

Abstract

This doctoral thesis examines the role of quality education, with a particular focus on non-formal education and vocational counselling, in facilitating access to the labour market for NEET youth (Not in Employment, Education or Training) and in supporting their broader process of social inclusion. The topic is highly relevant from both theoretical and applied perspectives, given the persistently high rates of NEETs in Romania—especially in rural areas and less developed regions—as well as the structural challenges generated by recent transformations of the labour market.

From a theoretical standpoint, the research is grounded in an interdisciplinary conceptual framework that integrates human capital theory (Becker), social and cultural capital theories (Bourdieu), the capability approach (Sen), models of occupational stress (Karasek; Siegrist; Lazarus & Folkman), and contemporary approaches to social inclusion. This framework enables an understanding of employability not merely as a function of technical skills, but as the outcome of the interaction between professional competencies, social resources, socio-emotional capacities, and institutional and organisational contexts.

Methodologically, the study adopts an applied research design structured as a case study, centred on the project *"PROMIT – Promoting Work and the Integration of Youth"*, implemented in Buzău County. The research design is predominantly quantitative and relies on complementary and standardised instruments: a course activity monitoring sheet, a questionnaire evaluating vocational training and counselling, and an emotional intelligence test based on Goleman's model. Data collection was conducted at multiple stages (pre-course, post-course, and follow-up), allowing for the analysis of participants' trajectories over time and for the correlation of subjective perceptions with objective outcomes, such as labour market integration.

A distinctive contribution of the thesis lies in the fact that the research instruments were designed and applied by the author exclusively for scientific purposes, and that all statistical analyses and sociological interpretations presented are original and not included in the official project documentation. Unlike the fragmented evaluations conducted during project implementation—focused either on individual courses or on individual counselling sessions—the present thesis offers an integrated and cumulative analysis of the data, providing a comprehensive perspective on the impact of vocational training and counselling on the socio-professional pathways of NEET youth.

The findings indicate that participation in non-formal vocational training programmes, combined with personalised counselling services, significantly contributes to increased self-confidence, the development of professional and socio-emotional skills, and enhanced adaptability to labour market requirements. At the same time, the analysis highlights the persistence of structural barriers to labour market integration, particularly for women in rural areas, where caregiving responsibilities, limited access to community support services, and restricted local employment opportunities continue to constrain employment outcomes, even when training programmes are successfully completed.

The conclusions of the thesis emphasise the need for integrated public policies and interventions that combine quality education, continuous counselling, flexible employment arrangements, and community-based support services in order to facilitate sustainable transitions from training to employment. Through its empirical and methodological contributions, the thesis proposes a transferable analytical framework for evaluating programmes targeting vulnerable youth and supports the development of evidence-based social inclusion and employment policies.