

Learning for Careers

What kinds of
career guidance
and career education
services do young
people want in Europe
and Central Asia?

FOREWORD

Today's labour markets are turbulent and undergoing historic disruptions. In the face of accelerated automation, green and digital transformations, globalisation, fluctuating demographics, and recovering post-COVID-19 economies, the character of work is changing. For many this change brings about increased risks of joblessness, uncertainty, and precarious employment, young people being particularly affected by the current instability. Transitioning from school to work is therefore an ever more critical juncture that has consequences for the future employment, well-being, and social connectedness of the younger generation. However, rapid changes in the demand side of the labour market make decision-making about education, training, and work all the more difficult.

Against this backdrop, career guidance provides an opportunity for individuals, economies, and societies to build their resilience and better adapt to these challenging times. It plays an essential part in helping economies to recover and supporting people of all ages to navigate disruptions. For young people in particular, career guidance helps to build their capacity to make important choices about their education and career paths throughout their lives so that they may be able to visualise and plan their futures.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the European Training Foundation (ETF) joined forces to explore young people's needs, sentiments, and experiences with career guidance and counseling. The purpose of this research is not only to give voice to young people but also to gain a better understanding of one of the populations that career guidance services are aimed to serve. By engaging directly with young people and understanding their needs, aspirations, and realities, policymakers and technical experts can design better, more responsive, and more efficient policies. When designed effectively and supported with sustainable funding, career guidance systems can help individuals reach their potential, economies become more efficient, and societies become fairer and more equitable.

This report covers 11 countries in the Europe and Central Asia region, consulting with over 9,600 adolescents and young people. Its findings are essential given the socio-economic and demographic changes, outmigration, persistent inequality, and insecurity that are the reality in many of these countries. This report additionally has a specific focus on Ukraine and the unique challenges facing young Ukrainians' learning and career choices since the start of the war in 2022.

Much is known about the supply side of career guidance systems in the selected countries, thanks to prior research by the ETF and its partners. In the 11 countries covered in this report, research has shown an overall lack of a structured career education approach from primary schooling onward. Fragmented policies and services, along with insufficient coordination and cooperation, contribute to the relative inefficiency of career guidance systems.

This lack of a systemic approach to career guidance, which should have a lifelong perspective, is often linked to limited funding, where career guidance is seen as a cost rather than an investment.

On the demand side, adolescents and young people told us that they wish for services to be more individualised, responsive to their needs and situations, and more accessible, such as outside formal settings (e.g., school) or online. In addition to learning practical skills, such as CV writing

and interview skills (which many career guidance systems already provide), young people told us that they would also like to learn about the world of work, including a critical understanding of the labour market and its trends, and not simply about what occupations are out there. They would also like to learn about the world of learning and education, beyond the availability of courses and programs, and understand how learning can help them to achieve their life goals. Lastly, they would also like to learn more about themselves, not just identify their interests but also know "who am I" as part of making change in their lives and communities. Career guidance can achieve this and more; it can be an engine for empowerment and could have benefits for several generations.

The report presents several ways forward for policymakers, career guidance providers, practitioners, parents/guardians, and the young people themselves. Building effective career guidance systems means ensuring access to career guidance for all, both within the education system and outside, working with youth organisations, civil society, and other social partners. It also means ensuring quality by developing standards, increasing investment, building partnerships with employment services and companies, and providing experiential learning opportunities. Career guidance should be gender transformative, encapsulate a more extensive scope of career aspirations, incorporate entrepreneurship, labour rights, and labour market intelligence, and be available online and with person-centered guidance. For young people in Ukraine specifically, quality online career guidance will continue to be pivotal to their changing circumstances. Providing outreach, information, and career guidance to unserved young Ukrainians is critical.

The ETF and UNICEF remain committed to working closely with young people, listening to their needs, wishes, and aspirations, and linking these insights to decision-makers, so that policies and programs can be more responsive to the realities of young people. Our common goal is to support the young generation in Europe and Central Asia as they navigate decisions in their work and learning journey, throughout their lives, toward a more efficient, equitable, and prosperous future in the region.



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Abbreviations and Acronyms

CITUB	Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria
CMS	Career Management Skills
ECA	Europe and Central Asia
ECARO	Europe and Central Asia Regional Office
ETF	European Training Foundation
ETF CGC	European Training Foundation Lifelong Guidance System Reviews
EU	European Union
ICT	Information and communications technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
ISCO	International Standard Classification of Occupations
LLL	Lifelong Learning
MINT	Mathematics, Informatics, Natural sciences, and Technology
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PES	Public Employment Services
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VET	Vocational Education and Training



Executive Summary

Knowing about the preferences, needs, and wishes of young people is an important precondition to successful career guidance policies and services. The European Training Foundation (ETF) and the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO), in collaboration with young people, conducted polls and held focus groups to understand the needs of young people aged 14-34 regarding career guidance. The study covered Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Kosovo^{1*}, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

Young people want to learn for life, and career education and guidance that integrates life skills and career learning enables them to do this. Fit-for-purpose career guidance should ideally be: a systematic combination of structured career education programs (as part of curricula throughout formal education, to be able to reach whole generations), quality online self-learning and self-help opportunities; and person-centered career guidance service offered outside of school, both face-to-face and online.

Current career guidance offers fall short of what youth need

Instead, young respondents painted a picture of a shockingly high level of limited to no access to guidance. Current services are focused on a traditional approach, consisting of interest, personality trait, and aptitude testing, providing information that aims to match learning and job opportunities. However, these services occur at specific transition points, typically during the last grades of primary or secondary education.

Considering the changes in the labour markets and societies, those one-off interventions

contradict the need for empowering all individuals through career management skills development. These skills are required in order to develop durable human or life skills that help manage lifelong transitions. Moreover, only about one-in-five respondents said they “Learn about self-employment and support to create their own business” (22.1 per cent) or “Understand my rights at work and how to find a quality job” (21.7 per cent). Hence, services currently even fall short on information provision.

‘What I do not know, I cannot like’: Young people are seeking practical experience

Young people participating in polls and focus groups overwhelmingly showed a preference for practical experience, out-of-the classroom opportunities, and skills generated outside the traditional school curriculum. Such experiential learning increases the relevance of academic learning for their lives and their future, enabling them to better understand

and appreciate how school can link to their future career goals. This enhances academic achievement and attainment, helps reduce dropouts and mismatch, and contributes to gender equality. For societies as a whole, career guidance is an investment, not a cost.

1 Under UNSC Resolution 1244

Traditional methods of career guidance are outpaced by preference for online tools

When asked where they get their information and support when choosing a future profession, more than half of the respondents chose “Internet searches, websites” (56.7 per cent), followed by “Social media, chat rooms/message boards, online tutorials” (38.7 per cent), and “Parents” (32.5 per cent) and “Friends” (32.0 per cent), with limited importance given to “Youth NGOs, youth

centers” (11.6 per cent), “School career counselors” (8.6 per cent), and “Public employment offices” (8.7 per cent). The dominance of unstructured self-help provides insights on the quality and adequateness of existing services. As the role of parents remains dominant, this underscores the need for them to be supported as a reliable source of help.

Young people want a profession that matches their skills and interests

Overwhelmingly, young people wish for a profession that matches their skills and interests; however, they are very concerned about skills mismatch and working conditions that do not allow for such alignment. Respondents stressed the importance of life and career management skills to support their emotional development and personal growth;

they consider these to be foundational to their professional development. Consequently, there is a strong call for structured career education which follows a holistic human empowerment approach throughout formal education and during the school-to-work transition period.

Career aspirations of young people remain limited to traditional careers

In line with other research, respondents showed a limited scope of career aspirations, with traditional careers such as teachers, doctors, or nurses being predominant. This finding is deeply concerning, as it highlights how the current state of career guidance does little to broaden the scope of career aspirations and how it has failed to showcase

the opportunities presented by the green and digital transitions. A broader scope of potential career options could also contribute to overcoming gender stereotypes. Undoubtedly, the role of formal education must play a stronger role in becoming a place for career learning and discovery of more extensive career options.

Educational aspirations of young people mirror parental and societal expectations

Over eight-in-ten respondents said that they intend to complete some level of tertiary education (81.9 per cent), showing extremely high expectations that may not necessarily align with either labour market or skill needs. Moreover, a preference for tertiary education tends to ignore the opportunities provided by vocational education and training (VET) in

terms of wages, careers, and job satisfaction. Instead, VET often has a negative reputation as a place for low achievers. A preference for higher education as the best choice increases the risk of being mismatched and even becoming a young person not in employment, education, or training (NEET) in economies that still require an upper secondary educated

workforce. Career guidance can play a crucial role in guiding both young people and parents/

guardians to prevent such biased education aspirations.

Many young Ukrainians lack access to career guidance services

Career guidance systems require a special focus on young Ukrainians. There are many young Ukrainians, both in Ukraine (including displaced persons) and abroad, that lack access to guidance services. More active outreach is needed, both face-to-face and online, as well

as more holistic online services for self-help and self-learning. Personal guidance is also required to meet the needs of this particularly vulnerable group of young people in a difficult context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in a context of a changing jobs market, a more diversified education and training provision, and increasingly complex learning and career pathways, people need relevant, timely, and easily accessible guidance to make informed decisions. By understanding the needs, wishes, and preferences of young people, more effective and efficient policies and services may be formulated. Building career guidance systems across education, employment, youth, and social inclusion sectors that respond to the needs of individuals and groups of population must lie at the heart of efforts to build lifelong learning systems.

The strong interlinkages between career development support, lifelong learning, and the requirement of all countries to ensure quality education, economic, and social outcomes highlights the relevance of career guidance and makes the case for its prioritisation. Lifelong career guidance is a catalyst for policies aiming at economic growth, social equity, and innovation closely aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the European Union's renewed employment, skills, and social inclusion focus reflected in the European Pillar of Social Rights, reinforced Youth Guarantee, and the recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and resilience.



Photo credit: @UNICEF/Ukraine/Anna Markel

INTRODUCTION

There is wide global consensus that career guidance has never been as important as it is today. The changes in the labour market and in our societies have been so rapid and profound that career guidance is becoming a crucial element that can empower people to manage manifold transitions throughout their lives.²

Career guidance describes the services which help people of any age manage their careers and to make the educational, training, and

occupational choices that are meaningful to them.³ Scientific research proves the positive effects guidance has on individuals, organisations, and societies.⁴ While important insights have been gained about existing career guidance policies and services⁵, more needs to be done to better understand the specific needs of individuals and groups, in particular the needs of young people in countries covered by this report.

Focus of the research

The European Training Foundation (ETF) and the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) conducted polls and focus groups to better understand the needs, views, sentiments, and experiences of young people, mainly between the ages of 14 and 34, in relation to career guidance. The geographical focus of the research was on select countries in the Europe and Central Asia region, specifically covering Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Kosovo*, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. The research was co-designed and conducted in close collaboration, and with the full participation, of young people. This initiative's main objective has been to generate

new evidence on career guidance demand and expectations among the young generations in these 11 countries and beyond. This is particularly important against a backdrop of existing policies and services, as well as ongoing reforms in the countries covered in this report and given the significant socio-economic changes, especially the acceleration of digitalisation, fragmentation of the labour markets, outmigration, unequal opportunities, and other rapid changes that these countries are experiencing.

This research aims to contribute toward ensuring that career guidance policies and services effectively meet the evolving needs

2 <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/investing-career-guidance>

3 Ibid.

4 See European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) <https://www.elgpn.eu/publications/browse-by-language/english/elgpn-tools-no-3.-the-evidence-base-on-lifelong-guidance/> and OECD <https://www.oecd.org/education/career-readiness/> in particular: longitudinal analyses [Experiencing the workplace: the importance and benefits for teenagers](#) and [Career readiness in the pandemic: Insights from new international research for secondary schools](#)

5 In 2022, the ETF reviewed the state of career development support systems in 10 countries – [Albania](#), [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Kosovo*](#), [Montenegro](#), [North Macedonia](#), [Serbia](#), [Armenia](#), [Azerbaijan](#), [Georgia](#) and [Ukraine](#), and produced two regional reports – [Western Balkans](#) and [Eastern Europe](#)

and expectations of young individuals. This is especially pivotal in the context of highly transformative labour markets and societies,

sluggish post-pandemic recovery, deepening inequalities, insecurity, and conflicts.

Context

Overall, prevailing career guidance approaches and processes in the countries covered do not seem to have adapted yet to new realities.⁶ On the supply side, there is a strong focus on providing transition support based on interest and personality testing, the related provision of information about matching jobs and education opportunities is still predominant. CV writing and job-interviewing support is also given. While these are key elements of career learning, they are insufficient. Countries are challenged with offering dedicated career education programs as part of curricula that help support young people and also prevent negative outcomes, such as dropouts and mismatch. This is partly due to the difficulty countries face in setting up and updating dedicated qualifications, standards for competences, and services of guidance practitioners, as well as limited continuous training offers for career counselors. Fragmented online and digital services, not tailored to user needs and not leveraged to overcome resource, efficiency, and effectiveness limitations, must be added to this list.

On the demand side, the socio-cultural context, and other factors such as the limited trust among young people in relation to formal institutions, their experiences of social exclusion, their limited opportunities to make

autonomous decisions or even participate in decisions affecting their lives, their often unrecognised needs for mental health and psychosocial support, as well as a range of other vulnerabilities related to insecurity, displacement, mobility and other factors experienced during adolescence may not be conducive to seeking guidance, counseling, and support.

Undoubtedly, all this is tied to limited funding of career guidance that is still mostly perceived as a cost rather than an investment, as well as the inefficiency caused by fragmented policies and services, insufficient coordination and cooperation between state stakeholders themselves and state and non-state stakeholders, which collectively results in the lack of a systematic approach to career guidance in a lifelong perspective.

While countries have made great progress over recent years, including due to substantial donor support, there is still a long way to go to set up lifelong guidance systems.⁷ Individuals undoubtedly have a great responsibility for their own career development, but the knowledge, skills, and attitudes as well as availability of social networks that empower individuals to access and sustain decent work and successfully manage transitions within and between learning and decent

6 See ETF (2020): International trends and innovation in career guidance – Volume I. Thematic chapters. URL: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/international-trends-and-innovation-career-guidance-0>

7 See ETF, ILO (2021): Developing national career development support systems. URL: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/developing-national-career-development-support-systems>

work, are always seen within the limitations of broader contextual factors. These include jobless growth, access to support services, the quality of the education and training offer, the labour market conditions and trends at global, national, regional, and local levels such as aging/demographic shifts, digitalisation, trade challenges, migration, climate change, conflicts and displacement, and finally very important aspects related to gender, age, and ethnicity.

Individuals and especially young people can therefore not bear the full responsibility

for career difficulties like unemployment or inactivity, because contextual factors are out of their sphere of influence and must be tackled by governments in cooperation with social partners.⁸ Successful lifelong guidance clearly requires so much more than a good professional relationship between a guidance practitioner and a beneficiary, young or adult. It requires a systemic approach, with strong cooperation and collaboration, funding, quality assurance, access for all and wider reforms in education, employment, youth, and social inclusion sectors.

The joint ETF-UNICEF ECARO initiative aims to support policymakers and technical experts in their efforts to deliver successful lifelong learning career guidance, and to engage youth, one of the key target groups, in decision-making on policies, programs, and standards relating to career guidance systems. Youth participation in policy and program design is needed to ensure that the offer takes into consideration their needs, aspirations, and realities, so that they are able to make smooth transitions when presented with choices about education and training throughout their lives.

Use of the results

One of the large-scale initiatives in Europe that support young people's successful transitions from learning to earning is the Youth Guarantee. This initiative looks both at preventive policies and services, mainly career education and career guidance in education but also youth policies and services, and reactive measures, specifically active labour market policies and measures focused on young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEETs). The NEET group still represents a relatively large proportion of young people in the countries covered in this report.⁹

The findings of this research can, for example, contribute to the outreach and career guidance measures included in the Youth Guarantee implementation plans in the Western Balkans and in the education, employment, and youth activities in Eastern Partnership and Central Asia countries. Many of these measures are implemented with the European Union's support and reflect education and employment priorities included in the European Pillar of Social Rights and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, it supports the prioritisation of better and more equitable working conditions as demanded

⁸ See Global Careers Month related activities and results: <https://www.skillsforemployment.org/skpEng/iagevent>

⁹ <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/key-indicators-education-skills-and-employment-2022>

by young people and youth organisations, such as the campaign for quality internships and traineeships led by the European Youth Forum.¹⁰

The report's findings can also be utilised by countries that wish to revisit career guidance standards and service delivery (including modes of delivery in a digitalised world), (re) training of practitioners, and reflection of new dimensions of career guidance and counseling,

particularly social inclusion, wellbeing, and mental health.

The study not only aims to recommend customised career guidance services but also to shape these services to address the unique challenges faced by youth, including vulnerable groups such as NEETs, those with disabilities, and migrants or displaced adolescents, ensuring a holistic approach to their lifelong learning and career development.

Methodology

This report represents the voices, views, sentiments, and experiences of young people regarding career guidance and counseling, as well as career education. The information for this report was collected through U-Report polls, UNICEF's social messaging tool and data collection system, conducted by UNICEF in May – August 2023 with youth aged 14-34 from 11 countries in Europe and Central Asia (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Kosovo*, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan), with a total of 9,471 respondents participating in the polls.

Young people were also asked to share their thoughts and opinions in participatory focus groups designed to encourage their involvement. A core group of 1-2 young volunteers aged 14-34 from each country participated in the co-design of the focus group methodology in September – October 2023. Co-design meant that young people, together with research staff at UNICEF, worked together to devise the facilitation approach, themes, questions, and guidebook, which included step-by-step instructions and resources for implementing the focus groups. Young volunteers also participated in online training

sessions relating to career guidance, ethics, research with children, and facilitation skills.

The same young volunteers then facilitated the focus group discussions between October – November 2023 with youth aged 14-34 from the same 11 countries in Europe and Central Asia, with a total of 139 participants. Focus groups were held in local languages, both in-person and online. Focus groups held with youth based in Ukraine, or Ukrainian youth abroad, were held exclusively online. Participants for focus groups were recruited through UNICEF country offices and their social partners in local communities, with specific attention paid to recruiting youth from diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, and other backgrounds, including youth with disabilities.

The focus groups were conducted using a peer facilitation model by young facilitators, focused on an informal approach with interactive workshop methods and games. Participants were given the opportunity to freely express their opinions, in a manner in which they felt comfortable, including through icebreakers, polls, small group work, and writing ideas on sticky notes.

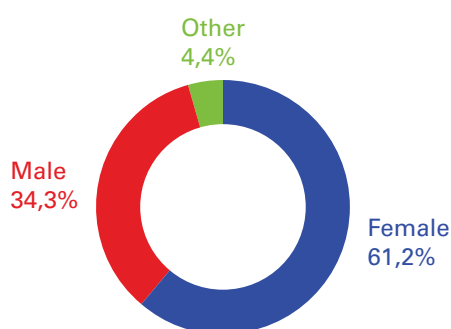
10 <https://www.youthforum.org/news/open-letter-commission-must-guarantee-legislation-on-quality-internships>

This research was governed by a strict ethical and child safeguarding protocol. Facilitators requested and obtained the informed consent of the participating youth. In the case of adolescents who had not attained the age of legal majority, informed consent was given by their parent(s) or guardian(s), while older

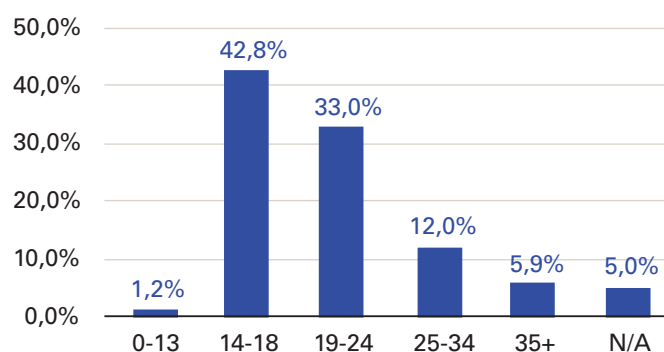
youths gave their own informed assent. The data collection process centered entirely around adolescents and youths. Participatory gender- and age-appropriate activities were used in the process of formulating the U-Report questions and for the focus group discussions.

U-Report polls: May – August 2023 (total respondents: 9,471)

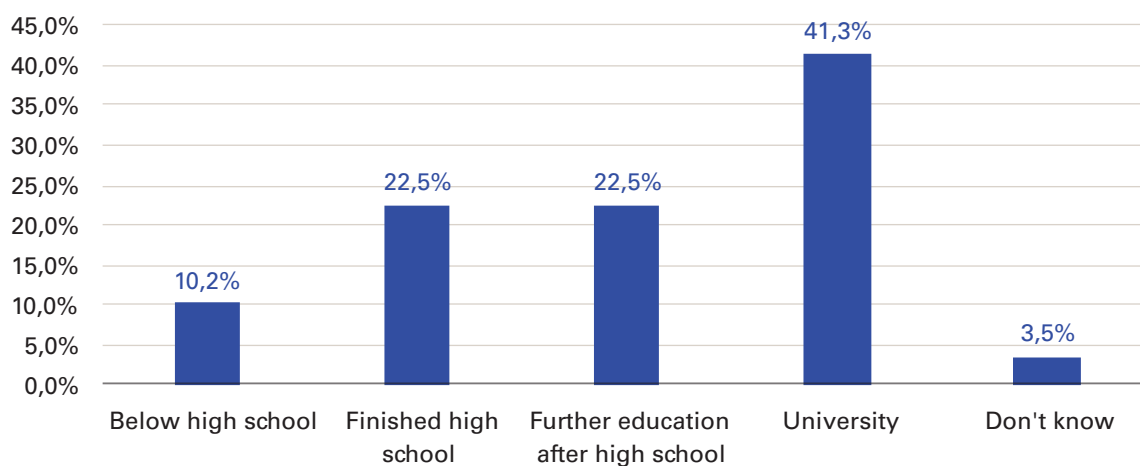
Respondent by Gender



Respondent by Age

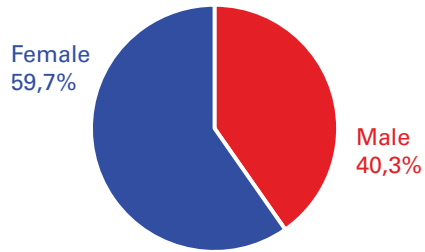


Respondent by parental education attainment (SES)



Focus Groups: October – November 2023 (total participants: 139)

Participant by gender



Participant by age

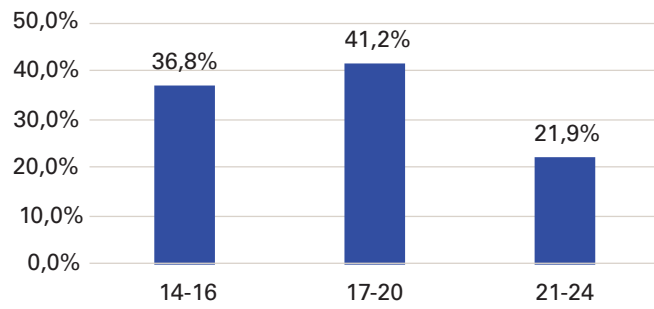


Photo credit: @European Training Foundation / Georgia

FINDINGS

Section 1. The state of play related to career guidance service offer

Effective and efficient career guidance systems should be systematic, well-coordinated, and cross-sectoral, providing seamless lifelong support within a context of stable and appropriate funding, enabling all those who require career development support the ability and the right to access it.¹¹ Obstacles to achieving this system require understanding bottlenecks in both the *demand* and the *supply* of career guidance systems.

On the demand side, this research centers around a comprehensive consultation with young people across 11 countries, examining their needs, sentiments, and experiences with career guidance and counseling. However, before exploring the voices of young people, a look at the supply side of career guidance systems in these countries, namely the current state-of-play at the policy and programmatic levels, is in order.

The ETF lifelong guidance system reviews (ETF 2022a, ETF 2022b)¹², hereinafter the ETF CGC reviews, reveal an overall lack of a structured career education approach from primary schooling onwards. Ideally, career guidance should aim to both prevent dropouts and mismatch and support integrated life

skills and career learning so as to develop career management skills that empower individuals to manage manifold transitions over a lifetime. However, research shows that systems are in fact rather fragmented, insufficiently coordinated, and lacking in a lifelong perspective.

Review findings can be summarised in brief as such:¹³

Albania has elective career education modules in the last year of high school, meant rather for the undecided youth and those not continuing learning at university level, while in VET, career education or vocational orientation is an integral part of the school curriculum, and higher education institutions offer career and alumni offices. Outside of school, the capital Tirana offers a career guidance center to assist youngsters and adults who are seeking employment, together with the Public Employment Services (PES). Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and social partners have a limited role, except through donor support, and the weak labour market information system and limited use of ICT for career guidance reduce the effectiveness of initiatives.

11 Cedefop, European Commission, ETF, ILO, OECD, UNESCO (2021).

12 ETF (2022a): A review of national career development support systems in the Western Balkans. URL: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/review-national-career-development-support-systems-western>; ETF (2022b): A review of national career development support systems in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine. URL: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/review-national-career-development-support-systems-armenia>

13 See ETF career guidance website with all publications: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/career-guidance-0>

Bosnia and Herzegovina, across regions, integrates basic careers information in general education and some practical learning in VET, while at university level, career development centers and alumni associations, where they exist, provide support on request. Donors support NGOs and social partners to provide some guidance services out of school. In contrast, **Greece**¹⁴ offers career guidance in secondary education as a personal service, as a structured career education program and actively involves subject teachers and parents. VET providers offer the subject school career guidance and have established career development offices, while universities offer employment and career structures. Online guidance portals and digital tools complement such support to young people outside of education settings, next to PES.

Kosovo* implements career education as an elective module in grade eight and a compulsory module in the ninth grade in lower secondary schools, while some VET providers offer career centers, and universities run career offices. The Kosovo* Youth Council supports youth in the building of their academic and professional goals. Diverse online portals on education and the labour market provide support outside of education, next to PES. **Kyrgyzstan**¹⁵ has adopted a guidance strategy, but it is not implemented. In **Uzbekistan**¹⁶, no strategy exists. In both contexts, there are very

limited guidance services offered. This also explains high dropout rates and mismatch after education, although online support and PES services are offered outside of education.

Montenegro considers career education as an elective subject, primarily in the last grade of primary and secondary school, and the University of Montenegro has set up a career center, while VET is lagging behind. In line with the Law on Youth, youth clubs or youth centers are being set up but not yet playing a role in guidance outside of education. Online sources are missing or are very limited. **North Macedonia** ensures career guidance in the final years of primary education, has established career centers in some secondary schools, and gives VET providers a role in career guidance, while all universities have to open a career center. Some online support is provided, centrally by the national Euroguidance center, and youth centers shall play a role in guidance at a municipality level in the future.

Romania¹⁷ rolled out a very modern, fit-for-purpose career education learning program in primary and secondary education, integrating life skills and career learning, and the subject counseling and guidance in VET as well as career counseling and guidance centers and learning initiatives in higher education. This is accompanied by online support and PES offers outside of education. **Serbia** set up

14 See Cedefop: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/inventory-lifelong-guidance-systems-and-practices-greece-0>

15 See ETF (2020): https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-03/04_trp_etf_assessment_2020_kyrgyzstan.pdf, ETF 2021) <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/building-resilient-generation-central-asia-and-europe> ETF (2017) https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/m/4BB614E89ABF40E1C12581FE002C9979_TRP%202016-17%20Central%20Asia.pdf and UNESCO-UNEVOC: https://unevoc.unesco.org/wtdb/worldtvtdatabase_kgz_en.pdf

16 See https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/m/2CA24F9B929F94ECC1258137004CB5C3_TRP%202016-17%20Uzbekistan.pdf

17 See Cedefop: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/inventory-lifelong-guidance-systems-and-practices-romania#career-guidance-for-school-pupils>

career guidance teams in (selected) primary and secondary education and VET to deliver services, as well as career development centers in universities – in line with national guidance standards. Youth offices provide career info points and career centers, while online portals like the platform of the national employment service and the national Euroguidance center offer solid digital guidance.

Ukraine integrated career guidance into its new state educational standards under the framework of the New Ukrainian School¹⁸, a key reform of the Ministry of Education and Science, and beyond that, envisions career centers in VET, while PES deliver guidance also to school students. The national youth center

and its affiliates closely cooperate with NGOs and the business sector in organising career guidance activities outside of education, which is accompanied by a vast online support offer.

In this context, understanding the demand side of career guidance systems through young people’s views, experiences, and aspirations becomes ever more important. Effective career guidance can help individuals reach their potential, economies to increase their efficiency, and societies to become fairer. Considering the needs of young people will help systems point toward lifelong approaches to learning, supporting young people in career and learning decisions throughout their lifetimes.

Policy Implication 1: Develop quality standards for career guidance

Quality standards for career guidance. A starting point for a holistic approach to career guidance within and outside of education must be relevant standards for career guidance across education, employment, social inclusion, and youth sectors in a lifelong perspective that build the basis for initial and continuous education and training of practitioners, validation of prior learning of practitioners, provider accreditation, and quality assurance. The development or revisiting of existing standards can be a catalyst for the necessary inter-sectorial cooperation and coordination.

Policy Implication 2: See career guidance as an investment, not a cost

Career guidance as an investment, not a cost. Budgeting for a full-time career guidance professional per school is a key investment in quality services that help to reduce dropouts, increasing educational attainment and academic achievement as well as facilitating smoother education to work transitions and even leading to better earnings and job satisfaction. The study findings show the limited role of career guidance practitioners in the lives of young people. Instead, this role is occupied by volunteering teachers who offer services in their free time, or test-driven interventions of school psychologists who do not provide the type of service needed and even drive young people away from professional career guidance services. This highlights the fact that half-hearted solutions are not actually solutions, underscoring how important it is to understand the needs of young people and allocate sufficient resources for in-school career guidance and counseling.

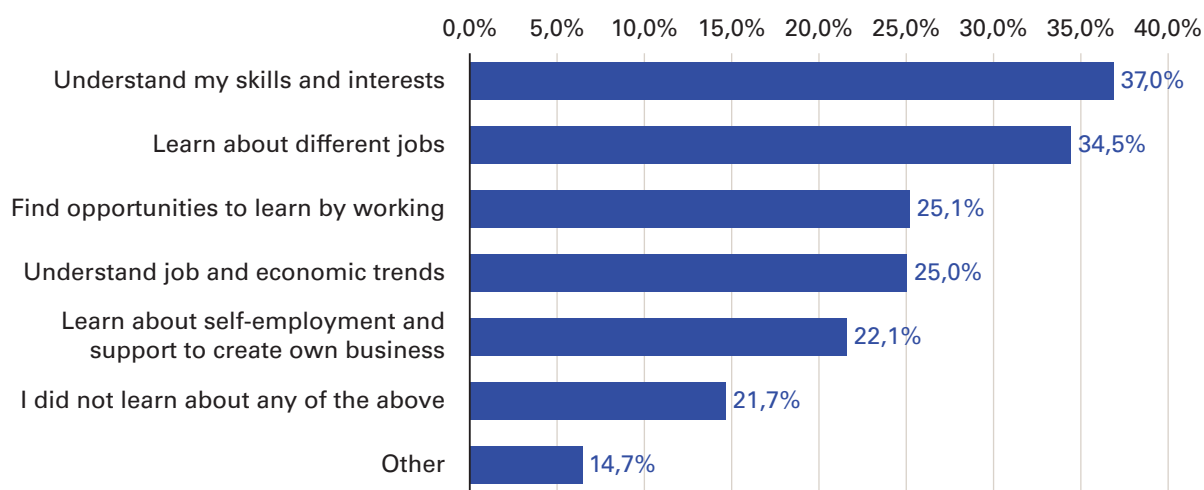
18 <https://decentralization.ua/en/education/nova-ukrainska-shkola>

Section 2. The reality of access to career-related information and support for young people

Figure 1 Access to information and support

What types of information or support do you have access to now?

I get support to: (% of respondents)



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 7,313. Multiple selection possible.

To understand the reality of access to career guidance in each country, we asked young people what types of career-related information and support they currently have. Through polls using UNICEF’s social messaging tool and data collection system, U-Report, as well as peer-led focus groups held across the 11 countries, young people revealed that the current career guidance offer in their countries are not fit for purpose. Most systems offer information and knowledge about careers, with experiential learning being a rare occurrence.

The U-Report cross-country results reveal that 37.0 per cent of respondents said they currently get support to “Understand my skills and interests”. This is followed by over one-third saying that they “Learn about different jobs” (34.5 per cent). The results do not show major differences by gender.

These results mirror the ETF CGC review’s insights: countries focus on traditional interest, personality trait, and aptitude testing and the provision of information about matching learning and job opportunities at specific transition points in the final grades of primary or secondary education. Considering the changes in the labour markets and societies, those one-off interventions stand in contradiction to the need to empower individuals through career management skills development so as to foster durable human or life skills that help manage lifelong transitions. CV writing skills will not magically be effective.

Around one-quarter further stated they receive support to “Find opportunities to learn by working” (25.1 per cent) and “Understand job and economic trends” (25.0 per cent), such as labour market conditions, employment rates, and wages. This result supports the analysis of a rather limited guidance focused on learning

about occupations and little support to young people to create a critical understanding of the economy and its impacts on the environment, on society, and on oneself. For example, understanding the impact of working in the informal economy on oneself, one's family, community, and society is pivotal.

While acquiring information about professions, salaries, and working conditions is crucial, concentrating solely on these aspects can be limiting. A more comprehensive approach involves encouraging critical thinking as a foundation for empowerment, motivating individuals to seize control of their lives and proactively pursue meaningful actions.

It is reassuring that learning through work experience is available, and education and employment stakeholders should work together to further extend such opportunities so that it becomes a standard offer to young people preparing for the school-to-work transition.

Only about one-in-five respondents said they “Learn about self-employment and support to create own business” (22.1 per cent) or “Understand my rights at work and how to find a quality job” (21.7 per cent). Given the jobless growth and difficult labour market situations in many countries, career guidance should more strongly entail support related to entrepreneurial mindset development, aid to self-employment, and connections to start-up support. Furthermore, offering learning opportunities about labour rights, preferably in close cooperation with trade unions and experts, is usually overlooked. Instead, cooperation with companies and employer representatives is currently prioritised; this should be reversed to establish equal social [partnership](#).

19 See ETF (2022): <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/key-indicators-education-skills-and-employment-2022>

14.7 per cent further said that they did not get any information or support for career guidance. Those 14.7 per cent are even more worrying when we consider that a significant number of youth in the labour market are less active, inactive, and NEETs¹⁹. This lack of access exacerbates existing social inequalities and gender inequalities, with young girls being typically over-represented in the NEETs group. In line with ETF CGC review results, outreach to ensure access to career guidance is a key service that is rarely offered in the countries covered and therefore needs to be scaled up in close partnership with those closer to this group, with youth organisations, other NGOs and social partners, and youth and social workers, being those who would require training in career guidance.

In some cases, results by country reveal differences in types of information and support that young people currently have access to, reflecting the focus of the service provision and labour market opportunities and challenges. For example, in **Kyrgyzstan**, over 40 per cent of respondents benefit from information to understand job and economic trends. In the same country as well as in **Romania**, one third of respondents mention access to ‘Understand my rights at work and how to find a quality job’. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and **Uzbekistan**, the following choice was the predominant type of access (over 30 per cent of respondents): ‘To learn about self-employment and support to create my own business’.

With regard to this first topic of the research, the focus group participants confirmed and primarily agreed that they have access and support to understand their own skills and interests. Sometimes, this support was given during conversations with a career counsellor, such as in **Kosovo*** and **Kyrgyzstan**. In **Serbia**,

participants spoke about how volunteering has helped them learn more about their skills, as well as acquire new ones. Other participants, like in **Montenegro** and **Ukraine**, said that they knew very little about what skills they had, and instead reflected on how understanding one's interests seemed more approachable than understanding skills at younger ages; understanding one's skills only comes with age, participants said, as part of a growing up process.

This discussion about understanding one's skills highlights how important experiential learning is: for instance, by working as intern, one can understand what it takes, what one can and cannot yet do, and if a certain career really is of interest. *Interest* develops only through experience. What I do not know, I cannot like. This has important implications for career education and career guidance, which needs much more experiential learning through job shadowing, company visits, mock interviews, student companies, community learning, projects, internships, and apprenticeships. This type of learning, along with the provision of information, is essential in order to help young people develop interests, which traditional schooling is struggling to achieve. This stresses another positive effect of career guidance: learners develop an increased understanding of the relevance of academic learning for their lives and their future, which enhances academic achievement and attainment.

This is also relevant for gender equality. In a nutshell, all the initiatives implemented worldwide so far are very limited in effect to motivate girls and women to move into typical male technical education and occupations, or boys and men into non-traditional careers. Nonetheless, there are some successful

examples, and those are focused on (a) allowing for regular real practical experiences from very early schooling onwards, and (b) providing regular information about a wide range of work life, often through the use of role models and peers like women in mathematics, informatics, natural sciences, and technology (MINT) education or professions. The success model is: one can only get excited about something one knows. Additionally, a study²⁰ found new aspects related to early childhood experience: when being exposed to regular play with building blocks (like Lego) and regular repairing at home (from bicycles to building an IKEA cupboard etc.), there is a positive effect on the interest in technical learning and on choosing a technical profession, which has implications for pedagogy in primary and secondary schools. In conclusion, the role of career guidance has to be a neutral, evidence and fact-based service that exposes all young people to work life from an early age so as to intentionally go beyond female and male jobs and allow all youth to have the experiences and allow for the development of *interests*. Parents/guardians are to be strongly involved.

The other aspect to understanding one's skills is that the first transition decision should be taken wisely; *but* - and this cannot be stressed enough - young people should be aware that their first decision is not for a lifetime. Throughout their lives, they can and will have to take further career decisions sooner or later. This should relieve the pressure of the first transition decision, as this decision is merely setting a general direction based on opportunities, interests, and aspirations. It is important to inform youth about the wide range of opportunities and provide avenues for gaining experience with a wide range of options. It also highlights another key area of career management skills learning:

20 <https://ibw.at/en/resource/download/2195/ibw-researchbrief-109-en.pdf>

understanding life as a learning journey, in which one is the agent. Career guidance needs to emphasise the importance of engaging in lifelong learning for individuals as agents of change in their own lives, in control of their opportunities. This additionally brings positive effects for oneself and others, thereby also supporting learning-to-learn skills.

Focus group participants also described how their primary source for learning about different jobs is through their own job search and discovering job opportunities. A small group of participants had the opportunity to learn about job and economic trends. This confirms the above results about the limited scope of career guidance provision, and the insufficient development of labour market and skills intelligence systems²¹. For example, in **Montenegro** and **Uzbekistan**, focus group participants felt that the information about the world of work and economics was not easily accessible to young people and, as a result, does not receive enough attention. In conclusion, the lack of career learning programs therefore fails to support a critical understanding of the labour market, its trends, opportunities, and shortcomings, and parents/guardians are also not supported to provide this assistance to young people.

Many focus group participants further expressed that while they did not know a lot about their rights at work, they felt that this would be a valuable thing to learn. Indeed, in **Greece**, participants were surprised to see that only a small percentage of respondents receive support to understand their rights at work and how to find a quality job. In **North**

21 <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/skills-intelligence>

22 <https://www.youthforum.org/news/open-letter-commission-must-guarantee-legislation-on-quality-internships>

23 ETF carried out a series of consultations with trade unions, business representatives, and other stakeholders on their role in developing skills for enterprises, including career guidance services (as part of ETF's initiative Skills for Enterprise Development).

Macedonia, a participant spoke about a recent experience with an internship, where many of their fellow interns did not know their working rights. Fortunately, there were no real issues in the workplace. However, participants were generally cautious about internships. In **Ukraine**, the fact that volunteering and internships can sometimes feel like they are not valuable learning or work experiences was brought up. Therefore, quality experiences, namely those with adequate labour protections and of good educational value, are important. In **Uzbekistan**, participants pointed out that when internships are either unpaid or low paid, they are only accessible to those young people who can afford them, as costs related to travel and meals have to be borne by the young person. This clearly links to the broader need for social partnerships to support forms of work-based learning, such as apprenticeships and traineeships, in line with international and European quality standards. Youth organisations and young people themselves are calling for such standards, as seen in the campaign for quality internships and traineeships led by the European Youth Forum.²² The need for a systematic approach to lifelong guidance, labour market-relevant education programs, and services supporting school-to-work transition, including broader availability and access to such arrangements, are also highlighted by the focus groups.

In **Albania**, participants said that they would like to know more about how to be protected in the labour market. ETF's exchanges²³ with trade unions in Western Balkan countries for instance highlighted great interest in supporting

students in their understanding of labour rights. Currently, social partnership arrangements are limited to collective bargaining about wages and work conditions in most countries. Examples like the involvement of trade unions in school career guidance in Bulgaria²⁴ based

on an agreement between the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB), the Union of Bulgarian Teachers and the Ministry of Education and Science in Bulgaria, should inspire all countries.

Policy Implication 3: Support entrepreneurial learning and education on labour rights

Entrepreneurial learning and learning about labour rights. Quality career guidance should include support related to entrepreneurial mindset development, support for self-employment, and a link to start-up support. Additionally, offering learning opportunities about labour rights, preferably in close cooperation with trade unions and experts, should not be overlooked. More efforts to ensure cooperation with companies and representatives of social partners could smooth the path of young graduates toward employment. This development must be enhanced in times of increasing non-standard forms of employment and informality.



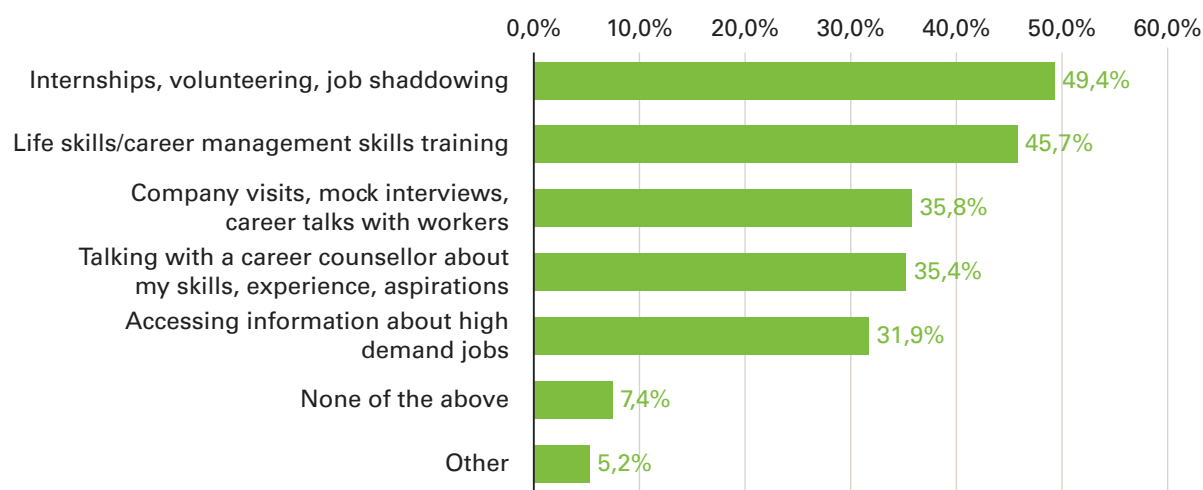
Photo caption: @European Training Foundation / Georgia

24 See www.zapochvamrabota.com

Section 3. What types of career-related information and support young people wish for

Figure 2 Aspirations for career guidance in the future

(Regional) What opportunities do you wish to have in the future?
(% of respondents)



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 6,912. Multiple selection possible.

Contrasting with the reality of the career guidance offer in each country, we asked young people which opportunities they wish they could have in the future. In order for career guidance programs and policies to be most effective, they should respond to the preferences of how young people wish to be supported. Broadly speaking, young people participating in our polls and focus groups overwhelmingly show a preference for practical experience, out-of-the classroom opportunities, and skills that are generated outside the traditional school curriculum to help guide them in their further learning and career decisions.

Nearly half of all U-Report respondents said “Internships, volunteering, job shadowing” (49.4 per cent) and “Life skills/career management skills training” (45.7 per cent) were the kinds of opportunities they wished

to have. Around one-third of respondents selected “Company visits, mock interviews, career talks with workers” (35.8 per cent), “Talking with a career counselor about my skills, experience, aspirations” (35.4 per cent), and “Accessing information about high-demand jobs” (31.9 per cent). Less than one-in-ten respondents (7.4 per cent) said that they do not wish to have any of the aforementioned opportunities.

Internships, life skills/career management skills, and company visits were the top first, second, and third choices, respectively, across nearly all countries. Some exceptions are countries that selected instead “Life skills/career management skills training” as their #1 choice, as was the case in **Albania** (55.7 per cent), **Kosovo*** (49.8 per cent), and **Uzbekistan** (57.3 per cent). In **Romania**, respondents selected “Accessing information

about high-demand jobs” as their #3 choice, with 46.0 per cent of respondents choosing this option. When disaggregating by gender, the top 3 choices are also the same, except females preferred “Internships, volunteering, job shadowing” at a higher rate (53.1 per cent) than males (43.4 per cent). However, for both genders, this option was still the #1 choice.

The relatively low score of ‘talking with a career counselor’ among young people’s preferences may imply the limited understanding of the role of counselors among young people, and possibly limited relevance of counseling services received so far. This could reflect a need to improve quality and responsiveness of the career information and support currently offered. The top ranking of ‘internships, volunteering, and job shadowing’ also shows that information about work and opportunities is not sufficient in the eyes of young people and may be a way for young people to meet their needs to get clarity about what they want through experience. Through real life experience they can independently create their vision of a future professional self. Calling for more experiential learning therefore shows that they want to play an active role in this identity formation. Similar to the U-Report poll, focus group participants uniformly agreed that practical experience, especially internships, but also volunteering and job shadowing, are the most desirable of all opportunities to learn about future careers. They felt that internships could help them become better professionals, as they could improve their skills through experience. It would also expose them to various occupations, helping them choose a future career. In sum, those results highlight that the strong focus on information provision currently prevailing in many countries is not seen as adequate by young people, which is in line with recent OECD research on the

importance of experiential learning for career readiness and successful transitions.²⁵ The education system, with its strong focus on academic learning, is clearly shown to not allow for experiential learning, and is therefore a weak source for career learning and successful transition support. This shows the need for curricular career learning programs for all.

Focus group participants further saw life skills and career management training as supporting emotional development and personal growth, which participants felt was necessary to also develop professionally. Example themes that respondents would like to see covered by life skills are leadership, self-improvement, communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and teamwork. Given that these types of soft skills are not taught by education providers, young people were keen to have opportunities to receive training on them. In summary, the high rating of life skills/ career management skills by respondents shows great awareness of their importance for life. Simultaneously, it is a clear call for schools to give more space to life skills and career learning in addition to information provision about occupations and learning program offers.

Focus groups also discussed if participants had experiences with the opportunities listed above. Participants in **Kosovo*** who completed internships spoke about how they had helped them become more active, cooperative, and social. Furthermore, they considered it a valuable opportunity to meet new people. Some participants in **Albania** specifically described how an internship in a hotel helped them improve their skills and performance while attending a vocational school. Others in **Ukraine** spoke about how they had attended life skills training workshops, but had found the information to be too general and so they

25 See OECD: <https://www.oecd.org/education/career-readiness/>

stopped attending them. In conclusion, life skills and career learning must be relevant to individuals, respond to their needs, and be well-integrated into academic learning. This can help to facilitate connections between learning in and out of school, aligning ideas of who one wants to be and what one wants to do in this world. The traditional testing and information provision approach does not deliver on that, indicating the need for a paradigm shift in career guidance provision.

To access information about high-demand jobs, **Kyrgyzstan** participants described using Telegram channels to learn about job vacancies, especially overseas. They also used social networks and job posting websites. One participant in **Ukraine** described having 20 mock interviews in the last 2 months, and how it helped them develop their own training plan for career development. Few participants

in **Serbia** and **Uzbekistan** had the opportunity to speak with a career guidance counselor, while participants in **Ukraine** described how they had tried it, but it was a “dead end”. They said the questions were philosophical and led to nothing – “only panic and even more confusion”. This anecdote highlights how, when career guidance is provided, the quality and approach matters. A traditional approach would typically include an interest/personality trait/aptitude test, under the control of an external expert, that results in an individual being put in a rather narrow box. By contrast, a skills-based approach would allow individuals to build competences in developing self-awareness, in understanding the world around them, and in appreciating the value of learning and how to learn. Such an approach would empower the person to make their own decisions and take action.

Policy Implication 4: The need for more experiential learning opportunities

Experiential learning opportunities. Learning through experiences such as holiday work experience, company visits, mock interviews, student companies, community learning, volunteering, projects, internships, apprenticeships, traineeships, or job shadowing, etc., has a different quality for career learning than information provision. However, work experience can only be of benefit if quality is ensured.²⁶ In addition, interest develops only through experience. What I do not know, I cannot like. More experiential learning is required to help young people develop interests which traditional schooling is failing to achieve. Consequently, connecting non-formal learning outside school with in-school career learning is pivotal for the development of career management skills.

26 See the European Quality Framework for Traineeships: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1045&langId=en> and the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships [EUR-Lex - 32018H0502\(01\) - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

Policy Implication 5: Build strong partnerships with the world of work

Strong partnerships with the world of work. Close cooperation with employment services, companies, and social partners is required for quality career guidance. Investing in time to work with and for young people is an investment in future skilled staff for companies and additionally supports career readiness of young people. Policymakers need to incentivise employer participation in career guidance activities and raise awareness that companies' involvement is an investment, not cost. Existing partnerships, often set up for work-based learning purposes, can be used to incorporate career guidance aspects. The same holds true for cooperation with local employment offices; several countries are successfully implementing labour market information sessions for pupils and students with the support of advisors from the Public Employment Services (PES).

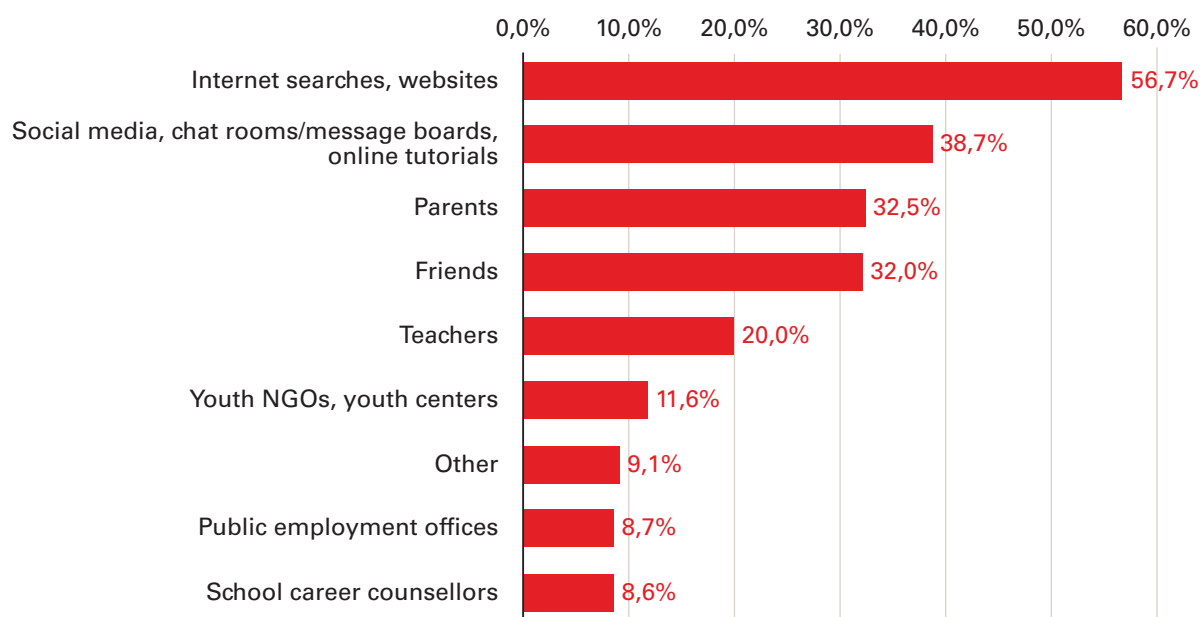


Photo credit: @UNICEF/Ukraine/Anna Markel

Section 4. Choosing a profession: How young people look for information and support

Figure 3 Current sources of information and support

(Regional) Where do you seek information and support to help you get your desired profession? (% of respondents)



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 5,988. Multiple selection possible.

We asked young people where they go to find information and support when choosing a profession. Understanding how young people currently seek out information, in contrast to simply knowing where and how information is provided, enables us to understand if the career guidance information on offer is reaching its target audience.

The results are insightful, though perhaps not surprising: there has been a significant shift in preferences, moving away from more formal sources of information and support, toward unstructured self-help in the online space. This presents both challenges and opportunities. Online sources can vary in quality, becoming outdated quickly, and can misguide youth. However, when based on evidence and

research, and designed well in consultation with young people, online sources can increase the access and scale of career guidance offers. Parents/guardians, along with teachers and peers, remain key sources of information for young people, and could play a role in guiding youth toward high-quality career information.

In the U-Report polls, more than half of respondents chose “Internet searches, websites” (56.7 per cent) and slightly fewer chose “Social media, chat rooms/message boards, online tutorials” (38.7 per cent) as their main sources of information when choosing a profession. In the middle are sources of information and support in a young person’s immediate familial or social circles: “Parents” (32.5 per cent), “Friends” (32.0 per cent), and

“Teachers” (20.0 per cent). In last place are institutions: “Youth NGOs, youth centers” (11.6 per cent), “Public employment offices” (8.7 per cent) and “School career counselors” (8.6 per cent). No major gender differences were found in relation to sources of information and support.

Focus groups re-emphasised and discussed young people’s preference for online sources of career information. The internet was seen as a key source for finding out new trends in work and up-to-date information about market demands. Participants mentioned ease and speed as advantages to using the internet to find information. Websites such as LinkedIn and job vacancy sites, such as hh.uz in **Uzbekistan** were named in particular as sources of career information and help in job searches. In **Romania**, participants said that individuals tend to be more sincere in a digital setting than when speaking with someone. The internet was also valuable for people with disabilities to access trainings. However, participants also mentioned how the internet does not necessarily provide them with all the information and guidance they need, and they would still seek support from experts.

This confirms a high demand for online services and is a clear call to upgrade online support through single-entry national online platforms. Such platforms have the potential to bring typically fragmented services from education, employment, youth, social inclusion, and health together. Online services also make low-threshold support possible, are independent of classic support center opening hours, and allow for self-help and peer-to-peer support. However, they must not be seen as a replacement for face-to-face guidance or

an opportunity to cut costs. This is because personal guidance is still the most effective form of support and cannot be replaced. Young people also stressed the importance of more personalised support.

Another key aspect is the purpose for which the internet and social media are used by young people. Given how fragmented and unstructured online professional guidance is in the countries covered, it is likely that young people go online to search for jobs, learn about what kinds of skills and experience employers seek by looking at social media, and watch videos about careers or employment-related topics. They also likely do self-assessment tests or exchange ideas about work and learning with peers online. Despite these activities being relevant for career learning, they cannot replace professional support and such online sources would need to be supported by professional guidance experts.

The fact that only 8.6 per cent of respondents seek information and support from school career counselors is alarming; it raises urgent concerns about, first, the lack of services, second, the guidance approach previously mentioned, and third, the related quality aspect of who is providing support. If teachers carry out guidance as untrained volunteers, this has an impact on service quality. If psychologists conduct some psychometric tests, the perception of young people is that they are getting assessed, not guided. This underscores the need to seek funding for career guidance; to have a full-time career guidance professional in each school, similar to the model followed in Armenia, as covered by the ETF CGC²⁷, as an investment and not a cost. ETF has developed an excellence model²⁸ for career

27 See ETF (2022): <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/document-attachments/career-development-support-system-review-armenia>

28 See ETF https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-12/ETF%20ENE%20CG%20excellence%20model_final.pdf

guidance that gives indications of what quality guidance would look like and therefore what it would cost. This research shows the value of high-quality career guidance for individuals and the return-on-investment for societies. It additionally indicates that young people are less likely to become NEETs, have shorter and smoother transitions to employment, earn higher salaries, and contribute to an overall reduced social security expenditure.

While using the internet to search for career information and support was the top choice across all U-Report countries polled, there are some variations on what the second most popular source was. In **Albania** (45.8 per cent), **Greece** (39.5 per cent), and **Kosovo*** (36.2 per cent) “Parents” were selected as the #2 choice, whereas in **Montenegro** (36.8 per cent), respondents selected “Friends”.

Participants in focus groups provided additional context to this split. In **Albania** and **Serbia**, participants spoke of the important role of family in Western Balkans culture in particular. They said that even though parents might not have all the information, they value the education and career choices that their children make and will try to support them. Parents were particularly helpful if they were already employed in a field that interested the young person. However, there are feelings of ambivalence – parents can help their children, but they also can hinder their freedom to choose a career on their own.

The high ranking of parents as sources of guidance shows the need to actively involve parents/guardians in career guidance, for two reasons. First, young people can benefit from their expertise as professionals and their work experience, which makes them easy partners for guidance. Second, parents/guardians should be supported to be better informed about labour market trends and skill needs in their countries, so they can provide

information beyond their own professional reality. Parents/guardians should be made aware of developments and opportunities together with their children to help overcome stereotypes related to gender and educational and career choices (e.g., agri-food is dirty and physically demanding work, hence not for women; or any university qualification is better than VET for your future income and career progression).

Teachers should be involved in the same way, to become partners in career education. This highlights the importance of a whole-school approach to guidance, where school management and subject teachers get basic guidance training and can therefore become part of career learning support (see the ETF guidance excellence model). Furthermore, alumni play a key role in guidance, as slightly older peers who have had their own experiences with transitioning out of education, therefore being a valuable source for career learning. The peer exchange between classmates is just as important, given that each person brings their own family experiences into the discussion. Working with groups, similar to personal guidance, is therefore of high value for any career learning approach and would show the importance given to peers by young people as per this research.

Many focus groups further mentioned how PES in their areas were either not active or not promoted. In **North Macedonia** and **Uzbekistan**, many participants did not have the opportunity to visit a public employment office, and some explained that this was because many people are not socialised to use employment services offered by the government. This mirrors again the narrow approach to career education and guidance practiced in the 11 countries. PES and education providers should further foster cooperation to offer insights into labour market trends, (future) skill needs,

and opportunities. They should connect with employers and promote self-employment and start-ups, thereby helping to foster learning opportunities that school environments cannot offer. This way, PES could change their image with the youth, who traditionally associate it with unemployed and “failed” people. Instead PES could position itself as a modern partner in managing lifelong transitions. PES usually already have online platforms that could be the starting point for single-entry online services to cater to the needs of young people. Unfortunately, most countries included in the research face significant staffing challenges, i.e. a high caseload per PES counselor, limiting

the capacity to cater to groups other than the unemployed. Hence, there is a need to expand partnerships with other actors, such as NGOs, including youth organisations.

Another issue that was less addressed in focus groups (but is by no means less important) is the support for securing scholarships and mentorships, particularly by those with less favorable economic family backgrounds, who would otherwise have trouble accessing internship or mobility opportunities. Career guidance needs to provide both this type of information and networking services to facilitate access to support.

Policy Implication 6: Provide quality online and digital guidance services

Quality online and digital guidance services. Young people express a strong preference for online resources for guidance. Setting up structured quality online and digital guidance services, with integrated personal guidance support, is therefore highly essential to reach young people. The use of ICT for career guidance is also *the* opportunity to bring together fragmented services across education, employment, youth, and social inclusion sectors. Websites of Public Employment Services (PES), available in almost all countries, could be the starting point for single-entry online services to cater to the needs of young people. The use of social media is especially beneficial for reaching out to young NEETs.

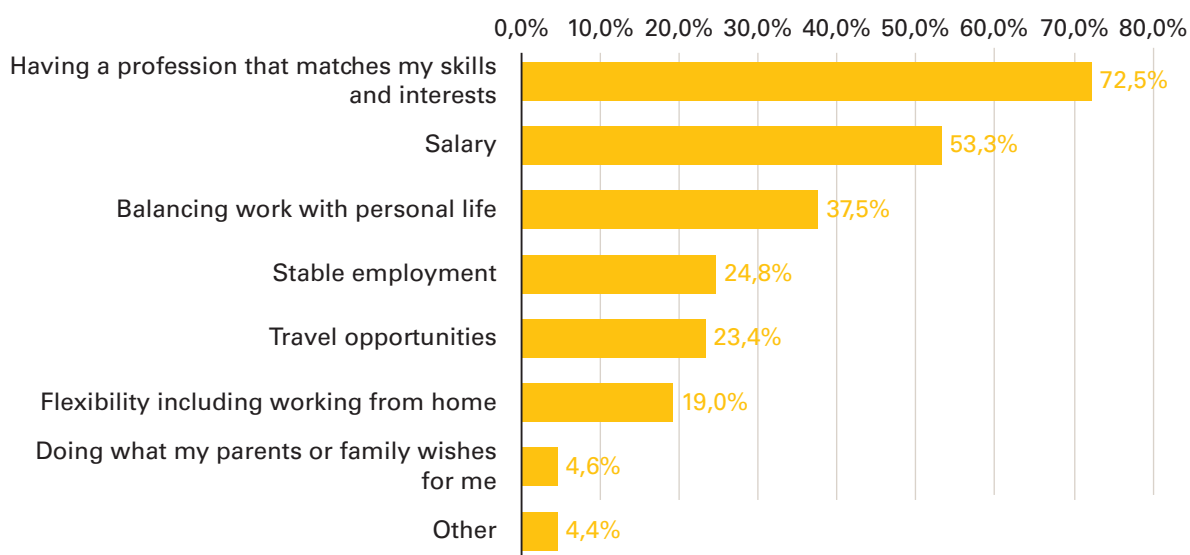


Photo credit: @European Training Foundation

Section 5. My future profession: What matters most to young people

Figure 4 Factors that matter most to young people in a future profession

(Regional) When you imagine yourself in a future profession, what matters most to you? (% of respondents)



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 6,191. Multiple selection possible.

Understanding the values and expectations that underlie young people’s decisions about careers help us design programs and services that are better tailored to their needs and preferences for support. Overwhelmingly, young people told us that having a profession that matches their skills and interests is the most important factor when thinking about their future profession. To a large extent, this is connected to young people’s concern about skills mismatch and working conditions that do not allow them to align their skills, interests, and occupation. Ensuring access to decent work must therefore remain a key priority for governments. Without proper guidance and information, young people’s preferences may not be in line with the reality of labour market conditions, and they will be unable to make informed decisions. With the right guidance, in consideration of a young

person’s understanding of their own skills and interests, career guidance services can help young people make a smooth transition to their future learning and working life.

In the U-Report polls, a vast majority of respondents (72.5 per cent) said “Having a profession that matches my skills and interests” is what matters most to them in a future profession. This is followed by “Salary” (53.3 per cent), then “Balancing work with personal life” (37.5 per cent). Around one-in-five respondents chose “Stable employment” (24.8 per cent) and “Travel opportunities” (23.4 per cent). Among the lowest ranked options is “Doing what my parents or family wishes for me” (4.6 per cent).

These results were mainly consistent across the region, with the exception of **Kyrgyzstan**, where “Travel opportunities” (51.6 per cent)

was the #3 choice, instead of “Balancing work with personal life”. When disaggregating by gender for the region, work/life balance was more important for females (41.0 per cent) than males (32.0 per cent).

The polls’ overall results are extremely interesting, mirroring the paradigm shift in young people’s expectations; there is a move away from job stability and income toward a profession matching their skills and interests. Numerous studies confirm this significant change in work and career expectations and choices among the younger generation, calling for wise adaptation of workplace practices and career development opportunities. Skills mismatch remains a significant challenge in the countries observed in this study, with young workers being particularly exposed to risk of working in jobs below their level of education / qualifications²⁹. Prolonged mismatched employment takes a huge toll on one’s competences, career, and income prospects.

Participants in focus groups overwhelmingly agreed: the most important factor when considering their future career is the alignment of skills and interests with the job. They said that the current generation wants to “follow their passions” in their career. Participants said that when your skills and interests match your job, it lets you “love your job” and it feels like you are “following your dreams”. Mental health was linked to these concepts – considering how much time a person spends on their occupation, it was important to do something that was enjoyable and suited to their interests. Others felt that this was the key to being successful in one’s job; whereas if you lacked interest in what you were doing,

you would be unlikely to produce high-quality work. This shows a level of maturity from respondents and focus group participants.

While it is true that matching skills and interests with a job is pivotal, focus group participants recognised that salary is still an important factor when choosing a future profession. Several participants stated that many professions in their country were low-paid, therefore emphasising salary as a crucial consideration. Salary and stable employment were seen as interconnected, as they both provide the means to meet basic needs.

In conclusion, the rather lower score of ‘stable employment’ in the U-Report poll certainly also reflects improvements in the labour markets. People are no longer waiting for a job in public administration; instead, they have other opportunities including through platform work³⁰. Salary is not the most important factor, as it is not necessary to accept any job with the sole purpose of earning a living and ensuring one’s livelihood.

Despite work-life balance coming in third, focus group participants in **Albania** saw travel opportunities as a more favorable choice than balancing work with personal life. Traveling as part of work would allow one to explore the world and have new experiences. This also reflects the impact of spending lots of time on social media, where the picture of the good work life is drawn as equal to following one’s passion, traveling, working remotely with a laptop on a beach, being creative, and not following a standard 9-to-5 job. In **Serbia**, flexibility, including the ability to work from home, was more popular than work-life balance. Overall, the fact that flexibility was

29 See ETF (2022) [Skills mismatch measurement in ETF partner countries | ETF \(europa.eu\)](https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/embracing-digital-age)

30 See ETF (2022): <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/embracing-digital-age> and ETF (2021): <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/future-work-new-forms-employment-eastern-partnership>

ranking rather low is an interesting factor. Doing something of real interest which matches one's skills appears to be more important and might lead to compromising on flexibility and other expectations of work life.

Parents occupy an ambivalent role in the lives of young people in terms of career choices, as reported by participants. On the one hand, some participants said that young people lacked the information or the maturity to make these decisions on their own. Most parents want the best for their children, and young people appreciate their help. However,

sometimes parents add unwelcome pressure on young people. Participants said that sometimes parents reflect their own dreams on their children, as opposed to what their children want for themselves. The best-case scenario, focus group participants said, is when parents are able to help steer young people in the right direction while still giving them enough space to choose what they want. This ambivalent relation to parents in career learning stresses the need for structured career education programs that systematically involve parents/guardians, as mentioned earlier.

Policy Implication 7: Focus on person-centered guidance

Person-centered guidance. Young people are very concerned about skills mismatch and working conditions that do not allow them to align their skills, interests, and occupation. Understanding that online self-learning is insufficient, they seek personal guidance to avoid such situations but do not find such support, ending up in the hands of untrained parents/guardians and peers. Ways to offer low-threshold personal support need to be found by combining online social media and physical outreach activities and coordinated interservice offers e.g., through one-stop shops. This requires the beforementioned close cooperation and coordination of stakeholders.



Photo credit: @UNICEF/Ukraine/Oleksandr Maiorov

Section 6. Expectations about future professions and education

While young people are paying more attention to their interests and passions when selecting a career, the range of careers that they are considering appears to be limited. We asked young people what type of profession they expect to have at 35, and most respondents mentioned professional careers, specifically traditional careers such as teachers, doctors, or nurses. This is paired with a somewhat unrealistic expectation of educational aspirations, with many young people in our consultation aiming for Masters and PhDs.

Such limited scope might indicate a lack of accessible guidance about the variety of careers available: a young person cannot aspire to a career that they do not know of. This is where high-quality career guidance can play a pivotal role, exposing young people to different types of professions, broadening their perspectives toward future-oriented work, such as in ICT or green industries. Career guidance can also open up young people to the possibility of VET as a viable education pathway, which may in some cases provide more opportunities in terms of meeting labour market needs, skills, wages, and job satisfaction.

6.1. Future profession

Figure 5 Expected future professions

Imagine you are 35 years old. In one word, what profession do you expect to have? by ISCO-08 Major Groups (% of respondents)



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 4,450. Short answer text field.

Given the highly individualised nature of the question, respondents were only asked about their future profession as part of the U-Report polls, and not in focus groups. When thinking about future careers, U-Report polls asked young people what profession they expect to have at 35, using an open text field. The responses were then categorised into major occupational groups, using the International Labour Organization (ILO) International Standard Classification of Occupations, 2008 (ISCO-08).^{31, 32}

Among respondents, the most popular occupations are classified as “Professionals” (64.1 per cent). According to the ILO: “Professionals increase the existing stock of knowledge, apply scientific or artistic concepts and theories, teach about the foregoing in a systematic manner, or engage in any combination of these three activities.”³³ Examples of professional jobs that were given by respondents included accountant, doctor, teacher, and architect. These occupation groups generally require university-level education.

In second place was “Managers” (20.3 per cent), who “plan, direct, coordinate, and evaluate the overall activities of enterprises, governments, and other organisations, or of organisational units within them, and formulate and review their policies, laws, rules

and regulations.”³⁴ Respondents submitted managerial professions including creative director, diplomat, human resources manager, and owner of a travel agency.

Together, professionals and managers account for over 80 per cent of all jobs identified. Indeed, when considering the top five most popular jobs,³⁵ in first place are “Teaching professions” (13.5 per cent). This includes primary, secondary, and university/higher education teachers/professors, as well as related jobs such as language teachers. Specific examples submitted by respondents included chemistry professor, music instructor, or English teacher.

Just over one-in-ten respondents submitted a profession classified as a “Health professional” (10.4 per cent). This category includes medical doctors (both generalist and specialist), as well as nurses. Specific examples submitted by respondents included cardiologist, neurologist, and pediatric nurse.

“Managing directors and chief executives” came in third place (8.3 per cent). ISCO-08 does not provide specific examples of jobs in this group, but does define some of the tasks to include “planning, directing, and coordinating the general functioning of an enterprise or organisation”, regardless of sector.³⁶ Specific examples submitted by respondents includes CEO, entrepreneur, business owner, and sports club director.

31 <https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/docs/resol08.pdf>

32 Figure 5 uses categories from the ISCO Major Groups, which are occupations grouped by skill level, “defined as a function of the complexity and range of tasks and duties to be performed in an occupation.” <https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/docs/annex1.pdf>

33 <https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/docs/groupdefn08.pdf>

34 Ibid.

35 Figure 6 uses categories from the ISCO Sub-Major Groups, which are jobs grouped primarily by aspects of skill specialisation. Skill specialisation is comprised of the field of knowledge required, the tools and machinery used, the materials worked on or with, and the kinds of goods and services produced. <https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/docs/annex1.pdf>

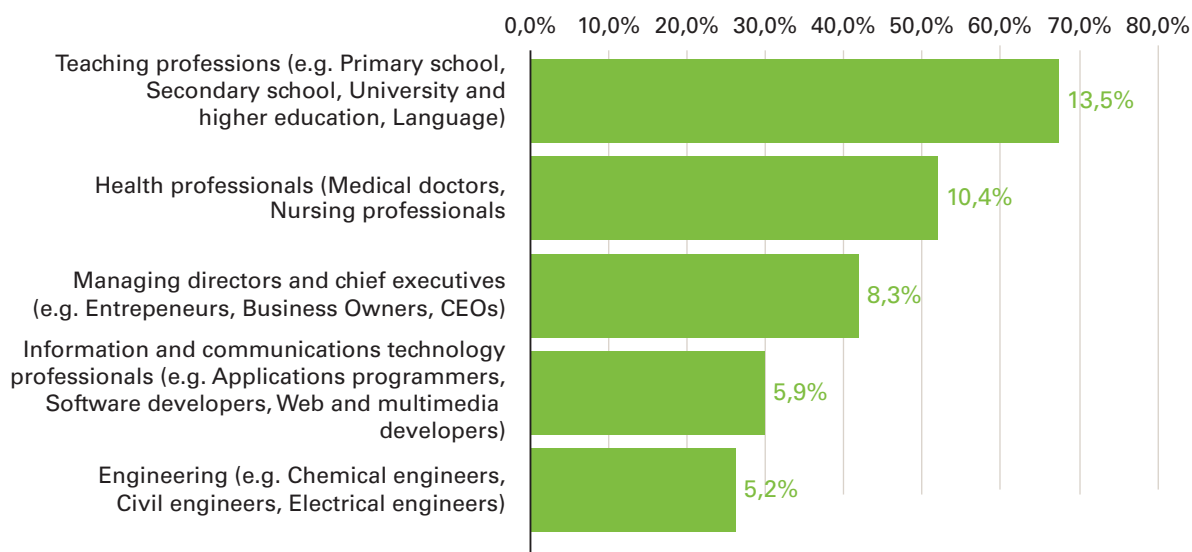
36 Ibid.

In fourth and last place, respectively, are “Information and communications technology professional” (5.9 per cent) and “Engineering” (5.2 per cent). Examples of ICT professions

submitted by respondents included computer programmer, full stack web developer, and IT specialists. Examples of engineers included civil engineer and water resource engineer.

Figure 6 Expected future professions: By job

Imagine you are 35 years old. In one word, what profession do you expect to have? Top 5 jobs by ISCO-08 Sub-Major Groups (% of respondents)



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 4,450. Short answer text field.

These results are striking and highly worrying – in line with a recent OECD study on career aspirations³⁷ – for two key reasons. First, the scope of careers is very limited on traditional professions. This mirrors how little is done through career guidance to widen the scope of options for young people. It also shows how dominant parental influence is, proposing pathways to well-established traditional jobs that require higher education qualifications.

respectively, do we have “Information and communications technology professional” (5.9 per cent) and “Engineering” (5.2 per cent). This provides a direct mandate to create experiential career learning opportunities in fields of relevance to future green and digital economies. OECD data show that young people struggle to visualise and plan their futures, and the lack of career learning opportunities exacerbates this bottleneck.

Second, there is very little attention given to opportunities emerging within the digital and green transitions, most probably due to limited awareness regarding the impact of twin transitions on occupations, skills, and competences. Only in fourth and last place,

Schools are unable to offer such experience through the current education system; curricular and extra-curricular integrated life skills and career education and career guidance learning activities are necessary. There are already highly inspirational practices to learn

37 See OECD: <https://www.oecd.org/education/dream-jobs-teenagers-career-aspirations-and-the-future-of-work.htm>

from around the globe.³⁸ However, as the data shows, while there is a general trend toward an increase in the educational attainment level of the population, with notable increases in secondary and tertiary graduates, educational attainment and learning do not necessarily correlate; despite the time spent on learning, the quality of the learning that takes place is limited both in relation to skills and relevance (mismatch).³⁹

Interestingly enough, and in line with the research results here, one of the main challenges that remains is tackling underachievement in key competences. Young people therefore have good reason to request life skills and career management skills learning from education providers.



Photo credit: @UNICEF/Serbia/Shubuckl

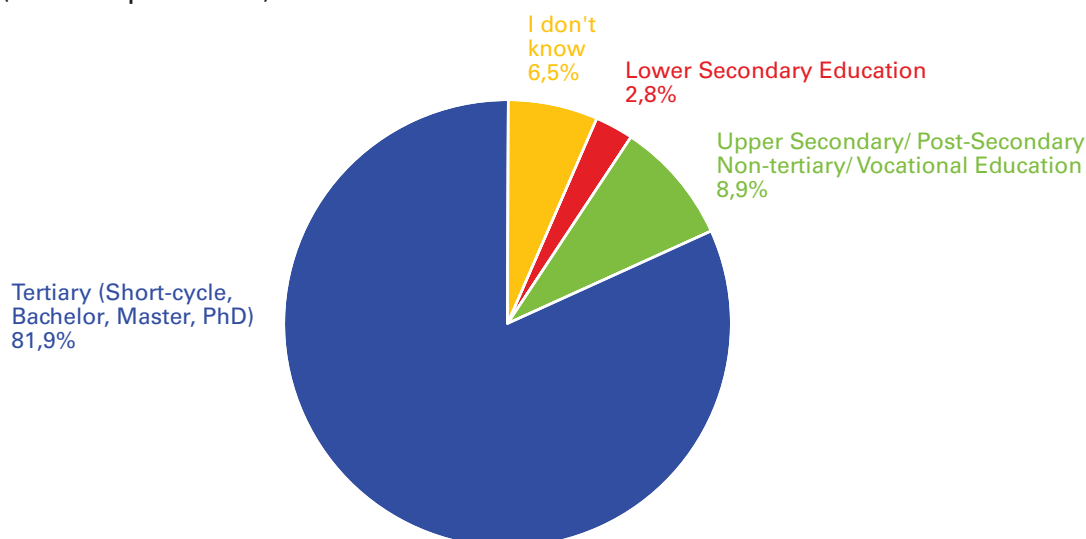
38 See <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/career-guidance>, <https://euroguidance.eu/>, and <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/inventory-lifelong-guidance-systems-and-practices>

39 See ETF (2022): <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/key-indicators-education-skills-and-employment-2022>

6.2. Aspired level of education

Figure 7 Desired level of education

What is the highest level of education you would like to complete?
(% of respondents)



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 4,683. Only one choice possible.

U-Report asked young people in the region about the highest level of education they would like to complete. The responses were then categorised into UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels, and grouped into four levels. Only 2.8 per cent of respondents stated that they would like to attain Lower Secondary Education⁴⁰, while 8.9 per cent said that they would like

to complete either Upper Secondary⁴¹, Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary, or Vocational Education⁴². A vast majority, over eight-in-ten respondents, said that they aim to complete some level of tertiary education (81.9 per cent), meaning Short-Cycle Tertiary Education⁴³, Bachelor's⁴⁴, Master's⁴⁵, Doctoral⁴⁶, or their equivalents.

40 Corresponding to UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011 levels. ISCED-2, or second stage of basic education. <https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>

41 ISCED-3, or end of full-time compulsory education, typically after 9 years. Ibid.

42 ISCED-4, or programs that straddle boundary between upper-secondary and post-secondary education. Is typically oriented toward general education, pre-vocational or pre-technical education, or vocational or technical education. Considering its content, it cannot be regarded as tertiary programmes. Ibid.

43 ISCED-5, or programs that are designed to provide participants with professional knowledge, skills, and competencies, and may also provide a pathway to other tertiary programmes. Ibid.

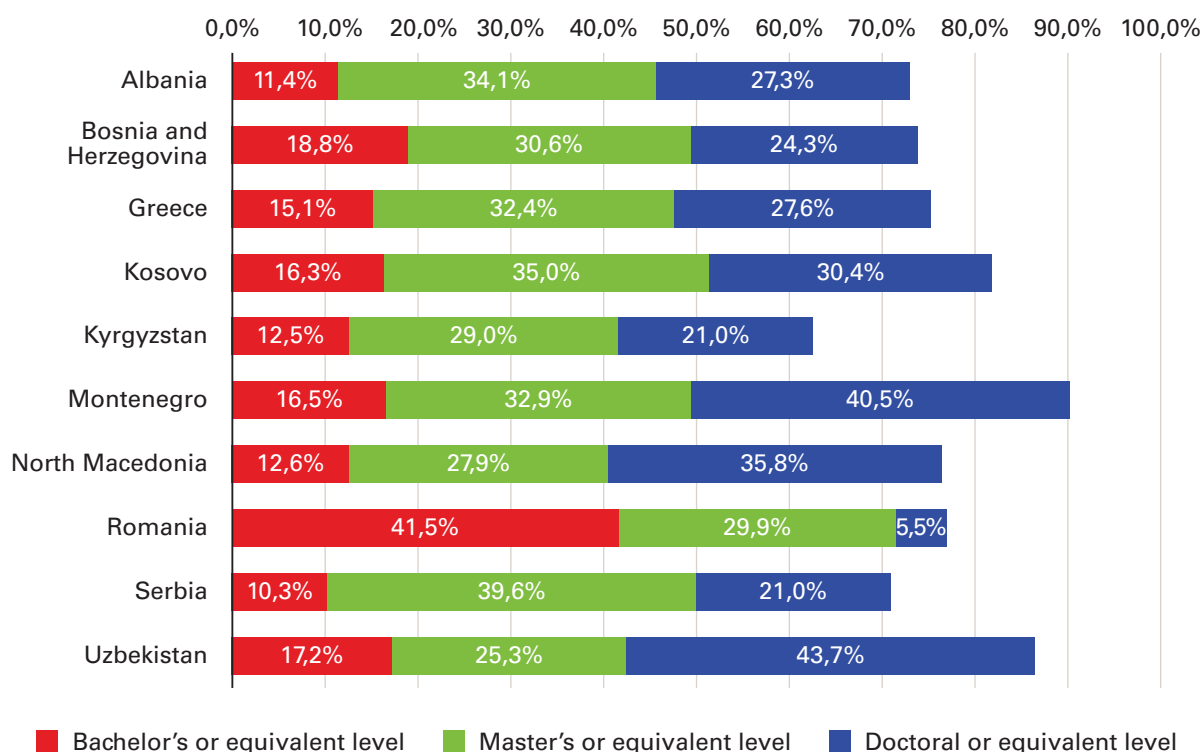
44 ISCED-6. Ibid.

45 ISCED-7. Ibid.

46 ISCED-8. Ibid.

Figure 8 Desired level of education (university degree only)

What is the highest level of education you would like to complete? - University degree (% of respondents)



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 4,683. Only one choice possible.

While it is important to keep in mind that the methodology used in the consultation neither ensures representativeness (it is a self-administered poll) nor allows for generalisations that would apply to the entire adolescent population, the results nevertheless show extremely high expectations regarding educational attainment among the respondents. This may be influenced by the high proportion of overall U-Report respondents (see *Introduction*) whose parents have a university education (41.3 per cent).

In this respect, focus group participants mentioned that young people face high expectations from their families and societies. Hence, those education aspirations might, to a large extent mirror the parental/family, and therefore societal, expectations to aim for the highest possible education.

However, these expectations are very problematic, as mentioned before, because they do not necessarily reflect labour market or skill needs. Additionally, they do not recognise opportunities in terms of wages, careers, and job satisfaction offered by careers based on, for instance, VET, which often has a negative reputation as a place for low achievers. While this requires broader reforms related to the quality and permeability of VET to increase its appeal, career guidance can contribute to both making VET attractive, based on evidence. Tracer studies, capturing the pathways of alumni, can provide such evidence and can be a very useful tool to feed into guidance work. The same is true for other sources of evidence, such as labour force surveys and labour market statistics. This again reflects the need for a systematic approach to guidance, because schools cannot do it all.

6.3. Matching education aspirations to future professions

When comparing aspired education with the desired future profession level, we can see whether the expected level of education matches the career aspirations of the young people surveyed. Using the ISCO-08 mapping

of Major Groups and Skill Level and the ISCED Education groups, we can see the minimum education and training requirements for various types of occupations.

Table 1: Major groups of occupations, skill level, and minimum education requirements

ISCO-08 Major groups	Skill Level	ISCED groups
1 Managers	3 + 4 ⁴⁷	Level 5: Short-cycle tertiary education Level 6: Bachelor's or equivalent
2 Professionals	4	Level 6: Bachelor's or equivalent
3 Technicians and associate professionals	3	Level 5: Short-cycle tertiary education
4 Clerical support workers	2	Level 4: Post-secondary non-tertiary education Level 3: Upper secondary education Level 2: Lower secondary education
5 Service and sales workers		
6 Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers		
7 Craft and related trades workers		
8 Plant and machine operators, and assemblers	1	Level 1: Primary education
9 Elementary occupations		
0 Armed forces occupations	1 + 4 ⁴⁸	Level 1: Primary education Level 6: Bachelor's or equivalent

Tabled based on "Mapping of ISCO-08 major groups to skill levels" and "Mapping of the four ISCO-08 skill levels to ISCED-97 levels of education" in <https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/docs/annex1.pdf>

By analysing how young people responded across the region, we can see the proportion of U-Reporters who accurately selected an aspired level of education that matches their wishes for a future career. In the occupation categories of "Managers", "Professionals", "Technicians and associate professionals",

and "Armed Forces"⁴⁹, a vast majority of respondents selected a type of "Tertiary" education, which generally aligns with the appropriate ISCED education level for those groups. These are highlighted in the charts below in green.

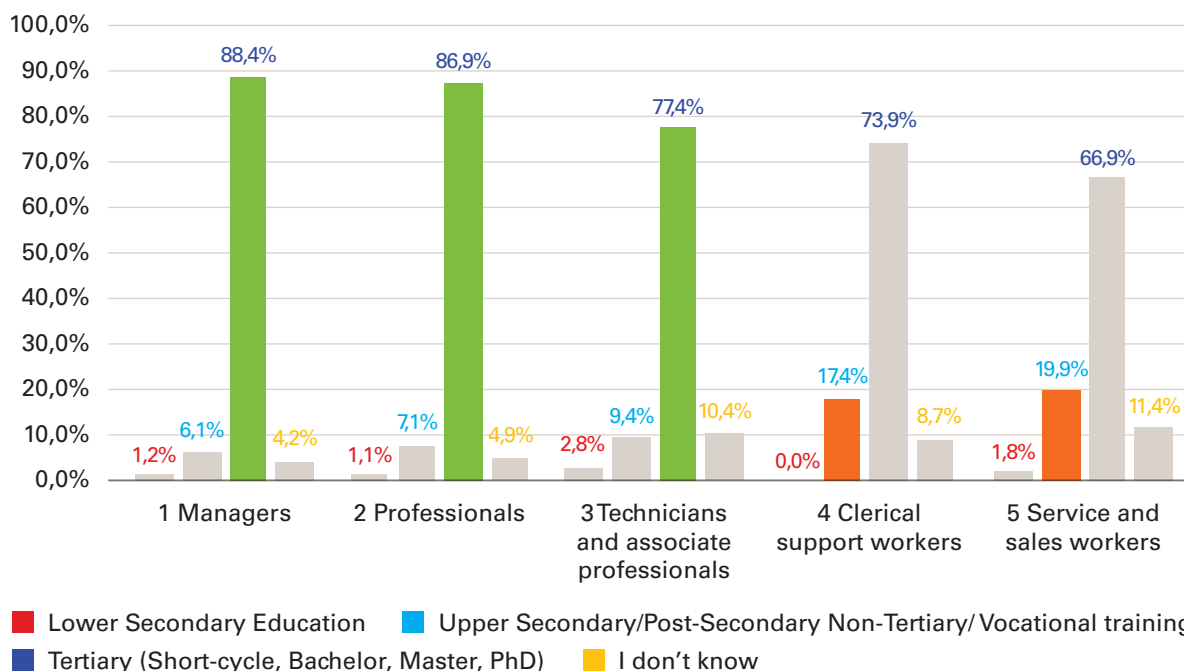
47 Within Major group 1 (Managers), occupations in Sub-major group 14, Hospitality, retail and service managers are at Skill Level 3. All other occupations in Major group 1 are at Skill Level 4. <https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/docs/annex1.pdf>

48 Within Major group 0, Military occupations, occupations in Sub-major group 01, Military officers are at Skill Level 4. All other occupations in Major group 0 are at Skill Level 1. Ibid.

49 82,0% respondents who selected an armed forces occupation identified a position that would fit under Skill Level 4.

Figure 9 Desired level of education, by occupation

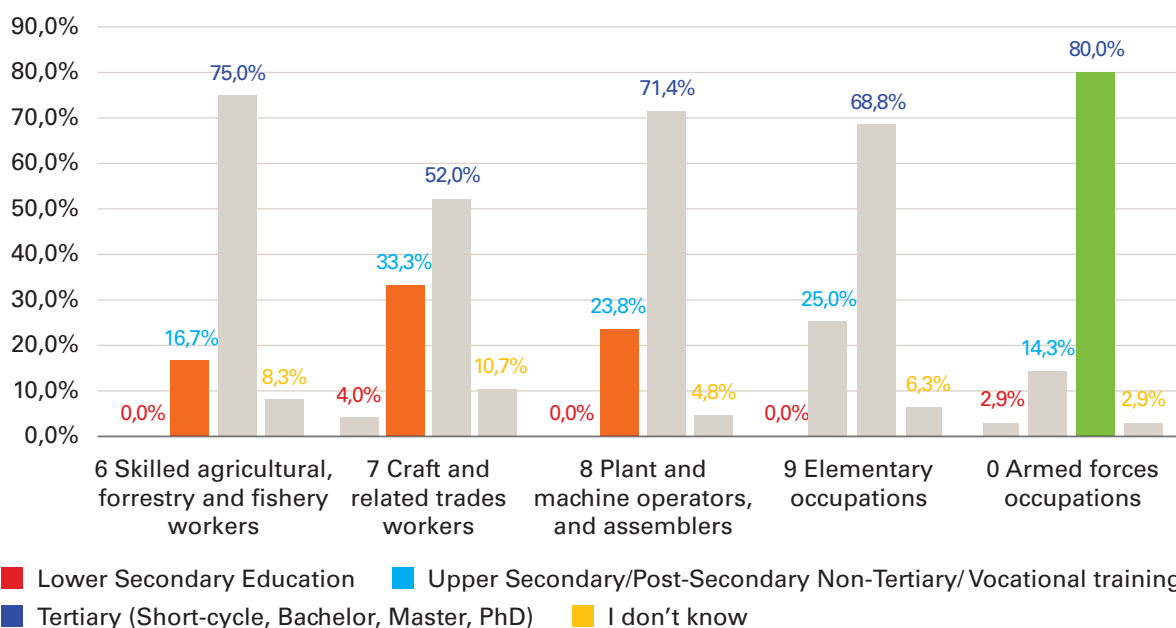
**What is the highest level of education you would like to complete?
By ISCO-08 Major Groups 1-5 (% of respondents)**



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 3,786. Only one choice possible.

Figure 10 Desired level of education, by occupation (cont.)

**What is the highest level of education you would like to complete?
By ISCO-08 Major Groups 6-0 (% of respondents)**



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 3,786. Only one choice possible.

However, for the occupation groups “Clerical support workers”, “Service and sales workers”, “Skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers”, “Craft and related trades workers”, and “Plan and machine operators, and assemblers”, only one-sixth to one-quarter of respondents chose an education level that fits with correct skill level, Skill Level 2 (Lower or Upper Secondary, or Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education). Instead, most respondents indicated that they would like to reach a “Tertiary” education, meaning that they would be *overeducated* for the careers that they aspired to.

This is especially the case for “Elementary occupations”, which include low skilled jobs, for which 68.8 per cent of respondents who said they wanted to have these jobs, also felt they should aim for a “Tertiary” education. However, this group of respondents, who submitted jobs that are categorised as “Elementary occupations” (see *Figure 5*), constitute a very small percentage of the overall respondents (0.4 per cent).

It goes without saying that this could be prevented through a school curriculum that helps students understand the relationship between education levels, occupations, and job prospects. This is an important role of guidance services in school, particularly in lower and upper secondary education.

Furthermore, career guidance should not be seen as a tool to steer the population into specific directions. Career guidance has to

remain a neutral, evidence-based service aimed at empowering people to make the best decision for themselves based on awareness of and knowledge about their environment and the competence to take action.

There is, however, another side to the role of guidance in relation to the research results presented here. Recent graduates, including those from higher education, are at risk of becoming NEETs in the countries covered by this report.⁵⁰ Young people face more challenges than adults when entering the labour market owing to their lack of work experience and the mismatch between the skills they have to offer and those required by employers. This, combined with labour market and economic disruptions and the sluggish post-pandemic recovery, can pose a risk to young people. During their transition from school to the labour market, young people often gain practical experience by accepting jobs requiring a lower level of skills, often remaining trapped in low-skilled jobs. Experiential learning opportunities and work-based learning opportunities during education periods would make such transitions easier.

Coupled with low labour mobility, this leads to a higher level of observed over-qualification. ETF data shows that young tertiary graduates had a higher probability of being over-skilled in all countries, holding jobs requiring qualifications lower than their formal levels of education. This type of mismatch could exceed 40 per cent in Albania, Kosovo*, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Serbia.⁵¹

50 See ETF (2022): <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/key-indicators-education-skills-and-employment-2022>

51 See https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-08/Skills%20Mismatch%20Measurement%20final%20report_EN.pdf and <https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-11/KIESE%202022%20Final.pdf>

Policy Implication 8: Aim to enlarge the scope of career aspirations through gender transformative career guidance

Gender transformative career guidance and enlarged scope of career aspirations. Quality career guidance should be neutral, based on evidence and facts. It should expose all young people from early in life onwards to all forms of work life to intentionally go beyond the biased understanding of employment opportunities, such as jobs or sectors ‘only for females’ or ‘only for males’. This allows everyone to gain experience and develop interests in a gender-neutral manner. This study, in line with other research, highlighted a very limited scope of career guidance for young people. Experiential learning and in-classroom career learning that introduces everyone to all forms of work life contributes to broadening the scope of career aspirations. Strong involvement by parents/guardians in career learning activities would further support the youth to learn from adult work life experience; it also empowers parents/guardians in their support role, and reduces gender stereotypes in their advice, which is very influential.

Policy Implication 9: Provide labour market and skills intelligence

Labour market and skills intelligence. Guidance needs to be evidence-based, which is why the existence and translation of labour market and skills intelligence for the use of different target groups, from policymakers to guidance practitioners, young people or parents/guardians, is essential. Tracer studies are of particular importance, because they provide information with local relevance that inform daily guidance work. If repeated regularly and consistently in terms of content, tracer studies of graduate cohorts also help evaluate medium- to long-term impact of education programs, improve the education and training content and study conditions, and can even help improve education, training, and employment policies. The same is true for other tools for investigating labour demand – either more traditional or digital. Countries should aim to consolidate labour market and skills information systems with regular updates reflecting highly dynamic economies, employment opportunities, and skills requirements.

Section 7. Focus on Ukraine and the impact of war on learning and working

Even within the context of conflict and war, young people still have aspirations for their future learning and working lives, despite the increased complexity of their situations. We asked young Ukrainians, both those who have left the country, and those who are still in the country, about how Russia’s war on Ukraine has impacted their education and career prospects and choices.

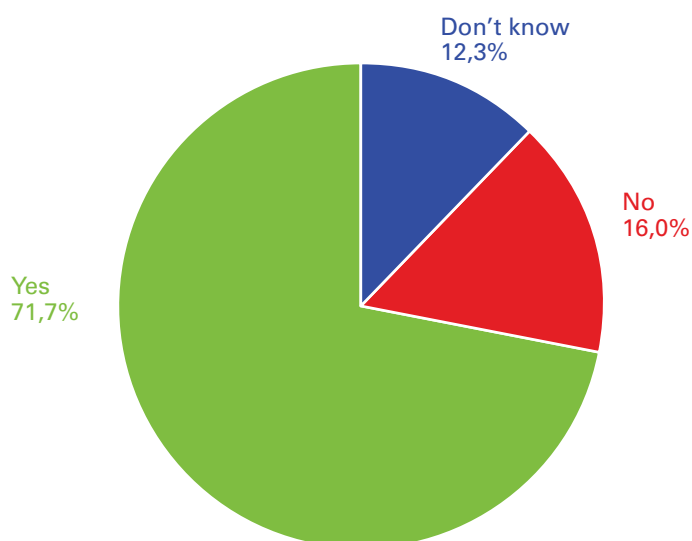
While several findings related to Ukraine are already reflected in the sections above, this

part focuses on the impact of war on Ukrainian adolescents and young people.

Young people from Ukraine, both those who are currently still residing in the country, and those who are abroad, were consulted about their specific needs relating to career guidance. This was done with a separate U-Report poll, which had a few additional Ukraine-specific questions, and two online focus group discussions.

Figure 11 Personal vision after the escalation of the Russian war on Ukraine

(Ukraine & U-Report Europe) Did your personal vision for learning & working change, after the escalation of the war? (% of respondents)



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 2,703. Only one choice possible.

Ukrainian respondents were asked if their personal vision for learning and working changed after the escalation of the war in February 2022. 71.7 per cent of respondents said “Yes”, while 16.0 per cent said “No”, and 12.3 per cent said “Don’t know”. Participants in the focus groups said that it was to be expected that the choice of career or learning

paths would be affected by the war. For this reason, the need for career guidance became even more evident.

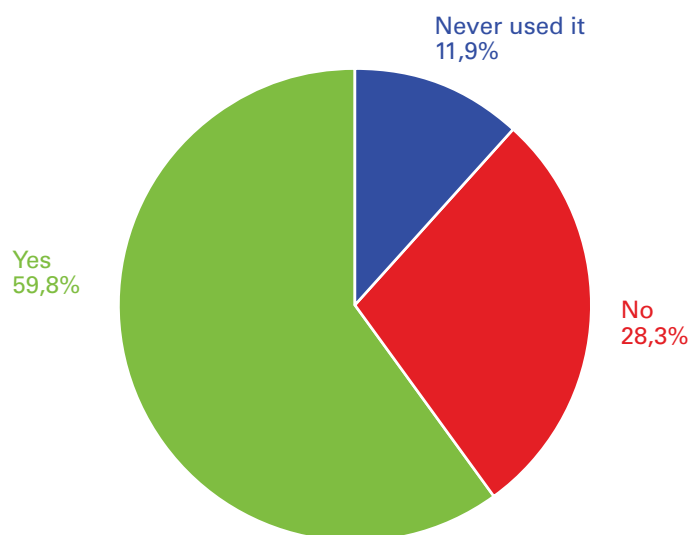
For those who fled abroad, a majority (59.8 per cent) said that they still use the career guidance sources that they used in Ukraine, while 28.3 per cent said that they did not, and 11.9 per

cent said that they had never used career guidance sources. Focus group participants explained that given that they were now abroad, they relied on the Internet even more heavily for career guidance support than before. Examples of websites given include LinkedIn, Djinni, and a subscription to a DOU platform, which is a Ukrainian platform of software developers aimed to distribute news

and articles about information technologies⁵². Participants said that they primarily use these websites to look for job postings and not necessarily for other types of career guidance support, which again underscores the strong need for personalised, professional support by a guidance professional to give sense to online self-learning activities.

Figure 12 Use of career guidance sources from Ukraine after fleeing abroad

(Ukraine & U-Report Europe) If you fled abroad, do you still use the career guidance sources you used in Ukraine? (% of respondents)



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 462. Only one choice possible.

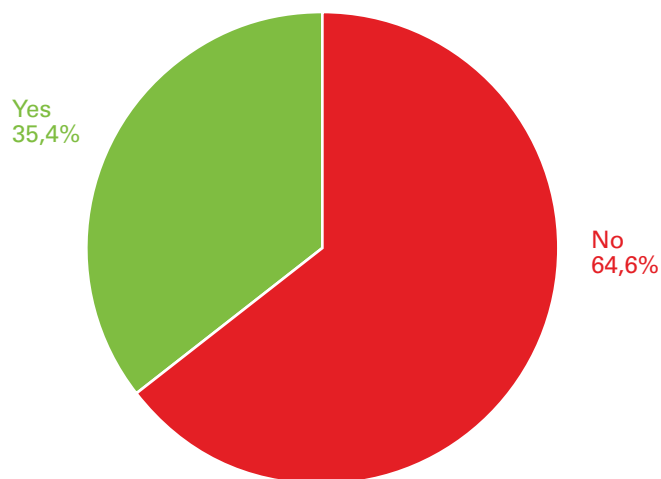
In contrast, nearly two-thirds of respondents who fled abroad (64.6 per cent) said that they do not use career guidance counseling or support in their host country. Focus group participants explained that Ukrainians living abroad primarily use Ukrainian information

channels. This may indicate that most Ukrainians living abroad do not intend to be away permanently, and that they continue to plan for a future education and career life back in Ukraine.

52 <https://dou.ua/>

Figure 13 Use of career guidance services in host country

(Ukraine & U-Report Europe) If you fled abroad, do you benefit from career guidance counseling in your host country? (% of respondents)



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 449. Only one choice possible.

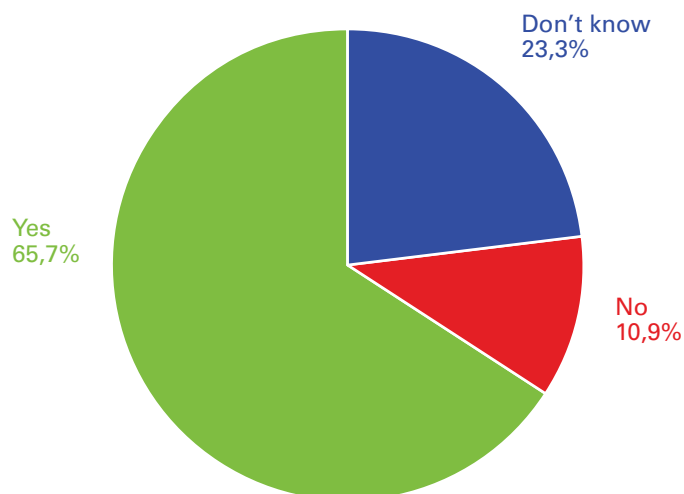
Looking ahead to a post-war period, all respondents (domestic and abroad) were asked if they were considering gaining skills or entering a profession that would support the reconstruction of Ukraine. A vast majority (65.7 per cent) said “Yes”, nearly a quarter (23.3 per cent) said “Don’t know”, and 10.9 per cent said “No”. In one of the focus groups, participants nearly unanimously associated a future career with social responsibility, due to the current situation in their country. They

wanted their work to benefit society, even if they did not have a clear idea of what kind of work that would be.

Some others were more skeptical, however. While many agreed that it would be good to have a profession that would help to rebuild the country, they said that many professions are not directly related to reconstruction, and might not be easily modified to serve the needs of reconstruction, in a strict sense of the word.

Figure 14 Preference for professions supporting the reconstruction of Ukraine

(Ukraine & U-Report Europe) Are you considering gaining skills or entering a profession that would support the reconstruction of Ukraine after the war? (% of respondents)



Source: U-Report polls, May-August 2023. Note: Number of respondents is 2,358. Choose only one.

Overall, the situation of young Ukrainians is more complex when compared to many other young people, either due to displacement, living abroad but still being connected to the Ukrainian education system through online schooling, or living in a war-affected country. It is therefore very reassuring that the Ukrainian government aims to further strengthen their online guidance services as per the recommendation of the ETF guidance system review.⁵³ This would both respond to the wish and need for more and better online services as per insight from this research and allow for the provision of service access to all the various young people. It will be important though to ensure online personal guidance as well.

64.6 per cent of respondents state that they do not benefit from career guidance in their host country, while 28.3 per cent also do not use guidance services in Ukraine, or have never used such services (11.9 per cent). This is a shockingly high number of young people unserved. Hence, this is a huge call to actively reach out to young Ukrainians in host countries and in Ukraine. The use of social media might be a strategic and meaningful way to do this, along with involving youth and social workers, and youth organisations, in the outreach and provision of information and career guidance.

53 See ETF (2022): <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/document-attachments/career-development-support-system-review-ukraine>

Policy Implication 10: Ensure quality online career guidance for Ukrainian youth, domestically and abroad

Ensure quality online career guidance. Those young people residing outside of Ukraine and those inside Ukraine, including displaced persons, express an increased need for career guidance. Offering online self-learning and self-help services is key, especially for those who fled, but better connections to online services of host countries of Ukrainians would also be important, as a large group of respondents stated that they do not benefit from career guidance in their host country. It goes without saying that ensuring integrated personal guidance online will be essential.

Policy Implication 11: Target young Ukrainians unserved by career guidance

Ensure outreach. There is a large unserved group of young Ukrainians, which is a call for reaching out actively to young Ukrainians in host countries and in Ukraine. The use of social media is recommended, as is involving youth and social workers and youth organisations in the outreach and provision of information and career guidance.



Photo credit: @UNICEF/Kyrgyzstan/Giacomo Pirozzi

CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

Countries need to build well-coordinated and sustainably funded career guidance systems that are responsive to the needs of individuals, especially young people, to be relevant, effective, and efficient. The EU should support the countries covered in this report and the whole neighborhood in this endeavor through its instruments, given that the scarcity of resources and capacity for building such a systemic approach are key bottlenecks. This would not only support achieving key priorities of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and 8 in particular), but would also be in line with the EU Council Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies (2008), which gives a direct mandate to the ETF to “Foster the development of lifelong guidance in third countries”. This is further reinforced through the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the reinforced Youth Guarantee, the renewed European Skills Agenda, and the Council recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and resilience. Career guidance systems should also ensure equitable access to high quality practical experiences, responding to the calls for better working conditions by young people and youth organisations through the campaign for quality internships and traineeships led by the European Youth Forum.⁵⁴

What young people wish for corresponds to changes in the labour markets and in societies. These changes call for individuals to be empowered through (CMS) through providing

important paradigm shift. Young people *can* and *want* to learn how to manage manifold transitions over their lifetime. Acquiring CMS means:

1. **learning about oneself**, not just identifying one’s interests, but learning “who am I”. It is about social and emotional skills, including the development of learning-to-learn skills. This is especially relevant for vulnerable groups like young NEETs, as it shows that individuals can learn to manage their life, learning, and career and also introduce change to their life and community.
2. **learning about the world of work**, not just about occupations, but developing an understanding of the labour market and its trends, developing a critical understanding of the economy and its impacts on the environment, on society and on oneself. An example is understanding how working in the informal economy or doing “platform work” may have an effect on oneself, one’s family, community and society; another example is learning about labour rights.
3. **learning about the world of learning and education**, not just courses and programs available, but creating an awareness of the need to engage in LLL (Lifelong Learning), and the positive effects for oneself and others; the opportunities and support available; and how learning can help achieve life goals and bring about wished change.

54 <https://www.youthforum.org/news/open-letter-commission-must-guarantee-legislation-on-quality-internships>

4. **learning of practical skills**, such as CV writing and interviewing skills.

Traditionally learning area four, addressing practical skills, has been the main focus of career guidance. Yet this needs to be changed, as it will not help a person deal with difficult transitions. A widening of the understanding of career guidance is necessary. A learning approach that focuses on the individual as a whole, one that takes into account the broader

context and is empowering, is required in order to offer services that are fit for purpose. Career guidance needs to build on the strengths of young people and enhance their career management skills including life skills.

Below is a summary of the key conclusions distributed throughout this report, as a way forward for policymakers, career guidance providers, and practitioners, as well as parents/guardians and young people:

Ensure access to career guidance for all

- *Within the education system.* To introduce learning programs to acquire career management skills, education decision makers should address, *inter alia*, overcrowded curricula that leave no space for new content, by moving from knowledge transfer towards learner-centred, interdisciplinary, competence-orientation in education.
- *Outside of education.* The large number of young people without access to career guidance calls for systematic outreach in close partnership with youth organisations, other NGOs and social partners, and municipal youth and social workers. Youth and social inclusion policies and strategies should provide adequate objectives and relevant funding for outreach outside of education to support reducing social and gender inequalities.

Ensure quality⁵⁵ career guidance

- *Quality standards for career guidance.* Standards for career guidance across education, employment, social inclusion, and youth sectors in a lifelong perspective can build the basis for initial and continuous education and training of practitioners. The standards also help validate prior learning of practitioners, provider accreditation, and quality assurance.
- *Career guidance as an investment, not a cost.* Budgeting for a full-time career guidance professional per school is a key investment in quality services that help reduce the number of dropouts, increasing educational attainment and academic achievement as well as facilitating smoother education to work transitions and even leading to better earnings and job satisfaction.
- *Strong partnerships with the world of work.* Close cooperation with employment services, companies, and social partners is required for quality career guidance. Policymakers need to incentivise employer participation in career guidance activities.

⁵⁵ The list here does not claim to define what quality means. Please refer to the ETF excellence tool for career guidance in VET, with application also for secondary and higher education, for details about quality guidance: https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-12/ETF%20ENE%20CG%20excellence%20model_final.pdf

- *Experiential learning opportunities.* What I do not know, I cannot like. Connecting non-formal learning outside school with in-school career learning is pivotal for the development of career management skills.
- *Gender transformative career guidance & enlarged scope of career aspirations.* Experiential learning and in-classroom career learning that introduces everyone to all forms of work life further contributes to broadening the scope of career aspirations and preventing a biased understanding of job opportunities (e.g., only for female or only for male). Parents/guardians are to be strongly involved in career learning activities.
- *Entrepreneurial learning and learning about labour rights.* Quality career guidance should include support related to entrepreneurial mindset development, to self-employment, and a link to start-up support. Also, offering learning opportunities about labour rights, preferably in close cooperation with trade unions and experts.
- *Labour market and skills intelligence.* Guidance needs to be evidence-based. Tracer studies are of particular importance, because they provide information with local relevance that inform daily guidance work.
- *Quality online and digital guidance services.* The use of ICT for career guidance offers the opportunity to bring together fragmented services across education, employment, youth, and social inclusion sectors. Websites of Public Employment Services (PES), available in almost all countries, could be the starting point for single-entry online services to cater to the needs of young people. The use of social media is especially beneficial for reaching out to young NEETs.
- *Person-centered guidance.* Ways to offer low-threshold personal support need to be found by combining online social media and physical outreach activities and coordinated interservice offers e.g., through one-stop shops. This requires the beforementioned close cooperation and coordination of stakeholders.

Special focus on young people from Ukraine

- *Ensure quality online career guidance.* Offering online self-learning and self-help services is key, especially for those who fled, but better connections to online services of host countries of Ukrainians would also be important, as a large group of respondents state that they do not benefit from career guidance in their host country.
- *Ensure outreach.* There is a large unserved group of young Ukrainians, which is a call for reaching out actively to young Ukrainians in host countries and in Ukraine. The use of social media is recommended, as is involving youth and social workers and youth organisations in the outreach and provision of information and career guidance.

In conclusion, the highly transitional labour markets and the unpredictable socio-economic contexts in Europe and Central Asia (as in other parts of the world) call for a systematic approach to career guidance. This is particularly important for adolescents and young people, as they transition from childhood to adulthood and from learning to earning. A system approach to career guidance requires policy coordination at national and regional levels across education, employment, youth, and social inclusion sectors. It also requires a well-coordinated service, offered in cooperation with career guidance providers, from PES to schools, youth organisations, social workers, and social partners, to ensure

seamless support to individuals, groups, and families throughout their lives, both face-to-face and online. The high percentage of NEETs, mismatch, and youth unemployment in the countries covered by this research, as well as the fact that young people participating in this study have limited access to the quality, person-centered guidance that they wish for, calls for prioritising investments in building a systematic approach to career guidance. Such a system approach would additionally increase the effectiveness and financial efficiency of services, and help to build the resilience of young people, economies, and societies, now and into the future.





