

Chapter 2: NEET as a Comparative Conceptualisation of Youth Marginalisation

A South African–Nordic European Exchange of Perspectives¹

2.1 Introduction

Youth can be defined as “a socially constructed intermediary phase that stands between childhood and adulthood” (Furlong: 2013, 1). This is the phase in which young people should ideally advance toward adulthood through a series of interconnected transitions. The transitions leading from childhood into social adulthood typically include moving from education into work, household establishment and family formation (Furlong: 2013, 16–7; Honwana: 2012, 19–22). With the advance of the global capitalist economy over many decades, successful transitions into work – which ideally means secure employment – have become key to all these transitions for most young people; failing the transition into work is associated with marginalisation and exclusion on the individual level, and if too many young people fail to make this transition, it can become a societal problem of social integration and social cohesion (cf. Chapter 4). Yet, evidence has accumulated over the last two decades indicating that large numbers of young people across the Global South and the Global North are failing to make transitions into work, or at least taking longer to do so than what is seen as ideal. Researchers working in the Global South have referred to young people “waiting” and in “waithood” (e.g. Dawson: 2014; Honwana: 2012; Jeffrey & Young: 2012), while researchers working in the Global North are concerned about young people not in education, employment or training (NEET young people; e.g. Eurofound: 2012; Eurofound: 2016; Social Exclusion Unit: 1999). The concepts represent different approaches to similar phenomena with waiting and waithood being more closely geared towards understanding failing transitions in young people’s lives and their experiences, while the NEET concept appears more normative in public statistics and policy discourse.

This chapter shows and reflects on how the NEET concept is used in the contexts immediately relevant to the case studies in this book. We consider the value of the NEET concept for comparative research by reviewing its evolution and refinement in the United Kingdom (UK) and continental Europe, after which we address its adoption in the Nordic countries and South Africa. We discuss the Nordic

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countries more broadly, but focus mostly on Finland and Norway, in line with the case studies presented in Part 2 of the book. By comparing research evidence and discourses that have emerged in these very different contexts, we highlight the strengths and limitations of the NEET concept as a comparative conceptualisation of youth marginalisation. We demonstrate that marginalisation is not necessarily tied to employment status, whereas the NEET concept might reinforce a capitalist focus on gainful employment as the criterion for inclusion in society. However, we argue that despite the concept's limitations it can be used as a lens through which young people's lives and their contexts can be compared across the case studies and the different countries focused upon in this book.

2.2 Conceptual Evolution in the UK and Continental Europe

The NEET concept has its origins in the UK, by and large because of changes in benefit regimes in the late 1980s whereby British school-leavers were no longer eligible to unemployment benefits until they turned 18. This resulted in the need for a new indicator to capture those young people in the age group who were vulnerable to the risks of social exclusion (see Eurofound: 2012, 19; Social Exclusion Unit: 1999; cf. Furlong: 2006, 553–554, 556–559). As a direct consequence, by the late 1990s “the term NEET was firmly established as the only acceptable form of language to be used in referring to workless youth” in the UK (Furlong: 2006, 556). NEET had by then been adopted as a replacement for the term “Status Zero”, which researchers and government officials had started to use a few years earlier to identify young people who were experiencing difficult transitions.

The NEET concept soon gained popularity beyond its initial consolidation in the UK. The term was adopted in almost all EU member states as a working concept, as well as in countries such as Japan, New Zealand, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. However, NEET became a frequently used term at the international level especially after the onset of the global economic recession during the late 2000s, which led to very high youth unemployment in a number of countries (Eurofound: 2012, 20; cf. Eichhorst et al.: 2013; Maguire: 2013; Serracant: 2014; Styczyńska: 2013). At the same time, the recognition of NEET young people as a heterogeneous category also became the basis for problematising the concept, noticeably in the wider European NEET debate. The criticism was that it incorporated “very different young people, displaying very different characteristics, facing very different challenges, risks and transitions in their lives, and with very different potential needs for intervention” (Yates & Payne: 2006, 333–339). One attempt to refine the concept therefore led to the identification of at least five subcategories within the NEET population:

- The “conventionally unemployed”, consisting of long-term and short-term unemployed young people who are available for work and are seeking employment;
- The “unavailable”, including young carers, young people with family commitments, and young people who are sick or disabled;
- The “disengaged”, referring to young people who are not seeking employment or education and training opportunities, and are not constrained from doing so by other obligations or incapacities; as such, this group includes young people discouraged from seeking employment as well as those who are pursuing dangerous and a-social lifestyles;
- The “opportunity-seekers”, referring to young people who are actively seeking work or training, but are holding back in anticipation of opportunities that they perceive will benefit their skills and status;
- The “voluntary NEETs”, referring to young people who are developing skills in an unpaid capacity through voluntary work, are travelling, or are engaged in other constructive activities such as art, music and self-directed learning (Eurofound: 2012, 24; cf. Eurofound: 2016; Holte: 2018a, 7–8).

Yet another line of problematisation has focused on how the concept is rather “too narrow” to deal with contemporary youth vulnerability (Furlong: 2006, 566). For some researchers it has thus become important to “go beyond NEET” to address the problem of youth vulnerability (e.g. Cuzzocrea: 2014; Furlong: 2006; King: 2015; MacDonald: 2011; MacDonald: 2013; Roberts: 2011). For them, it has become imperative to consider “underemployment”, low pay, precarious jobs and the situation of the working poor, which they argue have become distinctive features of the new globalised condition of “limited opportunity structures” that are increasingly uniting “the more and less disadvantaged in the experience of underemployment” (MacDonald: 2011, 439). They argue that this recognition should lead to a broader focus that will also direct attention to two other groups: graduate youths who increasingly suffer from un- and underemployment, and the so-called “missing middle” – working-class young people who neither follow NEET nor educational pathways, but who nevertheless remain vulnerable to the risks of social exclusion as their “future prosperity is by no means guaranteed by having low-level employment” (Roberts: 2011, 23–24; cf. Furlong: 2006; King: 2015; MacDonald: 2011; MacDonald: 2013).

For those arguing for a broader focus, then, it is not a case that the “conditions of life of those at the bottom” (that is, NEET young people) do not demand research and policy attention. Instead, they suggest that the focus on those at the bottom should not be at the expense of “a more panoramic view” (MacDonald: 2011, 437) that takes into account not only the missing middle, but also the insecurities and risks facing well-educated young people for whom fast-track transitions from tertiary education to secure graduate employment is no longer a given (MacDonald:

2011, 437; MacDonald: 2013, 3; see also King: 2015; Roberts: 2011). Seen from this broader perspective, there is today an increasing levelling of the playing field affecting a wide range of young people. Effectively this means that the correlation between education and training, on the one hand, and employment, especially of a more secure and life-sustainable kind, on the other hand, seems increasingly uncertain. This divergence calls for a critical questioning of the orthodoxy of the “skills economy” which posits that the “(p)roblems of young people becoming NEET or trapped in poor-quality jobs can be solved by ‘up-skilling’” and that “(t)here will be more opportunities for higher-skilled workers, such as graduates, in the coming ‘high-skill, information economy’” (MacDonald: 2011, 434; see also King: 2015; 144–145; MacDonald: 2013, 2–3). This, it is argued, should be contrasted with the reality of “the growth of underemployment” in the youth labour market, which is bringing about situations in which the disadvantaged may become even more disadvantaged as they are squeezed out by an “over-supply of well-qualified workers” for whom non-graduate jobs may become the only source of employment. By implication, this leads to a situation where “non-graduates become increasingly disadvantaged in the labour market and face increasing pressure to get higher qualifications in order to ‘keep up’, even though returns diminish relative to previous cohorts” (MacDonald: 2011, 435; cf. MacDonald: 2013).

2.3 NEET as a Phenomenon in the Nordic Countries

In shifting the focus in this section and the next to the Nordic countries, our starting point is to outline how young people are (and are not) NEET within a particular welfare state context. We also comment on some relevant differences between the Nordic countries before we turn to how NEET as an identifiable phenomenon is discursively constructed in Nordic debates, on the national and the regional level. This is done by pointing out how Nordic discourses on NEET likewise relate to the welfare state context – that is, to particular ways of thinking about education, work and welfare.

The Nordic countries are usually understood as relatively similar when compared to the rest of Europe and the world. In Gøsta Esping-Andersen’s (1990) typology of welfare states, for example, the Nordic welfare states are distinguished as a distinct regime. The basic idea of the Nordic ‘social democratic’ welfare state is to provide comprehensive universal welfare, which entails that public programmes, services and transfers are designed to serve everyone who lives in a country (Hiilamo & Kangas: 2013). This furthermore means that the state crowds out the market as a provider of welfare by offering the same services and benefits to all to promote an “equality of the highest standards” (Esping-Andersen: 1990, 27).

Comprehensive and high-quality tax-financed welfare presupposes broad tax bases and high employment rates, and the whole working-age population is expected to participate in education, training or employment. This is particularly important for young people because research indicates that unemployment has a “scarring effect” and affects future labour market opportunities (e.g. Albæk et al.: 2015a, 8). One recent article notes that “individuals who experience unemployment at an early stage in their career face a longer time horizon until retirement, thereby making the long-term scarring effects particularly severe” (Nilsen & Reiso: 2014, 37). In this context young people who are neither active in the labour market paying taxes and gaining work experience, nor participating in education or training to become more productive citizens in the future, are therefore often constructed as a social problem, as well as a problem for the individual. The idea is that those with an education should be employed as quickly as possible and those without an education should start one as soon as possible – if they are able.

However, while non-negligible shares of young people face difficulties in attaching to labour markets, and youth unemployment rates are much higher than general unemployment rates in the Nordic countries as elsewhere (Albæk et al.: 2015a; see Chapter 3), youth unemployment figures are also partly arbitrary. For technical reasons Nordic youth unemployment figures include large numbers of students who are looking for work, part-time or full-time. Also, the youth unemployment rates are much higher in Finland and Sweden, for instance, than they are in Norway and Denmark. This difference is largely explained by how pupils in the school-based vocational training systems that dominate in Sweden and Finland are classified as outside the labour force or as unemployed if they are looking for a job, while apprentices in the apprenticeship-based vocational training systems in Norway and Denmark are classified as employed (Bäckman et al.: 2011). Such classificatory differences yield relatively large effects on some indicators, such as youth unemployment, while the countries have more similar NEET rates (Albæk: 2015a, 64–65). This means that the proportion of NEET young people is similar across the Nordic countries, but the way they are classified in labour market statistics differs between them.

NEET rates can be posited as a more relevant indicator of youth disengagement than youth unemployment rates, as they include all young people and not just those who are active in the labour force (Albæk et al.: 2015b; Eurofound: 2012, 22–23). By one estimate, NEET rates for individuals aged 16 to 24 years were 8.4 per cent in Finland and 6.7 per cent in Norway in 2012, against 12.6 per cent across all Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries (OECD: 2014a, 103). Finnish and Norwegian NEET rates have also remained comparatively low since 2012 (e.g. OECD: 2018, 36; OECD: 2019, 34–35).

These comparatively low Nordic rates reflect strong economies and labour markets, as well as how the Nordic welfare states make more interventions than most other countries to reduce the number of young people without a registered occupation (Hyggen: 2013). As a direct consequence, many NEET young people are integrated into activation activities and programmes, which leads to a reduction in the overall NEET rates. Although the content and form of such activities and programmes vary, they generally aim to integrate individuals into education or employment. This is clearly the case in Finland and Norway. In Finland all unemployed young people below the age of 25 who have not completed formal vocational training or who need practical training are offered an individual plan to be followed – the so-called Youth Guarantee (see Ministry of Education and Culture: 2012; OECD: 2019, 100–104). The idea is to assign young people places at workshops to help them complete their education and find work. In Norway the integrated employment and social services at the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) coordinate the services and support available to NEET young people, most of which are aimed at moving them closer to work or helping them find work, and many of which come with strict activity requirements (see OECD: 2018, 123–140). This is over and above the fact that since 1994 there have been Follow-Up Services that contact people below 21 years of age who are not in education or employment and have not completed upper-secondary education to give them information and help tailor the services available to them (Albæk et al.: 2015a, 56; OECD: 2018, 99).

It is important to mention that all the Nordic countries offer education free of charge and financial support to students to promote access to secondary and tertiary education. But although this results in nearly all young people starting upper-secondary education in the Nordic countries, a significant proportion of Nordic students do not complete this level of education and remain in NEET situations for certain periods of time (Albæk et al.: 2015a; Bäckman et al.: 2011). In Finland, only 75 per cent of young people who started vocational education five and a half years earlier had completed their qualifications by 2014. The same was true of 89 per cent of those who had started general education tracks four and a half years earlier (Statistics Finland: 2016). This means that one in four students in vocational education and one in ten students in general education tracks did not complete their qualifications.

Similarly, 27 per cent of students who enrolled in upper secondary education in Norway in 2010 did not complete their three or four years of education by 2015. Students enrolled in vocational training programmes had a lower completion rate than students in general studies tracks (Statistics Norway: 2016a). An often-cited explanation for non-completion is that young people have not acquired basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics in primary education. In this respect one solution that has been proposed is to improve basic skills at kindergarten and primary school level already to prepare young people better for secondary education

and the labour market; another solution was to tailor secondary education more to the individual needs and skills of each student, and to offer more practical training as part of the curriculum (Djernes: 2013). Furthermore, a lack of apprenticeships continues to be an important reason why some young people do not complete vocational education, especially in Norway (Bäckman et al.: 2011; OECD: 2018, 103).

2.4 NEET as a Discourse in the Nordic Countries

The above discussion provides some background to illustrate how the NEET concept corresponds with already established research and policy discourses on youth marginalisation in the Nordic countries. Indeed, the concept has been used in research on young people “dropping out” of school (Bäckman et al.: 2011), youth marginalisation (Halvorsen et al.: 2012) and youth unemployment (Albæk et al.: 2015a) on the regional level, although this formed part of already established discourses rather than a separate and coherent discourse specifically on NEET. At the same time, however, the concept has also been used in research on the national level in Finland (Myrskylä: 2011) and Norway (Bø & Vigran: 2014; Grødem et al.: 2014). These reports have outlined the demography of “outsiders” in Finland and “NEETs” in Norway, thereby constructing NEET young people as populations and objects of discourses. Furthermore, most of this research has been commissioned by public authorities and is based on a tradition of population statistics that uses administrative registers and representative surveys to produce knowledge in the form of numbers. This has, at least to some extent, left the impression that Nordic discourse on NEET young people tends to feature probabilistic and future-oriented language.

As in the broader European discourse outlined above, the NEET indicator is not generally understood to capture a singular problem in Nordic discourse. Instead, it is emphasised that NEET young people are a “very heterogeneous” population and that the concept encompasses a variety of subgroups (Albæk et al.: 2015b: 88; Hyggen: 2013, 372–373). This has resulted in much of the Nordic research being focused on outlining the demographic properties of these populations to establish who the NEET young people are, what they do and what their future outcomes are likely to be. Indeed, it is widely accepted that young people with low levels of education, young people whose parents have low levels of education, and immigrants and the children of immigrants are over-represented amongst NEET young people in Finland and Norway (Bø & Vigran: 2014; Myrskylä: 2011; OECD: 2018; OECD: 2019).

Nordic research has tended to refer to NEET young people as not only facing heightened risk of falling outside the labour market and society (Halvorsen et al.:

2012, 132; Larja et al.: 2016), but in fact as being “at great risk of long-term exclusion from working life and society, perhaps for much of their adult lives” (Halvorsen et al.: 2012, 199; cf. Hyggen: 2013, 373). This suggests that the most important problem for NEET young people is their increased likelihood of future social exclusion rather than their prevailing situation. In reaction to this understanding, however, an emerging body of research has also started to address how the future orientation and probabilistic conceptualisations of the above-mentioned type of research do not correspond well with the experiences of the people the research is concerned with (Follesø: 2015; Holte: 2018a; Wall & Olofsson: 2008). According to this line of thinking, subjective experiences of risk may not correspond with predictions of risk based on population statistics and some young people simply understand “youth at risk” as referring to “others” who are different from themselves (Follesø: 2015). Along the same lines, young people who are conceived as “NEET young people” or “youth at risk” by researchers may also be more prone to understand their situation in terms of on-going problems, such as physical or psychological health issues, financial problems or boredom rather than in terms of potential future problems.

The discussion in this section suggests that there will also be noticeable incongruences between the conceptualisations of youth marginalisation in Nordic research and the policy discourses and everyday understandings of marginalisation that need to be taken into account. The problems that Bjørn Hallstein Holte (2018a; 2018b, 25–29), for instance, encountered when trying to find and meet NEET young people for interviews for the case study from Oslo in this book (Chapter 7) can be held up as an important case in point. The difficulties that he experienced pointedly highlight how people he met during the research tended to understand his translation of the NEET concept in the light of discourses on youth gangs, teenage criminals and dangerous youths rather than as a normatively neutral description. This applied to the extent that even individuals who could be identified as NEET from what they shared about their lives in informal conversations did not see themselves as NEET young people, understanding the concept rather as referring to “different others” (Holte: 2018a, 4).

We want to suggest that the difficulties that Holte experienced could well be explained against the backdrop of how young people who are neither in employment or education are often referred to as lazy, unmotivated and lacking in self-discipline in the Nordic countries. They are considered as not contributing to the sustenance of the welfare states (Kallio & Niemelä: 2014), while amongst young people themselves, those with jobs and work incomes have displayed a more punitive attitude towards young people who are on social assistance (Hiilamo: 2015).

2.5 NEET as a Phenomenon in South Africa

Judging from a survey of the literature, it appears as if the concept of NEET has in recent years also given new shape and direction to the academic and public debate on youths and marginalisation in South Africa. In this respect it could well be said that discourses and debates about young people in South Africa have followed the example of Europe, the continent where NEET emerged some 20 years ago as a popular (but also criticised) concept to explore comparative and comprehensive measures of inactivity, unemployment and problematic transitions in young people's lives (Eurofound: 2012; Quintini & Martin: 2006).

In the South African debate a study entitled *Responding to the Educational Needs of Post-School Youth* (Cloete: 2009a) is credited with having introduced the concept of NEET and, in doing so, creating new awareness about the dismal situation of a large proportion of the country's youth (see Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012a; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012b, 1; Kraak: 2013, 81; Perold: 2012, 178; Taylor: 2011, 50). This study reported (on the basis of results from the 2007 Statistics South Africa Community Survey) that almost three million young people (or 41.6 per cent of a total population of 6 758 366 in the age group 18 to 24) were so-called "NEETs" (Cloete: 2009b, 10–11). Furthermore, the study reported that this category included:

- Almost 1 million pupils who left school after completing Grades 10 and 11 and were therefore in need of multiple "second-chance opportunities" to complete matriculation;
- 700 000 youths who had the secondary school qualification of matric (Grade 12), but were not improving their education and training;
- Another million unemployed young people with a qualification of less than Grade 10 in need of training and jobs (Cloete: 2009b, 11; cf. Kraak: 2013, 81–82).

One could today easily point to a development whereby the term NEET has become firmly entrenched as a statistical indicator and concept in discussions about the plight of South Africa's youth. Painting an even bleaker picture, a commonly accepted figure that has emerged in more recent studies is that the number of NEET youth in the age group 15 to 24 years today stands closer to between 3.2 and 3.3 million individuals (close to 33 per cent of just over 10 million people in this age cohort) (Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012a; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012b; DHET: 2013, 3; Hall: 2015, 125; Lings: 2013, 7; Mashilo: 2012; Ramose: 2014; Van Broekhuizen: 2013, 45). This identification has in turn become the basis for the national Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) pointing out a trend of an ever-rising NEET population; by using the findings from the census surveys since the demise of apartheid (1996, 2001, 2011), it could point out how the number and percentage of NEET youths in the age cohort 15 to 24 has grown from 2.049 million in 1996 (a NEET rate of 25.1 per cent) to 3.155 million in 2001

(a NEET rate of 34 per cent) and to 3.199 million in 2011 (a NEET rate of 30.8 per cent) (DHET: 2013, 3).

Although some inconsistencies may be identified when comparing different figures of the extent of South Africa's NEET problem, it is nevertheless clear that in present-day South Africa the high and increasing rate of NEET young people presents a considerable challenge. Furthermore, it is against this backdrop that international comparative results put the extent of South Africa's NEET problem into a clearer perspective. When compared with countries beyond the African continent, South Africa emerges as a weak performer in terms of meeting the challenges of youth unemployment and addressing the problem of NEET. In the wake of the country's poorly performing labour market, it was found that the unemployment rate of its workers aged 15 to 24 was 51.8 per cent, three times the OECD average, and the NEET rate of youths in the same age cohort was close to 32 per cent, more than twice the OECD average (OECD: 2014b, 1–2). And a subsequent study found that amongst 42 OECD and G20 countries only Greece and Spain recorded higher unemployment levels in the age cohort 18 to 25 than South Africa (OECD: 2015, 1). On this basis, the study concluded:

The failure to integrate young people in the labour market threatens social cohesion. In particular young NEETs are at risk of having their future work career permanently “scarred” by prolonged spells of not working. Reaching out to this group and ensuring they are given the help needed to find employment or opportunities for further training is a key challenge for South Africa (OECD: 2015, 2).

On the basis of the discussion so far in this section, it is not surprising that South Africa's youth unemployment and NEET problem has been identified by commentators as perhaps the country's “most urgent challenge”, a “national crisis” that seriously undermines its prospects of long-term social, economic and political stability (Creamer: 2013; Lings: 2013). According to some, this could be put in context by the fact that South Africa has a strikingly youthful population with more than 50 per cent of its total population under the age of 25 (Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012a; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012b, 1). It is amongst this youthful half of the population that the related problems of unemployment and NEET could be said to represent a real struggle for a considerable and growing group of young people, leaving them with a bleak future and leading them, as one commentator puts it, to “disengage from society and participate in risky or socially-disruptive behaviour” (Lings: 2013, 7).

However, the factors of race and gender crucially also define the crisis of South Africa's unemployed and NEET youths. In present-day South Africa, as often recognised in discussions of the problem, unemployed and NEET young people are

predominantly from the country's majority black African and coloured population groups (Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012a; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012b, 2; Lolwana: 2014, 14; Mathibe et al.: 2012, 3, 5, 7; Mashilo: 2012; OECD: 2015). They by far surpass their unemployed and NEET counterparts from the white minority population, in some cases by more than three times the rate of the latter (Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012a; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012b, 2; Lolwana: 2014, 14). As one commentator has observed, it is the black youths of South Africa who are the major bearers of the brunt of the country's triple defects of unemployment, poverty and inequality, along the old lines of the apartheid era (Mashilo: 2012). To an overwhelming degree, they are the victims of very poor schooling and an unaccommodating post-school sector (see Cloete: 2009a; DHET: 2013; Gibbon et al.: 2012; Hall: 2015; Kraak: 2013; Lolwana: 2014; Spaul: 2013; Van Broekhuizen: 2013). They lack the necessary skills for meaningful employment and many young black African men in particular express their frustration and anger by taking to the streets in protests that are often violent (Kraak: 2013, 93; Mashilo: 2012).

South Africa's protesting black male youths may represent the public face of the country's unemployed and NEET youth today most explicitly, but this should not obscure a distinctive gender differentiation. Amongst South Africa's unemployed and NEET youths, females are numerically the most disadvantaged group. They represent a noticeable majority and while this may be a feature across population groups, at least two important qualifications stand out: firstly, that the percentage rates of African young black and coloured females are much higher than the rate of their white female counterparts; and secondly, that African young black women conspicuously remain a special case, given the fact that they represent a noticeable majority also in comparison to their African black male counterparts (Lolwana: 2014, 13–14; Mashilo: 2012; see also DHET: 2013, 6; Hall: 2015, 125).

2.6 NEET as a Discourse in South Africa

The South African discourse on NEET that has developed since the landmark study by Cloete and others (Cloete: 2009a) has not encountered the same kind of problematisation and lack of enthusiasm as the adoption and use of the concept has in the Nordic and broader European contexts. In South Africa today NEET is embraced as a straightforward, standard and innovative concept to discuss the plight of the country's youth. In this discourse, as illustrated by the verdict of Kraak in his important contribution to the unfolding of a South African discourse on NEET, "international criticisms of the concept" do not negate the fact that "NEET as an explanatory and predictive device is still very powerful and useful, particularly when applied to youth unemployment in South Africa" (Kraak: 2013, 79–80).

As a straightforward, standard and innovative concept, then, NEET has strengthened the debate or discourse on the endemic problem of youth unemployment and inactivity in South Africa in a threefold way. To the extent that it has become a complementary statistical and numerical indicator to that of youth unemployment figures, NEET has highlighted how a disturbing number and proportion of young people are not only unemployed but also not engaged in any form of meaningful education and training that could remedy their situation. Secondly, the adoption of NEET as statistical indicator has given weight to a thesis on an endemic social crisis in South Africa, also alluded to in the previous section. And, thirdly, as a result, it is from such vantage point of a deepening sense of social crisis that much of the discourse on NEET has evolved around an identification and discussion of the causal factors of the NEET and youth unemployment problem (cf. Kraak: 2013, 82–83), but also connected to this, around an identification and discussion of policy and strategic interventions to resolve the problem.

Indeed, attempts towards the development of a more profound understanding of South Africa's related NEET and youth unemployment problems, and the strategic and policy measures to solve them, have to a great extent been focused on the deficiencies of the country's education and training system. However, whereas much of this focus has been on the deficiencies of the post-school system (see e.g. CHET: 2012; Cloete: 2009a; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012a; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012b; Cosser: 2010; Fisher & Scott: 2011; Kraak: 2013; Perold et al.: 2012; Taylor: 2011), some have also pointed to the appalling state of the country's primary and secondary school systems (Hall: 2015; Spaull: 2013; Taylor: 2011, 10–22). According to this emphasis, attention should be paid first to the way in which South Africa's school system is failing the majority of the country's youths. In South Africa one is confronted with the reality that there “are in effect two different public school systems” that reflect the vast inequality of education opportunities across the divides of socio-economic privilege, geographic location and race: on the one hand, there is a “smaller, better performing system” accommodating the wealthiest 20 to 25 per cent of pupils and, on the other hand, a “larger system” characterised by its abysmal performance and catering for the poorest 75 to 80 per cent of pupils (Spaull: 2013, 6, 35–37; see also Hall: 2015, 122–124; Taylor: 2011, 10–22).

Consequently, it is the education system that could be regarded as a major factor in failing to prepare a large section of South Africa's young people to avoid a life of NEET conditions and precarious job opportunities. This is because a major feature of this system is the way in which it leaves large proportions of pupils “functionally illiterate and innumerate” (Spaull: 2013, 3, 39–44), and one could add to this the low retention rate of learners in the system (Fisher & Scott: 2011, 2; Hall: 2015; Spaull: 2013, 5, 31–34). In terms of the more precise findings of one study:

A close inspection of school data shows that of the 100 pupils that start Grade 1, 50 will drop out before Grade 12 (most of which happens in Grades 10 and 11), 40 will pass the NSC [National Senior Certificate] exam and 12 will qualify for university. Given that the NSC is the only externally evaluated, nationally standardised exam in the South African school system, grade progression in primary and lower-secondary school is an unreliable indicator of actual learning. Many pupils proceed to higher grades without acquiring foundational skills in numeracy and literacy. As the NSC exam approaches, schools and teachers can no longer afford to promote pupils who have not acquired the grade-appropriate skills, and consequently pupils fail and drop out of schools in large numbers in Grades 10 and 11 as schools weed out the weaker pupils (Spaull: 2013, 5).

In the South African discourse involving the NEET concept, the connection made between the prospect of meaningful employment and the factors of meaningful educational attainment and training could consequently be regarded as a distinctive feature. Thus, when compared to the critical European debate on NEET, there is a more ready acceptance of the orthodoxy of the skills economy and a related emphasis on the importance of “upskilling”. In this discourse the mantra is sustained that tertiary education and training increases individuals’ prospects of formal employment and increased earnings (Branson et al.: 2009; Branson: 2012, 154; Cloete: 2009b, 4–6; Fisher & Scott: 2011, 1; Lolwana: 2014, 9; Van Broekhuizen: 2013, 52), despite the labour market’s inability and unwillingness to absorb young people, insufficient economic growth and the manifestation of graduate unemployment (see Cloete: 2009b, 5–6; Creamer: 2013; Kraak: 2013, 82–83, 84–85; Lings: 2013; Lolwana: 2014, 5, 18–27; OECD: 2014b; Van Broekhuizen: 2013, 45, 47–48).

While a high premium is placed on the importance of tertiary education and training, what is identified as a more specific challenge in the South African discourse involving the NEET concept is to improve the quality and relevance of this level of education to equip young people more effectively with the skills demanded by the labour market and an increasingly knowledge-based, high-skills economy (Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012a; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012b, 2; Cosser: 2010; Fisher & Scott: 2011; Lolwana: 2014; OECD: 2014b, 2; Taylor: 2011, 34–37, 56–57). Added to this, it is emphasised that the tertiary sector should transform itself into a far more differentiated and expanded system providing for the needs of a far more heterogeneous group of young people (CHET: 2012; Cloete: 2009a; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012a; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012b, 4–5; Cosser: 2010; Fisher & Scott: 2011; Gibbon et al.: 2012; Perold: 2012; Taylor: 2011, 35–36, 52–59). Moreover, it has been pointed out that such transformation should be regarded as paramount as the current post-school system suffers from a number of serious deficiencies:

- Its inability to provide access and opportunities (including “second-chance” education) to a large segment of socio-economically disadvantaged young people,

especially those young people who have qualified for further education and training, and its tendency to sustain if not intensify a system of inequality along the lines of South Africa's apartheid past (Cloete: 2009b, 7–12, 16; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012a; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012b, 2–3; Fisher & Scott: 2011, 1–3; Gibbon et al.: 2012, 134; Kraak: 2013, 82–83; Taylor: 2011, 25–29, 37–38, 40);

- Its very high student drop-out (attrition) rate, with specific reference to those socio-economically disadvantaged young people who do manage to gain access to tertiary education (Cosser: 2010; Fisher & Scott: 2011, 1–2, 7–10; Kraak: 2013, 83, 90–91; Taylor: 2011, 29–30, 34–35, 43–45);
- Its inability to provide sufficiently for the needs for work placement (on-the-job) and practical and technical skills training of young people both in and outside formal tertiary education (Archer: 2012; Branson: 2012; Cosser: 2010; Kraak: 2013; Taylor: 2011, 48–49, 58–59).

Finally, it cannot go unnoticed that in the South African discourse involving the NEET concept, the state is both appreciated as a proactive role-player and acknowledged as part of the problem. So, for instance, one finds in the discourse participants who have been appreciating initiatives such as South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP), the implementation of a so-called Youth Employment Accord and measures to improve the country's technical, vocational and skills development (TSVD) sector (DHET: 2013, 7; Lolwana: 2014, 5–6, 30–41). Nevertheless, in stark contrast to such appreciation, one also finds those participants who not only point to the problems and challenges of effective policy implementation (Archer: 2012; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012a; Cloete & Butler-Adam: 2012b, 3–5; Lings: 2013, 8; Perold: 2012, 192–195), but even to the issue of outright state failure (Kraak: 2013).

In the light of these issues and challenges, we think it would be meaningful to once again take into consideration André Kraak's provocative article on South Africa's NEET problem. This is not only because of his claim of state failure, but importantly also for his thesis on the "substitution" role of the NGO sector (Kraak: 2013, 81) in the wake of the state's failure to provide for the employment, educational and training needs of its youth population. Indeed, Kraak's elaboration on how NGOs operating at the micro level in South Africa are instrumental in creating the kinds of social capital networks that are enabling young people to find access to workplace training and first-time job opportunities (Kraak: 2013, 85–94) provides important scope for exploring whether a potentially similar role might be played by faith-based organisations (FBOs) in the South African context. We acknowledge the current dearth of such research, but at the same time want to point to the case study research reflected in the later chapters in this book as a meaningful step towards addressing this shortcoming.

2.7 Conclusion

Our exploration in this chapter has provided sufficient scope for us to conclude with at least a qualified positive answer to the question about the usefulness of NEET as a conceptual framework for comparative research. The concept has risen to prominence in discussions about youth marginalisation on national and international levels; it clearly cannot be ignored – even if it is found unwarranted in certain respects. When considering its shortcomings, in line with our discussion in Section 2.2, youth marginalisation is not necessarily tied to employment status only. From this perspective the NEET concept offers a narrow view on young people's difficult life situations by reinforcing a capitalist focus on gainful employment as the (only) criterion for inclusion in society. However, besides NEET status there are also other important features that define young people's functional status, for example, their participation in care work and other household responsibilities, their participation in political processes, and their taking up of roles as mentors or providers for others (Eurofound: 2016; Holte: 2018a). Yet, there can also be little disagreement that sampling participants by the combined criteria of not being in education, employment or training will inform a concerted qualitative research initiative to capture a category of young people of whom at least a noticeable proportion will be marginalised, notwithstanding whether they find themselves in the Nordic countries or South Africa.

Nevertheless, from our discussion a strong case emerges for understanding the situation of NEET young people in relation to their social contexts. In the case of the countries covered in this book, the NEET rates are so much higher in South Africa than in the Nordic countries, and the resources available in families and from public welfare services are so different, that we cannot assume that the concept captures youths' experiences in directly comparable situations. Indeed, as readers will discover from a closer reading of the South African case study chapters, young people who participated in the research reflected in this book experienced homelessness, violence and other forms of hardship on a scale far beyond the difficulties experienced by their counterparts in the Nordic case studies.

Moreover, the above-mentioned discrepancies are also reflected in the differences between the Nordic and the South African discourses outlined in this chapter. Whereas the concept has been problematised because it captures heterogeneous populations in the Nordic countries, as in Europe more generally, it has been accepted more readily as capturing significant social and structural problems in South Africa. In the case of the Nordic discourse, the concern clearly remains with preserving the long-term sustainability of the welfare state; in the case of the South African discourse, there is in contrast a wider concern with the more fundamental issues of social cohesion and social stability, racial and gender inequality, weak state performance and a dysfunctional education system.

Although the NEET concept is used in different contexts, it should not be assumed to refer to directly comparable phenomena across these contexts. At the same time, however, we want to contend that the emphasis on difference should not be taken as discounting the fact that being NEET can delay or obstruct individual young people's transitions to adulthood. In the Nordic countries, being NEET not only hinders access to the social rights that are tied to paid employment, but also comes in the way of establishing independent living and attaining other markers of adulthood. And in South Africa, being outside the spheres of education and employment can mean that one is cut off from a source of more viable income as well as from perhaps the most important means of remedying such a situation of permanently precarious income. Across the localities focused on in the case studies in this book, NEET therefore also refers to distinct experiences resonating with the ideas of waiting and waitthood alluded to in the introduction of this chapter.

On the other hand, in the Nordic countries and at least in the case of the more privileged classes in South Africa, the labour market categories on which the concept of NEET is based may become less relevant where young people are increasing their stocks of capital through voluntary work, travelling or self-directed activities. But this diminishing relevance of conventional labour market categories to no lesser degree applies to those young people who, whether in South Africa or the Nordic countries, find themselves in conditions of insecure employment, or in education or training that they are unmotivated or unprepared for. In an important way, then, these qualifications suggest important grounds why the concept of NEET also needs to make way for reflections on structural changes emerging through the forces of neoliberalism and globalisation, changes that render increasingly flexible the distinction between those who are in education, employment or training and those who are not, and between those who are vulnerable and those who are not.

We could well point out how neither the Nordic nor the South African discourses explored in this chapter have so far taken sufficient account of the structural argument, in contrast to the way we have seen this argument take on an emphasis in the broader European discourse on NEET. Indeed, in both discourses the imperative of right and good education and training as the panacea for meeting the problem of youth unemployment still seems to be upheld without much qualification. In the case of the Nordic discourse, we have seen how this train of thought is accompanied by a steadfast belief in the virtues of the social democratic welfare state and the importance of education, employment and training to sustain that system. And in the case of the South African discourse, we have seen how this line of thinking is accompanied by a rather unqualified acceptance of the orthodoxy of the skills economy, without taking account of how the forces of the global capitalist economy – with which the South African economy is fully integrated – may be impacting on the prospects not only of the country's NEET youths, but also a significant

proportion of its youths in general who find themselves in some form of education and training.

Finally, our critical observations with regard to both discourses should not be taken as a call, similar to the call by some in the broader European discourse, to move beyond NEET as a conceptual apparatus. Instead, our critical observations should be understood as a recognition that adopting NEET as a conceptual framework in research on youth marginalisation necessarily demands that the factor of larger societal changes and their impact on the opportunity structures available to young people in the different countries be taken into account. For youth researchers in the Nordic countries, this implies that it may no longer be sufficient to understand the problem of youth marginalisation within the confines of the social democratic welfare state. And for their counterparts in South Africa, it equally implies that merely getting the economy and the education system right may not be regarded as the complete answer to the problem of youth marginalisation. In anticipation of the case study discussions presented later in this book, this wider outlook on youth marginalisation suggests that the problems faced by NEET young people in both contexts go beyond and are more complex than their NEET status alone.

