

PLANNING AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' PROFESSIONAL CAREER IN POLAND AND ITALY – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Purpose: The aim of the article was identification and analysis of factors influencing students' career planning and development in Poland and Italy.

Design/methodology/approach: The first stage of the research involved an analysis of the source literature and a review of the activities undertaken by universities in order to support students in career planning. This was followed by an analysis of reports on the situation of young people on the labour market in Poland and Italy. The final research method was a diagnostic survey with the use of a questionnaire, which was addressed to students of selected universities in both countries.

Findings: Polish and Italian students are aware of their needs regarding their future careers, they are able to formulate career goals and to select a strategy needed to achieve them. However, there are noticeable differences in the implementation of their career plans. These discrepancies may be due to the socio-economic situation of students' countries of origin.

Practical implications: The article is a source of information for both students embarking on their professional careers and employers who will be able to meet the expectations of young employees, as well as universities seeking to create competitive activities in order to support professional development of their students and graduates.

Originality/value: The article presents an interesting, comprehensive and comparative study of students in two EU countries, taking into account not only labour market data, but also direct opinions of students and an analysis of the career support activities offered by universities.

Keywords: professional career, career counselling, student needs, labour market, higher education.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Changes that have taken place in society and economy as well as in an individual's identity have shaped the current approach to career management. In the past, a professional work system was in place and the learned occupation was most often a lifelong profession that defined a person's identity. One of the signs of the transformation of the contemporary approach to careers is the deviation from linear, predictable and long-term careers to the development of flexible, variable, mosaic careers implemented in many organisations where responsibility for their development has been transferred to employees (Smolbik-Jęczmień, 2020, p. 118).

Each generation of employees has its own characteristics, different goals, needs, expectations and approaches to life and career development. Particularly for young people, choosing a career is not an easy task, especially in the current reality in which it is difficult to plan the future and predict the results of our actions. Obtaining a university degree nowadays is no longer a guarantee of a rewarding career. This is because tertiary enrolment rates are increasing and more and more people decide to go to university. However, young people are aware of the fact that in order to meet the requirements of employers they must ensure their competitiveness as early as during their studies and take initiatives that result in increased competencies. Not only taking up their first job, but also making skilful use of the support offered by those around them and by universities may improve their career prospects. There are many publications on people from Generation Z. Most of them focus on issues concerning the motivation of this group of employees, e.g. Paszkiewicz, Wasiluk (2022), or their chances of finding employment, e.g. Messyasz (2021). Additionally, there are reports presenting the situation of young people on the labour market on a national, EU or global scale. Detailed studies usually deal with the situation in a selected country, there is a lack of comparative studies taking into account the situation of young people from different countries who outwardly live in the same conditions and taking into account both their own needs and opportunities in their environment.

The aim of the article was identification and analysis of factors influencing students' career planning and development in Poland and Italy. The research sample consisted of full-time, first-degree students from selected universities. The authors' aim was to compare such aspects of students' careers as: ideas about future work; needs, expectations, motivation and values they follow in life; as well as to check the extent to which their career goals are reached. In addition, the authors made an in-depth analysis of the activities supporting students' career plans offered by universities and the problems faced by students at the beginning of their careers. The results of the research were juxtaposed with a number of published reports on the situation of young people on the labour market, required competencies and preferred professions.

This research will identify career areas that need to be improved by university centres as well as companies employing Generation Z people. In addition, the results of the research will help students set their goals and choose the strategies necessary to achieve them at the beginning of their careers. They will also make young people aware of the possibilities around them.

2. Individual career planning and management

A person's career is a sequence of career-related experiences, accumulated over a lifetime (Arthur, Hall, Lawrence, 1989, p. 8). Thus, an individual who develops his or her career is a particular person. His or her career is focused on work-related experiences that arise from undertaken tasks and solved problems. An employee is responsible for initiating his or her own career planning and identifying skills, values and interests. This person also seeks out career opportunities in such a way so as to achieve his or her goals.

Career planning involves an individual making informed choices about occupation, workplace and self-development as well as exercising control over their career (Hall et al., 1986). Career management means a balance between needs of an individual and need of an organisation. In case of an individualistic approach, it is the individual who manages his or her career, taking into account individual interests, abilities, motivation, rational choices as well as biological and social development. From organisations' point of view, career management is a support for employees' career development in a form of offering appropriate activities (Jarosik-Michalak, 2018, p. 128).

Career exploration is related to the information that a person collected and that concern themselves and their environment. This includes information about talents, values and interests, as well as opportunities and barriers they may encounter in their work environment. Awareness of these issues is crucial because people may not know themselves well enough to choose the right career path, or they may overestimate their strengths in certain areas and judge themselves to be more talented than they actually are (Jarosik-Michalak, p. 125). Exploring the environment, on the other hand, makes it possible to gather information about relevant aspects of the profession as well as present or future alternative jobs. Self-awareness and knowledge of work environment make it easier to set one's career goals. It is important to note that career management is an ongoing and continuous process, as work is a major part of an individual's life and a satisfying career can promote a sense of fulfilment. In contrast, a sequence of poor career decisions can have a negative impact on further development (Greenhaus, Callanan, Godshalk, 2000, p. 34).

From an individual's point of view career theories may be divided into: life-cycle theories, e.g. the theory of E. Ginsberg (1951) or the theory of D.E. Super (1990), in which an individual's actions are related to their career stage and theories based on an individual's

needs, interests and personality. These include, in particular, E.H. Schein's (1985) concept of career determinants or the hexagonal model of J.L. Holland (1973).

One's career identified with different stages of working life is represented by concrete activities and psychological adjustment (Arthur, Rousseau, 2001), it involves various events and specific tasks. Skills that have been already mastered are not sufficient to perform in a given position throughout one's career. Enabling employees to continuously learn and retrain is an important task for organisations. The process of knowledge development as a result of training requires an organisation to take advantage of this knowledge and create conditions for sharing it (Olkowicz, 2013, p. 412).

A person's life constitutes a cycle within which there is an ordered system of consecutive stages containing a component of conscious or unconscious choice, and resulting from individual characteristics of a person or from the pressure of external conditions (Miś, 2007, p. 97). The cycle includes stages of building and stabilisation and transitional stages. Transition periods are distinct stages in which new roles are undertaken after old roles have been analysed and abandoned. An individual usually makes a career choice at a very young age, but not everyone succeeds in achieving their goal. Sometimes a person chooses a career at a later age or is not able to take such a decision at all. An individual may also modify his or her career aspirations due to changes in his or her environment, recognition of his or her own limitations, changes in values and attitudes and those related to personal life. Career choices may be unintentional; even if planned, they do not guarantee the achievement of goals (Baruch, 2004, p. 40).

A university period is the time when an individual is looking for a career path that suits him or her. The point at which young people currently enter the labour market is not clearly defined, as it is difficult to specify when an individual completes their education, takes up their first permanent job and experiences regular employment. This period involves a number of activities in areas relating to education and work that overlap with the years of youth and early adulthood, as more and more students take up work during their studies (Tomaszewska-Lipiec, 2018, p. 123). Those who undertake work activities while still studying need to manage their time effectively in order to fulfil their tasks properly and responsibly. The lack of this skill may result in a lower level of motivation to study, compared to those only studying. Many students seek additional income mainly to satisfy their higher needs. A job does not only provide an income, but also gives an opportunity to gain experience, which is increasingly required of young people in the labour market. In addition to this, working students can also learn new things, improve their skills and build networks before getting their dream job. Taking up employment is also an opportunity to become independent.

It should be noted that students do not always find a job in line with their expectations and that their studies do not always coincide with their ideas about education. Setting career goals and choosing a right company is not an easy task, especially when there are different options of career plans implementation. Another problem is insufficient information about jobs,

employers or the requirements in case of a specific role in an organisation. A young person may then feel unprepared to take responsibility for their career and requires support from those around them. This may include guidance from immediate family, friends, employers or universities. The higher education system may define a new lifestyle for individuals in order to equip them with skills that will allow them to avoid problems (Ghiasi Nodooshan, 2022, p. 21). Gathering information about career options, i.e. exploring the environment, raises students' awareness of whether their interests, values or behaviours integrate with the expected job. Self-exploration, on the other hand, integrates an individual's goals, values and future behaviour with potential career paths. Students may engage in exploration of the environment, discovering career options and gaining knowledge about specific jobs or organisations as well as seeking information about specific areas of professional interests (Kleine, Schmidt, Wisse, 2021, p. 3). Exploring both their environment and themselves, they can discover available career options and ultimately choose a career path that is in line with their values and interests. Besides, a discovery of factors that favour or hinder career exploration can contribute to understanding the conditions for successful preparation for entry into the work environment (Kleine, Schmidt, Wisse, 2021, p. 3). Exploration of one's environment and the self may also in some cases reveal a lack of preparation for a future career, thus reinforcing negative emotions related to the decision-making process (Kleine, Schmidt, Wisse, 2021, p. 14).

The Covid-19 epidemic and the armed conflict in Ukraine have had a major impact on young people's career opportunities. Many of those who study nowadays try to find their way in a new environment that is unpredictable and changeable. Moreover, the crisis caused by COVID-19 has once again reminded everyone of the key role that leaders play in dealing with unexpected events that threaten functioning of an organisation (Olkowicz, Jarosik-Michalak, 2022, pp. 55-63). Young people expect not only clear and understandable messages from their supervisor, but also support, especially in crisis situations.

According to the research conducted, young people from Generation Z are ready to perform tasks entrusted to them to the best of their ability if they are also adequately remunerated, are able to develop and expand their competencies and have the opportunity to decide or co-determine certain activities of the company; in such a case they accept the possibility that they will bind themselves to a company for a longer period of time (Gajda, 2017, p. 170). Generation Z employees also value a good and comfortable life, based on the concept of work-life balance in which work will be a source of satisfaction and good experiences (Paszkiwicz, Wasiluk, 2022, p. 255).

3. Support for student career planning by universities

Young people make their plans, including setting career goals, in various ways. Some plan to stay in their country, others consider a possibility of moving abroad. There are also those who want to have a professional position that will allow them to work at various locations around the world. Due to the ongoing changes in the field of higher education resulting from the process of European integration, new opportunities, possibilities and challenges have opened up for universities and students. However, in order to meet the demands of the competitive EU labour market, students should start building their careers as early as during their studies (Krauze, 2012, p. 37). The authors of this study reviewed programmes at high-scoring universities in Poland and Italy. They used the rankings from *Perspektywy 2023* and *Lagunita Education* publications. The most important measures are summarised and described in the following section of the study.

As part of career planning Polish universities provide their students with, among other things, career counselling, i.e. getting to know one's career potential, preparing CV documents, assistance in preparing for job interviews, coaching/mentoring, training, psychological support, legal consultations, internship and apprenticeship programmes. Students who want to get to know their potential, may take career aptitude tests. This tool helps to discover one's own distinguishable strengths and the skills that need strengthening. What is more, these tools are used in recruitment interviews in order to determine candidates' professional predispositions and the level of skills they possess that are useful for a specific job. Students also have the opportunity to take the Extended DISC Behavioural Analysis tests. This is an online diagnostic tool that provides respondents with information about their preferred ways of behaving, so-called behavioural styles. The results are discussed together with a Certified Extended DISC Consultant, thanks to which a student finds out what motivates and demotivates him or her the most, which professional situations may be the most stressful for him or her, what may have the greatest impact on success in his or her career, which tasks will be the least comfortable for him or her and which types of superiors are the easiest and the most difficult to work with.

Another counselling support is the possibility to meet with a career counsellor. During individual sessions students may get advice regarding their career paths, plan their professional development, get information on how to recruit in a specific company or practice a recruitment interview. Qualified career office staff and career counsellors help graduates notice the practical skills needed to navigate the labour market, while informing them about its requirements and current trends.

Students can also take advantage of a wide range of training courses and programmes to improve their qualifications and stand out in the labour market. Management and leadership programmes are innovative forms of developing future leaders by dynamically developing their management skills and expertise at the same time.

Other development activities involve ambassador programmes used as tools to build employers' brands among students from the very beginning of their academic journey. Nowadays ambassador programmes are comprehensive projects that open up a number of inspiring opportunities for students. Thanks to them young people may get to know a company, its culture and values from the inside. Another activity that supports career planning is job interviews. As part of mock interviews, universities offer students a possibility to arrange a mock interview so that they can test their skills in self-presentation, giving impressive answers to recruitment questions or salary negotiations. Moreover, as part of the universities' internship programmes, students can apply for offers recommended by Careers Office, both to domestic and foreign companies.

Universities in Italy offer similar measures to those mentioned above in order to support a professional development of their students. They also use special platforms to help students find their perfect job. National and international offers can be found there. Universities in Italy also offer their students and graduates internship opportunities to help them enter the labour market. Internships are organised in such a way as to enable learning in practice. Universities organise various events throughout the year in collaboration with companies and institutions to foster interaction between universities and the labour market and to provide students with opportunities to meet recruiters and professionals from national and international companies. Students have an occasion to learn about each company's selection process, may present their CVs and have a mock interview with recruiters.

In addition, a Career Office offers students a professional career orientation service to support the development of their employability during the problematic phase of the transition from university to work. The office organises Career Labs, i.e. career orientation and skills development workshops designed and run by the Careers Office in order to help students and graduates take their first steps on the job path, make more informed choices about their career future and gain confidence in the selection process. Some universities have signed collaborative agreements to implement individual mentoring programmes for students who meet specific requirements. They also offer the opportunity to participate in talent programmes to provide guidance and support during a career start-up phase. During individual meetings which are freely arranged with a mentor, students' ambitions, skills and career goals can be discussed. Those who successfully complete the course receive a Career Management Skills Open badge.

Universities also launch a personalised CV review consultancy service for their students and graduates. Individual meetings are supposed to provide useful advice and strategies for creating a winning CV. An important support for development activities is the *NoiBene* psychological intervention programme, aimed at preventing mental disorders among students, providing knowledge about mental health and promoting positive, flexible behaviour and improvement of life skills.

4. Situation on the labour market in Poland and Italy

Among the main determinants of the labour market change mentioned by experts there are: technological development, demographic change, population migration, rapid urbanisation, resource scarcity and climate change (PARP, 2022, p. 34). Also, unexpected events in recent years, such as a pandemic or the war in Ukraine, as well as constant technological progress, the uncertainty of tomorrow and randomness have a strong impact on employment opportunities. In turn, trends transforming the labour market include the automation of manual work, increasing voluntary turnover of employees, decreasing employee attachment to employers, increasing expectations/new motivation tools, changes in work patterns and the development of alternative forms of employment, concern for the psychological well-being of employees, monitoring of employees (PARP, 2022, p. 34).

It is increasingly difficult to predict how the demand for employees in particular industries will evolve and what competencies will be required of employees. Current reports indicate that only 10 per cent of people have an occupation that will not change, 20 per cent of people have an occupation that will disappear, while 70 per cent of people will need to retrain (Jagielska, 2023, p. 25).

Among the generations on the labour market there are more and more people from Generation Z. A large proportion of the young working population are university students. This situation is related to the increasing massification of higher education, hence the share of university students in the workforce is steadily increasing, as students are often flexible with regard to working hours and look for work in the service sector and fast-growing industries, including IT (Beblavý, Fabo, 2015, pp. 23-24). Despite the benefits of a university degree it is also noticeable that the role of formal education is diminishing and certified courses and other forms of digital education are gaining in popularity, regarded as an indicator of the competences expected by employers (Warsaw University Incubator, 2022, p. 16).

In April 2023 the unemployment rate among young people (up to 25 years of age) was 13.8% in the EU-27 and 13.9% in the euro area (Eurostat, 2023). Poland's unemployment rate among young people (under 25) was 10.3% (overall unemployment rate – 2.7%), while in Italy it was 20.4% (overall 7.8%).

According to the 37th edition of the survey “Job offers in Poland. Monitoring of recruitment processes in the Polish labour market”, prepared by Grant Thornton in May 2023, employers published 308.5 thousand new job offers on 50 largest recruitment online services in Poland; the highest year-over-year increase in offers was recorded for the positions of: CIO/IT Director (67%), Accountant/Accounting Specialist (43%) and Physician (36%); the largest decrease was in the positions of Chief Financial Officer/CFO (83%) as well as HR Business Partner and Marketing/Sales Director (41% each). As many as 77% of employers worldwide declare problems in finding a qualified talent. Companies mainly expected candidates to have

experience (81%), relevant education (44%), foreign language skills (32%) and be available (39%) (Grant Thornton, 2023). Among the abilities valued by graduates and employers in the 21st century were communication and problem-solving skills. In addition, critical thinking, initiative and self-direction as well as social and intercultural skills were also identified as important (Karaca-Atik et al., 2023, p. 11).

According to the report prepared by PageGroup's experts who specialise in the analysis of talents in the labour market and are active in Page Insight group under Talent Trends 2023 research, work-life balance is one of the most significant factors influencing job satisfaction. As many as 40% of people are willing to turn down a promotion if they feel it will have a negative impact on their wellbeing (PageGroup, 2023).

The research "Young Poles on the labour market", which was conducted jointly by PwC, Well.hr and Absolvent Consulting, shows that:

- young people positively assess their chances in the labour market,
- more than one half of young Poles declare that high remuneration is one of the paramount aspects of work,
- an important motivating factor, apart from remuneration, is also gaining experience, sense of work, flexible working hours, possibility to combine professional and private life, good atmosphere, supervisor's support and taking care of their well-being,
- the most important competences in their opinion, are above all: openness to changes and quick adaptation in new conditions, combining different skills, quick learning of new things as well as IT and programming languages expertise,
- there are a number of things that young employees would find difficult to accept in the workplace: remuneration inadequate to expectations, high stress level, insufficient development and promotion opportunities, conflicts in a team, repetitive, boring tasks and long commuting times.

The Italian labour market is very diverse. Industrial activities are mainly concentrated in the north, while people in the southern regions work mainly in agriculture and tourism (EURES, 2023).

According to the report prepared by European Economy (2023), the labour market situation in Italy improved significantly in 2022. The unemployment rate continues to fall steadily from a peak of 12.9% in 2014. Large mismatches between local demand and supply persist, mainly due to an insufficient supply of skilled workers where they are needed. When considering employment opportunities, location is important. In the third quarter of 2022, the unemployment rate in the south of Italy (14%) was twice as big as in the centre (6.6%) or the north (4.9%).

Analysing the data contained in the report (2023), it can be established that:

- youth employment rates remain low, especially in the southern regions;
- overall, only 61.9% of Italians aged 15-34 are employed compared to 76.4% in the Eurozone;

- those who have obtained a tertiary education (academic or vocational) are as likely to be employed in the north of Italy as the Eurozone average. In the south of Italy, on the other hand, employment rates are much lower than in the country as a whole. Hence, those with higher education are more likely to find a job;
- the share of young people not in employment, education or training falls to 19% in 2022. However, it is much higher for young people with a migrant background.

The results of empirical research whose aim was to propose a typology of labour markets of the European Union Member States show that labour markets characterised by the most favourable position of young employees include those existing in the Netherlands, Germany and the Nordic countries; the least favourable situation concerned Greece, Spain and Italy; the situation of the Polish labour market was assessed as average (Potocki, 2021, p. 10).

As it was mentioned earlier, the Covid-19 pandemic had a major impact on the labour market and thus on career opportunities. As a result of the crisis caused by the pandemic, unemployment rate among young people increased significantly. Limited on-the-job training, financial insecurity, housing instability and often psychological problems became a cause of hardship for many representatives of the younger generation (Mazurkiewicz, 2022, p. 137). The imposed isolation resulted in a higher anxiety and other psychological problems among young people, which has translated into a deterioration of their emotional well-being (Cowie, Myers, 2021, p. 63). These aspects should be considered by employers wishing to attract and retain the best young employees.

5. Methodology of the research

The design of the research on planning and career opportunities for students in Poland and Italy aimed to provide effective methods for collecting, analysing and sharing information. It included the definition of research objectives, the selection of the research sample, the choice of methods for collecting information and the qualitative analysis of the results. The main objective was identification and analysis of factors influencing students' career planning and development in Poland and Italy. The following specific aims were also set:

1. To identify factors relevant to career planning and management by an individual, taking into account the student group.
2. To identify solutions proposed by universities for the development of students' careers.
3. To analyse the situation of young people in the labour market in Poland and in Italy.
4. To compare future work perceptions of students in Poland and in Italy.
5. To identify the needs, motivations and expectations of Polish and Italian students with regards to their future work.
6. To identify the values which guide students in both countries when taking up a job.

7. To identify and determine the degree of completion of activities undertaken in relation to the realization of professional goals by the students taking part in the survey.
8. To identify the activities undertaken by the selected universities to support students' career plans.
9. To formulate recommendations for students, employers and universities in order to enhance the career opportunities of young people who study as well as those who study and at the same time undertake professional activity.

The research group consisted of full-time, first-year students of selected universities from Poland and Italy. The authors deliberately chose such a research sample consisting of young people who are at the beginning of their career path; some of them only study, some of them have their first work-related experience. It is presumed that these people may have a low awareness of how to plan and manage their own careers, how to look for opportunities in their environment and to take advantage of the opportunities offered by universities.

In the first stage of the research a literature analysis on careers was conducted and the stages of individual career management were described. Attention was paid to aspects related to an individual's self-exploration and the examination of the environment, with a particular focus on young people working and/or studying. This was followed by a review of the measures taken by universities in order to support students in career planning. The authors of the article selected for analysis both public and non-public universities ranked high in the university rankings. These included five universities located in Poland and Italy. Then, secondary sources were analysed to identify the labour market situation in Poland and Italy. Reports prepared by various research entities from Poland and Italy were analysed. The last research method was a diagnostic survey in a form of a questionnaire addressed to students of two selected universities – one in Poland, located in Pomerania, and the other in Italy – in the Campania region. A total number of 76 students completed the questionnaire administered to students of these entities. In addition, the data obtained as a result of the survey was further analysed.

6. Survey results analysis

The questionnaire included two research areas, the first part concerned individual career planning and management while the second area concerned support for students' career planning by universities. In the first question the respondents were asked to indicate how they perceived their future career by selecting up to three answers. The highest number of answers among Polish students was self-employment (31%), work in large organisations/corporations (22%), work as an expert/specialist in a particular field (22%) and work related to a passion/hobby, e.g. travelling (21%). Italian students also rated self-employment (47.6%) and working as an expert/specialist (47.6%) highly. Interestingly, while working for non-profit

organisations is an important part of their future plans (42%), among Polish respondents no student wants to tie their future to a non-profit organisation. Such a high result may indicate that Italian students want to act in accordance with their own values and that this is a greater priority for them than the prestige of the employer or the amount of earnings, which will also be confirmed by the next question. In addition, it is clear from the answers obtained that when thinking about self-employment, students value independence, e.g. flexible working hours and the possibility of combining work and private life. Perhaps they also prefer to work remotely and be able to travel around the world at the same time, for example. This form of work has become an important alternative to stationary work and is an important part of young people's lives.

In the following part of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means a low need and 5 means a high need, their needs in relation to future work. While high salaries are very important for Polish students, as many as 75% of respondents marked this answer as the most important, Italian respondents singled out the need for full-time employment (71% of respondents). This may most likely be due to the more difficult situation and the lack of stability in the labour market in Italy. Furthermore, for both Polish (82%) and Italian (81%) students, fair treatment is very important. This result shows that the feeling of injustice at a workplace is a significant issue for young people. Students are aware that when someone feels that they are being treated unfairly, their morale decreases and their commitment to work becomes lower. This in turn can lead to a reduced productivity, increased absenteeism and lower loyalty to the company. These problems may include, for example, inequalities in remuneration, lack of clear criteria for promotion, ineffective communication, insufficient access to training or limited decision-making. In order to eliminate these negative effects, organisations should focus on building a fair working environment. Only the introduction of clear promotion criteria and fair decision-making processes can help to minimise the sense of injustice. Communication also plays a key role in eliminating misunderstandings and strengthening trust between employees and organisations.

The same needs in relation to future work in both groups were also found for: opportunities for professional development and qualification, flexible working hours and health and safety.

As far as other needs are concerned, significant differences were observed. For Italian respondents a high salary was not as important as for Polish respondents. On the other hand, they were more interested in material non-wage motivation tools (e.g. multisport card, a company car, tickets for events) and a prestigious job position. Respondents from Poland had a high need to work with competent staff, while students from Italy had a higher need to work with modern devices, machines, equipment and the need to stand out, succeed and combine their professional and personal lives. Furthermore, the research shows that Polish respondents do not need additional social and pension benefits and are not interested in working fixed hours. The latter were also less important for Italian respondents.

In the next question, respondents were asked to indicate which values they valued in relation to their future work. Among the values listed, respondents could rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means low value and 5 means high value, values such as respect and dignity, gaining knowledge, recognition of expertise and talent, a sense of pride in one's work, involvement in the life of the company, the company's care for the environment, care for physical and mental health and good interpersonal relations.

Respondents from Poland rated care for physical and mental health and interpersonal relationships highest, with 89% correspondingly. Respect and dignity (87%), gaining knowledge (86%) and recognition of expertise and talent (82%) were also important to them. Italian respondents also considered respect and dignity (76%), followed by the acquisition of knowledge (76%), recognition of expertise and talent (72%), a sense of pride in one's work (71%) and good interpersonal relationships (71%) as valuable aspects.

Placing these values at such a high level indicates that people want to be noticed, valued for their skills and achievements. Moreover, they want to know that their merits will be appreciated. The importance of respect and dignity indicate that most people want to be respected for who they are. Besides, the respondents' care of their health may show their a desire for ways to organise their lives and their work from the point of view of current and future health maintenance. This quality of life is also strongly influenced by company policies and practices.

Another analysed issue was the identification of professional and personal goals. The study showed that Polish students want to be independent, with 54.5% of respondents giving this answer, while Italian respondents dream about an international career (43.6%), want to develop talents 43% and to be entrepreneurial or creative 42.9%. The common goals of the respondents were to have a stable, secure job and to enjoy a work-life balance. As for the personal goals, respondents from both countries recognised financial independence (83.6% in Poland and 66.7% in Italy). Students from Poland also want to enjoy life and be happy, 65% of respondents answered yes.

Interestingly, in both countries, respondents are not interested in raising a family and having a child. The survey shows that students need a stable job and a steady income, as well as safe working conditions. This may be related to recent unpredictable events in the world, such as the pandemic or the war in Ukraine. Workers who fear losing their jobs may not be as innovative as expected, similarly to those who work in unsafe conditions. On the other hand, placing the need for independence at the top of the list may offer many benefits, such as feeling confident, being able to make own decisions or developing creativity. The results show that young people want to feel confident, do not want to be dependent on others in many aspects of their lives and want to think and act freely. Furthermore, independence can lead to success, satisfaction and a happy life, while lack of independence may cause a limited personal and professional development, loss of control over one's life and decisions, which can negatively affect one's wellbeing.

In order to find out how future employees entering the labour market would like to achieve the above career goals, the authors prepared the next question, namely what actions young people take to accomplish their objectives. The respondents from Poland are most likely to go to university 98.2%, start work 60% and attend courses/training 43.6% in order to reach their goals.

The respondents from Italy take advantage of more opportunities, such as being active in study clubs (as many as 72% of respondents marked this answer), studying 66.7% and working 62%. Many respondents also attend conferences and seminars 57.1% and take advantage of internship and apprenticeship opportunities in selected organisations 52.4%.

The results show a large disparity between the respondents of the two countries. Italian students are aware that in order to be able to develop their international career, their talents or their creativity, it is crucial to take advantage of the availability of additional development activities offered by the university. This attitude can foster a better exploration of the environment and thus develop their careers in line with their strategy. Moreover, attending conferences helps to understand one's career prospects better. These activities enhance competences, promote personal development and can help to gain knowledge about the latest trends, technologies or working methods. The interest of young Italians in the activities offered by educational institutions may also be due to the difficult situation of Generation Z in the labour market, as the available reports show. Awareness of the realities of work necessitates using the opportunities available in the environment.

Further analyses of the survey conducted among respondents concerned the support provided for them in pursuing a career. When asked who supports you most in your career plans, Polish respondents rated parents 81.8% highest, followed by a partner and friends 45%. The research showed that employers do not support young students in their career development. This situation shows that employers lack the awareness that if they educate students so as they meet their expectations, they will get a loyal, competent and familiar employees in the future. The situation is slightly different among the respondents in Italy. They receive the most support from their parents 53%, followed by employers 43%, partners and friends 38% and a career counsellor 9.5%.

The next stage of the research was to find out what support offered by the university the respondents use for their professional development. Their answers varied significantly. A higher level of activity was noted among Italian students. Respondents from Poland are most likely to use library resources, as many as 40% of respondents marked this activity, participate in job fairs 22%, engage in study clubs 18.2% and only 5.5% of respondents use Erasmus programmes. In Italy, on the other hand, the respondents use Erasmus programmes most frequently, with as many as 86% of them indicating this activity, followed by using available language courses 48%, research internships 43% and library resources 33.3%. This leads to the conclusion that young Italians want to go on Erasmus for various reasons. One of them may be a change in the labour market and a desire to gain international experience. Besides, these

programmes help them discover their own talents, adapt to new situations, acquire new competencies related to language, digital, social and professional skills, among others.

The research shows that students in both countries are mostly development conscious and want to have a satisfactory career. The economic situation of the country, unstable career paths and difficulties in adapting to changes in the labour market had an impact on the results. The change in mentality and attitude towards work of the younger generations is different from that of the older ones, the pandemic because of which many people had to change jobs and did not to return to their previous work are some of the reasons that have influenced the current situation.

The final aspect addressed in the research were problems in the labour market. The respondents were asked what difficulties they had encountered when looking for a job. As many as 65% of the Polish respondents and 76% of the Italian students indicated unreasonable expectations. Nowadays, browsing job advertisements, one may indeed notice that most employers require several years of experience and high competencies. It is very difficult for people entering the labour market to meet such expectations and they may feel like losers from the start of their career path. Another problem concerned the expectation that students will be fully available at work. In Poland, as many as 51% and in Italy 47% of respondents indicated such an answer. It is difficult to study and work at the same time. This attitude of employers certainly does not encourage young people to pursue formal education. Other problems encountered by Polish students were: the scope of duties incompatible with the job position (40%), unstable working conditions (37%) and lack of development (29%). In Italy, on the other hand, additional problems were discrimination (38%) or lack of introduction to work (33%).

On the basis of the analysis of the above information, it can be concluded that students in the labour market may face a number of problems in finding employment. One reason for this is the choice of popular fields of study or the lack of attempts to enter the labour market. Problems with high requirements can lead to frustration and a sense of injustice among employees. However, these expectations do not have to be negative when they go hand in hand with managerial support. Moreover, the adaptation of new employees, as indicated by the students, is an important process in which new employees adapt to work in a new environment, role and organisation. Obviously, this is an activity that involves several stages, but it is worth taking care of it in order to have an employee who will be fully productive in the future. Moreover, besides the fact that employers should create conditions and support young employees, young people should also think about how to improve their chances on the labour market. The list of tasks is long, since Generation Z should already be learning new contacts, skills such as communication and teamwork. It is a good idea to do internships so that they can gain valuable experience and practical skills, which may also be of interest to a future employer. It is worth taking advantage of the fact that universities encourage their students to participate in conferences, workshops or study clubs. These activities do not only give valuable experience, but may also increase young people's chances in the labour market.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The research has made it possible to identify factors important for the planning and development of careers of students from two European Union countries – namely Poland and Italy. The analysis of the literature on the subject enabled the identification of factors subject to self-exploration and examination of the environment undertaken by individuals managing their career. These aspects were taken into account in the survey targeted at university students in the region of Pomerania in Poland and in the region of Campania in Italy.

The review of the career support activities offered by leading universities to students and graduates in both countries revealed that leaders in higher education propose a wide range of solutions to help young people who are looking for employment. Among others, universities offer career counselling, coaching, mentoring, training, competency-enhancing workshops, psychological support, legal consultations, career labs, internship and apprenticeship programmes, numerous aptitude tests, Erasmus trips, job platforms, management and leadership schedules and even ambassador programmes. In addition, they enable people with neuroatypicalities to pursue careers by adapting programmes dedicated to them. Therefore, students in Poland and Italy may take advantage of various opportunities available in their academic environment.

The analysis of reports on the labour market situation of young people in Poland and Italy revealed that students, despite studying in the EU, have different employment opportunities. The situation on the Polish labour market is assessed as average compared to European countries, while the job prospects in Italy, especially in the southern regions, are unfavourable. Hence, the career expectations of the students surveyed in the two countries differed in many aspects.

The survey conducted showed that both Polish and Italian university students are aware of what they want to do in life and are able to name their needs and values in relation to future work. For both groups of respondents, independence and self-employment were important factors in pursuing a career. Fair treatment, ethical behaviour, flexible working hours, job stability and physical and psychological security, as well as social relations, were also found to be important.

Polish students furthermore highly value high salaries and working as experts. Many of them see themselves as development-oriented corporate employees. They also expect support from competent leaders. They cannot imagine working fixed hours and are not interested in additional social benefits. The majority of Polish students are simultaneously active in their careers. The people who support them in the realisation of their professional plans are mainly family and friends.

Italian students would mostly like to hold a prestigious position, not necessarily in a large company. For some of them, working in non-profit organisations is also important. They pay attention to non-salary material factors to motivate employees, but their salaries do not have to be very high. Instead, they expect access to new technologies and modern tools in their work. They are primarily helped by their family, but also by their employers in pursuing their careers.

When it comes to the opportunities offered by universities, these options are definitely used more often by Italian students, who are not only interested in the basic activities offered in most universities, but are also keen to get involved in study circles, attend conferences and seminars.

Interestingly, both young people from Poland and Italy no longer want to start a family. This situation may be due to an unstable and uncertain future, fears of a pandemic and the war in Ukraine. It is clear that young people are primarily focused on their development and a comfortable life. They are not making long-range plans.

It is evident from the conclusions cited that Polish students do not take full advantage of the opportunities around them. They care primarily about material benefits and their needs are a factor in their decision to work. This attitude may be due to the favourable, at the moment, situation on the labour market. Nevertheless, in order to be competitive, they need to take care of their development. Italian students, whose labour market situation is much more difficult, realise that additional skills and higher education can contribute to their success in the labour market. They take advantage of the opportunities offered by their universities and are willing to take a job that gives them a sense of security. To gain competitiveness in the labour market, they seek access to innovative technologies and are willing to gain experience in international markets.

The results presented here can add practical information to the literature on how students pursue careers. Young people will gain knowledge on how to manage their own careers and the opportunities provided to them by universities. Employers in both countries should pay attention to the values and needs of young people, making it easier for them to tailor their job offers to this group of employees. The role of universities is to reach out to young students with their wide range of career-enhancing activities and encourage them to take advantage of the various opportunities. It is also worth making students aware at all times that the labour market is changing, that the range of competences required will be modified, and that it is therefore worth taking advantage of the opportunities in the environment and continuously acquiring new qualifications, skills and experience.

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