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*QUAERE*

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# VOLUNTEERING AS A TOOL FOR ACTIVATING YOUNG NEETS: FROM BASIC HABITS TO EMPLOYABILITY

*Filip Bambúch, Jana Šolcová*

## **Abstract**

This study examines young people in NEET situations (Not in Employment, Education or Training) in Slovakia, analysing their demographic, socio-economic and psychological challenges, as well as the long-term consequences of NEET status. The research is based on qualitative analysis of focus groups with young people in the Banská Bystrica region and explores volunteering as a tool for their activation and enhancement of employability. The findings demonstrate that volunteering contributes to the development of basic work habits, increases self-confidence, provides practical experience, and improves the professional profiles of young NEETs. Respondents perceive volunteering as a bridge between inactivity and integration into the labour market, appreciating its motivational and social benefits. The study confirms that volunteering is an effective and comprehensive instrument for supporting the employability and social inclusion of young people outside education and the labour market, recommending its systematic integration into policies and programmes targeting this group.

**Keywords:** *NEET, youth, volunteering, employability, social inclusion, work habits, Banská Bystrica region, youth activation*

## **Introduction**

Young people who are not engaged in employment, education, or training (NEET) represent a group that has attracted the attention of international organisations (ILO, 2022a; Zucchelli et al., 2023). This category encompasses individuals aged 15–29 who are neither working nor participating in any form of formal or informal education or training, irrespective of whether they are registered as unemployed or are economically inactive (Eurostat, 2025b; ILO, 2022a; OECD, 2025). The NEET indicator enables the measurement of the extent of marginalisation among young people and their detachment from the labour market and society, signalling a risk of social exclusion (Eurofound, 2012; ILO, 2022a). At the same time, we distance ourselves from the use of this acronym as a further means of “labelling”.

## **1. Characteristics and Challenges of Young NEETs**

### **1.1 Definition and Demographic Overview of NEETs**

In 2024, the average NEET rate for young people aged 15–29 in the European Union was 11.0%, which remains above the EU’s strategic goal to reduce the NEET rate to below 9% by 2030 (Eurostat, 2025a; Marques et al., 2024). In Slovakia, the NEET rate for young people with a low level of education in 2024 was 14.0% (Eurostat, 2025a). The overall NEET rate in Slovakia for the 15–29 age group was 14.6% in 2018 (Eurostat, 2018).

The NEET rate generally increases with age: in 2024, the EU recorded rates of 5.4% for those aged 15–19, 12.8% for 20–24-year-olds, and 14.6% for 25–29-year-olds (Eurostat, 2025a). Gender disparities are also evident, with young women in the EU more likely to be NEET than young men (12.1% versus 10.0% in 2024) (Eurostat, 2025a). Educational attainment is a strong predictor of NEET status; in 2024, the NEET rate for 15–29-year-olds with low educational attainment in the EU was 12.6%, compared to 7.9% for those with higher

education (Eurostat, 2025a). These data highlight the need for differentiated strategies that take demographic nuances into account.

In the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region (BBSK), young people in NEET situations accounted for almost 24% of the youth population aged 15–29 in 2020, with inactive NEETs constituting 15%. BBSK ranked third in Slovakia for the number of young NEETs, behind only the Košice and Prešov regions. Within BBSK, the highest NEET rates were recorded in the districts of Rimavská Sobota (37.33%), Revúca (35.17%), and Lučenec (29.49%). Notably, in 58 municipalities in BBSK, the proportion of young people in NEET situations reached 50% or more, with Dulovo (Rimavská Sobota district) recording as high as 84.62%. Overall, women constitute a larger NEET group in BBSK, especially among inactive young people, where they represent almost 20% of the young female population (Androvičová et al., 2025).

## **1.2 Socio-Economic and Psychological Challenges**

NEET status is associated with a range of interrelated factors. The primary risk factor is low educational attainment (Eurostat, 2025a; Eurofound, 2012). Individual and family characteristics also play a significant role, including low parental socio-economic status, living in low-income households, or having a disability (Eurostat, 2025a; Eurofound, 2012; OECD, 2022; Zucchelli et al., 2023). The likelihood of becoming NEET increases with the number of risk factors, with this “cumulative disadvantage” requiring comprehensive interventions (Marques et al., 2024). Young NEETs face a high risk of social exclusion and negative social outcomes, including increased risk of criminal behaviour (Eurofound, 2012; ILO, 2022a; CEDEFOP, 2024; Tayfur et al., 2024). Mental health problems represent a dual challenge: they can be both a risk factor for, and a serious consequence of, NEET status (CEDEFOP, 2024; Marques et al., 2024; Tayfur et al., 2024; Zucchelli et al., 2023). Feelings of hopelessness may lead to complete withdrawal from the labour market (Zucchelli et al., 2023), hence effective activation strategies must integrate psychosocial support.

## **1.3 Long-Term Consequences of NEET Status**

The consequences of NEET status lead to serious and persistent negative outcomes for individuals, communities, and national economies (CEDEFOP, 2024; Tayfur et al., 2024). For individuals, long-term NEET status is associated with a significantly higher risk of adverse outcomes, including a 2.8-fold increased risk of suicide, a 2.06-fold increased risk of criminal behaviour, and a 1.98-fold higher likelihood of long-term unemployment (CEDEFOP, 2024; Tayfur et al., 2024). It also results in lower overall well-being and increased social exclusion (Eurofound, 2012; Movendi, 2015; Tayfur et al., 2024). From a societal and economic perspective, the alienation of young people from the labour market entails substantial costs. In 2011, the economic loss caused by NEETs in Europe was estimated at EUR 153 billion, equivalent to 1.2% of European GDP (Eurofound, 2012; UNDP, 2025). These costs provide a strong economic and social rationale for extensive investment in activation programmes, including volunteering initiatives.

## **1.4. Volunteering as a Tool for Activating Young NEETs**

Volunteering, defined as unpaid, non-compulsory activity aimed at providing services to others (ILO, 2022b), holds significant potential as an activation tool for young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET). It brings benefits not only to communities but also to the volunteers themselves, fostering personal growth and empathy (All Care VNA & Hospice, 2025; Barc Programs, 2024). The engagement of youth in volunteering also provides substantial contributions to national economies (Latham, 2003).

## **Mechanisms of Activation and Skill Development**

Volunteering enhances self-confidence and self-esteem, which is crucial for young NEETs who often suffer from low self-worth (All Care VNA & Hospice, 2025; DERA, 2007; Youth Futures Foundation, 2022). Activities that positively impact others provide a sense of achievement and purpose, leading to a more positive self-perception (All Care VNA & Hospice, 2025). Recognition of one's contribution further strengthens self-value (DERA, 2007).

Volunteering effectively improves social skills and expands social networks (All Care VNA & Hospice, 2025; Barc Programs, 2024; DERA, 2007). It provides a natural environment for the development of soft skills such as teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and communication, as well as hard skills including technological competencies (Barc Programs, 2024; DERA, 2007; Leonard, 2025; Walden University, 2024). This process builds “social capital” through social connections (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2013). Volunteering acts as a catalyst for overcoming barriers to engagement and serves as a stepping stone towards re-entering education or employment (Local Government Association, 2010). It offers a “low-risk way to explore new career areas” (Ellis, 2013) and can motivate individuals to re-engage with education (DERA, 2007). Mentoring programmes integrated with volunteering initiatives broaden the horizons of young NEETs and provide access to new opportunities (CEDEFOP, 2015).

## **Volunteering and Empirical Evidence of its Impact on Employability**

**The Youth Guarantee (YG)** of 2013 improved the position of young people in the EU labour market, yet challenges remain in reaching all young NEETs (Santos-Brien, 2018). Successful initiatives include Italy's “Yes I Start Up”, Austria's “Vienna Apprenticeship Guarantee”, and Slovenia's “Project Learning for Young Adults” (OECD, 2024). Mentoring programmes, such as those run by the Austrian social enterprise Sindbad, are also beneficial (CEDEFOP, 2015).

**The European Solidarity Corps (ESC)** offers opportunities for skills development and international experience (EUR-Lex, 2025; Youth Portal, 2025). Its support system covers costs and provides mentoring, thereby fostering social inclusion (European Commission, 2025; Youth Portal, 2025).

In Slovakia, successful programmes include the “**Lost Millennials**” project for the integration of young people over 25 (SBA, 2022) and the **SPACE** initiative, which focuses on supporting employment and social inclusion through counselling and mentoring (MPSVR SR, 2024). Empirical research supports the positive impact of volunteering on employability. Research by the Corporation for National and Community Service showed that unemployed individuals engaged in volunteering are 27 percent more likely to find employment (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2013; Warfield, 2013; Walden University, 2024). The US Department of Labor recognises volunteering as a valuable activity for the unemployed (Ellis, 2013). Joint research by UNV and the ILO confirms the positive labour market outcomes of volunteering for young people (ILO, 2022b).

A key finding is that the positive relationship between volunteering and employment is most pronounced among disadvantaged groups. Individuals without secondary education experienced a 51 percent increase in the likelihood of securing employment, and in rural areas this figure rose to 55 percent (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2013;

Warfield, 2013). This suggests that volunteering “opens doors and levels the playing field” for individuals with limited skills (Warfield, 2013).

Table 1: Benefits of Volunteering for Skill Development and Employability

Category of Benefits	Specific Benefits and Skills
Personal Development	Increased self-confidence/self-esteem, sense of meaning/fulfilment, improved mood, reduced stress levels, personal independence, empathy, perseverance/determination.
Social Skills	Enhanced social interaction abilities, expanded social and professional networks, improved teamwork, effective communication, conflict resolution, cultural sensitivity.
Employability Skills	Time management, problem-solving, leadership, project management, responsibility/reliability, career exploration, practical IT skills in the workplace, public speaking, presentation skills, social media management, training experience.
Impact on CV/Employment	Enhances CV, demonstrates positive character traits, provides valuable employable experience, increases attractiveness to employers.

Sources: (All Care VNA & Hospice, 2025; Barc Programs, 2024; DERA, 2007; Ellis, 2013; Leonard, 2025; Chauke, 2023; Walden University, 2024; Youth Futures Foundation, 2022).

Volunteering represents a comprehensive and effective tool for activating young NEETs. Through the development of key soft and hard skills, building self-confidence and social capital, as well as overcoming barriers to re-engagement, volunteering directly contributes to improving employability. Successful programmes at both European and national levels confirm its transformative potential, with empirical evidence clearly demonstrating that volunteering significantly increases the chances of finding employment, particularly for the most vulnerable groups. These findings emphasise that volunteering is not merely a social activity but a strategic investment in human capital and social inclusion.

## 2 METHODS

### Research Design

The qualitative research design, as defined by Gavor (2010), represents an approach focused on deeper understanding and interpretation of phenomena ascribed by participants based on their experiences. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative methods enable the uncovering of complex relationships and processes within natural settings. Data collection was conducted according to a pre-prepared focus group guide. Focus groups facilitate obtaining in-depth insights into the research topic through guided group discussions. The focus group guide was structured to cover all key aspects of the research question while allowing participants the freedom to express their opinions and experiences. Data collection took place from September to December 2024, allowing for a flexible approach to organising the focus groups.

### Data Analysis Method

Audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed and subsequently subjected to open coding. Each focus group was analysed separately by members of the research team. After a month of reflection, problem categories were defined, within which codes representing both objective and subjective causes of problems, including proposed solutions, were identified. Partial analyses were consolidated into a unified dataset using Excel, marking the occurrence of problems in specific groups. Based on this analysis, code and subcategory schemes for individual problem areas were created using the Miro software. The analytical process involved continuous data comparison to identify similarities and differences at all levels of

analysis. The card sorting technique was employed for presenting the results (Jabłoński et al., 2013).

### **Characteristics of the Research Sample**

Based on an analysis of the baseline situation using statistical data on young people in NEET situations in the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region (BBSK), we developed a plan for the frequency and spatial representation of focus groups in BBSK. The number of focus groups in individual districts was determined by the proportion of young NEET individuals in each district.

In total, 39 focus groups were conducted with 230 participants, distributed as follows:

- By district: Banská Bystrica (1 group, 3 participants), Banská Štiavnica (2 groups, 12 participants), Brezno (3 groups, 12 participants), Detva (2 groups, 7 participants), Krupina (2 groups, 8 participants), Lučenec (3 groups, 24 participants), Poltár (1 group, 13 participants), Revúca (3 groups, 19 participants), Rimavská Sobota (5 groups, 32 participants), Veľký Krtíš (2 groups, 11 participants), Zvolen (1 group, 4 participants), Žarnovica (2 groups, 13 participants), Žiar nad Hronom (1 group, 9 participants).
- Specific groups: Persons with physical disabilities (1 group, 2 participants), persons with mental illness (1 group, 6 participants), persons with intellectual disabilities (2 groups, 16 participants), young people after leaving substitute care (1 group, 2 participants), mothers of minor children in a risk district (1 group, 5 participants), refugees (1 group, 7 participants), persons serving prison sentences (1 group, 9 participants), persons in re-education centres (1 group, 10 participants), persons in resocialisation centres (2 groups, 6 participants).

The number of participants per focus group varied from two to thirteen individuals. Among participants, 112 were women (48.7%) and 83 men (36.1%), while in 35 cases gender was not specified in the consent forms. Regarding age groups, those aged 15–19 constituted 34.8%, those aged 20–24 made up 27.8%, and those aged 25–29 accounted for 22.2%.

### **3 RESULTS**

Based on empirical findings from focus groups with young people in NEET situations and individuals at risk of this status in the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region (BBSK), the objective was specified to examine volunteering as a tool for their activation, focusing on the development of basic habits and enhancing employability through multiple intervention areas. Respondents spontaneously suggested providing opportunities for volunteering as one of the key solutions to their situation. Within the results, two main areas were identified:

1. Development of basic work habits and skills – encompassing the development of fundamental work habits and overcoming stagnation, the indirect influence on the development of basic work habits, acquisition of practical skills, and motivational aspects of volunteering;
2. Support for employability and professional development – including gaining work experience, improving CVs and professional profiles, and the overall perception of volunteering as a solution.

#### **Development of Basic Work Habits and Overcoming Stagnation**

One of the key obstacles identified among young people in NEET situations is a lack of motivation and basic habits such as attendance, punctuality, responsibility, etc. Volunteering programmes directly addressed these issues. An example is the YMCA organisation in BBSK, where young NEET individuals stated that “with the help of mentors, we learn work habits

and life skills, to accept and bear responsibility, to adhere to time management, and also to discover what we are capable of.” Within this area, three specific categories were identified:

1. Acquisition of practical skills – young NEETs saw volunteering as an opportunity to develop practical skills in various fields;
2. Indirect influence on the development of basic work habits – deficits in basic habits were perceived as a key barrier to employment;
3. Motivational aspects of volunteering – respondents also emphasised the motivational dimension of volunteering.

Table 2: Identified Categories of Volunteering Benefits from the Perspective of Young NEETs

<i>Category</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Qualitative Quote</i>
<b><i>Acquisition of Practical Skills</i></b>	<b>Technical Skills</b>	"I would like to learn how to work with computers or how to communicate with people. In volunteering, I could learn this without pressure." (M, 19)
	<b>Interpersonal Skills</b>	"I learned to be responsible because even though it was just volunteering, I had an important role there." (W, 20)
<b><i>Indirect Influence on Development of Basic Work Habits</i></b>	<b>Structure and Routine in Daily Life</b>	"If I had to wait until I got a job and regularly commuted to work to gradually develop a routine, I would never get it. Now I have no structure in my life, and that harms me. Volunteering would give me a fixed schedule." (W, 21)
	<b>Testing and Building Self-Confidence</b>	"I am most afraid that when I get a job, I won't handle the responsibility. But as a volunteer, I could test whether I can do it without fear of being immediately fired." (M, 23)
	<b><i>Motivational Aspects of Volunteering</i></b>	<b>Sense of Meaning and Purpose</b>
<b>Building Self-Esteem</b>		"I liked helping other people. It would give me a feeling that I am good at something." (W, 18)

Source: Own elaboration.

### **Support for Employability and Professional Development**

Within the second area, we identified three categories:

1. Acquisition of practical experience and work skills;
2. Improvement of CV and professional profile;
3. Overall perception of volunteering as a solution.

These categories reflect specific mechanisms through which young people in NEET situations perceive volunteering as a tool to enhance their competitiveness in the labour market and overcome barriers in job seeking.

Table 3: Volunteering as a Catalyst for Employability and Professional Growth

<i>Category</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Qualitative Quote</i>
<b><i>Acquisition of Practical Experience and Work Skills</i></b>	<b>Overcoming the barrier of lack of experience</b>	"When you have no experience, no one wants to employ you. But if I were a volunteer, at least I would have some experience to write on my CV." (M, 20)
	<b>Learning work processes and</b>	"Even if it wasn't paid work, at least I would learn how things work at a job, how

	<b>workplace culture</b>	to behave towards people, how to be punctual." (W, 19)
<i>Improvement of CV and Professional Profile</i>	<b>Eliminating gaps in the work history</b>	"My CV is empty because I did nothing after school. If I couldn't help in this organisation, I wouldn't be able to write that I did something during this period." (W, 22)
	<b>Managing self-presentation</b>	"Employers always ask what I have been doing in recent years. If I didn't have volunteering experience, it would be embarrassing." (M, 20)
	<b>Managing communication with employers</b>	"When I communicate with the volunteer coordinator, I'm actually practising how I will talk to my future boss at work."
<i>Overall Perception of Volunteering as a Solution</i>	<b>Demonstrating motivation and willingness to work</b>	"They won't hire me because I'm not a trained shop assistant, but if they see that I am willing to work and volunteering confirms it, maybe they will hire me. I want to and I will, they just have to give me a chance." (W, 27)
	<b>Graduate internship</b>	"Right after school, you don't get a job here immediately, but volunteering experience is also good right after school." (W, 25)
	<b>Opportunities for networking</b>	"Through volunteering, I met people who work in various companies. Then, when they see me, they recognise me, and they talk to me differently." (W, 22)
	<b>Multidimensional benefits of volunteering</b>	"It's not just about having something to write on my CV. It's about feeling useful, gaining experience, and maybe finding a path to a job, to my own housing." (M, 24)

Source: Own elaboration.

Based on the presented results, it can be concluded that volunteering represents a comprehensive tool for activating young people in NEET situations, simultaneously operating on multiple levels of their personal and professional development. The activation potential of volunteering manifests not only in acquiring specific work competencies and experiences but also in fundamental processes such as establishing life structure, building self-confidence, and overcoming the passivity typical of the NEET population. The findings suggest that young people perceive volunteering as a natural bridge between their current inactive state and future integration into the labour market, with this activation process involving a gradual development from basic work habits to concrete mechanisms for enhancing employability. Thus, volunteering represents a holistic approach to activation that respects not only the need for gradual competence building but also the development of self-confidence among young people outside the education and employment systems.

#### 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of our study identified volunteering as a tool for activating young people in NEET situations that can respond to key challenges identified in the areas of employment and employability. The analysis showed that the problematic areas of employment and education

constituted the most complex problem clusters, with challenges divided into two main areas – demand-side challenges (objective factors) and supply-side challenges (characteristics of young people). Volunteering, as our findings indicate, can address both groups of these challenges (Androvičová et al., 2025).

The identified barrier of "lack of experience," described by young NEETs as a vicious circle – "we don't have experience, so we can't get a job, but without a job, we can't gain experience" – directly corresponds with our findings on volunteering as a tool to overcome the lack of work experience. Respondents' statements that volunteering allowed them to "learn how work functions" and "gain work experience," and "communicate with a future boss" align with research by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), which demonstrated that unemployed individuals actively engaged in volunteering are more successful in job interviews due to experience gained through volunteering (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2013). Insufficient education and missing certificates, which respondents described as "we don't have the education for the available jobs," can be partially compensated by volunteering through the development of practical skills. Our findings on acquiring practical skills in various areas—digital skills, time management, self-confidence, and many others—correspond with theoretical knowledge about the development of key soft skills such as teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and communication through volunteering (DERA, 2007).

Personal barriers, such as lack of confidence in one's abilities expressed by statements like "maybe I'm not smart enough" or "I'm incapable," directly correspond with our findings on the motivational aspects of volunteering. Respondents emphasised that volunteering would give them a feeling "that I am good at something," which aligns with empirical findings that volunteering increases self-confidence and self-esteem (All Care VNA & Hospice, 2025). Loss of motivation and reluctance to work, expressed in statements like "I don't feel like looking for a job" or "it's hard to find motivation," can be addressed through volunteering by providing meaning and structure. Our findings that volunteering offers a "fixed schedule" and helps in "creating routine" are also confirmed by Chauke (2023), whose study found that volunteering programmes positively contribute to the development of young NEETs by helping them become active citizens and develop a sense of self-worth.

Our research faces the limitation of a lack of comparison of findings with other studies in the context of Slovak conditions. Another limitation arises from the results of our study itself. From our perspective, it is necessary to extend the qualitative design with additional qualitative methods (such as individual interviews, etc.) and subsequently with further interpretations by the young people in NEET situations themselves. This will help us better understand the significance of subjective and individual preferences. The results of this study contribute to understanding support for the activation and employability of young people in NEET situations. They provide fundamental feedback and reflection on the state of volunteering as a tool for activating young people outside the education and employment systems in Slovakia.

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## Affiliation

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