

Voices of Youth in Transition

EDU LAB Webinar 1 Light Proceedings

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The first EDU-LAB webinar brought together preliminary findings from qualitative case studies in seven countries to examine how young people experience choices and transitions in education, training, and employment. It considered both the difficulties they encounter and the solutions they propose. Country presentations were followed by a comparative synthesis, a contribution on lifelong guidance, and an open discussion about the relationship between research, policy, and everyday practice.

A recurring finding was that qualifications, motivation, and personal adaptability do not by themselves secure a supported transition. Participants described difficulties obtaining first work experience, uneven access to guidance, financial and geographical constraints, and experiences of unfair treatment. They also described active efforts to revise plans, seek support, and find routes forward. The discussion placed these accounts within institutional and labour market conditions, while cautioning against treating resilience as a substitute for adequate support.

These proceedings report the findings and arguments presented at the webinar. The case studies and analyses were still developing, and the accounts concern purposively recruited groups rather than nationally representative samples. The proposals discussed below are attributed to young people, researchers, or discussants as appropriate; they were not adopted as a formal set of webinar resolutions.

Event at a glance

The webinar was scheduled for 09:30–14:30 on 7 October 2026. Professor Filomena Parada of CeIED, Lusófona University, Portugal, moderated the event and presented the overview of Work Package 4. EDU-LAB coordinator Alexander Chvorostov opened the webinar and contributed to the closing discussion.

The country presentations followed the programme order: Poland, Finland, Portugal, and Kosovo before the break; the United Kingdom, Austria, and Italy afterwards. Professor Ingrid Schoon of University College London provided the comparative synthesis. Cynthia Mary Harrison Villalba of Cedefop, coordinator of CareersNet, discussed lifelong guidance and its implications for youth participation. The final debate explored what the findings imply for support systems, policy implementation, and further analysis.



1 Project context and research approach

Hearing young people and developing solutions with them

Alexander Chvorostov introduced the webinar as part of the EDU-LAB project's wider effort to understand transitions and communicate findings to stakeholders. He emphasised the value of connecting evidence from different parts of the project and making it useful to those shaping education and employment opportunities.

Filomena Parada explained that Work Package 4 treats young people's insider knowledge and lived experience as central research resources. Its aims are to understand choices, pathways, barriers, and enablers, and to develop possible solutions with young people. The design therefore goes beyond asking participants to describe problems: it also creates opportunities for them to identify priorities, discuss alternatives, and formulate proposals.

The qualitative case studies cover seven countries and twelve locations. Recruitment was purposive, seeking variation among young people aged 15–30 across academic and vocational education, higher education, employment and job seeking, and experiences outside education, employment, or training. Recruitment and participation required sustained work with institutions and young people. Some groups proved more difficult to reach than others, affecting the composition of the evidence available at this stage.

Focus groups allowed participants to select or formulate questions relevant to their experience. Participatory workshops were organised as chains of four sessions, moving from identifying key challenges to discussing solutions and developing proposals. Preliminary interpretations were brought back to participants for feedback during subsequent sessions. Structured diaries added accounts between meetings, and participants could contribute voluntarily through collaborative online platforms.

Fieldwork reported at the webinar

At the time of the presentation, the teams reported 312 onboarding sessions involving more than 1,400 young people and 854 collected consent forms. Across the locations, 112 focus groups had involved 695 participants, and 202 workshop sessions had involved 486 participants. A further 2,780 structured diaries had been collected. These figures describe different activities in the research process; they should not be added together to calculate a total number of individual participants.

The presentations drew on preliminary analyses of different parts of this material. Several teams used AI tools to assist an initial identification or organisation of themes alongside research team interpretation. More detailed within-case and cross-case analysis remained ahead. Differences in the groups and materials selected for each presentation are therefore essential to interpreting the country accounts.



2 Country findings

Poland and the demand for regulation and fairness

Dagmara Szczepańska • Maria Grzegorzewska University

Dagmara Szczepańska presented work prepared jointly with Justyna Zielińska, who was unable to attend. The Polish case studies were conducted in Warsaw and Łódź. The presentation drew mainly on participatory workshops and reported 101 focus group participants and 91 workshop participants. Young women and the 19–23 age group predominated, while participants in the ISCED 4–5 recruitment category were particularly difficult to reach.

The analysis distinguished challenges in education from those in employment, while identifying a common demand for clearer rules and fairer treatment. In education, participants criticised outdated or impractical curricula, limited individualisation, hierarchical relationships, and inflexible arrangements. They expected education to offer more relevant information about work and stronger contact with potential employers. Their accounts raised a question about the relationship between the purposes of education and young people's expectations of preparation for employment.

In the labour market, participants described exploitative workplace cultures, precarious arrangements, unrealistic experience requirements for entry-level jobs, and opaque recruitment. Sending applications without receiving feedback made it difficult to understand decisions or improve subsequent attempts. High living costs also constrained which career options were financially possible.

Young people's proposals included more practical and coherent curricula, greater flexibility, joint activities between education providers and employers, realistic requirements for first jobs, and clear recruitment feedback. They also called for stronger labour market institutions, more effective controls, trade union involvement, and affordable housing. Szczepańska distinguished changing abusive workplace cultures from increasing inspections: regulation alone would not necessarily produce respectful relationships at work.

The presentation's central interpretation was a demand for stronger public and institutional involvement in securing decent working and living conditions. This was discussed as a noteworthy finding in the Polish context, rather than as evidence of a uniform attitude among all Polish youth. The ensuing exchange also noted young people's awareness of collective protection and the difficulty of moving from broad proposals to feasible implementation.

Finland and the connections between wellbeing and access to work

Sini Teräsahde • Tampere University

Sini Teräsahde presented findings from Helsinki and the Tampere region. The focus groups had involved 46 young people in Helsinki and 54 in the Tampere region. The workshop material involved 90 participants across 51 sessions. Recruitment reached varied backgrounds, but young men were harder to engage and the youngest age group was somewhat overrepresented. Most participants were in education, sometimes alongside employment.

Two challenges appeared throughout the initial workshops: wellbeing and mental health, and the work experience paradox. Participants described a circular requirement in which they needed experience to obtain a job but needed a job to gain experience. Limited summer jobs and internships made this particularly



difficult. Mental health difficulties and school burnout could interrupt education, prolong studies, or prompt reconsideration of what kind of work would be manageable.

Financial pressure and uncertainty interacted with these experiences. Insufficient support during studies could require young people to work while studying or limit their educational options. Pressure to graduate quickly sat alongside doubts about whether employment would follow. Participants also reported uneven career guidance, poorly supported internships, and insufficient onboarding in first jobs.

Access to work was shaped by personal connections as well as formal qualifications. Family networks could open opportunities that were not publicly advertised. Participants identified discrimination associated with foreign-sounding names and Finnish language requirements that they considered excessive for some roles. These concerns were raised by young people with and without migration backgrounds.

The proposed responses addressed several actors. Policymakers were asked to protect financial support for students and secure adequate institutional funding. Education providers were asked to offer accessible mental health support, study skills assistance, early help with learning difficulties, and stronger links with working life. Employers were asked to provide fairer recruitment, opportunities to learn Finnish at work, and adequate onboarding. Teräsahde stressed that the findings should be understood within Finland's current economic and employment conditions, and that young people should not be expected to navigate these interconnected difficulties alone.

Portugal and the need for continuous guidance

Táisa Oliveira and Natália Azevedo • CeiED Lusófona University

The Portuguese presentation compared Porto with Santarém and described young people as navigating education, training, and work without a sufficiently useful map. The reported material comprised 15 focus groups and 14 workshop chains involving 108 participants, 67 from Porto and 41 from Santarém. Most were aged 15–18 and studying. Recruitment of postgraduate students and young people outside education and employment was more difficult. The team reviewed and refined the initial themes produced with AI assistance.

Four connected areas organised the findings: systemic conditions and wellbeing; support and guidance; transitions within education and training; and the transition into work. Performance demands could generate a cycle in which stress affected results and poorer results increased stress. This pressure intensified when grades determined access to subsequent opportunities. Participants wanted support that continued before a crisis, alongside peer mentoring and assessment arrangements that reduced dependence on single high-stakes examinations.

Guidance was often present but experienced as insufficient, confusing, or poorly matched to the individual. A list of courses or occupations did not necessarily help someone understand how to choose among them. Informal advice could reflect adults' preferences rather than the young person's interests and capacities. Participants asked for ongoing relationships with professionals who knew them, and opportunities to ask substantive questions at career events, university visits, or work placements.

Early decisions about educational tracks were another difficulty. Participants proposed time to explore options before making consequential choices, sometimes described as a year zero. Transitions into higher education required practical orientation and support from more experienced students. Entering work could bring a further shock: young people encountered experience requirements while feeling unprepared for applications, interviews, financial responsibilities, and workplace expectations.



Proposals included paid internships, meaningful tasks, mentoring, practical preparation, and protected opportunities to learn through mistakes. Transport, travel costs, and the distribution of local provision also shaped access, particularly in Santarém. The overall argument was for continuity across a chain of transitions: difficulties at one stage could leave young people less prepared for the next, while support and opportunities remained unequal across schools and territories.

Kosovo and negotiated resilience

Arberore Bicaaj • AAB College

Arberore Bicaj presented findings from the Pristina region, asking what young people do when the route from education to employment fails to work as expected. The case study included 87 participants across secondary and vocational education, university, employment, job seeking, and experiences outside education and work. It included Serbian participants and participants from Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. The Serbian focus group required particular attention to its linguistic and institutional context, including separate Serbian-language educational structures.

The team analysed focus groups through a shared structured template before comparing recurring themes, differences, barriers, and supports. Four connected patterns emerged: strong aspirations; institutional barriers; active responses by young people; and varying degrees of alignment between education, skills, and employment. Participants sought meaningful careers, practical learning, development, and fair opportunities, while describing weak guidance, limited openings, and concerns about recruitment fairness.

Young people responded by learning independently, seeking mentors and work experience, persisting after rejection, and trying alternative routes. Some accepted work unrelated to their qualifications while maintaining a longer-term goal. Bicaj described this as negotiated resilience: young people continued to act, but often by adapting to conditions that did not adequately support them. Persistence could carry psychological and practical costs, including stress, disappointment, and pressure from combining study and work.

The analysis therefore located the main difficulty in the relationship between aspiration and available pathways, rather than in a simple lack of ambition. Resilience could help people manage mismatch without removing the conditions that produced it. The presentation argued for stronger career guidance, practical learning, mentoring, employer links, and wellbeing support. Its proposed shift towards system-enabled agency asked how institutions could create conditions in which young people's efforts lead to opportunities.

The United Kingdom and changing pathways through mismatch

James Williams and Andrew Dixon • Birmingham City University

James Williams presented research from Birmingham and Worcestershire, two neighbouring locations with contrasting urban, rural, economic, and demographic contexts. At this stage, 76 young people had participated and recruitment was continuing, particularly in Worcestershire. Participants covered a range of educational and employment situations, including academic and vocational pathways, university, work, and unemployment.

The analysis identified four related mismatches. First, education was understood as a route to opportunity, but obtaining qualifications did not guarantee access to employment. Experience requirements and the need for placements, apprenticeships, or other practical opportunities complicated the route into work. Second, finding the right path involved revising plans as interests, advice, barriers, and opportunities changed.



Transitions were described as ongoing adjustments rather than a straightforward sequence towards a fixed destination.

Third, participants needed both support and confidence to make use of opportunities. Teachers, tutors, lecturers, and careers advisers could be influential, while applications and interviews were moments of uncertainty. Families supplied help but also expectations that young people had to negotiate. Fourth, aspirations encountered structural conditions, including competition for jobs, financial pressure, migration experiences, and disruption associated with COVID-19.

Williams concluded that successful progression depended on support networks, confidence, and meaningful opportunities as well as qualifications. Andrew Dixon connected the findings with the earlier presentations, particularly unequal access to networks and less visible opportunities. Educators and advisers could help young people build connections that were not otherwise available to them. He also stressed that support and programme design needed to be considered within specific social, economic, and geographical contexts.

The UK account highlighted young people's active revision of plans while retaining the importance of opportunity structures. Adaptability was part of the observed response to uncertainty, but it did not remove constraints on which routes were actually open.

Austria and the importance of respect and reliable support

Natalia Wächter • University of Graz

Natalia Wächter presented work prepared mainly by Michael Duncan, who was unable to attend. The presentation focused on six focus groups involving 51 young people in Vienna and Graz who had experienced situations outside education, employment, or training. Recruitment was mainly through support measures and institutions, with some individual recruitment. Most participants were aged 15–23. The group was broadly balanced by gender, and many participants had migration backgrounds, including those born in Austria.

School dropout emerged as a process involving multiple experiences and circumstances. Participants described conflicts with teachers or peers, bullying, racism, language barriers, pressure, and physical or mental exhaustion. COVID-19 was an additional burden in some accounts. These experiences could weaken attachment to education and confidence in learning. Presenting dropout as a single decision or a simple lack of motivation would miss the accumulation described by participants.

Attempts to enter work could reproduce earlier difficulties. Young people reported limited openings, qualification barriers, unanswered applications, discrimination, exploitation in internships, and poor relationships at work. The recurrence of disrespect across education and employment contributed to frustration and interrupted trajectories.

Professional and institutional support was frequently described as a key resource. Youth coaches, local support organisations, social workers, and mental health professionals helped participants maintain or regain a route forward. Families and teachers could be helpful, but their contribution was not consistently supportive. Peers often provided emotional support.

When describing a good job, participants prioritised respect, appreciation, supportive colleagues and supervisors, fair pay, suitable hours, meaningful tasks, and continuity. Stability could matter more than status. The discussion following the presentation addressed the diversity hidden within the NEET category. Wächter explained that access through institutions shaped the sample: the evidence did not capture all young people who were disconnected from support systems. This recruitment limitation matters when interpreting the prominence of professional support in the accounts.



Italy and personal growth and self discovery

Natalia Tosoni • AlmaLaurea Interuniversity Consortium

Natalia Tosoni focused on four focus groups from the Bologna metropolitan area involving participants aged 24–30 with at least a bachelor's degree. Most were women, and many were studying, working, or combining the two. The presentation explored what young adults developed and understood about themselves while navigating education and employment, and how those processes shaped later choices. This selected group differed substantially from the younger or more marginalised groups highlighted in other presentations.

Two analytical dimensions organised the account. Personal growth concerned capacities, resources, self-awareness, and the ability to respond to demanding experiences. It included a shifting sense of agency, using setbacks to inform future choices, and managing anxiety. Examples showed participants asserting an educational choice against advice, recognising unwanted working conditions through an exploitative job, or finding a less pressured approach to university study.

Self-discovery concerned values, priorities, aspirations, boundaries, and ideas about a fulfilling life. Participants could experience tension between socially valued or financially secure routes and activities that engaged them personally. One example concerned a graduate who initially regarded teaching as a fallback after studying biology, but came to recognise it as a preferred direction.

The two dimensions were separated for analysis but could overlap in lived experience. Both were presented as outcomes of earlier trajectories and as influences on future decisions. Learning about oneself could therefore change the direction of a pathway, as well as arise from having followed it.

Tosoni cautioned that these processes should not be understood as purely individual characteristics. The ability to revise plans and pursue alternatives was situated within unequal social conditions and the presence or absence of institutional and welfare support. The presentation added a perspective on agency that extended beyond coping with barriers to include discovering what a young person wanted to do, while leaving open how such possibilities vary across groups and contexts.

3 Comparative synthesis and lifelong guidance

Ingrid Schoon on shared themes and different experiences

Ingrid Schoon situated the case studies within differences in transition regimes, education systems, and institutional support. Her synthesis drew on the presentation materials shared with her and the session discussion. She used national transition arrangements as an interpretive frame for asking how expectations about support and progression relate to young people's accounts.

Across the presentations, she identified demands for more practical and flexible education, better preparation for work, stronger connections with employers, and support for learning difficulties and mental health. Accounts of exploitation, unrealistic entry requirements, and opaque recruitment raised questions about workplace cultures and protection. Living costs, housing, transport, and investment in institutions also shaped whether opportunities could be used.

Schoon emphasised the coexistence of active agency and institutional constraints. The Kosovo and Italian accounts, for example, illuminated persistence and personal development in very different participant groups. Such experiences could be resources for young people, but should not justify reducing institutional responsibility. Qualifications and motivation needed to be connected with real openings and sustained support.



Her main analytical challenge was to examine differences within the apparently shared themes. Do young people of different ages, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, or locations describe the same problem in the same way? How do the selected participant groups influence each country account? What is specific to a locality or national system, and what is common across contexts?

She also raised methodological questions about whether focus groups and workshops produced different accounts, and whether online, in-person, or hybrid settings affected participation. The synthesis therefore pointed towards more detailed comparison, with attention to the conditions under which similar themes emerge, rather than a single explanation for all seven countries.

Cynthia Mary Harrison Villalba on guidance across the lifespan

Cynthia Mary Harrison Villalba connected the findings with Cedefop's work on lifelong guidance and the CareersNet network. She introduced the EU reference framework for lifelong guidance, which contains 18 guidelines for policy and systems development. The framework treats guidance as a continuing resource across education, employment, and other stages of life, recognising that careers are increasingly varied and nonlinear.

Her contribution emphasised the value of firsthand research on users' experiences for policy and service development. Guidance should help people understand themselves, identify needs and strengths, interpret opportunities, and make meaningful choices. This requires coherent systems, reliable career information, qualified practitioners, sustainable funding, quality assurance, and access that responds to different circumstances.

Youth participation was central to the connection with EDU-LAB. Harrison Villalba highlighted co-creation of guidance services, active involvement in career planning, and systematic collection and use of feedback. Young people should contribute to shaping services as well as receive them. Career management skills and learner-centred approaches could support agency, self-awareness, and decision making without reducing guidance to the delivery of a predetermined answer.

For young people at risk of exclusion, she drew attention to prevention, community outreach, accessible services, second-chance routes, and support for re-engagement. Digital inclusion mattered alongside legal access and practical accessibility. Guidance also concerned participation in learning and society, extending beyond an immediate employment outcome.

Questions addressed who should provide guidance, how implementation could be monitored, how it should be funded, and the role of digital tools and AI. Harrison Villalba explained that Cedefop supplies evidence, reference points, and cooperation rather than legal enforcement of national systems. Responsibility for implementation rests within different national and sectoral arrangements. Digital provision was expanding, but questions about appropriate uses of AI and the evidence supporting them remained open.

She subsequently encouraged the project to distinguish challenges particularly associated with youth from issues also experienced by adults. This wider perspective could help clarify the contribution of youth research to guidance and working life across the lifespan.



4 Discussion on implementation and opportunity

From available evidence to changes in practice

Filomena Parada opened the debate by asking how the findings could inform practice across different countries and transition regimes. A recurring issue was the gap between familiar proposals and participants' actual experience. Better guidance, integrated support, employer engagement, and meaningful first opportunities were repeatedly requested, even where related policies or services already existed.

Harrison Villalba suggested strengthening connections within the wider ecosystem of schools, institutions, researchers, policymakers, employers, and social partners. Organisations involved in recruitment could also become audiences for feedback. Making findings visible mattered, but so did identifying where they were relevant and building relationships with actors able to use them.

Theodor Leiber, drawing on the project's modelling perspective, questioned why known problems and available instruments continued to coexist. He proposed using frameworks such as Cedefop's to examine which problems existing approaches address and where gaps remain. He also asked whether difficulties arose from communication, institutional complexity, limited understanding of available routes, or other mechanisms. The discussion did not resolve these alternatives, but identified them as questions for further work.

Expectations and the opportunities actually available

Parada asked the teams to examine both young people's expectations and the expectations that education and society create for them. Promises that effort and qualifications will lead to secure employment can conflict with the openings available. Geographical inequalities complicate this relationship, including differences within the same city or region.

Harrison Villalba asked what preparation for the labour market should mean in practice, and how youth-specific needs relate to wider problems in working life. James Williams emphasised early intervention, integrated services, personalised pathways, employer engagement, and specialist support. He noted that many of these principles had been discussed for years, sharpening the question of why young people still encountered gaps in everyday provision.

Andrew Dixon stressed the need to examine the supply of opportunities alongside preparation for job entry. An account of young people interested in apprenticeships raised the possibility that suitable places were not available, an issue he identified for further investigation. Guidance and individual readiness could not alone create positions that did not exist. His intervention extended the debate from how young people navigate a system to how that system distributes opportunities.

Participation and the next stage of analysis

The discussion returned to differences by gender, age, socioeconomic background, field of study, migration background, and place. Parada emphasised that the next stage required detailed analysis of what was common and what was specific. Young people's accounts supplied one essential perspective on complex systems, to be examined alongside other evidence in the project.

Participation itself also emerged as a topic. Parada reported that participants valued sharing experiences, hearing others, recognising common difficulties, and contributing possible solutions. This suggested that opportunities for meaningful involvement could be scarce in their usual settings. It also raised a question



about how participatory research could inform more sustained forms of involvement in services and institutions.

The debate generated directions for analysis and engagement, rather than a formal implementation plan. It called attention to the need to investigate mechanisms, connect findings with relevant actors, and retain young people's perspectives when developing responses.

5 Closing reflections

In closing, Filomena Parada emphasised the remaining work of analysing the data in depth and understanding variation across groups and locations. She highlighted the contribution of young people's proposed solutions, including their practical relevance and the questions they raised about the difference between existing policy and experienced provision.

Alexander Chvorostov stressed the task of integrating youth accounts with policy analysis, quantitative evidence, and stakeholder perspectives across EDU-LAB. He also questioned how inherited categories of education, work, and transition capture contemporary experience. Communicating useful findings to different audiences remained an important task for the project.

Parada described ongoing work towards a youth-oriented area of the project website through which appropriate participant contributions could be shared while respecting identity protection and consent. The organisers invited continued engagement with the webinar series and indicated that the next webinar, planned for 10 December, would turn to governance and stakeholder perspectives.

The event left a set of substantive questions for subsequent research and discussion: how to connect education with fair and meaningful work; how to ensure continuous support across changing pathways; why existing policies do not always translate into accessible provision; and how to make young people's participation consequential in the institutions that shape their opportunities.

