

**PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION AND LOW SKILLED YOUTH: ANALYSIS OF
POLICIES IN MERCOSUR MEMBER STATES IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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Abstract

In 2020, the global spread of the “new coronavirus” had an impact on the health, social and economic fields, which effects can affect the population in an unequal way, allowing the emergence of a “lockdown generation”, related to the impossibility of entry and movement of a certain group in the labour market due to an emergency situation (ILO, 2020b). Thus, integrating especially vulnerable groups, strongly affected by the pandemic, young people faced the highest rates of unemployment and underemployment, were mainly active in the informal economy (ILO, 2020a) and were affected mainly with regard to education and training, the loss of jobs and income and the difficulties of getting a job (ILO, 2020b). It should be noted that the vulnerability of youth is increased in cases of lack of access to education and training, i.e, to professional qualification (Garmendia Arigón, 2003; Fonseca, 2017; Singh, 2005). In this sense, the research has the general objective of investigating professional qualification policies nationwide of the MERCOSUR Member States (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) directed to low skilled youth, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a temporal clip in the period of March 2020 to March 2021. The focus on MERCOSUR Member States is justified, because, in addition to being part of the ILO and to committing to the promotion of decent work, they meet in the process of regional integration and recognize, in the Social and Labor

Declaration of MERCOSUR (2015), the right to professional training and qualification for employed and unemployed workers. As specific objectives, the investigation proposes: (i) to provide an overview of the employment and occupation indexes related to the labour market and, specifically, to the youth, considering the period prior to the pandemic (2019) and the period of the pandemic (2020-2021), based on data provided by the country's national statistical institutes (INDEC in Argentina, IBGE in Brazil, INE in Paraguay and INE in Uruguay), as well as by the ILO (ILOSTAT); (ii) to identify whether and, if so, describe the professional qualification policies nationwide directed to low skilled youth created to face the crisis generated by the pandemic; (iii) to describe and to analyze the results of the professional qualification policies identified, evaluating their repercussions, challenges and continuity. For that, the paper is going to use the deductive method and the research techniques of bibliographic and documentary research, as well as content analysis.

Keywords: Low skilled, MERCOSUR Member States, Professional qualification, Public policy, Youth.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that extended globally in 2020 – and continues in 2021 – has caused not only in health, but also social, economic, financial, educational impacts, among many others. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the current crisis is very different from those previously faced, because the necessary health restrictions adopted to mitigate the pandemic and to slow the contagion by the virus have generated unprecedented consequences in the crises already experienced, affecting people and nations unequally.

In this scenario, the research sought to analyze whether, and, if so, how the countries of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), a bloc that involves developing countries, are mobilizing to face the effects of the pandemic in the working lives of young people. MERCOSUR's Member States are Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay (in addition to Venezuela, which is suspended from the rights and obligations inherent to the status of Member State of the bloc)¹.

In the bloc, the countries recognize in the Social and Labor Declaration of MERCOSUR (2015) the right to professional training of workers. Furthermore, the four countries which are the object of this analysis are also part of the ILO, committing them to the promotion of decent work with the Organization.

Thus, considering a greater comparative relevance between the member states of the bloc, as well as the hypothesis that there is some type of integrated policy between the countries, this study aimed to investigate policies for professional qualification nationwide of the MERCOSUR Member States (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) directed to low skilled youth, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a temporal clip in the period from March 2020 to March 2021.

Therefore, starting from the deductive method (Marconi; Lakatos, 2003, pp. 91) and based on bibliographical and documentary research, the development of the investigation was organized around the following specific objectives: (i) to provide an overview of the employment and occupation indexes related to the labour market and, specifically, to the youth, considering the period prior to the pandemic and the period of the pandemic; (ii) to identify whether and, if so, describe the professional qualification policies nationwide directed to low skilled youth created to face the crisis generated by the pandemic; (iii) to describe and to analyze the results of the professional qualification policies identified in the period from March 2020 to March 2021.

The results of the investigation are presented in this paper, structured in two large parts: the first, dedicated to understanding the normative panorama about professional qualification in the context of the countries analyzed and to the description of employment and unemployment rates, especially among the youth, in these countries; and the second, dedicated to identifying public policies for professional qualification directed to low-skilled youth in the countries analyzed and to

¹ In addition to the member countries of the bloc, Bolivia (which is in the process of joining), Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru and Suriname are associated countries.

analyzing the results and structure of these policies. At the end, are presented final considerations about the developed analyses.

Methodological note

This research used the deductive method (Marconi & Lakatos, 2003, pp. 90) to understand whether, and, if so, what are the characteristics of policies for professional qualification nationwide of the MERCOSUR Member States (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) directed to low skilled youth, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a temporal clip in the period from March 2020 to March 2021.

For that, – as from the search terms “work + young people”; “education + young people”; “professional qualification + young people”; “professional training + young people”; “youth + pandemic”; “professional qualification + pandemic”; “professional training + pandemic”; “youth job” –, the bibliographical research was carried out in the bases of the International Labour Organization (Labordoc and ILOSTAT), MERCOSUR, Inter-American Development Bank, Scielo and EBSCO Host.

In order to identify the employment and unemployment rates of the young people in the countries analyzed, the data provided by the national statistical institutes of the countries were mapped – INDEC in Argentina, IBGE in Brazil, INE in Paraguay and INE in Uruguay, as well as by the ILOSTAT database of the ILO – in the period 2019 (year before the pandemic) to June 2021 (period of the pandemic).

Referring to the mapping of public policies, national ministries or secretariats that could potentially be linked to the promotion of professional qualification for young people were selected: labour; education; science and technology; development; youth. On the official website of each one, the following terms were searched: “work + young people”; “education + young people”; “professional qualification + young people”; “professional training + young people”; “youth + pandemic”; “professional qualification + pandemic”; “professional training + pandemic” (in Portuguese and Spanish idioms). The results were systematized in the table in item 2.1.

The results were investigated using the content analysis method (Bardin, 2011).

1.1. MERCOSUR Member States: Social and Labor Declaration, right to professional training and policies

The Treaty of Asunción (1991) preceded the creation of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), with an aim of promoting integration between Member States based on the free circulation of goods, services and factors of production (Article I), on the coordination of macroeconomic and sectoral policies and on the commitment to the harmonization of national legislation of the countries, namely Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, to strength of the integrative process.

It is noticed that the Treaty of Asunción was silent regarding social aspects, which may denote the absence of concern for the theme in the constituent act (Beltran, 1998, pp. 327-328). In this sense, as a potential mechanism for harmonizing labour and social norms within the MERCOSUR (Beltran, 1998, pp. 338), the Social and Labor Declaration of MERCOSUR (1998) was created.

Recognizing that regional integration should not be restricted to the commercial and economic sphere (Pasqualetto; Scodro, 2019, pp. 723), the Declaration contemplated rights related to labour relations, such as the promotion of equality, based on the commitment of the Member States with the adoption of effective measures to promote education and professional training for people with disabilities (Article 2).

In 2015, the Social and Labor Declaration of MERCOSUR was revised, amended and expanded. In this version, in addition to the provision of equal treatment between workers, which includes access and measures to education and professional qualification, Article 24 was added, directed to professional training for employed and unemployed workers.

This Article provides the “right to professional education, counseling, training and qualification in a systematic and continuous way, throughout their working life”, as well as recognizes the commitment of Member States to the promotion of services and programs and the installation of employment offices and measures of articulation for the work mediation. Furthermore, the Article provides for the commitment of States to “guarantee effective information on job markets” at the national and regional levels.

It can be seen that, through the Declaration (2015), the States recognized the right to professional training, as well as the commitment to the harmonization of their norms to enable regional integration. In this sense, to observe the treatment given by law and harmonization, the national and international instruments of law (international labour standards) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) were observed and, later, the ideas that permeate employment policies, connected to the right to work in its collective scope (Fonseca, 2009).

With reference to the countries, it is possible to verify similarities between the legal systems of the Member States, especially with regard to the constitutional provision of the right to work.

In Argentina, the Constitution of the Nation (1994) recognizes the right to work and mentions education in a segmented way, like environmental education and education for consumption. Furthermore, the instrument establishes the competence of Congress to legislate on the professional training of workers, as well as to lead to human development and economic progress with social justice, which can be understood as correlated.

In Brazil, based on the recognition of the right to work and the right to education as social rights (Article 6), by the Federal Constitution (1988), it is observed the fundamentals for the structuring of public policies by the Government directed to professional training and, above all, to full employment (Fonseca, 2017, pp. 88-89). The Brazilian Constitution recognizes education as a right for all and a duty of the State and the family, being the basis for the full development of the

person, his preparation for the exercise of citizenship and his qualification for work (Article 205). By the provision for the national education plan, among other guidelines, the Constitution aims the eradication of illiteracy and defines professional training as an objective.

In Paraguay, the Constitution of the Republic (1992) recognizes the right to work as a fundamental right, providing that the State is responsible for promoting policies for full employment (Articles 86 and 87). Therefore, it is common as a permanent objective of the educational system the professional training (Article 73), stating to the State the responsibility for promoting it through technical education with a view to training human resources for national development (Article 78). Specifically with regard to young people, the Paraguayan Constitution provides for the promotion of adequate conditions for youth participation in the country's political, social, economic and cultural development (Article 56).

In Uruguay, the Constitution of the Republic (1994) states that all people can engage in work in cultivation, in industry, in commerce or any other licit activity (Article 36) and everyone has the right to be protected in their labour activity (Article 7th). Unlike the other Constitutions analyzed, such as which regulate the right to work, the Constitution of the Republic of Uruguay without prejudice to freedom, provides that every inhabitant of Uruguay has the duty to apply their intellectual or physical energies in a way that brings benefits to the community, which will seek to offer the possibility for people (with preference for Uruguayan citizens) to earn their livelihood through the development of an economic activity (Article 53). In this sense, the instrument establishes the obligation of primary, secondary, agrarian or industry education, disciplining that the State must promote technical education (Article 70).

At the international level, on the other hand, a plurality of international organizations leads to the possibility of innumerable instruments to be adopted. By the clip of the research, the analysis proposed to emphasize the international labour standards of the International Labour Organization.

The international labour standards are structured in the form of Conventions, which have the legal nature of “legally binding” international treaties that can be ratified by the Member States, and Recommendations, which are instruments that do not require and/or admit the figure of ratification and, therefore, are not binding (ILO, 2019, pp. 25).

The Convention No. 142, pertinent to the development of Human Resources, provides that Member States shall adopt and develop coordinated and comprehensive policies and programs of professional guidance and professional training, above all, related to employment (Article 1.1), as well as that they shall gradually extend, adapt and harmonize their vocational training systems (Article 4) (Fonseca, 2017, pp. 72). The instrument entered into force on July 19, 1977 and was ratified by Argentina, in 1978, and by Brazil, in 1981. It is noteworthy that Paraguay and Uruguay have not ratified the instrument.

Subsequently, in order to observe the treatment given by law and harmonization, the ideas that permeate employment policies in MERCOSUR were observed. Initially, (public) policies are

related to the Government's planned action directed to the pursuit of a goal (Fonseca, 2006, p. 116-117). Therefore, the action includes the adoption of normative instruments, as well as inspection and control by competent organs of public authorities (Fonseca, 2006, p. 116-117).

It should be noted that public policy is based on intentionality and response to a public problem, so that its purpose is based on promoting “the treatment or resolution of a problem understood as collectively relevant” (Secchi, 2013, pp. 02). Thus, according to Thomas R. Dye (2013, pp. 3), “public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do”, which is related to what is done, why it is done, when it is done and what difference it generates.

From this perspective, when relating to the action chosen and carried out by the Government, it is possible to affirm that the State has the obligation to promote the implementation of public policies that, for example, are aimed at guaranteeing social rights (Fonseca, 2006, pp. 118). It should be noted that the Social and Labor Declaration of MERCOSUR provides the commitment of Member States to “formulate and implement active policies of decent work and full productive employment in consultation with the most representative organizations of employers and workers [...]” (Article 2.1).

In addition, Article 21 provides for the reaffirmation of the “centrality of employment in the public policies”, under the justification of seeking the advancement of sustainable development by the States Parties. It is clear, therefore, that the Social and Labor Declaration of MERCOSUR recognizes to Member States the right to professional training and the commitment to the harmonization of their standards to enable regional integration.

1.2 Youth employment: ILO monitoring in the pandemic, “lockdown generation” and MERCOSUR Member States

On March 11, 2020, the intensification of the spread of the “new coronavirus” for more than one hundred countries and the number of cases infected by COVID-19 led to the recognition of a “pandemic” by the World Health Organization (PAHO, 2020, 11 March). A “pandemic” refers to the spread of a new disease on a global scale, in which a new virus emerges and spreads, without the majority of people having any immunity (WHO, 2010, 24 February).

This increase in the spread and number of infected cases led to the worsening of the health crisis, which had repercussions for the social, economic and political spheres. In this scenario, members of the international community began to mobilize, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) from the publication of monitoring and preliminary assessments of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world of work (ILO, 2020, 18 March).

On March 18, 2020, the first edition of ILO monitoring recognized that the impacts of the pandemic on the world of work would affect, in addition to the health of workers and their families, the amount of employment, considering unemployment and underemployment and the quality of work

in relation to labour income and working poverty (ILO, 2020, 18 March). These effects would be felt by groups considered especially vulnerable, such as youth, who already face the highest rates of unemployment and underemployment and, in the scenario, would be more susceptible to a decline in labour demand (ILO, 2020, 18 March).

Regarding youth, the International Labour Organization found a particular vulnerability and susceptibility to the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. This scenario can mark the professional life of young people and indicate the emergence of the “lockdown generation” (ILO, 2020, 27 May).

According to the ILO (2020, May 27), in the period prior to the COVID-19 crisis, 267 million young people were not employed, studying or in training and 178 million youth were working. Of the young workers, almost 80% were active in the informal economy (ILO, 2020, 27 May).

In the COVID-19 pandemic, it was found that one in six young people stopped working because of the crisis due to layoffs or the closure of businesses (Oficina Internacional del Trabajo, 2020). Thus, at present, the ILO considers that the probability of young people aged 15 to 24 years of being unemployed is three times higher than that of individuals aged 25 or over (Oficina Internacional del Trabajo, 2020).

Jointly, the International Labour Organization identified the great impact on education, training and on-the-job training. In this sense, it was possible to verify that about two-thirds of the training was being carried out at a distance, so that this reality is not present in low-income countries, which have not made the full transition to offering via the internet (ILO, 2020, 27 May).

Therefore, it was noticed that the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic intensified the obstacles to young people, leading to the interruption of education and training; to job loss; to the collapse of companies and the reduction of income and opportunities for startups; and to the emergence of difficulties in finding jobs, entering the labour market and transitioning to better jobs (ILO, 2020, 27 May). This scenario can lead to long-term impacts, enabling the emergence of a “lockdown generation”, which refers to a generation of people, especially youth, who face a major risk of being excluded from the labour market (OECD, 2020) and be marked in their professional life (ILO, 2020, 27 May).

In view of this, in the editions of the monitoring of the International Labour Organization, urgent action was suggested, in order to avoid long-term damage to young people in terms of education and training and prospects for the labour market (ILO, 2020, 27 May). It can be seen that the idea of urgent action by the States is directly linked with the Government's planned action and, therefore, with the formulation and/or adaptation of (public) policies to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This suggestion dialogues with the recognition of the right to professional training and the commitment to the formulation of active public policies for work and employment by the Member States of the Southern Common Market, which are included in the scope of application of the Social

and Labor Declaration of MERCOSUR. These policies, as they refer to the planned action of Governments, must line with the circumstances, in order to be directed towards the effective resolution of socially relevant problems.

To enable dialogue and, therefore, reflection of the (possible) impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market, an overview of employment, unemployment and occupation rates, specifically related to the youth, was sought. Therefore, using data provided by the national statistical institutes of the Member States, the research considered the period prior to the pandemic (2019) and the period of the pandemic (2020-2021).

In Argentina, statistical data are collected and gathered mainly by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INDEC), in the section “Mercado de Trabajo”. To get the data, which are available on a quarterly basis, a weighted average of the numbers was used.

In relation to rates, the following were considered: the activity rate, which was 47.3 in 2019 and 43.2 in 2020; the employment rate, which was 42.6 in 2019 and 38.3 in 2020; and the unemployment rate, which was 9.8 in 2019 and 11.5 in 2020. These rates refer to the general population, which is, together, broken down by gender and age group.

Table 1: Quarterly average of activity, employment and unemployment rates, by gender and age group (2019-2020)

Rates	2019	2020
Activity rate of the total population	47.3	43.2
Women of 14 to 29 years old	40.4	35.5
Men of 14 to 29 years old	55.7	49.3
Population of 14 to 29 years old	48.1	42.4
Women of 30 to 64 years old	68	63.4
Men of 30 to 64 years old	91.2	86.5
Population of 30 to 64 years old	79.6	75

Employment rate of the total population	42.6	38.3
Women of 14 to 29 years old	31.5	26.5
Men of 14 to 29 years old	45.7	39.5
Population of 14 to 29 years old	38.6	33
Women of 30 to 64 years old	63.1	58
Men of 30 to 64 years old	85.7	79.9
Population of 30 to 64 years old	74.4	68.9
Unemployment rate of the total population	9.8	11.5
Women of 14 to 29 years old	22	25.4
Men of 14 to 29 years old	18	20
Population of 14 to 29 years old	20	22.7
Women of 30 to 64 years old	7.3	8.7
Men of 30 to 64 years old	6	7.7
Population of 30 to 64 years old	6.7	8.2

Source: Own elaboration, based on INDEC data.

In the period, the highest rates of activity and employment were concentrated in people aged 30 to 64 years and, specifically, in men, while the lowest refer to women aged 14 to 29 years. The

highest unemployment rate, on the other hand, intensifies among people aged 14 to 29, with growth for both genders from 2019 to 2020, despite men's rates being lower than women's.

In Brazil, statistical data are collected and organized, mainly, by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), based on surveys such as the Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua (PNAD Contínua), which occurs quarterly, semiannually and annually, with variation of the information collected in the periods. The survey information was collected from the Sistema IBGE de Recuperação Automática (SIDRA) of IBGE and considers the reference week.

Initially, the information from Brazil was systematized in Table 2, which brought together the mean of the quarterly data for 2019 and 2020 of people aged 14 and over in general, in the workforce - which refers to the sum of occupied people and unoccupied – and out of the workforce.

Table 2 – Average of people aged 14 or over, in the reference week, in thousands (2019-2020)

People aged 14 or over	2019	2020
General	171,056.5	174,358
In the workforce	105,717	102,588.5
Occupied	93,207.5	89,201
Unoccupied	12,509.5	13,387.5
Out of the workforce	65,339.5	71,769.5

Source: Own elaboration, based on IBGE data.

It is noticed that the general population has increased, as well as the number of people out of the workforce. Regarding people in the workforce, which decreased in the period, the unoccupied population grew, which reflected in the inoccupation rate, which went from the quarterly average of 11.85 in 2019 to 13.05 in 2020. In both years, the inoccupation rate is higher for women.

Specifically about unoccupied people, Table 3 systematized the annual means, segmented by age group.

Table 3 – Average of unoccupied people aged 14 or over, by age group, in the reference week, in thousands (2019-2020)

Unoccupied people aged 14 or over	2019	2020
Total	12,509.5	13,387.5
14 to 17 years old	1,014.5	910
18 to 24 years old	3,951.5	4,097.5
25 to 39 years old	4,343	4,620.5
40 to 59 years old	2,854	3,386.5
60 years or more	346	372.5

Source: Own elaboration, based on IBGE data.

It is noted that, in the period, there was an increase in unoccupied people, so that only the number of people aged 14 to 17 decreased. Also, the age groups with the highest number of unoccupied people are, in both years, people aged 25 to 39 and 18 to 24 years old.

In Uruguay, data on employment and unemployment are provided by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), in the section “Atividade, emprego e desemprego” and in the results of the Pesquisa Domiciliar Contínua. The data of 2019 are available by age on the INE website. However, the 2020 data are still mostly unavailable on the INE website, but could be partially found in the ILOSTAT database, of the ILO. The lack of 2020 data on the INE platform makes it difficult to compare the years 2019 and 2020. However, considering that the countries themselves send their statistics to the ILO to be integrated into ILOSTAT, the rates contained in ILOSTAT were indicated in order to highlight the 2020 panorama in terms of employment and unemployment rates.

Table 4 – Employment rate by age group in Uruguay (%) (2019-2020)

Source	Year	Age group			
		14 to 24 years old	25 to 39 years old	40 to 60 years old	61 years old and over

INE Uruguay	2019	31.2	81.8	80.5	19.9
INE Uruguay	2020	No data	No data		
ILOSTAT	2020	55.2 (No data for age groups)			

Source: Own elaboration, based on INE Uruguay data and ILOSTAT.

Table 5 – Unemployment rate by age group in Uruguay (%) (2019-2020)

Source	Year	Age group			
		14 to 24 years old	25 to 39 years old	40 to 60 years old	61 years old and over
INE Uruguay	2019	27.7	7.6	4.5	3.5
INE Uruguay	January-February 2020	27.9	6.4		
ILOSTAT	2020	33.1	10.3		

Source: Own elaboration, based on INE Uruguay data and ILOSTAT database.

Although it is difficult to make comparisons of data from different databases - which may have been adopted based on different methodologies – it is possible to see, in general, that the unemployment rates of the youth population are higher than the unemployment rates of the non-youth population.

In Paraguay, data on employment and unemployment are provided by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), in the “Empleo” section. As well as in the case of Uruguay, data mapping was difficult. In Paraguay, it was not possible to find employment and unemployment rates by age. Therefore, the table below was also complemented with information extracted from the ILOSTAT database, of the ILO.

Table 6 – Occupied and unemployment rates by age group in Paraguay (%) (2019-2020)

Year	Occupied rate	Occupied rate of youth	Unemployment	Unemployment rate of youth	Source
2019	67.6	No data	5.3	No data	INE Paraguay

2019	74.2	50.8	6.6	15.3	ILOSTAT
2020	64.8	No data	7.7	No data	INE Paraguay
2020	64.8		7.6	17.1	ILOSTAT

Source: Own elaboration, based on INE Paraguay data and ILOSTAT database.

Considering the forewarning already made about the difficulty of making comparisons between different bases, it is worth noting that the unemployment rates of the youth are higher than the unemployment rates of the non-youth population, reinforcing once again the need for special attention to this specific public.

It is noticed that the data provided by the national statistical institutes of the countries (INDEC of Argentina, IBGE of Brazil, INE of Paraguay and INE of Uruguay) have substantial differences regarding the information collected and its categorization, such as, for example, based on gender and age criteria. In this sense, in order to make comparison possible, data related to unemployment were sought from the ILOSTAT database.

Table 7 – Unemployment (general and youth population) rates from ILOSTAT database (%) (2019-2020)

	Unemployment rate in general	Unemployment rate of youth	Unemployment rate in general	Unemployment rate of youth
Country/Year	2019	2019	2020	2020
Argentina	9.8	25.9	No data	No data
Brazil	11.9	27.8	13.7	31.3
Paraguay	6.6	15.3	7.6	17.1
Uruguay	8.9	27.8	10.3	33.1

Source: Own elaboration, based on ILOSTAT database.

It was verified, based on data provided by ILOSTAT for the period 2019-2020, that, in 2019, Brazil had the highest unemployment rate in general of the bloc. However, in the same year, the rate of youth was the highest in Brazil and in Uruguay, with the same percentage.

In 2020, in turn, the analysis referring to Argentina was hampered by the absence of information from ILOSTAT. Also, Yet again, Brazil had the highest total unemployment rate. In relation to youth, the highest rate was in Uruguay, which was more than 50% higher than in Paraguay.

2. Low skilled youth and national professional qualification public policies in the MERCOSUR Member States

The analysis of the Constitutions of the MERCOSUR countries made it possible to identify a certain similarity between them in terms of preparation for work, through the education and technical education systems, as well as the State's duty to promote policies for this purpose. In this sense, we sought to analyze whether there are and, if so, what are the initiatives to confront COVID-19 with regard to the professional qualification of low-skilled young people. Therefore, it is necessary to demarcate what is meant by low skilled youth in this paper.

2.1. Low skilled youth: seeking definitions and demarcating concepts

Initially, to enable the development of this study, it was necessary to demarcate what is understood by low skilled youth, an expression that brings together two notions: age group and skills. With regard to age group, the International Labour Organization is dedicated to the prohibition of child labour as one of its fundamental principles and rights at work.

It can be seen, therefore, that the issue of age and entry into the labour market have been concerns of the ILO since its creation (1919), when it approved two of its first conventions: Convention No. 5 (on the minimum age for employment work in industry, defined as 14 years) and Convention No. 6 (on child night work, prohibited for persons under 18 years of age) related to child labour.

Throughout its history, the Organization has adopted other conventions relevant to age delimitation, notably Convention No. 138 on the minimum age for work (1973) and Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour (1999). These (Fundamental) Conventions underpin the “effective abolition of child labour” in the quality of the fundamental rights and principles at work stated in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998).

In relation to C138, the content provides that the Member State must set a minimum age for admission to employment or work (Article 2.1), which cannot be under 15 years (Article 2.3). It is worth mentioning the reservation regarding countries with insufficient economic development and teaching conditions that, after the process of social dialogue, may redefine the minimum age of 14 (Article 2.4).

Despite this, Article 3.1 prohibits the possibility of fixing work for people under the age of 18 for occupations whose nature and/or circumstances in which it is carried out may harm health,

safety and morals “of the young persons”. In addition, Article 3.3 provides that work or employment may be authorized from the age of sixteen as long as there is protection for the health, safety and morals of the young people involved, provided with “adequate specific instruction or vocational training in the relevant branch of activity”. Note that C138 uses the expression young people at different times and, especially, when referring to those under the age of 18 and over 16.

The Convention No. 182, on the other hand, provides for the prohibition of the worst forms of child labour and immediate action with a view to their elimination, as well as defining an age standard for children who identify themselves as all persons under the age of 18 (article 2). This definition allows reflections regarding the age that are considered “young people”.

This study used the expression “young people/youth” to indicate people aged between 15 and 24 years, in consonance of the recognition at the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth (1998) and recently reiterated by the ILO in an official publication (ILO, 2017).

Regarding skills, it is noticed that the notion is presented in a broad way, which dialogues with the perspective of Palmer (2017), for whom there is no consensus on what skills are. According to the author, in general, international organizations categorize competences into three groups: fundamental competences, such as literacy and basic knowledge of mathematics, for example; transferable, personal or emotional skills, such as the ability to solve problems and be communicative; vocational skills, which are linked to specific occupations, such as the ability to use statistical software, for example.

Low skilled workers is a term that appears generically in the academic texts and institutional reports analyzed and is sometimes related to people (low skilled workers) and sometimes related to jobs (low skilled jobs). Furthermore, no definitions of the term were found in most of the analyzed texts.

Grip and Zwick (2005) assume as low-skilled workers those with the maximum level of education in early childhood education (ISCED0-2 according to the International Standard Classification of Education 2011). They are low-skilled workers who are outside their ideal occupational domains (Grip; Zwick, 2005). According to Grip and Zwick (2005), low-skilled workers constitute the main group of workers who are at risk of losing their jobs due to the obsolescence of their human capital. The authors mention that low-skilled workers suffer from technical obsolescence, which can reverberate in the low value of the service provided.

Considering the inequalities, thinking about policies to promote professional qualification becomes latent. Thus, starting from the ideas presented, in this paper, low-skilled young people are understood as people aged between 15 and 24 years old who do not have the level of skills - be they fundamental, transferable or vocational (Palmer, 2017) - ideally desirable for a person of a certain age and/or a certain occupation. Furthermore, considering Palmer's categorization, which systematizes skills beyond educational background, relating them, for example, to professional experience, low skilled youth is understood to be those who have no experience in the labour market.

2.2 Public policies aimed at low-skilled youth during the COVID-19 pandemic in MERCOSUR countries

From the mapping carried out according to the methodological note of this paper and the search criteria used, eight (8) initiatives were identified in Argentina; nine (9) initiatives in Brazil; two (2) initiatives in Paraguay; and two (2) initiatives in Uruguay.

The initiatives were examined considering the following criteria, which were systematized and presented in the table below.

Table 8 – Professional qualification policies nationwide of the MERCOSUR Member States (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) (March 2020 to March 2021)

Public policy	Year of implementation	Responsible body	Dimension	Description and purposes	Connection to Covid-19	Target	Does it contemplate low-skilled youth?	Does it involve another actor (not a company)?	Does it involve a company?	Was there any change with the COVID-19 pandemic?
Argentina										
FormAr	No data	Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social:	Full public policy	This open event intends to connect young people and human resources specialists for job profile definition and skills identification. The initiative covers the construction of the curriculum, the practice of declaration, training through courses, connection with companies, entrepreneurship and access to projects related to the future of work.	No data	Youth from 18 to 30 years old.	Yes	No data	No data	No data

Jóvenes con Más y Mejor Trabajo	No data	Ministério de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social:	Full public policy	This training is aimed at young people who want to enter the labour market, enabling them to take an introductory course, learn a trade and receive a certification of skills, with the perception of a monthly economic incentive.	No data	Unemployed youth between 18 and 24 years old, with incomplete primary or secondary education and permanent residence in the country.	Yes	No data	No data	No data
Cursos de capacitación	No data	Ministério de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social:	Part of a public policy	Those are professional training courses offered and certified by the Ministry.	No data	Open access (no target audience defined)	Yes	No data	No data	No data

EnFoCo-INET	No data	Ministerio da Educación	Full public policy	It is a virtual in-service training program aimed at the management and teaching team of secondary technical institutions, higher technical institutes and vocational training centers across the country.	No data	Open access (no target audience defined)	Yes	No data	No data	No data
ProgresAr	No data	Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social:	Full public policy	The initiative proposes to guide the action of the State in the direction of the development and growth needs of Argentina, guaranteeing equal conditions of access to education, permanence and graduation, and enabling the monitoring of young people.	No data	Youth from 18 to 24 years old, which income that do not exceed three minimum salaries. Also, it extends up to 35 years for people with children under 18 who is single parents and up to 40 years for people who do not have a formal contract. There is no age limit for trans, indigenous, disabled or refugees.	Yes	No data	No data	There was an extension of the application deadline.

Educ.Ar	No data	Ministério da Educação	Part of a public policy	The platform brings together the Cursos Comunitários (Comunitary Courses), which bring a diverse offer of proposals with the aim of facilitating access to knowledge and useful tools to perform new tasks from home, to improve performance at work and generate new opportunities, to organize, study or discover vocation.	No data	Open access (no target audience defined)	Yes	No data	No data	No data
Plan Argentina Programa	No data	Ministério de Desarrollo Productivo	Part of a public policy	It is a training course with programming content offered and certified by the Ministry.	No data	Open access (no target audience defined)	Yes	No data	No data	No

"Potenciar Trabajo"	No data	Ministerio de Desarrollo Social	Full public policy O Programa Nacional de Inclusão Sócio-produtiva e Desenvolvimento Local "Promover o Trabalho", unifica os programas The Programa Nacional de Inclusión Socioproductiva y Desarrollo Local "Potenciar Trabajo" unifies different programs into a single initiative, whose objective is to contribute to the improvement of employment and the generation of new productive proposals, in order to promote the full social inclusion of people in situations of social and economic vulnerabilities em uma única iniciativa, cujo objetivo é contribuir para a melhoria do emprego e geração de novas propostas produtivas por meio do desenvolvimento da sociedade -projetos econômicos, produtivos, sócio-comunitários, sócio-trabalhistas e de terminação educacional, a fim de promover a inclusão social plena de pessoas em situação de vulnerabilidade social e econômica.	No data	People from 18 to 65 years old.	Yes	No data	No data	The Ministry ordered the payment of 3,000 pesos for those who are part of the program "Potenciar Trabajo" and have not received the emergency family income created by the national government to face the pandemic.
Brazil									

Curso "Caminhando Juntos"	2021	Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos	Specific initiative	This is a course with the objective of guiding young migrants on the necessary steps for integration in the Brazilian labour market, going through the themes of documentation, possibilities for training and improvement, development of personal skills, development of curriculum and selection processes and access to entrepreneurship and generation of income.	Created during the pandemic, but there is no direct relation to COVID-19 pandemic.	Young migrants from countries neighboring Brazil	Yes	IOM UM	SENAI SC	Not apply
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Carta Brasileira para Cidades Inteligentes	2021	Ministério do Desenvolvimento Regional	Part of a public policy	<p>This is a Charter, which expresses a Brazilian public agenda prepared with the integrated participation of the Federal Government, civil society, academia and the private sector. The document intends to guide the agenda of smart cities in the Federal Government for the coming years and also serve as a foundation for the formulation of policies by states and municipalities, based on the premises of the Política Nacional de Desenvolvimento Urbano (PNDU). Thus, it includes the encouragement of professional training in the area of ICTs.</p>	Created during the pandemic, but there is no direct relation to COVID-19 pandemic.	<p>People responsible for making decisions in Brazilian municipalities and the Federal District; people who are technical and political agents of national and state public bodies; Legislative powers at the three levels of government and the judiciary; State structure control bodies; professional people from the technical and scientific fields in teaching and research institutions; private sector; and civil society organizations.</p>	No	Yes	Yes	Not apply
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Escola do Trabalhador 4.0	2021	Ministério da Economia	Part of a public policy	It is a professional qualification program that offers free courses on technology and productivity topics, with a focus on increasing employability, preparing for the new demands of the labour market, especially in the digital environment.	Created during the pandemic, but there is no direct relation to COVID-19 pandemic.	Workers, over 18 years old, looking for a job.	Yes	No	Microsoft	Not apply
Qualifica-Mais, Emprega-Mais	2021	Ministério da Economia; Ministério da Educação	Full public policy	This is a Program which offer free vacancies in professional qualification courses with a focus on developing skills for the world of work, to assist students in entering and staying in jobs in the formal labour market.	Created during the pandemic, but there is no direct relation to COVID-19 pandemic.	Young workers up to 29 years old, with complete secondary education and residing in the metropolitan areas/regions where the course is being offered.	Yes	No	No	Not apply
Espaço 4.0	No data	Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos	Part of a public policy	It became an action of the technological axis of the Programa Horizontes and consists in the implementation of units of creative innovation environment to encourage the use and to be an opportunity for technical training, expansion of technical and socio-emotional skills.	Already existed and applies to the moment	Youth from 15 to 29 years old, especially those in a situation of social vulnerability.	Yes	No	No	No

Aprendizagem 4.0	2020	Ministério da Economia	Full public policy	It is a qualification program with an innovative format through a curriculum that includes the technical and social-emotional skills required by Industry 4.0.	Created during the pandemic, but there is no direct relation to COVID-19 pandemic.	Youth from 14 to 24 years old.	Yes	No	SENAI	Not apply
Todos por Todos	2021	Ministério da Economia	Full public policy	It is a campaign to encourage the solidarity movement, attracting service offers to the population and proposals for donations to governments, to fight the new coronavirus pandemic. One of the fronts is aimed at promoting free distance training for entrepreneurs and workers, through hundreds of courses provided by interested institutions.	Direct response to COVID-19 pandemic.	Workers and entrepreneurs.	Yes	Interested institutions.	Interested institutions.	Not apply

Novos Caminhos	2019	Ministério da Educação	Full public policy	It is a program that encompasses a set of actions aimed at strengthening the Professional and Technological Education policy, allied to the productive sector, "in support of educational networks and institutions, in planning the offer courses in line with the demands of the productive sector and in the incorporation of transformations produced by technological innovation processes".	Already existed and applies to the moment	Open access (no target audience defined)	Yes	No	No	No
Programa Horizontes	2020	Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos	Full public policy	The program seeks to increase the qualification of youth by the incentive to the creating and maintaining their own businesses, in addition to providing training to help them integrate into the job market.	Created during the pandemic, but there is no direct relation to COVID-19 pandemic.	Youth from 18 to 29 years old, especially those in a situation of social vulnerability.	Yes	No	No	Not apply
Paraguay										

Taller Inserción al Empleo Juvenil	2020	Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social	Part of a public policy	<p>This is an online lecture on youth employment. The initiative is part of PAIL and aimed to present to interested parties the professional placement platform (Para empleo). The services of the Centro de Formação de Empreendedores (Entrepreneur Training Center) (CEE) were presented, as well as information on part-time employment and offers of vocational training courses for young people.</p>	Already existed and applies to the moment	Open access (no target audience defined)	Yes	<p>The lecture took place within the scope of the Programa de Apoyo a la Inserción Laboral (Support Program a la Insertion Laboral) (PAIL). It is one of the professional training courses offered by the Ministry of Work, Sistema Nacional de Formación y Capacitación Laboral (Employment and Social Security through the National System of Training and Training in</p>	No	It was performed in the virtual environment.
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Labor)
(SINAFOCAL)
and by the
Inter-
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Development
Bank (IDB),
with the
support of la
Fundación
Centro de
Información y
Recursos para
el Desarrollo
(Information
and
Resources
Center
Foundation
for
Development)
(CIRD).

Programa Prácticas Laborales 2021	2021	Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social	Full public policy	<p>This is the first edition of the program, carried out in partnership with the company Nestlé. The objective is that, for 6 months and with a dedication of 12 hours per week, the young people get to know the work practice and receive training in strategic areas, with emphasis on the areas of finance, accounting, administration, human resources, digital media, communication. Participation in the program, however, does not imply subsequent hiring by the company.</p>	Created during the pandemic, but there is no direct relation to COVID-19 pandemic	18 to 29 years of age, with residence in Paraguay; and be a university or technical student	No data	No	Nestlé	Not apply
Uruguay										

Yo Estudio y Trabajo	2012 (Em 2020, o programa estava em sua 9ª edição)	Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social	Full public policy The program aims to offer a first formal work experience to young students (in formal or non-formal education, in courses of at least 240 hours) between 16 and 20 years old, to develop transversal skills that allow them to act in the labor market, ensuring the continuity of studies. The program links young people interested in having work experience with companies willing to offer vacancies. The activities are of operational and administrative support. The program has a minimum duration of 9 months and a maximum of 12 months and a workload of 20 to 30 hours per week, depending on the company in which it is allocated. It is not possible for the young person to choose the company in which they will be allocated. Young people are paid in the program. If the young person stops studying, he/she is excluded from the program.	Already existed and applies to the moment	Young students between the ages of 16 and 20	No data	Inter-institutional program	Yes	No data
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Centros Educativos de Capacitación y Producción (Cecap)	1981	Ministerio de Educación y Cultura	Full public policy	<p>It is a public educational proposal aimed at young people aged 15 to 20 who are outside the formal education system and do not work. The program has as general objectives the promotion of integral education, social inclusion and citizen participation; and its specific objectives are reinsertion and continuity in the formal educational system, as well as training for work. It offers a comprehensive educational proposal with a diversity of pedagogical spaces organized by areas such as artistic expression, basic knowledge, physical education and recreation and sport, information and communication technologies and work area.</p>	<p>Young people between 15 or 14 (there is a divergence in official pages on the minimum age. Some indicate as minimum age 14 years, while others indicate 15 years. It accredits that the most up-to-date is 15 years, considering the minimum age for or work no country, pursuant to article 7 of the Law No. 19.133 / 2013) and 20 years that have not been inserted in the educational system (formal or not formal) and have not been employed</p>	Yes	No data	Yes	No data
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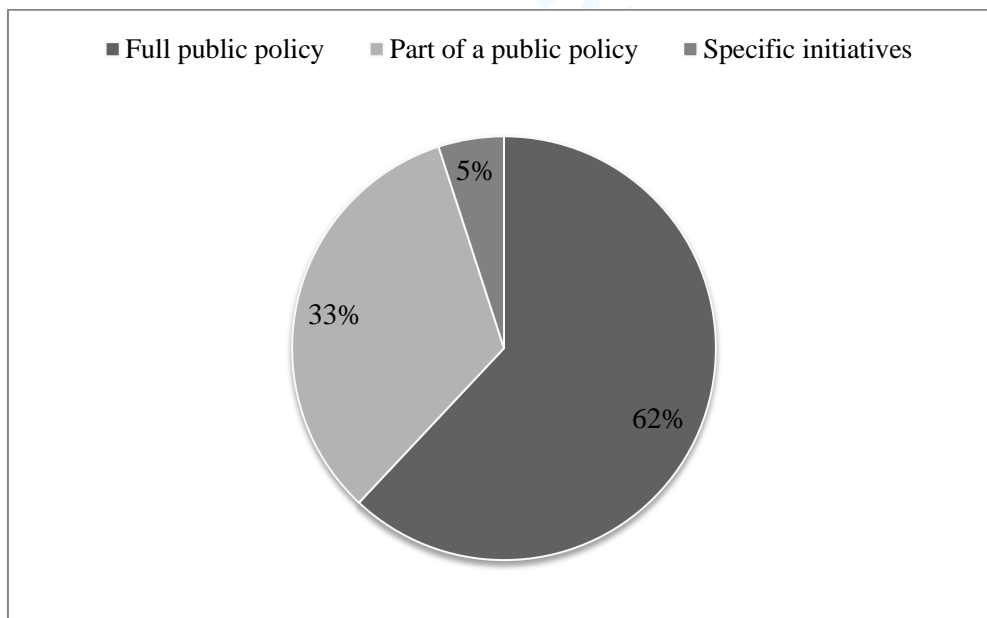
Source: Own elaboration, based on official data collected in the websites of Member States.

Initially, to analyze the initiatives carried out by the countries, it is necessary to consider that the quantity of policies presented is not necessarily related to the quality and success of their performance. In this sense, to identify the causal relationship between quantity, quality and effectiveness, it would be necessary to provide information related to the actual performance, the results and effects on the population involved, which was not possible to verify.

The information collected indicated that the implementation of initiatives by MERCOSUR Member States are concentrated in the specific Ministries for matters related to work, employment and social security and education, which dialogues with the provision of the right to professional training as an interdisciplinary theme between work and education. It should be noted that in Brazil, the Ministry of Labour was abolished, so that it is possible to identify initiatives carried out with the Ministry of Economy.

Regarding the dimension, based on the official information made available, the initiatives were identified as: (i) full public policy; (ii) part of a public policy; and (iii) specific initiatives. In this sense, the chart below indicates the percentage of dimensions.

Graphic 1 – Dimensions of analyzed initiatives, by aggregated country data



Source: Own elaboration, based on data collected from official country websites.

In (i) full public policies, programs aimed at training, qualification, formal work experience, continuous training and the improvement of employment and generation of opportunities were identified, as well as educational proposals, campaigns, open events, courses and guidelines for state action. The information provided makes it possible to verify that, in a few cases, there is involvement with private companies and other actors. Nestlè's participation in Program Practicas Laborales 2021 (Paraguay) is noteworthy, aimed at young people (higher or technical education students) from 18 to

29 years of age, which aims to enable young people to experience labour practice and provide training in strategic areas; and the participation of the Serviço Nacional de Aprendizagem Industrial (SENAI) in the "Program Aprendizagem 4.0 do Brasil", aimed at young people aged 14 to 24, which seeks to promote qualification in an innovative format that dialogues with the demands of industry 4.0.

In (ii) part of a public policy, the initiatives were aimed at conducting courses, lectures, implementing learning units and developing a Charter, which expresses a public agenda. It was noticed that the involvement with actors and private companies, such as the "Taller de Inserción al Empleo Juvenil" from Paraguay, which was defined as an online lecture held within the scope of the Programa de Apoyo a la Inserción Laboral (PAIL), which is offered through the Sistema Nacional de Formación y Capacitación Laboral (SINAFOCAL) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) with the support of the Fundación Centro de Información y Recursos para el Desarrollo (CIRD), and the "Escola do Trabalhador 4.0" in Brazil, which offers varied professional qualification courses and is taken with Microsoft.

In (iii) specific initiatives, there was the Course "Caminhando Juntos" in Brazil, which was developed together with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) of the United Nations and the SENAI of the state of Santa Catarina. The initiative aims to offer a course aimed at guiding young migrants, in Spanish, with content on necessary documentation and possibilities for professional training and improvement, for example.

Regarding the year of implementation, the information showed a long-standing initiative, implemented in 1981, and recent initiatives, especially in 2019, 2020 and 2021. Most recent initiatives were created during the pandemic, despite the lack of information about its relationship with COVID-19. In two cases, the initiatives already existed and started to be applied in the context of the pandemic, and in only one case, the initiative was created as a direct response to COVID-19. This initiative refers to the Brazilian campaign Todos por Todos, created in March 2020 and aimed at stimulating the "solidarity movement", contemplating the distance training front from courses provided by interested institutions.

It is noted that, based on the information available, the inapplicability of any policies during the COVID-19 pandemic was not identified. In fact, in the case of initiatives prior to COVID-19, it was possible to verify that the majority underwent changes with the pandemic scenario, such as, for example, the implementation in a virtual environment, the extension of the registration period, inclusion in another public policy and the payment of an amount. This payment was made under the National Program for Social Inclusion and Local Development "Potenciar Trabajo", in which the Ministry of Social Development of Argentina determined the payment of three thousand (3,000) pesos to program participants who were not covered by the Emergency Family Income (IFE), created by the government to fight the pandemic.

About the target audience of the analyzed initiatives: 6 had open access, that is, without a defined target audience; 11 had an age range for young people; 3 were generally directed at workers

(for example, people over 18 and people aged 18 to 65); and 1 was aimed at people responsible for making decisions in municipalities, control bodies, civil society organizations, etc.

Regarding the initiatives delimited to youth, it is clear that 1 was aimed at the age group from 14 to 24 years old; 1 targeted the 15 to 20-year-old age group; 1 targeted the 15 to 29 age group; 1 targeted the 16 to 20-year-old age group; 2 were directed to the age group from 18 to 24 years old; 2 were aimed at the age group from 18 to 29 years old; 1 targeted the 18 to 30 year age group; 1 targeted the age group up to 29 years old; and 1 was aimed at young people migrants from countries neighboring Brazil.

Mostly, young people were differentiated with regard to situation and education. In this sense, reference was made to the situation of social vulnerability (2); to student status (2); to incomplete high school (first and second grade) (1); to complete high school (1); and not being included in formal education (1).

It is noted that, in cases where the age group and situation were indicated, it is possible to see parallels with what is understood as low-skilled young people, that is, those people aged between 15 and 24 years old who do not have the level of desirable ideal skills for a person of a certain age and/or a certain occupation and who have no experience in the labour market. It was possible to identify policies that skewed towards vulnerable youth, as well as those facing unemployment and lack of education - incomplete and/or not accomplished - such as the following initiatives Centros Educativos de Capacitación y Producción (Cecap) in Uruguay, Espaço 4.0 in Brazil, Horizontes Program in Brazil and Jóvenes con Más y Mejor Trabajo in Argentina.

It was possible to identify in the analysis of the four countries the absence of systematized data on these policies, making it necessary to consult many official news and different fields on official websites to obtain more detailed information about each of the initiatives. Furthermore, it was also noted the lack of information - systematized or not - on the results of the policies analyzed in the countries, which makes it impossible to analyze the effectiveness of the initiatives and possible points of attention in each of them.

In Argentina, official websites make it impossible to systematically and specifically search for the competences of each Ministry, which makes it difficult to collect up-to-date news related to their initiatives, as well as their (possible) effects. It should be noted that no data were identified on the results of the analyzed initiatives.

In Brazil, it was noticed a difficulty in managing websites, which present themselves with “broken links”, which make certain searches unfeasible because the content is down. Still, in the country, there is no kind of systematization regarding the initiatives, making it difficult, for example, to recognize their correlations, as well as there is no information that enables the analysis of their effects and results.

In Uruguay, the Ministry of Education and Culture statistics are only available until the year 2019 and the statistics referring to public employment policies of the Ministry of Work and Social

Security are only available until the year 2015. In these available data, no specific information about the young population was found.

In Paraguay, the same difficulty was encountered: no data on the results of the analyzed initiatives were identified. In the specific case of this country, it is believed that the lack of data results from the fact that one of the analyzed initiatives is punctual (open access virtual lecture), while the other initiative is still in progress.

In this sense, it is believed that, due to the time frame used, the results of part of the analyzed initiatives are not yet available, leaving room for further investigation based on data that will potentially be made available by countries in the future.

Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate public policies for professional qualification nationwide in MERCOSUR Member States (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) aimed at low-skilled youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a time frame in the period from March 2020 to March 2021.

A greater number of public policies for professional qualification aimed at the young population were identified in Brazil and Argentina than in Paraguay and Uruguay. However, it is important to emphasize that the existence of more policies does not necessarily mean a more active posture or greater effectiveness of actions. It is necessary to make this reservation because, in addition to the difference between the size and population of countries, it is possible that the creation of a new public policy was not necessary as a specific response to the pandemic with regard to the professional qualification of low-skilled youth (and do not mean the lack of concern with the subject).

There was, in general, in the context of the four countries analyzed, a difficulty in mapping the existing public policies, their details and, above all, their results. It was noticed that the data is little or not systematized and the information is spread out in different spaces within the official websites. The absence or insufficiency of information makes the planning, monitoring and analysis of public policies difficult, and this is an aspect identified as a point of improvement.

Regarding data on levels of occupation and unemployment, employment and unemployment rates and other labour market statistics, a variety of ways of externalizing data between countries was identified: each country makes these data available in a specific way and without a pattern between them. In this sense, it is necessary to highlight the relevance of mechanisms such as ILOSTAT, which systematize and standardize data, making possible a comparative analysis between different countries.

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