when used for productive purposes like online learning. Our findings also highlight the mediating role of trait self-control and capacity to front situations in the relationship between digital competencies and socio-emotional skills. This implies that developing these intermediary traits is essential for NYNA NEETs to use digital tools productively and build the necessary socio-emotional skills for job market success. Moreover, the study shows that rural NYNA NEETs face distinct challenges in leveraging digital competencies and socio-emotional skills compared to their non-rural counterparts. These differences highlight the need for targeted and region-specific interventions that consider infrastructural, educational, and social inequalities to address the specific barriers faced by rural youth, such as access to digital tools and the development of socio-emotional skills (Simões & Marta, 2024; Tomczyk, 2024).

In conclusion, this study provides strong evidence supporting the importance of digital competencies in enhancing socio-emotional skills, with the capacity to front situations and trait self-control serving as key mediators in these relationships. Moreover, it emphasises their crucial role in a successful labour market engagement among NYNA NEETs, pointing out the distinct challenges of rural and non-rural NYNA NEETs.

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ARTICLE

The Long Road for Vulnerable Jobseekers Transitioning to Green and Socially Sustainable Employment

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Abstract

Although the role of education, training, and life-long learning has become widely recognised in EU social policy, not all EU citizens have had the opportunity to maintain or acquire the skills necessary for full participation in society and success in the labour market. This article examines interventions specifically designed to support vulnerable unemployed individuals for (re)entering and succeeding in the labour market. It presents a qualitative, case-specific study of training programmes implemented by a local unit of the Public Employment Service (PES) in a Southern European country. Portugal serves as a compelling case for examining how and why the effort to equip under-skilled and underqualified citizens with (new) skills remains challenging. Our theoretical framework builds on historical institutionalism to identify the enduring limitations of Portuguese active labour market policies, as well as other institutional and actor-related constraints that hinder unemployed individuals from navigating the challenges of an increasingly complex and diverse labour market. To explore these dynamics empirically, we conducted a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders—including PES staff, training providers, and unemployed participants—focusing on their perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of training programmes and their implementation. Additionally, we used supplementary sources such as official documents related to training and other labour market policies, as well as relevant statistical data, to contextualize and triangulate our findings. The findings demonstrate that institutional weaknesses, combined with the shortcomings of training programmes, fail to accommodate the specific needs and conditions of vulnerable unemployed individuals, leaving them without the skills necessary to secure stable employment and to respond effectively to the challenges posed by the ecological and digital transitions.

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1. Introduction

As the world—and the European Union in particular—navigates turbulent times, specific strategies have been implemented to address ongoing challenges that threaten citizens' lives and working conditions. Advancements in EU social domains have always been constrained by legal, political, and financial obstacles, even though it is accepted that EU institutions play a crucial role in shaping member states' public policies in areas related to workers' rights and employment conditions (Erne et al., 2024). The increasing regulation of social policy issues at the supranational level goes along with a growing willingness to further reconcile economic, social, and ecological goals (Sabato et al., 2022, p. 199). Among the challenges pertaining to the trajectory and scope of EU social policy lies the need to reorient the economy toward a greener and environmentally sustainable path (Im et al., 2023; Pociovălișteanu et al., 2015). Achieving this goal—aligned with the evolving industrial and technological landscape and strategies of member states—requires preparing workers for new employment opportunities, "green jobs" in more environmentally sustainable industries (Sikora, 2021). Authors like Fischer and Giuliani (2025) emphasise how important it is for EU institutions to address environmental and social goals and policies in an integrated manner, within a "new growth model" (Koch, 2025). As examples of this commitment, two key initiatives were recently supported by the European Commission in the areas of employment, social protection, and environmental policy. The first is the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), proclaimed in Gothenburg in 2017, which addresses critical social dimensions such as equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection (European Commission, 2021). The second is the European Green Deal (EGD), a flagship initiative of the first EC led by Ursula von der Leyen (2019–2024), which aims to achieve climate neutrality and promote a just ecological transition by 2050 (European Commission, 2019a).

A growing body of literature has traced the historical trajectory that led to the launch of these initiatives (Hacker, 2023), analysed their political and legal characteristics (Arabadjieva & Barrio, 2024; Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2017), and highlighted the strategic role of key actors in shaping recent EU social policy (Dura, 2024). However, the impacts of these policy measures on the everyday lives of EU citizens—beyond aggregate quantitative indicators and their evolution at the country level—remain insufficiently explored.

This article seeks to fill this gap by analysing a specific set of training programmes for low-skilled unemployed individuals, implemented by a local unit of the Portuguese Employment Service (PES) in the central region of Portugal. Our research question is: To what extent do training programmes implemented in Portugal under the EU's social policy agenda equip low-skilled and under-qualified unemployed individuals with the skills needed to adapt to ecological and digital transitions and secure stable employment?

This article adopts a historical institutionalist approach to examine why active labour market policies (ALMPs) in Portugal—particularly those aimed at vulnerable unemployed individuals—have evolved incrementally despite supranational pressures for reform. Informed by the contributions of Pierson (2000), Mahoney and Thelen (2010), among others, it analyses how past policy legacies, critical junctures (such as the eurozone crisis), and institutional path dependencies continue to constrain the capacity of PES to implement more transformative social investment approaches. While European Union initiatives like the EPSR promote ambitious activation and re-skilling agendas, these goals often clash with entrenched bureaucratic routines, fiscal constraints, and segmented labour markets typical of Southern European welfare regimes. Rather than radical change, the Portuguese case illustrates a pattern of institutional layering

and drift, in which new policy objectives are grafted onto existing structures without fundamentally altering their logic or effectiveness.

The programmes analysed correspond to the following EU-standardised categories: (a) apprenticeship courses (for example, automotive mechatronics technician) with dual certification (upper secondary school diploma (12th year) plus EQF Level 4 vocational qualification); (b) adult education and training (EFA) courses with a "school-leaving certification pathway" (equivalent to upper secondary education); and (c) courses from the "Vida Ativa" (active life) programme, with, for example, a medium-duration vocational training in secretarial studies. These programmes reflect both continuity and adaptation. On the one hand, they remain governed by bureaucratic requirements—such as minimum cohort sizes and mandatory full-time attendance—and by compliance with EU agency guidelines and policy frameworks. On the other hand, caseworkers retain a degree of discretionary flexibility in interpreting and applying these rules, particularly when determining participant eligibility. These discretionary practices are shaped not only by local labour market conditions, administrative capacity, and budgetary constraints, but also by longstanding institutional routines. From a historical institutionalist perspective, this interplay between formal regulation and bounded discretion illustrates how new policy objectives are layered onto existing structures, often without fundamentally altering the underlying institutional logic.

This article's empirical analysis is anchored on 29 semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2019 and March 2020. The study involved 23 working-age individuals and six interviews with stakeholders. The first group consisted of individuals who were either temporarily unemployed or who had been labour market inactive for more than 12 consecutive months, some of whom had been out of work for a significant period. Their ages ranged between 21 and 63 years old, and they were enrolled in various training programmes. The second group comprised stakeholders with distinct roles, expertise, and levels of responsibility. All interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis using both deductive and inductive coding (Knott et al., 2022). We conducted 23 interviews with programme participants, focusing on their expectations regarding the training experience and anticipated labour-market outcomes. In addition, we interviewed two front-line caseworkers and two trainees to explore the administrative and organizational dimensions of programme delivery. Finally, two senior managers at the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP) were interviewed to examine the agency's evolving role—particularly since the 2008–2009 crisis—its coordination with national and EU partners, internal performance challenges, and changes in the training portfolio.

The article addresses one of the key objectives of the EPSR, namely, increasing adult participation in training to enhance employability amid green and digital transitions, and examines how this goal can better equip disadvantaged groups to fully engage in a labour market and society facing major challenges.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. First, the article reviews recent developments in EU initiatives aimed at enhancing workforce employability and adaptability in changing labour markets, through skill development. The article then analyses the trajectory of a Southern European country—Portugal—which, since joining the EU in 1986, has made considerable efforts to adapt its institutions and social policies in line with EU social policy frameworks. Focusing on training programmes targeting vulnerable groups of unemployed individuals, the article examines the persistent institutional constraints and limitations that continue to hinder the effective implementation of these policies. This is followed by a presentation and

discussion of the empirical research findings, highlighting the limitations in promoting the labour market participation of (vulnerable) individuals. The conclusion summarises the key results of the analysis.

2. Activation and Skills Investment: Cornerstones of EU Social Policy in Recent Years

Among the distinctive features shared by most EU member states is their commitment to the so-called European social model—a societal model that values social cohesion, universal social protection, and inclusive economic development. While interpretations vary across EU member states, common principles include the protection against social risks, promotion of equal opportunities, and solidarity (Esping-Andersen, 2003; Hemerijck, 2013). Within this framework, member states are encouraged to allocate portions of their national budgets to education and training while shaping their national policies to uphold citizens' rights to work and decent living standards.

As EU economic integration advanced throughout the 1990s, the need for welfare state reforms became increasingly evident (de la Porte & Palier, 2022). These reforms were largely guided by a social investment approach aimed at "preparing, supporting, and equipping individuals to participate in the knowledge economy and respond to the new social risks associated with it" (Morel et al., 2012, p. 355). In a context of accelerating economic and demographic change, social risks became more complex and diversified. "Old risks" such as unemployment, sickness, accidents at work, and old age—traditionally the primary focus of classic welfare state regimes—are now increasingly interrelated with "new risks" arising from evolving family structures, changing forms of labour market attachment, and the possession of low or obsolete skills (Bonoli, 2007; Greve & Paster, 2022). Some of these risks have been exacerbated by the social effects of climate change, which introduce new threats to physical health and human well-being. Events such as more frequent and intense floods or extreme heat waves endanger individuals' living and working conditions, disproportionately affecting vulnerable population groups (Fischer & Giuliani, 2025, p. 4). Technological advancements linked to digitalisation, automation, and artificial intelligence, for example, also pose significant challenges regarding workers' skills, the way work is performed, and how social relations are (re)constructed (Pettinger, 2019; Susskind, 2020).

As underscored by Hemerijck et al. (2022), the social investment perspective aims to "enhance people's capabilities and opportunities in knowledge-based labour markets, so as to promote high levels of employment, inclusive social cohesion, individual agency, and overall life satisfaction" (p. 5). Life satisfaction is linked, among other factors, with individuals' connection to the labour market, which remains central to ensuring social integration. Adequate skill levels play a crucial role in determining one's chances of securing employment and accessing a certain level of social protection. The role of programmes that enhance individuals' employability and foster human capital development reflects a broader shift in how the welfare state integrates the social investment approach (Luque Balbona & Guillén, 2021). Over time, the latter came to include a wide range of policies, including family policies, education and life-long learning, training, and ALMPs (Bouget et al., 2015; Hemerijck & Bokhorst, 2025).

After a period of relative stagnation in the development of social investment goals and instruments, the EU's engagement in the social domain has once again shifted towards enhancing individual well-being. The 2017 proclamation of the EPSR is widely regarded as a turning point in the EU's social policy agenda, paving the way for tangible initiatives aimed at ensuring, among other things, access to the labour market, fair working

conditions in the labour market, and adequate social protection for all. Several principles enriched in the EPSR—such as education and life-long learning (Principle 1), active support to employment (Principle 4), and childcare and support to children (Principle 11)—reflect a clear social investment logic. Within the EPSR framework, particular emphasis has been placed on equipping workers for the green and digital transitions. This is evident in specific quantitative targets, including ensuring that 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 is employed by 2030 and that at least 60% of all adults participate in training each year to acquire the skills required for emerging labour market demands.

Beyond these general targets, significant challenges remain in adapting the dynamics of employment to the impact of the digital economy and concerns about environmental protection. These challenges include making large-scale investments in new technology, adequately preparing workers, and reforming welfare systems. In some member states, such as the Nordic countries, capital investment policies "stimulated a shift towards more skilled employment and higher value-added production" contributing to a decline in the supply of less-skilled workers, a rise in skills levels, and the transformation into a knowledge-based economy (Morel, 2013, p. 647). In contrast, several European welfare systems remain heavily pension-oriented and struggle with increasingly inefficient healthcare systems. Balancing the demands of the digital and the energy transitions while addressing persisting social priorities may pose an additional burden—particularly for Southern and Central Eastern European countries—whose welfare and labour market systems face structural weaknesses (Bengtsson et al., 2017; Ronchi, 2018).

Chapter 1 of the EPSR integrates the European Skills Agenda, a five-year plan launched in 2020 to ensure that both workers and businesses are better equipped to navigate ongoing climate and digital transformations. In line with this agenda, specific targets were established for achievement by 2025. Particular emphasis is placed on increasing the participation of low-qualified individuals in learning activities over the previous 12 months, as well as raising the share of adults possessing at least basic digital skills (Taurelli, 2021). Another initiative emanating from EU institutions is the *Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training (VET) for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience* (Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020, 2020).

In the context of the green and digital transitions—alongside evolving labour market dynamics across EU member states—the activation of vulnerable groups has received growing policy attention. This includes individuals in precarious employment, older workers, people with very low levels of education, and people with disabilities (European Commission, 2019b). Recent studies highlight significant variation across EU countries in addressing these challenges (Corti & Ruiz de la Ossa, 2023; OECD & European Commission, 2025). This variation reflects the fact that, while EU institutions play a supportive and coordinating role, primary responsibility for (un)employment and social policy primarily remains with the member states. Internal diversity across the EU is well documented, and it has long posed governance challenges—particularly during periods marked by growing risks of social and economic divergence. Such divergence reflects, among other factors, the differing welfare state models and institutional capacities among member states.

3. Historical Institutionalism and the Analysis of National Policy Specificities

Historical institutionalism, like other strands of the "new institutionalism" (Hall & Taylor, 1996), is grounded in the idea that institutions matter—not only because of formal rules and material incentives, but also due to the way past policy decisions shape current choices and constrain future possibilities. This approach highlights how institutional development follows path-dependent trajectories, in which early choices—particularly those made during critical junctures—create self-reinforcing mechanisms that render transformative change difficult (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Pierson, 2000). Organisational routines and governance structures tend to become embedded over time, generating institutional inertia even in the face of new policy agendas or external pressures.

These insights are particularly relevant when analysing labour market policies—both in their design and implementation—as institutional legacies continue to influence how such policies evolve and function. Institutional arrangements such as PES often adapt incrementally, layering new objectives onto existing structures without fundamentally altering their underlying logic. In this context, EU-framed training initiatives, despite their ambitious goals linked to upskilling, social investment, and green and digital transitions, are implemented through national systems shaped by prior decisions, bureaucratic routines, and politically mediated reform paths (Bonoli, 2013; Pierson, 2004).

This article argues that institutional structures, governance routines, and historically embedded trajectories shape both the interpretation and implementation of training programmes in Portugal. From a historical institutionalist perspective, policy is not simply designed in response to current needs but is conditioned by earlier institutional developments, political compromises, and the accumulated weight of past reforms. In this context, PES operate within systems that evolve incrementally, with reforms often reflecting continuity rather than rupture—despite the transformative aspirations of supranational frameworks such as the EPSR and the EGD. Among its thematic agendas are skills enhancement and competitiveness. Within the RRP, specific initiatives and funding were allocated to support the digital transition, including: (a) EUR 521 million for upgrading facilities and technological equipment in vocational education and training institutions and (b) EUR 130 million for modernising science facilities in schools and universities under the Youth Impulse initiative. Increasing the skill levels of the Portuguese population, reducing labour market segmentation, and (re)adjusting adults' competences to labour market needs have been recurring priorities in the European Commission's country-specific recommendations over the years. Nonetheless—as in other member states—the implementation of these recommendations has consistently fallen short of expectations. Structural vulnerabilities in the Portuguese labour market persist, including low levels of intermediate skills among the active adult population, pronounced income inequality, and significant social and territorial disparities (Rodrigues, 2019). Further challenges include strong labour market segmentation and low internal mobility, exacerbated by rigid wage structures (Martins, 2021).

Despite growing awareness of the impact of education and training on the risk of unemployment or low-quality jobs—as well as the increasing emphasis on activation, reflected in the allocation of public spending—evidence on the effectiveness of training programmes and other ALMPs remains limited (OECD, 2024, p. 25). Moreover, the persistent mismatch between policy design, the profiles of unemployed jobseekers, and the needs and preferences of employers continues to pose significant challenges. Over the past two decades, considerable efforts have been made to improve the performance of the Portuguese PES.

Nonetheless, major hurdles persist, particularly in terms of data coverage, the systematic assessment of both the positive and negative effects of implemented measures, and the overall weakness of the monitoring system for services and programmes delivered to jobseekers (OECD, 2024, p. 26). These shortcomings can be partly attributed to financial constraints faced by Portuguese public institutions—given that programme evaluations are often costly—as well as to the prioritisation of evaluation procedures for programmes financed by EU structural and social funds. Furthermore, delays in equipping PES staff with the necessary skills and competences hinder the delivery of services in a more effective and citizen-oriented manner. In the case of training programmes specifically, regular monitoring and evaluation could generate more detailed insights into how to better align these interventions with the needs and expectations of unemployed jobseekers.

An enduring trend in Portuguese labour market policy is the limited adoption of a social investment approach (Bonoli, 2013). Historically, the shift from passively compensating unemployment toward actively promoting employability (Van Kersbergen & Hemerijck, 2012) has not been a dominant feature of employment policy. Instead, higher levels of public spending have been allocated to compensatory social policies rather than to ALMPs (Immervoll & Scarpetta, 2012; Ronchi, 2018). While social investment strategies inherently require sustained and substantial financial commitments, such investments are particularly challenging for countries like Portugal, which operate with comparatively low levels of public revenue (see Figure 1). As a result, policy efforts have tended to focus on isolated measures rather than being embedded within a comprehensive strategy that integrates passive and ALMPs in a coherent and mutually reinforcing manner (Valadas, 2022).
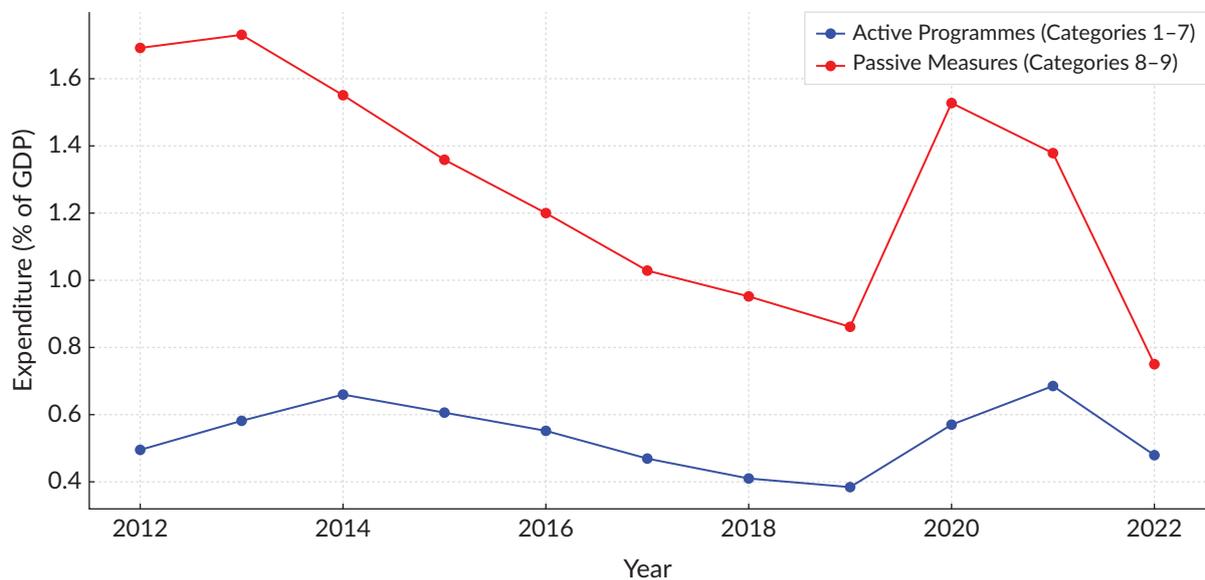

Figure 1. Public expenditure on active and passive programmes in Portugal, 2012–2022. Source: Based on data from OECD Labour market programmes.

As shown in Figure 1, the "social investment welfare budget" in Portugal has not experienced significant growth over the past two decades. On the contrary, similar to patterns observed across many Southern, Central, and Eastern European welfare states, Portugal continues to lag behind in social investment spending (Bengtsson et al., 2017; Luque Balbona & Guillén, 2021). Although investment in adult education and the upskilling of unemployed individuals has received increased policy attention in recent years, these

efforts have largely depended on financial support from European instruments, particularly the European Social Fund.

The following section analyses a range of factors that help explain the shortcomings of training programmes and the institutional barriers hindering the effective inclusion of vulnerable groups in the labour market and broader society. Among the most salient factors are individual characteristics—such as age, gender, skill, and education levels, health status, language proficiency, and household or caregiving responsibilities—and circumstantial elements, including place of residence, access to social networks, and the duration of unemployment. These are further compounded by institutional obstacles related to policy design, administrative capacity, and service delivery. The interplay of these three dimensions—individual, circumstantial, and institutional—is particularly detrimental to the labour market integration of certain groups, reinforcing patterns of exclusion.

3.1. Individuals' (Social) Inabilities and Contextual Features

Various authors have shown that unemployment risks and their effects are unequally distributed across countries, regions, and individuals (Boland & Griffin, 2015; Demazière & Zune, 2019; Didier et al., 2013; Valadas, 2023). Certain groups face specific disadvantages, including women, immigrants, low-skilled individuals, and those from lower-income backgrounds. Most of our interviewees belong to these groups, many having low skill levels and irregular educational paths. They had been unemployed for varying periods: eight for less than twelve months, six between one and two years, five for more than two years, and four did not disclose their unemployment duration. Nearly all (16) had experienced unemployment before, and three had never been employed. Four did not respond. These distinctive aspects can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewees by age, gender, education level, and length of unemployment.

Course	Digital literacy + sewing	Industrial maintenance electromechanics	Secretarial/office administration	Mechatronics	TOTAL
Age					
18–24	–	2	–	–	2
25–34	–	–	1	4	5
35–44	1	2	2	1	6
45–54	2	1	1	–	4
55–64	2	–	–	–	2
No answer	3	–	–	1	4
Gender					
Male	8	4	-	5	17
Female	–	1	4	1	6
No answer	–	–	–	–	–

Table 1. (Cont.) Interviewees by age, gender, education level, and length of unemployment.

Course	Digital literacy + sewing	Industrial maintenance electromechanics	Secretarial/office administration	Mechatronics	TOTAL
Family situation					
Single	–	3	1	6	10
In a relationship/ cohabiting	1	–	1	–	2
Married/domestic partnership	5	1	2	–	8
Divorced/separated	1	1	–	–	2
Widowed	1	–	–	–	1
Single mother/single father	–	–	–	–	–
No answer	–	–	–	–	–
With children	7	–	3	–	10
No answer	1	–	–	–	1
Educational levels/years of formal schooling					
Less than 4 years	1	–	–	–	1
4 years	5	–	–	–	5
6 years	1	5	–	–	6
9 years	–	–	–	4	4
12 years	–	–	4	2	6
No answer	1	–	–	–	1
Previous unemployment experiences					
Previously unemployed	7	2	4	3	16
No prior experience of unemployment	–	1	–	2	3
No answer	1	2	–	1	4
Length of unemployment					
Less than one year	1	-	4	3	8
1–2 years	1	2	–	3	6
More than 2 years	3	2	–	–	5
No answer	3	1	–	–	4
(Previous) work experience					
Less than 1 year	–	–	–	–	–
1 to 3 years	–	–	–	–	–
More than 3 years	6	2	3	2	13
No answer	2	3	1	4	10

Table 1. (Cont.) Interviewees by age, gender, education level, and length of unemployment.

Course	Digital literacy + sewing	Industrial maintenance electromechanics	Secretarial/office administration	Mechatronics	TOTAL
Income support/welfare benefit					
Unemployment benefit	3	1	1	4	9
Minimum income scheme	2	–	–	–	2
Old-age/retirement pension	–	–	–	–	–
Disability pension	1	–	–	–	1
Traineeship allowance	2	4	3	2	11
No answer	–	–	–	–	–
Number of trainees interviewed	**8**	**5**	**4**	**6**	**23**

Among the employment barriers preventing the unemployed individuals interviewed from (re)entering the labour market are insufficient work-related capabilities, such as a lack of skills and work experience. In addition to unemployment, they encountered other vulnerabilities, including health-related limitations, housing instability, learning disabilities, lack of motivation, and unintended caregiving responsibilities. These challenges further compound their difficulties in securing stable employment.

From the thematic analysis of the interviews, three distinct profiles emerge. The first group—named "educational aspirants"—views training as an opportunity to obtain a higher level of education, though they have little to no expectations of applying the acquired skills in fields such as sewing or welding, for example. The second group—"benefit-dependent programme participants"—consists of individuals receiving social benefits or assistance programmes, such as unemployment insurance or the *rendimento mínimo garantido*. For these individuals, training is often a mandatory requirement within their benefits contract. In some cases, participation in training presents a more advantageous option—both personally and financially—rather than accepting less desirable job offers they would otherwise be required to take. Finally, a smaller group—"in-transition unemployed"—sees training as a means to enhance their professional qualifications and improve their employment prospects.

For the first two identified groups, the possibility of utilizing the acquired skills—or even achieving eventual (re)integration into the labour market—is, in most cases, not an expected outcome. Instead, the effects that programme participants themselves report from their involvement in training programmes are primarily motivational, emotional, and relational in nature. These outcomes were found in similar studies (Carvajal Muñoz, 2024). Although motivational factors are often linked to the mere fulfilment of obligations—whether related to participation in active labour market measures or meeting minimum educational requirements, for instance—they can serve as incentives for improving individuals' initial situations (Bredgaard, 2015, p. 439). Emotional and relational factors, on the other hand, are expected to have more indirect effects on individuals' chances of securing (new) employment. While these seemingly positive aspects are associated with participation in training programmes, one inherent limitation is the relatively short duration of these

initiatives. Moreover, vulnerable unemployed individuals continue to face risks of stigmatization and restricted access to low-quality jobs. Considering the three "profiles" of the unemployed interviewed, they all share low employability attributes, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Profiles of interviewed unemployed individuals.

Profiles	Expectations/main goals	Labour market (re)integration prospects	Distinct groups
Educational aspirants	Increase education level Distraction from unemployment Getting out of the house Meeting new people	Low	(Older) labour market inactive women; youth with unstable employment; workers with weak labour market attachment
Benefit-dependent programme participants	Maintain social/ unemployment benefits Comply with caseworker's recommendations	Low	Early retirees with weak incentives to work
In-transition unemployed	Finding a job Starting a self-employment business	Moderate	Prime-age unemployed; long-term unemployed youth

All three profiles encompass distinct groups of vulnerable unemployed who face a combination of personal and, in some cases, family-related challenges alongside low work-related capabilities. Many of them encounter multiple barriers and have limited expectations or incentives for finding employment. Moreover, the training programmes they participate in are often tied to sectors with scarce job opportunities, further limiting their prospects.

3.2. Policies' Shortcomings and How Institutions Work

As mentioned above, the designation "active labour market policies" refers to various types of policies (Kluve et al., 2007), including, among others, training programmes, job search assistance, private-sector incentive schemes (like wage subsidies), and temporary job creation programmes in the public sector (Kelly et al., 2011). This article focuses on a specific type of ALMP, training programmes.

Over the past two decades, Portugal has developed a more robust training system for the working-age population, focusing on addressing low education and skill levels among adults. For those struggling to (re)enter the labour market, these initiatives—primarily led by the IEFP, the Portuguese PES—aim to enhance employability through skill development and labour market integration. Like other PES (Csillag & Scharle, 2019), the IEFP functions as a kind of *maestro*, coordinating various employment and vocational training initiatives.

IEFP is the public body responsible for employment and vocational training policies in Portugal, operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, while maintaining administrative and financial autonomy (OECD, 2024, p. 24). The IEFP comprises a range of services and operates through a decentralized structure, with five sub-national directorates covering mainland Portugal. These regional bodies are responsible for delivering a variety of services aimed at implementing ALMPs.

In its support for unemployed individuals, the IEFP acts as an intermediary between jobseekers and potential employers. Its vocational training programmes primarily target groups facing significant labour market disadvantages (Valadas, 2022), including the long-term unemployed, immigrants, low-skilled workers, persons with disabilities, and individuals experiencing severe social exclusion.

Over the years, the IEFP has implemented a wide range of employment and vocational training policies, adapting to increasingly diverse target groups and shifting priorities. While employment-related measures have been a primary focus, vocational training has gained prominence, addressing sector-specific skill needs. Despite these evolving priorities, the IEFP's training offerings have remained relatively stable.

For young people, qualification programmes include: (a) apprenticeship courses (*cursos de aprendizagem para jovens*), which provide both academic and professional certification, focusing on labour market integration; (b) youth education and training courses (CEFJ; *cursos de educação e formação de jovens*), primarily aimed at addressing early school dropout and deficits in academic and/or professional qualifications; and (c) technological specialisation courses (CET; *cursos de especialização tecnológica*), designed to equip students with scientific knowledge and technological skills to help them start a career.

For adults, the training offer includes: (a) adult education and training courses (EFA; *cursos de educação e formação de adultos*), which aim to establish secondary education as the minimum educational standard; (b) courses under the "Vida Ativa" programme; and (c) the Recognition, Validation, and Certification of Competencies measure (RVCC; *reconhecimento e validação e certificação de competências*; see also Dray, 2016, p. 208).

The target groups for most initiatives are young people—particularly those not employed, in education or training (NEET)—the long-term unemployed (particularly those with low levels of qualification), and individuals with disabilities.

In the period following the 2007–2008 financial crisis, when unemployment reached historically high levels (2011–2015), there was a diversification in the profiles of individuals seeking (new) employment amid a labour market with scarce job opportunities. At that time, the IEFP was called upon to adjust the types of programs and measures offered, redefine priority groups, and adapt its own operational model—particularly in response to a shrinking number of staff alongside a growing and exceptionally high number of new registrations. The preferred measures were aimed at quickly integrating individuals into the labour market. The vocational training offered during this period was predominantly short-term and non-certifying, mainly ensuring access to an occupation and/or precarious employment, especially for those in situations of greater social vulnerability, and often in the informal economy. During this time, priority was also given to beneficiaries of social benefits (e.g., unemployment benefits).

As the country's macroeconomic and labour market situation improved (OECD, 2024), it became necessary to readjust policies' goals and priorities. For example, even greater attention was given to individuals who had been excluded from the labour market for an extended period. Additionally, the need to enhance digital skills became more prominent. As the principle of vocational training programmes—particularly those aimed at the re-employment of low-skilled groups—remained strongly linked to increasing individuals' education levels and addressing their lack of skills, the available programmes continued to cover a limited range of

(mostly traditional) occupations. Among the occupations offered—such as hairdressing, metalwork, and machine operation—training follows a highly segmented framework composed mainly of short courses. These programmes frequently substitute for formal schooling among early school leavers or merely occupy older unemployed individuals. Yet, as Bonoli (2013, p. 26) observes, they "do not fundamentally change the type of job a person can do." Moreover, they seldom provide vulnerable participants with the essential wraparound supports—such as housing assistance or social services—that might improve employability and remove non-work barriers (Sage, 2015).

Our case study confirms these shortcomings. Despite periodic investments in equipment and facilities, course materials, curricula, and learning objectives have not been sufficiently updated. The resulting standardized offerings—ranging from hairdressing and beauty therapy to locksmithing and automotive mechanics—remain limited in scope and less competitive than those in the private sector. Furthermore, local economic and social contexts—such as predominant industries and urgent community needs—are too often overlooked in programme design and delivery.

Interviews with PES caseworkers and officials underscore this occupation-centered approach, revealing a general lack of tailored, integrated strategies to address participants' complex "wicked" social problems (Lönngren & van Poeck, 2020). Consequently, the programmes under study do not demonstrate sustained, long-term investment in human capital development. These shortcomings are especially critical in an era of automation and technological change, which has reduced opportunities in certain occupations (Susskind, 2020). Providing adequate, context-sensitive training for individuals who are temporarily or long-term out of the labour market is therefore essential. Nevertheless, many existing programmes are poorly designed and fail to address the diverse support needs of those facing multiple labour-market challenges (Greve & Paster, 2022, p. 281).

Even among individuals with prior work experience who are motivated to enhance their skills, as was one of our interview groups, training programmes frequently fail to account for their personal and social challenges, broader employment barriers, and the prevailing economic context. This oversight is critical, as the effectiveness of ALMPs also hinges on factors such as the business cycle, firms' competitiveness, national income levels, and institutional capacity (Simões & Tosun, 2024).

3.3. Unanticipated or Unintended Consequences of Training Programmes for Vulnerable Unemployed Groups in Portugal

The target audience of the initiatives developed by IEFP—particularly training programmes—includes individuals seeking employment as well as those who, while employed, wish to change jobs. In addition to the formal categorization used to classify the unemployed into four major groups—registered unemployed, employed, occupied, and unavailable—an IEFP official interviewed highlighted two key characteristics of the recipients of IEFP policies: availability and work capacity. The same interviewee also emphasized the special attention that IEFP gives to individuals in situations of greater vulnerability. This concern is reflected in the type of training offered, which includes programmes specifically designed for long-term unemployed individuals and for groups facing difficulties in accessing the labour market.

In the selection and guidance of candidates for different training opportunities, employment, and/or vocational training, officers apply formal criteria defined by regulations that govern each action/measure.

In the case of unemployed individuals, specific criteria such as qualification level, age, and duration of unemployment are considered. Alongside the formal criteria that determine eligibility for participation in a specific programme, other factors influence the selection and integration of unemployed individuals into various programmes. Certain personal characteristics, such as motivation, cognitive abilities, language proficiency, and level/potential for commitment, are valued in the selection and redistribution process. Additionally, it is important to consider factors that impact the functioning of the training programmes themselves: (a) dropout rates from courses and (b) the number of trainees successfully integrated into the labour market. Thus, it becomes evident that the (pre)existence of indicators demonstrating the potential success of these measures is taken into account by employment officers during the (pre)selection of candidates.

This is a recurring topic in various international studies. Referring to the American context, Heckman and Smith (2004) have shown how participation in certain social programmes involves different stages (eligibility, programme awareness, application, acceptance into the programme, and formal enrolment), which can lead to unequal access to programmes among different groups. In a more recent study with a specific focus on labour market policies, Bonoli and Liechti (2018) analyse how the stages and criteria behind a rigorous selection process determine whether the most vulnerable unemployed individuals are included in these programmes. More specifically, the authors distinguish two phases in the candidate selection process: the "eligibility" phase, based on formal criteria that must be met to participate, and the "inclusion" phase, which depends on additional characteristics such as local language proficiency, a certain cognitive level, and motivation. As a result, there is a potential mismatch between eligible candidates and those who participate in the programmes. These analyses align with our own empirical research and lead us to question whether individuals at higher risk of labour market exclusion and with greater integration vulnerabilities ultimately end up being excluded from the selection process or redirected to lower-skilled programmes. In other words, we question whether eligibility criteria themselves might be contributing to exclusion.

The rise of the green economy and the expansion of green jobs signal the need for new skill sets. However, equipping workers who face multiple vulnerabilities remains a significant challenge. Although the Portuguese labour market and qualification levels—especially among young adults—have improved in recent years, adult educational attainment in Portugal continues to lag behind international standards, especially within older age cohorts (OECD, 2024, p. 22). Among the working-age population (25–64 years old), both non-tertiary and tertiary attainment rates remain below the EU average, highlighting the ongoing need to strengthen adult and alternative education pathways. In 2022, Portugal's adult learning participation rate stood at 44.2%, slightly below the EU average of 46.6%. These persistent gaps underscore how longstanding structural limitations continue to constrain efforts to realign employment policies with the demands of the 21st-century labour market.

Drawing on Merton's (1936, p. 896) concept of "unanticipated consequences," it is crucial to examine how formal training policies—designed to promote labour-market (re)insertion—can sometimes fail vulnerable participants or even produce harmful effects. For instance, programme participation may engender stigmatization, especially among the most disadvantaged groups. Our case study reveals that the interaction of individual vulnerabilities and institutional constraints undermines participants' chances of securing stable, quality employment. Moreover, the very nature of the skills imparted by these training programmes can both shape and, in some instances, constrain jobseekers' employment prospects (Kelly et al., 2011, p. 15). These

limitations are most pronounced when participants do not match the profile for which the programmes were originally designed (Benda et al., 2019) or when employers remain sceptical about the programmes' quality and the extent of participants' skill development (Martin, 2015).

Our research aligns with existing studies, suggesting that those most in need of new or additional skills are often the least likely to participate in training programmes that provide access to secure and high-quality employment (Bonoli et al., 2017; Bonoli & Liechti, 2018). This phenomenon reflects the "Matthew effect," whereby social policies disproportionately benefit those with fewer needs—typically the middle class and higher-educated—thereby undermining the equalizing intent of such interventions and, in some cases, exacerbating disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged groups (Yerkes et al., 2022, p. 295). Focusing on active employment policies, Bonoli and Liechti (2018) show that even when programmes are explicitly directed at vulnerable groups—such as the long-term unemployed, low-qualified workers, or immigrant populations—it is not necessarily the least advantaged who benefit most from initiatives designed to improve labour-market integration or access to social protection (e.g., health care, education, family support). They attribute this "Matthew effect" in part to two complementary mechanisms. First, participation in training, for example, presumes a baseline level of knowledge (such as language proficiency) and/or existing skills. Second, these programmes often anticipate and reproduce the very selection processes that participants will face in the labour market (Bonoli & Liechti, 2018, p. 897). McKnight (2015) further underscores that low expectations and the limited returns delivered by active policies for "vulnerable unemployed" make it difficult to achieve promising outcomes—particularly in the absence of substantial political commitment and investment. Together, these insights underscore that without substantial political investment, inter-policy coherence, and wraparound support, even well-intentioned active labour market programmes risk reproducing existing inequalities and yielding only limited benefits for those they are designed to help.

4. Conclusion

As the world faces unprecedented environmental challenges that threaten both human society and the physical environment, the social implications of global ecological risks—identified by Beck (1992) several years ago—have become even more evident. In this context, EU institutions have sought to follow a trajectory—albeit an uncertain one—that aims to reconcile social and ecological objectives. Given the rapidly changing economic, social, digital, and demographic landscape, it is crucial to equip workers with training and new sorts of skills to meet evolving labour market demands. Despite the potentialities attributed to the Social Investment approach in facilitating life-course transition and human capital policies, specific interventions targeting unemployed individuals from vulnerable groups do not necessarily increase their chances of (re)entering and succeeding in the labour market.

Considering the experience of Portugal, some of the schemes designed for vulnerable populations—aimed at improving their preparedness through investment in skills and education—continue to show signs of ineffectiveness in promoting their social and labour market participation. While at the ideational level, Portuguese authorities demonstrate a cooperative willingness to advance training policies, several institutional constraints persist. The analysis of specific programmes reveals that they fail to address the complex needs of vulnerable unemployed—not only in terms of employment, but also in granting access to health, education, and other social services—as they lack a tailor-made support and fail to provide a holistic

policy and institutional approach. This creates additional challenges for individuals whose social and labour market conditions are already highly precarious.

Despite the limitations of this study's empirical scope, the findings suggest that the planning and design of vocational training courses in Portugal may restrict jobseekers' ability to improve their employability and secure adequate employment. More effective and inclusive initiatives remain constrained by long-standing institutional arrangements—namely, the structure of labour market governance, inefficient allocation of welfare resources, fragmented policy frameworks, and redistributive mechanisms that reproduce inequality. In this context, the core objectives of social investment—particularly those related to upskilling, inclusion, and the promotion of quality employment—have yet to be fully realised in Southern European countries such as Portugal. This undermines the potential of ALMPs to act as preventive mechanisms against persistent unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion.

From a historical institutionalist perspective, the case of Portugal illustrates how entrenched bureaucratic routines, organisational inertia, and path-dependent policy legacies continue to shape the design and implementation of ALMPs, including EU-framed training programmes. Rather than transformative reform, what can be observed is incremental adjustment—where new goals and priorities, such as those embedded in the EPSR and the EGD, are layered onto existing institutional structures without fundamentally altering their logic or effectiveness. EU-level pressures—whether coercive, normative, or mimetic—often clash with national institutional trajectories and administrative capacities, leading to a selective or partial appropriation of reform agendas. As such, the slow pace of institutional change highlights the enduring influence of historical trajectories in shaping the possibilities and limits of labour market and social policy innovation in Portugal.

Three key themes emerging from this research warrant further examination. First, as technological advances continually transform both the nature of work and how it is carried out, it is essential to acknowledge that many individuals lack the necessary technical skills and possess limited learning capacities and social competencies. This raises the question of whether social integration through employment is the sole—or even the most effective—pathway. Second, territorial specificities must be considered. In Portugal, significant variations exist in how PES agencies operate and collaborate with local and regional stakeholders to address jobseekers' social and economic needs. Moreover, factors such as business dynamics, the availability of employment opportunities, transport infrastructure, housing costs, and access to health and educational services directly influence vulnerable individuals' ability to reintegrate into the labour market. Third, while rising pollution and climate change present significant risks, they also create new employment opportunities and drive policies toward a more sustainable, green economy. This underscores the necessity of training programmes that target emerging skill sets and equip all individuals—including the most vulnerable—to pursue alternative forms of work and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Equipping individuals for the challenges of a green economy and digital industries remains a considerable challenge, as it must be balanced with respect for their complex needs and overall well-being. This is particularly true for those with multiple vulnerabilities enrolled in traditional training programmes, whose prospects for successful integration into 21st-century societies remain significantly constrained. Up until now, structural constraints continue to limit the autonomy of public policies' PES units and their practitioners.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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