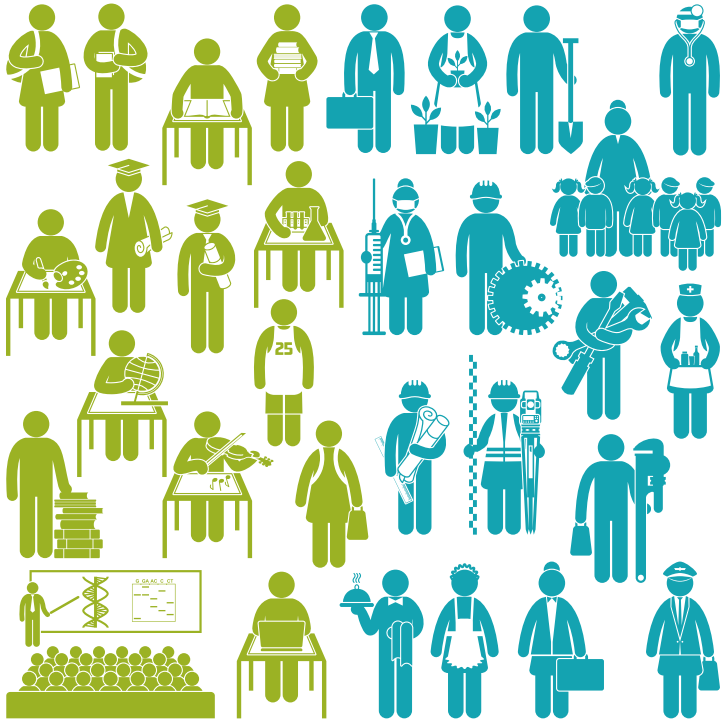
EDU LAB | European Youth in Transition to Education and Labour



Funded by the European Union

A Horizon Europe collaborative project (2025-2027)
Grant Agreement # 101177428
Project Duration: 2025–2027

Youth Voices: Preliminary Findings from United Kingdom: Birmingham, Worcestershire

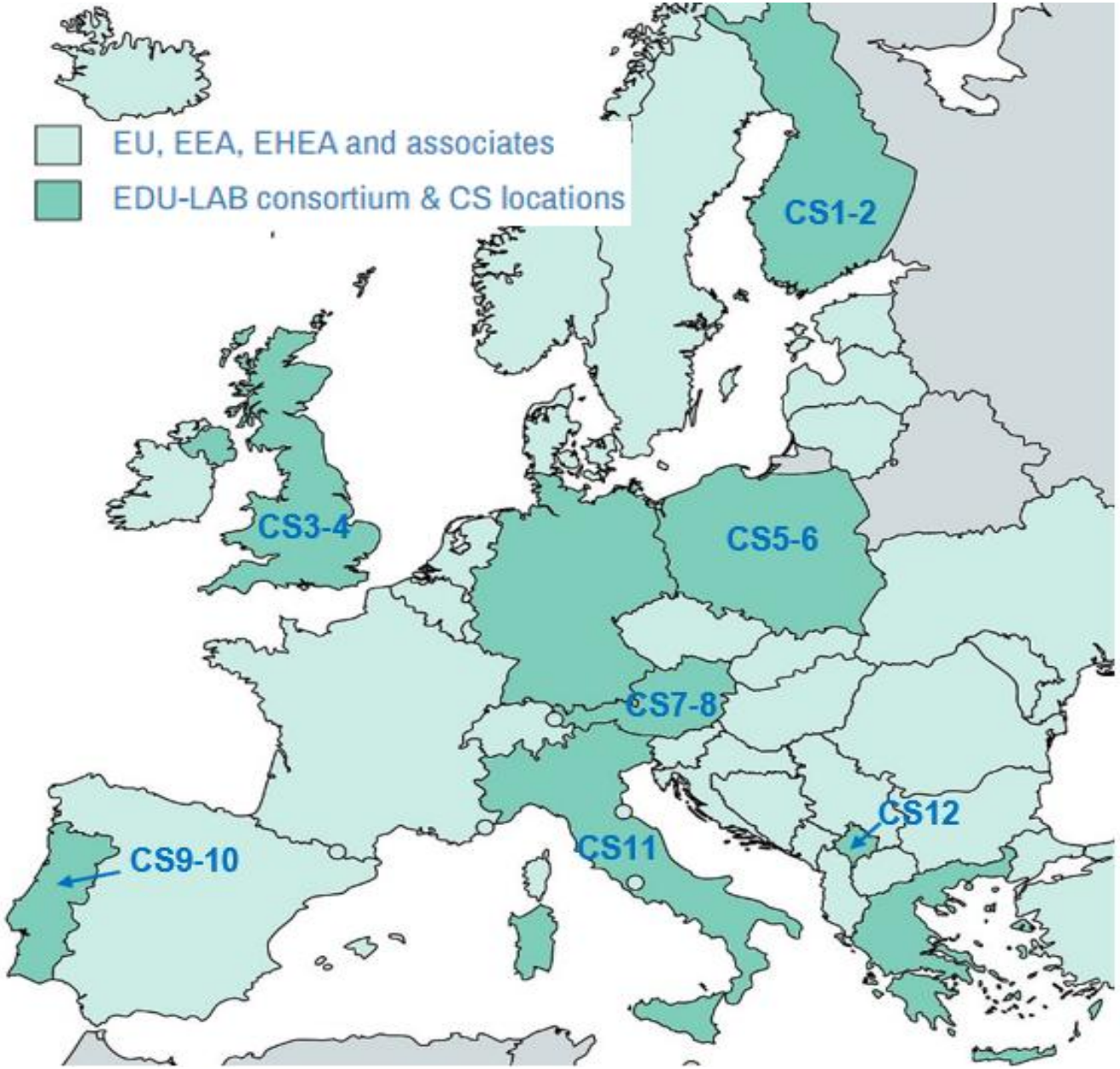
James Williams| Andrew Dixon| Xi Guo| Mona Wong| Michelle Thompson| Susan Jones|

BIRMINGHAM CITY University

Case Studies Locations

Country: Birmingham, Worcestershire, UK (CS3-4)

- CS Location 3 (Birmingham): young, highly diverse city, with a large migrant population and a service-based economy that has replaced its former industrial employment base.
- CS Location 4 (Worcestershire): rural, older, and less ethnically diverse; economy centred on services and agriculture following a similar decline in traditional industry.



Study Aim & General information

Study Aim

- To understand young people's educational and career journeys through their lived experiences, choices and transitions;
- identify the key barriers and supports shaping participation, progression and decision-making;
- and co-produce solutions with young people to improve engagement, completion and transitions into employment.

Findings from

- ✓ CS location(s): Birmingham and Worcestershire;
- ✓ Focus Groups (indicate total number and number per location, if different): Birmingham: 9; Worcestershire: 5;
- ✓ Participatory Workshops (indicate total number and number per location, if different): Birmingham: 7; Worcestershire: 4;
- ✓ Structured Diaries: SD1: 10; SD2: 5;
- ✓ Total number of participants: 76.

Identifying expectations and opportunities: Navigating the mismatch

Participants

Location

Birmingham	55
Worcestershire	21
Missing	0

Gender

Female	37
Male	38
Missing	1

Age

15-18 years	26
19-23 years	29
24 or > years	19
Missing	2

Country of Birth

United Kingdom	69
Other	7
Missing	0

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

Migration Background

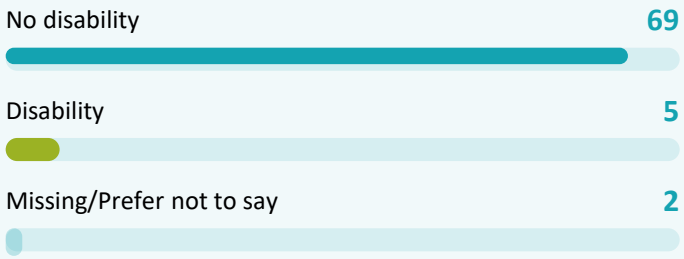
No migrant background	31
Migrant background	43
Missing	2

Ethnic Minority Background

No ethnic minority background	31
Ethnic minority background	43
Missing	2

Participants

Disability Status



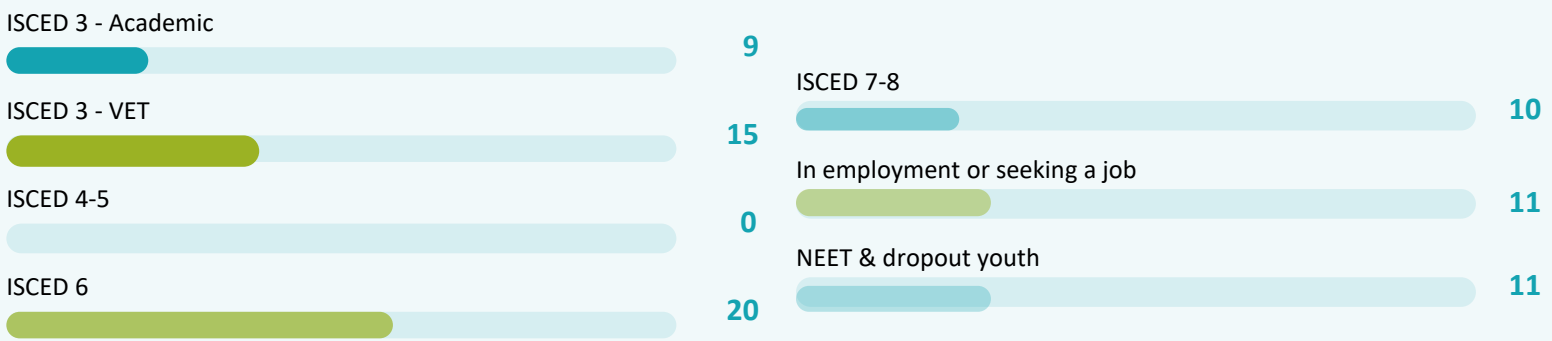
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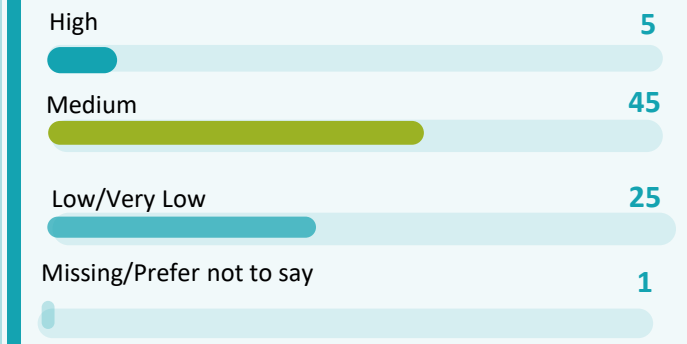
Employment situation



Profile



Perceived SES



Expectations and Opportunities: Navigating the mismatch

Across Birmingham and Worcestershire, the dominant finding in our preliminary data analysis is that young people do not experience a simple transition from education into employment. Instead, they continually negotiate four interconnected mismatches:

Mismatch 1 – Education as a Route to Opportunity

1. Qualification vs experience
2. Education as a gateway rather than an endpoint
3. Competition for opportunities

Mismatch 2 – Finding the Right Path

1. Career exploration and changing aspirations
2. Pragmatic adaptation to opportunities
3. Identity formation through education

Mismatch 3 – Support, Confidence and Navigation

1. Teachers, tutors and mentors as navigators
2. Confidence and self-presentation
3. Family and peer support networks

Mismatch 4 – Aspiration versus Structural Reality

1. Labour-market competition
2. Social and personal circumstances
3. Institutional and historical disruptions (e.g. COVID)

Mismatch 1? Education as the Route to Opportunity

Gaining qualifications does not automatically create opportunity

Young people view education as the primary mechanism for accessing future opportunities, but they recognise that qualifications alone are insufficient and must be combined with experience, skills and further progression.

Qualification vs experience

- *"If I do placement, I'll have the experiences as well, which will be more useful for me to get apprenticeships." (Birmingham, T-level student,17)*
- *"Companies look into people's skills and their experiences." (Birmingham, T-level student,17)*
- *"I haven't had a job yet because I find it really difficult to get one because most people require experience. I don't have the experience." (Worcestershire BTEC student,18)*

Education as a gateway rather than an endpoint

- *"I wanted to do travel and tourism because it was the only good course... and then I'll go to the uni and then I'll try to find somewhere to work." (Worcestershire, BTEC student,18)*
- *"The agency is structured, it's a little cross between a uni and an apprenticeship." (Worcestershire, BTEC student,18)*
- *"This is one of the brightest opportunities that had come to me." (Birmingham, T-level student,17)*

Competition for opportunities

- *"There was a lot of applicants." (Worcestershire, BTEC student,18)*
- *"The travel industry is quite competitive." (Worcestershire, BTEC student,18)*
- *"There's a lot of people doing computer science... it's just about trying to make yourself stand out." (Birmingham, Computer Science student, 20*

Mismatch 2? Finding the Right Path

Career pathways evolve rather than follow fixed plans

Educational and career pathways are rarely linear. Young people continuously explore, revise and adapt their aspirations as they encounter new experiences, opportunities and constraints.

Career Exploration

- *"It gave me the time to actually realise which part I really enjoyed." (Birmingham, Computer Sciences BA, 21)*
- *"My career plan has changed." (Birmingham, Computer Sciences BA, 21)*
- *"Originally I wanted to study childcare and then pretty last minute I changed my mind." (Worcestershire, BTEC student,18)*

Pragmatic Adaptation

- *""If I had chosen T level, I'll be stuck with that... I could still have the choice of mechanical, electrical or architecture." (Birmingham, BTEC student, 17)*
- *"My grades didn't really get me to that place, so I just accepted my firm in BCU." (Birmingham, Computer Sciences BA, 21)*
- *"My mum told me about travel and tourism and then I started looking into it and thought it was a better option." ." (Worcestershire, BTEC student,18)*

Identity Formation Through Education

- *"I love learning and I'm very much an academic." (Worcestershire, UG, 20)*
- *"I've enjoyed my time. I've done a lot." (Worcestershire, BTEC,18*
- *"When it comes to everything academic related, I've had the time of my life." (Worcestershire, UG, 20)*

Mismatch 3? Support, Confidence and Navigation

Opportunities require active navigation and confidence to access

Successful progression depends not only on ability and motivation but also on access to supportive relationships, growing confidence, and the capacity to navigate complex educational and employment systems.

Teachers, Tutors and Mentors as Navigators

- *"The most influential people really are your teachers." (Birmingham, T-level, 17)*
- *"BCU has a really good Careers team... you can book in to get your CV checked." (Birmingham, Computer Science UG, 20)*
- *"I look back on a lot of the teachers... and can see how they encouraged me." (Worcestershire, UG, 20)*

Confidence and Self-Presentation

- *"I wasn't confident enough to explain my skills." (Birmingham, T-level, 17)*
- *"My confidence just plummeted to the floor." (Birmingham, T-level, 17)*
- *"Since I've been here, I've been able to build my confidence a lot." (Worcestershire, BTEC,18).*

Family and Social Capital

- *"One of my sister's thoughts was to choose T level." (Birmingham, T-Level, 17)*
- *"My mum just kept going over things like, what job do you want to do?" (Worcestershire, BTEC,18).*
- *"My parents helped me a lot." (Worcestershire, BTEC,18).*
- *"It was just too much for me... Travel and tourism is much more interesting." (Worcestershire, BTEC,18)*

Mismatch 4? Aspiration versus Structural Reality

Aspirations are continually shaped by wider structural realities

Young people's aspirations are shaped, enabled and constrained by wider social, economic and institutional conditions that often lie beyond their direct control.

Labour-Market Competition

- *"There was a lot of applicants." (Worcestershire, BTEC, 18)*
- *"It's hard to find jobs as a graduate." (Birmingham, Psychology UG, 21)*
- *"Employers want people with experience." (Birmingham, Computer Science UG, 21)*

Social and Personal Circumstances

- *"I was new to the country." (Birmingham, T-level student,17)*
- *"I am not the very academical person. I'd rather do practical things." (Birmingham, T-level student,17)*
- *"I have never experienced poverty... both my parents are financially secure." (Worcestershire, UG, 20)*

COVID and Educational Disruption

- *"There was supposed to be a point where you were going to be sent away on work experience... that got disrupted by COVID and completely cancelled." (Worcestershire, UG, 20)*
- *"I am hugely impacted by COVID, but I am the first year group after COVID to sit GCSEs." (Worcestershire, UG, 20)*
- *"The year groups after me got substantially less and less assistance every time." (Worcestershire, UG, 20)*

Conclusion

Key take-home message 1

Young people's pathways are rarely straightforward: qualifications alone do not guarantee opportunity, career plans evolve over time, and success depends on navigating opportunities within wider social and structural constraints.

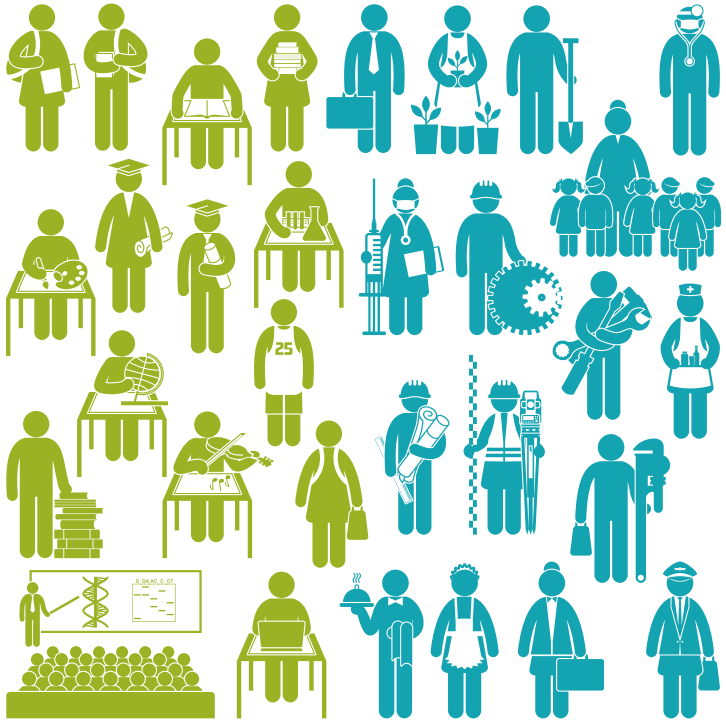
Key take-home message 2

Young people describe educational and employment transitions as a process of continual adjustment, where success depends not only on qualifications but also on experience, confidence, support networks and access to opportunities.

In sum:

Young people are not simply progressing through education into work; they are continually adapting expectations in response to opportunities, barriers, confidence, and labour-market realities.

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Thank you for your attention.