

SOME REMARKS ON THE CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY BACKGROUNDS AND NEET STATUS

Andrea Ciccarelli, Marco Di Domizio, Elena Fabrizi

1. Introduction

Literature is progressively focusing on the analysis of the features of so-called NEETs, that is those young people who, besides being not employed, are not involved in any education or training activities.

In the past, we have also investigated the role played by personal characteristics (age, gender, qualification, residence) as well as by context factors (in particular, related to the families of origin in determining the above status). On the one hand, a very complex situation arises, in which Italy shows a distinctive profile compared to other European countries; on the other hand, empirical evidence, while clearly suggests some features as closely linked to the probability of being NEET (such as “economic transfers from family”) do not always clarify the cause-effect relationship between these explanatory variables and the dependent variable.

In such a context, the aim of this paper is to study the causal relationship between family characteristics and NEET status. This analysis will allow us to highlight whether economic transfers from families to younger generations should be intended as intergenerational welfare activities, thus representing the necessary support for those who in certain age groups struggle to find jobs or pursue education / training processes, or whether such transfers can even trigger “effort resetting” mechanisms that push young people towards NEET position.

2. NEETs in Europe: an overview

In 2015 more than 17 million young people in EU-28 area, aged 20-34, were unemployed, inactive, neither enrolled in a school course nor in a training course (Mihai, 2015). This category of young people aged between 20 and 34, named by literature NEET (Neither in Employment nor in Education or Training), has considerably increased going from 16.5% in 2008 to 18.9% in 2015 (Eurostat, 2016) out of the whole corresponding population. Such dynamics is mainly due to

the specific impact made on young people by the world economic crisis arisen in 2008 (Ghoshraya et al., 2016).

In this rather critical framework, there are elements of serious concern also for Italy, where almost one third of young people in the age range above-mentioned are in a NEET status, with substantial heterogeneity as to gender, education and geographical location; such differentiations do not reduce and, if anything, emphasize, the extent of the severity of this phenomenon (Table 1).

Table 1 – NEETs in some European Countries, aged between 20 and 34, by sex (Year 2015 – percentage values).

<i>Country</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Austria	8,8	13,6	11,2
Belgium	16,2	20,0	18,1
Bulgaria	21,4	29,1	25,2
Croatia	22,7	25,0	23,8
Czech Republic	7,9	27,8	17,6
Denmark	9,1	11,3	10,2
Estonia	8,3	22,2	15,1
Finland	13,1	18,0	15,5
France	15,9	22,1	19,0
Germany	8,4	16,2	12,2
Greece	27,7	37,2	32,4
Hungary	12,7	27,4	19,9
Ireland	17,4	22,7	20,1
Italy	26,8	36,4	31,6
Latvia	13,8	21,0	17,3
Lithuania	13,3	17,5	15,3
Luxembourg	6,8	12,7	9,7
Netherlands	7,8	12,4	10,1
Poland	14,0	23,9	18,8
Portugal	15,1	17,1	16,1
Romania	16,5	31,4	23,7
Spain	22,4	26,1	24,2
Sweden	7,8	9,3	8,5
United Kingdom	10,0	20,2	15,1
EU-28	14,9	23,0	18,9

Source: Eurostat

As highlighted in Table 2, NEET status is strongly influenced by the age range. If we identify two different age groups, 20-24 and 30-34, it is clear how profile typologies dramatically change.

In the youngest age group, a slight majority of NEETs is represented by unemployed (51.7%), whereas this percentage drops considerably in the age group 30-34 (37.6%), where NEETs are concentrated among inactive people (62.4%). Wide differences are connected to sex, since both in 20-24 and 30-34 age groups, females are strongly characterised as “inactive”, showing an average of 58% and 72.6% respectively, compared with 38.2% and 41.5% of males.

Table 2 – NEETs in some European Countries, by activity status, age group and sex (Year 2015 – percentage values).

Country	20–24						30–34					
	Unemployed			Inactive			Unemployed			Inactive		
	Tot	M	F	Tot	M	F	Tot	M	F	Tot	M	F
Austria	49,0	58,8	39,8	51,0	41,2	60,2	34,1	53,8	25,8	65,9	46,2	74,2
Belgium	56,3	65,2	47,1	43,7	34,8	52,9	39,1	50,0	31,8	60,9	50,0	68,2
Bulgaria	30,0	35,9	23,9	70,0	64,1	76,1	30,2	43,1	21,2	69,8	56,9	78,8
Croatia	74,4	76,0	71,9	25,6	24,0	28,1	63,8	81,1	51,1	36,3	18,9	48,9
Czech Republic	44,4	68,0	31,9	55,6	32,0	68,1	20,6	57,0	12,5	79,4	43,0	87,5
Denmark	38,7	43,5	33,3	61,3	56,5	66,7	39,0	47,1	33,9	61,0	52,9	66,1
Estonia	37,7	62,2	21,4	62,3	37,8	78,6	24,0	58,9	12,6	76,0	41,1	87,4
Finland	49,0	55,7	40,6	51,0	44,3	59,4	31,1	48,0	21,8	68,9	52,0	78,2
France	59,3	67,9	50,6	40,7	32,1	49,4	42,3	63,5	30,4	57,7	36,5	69,6
Germany	39,8	55,0	28,0	60,2	45,0	72,0	28,1	57,0	15,9	71,9	43,0	84,1
Greece	75,9	76,0	75,8	24,1	24,0	24,2	71,5	87,4	60,9	28,5	12,6	39,1
Hungary	45,7	62,3	32,1	54,3	37,7	67,9	23,9	46,8	16,0	76,1	53,2	84,0
Ireland	53,3	64,5	41,0	46,7	35,5	59,0	33,5	59,9	18,7	66,5	40,1	81,3
Italy	47,4	52,9	41,6	52,6	47,1	58,4	33,8	50,0	24,9	66,2	50,0	75,1
Latvia	51,3	66,7	38,9	48,8	33,3	61,1	38,0	60,4	26,9	62,0	39,6	73,1
Lithuania	50,0	57,5	43,5	50,0	42,5	56,5	33,6	43,3	-	66,4	56,7	-
Luxembourg	53,4	57,0	50,0	46,6	43,0	50,0	33,3	Nd	32,0	66,7	-	68,0
Netherlands	40,3	42,9	37,0	59,7	57,1	63,0	28,6	42,7	21,2	71,4	57,3	78,8
Poland	51,1	63,4	38,5	48,9	36,6	61,5	29,9	48,6	22,0	70,1	51,4	78,0
Portugal	69,1	68,9	69,4	30,9	31,1	30,6	59,6	62,0	57,2	40,4	38,0	42,8
Romania	37,8	54,7	25,8	62,2	45,3	74,2	22,6	48,5	10,7	77,4	51,5	89,3
Spain	74,8	79,1	69,8	25,2	20,9	30,2	69,4	81,9	60,5	30,6	18,1	39,5
Sweden	48,4	56,7	38,9	51,6	43,3	61,1	39,5	52,5	30,9	60,5	47,5	69,1
United Kingdom	40,3	57,7	27,7	59,7	42,3	72,3	18,8	36,7	12,8	81,2	63,3	87,2
EU-28	51,7	61,8	42,0	48,3	38,2	58,0	37,6	58,5	27,4	62,4	41,5	72,6

Source: Eurostat

Furthermore, it has to be underlined that only 4 out of 28 Countries report a female inactivity rate lower than 50% in the upper age group, while in some Countries marked by a different economic framework – such as the Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Hungary, Romania and the United Kingdom), the female inactivity rate in the upper age group goes beyond 80%. Broadly speaking, NEETs in search of a job prevail among males, whereas the inactivity component prevails among females. In such a context, Italy seems to fall into the European average with reference to female inactivity rates, while it is characterized by markedly higher percentages of inactive males, that are higher by 8.9% and 8.5% respectively, in the two age groups here considered.

Further significant elements regarding NEET status are linked to the education level and geographic location (due to space reasons, we don't report such data in table format). With reference to the former, it is clear there is an inverse relationship between the education level and NEET status: on average, in EU-28, in

20-24 age group 38.1% of young people having at least lower secondary education are in NEET status, compared to 13.6% of young people having higher education.

In Italy such percentages are definitely higher, reaching 52.3% and 26.7% respectively. In immediately upper age group (25-29), NEET percentage among young people having a poor education level is 43.2%, dropping to 18.5% and 11.1% respectively for those having higher secondary or tertiary education. Also in this respect, Italy's percentages are worse than European average, since NEETs having a poor education level are 51.5%, whereas those having higher secondary or tertiary education are 29.1% and 26.4% respectively. In the last age group investigated (30-34), average EU-28 percentages do not vary so much compared to the previous age group – respectively 39.6%, 18.8% and 10.9% related to the different education levels – while in Italy such percentages are absolutely better than those of the previous age group – 45.1%, 26.5% and 20.1%, with a considerable decrease in absolute and relative terms for young people having tertiary education.

With reference to urban location, differences in percentages are not as marked as for education. As expected, the percentage of young NEETs is lower for those who live in big cities (17.1%) than rural areas (21.1%). For Italy, such percentages are significantly higher and are within a maximum of 32.2% in rural areas and 30.8% in small towns and outskirts. With reference to geographical location, in our Country a duality in the concentration of NEETs between North, Centre and South Italy has to be highlighted. From the BES Report published by ISTAT in 2016, on 2015 data, it appears that in the age group 15-29, NEET percentages are 18.4%, 21.5% and 35.3% respectively for the North, Centre and South Italy, compared to an estimated national average of 25.7%.

3. Some preliminary remarks

The acronym NEET dates back to the early '90s, particularly in British press. Peter Kingston, in an article published by "The Guardian" on November 2, 2004, introduced some aspects which the scientific literature would focus on later. By comparing British and Japanese contexts, the article already highlighted one of the topics that would be most investigated by literature, that is, whether this phenomenon was the product of an economically-developed society where young people are allowed to "take time" before making their choices clear, or it is the result of an economic and social discomfort that drives young people to exclude themselves from education, training and work.

If the first contributions were focused on trying to identify a shared definition of NEET (Instance et al., 1994), a term subject to different interpretations (Furlong,

2006), over time the attention has shifted towards identifying the potential causes able to change the probability of belonging to such status. These factors trace back to both strictly personal aspects (referring to characters, aptitudes) and to the most general ones related to macroeconomic variables and policies implemented by the various governments (Pemberton, 2008; Mendolia and Walker, 2014; Alfieri et al. 2015; Driouchi and Harkat, 2017).

Among the most significant factors, family background emerges surely. It can affect the likelihood of being NEET in a variety of ways. In a recent contribution Berloff et al. (2016) have highlighted the multiple “parental” transmission channels through which an influence on the (non-)working youth status is exerted by providing extensive literature. On the one hand, parents’ experiences affect the working status of their children indirectly, through the effects triggered by the intergenerational transmission of inequalities, as to social mobility and income, which, by influencing the processes of school education and relational aspects, are transmitted on the potentialities/opportunities of young people (Franzini et al., 2013; Raitano and Vona, 2014), hence on their ability to become NEET or not.

On the other hand, as recently pointed out (Ciccarelli and Fabrizi, 2017), direct effects on the probability of being NEET, related to the family’s economic transfers, could emerge. In particular, in the aforementioned contribution, in Italy the probability of being NEET for a young person up to 35 years old, would be about 1.5 times compared to those who do not receive transfers. This data could be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, family transfers could be interpreted as a mechanism that substitutes welfare which, due to fiscal policies developed over the last few years by Italian governments, is no longer able to support the medium-term effects of the 2008 economic crisis. On the other hand, the ability to draw on family transfers could lead young people reduce their urge to start or complete a course of study, training or work.

In addition to this, further findings emerged in the work abovementioned, which deserve reflections. Women seem to be more penalized; qualifications bring rewards, though in Italy less than elsewhere; NEETs are usually married rather than single, live in a property house, get economic transfers from their family (in our country) rather than from the state (in the other countries analysed). Careful analysis highlights a matter of primary importance: while for some characteristics (such as gender or educational level) the cause/effect relationship would be clear, for others the causal link seems far less obvious, which is a serious problem as to interpretation. For example, NEETs are in such a status because they are supported by their family of origin (through money transfers), or economic support is offered to those young people who are NEETs and, without the economic transfer of their family members, would not be able to take care of their own needs?

4. The incidence of family background on NEET status

The following analysis is based on the findings previously reported, focusing on those aspects for which the direction of the action is less ambiguous. To this end, it seems useful to highlight the association between some features of parents, such as economic status (measured in terms of income level) and their educational background on the likelihood of being NEET. This choice is based on the fact that parents' peculiarities/abilities are necessarily "before" compared to "child" conditions and make it easier to establish the relationship between cause and effect: time, in fact, follows a natural order, thus making it immediately identifiable what is "before" and what is "after", the former causing – potentially – the latter, since the opposite is obviously not possible.

In order to retrieve information on both young people investigated and their parents, and to be able to make international comparisons, it was considered necessary to use cross-section data of the EU-SILC survey: this is, as is well known, a sample survey, annually carried out in different EU Member States. The wave used is that of the year 2012. In this study we focused on the family background of the young NEETs and, in order to analyse the family profiles these young people come from, we focused on the age group 16-25; such a choice, which could seem a limiting factor especially in some contexts such as the Italian one – where young people tend to enter labour market at a later time on average – is needed to include those young people still living at home with their parents. Of course, as the age grows, young people tend to break away from their family of origin to form their own family unit (thus, losing information about their parents). In the estimated model, NEETs were compared with the employed and students of the same age group.

From a methodological point of view, being the dependent variable a multinomial (being employed or being students in comparison with being NEETs), GLM models and the family of binomial distributions with logit link function were considered. To estimate model parameters, the method of maximum likelihood was considered (Agresti, 2013).

Data processing highlights a rather complex situation, and we will try to bring out the most salient features. First of all, regarding the comparison with the employed, the likelihood of being NEET grows when family income declines; furthermore, young people coming from poorer families experience a probability 7.7 times greater in Italy than those coming from richer families; European trends are similar, with a peak in Germany, where the same probability is 16.6 times (Table 3). Similarly, even the age group seems to affect NEET status – that is, younger people risk more of being NEET (with a probability more than twice higher in Italy, Spain and the UK). This seems quite understandable: in the age

group 16-20 there are those who came out or are coming out of the educational system and are therefore looking for their own living and working dimension, albeit in progress; furthermore, some inconsistencies in the answers of those who – being both minors and workers – may be reluctant to disseminate information about their often “informal” employment status could also be present. Also the number of family members seems to increase the odds of being NEET, although its effect is not so high (1.2 higher in Italy, 1.4 in France, 1.3 in Germany and UK).

By contrast, there are no significant differences referred to the parents’ working status (the probability of being NEET halves in Italy only in the case a mother is self-employed) as to the level of parental education (we will soon focus on such point more precisely). Also father and/or mother age seem not to affect significantly children’s status.

With reference to the comparison with the student group (Table 4), the influence of income on the likelihood of remaining NEET is confirmed, although the impact appears lower, in terms both of incidence and of significance in the differences between groups (except for Germany, especially for lower incomes). In addition, the effect of the age group (in this case reducing the odds of re-entering NEET status) and the importance of gender are confirmed: womanhood seems to be generally a “protection” in this case, and this is not a surprise, given that females tend to get higher education levels on average; such element, well-established in Italy, France and Spain (where the probability of being NEET almost halves for women) seems not to have a significant incidence in Germany and the United Kingdom.

Some more precise reflections should be made, instead, on parental education levels that, as can be seen in comparing NEETs and students, tend to protect, when such levels are higher, from the probability of being in the state of inactivity. This is especially true in Italy, where this phenomenon is particularly widespread: for example, father’s degree, compared to the middle school qualification, reduces the probability of being NEET of his child to about a quarter. Such trend develops also in other countries, with the exception of Germany (where differences are not significant) and the United Kingdom, where only mother’s education level, if it is a university level, seems to affect NEET status.

The most interesting aspect is the fact that qualifications, as previously underlined, do not appear to affect the chances of belonging to the NEET group, when compared with the group of employed people. Essentially, a sort of “imitation effect” appears to occur as long as young people are students while, on the contrary, in the transition to the labour market, the family environment seems less influential. In fact, economic differences arise overwhelmingly, which obviously imply also a social relationship system that allows young people an easier transition to the employed status.

Table 3 – *Logit Model: Probability of being included in “NEET” vs “Employed” group – context factors (Odds ratio- young people aged 16-25)*

	<i>Italy</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Spain</i>
Income: Low vs High	7.679 ***	5.398 ***	6.573 ***
Income: Medium-Low vs High	3.510 ***	5.018 ***	2.675 ***
Income: Medium-High vs High	1.833 ***	1.907 ***	1.409 *
SEX: Female vs Male	1.049	1.371	1.177
Age: 16-20 vs 21-25	2.351 ***	1.494 *	2.422 ***
Number of family members	1.206 ***	1.389 ***	1.173 **
PC: YES vs NO	0.876	0.467	0.809
Father’s educ. level: University vs Middle school	1.298	1.365	1.112
Father’s educ. level: High school vs Middle school	0.732 **	0.798	0.804
Mother’s educ. level: University vs Middle school	1.240	1.239	1.027
Mother’s educ. level: High school vs Middle school	1.225	0.839	0.998
Father job: Self-employed vs outside the lab. market	0.863	0.466	0.520 ***
Father job: Employee vs outside the labour market	1.186	1.261	0.915
Mother job: Self-employed vs outside the lab. market	0.553 ***	0.512	1.613
Mother job: Employee vs outside the labour market	1.010	1.001	1.129
Father Age	1.086	0.947	0.968
Mother Age	0.801	1.337	1.392
Father Age ²	1.002	0.998	0.997
Mother Age ²	0.999	1.001	1.000
	<i>Germany</i>	<i>U. K.</i>	
Income: Low vs High	16.563 ***	4.964 **	
Income: Medium-Low vs High	7.141 ***	2.563 **	
Income: Medium-High vs High	3.703 ***	1.476	
SEX: Female vs Male	1.225	0.797	
Age: 16-20 vs 21-25	0.646	2.085 **	
Number of family members	1.328 *	1.376 *	
PC: YES vs NO	0.438	0.378	
Father’s educ. level: University vs Middle school	1.652	2.978 **	
Father’s educ. level: High school vs Middle school	1.531	1.941	
Mother’s educ. level: University vs Middle school	1.193	0.850	
Mother’s educ. level: High school vs Middle school	1.140	0.789	
Father job: Self-employed vs outside the lab. market	0.311 *	0.281 **	
Father job: Employee vs outside the labour market	0.731	0.409 **	
Mother job: Self-employed vs outside the lab. market	3.177	0.157 *	
Mother job: Employee vs outside the labour market	1.610	1.143	
Father Age	0.736	1.097	
Mother Age	0.981	0.592 *	
Father Age ²	1.001	1.006 *	
Mother Age ²	1.003	0.999	

Source: Our estimates on Eurostat data – EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC), 2012

*, **, *** show a significance level respectively equal to 0.10, 0.05, 0.01.

Table 4 – Logit Model: Probability of being included in “NEET” vs “Student” group – context factors (Odds ratio- young people aged 16-25)

	Italy	France	Spain
Income: Low vs High	1.651 ***	1.945 *	1.801 ***
Income: Medium-Low vs High	1.528 ***	0.955	1.420 *
Income: Medium-High vs High	1.126	1.177	1.260
SEX: Female vs Male	0.580 ***	0.598 ***	0.658 ***
Age: 16-20 vs 21-25	0.237 ***	0.160 ***	0.197 ***
Number of family members	1.238 ***	1.249 ***	1.305 ***
PC: YES vs NO	0.276 ***	0.294 **	0.354 ***
Father’s educ. level: University vs Middle school	0.246 ***	0.492 **	0.413 ***
Father’s educ. level: High school vs Middle school	0.455 ***	0.680 *	0.549 ***
Mother’s educ. level: University vs Middle school	0.439 ***	0.271 ***	0.491 ***
Mother’s educ. level: High school vs Middle school	0.586 ***	0.606 **	0.617 ***
Father job: Self-employed vs outside the lab. market	0.909	0.342 **	0.600 ***
Father job: Employee vs outside the labour market	1.050	0.854	0.878
Mother job: Self-employed vs outside the lab. market	0.598 **	0.887	0.867
Mother job: Employee vs outside the labour market	0.777 **	1.102	0.870
Father Age	1.056	0.799	0.986
Mother Age	1.046	1.502 *	1.125
Father Age ²	1.000	0.997	0.999
Mother Age ²	0.999	1.002	1.000
	<i>Germany</i>	<i>U. K.</i>	
Income: Low vs High	11.810 ***	0.559	
Income: Medium-Low vs High	2.927 **	0.989	
Income: Medium-High vs High	1.843	0.871	
SEX: Female vs Male	0.905	0.672	
Age: 16-20 vs 21-25	0.311 ***	0.093 ***	
Number of family members	1.121	0.962	
PC: YES vs NO	0.064 **	0.351	
Father’s educ. level: University vs Middle school	0.813	1.335	
Father’s educ. level: High school vs Middle school	1.383	1.640	
Mother’s educ. level: University vs Middle school	0.483	0.209 ***	
Mother’s educ. level: High school vs Middle school	0.895	0.528	
Father job: Self-employed vs outside the lab. market	0.757	0.728	
Father job: Employee vs outside the labour market	0.880	0.701	
Mother job: Self-employed vs outside the lab. market	2.816	0.076 **	
Mother job: Employee vs outside the labour market	1.373	0.708	
Father Age	0.801	1.231	
Mother Age	1.256	0.573	
Father Age ²	0.997	1.006	
Mother Age ²	1.002	0.998	

Source: Our estimates on Eurostat data – EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC), 2012

*, **, *** show a significance level respectively equal to 0.10, 0.05, 0.01.

5. Some concluding remarks

Analysing accurately the features that most affect young people’s (educational and working) inactivity is not easy, both because of the difficulty in summarizing the many variables that may potentially affect such status, and because of the

difficulty in having reliable databases that provide information not only about individuals' characteristics, but also about the context where they have lived and the cultural and economic environment of their family of origin.

Data processing shows interesting causes for reflection, especially as regards social and economic features of the families of origin. In particular, it is interesting to note that parents' qualifications or mothers' working activity strongly protect from the risk of being NEETs for those who may still choose to study: these ones, on average younger, seem to be pushed by the imitation effect towards the attempt to repeat the family model in which they have lived. Conversely, regarding the differences between NEETs and the employed, the biggest discriminant seems to be income level, entailing a combination of relational fabric and greater working possibilities for young people.

Another noteworthy element is that, although with appropriate differences in intensity, the main characteristics (both family and personal) analysed seem to affect the probability of being NEET in substantially the same way in all Countries, as a proof of the fact that all the areas analysed share the same issues.

To conclude our analysis, to come back to the original question, that is, the definition of the causal link between family transfers and NEET status, it seems surely not easy to give a unambiguous and "certain" answer; mostly because available databases do not enable us to estimate a model comprising all the data useful to verify such relationship.

Essentially, are NEETs so because they are backed by their family of origin or are they backed by their family because they have become NEET?

However, by putting together the results of previous works (Ciccarelli, Fabrizi, 2017) with current findings, a situation seems to occur, that is the greatest probability of experiencing educational and simultaneously working inactivity status involves those who come from a lower economic and social background; this element suggests us that the family of origin seems to be more like a NEETs' protective network rather than as a context in which they "wallow" by avoiding to work and study, thus leading to exclude those efforts resetting mechanisms which also some fear.

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SUMMARY

SOME REMARKS ON THE CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY BACKGROUNDS AND NEET STATUS

Literature is progressively focusing on the analysis of the features of so-called NEETs, that is those young people who, besides being not employed, are not involved in any education or training activities.

In the past, we have also investigated the role played by personal characteristics (age, gender, qualification, residence) and by context factors (in particular, related to the families of origin in determining the above status). On the one hand, a very complex situation arises, in which Italy shows a distinctive profile compared to other European countries; on the other hand, empirical evidence, while clearly suggests some features as closely linked to the probability of being NEET (such as “economic transfers from family”) do not always clarify the cause-effect relationship between these explanatory variables and the dependent variable.

In such a context, the aim of this paper is to study the causal relationship between family characteristics and NEET status. This analysis will allow us to highlight whether economic transfers from families to younger generations should be intended as intergenerational welfare activities, thus representing the necessary support for those who in certain age groups struggle to find jobs or pursue education / training processes, or whether such transfers can even trigger “effort resetting” mechanisms that push young people towards NEET position.

Andrea CICCARELLI, University of Teramo, aciccarelli@unite.it
Marco DI DOMIZIO, University of Teramo, mdidomizio@unite.it
Elena FABRIZI, University of Teramo, efabrizi@unite.it