

Institutional Practices And The Making Of NEET Status Among Migrant Youth In Southern Italy

Pierangela Contini, PhD¹, Ass. Prof. Dr. Paolo Contini, PhD²

Abstract

This article investigates how institutional practices and policy discourses co-produce the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) condition among young people with migrant backgrounds in Southern Italy. Preliminary ISTAT data for 2025 show that 26.4% of foreign youth (aged 15–34) are classified as NEET, compared to 13.1% of their Italian counterparts. Based on twenty semi-structured interviews with professionals and twenty with young migrants, the study explores how bureaucratic rigidity, delayed recognition of qualifications, and legal and language barriers intersect to reinforce institutional exclusion. Adopting a post-structural¹ and critical policy lens, the analysis conceptualizes NEET not merely as a descriptive label but as a performative and institutional mechanism that actively shapes life trajectories. Findings reveal a systemic process of “NEET-ization” sustained by administrative routines, whereby young migrants are labeled and trapped in this status upon arrival. The article argues for an epistemic reversal to challenge the premise that inactivity is voluntary, highlighting the need for context-sensitive policies and inclusive recognition systems.

Keywords: *Migrant youth; NEET; institutional practices; integration policy; credential recognition.*

Introduction

Over recent decades, the acronym NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) has evolved from a narrow statistical descriptor into a pivotal, yet deeply problematic, category in global youth research and policy. Originating in the United Kingdom during the 1980s to identify youths perceived as vulnerable and disengaged, its institutional codification was cemented by the Bridging the Gap report (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999; Istance et al., 1994). While initially designed to delineate a segment of the native-born youth population, the concept has been progressively universalized, becoming a key indicator for international institutions such as Eurostat and Eurofound (Eurofound, 2012; Serracant, 2014).

According to ISTAT (2025), 26.4 % of foreign youth in Italy were classified as NEET in early 2025, compared with 13.1 % of native peers. Comparable OECD data indicate that NEET rates among immigrant youth in EU countries are consistently higher than among native-born youth (OECD, 2025), underscoring structural barriers to integration.

Its application to youth with a migrant background, however, reveals and amplifies its conceptual fissures. This article contends that the widespread and often indiscriminate use of the NEET label has fundamentally transformed its sociological function. It has morphed from a tentative empirical description into a powerful normative and performative construct—a “social problem” demanding political attention and intervention (Gusfield, 1981). Through a post-structural lens (Foucault, 1976; Butler, 1997), we argue that

¹Research Fellow, Department of education, Psychology, Communication. University of Bari “Aldo Moro” (Italy) Email: pierangela.contini@gmail.com ORCID: 0000-0001-9111-2283

²Associate Professor, Department of Human Sciences. Telematic University of Studies “IUL” – Florence (Italy) Email: p.contini@iuline.it ORCID: 0000-0002-2420-0360

labelling a young person as NEET does not merely describe a condition but actively participates in its production, activating mechanisms of classification and visibility that reshape social subjectivity.

Critical scholarship has long warned that NEET constitutes an overly residual and generalizing category, erasing internal heterogeneity and clustering diverse biographies under a homogenizing and stigmatizing tag (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Furlong, 2006; Nudzor, 2010; Yates & Payne, 2006). These limitations are particularly acute for young people with a migrant background, for whom the label is often affixed upon arrival, irrespective of skills, aspirations, or pre-migration trajectories.

When examined through an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989), migration status intersects dynamically with legal precariousness, unequal recognition of cultural capital, and gendered care responsibilities, producing cumulative vulnerabilities (Eurofound, 2022; Rahmani et al., 2024). In this sense, migrant background functions as an aggravating institutional marker rather than an individual characteristic.

Drawing on qualitative evidence from twenty semi-structured interviews with practitioners in Southern Italy and twenty semi-structured interviews with youth migrants, conducted within a national research project on NEET inclusion, this article introduces the concept of institutional NEET. This concept captures the systemic and self-reinforcing process through which young migrants are not only automatically classified as NEET upon entry but are also structurally maintained within this condition by bureaucratic, legal, and organizational constraints.

By shifting the analytical focus from individual deficits to institutional dysfunctions, this contribution reframes NEET status among migrant youth as the outcome of policy design and administrative routines, rather than voluntary inactivity or personal failure.

Methodology

This study employs a sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) to investigate the NEET condition among first-generation migrant youth in a southern Italian city. The research first integrated the analysis of secondary statistical data to quantify the phenomenon locally, followed by two sequential phases of primary qualitative data collection to explore its experiential dimensions in depth. This approach is methodologically justified by the need to both map the structural dimensions of the issue and to navigate the complex, sensitive field contexts involving vulnerable populations (Liamputtong, 2007), while critically unpacking how administrative categories like NEET are translated into local practice by street-level professionals (Lipsky, 2010).

Data collection began with twenty interviews involving key professional stakeholders—social workers, educators, career counsellors, cultural mediators, and trainers (coded OPR). Engaging these actors first served a dual purpose: they acted as essential gatekeepers for ethical access to the youth population and as crucial interpreters of the local socio-institutional landscape. Their insights were instrumental in mapping the operational realities of youth services and the specific barriers faced by migrants, allowing us to refine our interview protocols and sampling strategy for the second phase.

The core of the qualitative study consists of twenty-one interviews with first-generation migrant youth (coded GVMGRN), aged 17–35.

Although common NEET monitoring frameworks by Eurostat and OECD focus on the 15–29 age group, official Italian data collections and labor market reports indicate that transitions into employment and training often extend into the early thirties, particularly for migrant and precariously documented youth. OECD data show that NEET rates for immigrant youth (using a similar broad age approach) were systematically higher than for native-born peers across OECD countries in 2024, highlighting the need to include older youth to capture prolonged transitions into stable economic and educational pathways (OECD International Migration Outlook 2025).

Sampling relied on a snowball technique, facilitated by the networks established with professionals during the first phase. A pivotal finding that emerged from this phase

was the empirical limitation of the formal NEET classification. Contrary to the passive image the label suggests, many contacted youths were actively engaged in activities vital for their legal and social integration—such as attending mandatory Italian language courses to secure residency permits or enrolling in formal education—or were working in the informal economy. This observation aligns with critical scholarship that questions the homogenizing use of the NEET category, noting it often masks diverse activities and forms of agency (Yates & Payne, 2007; Furlong, 2006). This discovery prompted a strategic reframing of our analysis. We shifted focus from solely diagnosing the causes of NEET status to also investigating the strategies and factors that prevent its occurrence, thereby highlighting forms of agency and navigation within structural constraints. Conversely, those youth who did fit a “pure” NEET profile were often found in situations of profound multi-dimensional marginalization. This finding resonates with international research that identifies a strong correlation between sustained NEET status and a heightened risk of severe social exclusion and involvement in deviant or criminal economies (Bäckman & Nilsson, 2016; Bynner & Parsons, 2002), suggesting the label captures a specific subgroup in acute distress.

Two distinct yet complementary interview guides were employed, one for professionals and one for youth. The latter was specifically calibrated after the first phase to better capture the locally salient concerns and navigational strategies identified. All interviews were conducted in Italian or a mutually understandable vehicular language, following informed consent and strict ethical protocols ensuring anonymity and voluntary participation.

Data analysis followed an iterative, reflexive approach inspired by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The full corpus of 40 interviews was analyzed using Taguette software, moving from open coding to thematic clustering and theoretical integration. The process was strengthened by team-based double-coding and constant comparison, embracing the constructivist principle that the researcher is co-participant in generating meaning from the data. The main methodological challenge—the inherent ambiguity and potential stigma of the NEET label—ultimately became a central analytical theme, revealing the mismatch between rigid bureaucratic categories and the fluid, strategic realities of migrant youth trajectories.

Results

Inactivity as a Structural Constraint

The analysis shows that NEET status among migrant youth is not merely recorded by institutions but actively produced through administrative routines, legal frameworks, and service provision practices. Rather than reflecting individual disengagement, inactivity emerges as a structurally imposed condition shaped by migration governance and youth policy implementation.

Institutional Production of NEET Status

Across interviews with professionals, a central finding concerns the automatic classification of young migrants as NEET upon arrival. Operators consistently describe NEET status as an a priori institutional identity, assigned independently of migrants’ skills, aspirations, or previous trajectories. As one professional stated, “A NEET with a migrant background... they arrive already as NEETs,” signaling how the label precedes any substantive assessment of individual situations (OPR12, 2025).

This automatic classification produces immediate marginalization. Young migrants often arrive with clear projects, continuing education, entering the labor market, or supporting families transnationally, yet institutional procedures suspend these trajectories. As one practitioner observed, many arrive “to help their families, with the goal of sending money home,” only to find themselves “here doing nothing, not studying or working, which is extremely discouraging” (OPR2, 2025).

Highly qualified individuals, including those with backgrounds in engineering, IT, medicine, or design, are rendered invisible within the Italian system due to the non-recognition of credentials. Professionals describe this process as a form of systemic human capital devaluation, producing what they explicitly name as “brain waste” (OPR1, 2025). NEET status thus emerges not as a neutral descriptor but as an institutional outcome of blocked recognition.

For migrant youth, this condition is experienced as one of liminality and suspension. Waiting for administrative decisions, i.e., residence permits, asylum outcomes, or document renewals, prevents forward planning and reinforces feelings of stagnation. As one young interviewee explained, “If my commission hurries up, then I will start working seriously” (GVNMGRN1, Pakistan, 25 years). Inactivity, in this sense, is not chosen but produced through prolonged bureaucratic waiting.

Legal Status as a Structural Bottleneck

Legal status emerges as the primary institutional barrier structuring access to all other forms of inclusion. Delays related to residence permits and asylum procedures prevent access to education, vocational training, labor market programmes, and formal employment. Professionals describe a systemic trap in which young migrants lose job opportunities or are excluded from internships solely due to documentation issues. One practitioner recalled the case of a young man who lost a permanent job after his asylum appeal was rejected, describing it as “a defeat... the company had invested in this young man” (OPR2, 2025).

Youth testimonies confirm how legal precarity enforces exclusion. Several interviewees reported being unable to work or enroll in courses despite having skills or concrete opportunities. A qualified mechanic explained that he was denied an internship simply because “I didn’t have the documents” (GVNMGRN21). Another young asylum seeker described his situation as one of complete stasis: “I’m waiting for the results... I can’t work” (GVNMGRN19).

Legal uncertainty thus functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that institutionalizes inactivity and channels young migrants into informal or precarious arrangements. Rather than a temporary administrative issue, legal status becomes a central mechanism through which NEET status is produced and maintained.

Credential Non-recognition and Forced De-professionalization

A second institutional mechanism sustaining NEET status is the failure to recognize foreign qualifications and prior learning. Both professionals and youth describe validation procedures as complex, opaque, and time-consuming. For many, the impossibility of credential recognition blocks access to appropriate educational or occupational pathways. As one practitioner noted, “If I could have my degree recognized and continue university here, I’d stop being NEET. But since that’s impossible, they’re forced to stay NEET” (OPR5, 2025).

This rigidity leads to systematic de-professionalization. Migrant youth with university degrees or vocational qualifications are redirected into low-skilled or informal work, or remain inactive while navigating bureaucratic obstacles. A Colombian design graduate described the recognition process as so confusing that it was “Meglio fare tutto da capo” (“better to start all over again”) (GVNMGRN15). Similarly, a Senegalese graduate in Marketing and Communication abandoned the process, describing it as “difficult and time consuming” (GVNMGRN20).

For those with non-formal or non-Western educational backgrounds, the barriers are even more absolute. As professionals explained, “nothing is validated,” forcing youth to restart schooling from the beginning (OPR12, 2025). These institutional constraints, as one operator acknowledged, “assign” young migrants to a NEET condition “maybe not forever, but for a long time” (OPR12, 2025).

Language Provision and Institutional Gatekeeping

Italian language proficiency is universally identified as a prerequisite for access to education and employment. However, the limited availability and low intensity of institutional language courses constitute another structural barrier. Some interviewees reported courses lasting only a few hours per week, leaving them “not understanding anything, just attending” during the initial months (OPR12, 2025).

Language thus operates as a form of institutional gatekeeping. Lack of proficiency restricts access to training, employment, and even basic workplace communication. One young Egyptian interviewee reported that his construction employer spoke only in local dialect, which he could not understand (GVNMGRN5, Egypt, 19 years).

Crucially, interviews suggest that linguistic barriers are not merely technical but relational. As one professional observed, when young migrants feel recognized and receive meaningful guidance, “they recover the linguistic gap in very little time” (OPR15, 2025). This indicates that language deficits often reflect broader institutional failures rather than individual incapacity.

Subjective Resilience, Discrimination, and Support Networks

While institutional barriers structure the production of NEET status, the analysis also reveals significant forms of agency, resilience, and reliance on informal support networks among migrant youth. These strategies do not offset structural exclusion but instead highlight the gaps and failures of formal institutions.

Many young migrants reported progressing not through official services, but through informal relationships with individuals positioned at the margins of institutions. Access to information, bureaucratic support, and even legal assistance often depended on chance encounters with volunteers, social workers, landlords, or community members. For example, one young man from India described how his landlord, also working in a tax assistance center, helped him navigate administrative procedures. Another interviewee from Guinea (23 years old) credited a volunteer from an association with providing both language support and assistance in finding a lawyer following a negative asylum decision.

These informal networks function as crucial bridges where institutional support is fragmented or inaccessible. Similarly, a young man from Senegal (29 years old) described being guided into voluntary work and later formal training through the intervention of a social worker and contacts within the Sant 'Egidio association. Such trajectories underline how exit from NEET status often depends less on formal policy measures than on personalized, relational forms of mediation.

At the same time, experiences of discrimination further compound institutional exclusion. Several interviewees recounted being refused housing once landlords realized they were foreigners, or being subjected to explicit racist incidents in public and workplace settings. One young man from Bangladesh (17 years old) reported being told on a bus to “clean my shoes for 20 euro,” while another from Senegal (29 years old) recalled being told in a restaurant, “we don't want you to serve our table.” These experiences reinforce social marginalization and constrain access to employment and stable housing.

Gendered vulnerabilities also emerged. While care work was perceived as a relatively accessible entry point into employment for women, particularly in domestic and caregiving roles, female interviewees, especially married women with children, reported limited opportunities beyond these sectors. Traditional gender expectations and the lack of childcare support further restricted their educational and occupational options.

Importantly, the presence of resilience and agency does not contradict the concept of institutional NEET. Rather, it underscores that prolonged NEET status persists despite active efforts by young migrants to navigate and overcome institutional constraints. Informal support networks and individual strategies emerge not as alternatives to policy, but as compensatory mechanisms in contexts where institutional pathways fail to provide timely and effective inclusion.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study demonstrates that NEET status among migrant youth is produced through institutional practices rather than individual disengagement. Rather than describing inactivity, the category functions as a performative administrative label that actively structures trajectories of exclusion (Assousa, 2019; Ellena, 2025). Institutional NEET refers to the process by which migrant youth are automatically classified as NEET upon arrival and maintained in this status through legal uncertainty, non-recognition of qualifications, limited language provision, and fragmented institutional support. This process produces inactivity structurally, rather than reflecting individual disengagement.

Prolonged NEET status persists despite, rather than because of, migrant youth behavior. Many actively seek education, employment, and training, participate in language courses, or work informally while awaiting documentation. Their classification as NEET obscures ongoing forms of agency, rendering structural constraints invisible and shifting responsibility onto individuals. Informal support networks, volunteers, and community intermediaries illustrate how exits from NEET status often occur outside formal policy channels, compensating for institutional failures rather than reflecting effective interventions.

Structural inequalities further compound inactivity. Discrimination in housing and labor markets, and the concentration of migrant women in care and domestic work, intersect with legal precarity and non-recognition of credentials, limiting access to stable occupational trajectories. Subjective narratives reveal experiences of suspension and liminality: prolonged waiting for documents, legal security, or qualification validation. NEET status thus emerges as an institutional outcome, rendering youth invisible both as migrants and as NEETs.

These findings call for an epistemic reversal in youth and integration policies. The challenge is not merely to activate inactive individuals, but to dismantle structural mechanisms that produce inactivity (Vieira et al., 2021). Exiting NEET status rarely depends solely on job availability; it requires legal certainty, recognition of prior learning, access to intensive language training, and coordinated, multidisciplinary support. Effective policies must move beyond reductive notions of NEET as voluntary inactivity, recognizing that structural constraints, administrative delays, inaccessible courses, or unmet psychosocial needs, underlie prolonged inactivity.

Despite systemic obstacles, migrant youth demonstrate remarkable agency and resilience. They navigate complex institutions, interpret opaque rules, and pursue education and employment informally. Their prolonged NEET condition reflects systemic dysfunction rather than passivity. Policies should therefore adopt personalized, cross-sectoral interventions that prioritize legal certainty, functional validation of skills, and inclusive pathways to integration. While grounded in a Southern Italian context, these mechanisms are analytically transferable to other European settings characterized by restrictive migration regimes and fragmented youth policies. Addressing migrant youth exclusion requires not only targeted activation measures but a critical reassessment of how institutional categories themselves shape inequality.

References

1. Assousa, G. (2019). Ni jóvenes, ni desempleados, ni peligrosos, ni novedosos. Una crítica sociológica del concepto de ‘jóvenes nini’ en torno los casi de España, México y Argentina. *Cuadernos de Relaciones Laborales*, 37(1), 91–111. <https://doi.org/10.5209/crla.63823>
2. Bäckman, O., & Nilsson, A. (2016). Long-term consequences of being not in employment, education or training as a young adult. Stability and change in three Swedish birth cohorts. *European Societies*, 18(2), 136–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2016.1141306>
3. Blommaert, J. (2010). *The sociolinguistics of globalization*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Bourdieu, P. (1993). *La misère du monde*. Seuil.

5. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
6. Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. Routledge.
7. Bynner, J., & Parsons, S. (2002). Social exclusion and the transition from school to work: The case of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 60(2), 289–309. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.2001.1868>
8. Charmaz, K., & Bryant, A. (A cura di). (2007). *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory*. Sage Publications.
9. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1228995>
10. Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3^a ed.). Sage Publications.
11. Ellena, A. M. (2025). Unveiling the complexity of Italian NEET status through Latent Class Analysis: Examining NEET profiles and their engagement with Public Employment Services (PES). *Social Indicators Research*, 179, 1665–1686. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-024-03437-y>
12. Eurofound. (2012). *NEETs – Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe*. Publications Office of the European Union.
13. Eurofound. (2022). *Youth and COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being*. Publications Office of the European Union.
14. Foucault, M. (1976). *La volontà di sapere*. Feltrinelli.
15. Furlong, A. (2006). Not a very NEET solution: Representing problematic labour market transitions among early school-leavers. *Work, Employment and Society*, 20(3), 553–569. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017006067001>
16. Gusfield, J. R. (1981). *The culture of public problems: Drinking-driving and the symbolic order*. University of Chicago Press.
17. Istance, D., Rees, G., & Williamson, H. (1994). *Young people not in education, training or employment in South Glamorgan*. South Glamorgan Training and Enterprise Council.
18. ISTAT. (2025). *Giovani fuori da lavoro e formazione – Dati primo trimestre 2025*.
19. Liamputtong, P. (2007). *Researching the vulnerable: A guide to sensitive research methods*. Sage Publications.
20. Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services* (30th anniversary expanded ed.). Russell Sage Foundation.
21. Mattoo, A., Neagu, I. C., & Özden, Ç. (2005). Brain waste? Educated immigrants in the U.S. labor market. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* (3581). <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-3581>
22. Nudzor, H. (2010). Depicting young people by what they are not: Conceptualisation and usage of NEET as a deficit label. *Educational Futures*, 2(2), 12–25.
23. Obasuyi, O. Q. (2025). *Lo sfruttamento della razza. Le nuove gerarchie della segregazione*. DeriveApprodi.
24. OECD (2025). *International Migration Outlook 2025*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/ae26c893-en>
25. Pfeffer, T., & Skrivanek, I. (2018). Why is the recognition of credentials not just a matter of good will? Five theories and the Austrian case. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 5(4), 389–422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2018.1439880>
26. Rahmani, H., Groot, W., & Rahmani, A. M. (2024). Unravelling the NEET phenomenon: A systematic review and meta-analysis of risk factors. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 29(1), 2331576. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2024.2331576>

27. Save the Children Italia. (2024). *Nascosti in piena vista: Cosa accade ai minori stranieri soli a 18 anni (IV ed.)*. Save the Children Italia.
28. Serracant, P. (2014). A brute indicator for a NEET case: Genesis and evolution of a problematic concept. *Social Indicators Research*, 117(2), 401–419. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-013-0352-5>
29. Social Exclusion Unit. (1999). *Bridging the gap: New opportunities for 16–18 year olds not in education, employment or training*. The Stationery Office.
30. Tibajev, A. (2019). Effects of recognition of foreign education for newly arrived immigrants. *European Sociological Review*, 35(4), 506–521. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcz025>
31. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2022). *Effective processing of asylum applications: Practical considerations and practices*. International Institute of Humanitarian Law.
32. Vieira, M. M., Pappámikail, L., & Ferreira, T. (2021). NEETs in Europe: From plural (in)visibilities to public policies. *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*, 4(2), 89–94. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43151-021-00045-4>
33. Yates, S., & Payne, M. (2006). Not so NEET? A critique of the use of ‘NEET’ in setting targets for interventions with young people. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9(3), 329–344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260600805671>