MID-EVALUATION REPORT

November 2024/May 2025 – October 2025

(1.11.2025)

PROJECT: Revealing the hidden resources:
supported employment for NEETs with support needs
(ESF-SI-2023-SKILSS-01)

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Executive summary

The first year (November 2024 – October 2025) of the project have passed accordingly to the project plan. The activities and deliverables are mostly on schedule.

The key discoveries of the first year of the project are:

1) The successful kick-off week has laid good foundations for the project. However, a slow start of the project has had an impact on the progress of the project.
2) The different national contexts have had an effect on the project. Especially, the differences between the economic situations of the partner countries are reflected to the project.
3) It takes time before the optimal marketing channels are discovered and the project and its services are known to the potential candidates and employers.
4) The target group needs time to get involved with the project. Furthermore, they often make progress in baby steps.

Regardless of the challenges, the project has been able to stay on schedule. The project staff acknowledges the challenges related to e.g., the target group and economic situation, and is tackling them. The project partnership has deepened, and the spirit of mutual encouragement and trust prevails between the partners.

The main recommendations are 1) outreach work should continue throughout the project, 2) the Dutch practice “sharing successes on Mondays” should be adopted by the partner countries, 3) the project timetable should be revised regarding the testimonials, and finally, 4) in the future projects, more time should be allocated for the recruiting the project staff and launching the project.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This mid-term evaluation report assesses and summarises the progress of the project *Revealing the hidden resources: supported employment for NEETs with support needs* during the first project year (November 2024 – October 2025) focusing on the second quartile of the project, i.e., between May 2025 and October 2025. As indicated in the project plan, this mid-evaluation assesses 1) guidance and coaching stage of the project, 2) engagement of stakeholders, and 3) the quality of collaboration and partnership.

The evaluation data contains the documents created in the project during the first year of the project, i.e., the minutes of Steering Committee Meeting in November 2024, January 2025, April 2025 and September 2025. During the first project year, there were five intervisions, which took place in May (one) 2025 and in October 2025 (four). In addition, the evaluation draws from the continuous reporting sheet of the project and the observations of the evaluator. The data has also been supplemented with a questionary (October 2025) to the Lithuanian and Finnish partners to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their progress, successes, and circumstances which has had an impact to their progress.

During the first year of the project (between November 2024 and October 2025) the following work packages and activities were in progress:

WP001 Management Y1
A001.001 Project coordination
A001.002 Online Steering Committee Meetings (28 November 2024, 22 January 2025, 2 April 2025, 5 June, 16 September 2025 and 21 October). In addition, one live Steering Committee meeting took place in the Hague (28 February).
A001.003 Evaluation of progress and implementation
A001.004 Reporting

WP003 Capacity building
A003.001 International training on SWOM model (completed, cf. the previous evaluation report)
A003.002 Intervisions online (25 May 2025, 20 October 2025, 21 October 2025, 22 October 2025 and 23 October 2025)
A003.003 Guidelines of the model (completed)

WP004 Piloting of the SWOM model
A004.001 Piloting the SWOM model (ongoing)
A004.002 Outreach youth work (continuing)
A004.004 Certification (ongoing)

WP005 Advocacy and dissemination
A005.001 Local dissemination events in Lithuania (ongoing)
A005.002 Local dissemination events in Finland (ongoing)
A005.003 Local dissemination events in the Netherlands (ongoing)
A005.007 Website (in operation)
A005.008 Representation of the project in international conference or an event (in the works)
A005.009 Testimonials (delayed)

2 FINDINGS

Guidance and coaching stage of the project

This stage of the project consists of activities included in project management and capacity building. As discovered in the previous evaluation report, the training sessions during the kick-off meeting in The Hague and training reports have contributed to a mutual understanding of the projects, its tasks and aims, and the roles of the partners. Compared to the beginning of the project, these activities have united the project personnel into a project group. The lead partner has also provided guidance and coaching in the meetings of the Steering Committee. Furthermore, the intervisions led by the Dutch partner have played an important role in the strengthening of the staff's enthusiasm and trust in the success of the project.

During the first year of the project, the guidelines for the development of the SWOM model guide (WP 003, A003.003) has been produced by the partners. This guide is a paramount document in terms of guidance and coaching, and an important tool for rooting the SWOM model in other countries too. It is also significant for building a deepening mutual understanding of the partners. As a concrete product, it is a reward of the work done and successful collaboration, and a proof of the achievements of the project. From this background, the finished model guide also contributes to the self-confidence of the project staff and to the trust of achieving the other goals of the project.

The project plan contains 10 intervisions during the piloting stage of the project. The aim of the intervisions is to foster mutual learning and exchange among project partners. Unfortunately, only 5/10 intervisions (25 May 2025, 20 October 2025, 21 October 2025, 22 October 2025 and 23 October 2025) took place during the first year of the project. The intervisions were also considerably shorter that what had been envisioned (4 h) in the project plan.

From the evaluator's viewpoint, there are three explanations for not achieving 10 intervisions during the year one. Firstly, the delay in the launching of the project. During the spring 2025, the Lithuanian and Finnish partners were not able to proceed to the point where it would have been fruitful to organize more than one intervision.

Secondly, the summer holiday had its effect on the progress of the project. The holiday season tends to run approximately from June to August in Finland and Lithuania following the school holidays. In the Netherlands, the summer holidays start a month later. In other words, overlapping summer holiday season has had an impact on the timetable of the project and scheduling of international collaboration. Furthermore, during the summer holiday season employers do not usually recruit, because the summer jobs are also already filled. From the project's point of view, summer offers very little opportunities for their clients. As to the candidates, some of them are inclined to enjoy summer and postpone job search for autumn due to the lack of vacancies. Consequently, summer months and early autumn were not a fruitful time for organizing intervisions.

Thirdly, due to the changes in the Dutch project personnel, it was not possible to organize the second intervision until 20 October. For these reasons, five of the planned 10 intervisions took place during the first project year, and remaining five were postponed to the second project year.

However, the above-mentioned three factors, which have slowed down the progress of the project, are quite typical obstacles for projects. They are not a reflection of the skills of the project staff or the quality of the work done in the project.

Engagement of stakeholders

As it was already discovered in the first evaluation and noted in this evaluation report, the prolonged recruitment process of the project staff slowed down the start of the project. The delay in the starting phase has resulted a domino effect, and consequently, the project was struggling to stay on schedule during its first year.

The different national contexts have also had an impact on the engagement of stakeholders as it was already foreseen in the first evaluation report. Firstly, both Lithuania and Finland lack a tool similar to the Dutch Quota System, which offers incentives for employing candidates who are in an invulnerable situation. Secondly, there are other differences between the project countries too. Furthermore, the candidates of the Dutch partner differ from other partners whose clientele consists of NEETs solely.

According to the Eurostat (2023), the Netherlands have the lowest share of NEETs when viewing the 15–29-year-old NEETs across the EU countries. On the basis of this source, the lowest NEET rates for young women and young men were both recorded in the Netherlands (3.8% for young men and 4.6% for young women). Furthermore, in the Netherlands, the NEETs are relatively equally distributed in the country. It should be noted that there is always a delay between the statics and the present-day situation and the statics may not reflect the present situation in all respects. However, on the basis of the figure of the Eurostat, compared to Finland and Lithuania, the Dutch national context seems different.

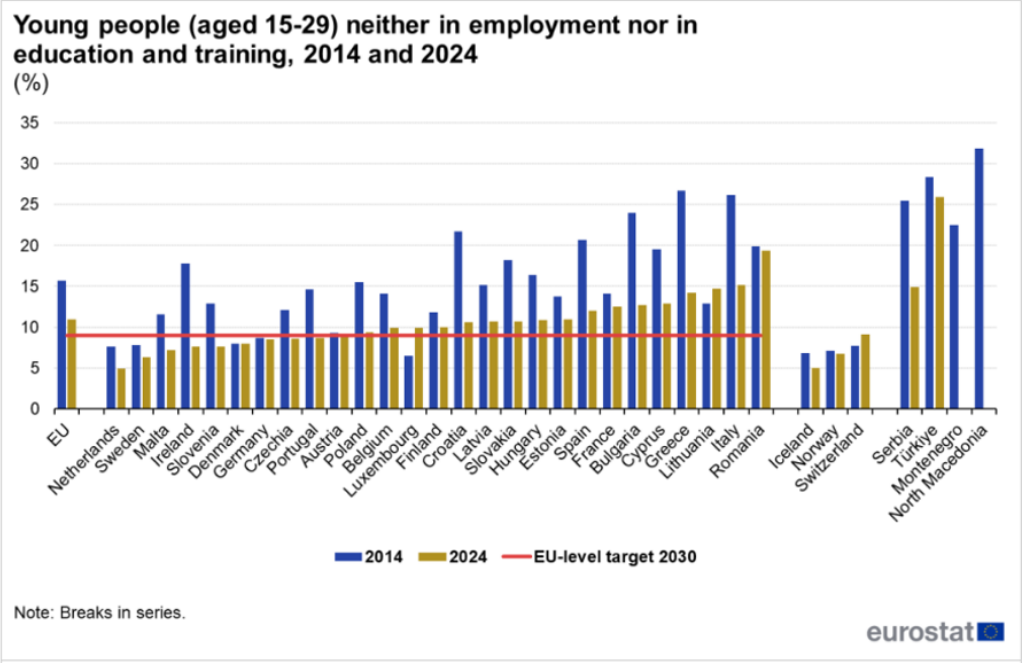


Figure. NEET (aged 15–29) 2014–2024. Source: Eurostat, figure 2 edat_lfse_20

There are also national differences between Lithuania and Finland. In Lithuania, there are disparities regarding the distribution of the NEETs. In the capital region, Central and Western Lithuania, the unemployment rate is below the national average. (EURES 2025). The Lithuanian partner operates in Šiauliai, in the northern Lithuania, approximately 200 kilometres from the capital city Vilna. The Finnish partner operates in the Turku region, which is located in Southwest Finland, also circa 200 kilometres from the capital, Helsinki. According to Lounaistieto (2025), a regional information service operating in Southwest Finland, and KEHA (2025), a state expert agency, the employment rate is in Southwest Finland is below the average of the country, similarly to Helsinki, the Finnish capital city (Helsinki 2025). There are indications that compared to Finland, labour demand is higher in Lithuania, which supports the youth employment efforts in Lithuania. Furthermore, at the beginning of the project, it was discovered by the Finnish partner, that there were already other projects in operation which competed for the attention of their target group.

Despite the challenges, the partners have been success in enrolling young participants. In Lithuania, ŽISPB had signed a contract with 5 participants by May 2025. In Finland, Valo had signed a contract with 4 participants by June 2025. By the end of October 2025, ŽISPB had already 28 participants, of which 4 were in employment, and Valo had 10 participants, so far there are no employed clients amongst their participants. As the aim of the project is to recruit 80 participants and place 30 participants in employment in total, linearly considered, the first year of the project does not reach to the half of the attempted results regarding the number of young participants who are employed. However, the total number of participants in autumn 2025 shows a promise of a strong second year. Over time, the services of the project are also becoming better known in its regions. Nevertheless, the Lithuanian partner has already reached the half of their calculated quota of the first project year clients and the Finnish partner is catching up after a slower spring season. Furthermore, recruitment (or replacement in working life) is not necessarily a linear process. It can also be an accelerating process.

One of the challenges of the project during the second year, will be the engagement of the employers. Even tough, this work is already in motion, it is still at an early stage. Especially in Finland, where the unemployment numbers are record high, finding an employment even for a candidate who has no special needs is challenging. Furthermore, due to the present economic situation, the employers are cautious about recruiting new employees, let alone those do not have previous work experience. The number of applicants is also so high in many sectors that employers are not always eager to announce a vacancy in fear of hundreds of applications even if they need more workers. On the other hand, this can also be an advantage for the project. In case the Finnish partner manages to discover hidden jobs for their applicants, they can be a valuable asset for those employers who are in need of labour force, but are hesitant in advertising the vacancies in the fear of a vast number of applications. However, this means the competition with professional recruitment offices with the price and quality of their services.

Nevertheless, both Finnish and Lithuanian teams have had success with clients and discovered good practices. The main finding is that the target group requires individual client-orientated approach and achievable goals. They may also suffer from the fear of social situations and need assistance in contacting the employers or in work interviews. Regarding the employers, in Finland, the trial period has been a successful tool for employing candidates. In Lithuania, using informal

contacts with moderation and the use of the Irish initiative, called DUODay dating from 2008, (SUSE, 2025) has let to good results. It has also been discovered that clear communication and building trust are required with employers. Furthermore, following the SWOM model, the knowledge that the candidates are handpicked for the employer and the project will support them throughout the process, are keys for a success, in addition of training the candidates to express better their strengths. On the basis of these experiences, it can be concluded that the SWOM model seems to be adaptable in Lithuania and Finland and is successful there too.

Quality of collaboration and the partnership

The quality of collaboration has been examined in terms of its timely progress and planned outputs.

The activities and outputs of the WP001 (Management Y1) took place and where all completed as planned at the end of the first project year. The WP002 (Management 2) is planned to start at the beginning of the second year of the project. Regarding the WP003 (Capacity building), apart from the planned 10 intervisions, the tasks in the work package has been completed and the outputs of the WP003 are finished. As stated earlier, challenges related to the slow start in engagement of the participants has been reflected on the intervisions.

The WP004 (Piloting the SWOM model) has also started during the first project year. Activities A004.001 (Piloting the SWOM model), A004.002 (Outreach youth work) and A004.004 (Certification) are in progress. It was discovered that there is a need for continuing outreach youth work (A004.002) between the project months 10 and 18 to support the engagements of young people instead of the planned 9-month pause in outreach youth work. The fourth activity A00.003, White book of supported employment, is planned to start, according to the project plan, during the last quarter of the project, and consequently, it is not in progress yet.

The WP005 (Advocacy and dissemination) is in progress as it has been designed in the project plan. Local dissemination events have been organized in all partner countries. The website is running and the partners have been active in social media. Preparations for the presentations of the project in international conferences have also started. The WP005 is progressing on schedule. However, there a slight concern regarding the activity A005.009 Testimonials (start month 6). This activity is still on the starting line due to the slow progress of the engagement of stakeholders. Nevertheless, the project is likely to catch up schedule and all other first year activities are in progress and mostly on schedule.

3 THE SUMMARY

After the first year, the strengths of the project include skilful, determined smoothly cooperating international staff. All partners show strong dedication to the aims of the project. Secondly, the Lithuanian and Finnish partner organizations share the same client group, similar employer network situation and work practices, The Lithuanian and the Finnish partner also define the young person similarly. Even though, the labour market situation in Finland is extremely difficult currently, the similarities between the two partner countries have contributed to a deeper mutual understanding and learning from the experiences of the other partner. Furthermore, the Dutch partner has been giving insightful advices and keeping up an encouraging and hopeful atmosphere in the intervisions successfully, which supports the other two partners in solving challenging client situations.

The challenges of the first project year are the delay in the recruitment of the project staff in the kick-off period, which has caused a slight domino effect in the advancement of the project. Another major challenge has been the drastic weakening of the labour market and economic situation in Finland. According to Matti Pohjola (2025, p. 10), Emeritus Professor of Economic at the Aalto University, the root cause of the Finnish situation lies in the efficiency of production. Pohjola argues that in Sweden and Denmark, information and communication sector alone has contributed to economic growth during the last decade as much as the entire Finnish market sector (Ibid., 10). Reflecting the project's target group in Finland, discussion on the efficiency of production is heartbreaking. Many of NEETs are not equipped for meeting to the needs of the hectic working life. They can also be in need of additional mentoring and guidance in workplaces; however, they are eager to perform in the limits of their own capacities. Doubts of some employers regarding their ability to work successfully or concerns on additional work required for their mentoring may be barriers for their employment. As society, Finland is facing a fundamental moral question: are young people in vulnerable situation offered opportunities only during a period of well-being, or do they get a chance also when economic views are dim?

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Outreach work** should be a continuous activity at least till the last quarter of the project period.
- **The Dutch practice "Sharing successes on Mondays"** is an insightful method for preventing cynicism while working with clients whose progress towards employment may be laborious and slow. The adaptation of this practice would be useful for the Lithuanian and Finnish teams too for maintaining faith in their clients and for coping at very demanding interpersonal work.
- **Strategic use of the intervisions.** During the first year, concentrating on individual questions related to specific clients in the intervisions has been helpful for the Lithuanian and Finnish partners. However, during the second year, when the project has established its place amongst the services and the number of clients has grown, more strategic use of intervisions could be useful for preparing the sustainability of the model developed in the project.

- **Revising the project plan regarding the collecting of the testimonials.** Considering the progress of the project, the main part of the client work and their placements will take place during the second year of the project. From this background, it is not realistic to expect the project to collect in total 45 stories as stated in the project plan (A002.003). Considering the available time, the number of collected stories (testimonials) should be reduced to 24–30 stories (i.e., 8–10 per country) of which 15 stories (approximately 5 per each country) will be selected for the final analysis.
- **Longer capacity building period in future projects.** Reaching the results set in the project plan for the first year seem to have caused stress amongst the project staff. When working with young people with extremely challenging situations, the piloting/start-up phase of the project should be longer. In a two-year project with international partners who are starting their work from the scratch, the six first months should be designated for capacity building, team building and marketing of the project for its clients and networks instead of endeavouring to have results immediately. In the future projects, the project members should concentrate on laying the foundations of the project instead of worrying the quantitative results during the first quartile of the project.

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