

Struggling at School but Starting a Business?

At-Risk NEET Young People, Entrepreneurship and Social Change

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Introduction

Young people no longer in the compulsory schooling system and yet Not in Employment, Education or Training (termed NEETs) are the focus of government attention in the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU). Though the term and definition are problematic, the grouping often includes those from low socio-economic backgrounds and rural communities. These young people typically struggle with educational attainment, employment, personal health and wellbeing, social inclusion, and positive social outcomes. This situation is widely considered a complex social issue consisting of several factors that have resulted in various targeted interventions. One area of focus has been entrepreneurship education programmes (EEPs).

In this piece, we broadly introduce the subject matter of entrepreneurship as a vehicle for improving employability alongside the personal and social skills of young people. Following this, we present some brief insights into a current EU Interreg 2seas social innovation project, SPEED-You-UP (SYU)¹, across the UK, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. The project seeks to help at-risk NEETs to work and employment by improving entrepreneurial, personal, and social skills through a co-created entrepreneurship program. The project creates entrepreneur hubs both in secondary schools with many at-risk NEET students and in local communities with a high number of hard-to-reach NEET young people. In these hubs, young people develop and create pop-ups that seek to answer the specific needs of the communities in which they live or attend school. Our role has been to evaluate the impact and feasibility of upscaling this approach into new regions across the four countries. We include preliminary insights from focus group data with school administrators, welfare organisations, policymakers, financial services, entrepreneurs, and interviews with young people, teachers, and programme coaches on its effectiveness.

Entrepreneurship, young people, and social change

Evidence pointing to the link between entrepreneurship and economic prosperity has influenced the support for entrepreneurship education and the growth of EEPs. A defining feature of EEPs

for young people challenges the long persisting idea of entrepreneurship as something innate and unteachable. Instead, EEPs assume that we can teach entrepreneurship skills, which should be considered a general valuable attitude in all work activities and everyday life. So far, these programmes' methods, approaches, and objectives lack consistency but aim to transmit entrepreneurial knowledge, prepare participants for a career in entrepreneurship, or develop entrepreneurial attitudes for better employability and everyday adjustment.

Most EEPs target students in Higher Education (HE), and most NEET programmes do not target young people at risk of becoming NEET. Also, while most EEPs target young people in formal education, there are fewer initiatives for NEET young people, especially in countries where the preferred transition from school to entrepreneurship is via HE, and entrepreneurship is more acceptable after university education.

SYU aims to bridge that gap and align with new education models that prepare people for work and a more unpredictable and complex society. Further, it is community focused and seeks to encourage young people to develop their local communities, a social entrepreneurship model. The project highlights the importance of entrepreneurship education in creating an entrepreneurial and innovative culture of social and economic change.

Insights and Challenges

A key feature of SYU is that it is purposely not within the school curriculum to allow young people who struggle with a formal education an alternative experience. This presented a challenge because it brushed against the academic priorities of schools, especially during and after the covid-19 pandemic. We found that attempts to implement SYU in schools were often met with some trepidation by teachers and school administrators who liked the idea but were under pressure to catch up with the curriculum; this was especially the case in the UK, where accessing schools was more difficult.

At-risk NEET students are not just those with academic difficulties but also those who struggle with decision-making, interpersonal communication, and wellbeing, aspects SYU seeks to address. We found that schools based their motivation to participate in SYU on the academic subject outcomes—what they perceived as business studies—or the more transferable skills offered. Some schools saw a clear connection between SYU training only for business students; others are more interested in the programme's approach and how that can boost transferable skills like curiosity, teamwork, and self-confidence among young people for later use in the workplace.

The programme's impact on NEET young people, delivered via welfare organisations, also varied among NEET young people. For some, it was an opportunity to engage in free skills training and improve their living standard by encouraging self-employment. For others, the programme was too aspirational and did not respond to more immediate needs.

The realities of implementing SYU in schools and welfare organisations are different. On the one hand, it is easier to reach school students than NEET young people. Schools, in most cases, retain some control over when, how and who will participate, which we found could undermine the efforts of SYU to operate outside of formal education. For students, it was still in school time and space, and in some cases, delivered by teachers made it feel less extra-curricular. On the contrary, NEETs attending schemes in welfare organisations struggle with the commitment and organisation required. The decision to participate rests with NEET young people; they are more challenging to reach and have inconsistent attendance and an overall low retention rate.

A key feature of SYU is a co-creation approach to entrepreneurship education, which involves schools, universities, welfare organisations, employment services, and local businesses and, in so doing, aims for a community-based or social model of entrepreneurship. Studies have shown that contextual interpretations of its goals can influence the delivery of EEPs. Focus groups with coaches and welfare organisations across participating regions in all four countries revealed that the meaning of community varies greatly. Qualitative data analysis is underway to explore the perspectives in more depth and their impact on the project delivery and outcomes.

In interviews with young people, most participants displayed a positive attitude towards self-employment to achieve societal changes in the community. Some examples of pop-up businesses included: a shop selling dog collars, a community newspaper and podcasts, a community cinema in a local youth centre, a confectionary shop and café at schools, and a collaborative international recipe book. Some young people reported gaining self-confidence generally and in business-related tasks and employability skills such as presenting a pitch to others.

Implications and Future Work

To conclude, we found that SYU positively impacted the young people who participated, particularly with confidence, social adjustment, and transferable skills for employment. The co-created approach, whilst challenging to deliver consistently across contexts, can be impactful. We feel it is essential to have policy support for EEPs like SYU, which is often lacking. Policy support is needed to facilitate the transition of at-risk young people into work based on educational qualifications and evidenced skills/competencies training. The aim is to move into the next phase of embedding SYU in two new UK regions with that support., SYU calls attention to largely neglected policy regions for NEET young people. We will continue to explore the potential of SYU, and our work so far raises some crucial questions for future research:

- Would EEPs be effective as a one-off intervention in schools retaining core programme aims, making it easier to deliver and reach more at-risk NEETS?
- How do we help teachers embrace EEPs like SYU with their workload challenges?
- How can we access a broader range of NEETs and help retain them on EEPs like SYU?
- How can we ensure the community aspect of SYU does not get neglected?

We welcome further collaboration with schools, welfare organisations, employment agencies, businesses, entrepreneurs, and policymakers. More details on the project can be found on the [SPEED-You-UP website](#). Please get in touch to discuss further opportunities.

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Notes

1. Acronym: **S**tudents and **N**EET young people, **P**rofessionals and **E**ducators work on **E**mployability and entrepreneurial skills in the battle against school **D**ropout and **Y**outh **U**nem**P**loyment.

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