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# School-to-work transition in France: the role of education in escaping long-term NEET trajectories

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse the school-to-work transition of young people in France, focusing specifically on those who are not in employment, education or training (so-called NEETs), in order to understand their risk of becoming and remaining NEET. Using longitudinal data from a representative national cohort of French young people leaving the educational system in 2010, this study shows how NEET status fits in more or less long-lasting ways in their career pathways. We indicate that 70% of young people experienced a NEET status at least once over the three-year period, if we retain a static and conventional definition of NEET. For most of them, NEET is a temporary situation that spans all educational attainment groups. However, a quarter of the cohort is still in a NEET status 3 years after leaving the education system. The lack of educational and social capital, as well as geographical economic conditions, are decisive factors in remaining in long-term NEET trajectories

## KEYWORDS

NEETs; France; school-to-work transition; labour market

## Introduction

The term NEET (not in education, employment or training) was formally defined at the political level in the UK, by the government's *Bridging the gap* report from the Social Exclusion Unit as those 16–18 year olds who neither participate in education nor training and have not been employed for at least 6 months after leaving compulsory education (Furlong, 2006). After the terms Status 0 (Armstrong et al. 1997) and Status A or Status Zero (Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), 1999), this acronym NEET has been developed as a benchmark indicator first in British youth policy and later in the European community. In the US, some authors have introduced the term 'disconnected young people' (Fernandes & Gabe, 2009). This new concept brings attention to young people's problems and the multifaceted nature of their disadvantages. NEETs share a common, cross-cutting characteristic, i.e. that of not accumulating human capital, which puts them at a greater risk of poor future employment prospects and social exclusion. Since 2010, the European Commission has used this indicator to monitor the labour market and the social situation of young people. According to OECD in 2016, the percentage of NEETs in France, 17.9% of the population aged 15–24, is significantly above the OECD average (13.9%). The EU considers NEETs to be one of the most problematic groups in the context of youth unemployment. Eurofound (2014) estimated that in 2012 the economic costs of NEETs (due to the NEETs' absence from the labour market) to be approximately €162 billion for the 26 Member States' economies (€23.2 billion for France).

As revealed by a number of studies (Eurofound, 2012, 2016; Carcillo et al., 2015 ...), NEETs are a heterogeneous population that encompasses a very wide range of different situations: young people who are disengaged, unoccupied, disadvantaged, living with their parents, looking for a career, having family responsibilities, or taking a year off. Some of these situations are associated with considerable vulnerability; however, it is uncertain whether young people in all these situations should be considered at-risk. A body of critical reflection on the NEET concept (Maguire, 2015; Reiter & Schlimbach, 2015; Serracant, 2014; Thompson, 2011) has emerged recently, which highlights this concept's ambiguity, particularly when it is based on a static approach. Moreover, 'NEETs' remain questionable as a label because, by defining them through their lack of education and employment, it tends to conceal their work experiences and hide the complexity of their life histories or their lack of social and monetary resources (Couronné & Sarfati, 2018; Yates & Payne, 2006).

Despite the high number of NEETs in France, our understanding of this population is

limited, especially when we would like to consider whether NEET is a temporary or long-lasting period. The object of this research is to examine the role of NEET status in the trajectories of young people who leave the French educational system and the factors that influence their exit from education and their experiences in NEET. In particular, we assume that the NEET label includes very different situations in the youth labour market and concerns temporary or long-lasting periods. In the highly segmented French labour market that gives preference to insiders, all students who leave high school or university are at risk of entering a period of NEET, at least to some extent. However, those who attain a lower level of education and who experience greater social and educational disadvantages face a higher risk of getting trapped in these situations.

To test this hypothesis, we will use data from a French national and longitudinal survey, '*Génération 2010*', carried out by Céreq (the French Centre for Research on Education, Training and Employment). This survey provides information on youths' first 3 years in the labour market after leaving education. Céreq contacted by telephone 38,600 young people who left schools in 2010 at various levels of education and entered the labour market in the same year. This survey has the advantage of including several factors that are considered in the literature to increase the risk of becoming a NEET (low level of education, immigrant origin, place of residence in an area with high unemployment or a remote area, etc.) and family background (low socioeconomic class, parents with low academic attainment) (Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), 1999; Coles et al., 2002; Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Cusworth et al., 2009 . . .).

Taking these elements into account, this research is made up of four sections. The first examines the main characteristics of the French school-to-work transition system and draws hypotheses on the importance of having a diploma on this transition, especially during periods of economic crisis. The second section presents the database and the methodological approach developed in the paper. The third section details the main results: firstly, highlighting the NEETs' pathways during the 3 years after they left education and the characteristics of the young people who belong to each pathway; secondly, presenting the determining factors for being in a NEET pathway, using descriptive statistics; thirdly, in order to test these effects, all other things being equal, summarising the results of a multinomial logit model, followed by another model explaining the probability of leaving the first sequence of NEET situation. Finally, in the fourth section, the conclusion discusses these results in relation to public policy that has been implemented in France to facilitate the

integration of young people into the labour market.

## The school-to-work transition in France: a bonus for a diploma

Different typologies have been proposed to explain the different ways that youth are integrated into the labour market. Some of them are extensions of typologies of educational systems to levels of vocational training (for a recent review, see Pilz, 2016): weight of track differentiation, standardisation of training programmes, the nature of in-firm vocational training structures, as well as the characteristics of students who leave secondary education in different countries (Kerckhoff, 2000; Müller & Shavit, 1998). Despite the development of apprenticeships<sup>1</sup>, France, compared to other countries, remains a country associated with formal schooling, even in the vocational track (Greinert, 2002). Moreover, in France, the vocational education track is often considered less valuable than the academic track because of the emphasis on general education. The secondary VET<sup>2</sup> track, compared to the academic track, is based on study choices that are often constrained as a ‘default’ option (Broccolichi & Sinthon, 2011). These constraints produce less motivated young people with more limited knowledge of basic skills (Branche-Seigeot, 2013) and a higher drop-out rate. In addition, a number of studies have highlighted the fact that, despite the increase in the level of education, participation in education is highly stratified by families’ socioeconomic background, school biographies, immigration history, differential educational decision-making, and institutional settings within educational systems, such as tracking and residential segregation (Broccolichi & Sinthon, 2011; Duru-Bellat & Kieffer, 2001; Landrier & Nakhili, 2010; Di Paola et al., 2016). Generally, the factors that channel some young people into the vocational track also become risk factors when entering the labour market. Although it is strongly debated, the apprenticeship tracks seem to guarantee better employability on the labour market (Bonnal et al., 2002). However, as the comparative research of Brebion (2019) shows, in France, this dual qualification is mainly considered as an advantage by firms operating in the external labour market,

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the vocational secondary education is based on a school training scheme although an apprenticeship system exists based on a dual education between a school and an enterprise. Only 5% of pupil choose this dual track at the end of the college, 28% the school vocational track and 61% the general of technological track (Pesonel & Zamora, 2017). This enrolment rate in the dual track decreased these last years in secondary education whereas it increased in higher education.

<sup>2</sup> At the end of the *college*, pupils opt for vocational tracks to prepare during two years a CAP the *Certificat d’aptitude professionnelle* (Vocational training certificate listed as ISCED 3 in the international classification), the first level of vocational training.

whereas in Germany, it mostly stems from a high retention rate on the part of the training firms.

Other classifications of types of transition systems, integrating the characteristics of the relationship between training and employment, make it possible to understand how young people differ in their access to the labour market. For Hannan et al. (1997), France is characterised by a rather weak relationship between training and employment, due to the absence of a professional market and especially to the strong weight of diplomas on young peoples' transitions into work. The credentialist value of diplomas in the labour market explains, in part, the situation of young people accessing different segments of the labour market, which can lead to a process of diploma inflation (Duru-Bellat, 2006). Although their importance is declining, diplomas still provide very strong protection when young people are first entering the labour market, particularly in times of economic crisis. A degree facilitates the entry into the most stable segments of the labour market (Dupray, 2001) and, therefore, a quick school-to-work transition.

Garona and Ryan (1989) point to how different actors in both the educational system and the labour market shape the modes of regulating youth entry into the labour market in different countries. For these authors, France, in this comparative framework, appears to be a regime of selective exclusion characterised by strong government intervention in order to reduce the high rate of youth unemployment: young French people are offered training, state subsidised employment, and incentives to go back to school in order to not become NEET, but also not to compete with older workers.

Moreover, the involvement of public authorities in employment policy partially improves the problems of the most vulnerable young people, who are often the least educated (Couppié & Mansuy, 2003). In addition, during a period of job shortage, the effects of competition on the labour market lead employers to increase their demands when hiring and to reinforce the differentiation of jobs for young people according to their level of qualification. Young people with fewer skills and diplomas are therefore usually less likely to gain access to jobs, and also are more likely to lose their jobs, if employed. Moreover, the difficulties experienced during their studies and not only the final diploma may also have long-term signal effects on the labour market (Brodaty et al., 2008). Young people with less qualifications and VET education are more likely to end up in the secondary segment of the labour market and have fewer opportunities to go back into training. Indeed, in these jobs the opportunities for acquiring experience appear poorer and poorer, which leads to risks

of being trapped in a precarious situation or even of exclusion (Amossé et al., 2011).

This labour market segmentation leads to very different levels of employability between graduates from higher education and students who left secondary school (Paul & Murdoch, 2000). If the former experience periods of unemployment, we can assume they are at the beginning of an extended period of search for qualified jobs. On the other hand, they enjoy security in the labour market more frequently than other diploma holders (Mora, 2008). This is not the case for those who left secondary education, especially those without any qualifications, who are more often in precarious jobs or subsidised employment programmes and more frequently unemployed throughout their career pathway (Bonnal et al., 1997). There is, for the least educated, and in particular for young girls, a very strong link between situations of unemployment and inactivity. For example, girls leaving secondary vocational tracks have experiences characterised by periods of inactivity resulting from entering into a romantic relationship as well as from anticipating problems finding a job on the labour market (Nicole-Drancourt & Roulleau-Berger, 2006).

Few longitudinal and comparative studies, at the moment, have dealt with the dynamics of NEET situations and their critical elements. A study by Carcillo et al. (2015), surveying 2,434 individuals aged 16 to 20 from 12 European countries, shows, however, that the longest NEET trajectories correspond more often to young people who drop out of school early. Only few young people have multiple NEET spells, but single spells in France can have long durations. These results confirm another study (Quintini & Martin, 2006) where France, along with Spain and Greece, was among the countries with the highest number of people who had been classified NEET at least once over a five-year period. Nevertheless, they show that turnover in this status was higher in France than in the other two countries.

In fact, the NEET situation in France has been mainly analysed in the context of European comparative statistical studies (OECD, 2009; Eurofound, 2012, 2014 . . .). Little research in France had focussed on the NEET category with a few exceptions (Kramarz & Viarengo, 2015; Reist, 2020). This can be explained by the willingness of researchers to focus on the unemployment issue, especially for the youth more affected than other generations (Cahuc et al., 2013). Moreover, the emergence of the NEET concept has led to an interest in a much larger population suspected to hide the difficulties of the most vulnerable categories (Demazière, 2018). The NEETs and their pathways have not yet been the subject of a specific survey or research in France, and remains to be investigated beyond the statistical profile.

On the basis of this literature review, one can expect to find, in France, very different NEET situations for dropouts according to their initial level of education. If the more educated experience a NEET spell, this situation will be temporary, whereas the less educated will be trapped in long term or recurrent NEET situations. These different elements lead us to consider the position of NEET status in the school-to-work transition and the pathways leading up to NEET situations.

## Methodology

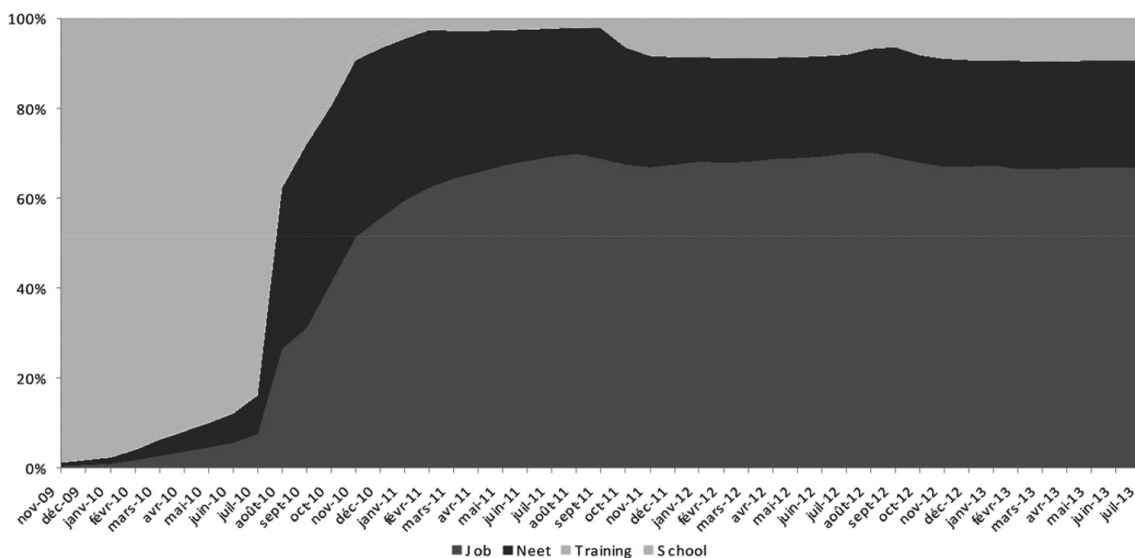
In this section we focus on the school-to-work transition of young people leaving school or university in 2010, using a French longitudinal survey, *Céreq Génération 2010*. This national survey conducted by Céreq allows to follow the career paths of young people at the end of their studies. The database was created after collecting data from schools and universities on all the youth who have completed their schooling in France (3,000 institutions forwarded their files to Céreq, representing a response rate of 73%). A balanced sampling design was used on the basis of strata corresponding to the French regions and the main educational levels. The survey was administered by telephone using a computer-assisted interviewing (CATI) procedure (with a response rate of 34%). A non-response adjustment method has been developed to reduce partial non-response bias by modelling the probability of response. This survey was approved by the National Council for Statistical Information (CNIS). Anonymity of individuals has been preserved throughout the study.

This school-to-work transition survey, released after the economic crisis of 2007/2008, shows, month by month, the labour market pathways of over 38,000 young people representative of the 708,000 first-time school leavers at all levels of educational attainment in 2010 (Figure 1).

We start with presenting a general description highlighting various aspects of NEET status. We examine whether this status can be understood as a transitory step taken by young people on their way to successful careers or whether NEET spells represent long-lasting departures from the labour market. To do so, we analyse a 45 month-long period starting in November 2009.



### Share of each situation on the labour market month by month for young people during the school-to-work transition



**Figure 1.** Source: Céreq ‘Génération 2010’ survey (NEET in black).

In order to measure a consistent NEET category, we looked at young people aged 15 to 26 at the time of leaving the educational system (people 27 and older were excluded). This reduces the sample to 30,049 individuals. Note that the NEET indicator is calculated here on a cohort of young people entering the labour market in the same year, and not in relation to an age category as is the case for most international studies on the transition to the labour market. Up to the time of the survey, a calendar was used to collect, month by month, the following situations: employment, unemployment, study, training, and inactivity (with a minimum length of 1 month for each situation).

This population started searching for jobs in 2010, facing unfavourable conditions in the labour market following the 2008 economic crisis. Three years after leaving the educational system, 66% of young people had a job, 9% were training or studying, and 25% were NEET (24% of women and 25% of men). This withdrawal from the labour market was more likely among non-graduates<sup>3</sup> (half), as well as those who left secondary school with a secondary VET diploma (CAP) (a third). The higher the

<sup>3</sup> Young people without any diploma (ISCED 0–2).

level of education, the lower the share of NEETs, but *baccalauréat*<sup>4</sup> holders (21%) and graduates from higher education (12%) are not spared.

At the time of the survey in 2013 Table 1, 30% of the respondents had not experienced a NEET status and 70% of young people had experienced a NEET status at least once over the three-year period (8% one spell, 28% two spells and 33% more than two spells of NEET). For the total population, the average length of the first period of NEET was 6 months, and for all young people who have experienced a situation of NEET, the average length was 11 months. By spring 2013, the young people in the survey had been NEET for 17 consecutive months on average, from almost 2 years for women without a diploma to 1 year for male and female tertiary graduates. Often, the first NEET episode occurred immediately after leaving the educational system. Furthermore, 44% of the population spent more than 6 months in NEET status, of which 14% spent more than 2 years. Thus, many young people alternate between jobs and NEET episodes.

In fact, the NEET situation in 2013 masks differentiated pathways. The trajectory of the population can be described using a comprehensive timeline, retracing month by month the situation of these young people. This representation allows us to visualise the evolution, over time, of the share of young people in employment, NEET, and education or training during the first 3 years following the end of their initial training. In the summer of 2011, nearly 70% of young people were employed, a proportion that remains relatively stable thereafter, with 67% employed at the time of the survey. Over the same period, the proportion of NEETs decreased from 29% to less than 25%.

Our empirical strategy is divided into four stages. First, in order to account for the dynamics of the pathways, we constructed a longitudinal typology, depending on the time spent in a NEET status and on the final monthly situation observed. Indeed, we took into account the periods of at least 6 months spent in NEET status (excluding summer holiday months) as proposed by Furlong (2006). In addition the timing of a NEET sequence in the trajectory may have different effects on the rest of the pathway. The absence in France of a dual system and the strong segmentation of the labour market lead to a first-job search time for which can be high for young people. High NEET periods are therefore less problematic at the beginning of the trajectory than at the end, where they can be seen as a signal of an inability to find or to keep jobs (Allaire et al., 2000).

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<sup>4</sup> *Baccalauréat* (ISCED 3) is the standard final diploma of upper secondary education as far as the gateway to higher institutions is concerned

Second, we provide a descriptive comparative analysis of the characteristics of school-leavers in each pathway. Third, we estimate a multinomial logistic regression model to assess the variables that predict the different types of NEET pathways, everything else being equal. A large set of individual characteristics were investigated: gender, migrant origin, late entering secondary school, highest qualification reached, type of training (apprenticeship), field of study (industrial, services, general), reason for leaving studies (financial, had enough of studying, had reached the desired level, not admitted in further studies, no training nearby), parents' education level, parents' status and situation, place of residence upon leaving education (whether or not they live in a disadvantaged urban neighbourhood – ZUS), the rate of unemployment in the respondents' residential area upon leaving education, and whether their choice of study was constrained after secondary school (*collège*). Fourth, in order to learn more about the dynamics of moving in and out of NEET status, we focus on the first NEET sequence, which has a strong impact on the trajectory. We explain the probability of leaving the first sequence of NEET situation, using a semi-parametric duration model (Cox model).

## Results

### *Four separate groups based on NEET status*

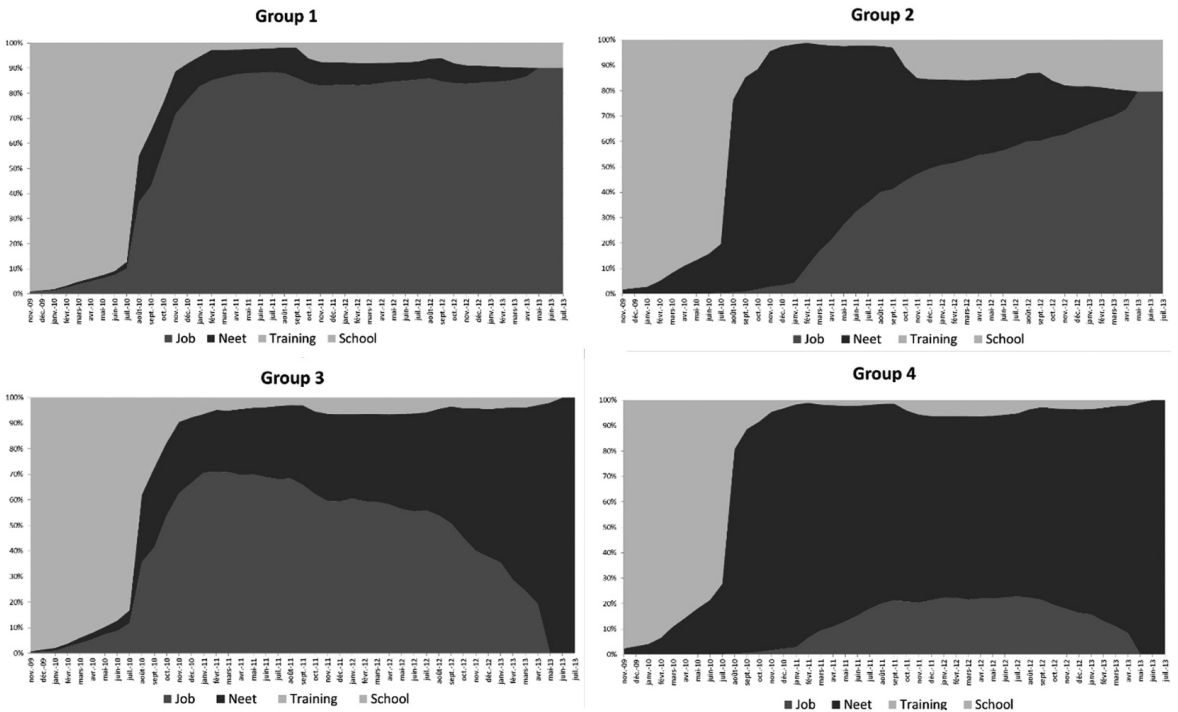
Four groups were created by considering periods of at least 6 months spent in NEET, which does not account for months of summer holidays and allows for a consistent duration (*cf.* Furlong, 2006):

- Group 1 brings together young people who were not NEET for 6 months after leaving the school and are not NEET on the survey date in 2013 (19,108 young people named 'Never NEET', representing 60% of the population).
- Group 2 comprises young people who were NEET for at least six consecutive months at the beginning of period but are no longer at the time of the survey in 2013 (4,238 young people 'Begin NEET', 15% of the population).
- Group 3 covers young people who are NEET at the time of the survey in 2013 but not at the beginning (3,321 young people 'End NEET', 12%).
- Finally, group 4 concerns young people who were NEET more than six consecutive months from the start of the path and are still NEET at the time of the survey (3,382 young people 'Always NEET', 13%).

The representation of their trajectories in the timeline highlights the different

transitions of the four groups (Figure 2).

Group 1, the ‘Never NEET’ young people or short-term NEET, experienced the most favourable transition with quick and sustained access to employment for most of the three-year period, and rare episodes of NEET. Eighty-four percent were in stable employment at the time of the survey, while 10% were in either education or training.



**Figure 2.** Source: Céreq ‘Génération 2010’ survey (NEET in black).

In contrast, two-thirds of group 4, the ‘Always NEET’ or long-term NEET (at the beginning and in the spring 2013), were out of employment and education from the beginning until 2013, with rare episodes of employment (less than 20% and often temporary). At the time of the survey, they had been NEET for a long time (21 months on average), after having been in NEET for a long time upon their entry into the labour market (24 months on average). This population is the most vulnerable. The young people of group 3, the ‘End NEET’ (in the spring 2013), experienced quick access to employment (in April 2011, 40% had a permanent contract and 20% had a fixed-term contract) but from mid-2012, they experienced upheaval and they had been NEET in the spring 2013 for 9 months on average.

The young people of group 2, the ‘Begin NEET’, had a difficult initial transition

with a long NEET spell (14 months on average) but they progressively got jobs, mostly on fixed-term contracts, then starting in late 2012 stabilised gradually, and, at the time of the survey, 70% of them were on permanent contracts and 20% were in education. Especially for young people who were already out of education or work at the beginning of the observation period, NEET status tended to be a long-term phenomenon (Table 2): when we look at time spent in employment compared to NEET, group 4 spent 83% of the time in NEET (63% in unemployment, 20% in inactivity) and 14% in employment. Group 2 is more evenly divided with 47% of the time in NEET and 43% in employment; group 3 spent more than half the time in employment and 42% of the time in NEET; as for group 1, the young people spent 84% of the time in employment and 10% in NEET over the three-year period.

**Table 1.** Situation in Spring 2013.

	Employment	Neet	Study	Total	Age mean
Without diploma	39	<b>49</b>	12	100	18
CAP (VET)	61	<b>34</b>	5	100	19
<i>Baccalauréat</i>	65	<b>21</b>	14	100	21
Tertiary diploma	83	<b>12</b>	5	100	23
Total	66	<b>25</b>	9	100	21
Women	66	<b>24</b>	10	100	21
Men	67	<b>25</b>	8	100	21

Source: Céreq 'Génération 2010' survey.

Note: 67% of young men are in employment in spring 2013, 25% are NEET and 8% are in education or training.

**Table 2.** Time spent in the diverse situations (in %).

	Group 4	Group 3	Group 2	Group 1	Total
NEET	83	42	47	10	29
– unemployment	63	34	33	7	22
– inactivity	20	8	14	3	7
Employment	14	53	43	84	65
Study	3	5	10	6	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Céreq's *Génération 2010* survey.

Note: 83% of young people of the group 4 spent 83% of their time in NEET status (63% are unemployed and 20% are inactive).

**Table 3.** Number of months spent in NEET status (in %).

	Group 4	Group 3	Group 2	Group 1	Total
<i>Mean of NEET duration</i>	<i>30 months</i>	<i>15 months</i>	<i>17 months</i>	<i>3 months</i>	<i>10 months</i>
0 month				50	30
1–3 months		13	1	25	16
4–6 months		12	12	10	9
7–12 months	4	27	29	9	13
13–18 months	10	19	27	4	10
19–24 months	14	15	16	2	7
24 months +	72	14	16		14
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Céreq's *Génération* 2010 survey

Note: the time spent in NEET status is 30 months for group 4; 72% of young people of group 4 spent more than 24 months in NEET status.

**Table 4.** The highest diploma according the groups (in %).

	Group 4	Group 3	Group 2	Group 1	Total
Without Diploma	47	22	28	8	18
CAP (VET)	21	21	18	12	15
<i>Baccalauréat</i>	21	32	28	32	30
Tertiary diploma	11	25	26	47	37
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Céreq's *Génération* 2010 survey

Note: In group 4, 47% of youth have no diploma, 21% are holders of secondary VET diploma, 21% have the *baccalauréat* and 11% have a graduate diploma.

**Table 5.** The main reasons to stop studies (in %)

	Group 4	Group 3	Group 2	Group 1	Total
Wanted working life	57	69	61	72	68
Had enough of studying	48	43	46	36	40
Reached the level desired	25	36	34	51	43
Financial reason	19	28	18	22	22
Job found	8	35	12	49	36
Not admitted in further studies	12	8	12	7	8
No training nearby	14	9	10	6	8

Source: Céreq's *Génération* 2010 survey.

Note: In group 4, 57% young people give the reason to enter active life . . .

It may also be observed that, if the average time spent in NEET for the entire population is 10 months without any gender differences, it ranges from 3 months for group 1, 17 months for group 2, 15 months for group 3 to 30 months for group 4 (Table 3). These findings echo the previous results: 10% of young people have never experienced employment during their first 3 years in the labour market. This includes 28% of school-leavers without a diploma, 12% of those with a secondary VET diploma (CAP), 7% of *Baccalauréat holders*, and 3% of tertiary graduates. More than half of the women and men of group 4 have never had a job.

### *Strong differentiation of NEET pathways by level of diploma*

We will present the specificities of the populations belonging to the four groups and their characteristics from the point of view of educational and social capital.

In terms of diplomas and degrees, there is a clear opposition between, on one side, group 1 'Never NEET', half of whom are tertiary graduates, and, on the other side, group 4 'Always NEET' for which half of the respondents left school without a diploma (Table 4). This table shows a strong structuring of trajectories based on the level of education and the overrepresentation of young people without a diploma in the more extreme NEET pathways. Group 4 combines struggling school careers with degree levels lower than the general population: nearly one-third, mostly male, were late in entering secondary school (compared to 18% of all young people) and one-third experienced constrained study choices in secondary VET track (compared to 22%).

When asked about the reasons for ending their studies, the whole population gave the following responses, in order of importance (Table 5): they wished to enter working life (68%), had reached the level of education desired (43%), had enough of studying (40%), financial reasons (22%) or having found a job (36%). Eight percent stopped their studies because they were not admitted into courses to continue their studies and the remaining 8% due to lack of education opportunities close to their place of residence. Youth from group 4 often stressed fatigue with their studies (half compared to 40% of the whole population) and the lack of educational options nearby (14% versus 8%). Financial reasons and the fact of having found a job distinguish group 3 and partly explain the large number of jobs at the beginning of the trajectory. These results highlight the heterogeneity of young people's relationships with their studies when they leave the educational system: young people who experience the toughest NEET trajectories are those who leave the

education system most often because they no longer want to attend school while, paradoxically, they are also the least likely to say they have reached their desired level of education.

As expected, this strong differentiation of pathways according to diplomas also reflects a demarcation according to the social and ethnic origin of young people. NEETs are found in all family backgrounds although their share is higher among those with modest social origins and cultural backgrounds (Table 6). Thus, most young people from group 4 have a more modest family background: less than 10% have a father or a mother in a professional position (versus 20% of the population), and only 39% have both parents in employment at the end of their studies versus more than the half in the other groups, and two-thirds for group 1. Moreover, young people from immigrant families – particularly coming from North African (Maghreb) countries – are a little more numerous in group 4 (10% versus 6% of the population). Similarly, they are more likely to live in an economically disadvantaged area at the end of their studies if they belong to group 4 or 3 (13% and 10%, respectively, compared to 8% of the population).

**Table 6.** The family background (in %).

	Group 4	Group 3	Group 2	Group 1	Total
Two French parents	76	77	79	83	81
Two North-African parents	10	8	6	5	6
Parents in employment	39	52	51	62	56
Parents not in employment	21	14	13	8	11
Father professional	11	20	21	26	23
Father worker/clerk	62	53	51	43	48
Mother professional	9	12	14	18	16
Mother worker/clerk	76	73	69	64	67
Father without diploma	27	23	23	22	23
Father with tertiary diploma	7	13	15	21	17

Source: Céreq's *Génération* 2010 survey.

Note: In group 4, 76% of young people have two parents of French nationality, 39% have both parents in employment . . .



These first descriptive elements demonstrate the strong heterogeneity of the pathways in NEET status, structured by degree and social origin. Young people most at risk, in the longest NEET trajectories, are often young people with a low level of education, typically those who have dropped out of school, and who come from modest family backgrounds. The combination of these different factors worsens their situation in the labour market. On the other hand, better qualified young people, including those with tertiary degrees, may also be affected by NEET situations, but their situation is more temporary and generally limited to the beginning of their first job search.

### *Who is most at risk of becoming and remaining a NEET?*

The transition between school and work is a critical period in the lives of young people because their entry into the labour market can have a significant effect on their trajectory and NEET status. This section focuses on the risk of being a NEET by using the set of key characteristics identified in the other studies, which places a special focus on educational and social factors. A multinomial model is conducted in order to better identify the characteristics related to the probability of being in one of the four groups, with reference to group 4.

The main results show that the risk of becoming NEET for a short period is very different than the risk of being NEET for a long time (the reference category). This difference is influenced by a range of factors and characteristics. Education is the most important factor, and it has the strongest effect on the probability of never being NEET, being a short-term NEET, or a long-term NEET. However, educational level ratios also vary widely across NEET trajectories, with ratios of 0.67 to 2.7 for 'Begin NEET' trajectory and 0.48 to 5.2 for 'End NEET' trajectory. For those who left school without a diploma, the likelihood of belonging to the 'Begin NEET' group rather than 'Always NEET' group decreases by a factor of 0.66 compared to young people with a VET diploma. When controlling for similar educational levels, the reasons for which young people decide to end their studies have a stronger effect on the subsequent labour trajectory. For example, wishing to enter working life, having reached the desired level of education all have positive effects on the probability of being 'Never NEET' or being NEET at the end of the trajectory. These results may suggest a higher motivation to find a first job, but this motivation does not play a protective role later. Other educational characteristics influence the probability of being NEET: having an apprenticeship track appears also as short-term

protection against a NEET situation. On the contrary, being more than a year behind in one's grade and constrained educational choice increase the probability of being NEET.

The gender effect is significant, although modest compared to other factors. For men, the odds-ratio of being 'Never NEET' rather than being in the 'Always NEET' category is 1.03. It is interesting to note that this ratio is higher in the first trajectory 'Begin NEET' (1.16), which suggests that men, with less family constraints, succeed in leaving a NEET situation more easily. However, we do not find any significant gender effect for being NEET at the end of the trajectory.

Other results from social and contextual variables confirm that cumulative factors influence the probability of being in a long-term NEET situation. The young people who come from more privileged family background (employed, high socioeconomic status) are more likely to be never NEETs or to avoid a long-term NEET situation. Parents' education plays a minor role on the likelihood of NEET status although it is still significant: having a father and, notably, a mother without a diploma increases the child's probability of being a long-term NEET (compared to a never or temporary NEET situation). Having at least one parent of immigrant origin has a more contrasting effect: controlling for education and social background, second-generation immigrants (mainly from southern European countries) have a lower probability of being always NEET, whereas the effect is generally not significant for the second-generation immigrants from North Africa. In addition, coming from a large family increases the likelihood of being in a long-term NEET situation. Finally, the local economic and educational context is a penalising factor in terms of being NEET (living in ZUS, disadvantaged urban areas, or a region with a higher unemployment rate).

At the end of a first NEET sequence, 77% of young people moved to work, 12% returned to school or training, and 11% remained NEET. For youth who have experienced a first NEET situation, the average duration was 6 months. This section will end with the estimation of the probability of leaving NEET status after the first episode of NEET, using a model of semi-parametric duration (Cox regression model, see Table 8 in Annexe). All things being equal, the probability of leaving a first NEET experience towards employment was lower for youth without a diploma compared to those with a secondary VET diploma (CAP). The probability of transition from NEET status to a job increased with the level of qualifications, and was also higher for young people having completed an apprenticeship track. On the contrary, the transition from a first NEET experience to training and education shows

another itinerary. Secondary school-leavers, especially those without a diploma or those who were previously not admitted to further studies, were more likely to return to study or to follow a training course. The situation of *baccalauréat* holders is unique: they are the only graduates to escape a first NEET experience by getting a job and a training. Indeed, the *baccalauréat* is in France the key diploma to access to higher education and vocational *baccalauréat* graduates also find jobs easily. The weight of the social background was, as expected, decisive to find a job: having both parents active, having a professional father, increased the probability. A mother with a tertiary degree played a role to find a job as well as to return to studies. However, social characteristics have no or few significant effects on the probability to return to studies.

## Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we used a dynamic approach to develop a better understanding of the factors that can explain how young people become NEET (individual characteristics, social and ethnic origin, school and family factors) in France. Our analysis of the youth pathways highlights more or less long episodes of NEET over a period of 3 years. Amid the diversity of these situations, our research allows to identify young people who remain locked in NEET status throughout their trajectory. It also highlights the weight of some major explanatory factors, such as the degree level and especially the absence of a diploma, which seem particularly penalising for escaping being a NEET in France. In this respect, this research suggests the limitations of a static approach to the NEET concept, the population being too heterogeneous to isolate at-risk youth. During the first 3 years following the end of the survey, 70% of the young people in the survey had become NEET at least once. In order to characterise this dynamic phenomenon, we studied the school-to-work transition of young people and observed their labour market history over 3 years. Four groups were distinguished according to the occurrence and the temporality of NEET status during the beginning of their professional life: the 'Never NEET', the 'Begin NEET', the 'End NEET' and the 'Always NEET'. They represent, respectively, 60%, 15%, 12% and 13% of the sample. Young people seem to have very different levels of vulnerability in each group. The labour situation of young people in group 4 is the most problematic: they are NEET at the date of the survey and were in a NEET situation for at least two-thirds of the study's duration.

It also must be noted that tertiary graduates are represented in the four groups, at

least to some extent. If they are overrepresented in group 1 'Never NEET', groups 2 and 3 include a quarter of higher education graduates. However, in both cases, NEET seems to be a temporary situation. One of the interests of the longitudinal approach is to stress that the individual characteristics are not the same between the young people who are NEET at the date of the survey after professional experiences (e.g. group 3) and those who remain NEET throughout their trajectory (group 4). In the latter group, almost half of young people are without qualification, against one quarter in group

Overall, group 4 is the furthest from the other three in terms of individual characteristics. Groups 2 and 3, on the other hand, are closer, especially with a quarter of graduates. However, these two groups differ on the reasons for ending studies: group 3 underlines financial reasons, the wish to enter working life and getting a job while group 2 is closer to group 4 (Table 7 'all other things being equal').

**Table 7.** The multinomial model on the probability of the four school-to-work transition groups (reference group 4 ‘Always Neet’).

Covariate	Population 1	Population 2	Population 3
	‘Never Neet’ odds ratio	‘Begin Neet’ odds ratio	‘End Neet’ odds ratio
Woman (ref.)/Man	1.037***	1.165**	0.994
Not apprenticeship (ref.)/apprenticeship	1.693***	1.140**	1.660***
VET diploma (CAP) (ref.)/Without diploma	0.296***	0.666***	0.480***
Baccalauréat	1.917***	1.410***	1.603***
Higher VET diploma (Bac+2)	2.231***	1.513***	1.397***
Bachelor	2.430***	1.637***	1.703***
Master	3.487***	2.774***	2.216***
Doctorate	7.635***	2.063	5.237**
Field of study: Industrial (ref.)/General Services	0.831**	0.942	0.691***
Left studies for other reasons (ref.)/Financial reason	1.304***	1.007	1.639***
Active life wanted	1.655***	1.029	1.621***
Reached the level desired	1.177***	0.931	0.856***
Not admitted in further studies	0.674***	1.028	0.703***
Had enough of studying	0.685***	1.037	0.769***
Training not nearby	0.579***	0.818**	0.622***
Not late (ref.)/Late on entering secondary school	0.648***	0.869**	0.859**
Not constrained study choice in VET(ref.)/constrained study	0.617***	0.788**	0.839**
Large Family (3 brothers/sisters +) (ref.)/Alone	1.380***	1.282**	1.097
1 or 2 brother/sister	1.387***	1.148**	1.092
Father not in employment (ref.)/Father in employment	1.268***	1.207**	1.048
Mother not in employment (ref.)/Mother in employment	1.435***	1.135**	1.287***
Father position: worker/clerk (ref.)/professional	1.505***	1.237**	1.341**
Technician	1.399***	1.020	1.170
Independent status	1.641***	1.256**	1.242**
Status unknown	0.662***	0.869	0.855
Father with VET diploma (CAP) (ref.)/without diploma	0.825**	0.906	0.884
With <i>baccalauréat</i>	1.188*	1.052	1.301**
With tertiary diploma	1.000	1.061	1.008
Diploma unknown	0.857**	0.963	0.963
Mother with VET diploma (CAP) (ref.)/without diploma	0.847**	0.870**	0.807**
With <i>baccalauréat</i>	1.176**	1.043	0.983
With tertiary diploma	1.362**	1.176	1.093
Diploma unknown	0.773**	0.834**	0.815**
Parent national origin: France (ref.)/North African	1.035	0.732**	1.148
Other nationalities	1.208**	1.221**	1.319***
Residence out of Zus (ref.)/Zus	0.731**	0.961	0.873
Regional rate of unemployment	0.936**	0.974***	0.974***

Source: Céreq's *Generation* 2010 survey

\*\*\* = significant to 1%; \*\* = significant to 5%; \* = significant to 10%.

Note: in the model, all things equal, youth without diploma are less likely to be in the group 1 'never neet' than in the reference group ('always neet').

**Table 8.** The probability of escaping from NEET towards employment or education.

	Employment	Education & training
	Hazard Ratio	Hazard Ratio
Woman (ref.)/Man	NS	NS
Not apprenticeship (ref.)/apprenticeship	1.158***	0.769***
VET diploma (CAP) (ref.)/Without diploma	0.587***	1.286***
<i>Baccalauréat</i>	1.197***	1.304***
Higher VET diploma (Bac+2)	1.235***	NS
Bachelor	1.165***	NS
Master	1.239***	NS
Doctorate	1.611***	0.250***
Field of study: Industrial (ref.)/ General	0.9301***	1.432***
Services	NS	NS
Left studies for other reasons (ref.)/Financial reason	1.143***	0.782***
Active life wanted	1.460***	0.772***
Reached the level desired	1.138***	0.573***
Not admitted in further studies	0.837***	1.232***
Had enough of studying	0.826***	NS
Training not nearby	0.789***	NS
Not late (ref.)/Late on entering secondary school	0.874***	0.813***
Not constrained study choice in VET(ref.)/constrained study	0.815***	NS
Large Family (3 brothers/sisters and +) (ref.)/Alone	NS	1.188**
1 or 2 brother/sister	1.096***	NS
Father not in employment (ref.)/Father in employment	1.078***	1.168***
Mother not in employment (ref.)/Mother in employment	1.242***	NS
Father position: worker/clerk (ref.)/professional	1.113***	NS
Technician	1.073***	NS
Independent status	1.059**	NS
Status unknown	0.832***	NS
Father with VET diploma (CAP) (ref.)/without diploma	NS	NS
With <i>baccalauréat</i>	NS	NS
With tertiary diploma	0.930***	1.266***
Diploma unknown	0.935***	NS
Mother with VET diploma (CAP) (ref.)/without diploma	0.908***	NS
With <i>baccalauréat</i>	NS	NS

With tertiary diploma	1.069***	1.370***
Diploma unknown	0.877***	0.839**
Parent national origin: France (ref.)/North African	1.118***	NS
Other nationalities	1.087***	NS
Residence out of Zus (ref.)/Zus	0.895***	NS
Regional rate of unemployment	0.980***	0.981***
N	14,622	14,622
Log likelihood	-101,831.4*	-12,753.2***

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Source: Céreq's Generation 2010 survey

\*\*\* = significant to 1%; \*\* = significant to 5%; NS = no significant.

Note: in the model, all things equal, youth without a diploma are less likely to escape from the first NEET experience towards employment and more likely to escape from NEET towards education or training.

The Cox model (semi-parametric estimation) is used in order to estimate the impact of socio-demographic variables on the probability of leaving the first period in NEET towards job or education.

Indeed focusing on the youth pathways in the labour market, linked to the NEETs characteristics since the beginning of their trajectories, allows to understand the NEET situation as a temporary experience or an enduring trap. Taking into account for the first time in research the reasons for leaving school in order to analyse the school-to-work transition shows that school experiences (repeating a class level, constrained studies, not admission in further studies, or the lack of training nearby), has an impact on a long recurrent NEET situation.

Our main results show that educational factors are strongly related to the risk of being NEET for an extended period. To leave the educational system without a diploma or even with a diploma of secondary vocational education (VET) increases the risk of a long-term NEET situation. In addition, young people who have experienced difficulties at primary school (as shown by late entry to secondary school) or have faced constrained educational choices to have a higher probability of being NEET, which suggests that there is a strong correlation between the difficulties experienced during primary and secondary education and entry into the labour market. However, having an apprenticeship qualification seems to protect against becoming and remaining NEET. This dual qualification acts as positive credential for potential employers, even if young people are in a NEET situation at



the beginning of their labour market history. However, our results do not take into account the potential selection bias in apprenticeship in favour of students with higher social and educational characteristics (Bonnal et al., 2012). This dual track remains selective and seems to be associated with forms of discrimination that exclude young people from migrant and low social backgrounds (Kergoat, 2010). A low level of education (individual and parental) is the main determining factor for the long-term NEETs, since their parents are not always in the most favourable social position to support the professional integration of their children.

These results can be put into perspective with the labour market public policies developed in France. For example, starting in 2013 on an experimental basis, a Youth Guarantee<sup>5</sup> programme called '*Garantie Jeunes*' was gradually implemented. It aimed at supporting young vulnerable NEET towards employment and education through a financial allowance. From 2013 to 2018, 229,400 young people followed this one-year intensive support programme, combined with training and professional immersion. This type of policy prioritises a 'work first' approach to employment, instead of the human-capital approach (Greenberg et al., 2004). An assessment of this Youth Guarantee programme (Loison-Leruste et al., 2016) highlights its effects by identifying three types of pathways for young people. After a few months, one group of pathways is characterised by transition into (mostly precarious) jobs. Young people in the second group do not achieve a positive outcome but do seem to improve their employability. However, for the last group, the programme is unsuccessful because the young people are facing psychological, social or economic problems that cannot be solved simply by providing a job. The employability of the third group, which is the most disadvantaged and which resembles our fourth pathway ('Always NEET') remains highly question-able. A personalised training programme for these young people, which would develop a set of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, seems crucial in order to integrate them into the labour market. However, the supply of adapted training programmes, not based on school learning, seems decisive if they are sufficiently accessible. We found that young people in our third and fourth groups more frequently declare ending their studies because they have had enough of studying or because of the lack of nearby educational opportunities. However, a return to study allows the school-leavers with the lowest levels of education to escape the first NEET sequence whereas they have rather limited chances to find a

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<sup>5</sup> NEET become a target category of employment policy for the first time in France via the Youth Guarantee from October 2013 supported by the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) and the European Social Fund (ESF) the key EU financial resources.

job.

However, our quantitative approach remains unsatisfactory to fully characterise this group of long-term NEET, especially the most marginalised young people. In addition, in-depth qualitative interviews would be useful to get better information on the cumulative factors that result in a long-term NEET situation and to translate the statistical NEET category into more relevant conceptual subcategories (Holte, 2018). For example, Salvà-Mut et al. (2018), underline the different interacting factors (low education, health and drug problems) that lead to the ‘discouraged-disengaged’ group of young Spanish NEETs. Their biographical interviews allow them to go further in their understanding of the dynamics of NEET experiences.

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