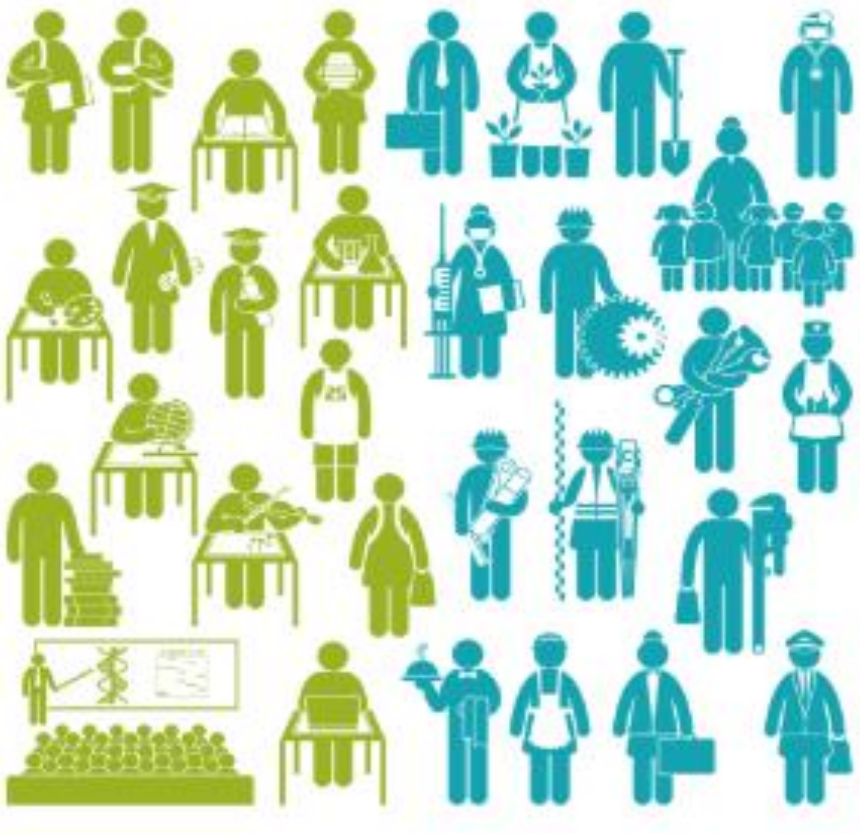
EDU LAB | European Youth in Transition to Education and Labour



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Youth Voices from Portugal
Navigating Without a Map: Preliminary Findings of Portuguese Young People's Transitions Across Education, Training and Work

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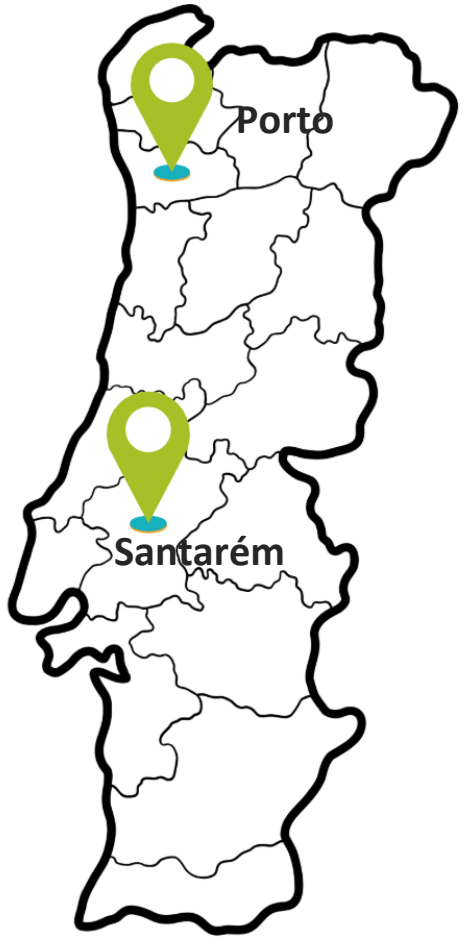
Case Study Locations in Portugal

Porto (CS9)

- Second-biggest city in the country
- Major economic centre
- Home to 17% of the country's tertiary graduates, offering strong opportunities for young people
- Offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes that attract local and international students, making Porto a vibrant educational hub

Santarém (CS10)

- Historic city in central Portugal, about 65 km northeast of Lisbon
- It has a rich cultural heritage and strategic importance dating back to Roman times
- It is known for its annual National Agricultural Fair
- Youth unemployment and social inclusion remain significant challenges in the Santarém region
- Social exclusion among youth, particularly those from Roma and immigrant communities, has been a pressing issue



Study Aims & General Information

Study aims

- To investigate Portuguese young people's experiences of transition within education or training and to the labour market
- To understand the key challenges and dilemmas they experience during these transitions, and the solutions they propose to address these challenges, as well as why they think these solutions work

Findings from

- 15 Focus Groups (9 in Porto and 6 in Santarém)
- 14 Participatory Workshops (8 in Porto and 6 in Santarém)
- 108 participants
  - ✓ FGs only: 32
  - ✓ PWs only: 15
  - ✓ FGs & PWs: 61

Preliminary analysis

- Initial thematic analysis supported by SciSpace and LusoChat (AI-assisted)
- Themes generated by the tool were reviewed, refined and validated by the researchers

Participants

Location

Porto	67
Santarém	41
Missing	0

Gender

Female	60
Male	41
Missing	7

Age

15-18 years	62
19-23 years	32
24 years or older	14

Country of Birth

Portugal	83
Other	18
Missing	7

Other countries: India, Brazil, Mozambique, Angola, Bangladesh, China

Migration Background

No migrant background	73
Migrant background	29
Missing	6

Ethnic Minority Background

No ethnic minority background	76
Ethnic minority background	26
Missing	6

Participants

Disability Status

No disability	93
Disability	7
Missing/Prefer not to say	8

In E&T

In E&T	93
Not in E&T	9
Missing	6

Employment Situation

Only studying	77
In employment	11
Not in employment	12
Missing/Prefer not to say	8

Profile

ISCED 3 - Academic	28	ISCED 7-8	5
ISCED 3 - VET	17	In employment or seeking a job	14
ISCED 4-5	10	NEET & dropout youth	8
ISCED 6	20	Missing	6

Perceived SES

High	6
Medium	67
Low/Very low	18
Missing/Prefer not to say	17

Summary of Key Findings

1

Systemic conditions and wellbeing

- Background conditions for all transitions
- Mental fatigue, anxiety and the "snowball" cycle
- Inadequate support
- Geographical and territorial barriers

2

Lack of support and guidance at key transition moments

- Information deficits and unequal access to guidance
- Quality and efficacy of guidance provision

3

Transitions within education and training

- Early forced choices
- Course changes as a response to mismatch
- Transition shock (secondary to higher education)

4

The school-to-work transition as a shock

- Experience paradox
- Practical unpreparedness
- Precarious, harsh first work
- Unmet expectations and disillusionment

From choices in education and training to the shock of leaving for work, under adverse systemic conditions and an overall lack of support

Theme Occurrence

Theme	Sub-theme	FGs	PWs	Total
Systemic conditions and wellbeing	Mental fatigue, anxiety and the “snowball” cycle	13	12	25
	Inadequate support	12	12	24
	Geographical and territorial barriers	7	11	18
Lack of support and guidance at key transition moments	Quality and efficacy of guidance provision	8	4	12
	Information deficits and unequal access to guidance	6	7	13
Transitions within education and training	Early forced choices	8	8	16
	Course changes as a response to mismatch	9	3	12
	Transition shock: secondary to higher education	5	4	9
The school-to-work transition as a shock	Experience paradox	6	5	11
	Practical unpreparedness	13	9	22
	Precarious, harsh first job	8	4	12
	Unmet expectations and disillusionment	8	4	12

Occurrence = number of observations in which a theme appeared | **Total number of observations = 29**: 15 focus groups and 14 chains of participatory workshops

Theme 1: Systemic conditions and wellbeing

The problem

1 Mental fatigue, anxiety and the "snowball" peak in transitions

- Most **pervasive** theme: shared across profiles and age groups
- Background condition NOT a minority experience
- Performance demands → stress → poorer results → more stress: **"snowball"** compounded by **lack of institutional recognition or support**
- **Peaks around transitions**: grades needed for university entry and internships, competition for placements, anticipating labour-market entry, uncertainty about employment/occupational future

2 Inadequate support

- Scarce provision of institutional support (guidance, mental health and wellbeing, learning disabilities)
- Where support exists, it is perceived as insufficient, both at the secondary and the higher education level

PT102CS11: "There could be more [psychological support]. Not that it doesn't exist, but there could be more."

Solutions

More and better-resourced institutional support

- Structured institutional support offered continuously over time and not only for young people in crisis
- Less pressure/competition
  - ✓ More mutual support
  - ✓ Distributed, continuous assessment instead of single high-stakes exams, to break the stress "snowball"
- Sharing of experiences
  - ✓ Peer study groups and mentoring

Theme 1: Systemic conditions and wellbeing

The problem

3 Geographical and territorial barriers

- Theme mostly present among Santarém youth; in Porto: within-city disparities
- Highlights the differential infrastructure of opportunity that geography entails and that leads to educational and labour market inequality
- Other important barriers concern transport, commuting time and costs
- Outcome: trajectory dependencies that are difficult to reverse

PT025CS6: "We don't have the possibility of going to another school, because it's far away or because they simply can't afford it."

Solutions

More equitable access to resources and opportunities

- Expanded and distributed (online) access to guidance provision
- Financial support for young people who commute or relocate for education and training
- Investment in local infrastructure (education, training, labour market)

Theme 2: Lack of support and guidance at key transition moments

The problem

1 Quality and efficacy of guidance provision

- Guidance (formal and informal) was consistently characterised as **insufficient, confusing** or misdirecting
- Formal provision of guidance was often experienced as a **one-off event**, and described as either **unhelpful** or actively **counterproductive**
- Informal provision of guidance (parents, peers, teachers) was described as **inconsistent in quality** and often shaped by interests and assumptions different from the young person's preferences and aptitudes

PT079CS11: "What I really wanted was something more about me thinking my future, which would make me feel more secure."

2 Information deficits and unequal access to guidance

- Lack of timely, clear and accessible information about education and occupational options: **"there is no guide"**
- Access varies across schools, regions and socioeconomic contexts
  - ✓ More limited or absent in Santarém and less-resourced schools

Solutions

More and better vocational guidance, including career fairs and taster programmes

- Continuous institutional support (school psychologists, teachers, principals)
  - ✓ Formal support mechanisms for each critical transition rather than concentrating provision at a single point
- Expanded access to career fairs, university open days, job shadowing and "Universidade Júnior"-type taster programmes
- Accessible (online) information for everyone – e.g., official information expanded online

Theme 3: Transitions within education and training

The problem

1 Early forced choices at key decision points

- Pervasive in young people's accounts of their experiences, especially concerning the end of 9th-grade education choice
- Experienced under conditions of limited information, emotional unpreparedness, external pressure (parents, teachers, peers) and absence of meaningful guidance
- Often a choice **"by elimination"**

2 Course changes as a response to mismatch

- A **common feature** of educational navigation; most prominent among young people in **SC2 and SC4**
- Active response to mismatches between the chosen pathway and the young person's interests, expectations, and emotional or financial resources
  - ✓ Pathway chosen and young person's interests, abilities or ambitions

Solutions

Exploratory learning phase and exposure

- Young people see it as key to **backing up** their decisions
- Gradually start exploring: **"Year Zero"**
- **Experiential exposure** is a **precondition** for **well-informed/quality decision-making**

Theme 3: Transitions within education and training

The problem

3 **Transition shock: secondary to higher education**

- Sudden, **disorienting** shift in environment, expectations, pedagogical culture, and need for autonomy
- No prior **practical orientation to university life**: how courses are structured, what is expected, how to seek support

Solutions

Peer mentoring and more structured support

- Older young people **guiding** younger ones through **key transition moments**
- Formal support mechanisms at each critical transition

Theme 4: The school-to-work transition as shock

The problem

1 The experience paradox

- Structural **contradiction**: employers require prior experience but do not provide entry-level opportunities to gain it
- Named explicitly in participatory workshops; present more diffusely in focus groups (search for a first job) and in references to the difficulty of securing the first job

PT102CS11: "Many companies now ask for experience, but young people haven't yet had the opportunity [to gain it]."

2 Practical unpreparedness for adult and working life

- Participants **left school without essential practical skills**, such as filing taxes (IRS), understanding contracts, writing a CV

PT004CS6: "We reach an age where we have to deal with certain matters and the truth is nobody ever taught us about them, so we have to scramble around ("andar às aranhas") trying to find out how things work."

Solutions

Experience built into education, and first-opportunity obligations

- Mandatory internships integrated into educational programmes (paid or offering credits)
- A legal obligation for employers to offer entry-level opportunities (internships, jobs)
- Entry-level jobs with built-in mentoring and effective training
- Financial literacy and administrative skills (taxes, contracts, personal finances)
- CV and interview preparation, peer mentoring, training for job recruitment

Theme 4: The school-to-work transition as shock

The problem

3 First work as precarious and harsh: little room for mistakes

- Precarious, harsh and exploitative first jobs; young workers devalued and replaced by older hires offered permanent contracts
- Young people enter the working world with **limited room to make mistakes, experiment and learn**

PT029CS6: "At the same time they treated me like rubbish, completely like rubbish. If I made a mistake, which is completely normal, they shouted at me."

4 Unmet expectations and disillusionment

- **Gap** between expectations formed in education (what work would be like, the reward for a qualification) and the labour-market reality
- The implicit promise of education (invest effort, get stable, well-paid work) **not honored**

PT160CS11: "In my case it was the shock […] I got to 18 thinking it was all very easy, but in 2018, when I finished the course, there wasn't much work, and it was a shock. […]"

Solutions

Protected space to practise

- Meaningful internships that **prepare for the labour market**, with real room to practise and learn – not **"just printing papers"**
  - ✓ A mentor who is genuinely available to **guide** and **support** throughout
  - ✓ Improve social and economic conditions: e.g., fair wages, lower cost of living and free higher education

Conclusion

Young people are navigating education and employment pathways and transitions in a fast-changing world **without a map**

They are confronted with educational, training and employment **systems that do not adequately support their navigation** of these pathways and transitions

The transitions form a chain, not separate events

- ✓ Choices forced early, with little support, lead to course changes and shock on arriving in higher education or work
- ✓ Each unsupported step leaves young people less prepared for the next one

Mental fatigue and anxiety link the steps

- ✓ Each transition adds pressure, and the stress carries into the next one
- ✓ Institutional and psychological support is scarce: nothing breaks the “snowball”
- ✓ Peaks in stress or ill-being occur wherever a transition coincides with institutional gaps

Conclusion

Gaps are not equally distributed

- ✓ Guidance and opportunities vary by school and territory
- ✓ Young people with fewer resources typically face the same transitions with less support

Solutions point towards one direction: continuity of support and exploration experiences

- ✓ Support that doesn't depend on crisis, exposure before choosing, mentoring, and real experience before entering work

PT029CS6: *"How is it that I've done a bit of everything and, even with my studies, I reach the labour market and feel so unprepared? […] My colleagues even joked with me: so, didn't you do a degree? And I really did spend three years doing a degree. The only thing I knew how to do when I arrived at a hotel reception desk was speak languages and talk about the city. The rest I learned day to day."*

PT082CS11: *"You may have already heard these problems, but hearing them from students, with solutions and everything, is very different."*

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