

Learning for Careers

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

Summary of the ETF – UNICEF ECARO joint report (forthcoming)

Note: the joint report is due for official launching on the 12th March 2024 in Brussels. This summary document is not intended for public dissemination

The regional report is the result of collaboration between the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (UNICEF ECARO) and the European Training Foundation (ETF). The geographical focus of the research was on the Europe and Central Asia region, specifically covering Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Kosovo*, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

UNICEF ECARO and ETF conducted desk review, surveys and focus groups to understand better the needs, views, sentiments and experiences of young people mainly between the ages of 14 and 34 related to career guidance. The research was co-designed and conducted in close cooperation and with the full participation of young people. Almost 9,500 young people participated in the polls and 139 in the focus groups organised for gathering their opinions and insights.

The main objective of this initiative has been to generate new evidence on career guidance demand and expectations among the young generations in the 11 countries and beyond. This research aims to contribute towards ensuring that career guidance policies and services effectively meet the evolving needs and expectations of young individuals, especially in the context of highly transformative labour markets and societies, sluggish post-pandemic recovery, deepening inequalities, insecurity and conflicts.

Knowing about the preferences, needs and wishes of young people is an important precondition to successful career guidance policies and services. Career guidance that is fit-for-purpose ideally should be: a systematic combination of structured career education programmes (as part of curricula throughout formal education, to be able reach whole generations), quality online self-learning and self-help opportunities; and person-centred career guidance service offered outside of school, both face-to-face and online.

Current career guidance offer falls short of what youth need

Young respondents painted a picture of a high number of no to limited access to guidance. Current services are focused on a traditional approach, made up of interest, personality trait and aptitude testing and providing information that aims to match learning and job opportunities, only at specific transition points, typically at last 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 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 own business” (22,1%) or “Understand my rights at work and how to find a quality job” (21,7%). 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 that are generated outside the traditional school curriculum. Such experiential learning increases the relevance of academic learning for their lives and their future. Young people are better able to understand and appreciate how school can link to their future career goals. This enhances academic achievement and attainment, helps reduce dropouts and mismatch, as well as it contributes to gender equality. For societies as a whole, career guidance is an investment, not a cost.

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 respondents chose “Internet searches, websites” (56,7%), followed by “Social media, chat rooms/message boards, online tutorials” (38,7%), and “Parents” (32,5%) and “Friends” (32,0%), with limited importance was given to “Youth NGOs, youth centres” (11,6%), “School career counsellors” (8,6%), and “Public employment offices” (8,7%). The fact that unstructured self-help is dominating tells us a lot about the quality and adequateness of existing services. As the role of parents remains dominant, this points 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, while being very concerned by 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, as they see these as foundational to their professional development. Hence, there is a strong call for structured career education throughout formal education and during the school to work transition period that follows a holistic human empowerment approach.

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 dominating. This finding is highly concerning, as it shows us how the current state of career guidance does little to widen the scope of career aspirations, and how it has not showcased the opportunities the green and digital transitions have to offer. A wider scope of potential career options could also contribute to overcoming gender stereotypes. Surely, the role of formal education must play a stronger role in becoming a place for career learning and discovery of wider career options.

Educational aspirations of young people mirror parental and societal expectations

Over eight-in-ten respondents said that they aim to complete some level of tertiary education (81,9%), showing extremely high expectations that may not necessarily reflect labour market nor skill needs. Moreover, a preference for tertiary education does not give credit to 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 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 and 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 avoid such biased education aspirations.

High numbers of young Ukrainians do not have access to career guidance services

Career guidance systems require a special focus on young Ukrainians. There are high numbers of young Ukrainians, both in Ukraine (including displaced persons) and outside Ukraine, that do not have 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.

Key conclusions

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.

Knowing about the needs, wishes and preferences of young people helps design policies and services that are more effective and efficient.

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 outcomes, economic outcomes, 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 European Union's renewed employment, skills and social inclusion reflected in the European Pillar of Social Rights, reinforced Youth Guarantee and recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience.