Phd on impact of youth employment & engagement policies implemented or designed by collaborative workspaces

Research Premise

The PhD research will focus on the qualitative impact of youth employment and engagement policies implemented or designed by collaborative workspaces, such as coworking and creative spaces, incubators, hubs, collectives, and similar institutions as defined by the literature review and the methodological design. These spaces will be public, private or hybrid organizations located in the periphery of EU countries (e.g. less-developed, rural, decarbonized, northern-southern, insular areas etc.) and the initiatives in focus will be national (e.g. to tackle brain drain), European (e.g. Erasmus+, EEA), or private (e.g. bottom-up or philanthropic) in order to highlight various comparative approaches. The qualitative methodological approach is designed based on a place-based scope and taking into consideration the impact on policy makers, young beneficiaries, and local contexts. The research will focus on the methods used to boost youth employment and community engagement and their impact on the micro-level of the actors involved. The objective is a meta-evaluation of collaborative spaces as 'learning middlegrounds' and their role in fostering social and digital innovation. After designing the methodology to be followed during the fieldwork research, based on the review of bibliographical resources and similar case studies, the fieldwork visits took place in May and until October 2023. The fieldwork took place in four peripheral areas across Europe: Extremadura, Spain, Licata, Italy, Aarhus, Denmark, and Limerick, Ireland. The inclusion of Denmark in the research project, a country with a consistent national policy for youth employment, will allow a comparison between the European north and south to emerge, in terms of the design and implementation of similar policies.

To comprehensively address the research questions regarding employment and engagement policies, the support provided by collaborative workspaces, and their resultant impact, a multidisciplinary approach encompassing qualitative methodologies supported by quantitative data has been adopted for this study. The focal point of the

research analysis revolves around the intricate interplay of collaborative workspaces and hubs, stakeholders, and NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) or other young beneficiaries (18-34yo) who have benefited from these initiatives.

The qualitative component of this research endeavors to shed light on the nuances of the experiences and perspectives of the directly involved actors, namely managers and members of coworking spaces, as well as the beneficiaries themselves. The chosen methodology for this qualitative exploration is semi-structured interviews, a powerful tool widely recognized for its ability to elicit rich and insightful responses (Flick, 2014). The interviewees are encouraged to share their subjective positive and negative experiences during their engagement with the coworking spaces, thus granting them the power to narrate their unique journeys.

By adopting the life-story-interview model, as proposed by Atkinson (Gubrium, 2012, pp. 120-123), the research aims to delve deeper into the intertwining of the interviewees' subjectivity with the digital and physical spaces they occupy. This approach facilitates the construction of a compelling narrative, both internal and external, that encapsulates the dynamic relationship between individuals and the spaces they inhabit, thus painting a comprehensive picture of their journey towards sustainable employment and skills development. Finally, it will be useful to design focus groups among the actors, which will allow for even more in-depth data to emerge about the relevant research questions. A focus group is a qualitative research methodology used to gain multifaceted knowledge about attitudes and behaviors. They are meant to understand and meaningfully explain certain communication phenomena with descriptive data. The term "focus group" refers to the group interview of a purposive sample, ideally six to eight participants, and focuses on a pre-selected central theme, in this case, the relationship of young people to employment policies and the platform economy (Omilion-Hodges, 2017).

The peripheral approach will follow the so-called "place-based" model. In recent years a new way of thinking about the process of local economic development has developed. Around the world, local and national governments have moved away from traditional approaches that emphasized the provision of large-scale infrastructure, aimed at

compensating for the consequences of industrial restructuring and low growth (Tomaney & Australian Business Foundation., 2010). The new approaches tend to emphasize the identification and mobilization of endogenous potential, i.e., the capacity of places to develop based on their resources. Place-based development policies are partly a response to the perceived failures of previous regional policies and focus on addressing untapped economic potential and reducing social exclusion through the provision of integrated goods and services tailored to local needs and enabling innovation (Barca et al., 2012).

Fieldwork was conducted across four distinct European regions to explore how local organizations address youth unemployment, promote entrepreneurship, and foster community engagement. In Badajoz, Extremadura (Spain), FUNDECYT-PCTEX demonstrated its key role as a science and technology interface, bridging policymakers, entrepreneurs, and civil society. Through programs like "RAISE the Youth" and "Better Incubation," the foundation helps NEETs and under-represented groups develop agri-business ideas and social entrepreneurship models. By participating in workshops, focus groups, and interviews with project managers, beneficiaries, and stakeholders, the researcher observed how these initiatives strive to stimulate local economies and curb depopulation.

In Licata, Sicily (Italy), Make Hub served as a private incubator and coworking space mediating the Resto al Sud program run by Invitalia. With Sicily's NEET rate reaching 32.4% in 2022, Make Hub functions as a conduit for aspiring entrepreneurs to receive funding and guidance. Fieldwork included interviews with program beneficiaries who were opening small businesses, alongside a focus group with hub managers to understand the challenges of youth inactivity and the strategies employed to counteract brain drain.

The Institut for (X) in Aarhus (Denmark) provided insights into a vibrant youth-oriented cultural and entrepreneurial ecosystem. Despite low unemployment rates, there remains a focus on continuous youth engagement. The FLUKHX program, a collaboration between Institut for (X), Frontløberne, and UKH, fosters creative projects and inclusive cultural production. Through extensive observation, participation in events, and numerous interviews with local artists, immigrants, and young entrepreneurs, the research revealed

how a do-ocracy model, minimal administrative layers, and community-driven initiatives can stimulate skill development and social inclusion. A subsequent visit to the Maker Lab in Svendborg illustrated efforts to integrate digital technologies in vocational training and encourage STEM careers among young learners.

Finally, in Limerick (Ireland), the Southill Hub illustrated a community-based approach to tackling youth unemployment and inactivity, historically high in the region. Through initiatives like the Targeted Youth Employability Support Initiative (TYESI) and the Junior Leader Program, the hub offers individualized support and group-based skill-building opportunities for NEETs. A series of interviews and focus groups with beneficiaries, youth workers, and project managers highlighted the importance of holistic interventions, combining employability support with broader social and community development.

Overall, the fieldwork demonstrated a shared commitment to tackling youth unemployment and promoting entrepreneurship, albeit in contexts with varying socio-economic challenges. Each organization's activities, whether incubating businesses, engaging NEETs in social innovation, or creating inclusive cultural platforms—underscore the importance of tailored, context-specific strategies to empower young people and strengthen local communities.

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