

Transnational research report

Competence Framework for youth workers





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It appears that a clear agreement has been reached across Europe about the substance of youth work – not only for the young person but for the whole society on a local, regional or national level. In the last few decades, youth work's strong link to employability has been highlighted in the stated objective to 'develop youth work as a resource to support youth employability' (EC, 2009: 6).

Although efforts on a European level for enhancing the capacity of youth workers continue, it is observed that they still struggle in finding the best approach to youngsters and in coping with everyday challenges of activating NEETs. Based on disparities among Europe and on the ongoing cohesion policy, the COMPASS project aims at supporting the countries facing the highest rates of unemployment among NEETs and at equipping youth workers with tailor-made measures.

In a world of disrupting change and socio-economic uncertainty, partners from six countries – Bulgaria, Austria, Greece, France, Romania and Spain - got together and investigated in depth how to contribute to the growth and personal development of the youth workers in their countries. The quantitative and qualitative research conducted in the first stage of the project concluded that youth workers should possess a wide range of skills and competences in order to answer to the needs of the youngsters they are working with.

According to the demographic data collected, a profile of the youth workers could be described – most of the people working with NEETs are between 25-35 years old and possess a Bachelor or Master degree, mainly in Social science. A substantial number of them haven't passed through a special training dedicated to soft-skills development.

Based on more than 200 answers in the online survey and 30 individual interviews with youth workers, the consortium created a competence model carefully adapted to the main challenges they are facing **with a particular emphasis** in youth workers' skills for facilitating a career counselling and mentoring process. The competence model **subtracts 6 key competences with 5 behaviours each,** summarizing the specific knowledge, skills and attitudes required.

This competence framework would be the basis for the next project phases, ensuring that all the products developed will be tailor-made to the needs of the youth workers and provide cutting-edge methodologies and instruments for NEETs activation – a competence-based training for youth workers and a gamified platform for youth empowerment.



INTRODUCTION

According to the latest research of Eurostat concerning the share of NEETs conducted in 2018, 9 countries are experiencing unemployment rates higher than the average for Europe (17,2 %) among which are Greece (28,8%), Romania (21,4%), Spain (20,8%), Bulgaria (18,1%), and France (18,2%). In order to tackle this issue, the youth workers' role was recognized on the European level, as well as the positive impact it has on the social integration, the active citizenship and the employability of NEETs.

In this context, the primary objective of the COMPASS project is to recognise and improve youth work and its impact on NEETs' education and labour market inclusion. The target group are youth workers (community mediators, Roma mediators, social workers, career counsellors, etc. between the age of 18 and 29) who work directly with NEETs and are aiming to support them in the education and labour market integration process. In the long-run that would lead to **lower unemployment levels among NEETs**. Another long-term benefit will be the increased quality of European youth work with NEETs and the improved recognition of skills of European youth educators.

The role of the current report is to establish a comparative analysis of the situation of youth work in the partner countries of the COMPASS project, in order to provide a better understanding of the challenges that youth workers are facing and tackle them with a tailor-made competence model that encompasses the specific knowledge, skills and attitudes required for an effective career counselling and mentoring process of NEETs. In doing so, COMPASS project will ensure a more focused approach towards the competence assessment of youth workers, with a particular emphasis on youth workers' skills for facilitating a career counselling and mentoring process.

In order to explore the concrete learning and training needs of youth workers that support NEETs it is necessary to adopt and embrace a holistic approach towards defining the competences. Such an approach will make their role even more efficient and successful in assisting youths in the development of skill-set of the future. These skills are essential to enable them to deal with the many challenges they will encounter and also to gain the confidence needed to embrace any arising opportunities.

This fundamental first step will allow the project experts to create a competence-based training programme for youth workers which directly corresponds to their needs. Based on previous research in the participating partner countries, no comprehensive trainings for youth workers exist that develop their competences in a targeted way to prepare them for the career counselling and mentoring of NEETs. Therefore, for the first time a competence-based training explicitly targeting youth workers' soft skills will be developed and offered.

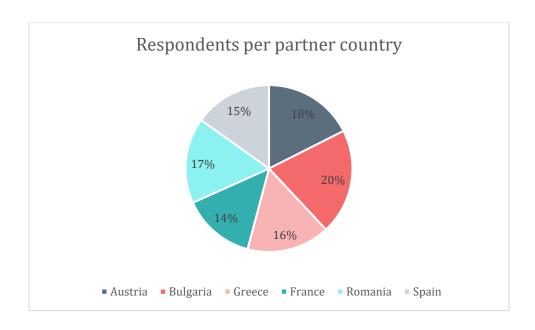


METHODOLOGY

The initial research showed that there are no comprehensive quantitative and qualitative studies on the competence profile that youth workers have to possess in order to effectively support NEETs in their education and labour market integration. Thus, the current report is conducting quantitative research of youth workers' competences and will further explore the target group in each partner country with qualitative methods (interviews/focus groups) in order to make an in-depth analysis of their current training needs and concerns regarding their work with NEETs.

The methodology of the research encompasses the following steps:

An online questionnaire had been prepared to address youth workers and their key
competences as defined in the European Youth Work Portfolio and focusing on career
counselling and mentoring skills. The questionnaire was available in the 6 partner
languages and due to the already existing network the partners managed to gain a
total of 200 responses for the whole project consortium, exceeding the intended 180.
The next graph shows the contribution of each partner country to the online survey.



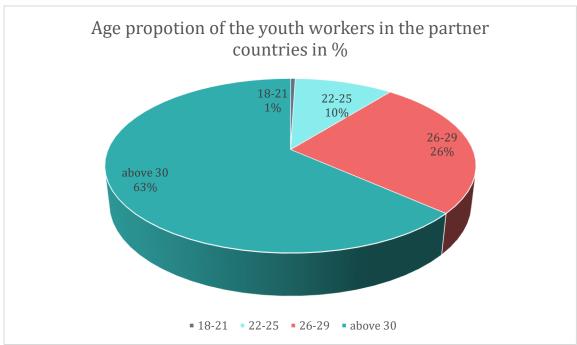
 In order to get an in-depth insight about the learning and training needs of youth workers and their main challenges faced in their practice with NEETs, each partner conducted 5 interviews. Building upon the results gathered in the questionnaire, the consortium gained comprehensive understanding about the youth workers'



- competences. The aim was to identify their common challenges while working with NEETs and the competences they need to improve in order to support more effectively NEETs activation.
- Based on the already mentioned fundamental steps and taking into consideration the
 results of qualitative analysis conducted, the project consortium defined the "must
 have" 6 key competences with detailed and observable behaviours. This framework is
 an integral part of this report and will be used for the design of the training programme,
 as well as the competence assessment methodology, based on a well-proven
 coaching instrument called "Wheel of Life".

TARGET GROUP SPECIFICS AND CURRENT SITUATION IN THE PARTNER COUNTRIES

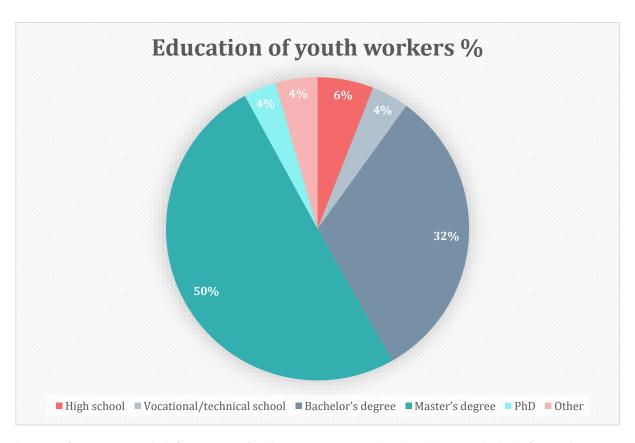
An interesting tendency should be highlighted in connection to the age of youth workers participating in the survey. It is observed that 63% of them are older than 30 years. Obviously, youth workers are not necessarily young people themselves. A possible benefit of this could be an increased respect for them from side of the young people. Furthermore, youth workers who are older than 30 years bring a wealth of experience in life - but also in their work as youth workers.



Also, taking into account the education degree of the people working with youngsters, which is more than 80% higher than vocational, gaining the necessary experience is very rarely achievable before the age of 30. Despite their higher educational degree, **70% of the respondents have not completed specialized trainings** focused on their soft-skills development.

Another distinctive feature of the target group is their professional occupation. According to the conducted survey, we can underline that in Austria, Greece, France and Romania there is no specific professional role for the specialists working with NEETs – they are mainly teachers, project managers, psychologists, social workers. In contrast in Bulgaria and Spain all the respondents are in the same role - youth workers in Bulgaria and career counselors in Spain.





In the next few pages, a brief summary for the partner countries is elaborated, the information is concentrated in 4 main directions:

- Trainings for youth workers available, distinctive features of the professional role
- Main challenges while working with the target group
- Methods which are successful for youth activation
- Skills and competences further needed to be developed

Austria

There are no VET trainings or university degrees in Austria which are especially designed for dealing with NEETs, but there some qualifications that are suitable for the work with this target group, such as degrees in the field of education, pedagogy, social work, social pedagogy and teacher training. Youth workers have different educational backgrounds – some of them are certified trainers, others have university degrees. They have attended various soft skills trainings, including on topics such as gender and diversity, communication, conflict management, intercultural communication and conflict management, motivation,



self-reflection, self-confidence, working with young people with a migration background, training in theater pedagogy.

According to the experts, the needs of the target group are best met with varied methods and approaches which contain a **playful component**. A thorough understanding of the needs and the interests of young people is required. It is best to combine different training methods in a diverse offer, and pay attention to the **duration** – lengthy trainings lower participant's motivation. The availability of **low-threshold** offers is vital for enabling young people to access trainings. Praise and recognition play an important role – if the NEETs get **good feedback**, they retain their motivation and keep attending the activities.

The main request for help that youth workers in Austria receive from NEETs concern organisational help (e.g. communication with public authorities), personal problems (e.g. problems with the family), education and training, carrier counselling, voluntary work and leisure activities. According to the interviews with youth workers, they would benefit most from additional training on topics such as self-reflection and self-confidence building; teambuilding, group dynamics, group activities; conflict management; communication techniques; effective carrier counselling; as well as improving digital competences.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria is a country with dedicated youth mediators working within local municipalities. Their positions are financed through a National programme ('Youth guarantee') and coordinated by the Ministry of Labour and Social policy. There are no VET trainings or university degree programmes identified that are addressing the qualification of youth workers in Bulgaria. The mediators working under the ministry programme pass a training consisting of topics including administrative procedures and laws (National and European strategic documents); definition of the term NEETs; how NEETs status is acquired and how to activate NEETs – introduction to field work.

Youth workers in Bulgaria identified a number of concrete challenges facing young people – many of them continue to be **reliant on their parents** (both financially and psychologically) well into adulthood. In many smaller municipalities there is a **limited number of job openings**, restricting career opportunities for NEETs who decide to seek employment. This is further complicated by widespread **unrealistic expectations for remuneration** – many young people refuse to accept an entry-level salary, and a **low level of trust in public institutions** intended to lend support, which are often seen as administration-heavy and lacking resources. Members of the **Roma minority** face a number of additional challenges – many of them lack the literacy or even spoken language fluency to start a job, while some of the women face discrimination and are not allowed to work by their families.

Social media (Facebook groups, Messenger and YouTube) are an effective tool both for reaching out to the target group and providing training offers to them. Another effective method used by the youth mediators in NEETs activation is their knowledge on the **national**



legislation. A good practice applied by youth mediators is their **well-established partnerships** with local institutions, NGOs and employers, including ennoblement of youth in different educational courses and the organisation of job fairs. According to the youth workers, **visual presentations** and the provision **of success stories** are a great way to motivate young people.

The main request for help that youth workers in Bulgaria receive from NEETs concern job search support; support in the preparation of CV, Cover letter and the interview, and support towards financial issues. Identified training needs for youth workers include methods on motivating and engaging NEETs, retaining their attention, communicating more effectively, identifying their needs, providing psychological support, as well as providing concrete knowledge about the labour market specifics and the different professions.

France

In France, the NEETs are supported by several structures and professionals, not only in the context of professional integration. However, the provision of resource persons is insufficient to guarantee adequate support, and if responsibilities are to be shared, professionals would require both cross-cutting training and facilitated networking. Training courses in France differ according to specialities, most interviewees are specialised educators focused on professional reorientation. Their training includes modules on active and effective communication, problem solving, practical analysis, self-development, working with disabled youth and with young migrants in isolation.

A major hinderance to youth empowerment is the **low self-esteem** of many NEETs. Youth workers need to be able to **listen attentively** to their target group, in the words of a respondent: "Our goals are not their goals and you have to be able to hear them". Training offers for young people should be as **practical** as possible and include **rich information resources** on professional integration, the healthcare and other opportunities. Gamified training offers are generally considered to be effective, as well as success stories that can inspire others.

The main request for help that youth workers in France receive from NEETs concern support in writing their CVs, family mediation, health support (including psychological support), as well as support in terms of financial management. Regarding the training needs of youth workers, the most important aspect identified was that of effective communication, as well as information-gathering tools, best practice exchange and role-playing techniques for better mutual understanding with the target group.



Greece

There are no specialised university training programs for youth workers in Greece. Some of the people working in the field have degrees in Psychology and Counselling, while the majority of the youth workers have attended non-formal education training. The employment and training programmes in Greece mainly consist of voucher programmes that start with counselling services for the NEETs before the training that are followed up in the period before the job placement. This kind of support has a demonstrable effect on activating the NEETs and provides security while entering training programmes and especially the labour market.

NEETs in Greece are faced with the following challenges: many of them have **limited** access to education and training. Due to little or no work experience they have limited chances of securing employment, which is further complicated by an **insecure employment** environment due to the overall condition of the economy.

According to youth workers, **social media** are the best channel to approach young people. In addition, personal **interviews** and specific **psychometric tools** are well accepted by the professional community. The presence of a large **network of contacts** is one of the most important factors for successful work. A lot of efforts of the youth workers are directed towards **motivating** the young people, as the majority feel disappointed in the country's educational and employment system. After that, they focus on the **reintegration in education** for the early school leavers and on connecting of the already obtained **skills and knowledge** to the actual needs of the employment sector. Young people can benefit from an **integrated web platform** offering access both to training resources and to counselling services.

NEETs in Greece most often seek from youth workers guidance in administrative procedures, vocational guidance, psychological support (especially in retaining confidence that they are able to change their lives), as well as information provision (on opportunities for trainings, seminars etc; opportunities for mobility programmes; career and study opportunities). Noteworthy is a desire for a more attractive, targeted and **customised educational process** focusing on practical issues and skills. Most training needs of youth workers revolve around improving their understanding of the young peoples' needs, as well as improving their soft skills.

Romania

There is no specialised university training for youth workers in Romania, and specialised non-formal training courses are also not common. According the specialists in the field, the most relevant available studies are degrees in Psychology and Social Work.



NEETS is Romania are often faced with a number of challenges, including a **lack of confidence** in themselves, peer pressure, **financial and family problems**. Youth workers often find that young people are **reluctant to discuss** their problems of even show no interest in them. They are often faced with a lack of affection and attention from family/their immediate context, pushing them to feel isolated and sometimes lash out.

The most effective approach for the work with young people is found to be the **active listening** and patience; a subtle approach, allowing the young people to take the time they need to open and respond; as well as engaging in **discussions** and relaxed debates on topics of interest, getting to know each other better. Empowering young people means getting them involved in every step of the process of finding and implementing solutions to their problems; supporting their talents and **coaching** them so they can achieve their goals, which motivates them and improves their confidence. Small trips and performances for the community, which help create **group cohesion** and **improve self-esteem** also have an empowering effect on young people. Lastly, **quizzes** and **team games** tend to encourage interaction and engagement. On the other hand, youth workers managed to identify some approaches that are clearly counterproductive, such as asking direct questions, especially when others are present; taking into account only one's own point of view and drawing conclusions prematurely. Imposing one's solutions in an authoritative way is to be avoided.

NEETs in Romania seek youth workers in order to receive assistance for dealing with financial and family problems, as well as for reaching decisions and finding one's purpose in life. They are interested in topics related to the job market and the skills required in certain fields; digital skills and social media; health and sex education. Group communication, integration and a **sense of belonging to a group** are clearly important for young people. Youth workers in Romania identified their own training needs to include competences such as teamwork, improved English language and digital skills; better understanding of the target group, their psychological conditions and how to support youth with special needs; employing flexible and non-intrusive methods for interaction with and empowerment of youths; adapting role-playing methods to working with NEETs.

Spain

Same as in many other countries, here is no specific university or vocational training that qualifies one as a youth worker in Spain. Youth workers are required to possess some kind of university degree, though, although their background is extremely diverse, venturing from social work to law and business. Many youth workers attend additional courses, often taking place at work, including topic such as time management, understanding of the millennial mentality, the psychology of young people's experiences, motivation with young people, teamwork, conflict resolution.

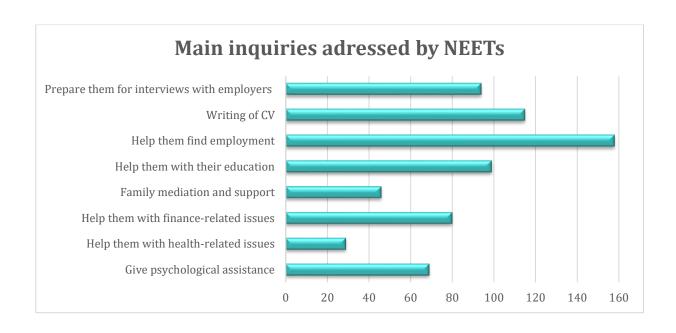


In their work, youth workers in Spain have to deal with **low levels of youth engagement**, a general **lack of resources** to carry out programs and **time constraints**, preventing them from developing personalized itineraries for the NEETs. The main tools used to attract and activate young people are related to good communication, based on **active listening** to detect their needs. It is vital to communicate in understandable language that allows for **feedback** from the young persons. **Empathy** is another essential tool to build trust with the young person and better understand their situation, being able to develop more personalized itineraries.

Young people seek youth workers' help, especially in administrative matters, such as asking for an unemployment card and unemployment benefits, signing up for a youth guarantee, getting to know their labour rights. They are also interested in carrier counselling, job trainings and other available courses, preparing for a job interview, submitting a CV and application, looking for available job openings. Youth workers in Spain defined their training needs to include topics such as time-management, teamwork, dealing with frustration, as well as improved digital skills with a special focus on employing new technologies and understanding social networks better.

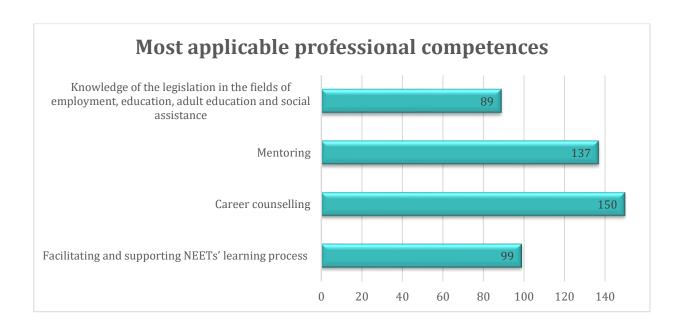
GENERAL OVERVIEW AND MAIN FINDINGS

Given the fact that in most partner countries youth workers don't pass through a specialised qualification course, the need for **training courses** focused on their professional competences becomes apparent. The research conducted provides clear implications on what that training content needs to include.



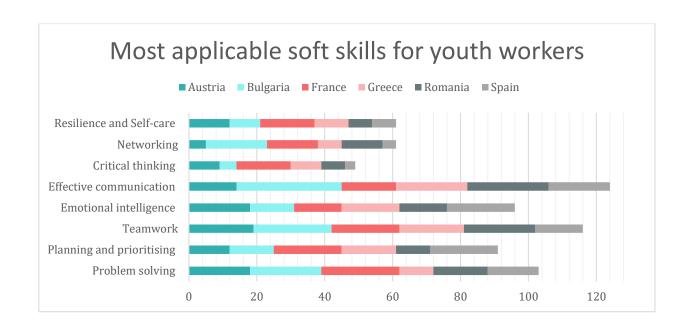
According to the results of the survey and interviews, **carrier counselling** is clearly the task most frequently performed by youth workers. They help NEETs identify their skills and interests, search for job openings, prepare their applications, get ready for interviews etc. In addition, they perform a plethora of other tasks based on the current needs of their target group, including, but not limited to:

- administrative support with state and municipal programmes;
- searching for further education opportunities;
- helping with finance-related issues;
- helping with health-related issues;
- assisting with personal and family problems.



Closely related to the main task performed by them, **career counselling** is revealed as the main competence required for youth workers. Young people require assistance in order to take steps towards achieving their independence, and being able to secure their financial status is of paramount importance to them.

In addition, mentoring is a competence required by all youth workers. The ability to **motivate** youths and empower them to take the steps necessary to achieve their goals is key in all partner countries. This in an area where significant challenges are encountered, for many NEETs lack the confidence that they are able to achieve a meaningful change in their lives.

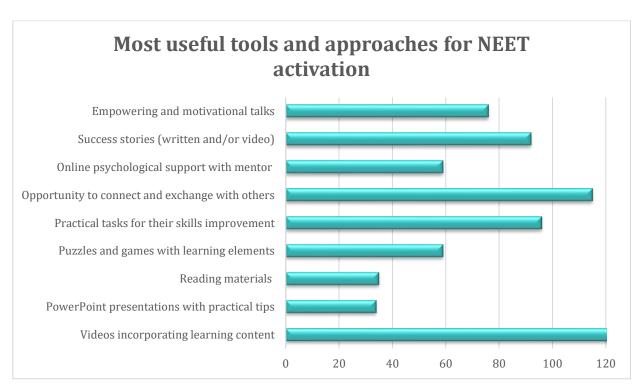


There is a strong agreement both among interview and survey respondents in all partner countries that effective **communication** is of paramount importance for working with young people. It is impossible to achieve any results without proper understanding of the young peoples' needs and the ability to get across the importance of taking certain steps in order to achieve the desired goals. Professionals already understand the need to actively involve both parties in the communicative process, but they could benefit from further tools and approaches.

Closely related to this topic is the competence of **emotional intelligence** and empathy, as well as resilience and self-care. A youth worker needs to be able to recognise one's own emotions, feel confident in his/her calling, and be able to withstand pressure in order to be able to offer effective assistance to other people's problems.

Youth workers are often encountering significant challenges in their work. That is why it is of vital importance for them to be **efficient** in their work: be able to plan ahead, prioritise, employ critical thinking in order to deal with the problems they encounter.

Last, but not least, youth workers are not alone. They should always be a part of a broad coalition involving their team members, government officials, NGOs and companies. **Networking** and teamwork are competences playing a vital role in achieving the desired goals and overcoming the feeling of helplessness and frustration that arises from dealing with challenges without proper assistance.



Youth workers have clearly articulated opinions on what modes of learning are effective in dealing with their target group and what don't really work. There is a distinct focus on **practical application** as opposed to theory. Youth workers want to exchange experience with their peers to see what works and what doesn't. They require additional practical tasks focused on skill development, as well as provision of learning games to present new material in an accessible way.

Motivating NEETs is a clearly identified challenge that can benefit from empowering talks and the dissemination of success stories of youngsters who managed to develop their skillset and find employment. The ability to offer systematic support online is seen as a significant factor in youth empowerment.

As far as the mode of presentation is concerned, there is a very strong preference for **video material** as the expense of anything involving reading, be it longer texts or PowerPoint presentations. The reasons for that are twofold – some of the target group are challenges with low levels of literacy, but also the prevalence of social media in the 21st century has created learners requiring strong visual stimulation in order to maintain their interest.

COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH WORKERS

The competence framework acknowledges the importance of youth work in the socioeconomic development in the countries in EU. It focuses on supporting young people in labour market integration and their empowerment through an innovative and efficient approach that will ensure their long-term motivation. Also, the competence framework will serve as a source of inspiration for the development of youth workers' training programme, and support them in assessing their own competences. It includes a number of desirable competences and behaviours that reflect healthy underlying attitudes.

Based on 'A Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally', we are also focusing on the following four dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviours.

- Attitudes (the youth workers' willingness) are the pre-requisite, the foundation for competence development. They lead to
- · knowledge (gained through experience, books, the Internet, etc.) and
- skills (ability to perform a task, to apply knowledge and turn attitudes into actions), which will then lead to
- appropriate and contextual behaviour.

Therefore, behaviour encompasses attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Through behaviour we can assess the competence level of the youth worker and whether it is sufficient for his/her work. In short: behaviour reflects the underlying attitudes of a youth worker.¹

1) Emotional intelligence, resilience and self-care (self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy,)

- Paying attention to one's mental, physical and emotional state and incorporating habits and attitude which make one stable and efficient in the work environment.
- Being able to understand one's internal states, preferences, resources and emotions, as well as their role in the successful professional and personal occupation.
- Managing one's internal states and resources by keeping disruptive emotions and impulses in check and taking responsibility for personal performance.
- Demonstrating persistence, commitment and a strong achievement drive in pursuing goals despite obstacles and setbacks.

¹ A Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally



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 Tackling others' feelings, perspectives and needs, and taking an active interest in their concerns by being attentive to emotional cues, listening well and showing sensitivity.

2) Youth worker efficacy

- Striving to improve or meet a standard of excellence, by being informed about recent changes and opportunities in one's professional sphere.
- Incorporating strategies for efficient planning and prioritizing, in order to coordinate and manage one's daily tasks and tackle the progress of each youngster in a long-term perspective.
- Always seeking and experimenting with innovative and digital tools and approaches which could be useful for working with NEET's
- Actively promoting teamwork with colleagues, initiating collective learning in the youth workers' team and using the results to improve the effectiveness
- Depending upon the nature of the problems that youngsters are facing, evaluating the best solutions, potential risks and resources needed and proposing mediation support if necessary.

3) Effective Communication and (incl. feedback giving, active listening, adaptation of the communication style, negotiation and persuasion)

- Listening actively, asking questions and being aware of the body language in order to understand the real needs and aspirations of the NEETs in a one-onone conversation.
- Adaptation of one's communication style, taking into account the cultural and psychological diversity of the interlocutor
- Giving effective feedback focused on the behaviour and the effect of behaviour, pointing out NEETs progress, but also suggesting areas of improvement for successful goal realisation;
- Making constant efforts to contribute to the growth of the relationship, using an assertive approach of mutual respect and transparency.
- Demonstrating honesty and acceptance about the NEETs opinion, aspirations and goals and provoking action.

4) Motivating and empowering NEET's

- Providing personal support in dealing with crisis situations in a transparent & constructive manner.
- Using playful elements in the one-on-one session with youngsters such as the Moving motivators cards.



- Provoking ownership of the already set goals corresponding to the internal motivation drives of the NEET.
- Believing in NEET's potential and supporting him/her in creating a positive and realistic self-image by boosting self-confidence.
- Provoking a growth mindset of the youngsters by being a role model and transforming the challenges into opportunities.

5) Career counselling

- Analysing the NEET's individual situation and supporting them with patience in identifying their learning needs and styles, as well as the appropriate career step, by using creative and innovative methods.
- Accommodating to NEETs with issues in connection to labour market orientation and job searching tools and strategies (CV, Motivation letter, preparation for job interview).
- Being able to set SMART goals and an individual plan, involving the youngsters actively in the process and aligning them with the current socioeconomic situation in the country.
- Guiding and supporting NEETs through mentoring and coaching techniques to achieve the already set SMART goals and to evaluate their progress
- Providing regular opportunities for self-reflection, as well as for peer-to-peer learning, in order to create group cohesion and provoke youngsters to take action.

6) Networking and relationship building

- Investing time for creating contacts with stakeholders in various sectors by participating in career and local events.
- Demonstrating interest, initiative and proactiveness in communication with potential employers, in order to gain better employment opportunities for youth.
- Sharing and exchanging on a monthly basis relevant information and good practices in youth work internally with colleagues, but also externally with international partners and stakeholders.
- Organizing networking events and career forums, in order to create a setting for gathering employers and youngsters.
- Using on a daily basis different social media tools, developing social media campaigns to promote vocational education, training programmes and nonformal activities.



CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Career counseling skills possessed by youth works in EU are an integral part of their success. Furthermore, according to the main findings, they should also have additional competences such as emotional intelligence, effective communication skills, motivation techniques, networking and digital skills.

The main objective of the present report is to provide a competence framework for youth workers who are dealing with NEETs activation among 6 European countries. It is crucial for them to have concrete behaviors, so that they can access this competence and underline specific arias for focused development. The proposed six-step competence model has been clearly defined and its importance has been revealed as the appropriate tool/mechanism in the youth worker "toolkit" that would facilitate their contribution towards the smooth integration of young people.

Therefore, a competence-based training will be elaborated with practical tools and exercises which will develop the already identified competences.

An added value for the unique COMPASS approach will be the gamified platform for NEETs activation with empowering missions and motivational content, containing interactive activities, educational videos and playful elements, ensuring the long-term motivation and engagement of the users.

LIST OF REFERENCES

Salto Youth (2016). Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally