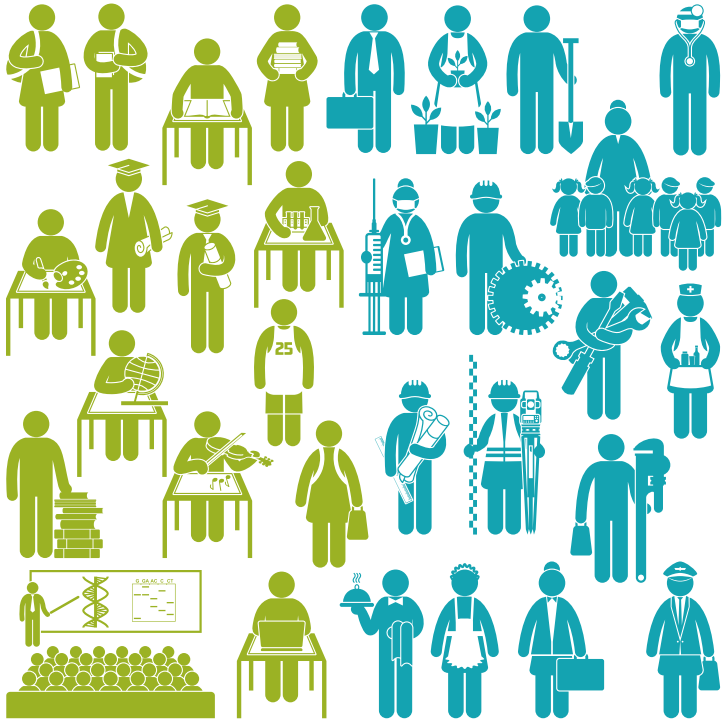
EDU LAB | European Youth in Transition to Education and Labour



Youth Voices from Italy

Personal Growth and *Self-Discovery* as Outputs and Driving Factors in Young-Adults' Educational and Work Trajectories: Preliminary Findings.

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The Research Team

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Case Study Location

Country: Bologna, IT (CS12)

Demographics & Territory: Capital of Emilia-Romagna with over 390,000 residents (52% women, 15% foreign nationals) and ~1 million in the metropolitan area (55 municipalities).

Education: Over 54 upper secondary schools and specialized vocational centers. Home to the University of Bologna (Western world's oldest, ~85,000 students), the Academy of Fine Arts, and the Conservatory.

Youth & Employment (2023): Youth unemployment stood at 17.4% and the NEET rate at ~11%. Supported by local vocational training, apprenticeships, and university career services.

Bologna - EDU-LAB

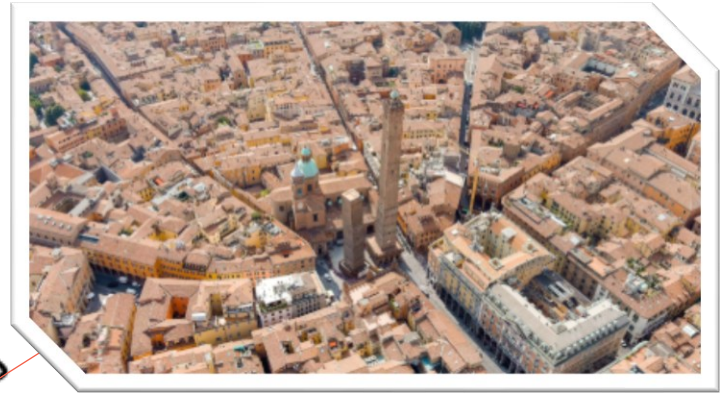


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Study Aim & General information

Study Aim

- What do young adults develop and come to understand about themselves as they navigate educational and employment trajectories?
- How do emerging dimensions of agency interact and shape subsequent educational and employment choices?

Findings from

- ✓ CS location: **CS12 - Bologna**
- ✓ Focus Groups: **4** (24-30 y.o. participants with at least a bachelor's degree)
- ✓ Total number of participants: **30**

Participants

Location

Bologna	30
Missing	0

Gender

Female	19
Male	11
Missing	0

Age

15-18 years	0
19-23 years	0
24 or > years	30
Missing	0

Country of Birth

Italy	27
Other	3
Missing	0

Migration Background

No migrant background	25
Migrant background	5
Missing	0

Ethnic Minority Background

No ethnic minority background	28
Ethnic minority background	-
Missing	-

- Data suppressed to prevent identification of individuals.

Participants

Disability Status

No disability	27
Disability	-
Missing/Prefer not to say	-

- Data suppressed to prevent identification of individuals.

In E&T

In E&T	18
Not in E&T	12
Missing	0

Employment situation

Only studying	10
In employment	11
Not in employment	-
Studying and in employment	7
Missing/Prefer not to say	-

- Data suppressed to prevent identification of individuals.

Profile

ISCED 3 - Academic	0
ISCED 3 - VET	0
ISCED 4-5	0
ISCED 6*	6
ISCED 7-8*	18
In employment or seeking a job	6
NEET & dropout youth	0

*Ongoing or concluded

Perceived SES

High	-
Medium	16
Low/very Low	11
Missing/Prefer not to say	-

- Data suppressed to prevent identification of individuals.

Summary of Key Findings

❑ Study aim

- What do young adults **develop** and come to **understand** about themselves as they navigate educational and employment trajectories?
- How do emerging dimensions of agency interact and shape subsequent educational and employment choices?

❑ Main results

❖ *Personal Growth* and *Self-Discovery* represent two dimensions of agency, capturing distinct ways in which individuals **actively shape and engage with their life circumstances and experiences** (NOTE: even if analytically distinguished, they can sometimes overlap).

❖ They reveal **how experiences of transition, uncertainty, and change contribute both to the development of personal capacities and to the clarification of individual orientations and priorities.**

Summary of Key Findings

Theme 1 – Personal Growth

What young people learn through challenging experiences:
capacities, competences, resources, self-awareness, ability to respond.

1. **A Shifting Sense of Agency**
   Moving from a phase in which life “happening” to the individual to a recognition of one’s capacity to shape one’s choices and direction (for instance by claiming one's own path)

2. **Transforming Setbacks into Resources**
   The ability to transform negative experiences (burnout, failure, exploitation) into meaningful data points for future growth.

3. **Emotional Regulation**
   Developing the capacity to manage systemic anxiety, moving from "scrupulous" perfectionism to "aware lightness."

Summary of Key Findings

Theme 1 – Personal Growth

A Shifting Sense of Agency

Moderator: As for your decision to attend a scientific high school, do you remember how that came about?

Participant, Italy: I was visiting schools, and I remember that ***my secondary school teachers had recommended a technical institute, but I was a bit stubborn about it. I said, "Yeah, I'm going to high school to prove I can do it."***

Moderator: There was a part where you said, "influenced by, strongly influenced by." Let's try to elaborate on that in more detail.

Participant, Italy: By my parents. Mainly, ***my father said, "You have to do this," and at that moment I replied, "I don't have to do anything." Then I did what he told me to do - let's say he gave me a little push - but ultimately, I made the decision myself.***

Transforming Seatbacks into Resources

Participant, Italy: I'd say that my BA and MA have profoundly transformed me as a person - I hope and believe in a positive way. […] What really helped me, paradoxically, to understand what I wanted to do was working under terrible conditions, as an exploited worker because ***it was precisely at that moment that I realized who I don't want to be and where I don't want to be. At the end, I believe that self-affirmation also comes through these negations****.*

Participant, Italy: I started doing classical studies in high school, which I deeply regretted, so in fourth year of high school - which was the second-to-last year because ***I'd been held back - I said, "Okay, this isn't for me". I hit a wall - everyone else who'd told me, "No, don't do it," was right. So I switched tracks*** *[…] and changed my academic focus entirely. [she abandoned her classical studies to find her place in the art world].*

Emotional Regulation

Participant, Italy: I felt the pressure to graduate on time[…] I've realized that I can't live just for university - that there are so many other aspects of my life that have caused me to fall behind on my exams - and I've come to terms with that. And now, despite my strong desire to get out of this small department that feels like a sheltered campus […] Let's just say ***I'm approaching everything with a little more awareness and a lighter heart****. I have five exams left to take, and I have to write my thesis.* ***I'm not quite sure what I'll do after graduation, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.***

Participant, Italy: I think it's also important ***to stay open to whatever experiences come your way****, rather than necessarily following a straight path and focusing solely on that single goal. In fact,* ***this could still lead me, for example, to discover the field of surgery.***

Summary of Key Findings

Theme 2 – Self-Discovery

What young people understand about themselves:
values, priorities, aspirations, boundaries, and what constitutes a fulfilling/dignified life.

1. **The "Script" vs. The "Self"**
   Distinguishing between the "safe" or "prestigious" paths expected by society/family and the paths that genuinely engage the individual.

2. **The Discovery of "Attitude"**
   Realizing one's inclinations - moving beyond mere capability (what one *can* do) to what one *wants* to do with pleasure.

Summary of Key Findings

Theme 2 – Self-Discovery

The "Script" vs. The "Self"

*Participant, Italy: I enrolled in university [in a program in the field of economics]. **It was a choice I now consider practical,** and one that led to fairly positive results. However, I don't think it was, all things considered, the best path for me. I went on to pursue a master's degree.*

Moderator: Let me interrupt you right there - what would have been the best choice?

*Participant, Italy: **I was supposed to become a high school Greek teacher**.*

Moderator: There you go. Easy. But that's not the case right now.

*Participant, Italy: That's not the case right now […] The basic idea is that for a few years I lived only with my mother; she, so to speak, took care of me and my sister. She was a high school teacher. Growing up, I didn't live a life of "hardship"- we were well-off - **but the idea was that "someday," my strong paternal instinct would drive me to ensure that my future children have greater financial stability** than a high school teacher can provide.*

*Participant, Italy: For me, it was a choice that was pretty much forced on me—in the sense that my family told me, "**Choose between classical and scientific high school**. You have no other options." Actually, if it had been up to me, **I would have studied agriculture**. So clearly, that influenced me afterward [then she made her own choice regarding her post-university career]*

The Discovery of "Attitude"

*Participant, Italy: I'm now doing a teacher training course because **I've discovered another passion: teaching**. Initially, this was my plan B. **Now that I'm actually doing it, I realise it should have been my first choice from the start.** So, bit by bit, I've got there; I'm currently working towards my teaching qualification, and once I've taken the exam, I'll be able to sit the competitive exam. And so I've put the research project completely to one side, because I'm no longer interested in it.*

*Participant, Italy: All this, however, comes down to the practical side of things: that is, after my three-year degree, I thought I'd be studying linguistics for the rest of my life, wearing thick-lensed glasses… but then I had more hands-on experience, interacting with people, **and at that point I shifted onto a broader path – one of personal enrichment too – which I'd previously put to one side**.*

*Participant, Italy : I realised that during my three-year bachelor's degree I had become very very ruthless and career-obsessed, and this caused me a great deal of distress. **It made me realise that I had to follow what made me happy, regardless of whether that meant financial rewards or good grades**.*

Conclusion

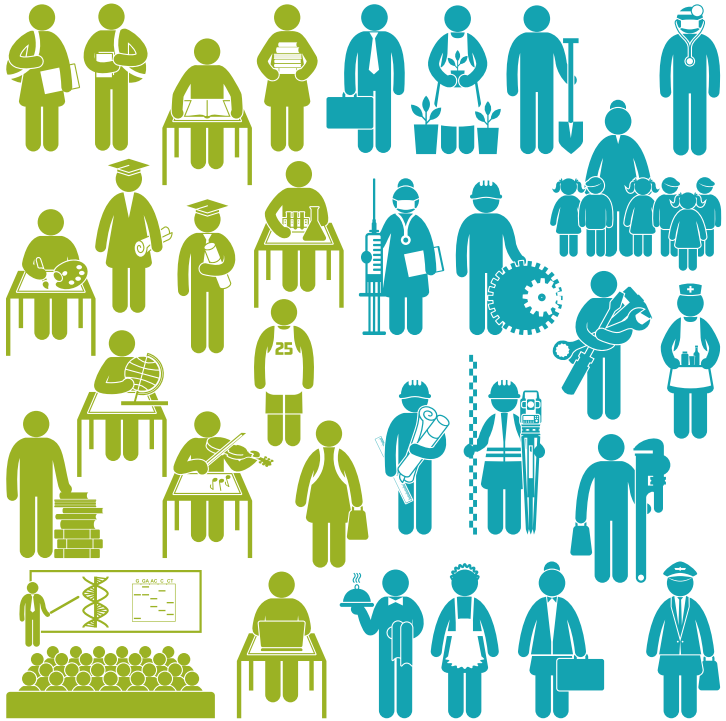
What we learn:

- *Personal Growth* and *Self-Discovery* are **not merely outcomes** of educational and employment trajectories, but key **drivers** of future choices and trajectories.
- *Personal Growth* and *Self-Discovery* are processes through which young people mediate **between their aspirations and life plans** and **the structural and contextual conditions within which these plans are pursued.**
- They capture how individuals interpret their experiences, reassess their expectations, and reflect on the opportunities and constraints they encounter, thereby shaping how they respond to changing circumstances and decide whether to persist with, adapt, or redirect a particular course of action.

In sum:

Personal Growth and *Self-Discovery* are processes **through which young people navigate an uncertain, de-traditionalised and de-standardised world**, making sense of their experiences and shaping their life trajectories. These processes, however, are not purely individual: **they are embedded in unequal social conditions and shaped by the opportunities and constraints provided by institutions and welfare policies**.

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Thank you for your attention.