

- Encouraging Upskilling Through Industry-Specific Training

Companies will be motivated to provide upskilling opportunities for current employees rather than relying on new hires. Short, industry-focused training programs will be promoted, covering key technical skills and adaptability training. Where possible, financial incentives or subsidies for upskilling programs will be explored to encourage broader participation.

- Creating Small-Scale Career Guidance and Mentorship Initiatives

Instead of large, resource-heavy programs, small and targeted career guidance initiatives will be prioritized. These include networking events, career fairs with industry representatives, and one-on-one mentoring programs run by professionals within specific fields. Universities and training centers will be encouraged to integrate these initiatives into existing curricula.

DISPARITIES IN SURVEY RESPONSES ACROSS COUNTRIES: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

The survey results in Table 15 highlight interesting differences in how people from Slovenia, Austria, Slovakia, Greece, and Serbia perceive key labour market trends. The most important trends, according to respondents, are technological advancements ($\bar{x} = 3.94$) and digitalization ($\bar{x} = 3.91$), both receiving high overall ratings. However, the level of importance given to these trends varies between countries, especially for technological advancements, where the differences are statistically significant ($p = 0.000$). This suggests that some countries may be experiencing or prioritizing these changes more than others.

Another trend with notable differences across countries is globalization and international trade ($\bar{x} = 3.79$), which is seen as more significant in some regions than others. Similarly, opinions on the shift toward a gig and freelance economy ($\bar{x} = 3.36$) vary widely ($p = 0.000$), indicating that flexible work models are more relevant or developed in certain countries. On the other hand, topics such as sustainability ($\bar{x} = 3.71$), evolving customer demands ($\bar{x} = 3.74$), and demographic changes ($\bar{x} = 3.60$) received similar ratings across all five countries, meaning they are generally viewed as equally important regardless of location.

Some trends were rated lower in importance but still showed significant differences between countries. For example, the impact of wars (Ukraine, Israel) ($\bar{x} = 3.43$, $p = 0.028$) and the increasing focus on diversity and inclusion ($\bar{x} = 3.40$, $p = 0.047$) were not seen as top priorities overall, yet perceptions of their significance varied depending on the country. This suggests that external events and social issues influence labour markets differently based on regional circumstances.

These results highlight that while technology and digitalization are widely recognized as key forces shaping the future of work, other trends—such as globalization, gig work, and social issues—are perceived differently across countries. These differences may reflect varying economic conditions, policies, and cultural attitudes towards work and employment.

Table 15: Statistical Differences in the Significance of Labour Market Trends

Trend	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Technological advancements	3.99	4.16	4.20	3.64	3.76	3.94	0.000***
Digitalization and automation	3.99	4.07	4.00	3.6	3.97	3.91	0.014*
Importance of mental health	4.01	3.81	3.94	3.64	3.80	3.84	0.162
Globalization and international trade	3.64	3.96	4.06	3.56	3.79	3.79	0.002**
Evolving customer and market demands	3.72	3.79	3.76	3.70	3.73	3.74	0.977
Sustainability and green economy	3.58	3.97	3.78	3.59	3.71	3.71	0.159
Remote and hybrid work models	3.91	3.66	3.49	3.65	3.77	3.69	0.056
Values changes	3.75	3.66	3.74	3.57	3.62	3.67	0.654
Demographic changes	3.58	3.69	3.69	3.50	3.56	3.60	0.661
Localization (importance of local products)	3.43	3.62	3.44	3.68	3.74	3.58	0.160
Wars (Ukraine, Israel)	3.13	3.37	3.61	3.48	3.54	3.43	0.028*
Increased focus on diversity and inclusion	3.38	3.37	3.14	3.55	3.54	3.40	0.047*
Shift towards gig and freelance economy	3.59	3.12	3.05	3.61	3.37	3.36	0.000***

Results (Table 16) highlight key competencies that individuals need to successfully integrate into the labour market, with notable differences across countries. The most highly rated competencies overall are self-awareness ($\bar{x} = 4.13$), problem-solving and critical thinking ($\bar{x} = 4.07$) and resilience ($\bar{x} = 4.02$), suggesting that these qualities are widely recognized as essential for career success. However, perceptions of their importance vary significantly between countries, particularly for problem-solving and critical thinking and resilience, indicating that different regions place different levels of emphasis on these skills.

Other competencies that received high overall ratings include employability, communication, and customer orientation ($\bar{x} = 3.98$), both of which show statistically significant differences between countries. This suggests that while these skills are valued, some countries may prioritize them more than others. Digital literacy ($\bar{x} = 3.94$) also stands out as an important skill, reflecting the increasing role of technology in the labour market. Some competencies, while still important, show less variation across countries. Creativity, collaboration ($\bar{x} = 3.94$), and labour market awareness ($\bar{x} = 3.93$) are rated similarly across all five countries, indicating a shared understanding of their relevance. However, career planning ($\bar{x} = 3.92$) and curiosity and inquisitiveness ($\bar{x} = 3.82$) show statistically significant differences, suggesting that some regions may place a stronger emphasis on these aspects than others.

The data show that soft skills, such as critical thinking, resilience, and self-awareness, are considered the most essential for successful labour market integration, though their perceived importance varies across regions. Meanwhile, technical skills and leadership are rated as less crucial, pointing to a broader shift in the job market where adaptability and interpersonal abilities play a more prominent role than purely technical expertise.



Table 16: Statistical Differences in Competencies Needed for Labour Market Integration

Competencies	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Self-awareness	4.10	4.26	4.15	3.84	4.36	4.13	0.004**
Problem-solving and Critical Thinking	4.08	4.25	4.36	3.70	3.99	4.07	0.000***
Resilience	3.95	4.32	4.22	3.68	4.01	4.02	0.000***
Employability	3.84	4.06	4.08	3.73	4.20	3.98	0.004**
Communication and Customer Orientation	3.80	4.22	4.15	3.79	4.03	3.98	0.004**
Digital Literacy	4.10	4.04	4.09	3.69	3.83	3.94	0.011*
Creativity	3.89	4.10	4.03	3.75	3.97	3.94	0.144
Collaboration	3.92	4.13	4.03	3.72	3.97	3.94	0.071
Labour Market Awareness	3.84	4.07	4.02	3.80	3.95	3.93	0.219
Career Planning	3.84	3.96	4.11	3.70	3.98	3.92	0.028*
Empathy	3.96	3.94	3.82	3.74	3.90	3.87	0.586
Technical Skills	3.86	4.04	3.85	3.75	3.83	3.85	0.456
Leadership	3.83	3.96	3.80	3.70	3.91	3.83	0.425
Curiosity and Inquisitiveness	3.69	4.01	3.95	3.64	3.87	3.82	0.046*
Self-employment Skills	3.63	3.96	3.81	3.6	3.89	3.78	0.111

Obtained data (Table 17) reveal key insights into how various labour market trends influence the need for individuals to develop new competencies. The highest-rated trend in this regard is technological advancements ($\bar{x} = 3.95$), with significant differences across countries ($p = 0.001$), indicating that some regions feel more urgent to adapt to technological changes than others. Similarly, the importance of mental health ($\bar{x} = 3.88$) shows statistically significant differences between countries ($p = 0.010$), suggesting that awareness and the need for mental health-related competencies vary across regions.

While digitalization and automation ($\bar{x} = 3.94$) are widely recognized as requiring new skills, there are no statistically significant differences between countries, indicating a shared understanding of its impact. Other trends, such as evolving customer and market demands ($\bar{x} = 3.78$), sustainability and the green economy (3.77), and globalization ($\bar{x} = 3.76$), receive moderate ratings but do not show significant differences across the surveyed countries, implying a uniform perception of their importance.

Some trends are seen as less critical for competency development, with notable regional differences. The shift toward a gig and freelance economy ($\bar{x} = 3.43$) shows strong variation across countries, indicating that in some regions, gig work is becoming a more prominent career path, while in others, it remains less relevant. Likewise, the impact of wars ($\bar{x} = 3.40$) on skill development is rated lower overall, suggesting that while geopolitical conflicts may affect the labour market, they are not perceived as requiring significant adaptation in new competencies.

The analysis underscores that technological advancements, digitalization, and mental health awareness are the most pressing factors driving the need for new skills. However, perceptions of these needs differ between countries, particularly regarding technology and gig work, reflecting regional variations in economic structures and labour market demands.

Table 17: Statistical Differences in the Need for New Competencies Due to Labour Market and Trends

New Competencies	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Technological advancements	4.03	3.97	4.26	3.70	3.80	3.95	0.001***
Digitalization and automation	4.09	3.72	3.93	3.83	4.06	3.94	0.108
Importance of mental health	4.08	3.62	4.09	3.77	3.76	3.88	0.010**
Evolving customer and market demands	3.77	3.85	3.88	3.57	3.86	3.78	0.127
Sustainability and Green Economy	3.76	3.62	3.95	3.61	3.84	3.77	0.134
Globalization and international trade	3.67	3.66	3.88	3.70	3.85	3.76	0.337
Remote and hybrid work models	3.85	3.56	3.49	3.79	3.70	3.68	0.070
Localization (importance of local products)	3.72	3.59	3.55	3.61	3.80	3.65	0.385
Values changes	3.87	3.46	3.62	3.57	3.63	3.64	0.099
Demographic changes	3.58	3.56	3.64	3.67	3.68	3.63	0.896
Increased focus on diversity and inclusion	3.66	3.26	3.43	3.56	3.65	3.53	0.093
Shift towards gig and freelance economy	3.62	3.29	3.09	3.60	3.43	3.43	0.001***
Wars (Ukraine, Israel)	3.29	3.13	3.46	3.50	3.53	3.40	0.112

Findings (Table 18) indicate that students across all five countries feel similarly prepared in addressing challenges related to soft skills ($\bar{x} = 3.65$), critical thinking and problem-solving ($\bar{x} = 3.59$), and digital literacy ($\bar{x} = 3.5$), as there are no significant differences between countries. This suggests that respondents generally perceive themselves as moderately capable in these areas, highlighting a shared confidence level in tackling these competencies.

However, significant differences emerge when looking at other challenges. Students in Serbia consistently rate themselves the highest, indicating they feel better prepared in these areas compared to other countries. On the other hand, students in Slovakia rate themselves the lowest, suggesting they perceive greater gaps in their readiness for the labour market.

Table 18: Statistical Differences in Perceived Preparedness for Addressing Competency Gaps

Perceived Preparedness	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Inadequate soft skills	3.63	3.69	3.58	3.58	3.80	3.65	0.499
Lack of critical thinking and problem-solving skills	3.47	3.68	3.48	3.57	3.77	3.59	0.247
Insufficient digital literacy	3.62	3.41	3.45	3.52	3.69	3.55	0.393
Limited practical work experience	3.44	3.53	3.08	3.50	3.81	3.47	0.000***
Difficulty adapting to workplace culture	3.44	3.53	3.08	3.50	3.81	3.47	0.050*
Shortage of employees	3.46	3.31	3.05	3.40	3.99	3.44	0.000***
Poor alignment of educational curricula with job needs	3.34	3.43	3.17	3.43	3.70	3.41	0.004**
Lack of industry-specific technical skills	3.43	3.49	3.05	3.36	3.66	3.39	0.000***
Difficulty offering competitive salaries or benefits	3.41	3.29	3.11	3.47	3.54	3.37	0.014*
High turnover or lack of employee retention strategies	3.24	3.25	3.11	3.50	3.60	3.35	0.001***
Legal or administrative barriers to hiring	3.17	3.19	2.92	3.52	3.67	3.30	0.000***



Insights from the data reveal notable differences in how students across five countries perceive the effectiveness of various forms of support for their academic and career development (Table 19). The most highly rated forms of support overall are internships and practical placements ($\bar{x} = 4.02$) and financial aid and scholarships ($\bar{x} = 3.90$), both of which show statistically significant differences between countries ($p = 0.000$). This suggests that while these forms of support are generally seen as valuable, their effectiveness may vary based on how well they are implemented in different regions. Similarly, workshops and training sessions ($\bar{x} = 3.78$) are considered effective, though with some variation across countries ($p = 0.013$).

Students in Slovakia consistently rate internships and financial aid as the most effective, with the highest scores in these categories (4.42 and 4.34, respectively). This suggests that these forms of support are either more accessible or better structured in Slovakia than in other countries. On the other hand, Greek students consistently rate these supports the lowest, particularly for financial aid (3.47) and internships (3.66), indicating that students there may find them less beneficial or harder to access. Other forms of support, such as mental health and well-being services ($\bar{x} = 3.71$) and academic advising ($\bar{x} = 3.59$), also show significant differences between countries. Serbian students rate these supports the highest, suggesting they may have better access to or a greater appreciation for these resources. Meanwhile, career counselling services ($\bar{x} = 3.52$) are among the lowest rated supports overall, with significant differences across countries, indicating that many students may not find them particularly useful or effective in their current form.

The comparative analysis shows that internships, financial aid, and training workshops are the most effective support mechanisms for students' academic and career development. However, their perceived effectiveness varies significantly across countries. Slovak students rate these supports the highest, while Greek students rate them the lowest, highlighting potential differences in availability and quality. Meanwhile, career counselling and academic advising receive lower overall ratings, suggesting a need to improve how these services are delivered.

Table 19: Statistical Differences in the Perceived Effectiveness of Support for Academic and Career Development

Support	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Internships and practical placements	3.80	4.35	4.42	3.66	3.98	4.02	0.000***
Financial aid and scholarships	3.74	4.13	4.34	3.47	3.88	3.90	0.000***
Workshops and training sessions	3.52	3.90	3.91	3.69	3.94	3.78	0.013*
Networking opportunities	3.44	3.82	3.73	3.67	3.85	3.70	0.053
Mental health and well-being support	3.44	4.04	3.76	3.49	3.94	3.71	0.001***
Online platforms for skills development	3.40	3.63	3.78	3.67	3.79	3.66	0.061
Access to professional associations	3.49	3.81	3.53	3.63	3.82	3.64	0.094
Academic advising	3.33	3.60	3.51	3.63	3.90	3.59	0.004**
Mentorship programs	3.40	3.72	3.52	3.60	3.72	3.58	0.141
Peer support groups	3.35	3.43	3.64	3.49	3.89	3.57	0.003**
Career counselling services	3.20	3.56	3.44	3.51	3.92	3.52	0.000***



The survey results highlight significant differences in how students across five countries perceive their involvement in shaping their career paths (Table 20). Overall, the most highly rated activity is using online platforms to learn about social phenomena ($\bar{x} = 3.62$), with statistically significant differences between countries. Serbian students rate their involvement in this area the highest (3.99), while Slovenian students give it the lowest (3.21). This suggests that students in Serbia may be more actively using digital resources to explore career-related topics than their peers in other countries.

Engaging in internships and practical placements ($\bar{x} = 3.37$) is another key aspect of career involvement. However, Slovak students rate themselves significantly lower (2.65) than students in Austria (4.01), where internships appear to play a much larger role. Similarly, participation in career workshops and webinars ($\bar{x} = 3.28$) varies widely, with Slovak students again reporting the lowest involvement (2.61), while Serbian students (3.90) rate their participation the highest.

Networking with professionals and alumni ($\bar{x} = 3.23$) and collaborating on projects addressing societal issues ($\bar{x} = 3.20$) are the lowest-rated areas of involvement. Slovak students feel the least engaged in both categories, with ratings of 2.30 and 2.33, respectively. In contrast, Austrian and Serbian students report much higher levels of engagement, suggesting that opportunities for professional networking and social project collaboration are more accessible or encouraged in these countries.

The findings suggest that students in Serbia and Austria feel the most involved in shaping their career paths. At the same time, those in Slovakia report the lowest levels of engagement across all activities. Online learning and internships are the most common ways students develop their careers, but networking and societal project involvement remain lower overall, indicating potential areas for improvement in career support initiatives.

Table 20: Statistical Differences in Perceived Involvement in Shaping Career Paths

Involvement	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Using online platforms for learning about social phenomena	3.21	3.85	3.47	3.64	3.99	3.62	0.000***
Engaging in internships or practical placements	3.35	4.01	2.65	3.48	3.63	3.37	0.000***
Participating in career workshops or webinars	2.88	3.49	2.61	3.61	3.90	3.28	0.000***
Networking with professionals and alumni	3.07	3.81	2.30	3.50	3.71	3.23	0.000***
Collaborating on projects addressing societal issues	2.89	3.75	2.33	3.59	3.65	3.20	0.000***

Regional differences are also evident in students' understanding of community issues and the labour market (Table 21). The highest-rated area of knowledge overall is awareness of community challenges ($\bar{x} = 3.77$), with significant differences between countries. Serbian students report the highest awareness (4.10). In contrast, Slovenian and Greek students feel the least informed (3.56), suggesting that students in Serbia may have more exposure to community-related issues or educational initiatives addressing them.

Similarly, knowledge of career pathways ($\bar{x} = 3.71$) and awareness of local labour market trends ($\bar{x} = 3.64$) show notable variation, with Serbian students again reporting the highest levels of understanding. This indicates that students in Serbia may have better access to career guidance resources or a stronger connection to the job market. In contrast, students in Greece and Slovenia report lower awareness in these areas, potentially highlighting gaps in career education.



A particularly striking difference appears in understanding career service learning ($\bar{x} = 3.53$) and its connection to transferable skills ($\bar{x} = 3.51$). Slovak students rate themselves the lowest in both categories (2.81 and 2.69), while Serbian students feel the most knowledgeable (4.01 and 3.94). This suggests that career service learning is either less emphasized or less accessible in Slovakia, whereas Serbian students may have more structured opportunities to engage in practical, career-related experiences.

The data show that Serbian students feel the most informed about community issues and career-related knowledge, while Slovak students report the lowest levels of understanding, particularly in areas related to career service learning and transferable skills. The differences across countries highlight potential disparities in educational programs and access to career development resources.

Table 21: Statistical Differences in Knowledge about Career Service Learning

Knowledge	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Awareness of Community Challenges	3.56	3.94	3.75	3.56	4.10	3.77	0.000***
Knowledge of Career Pathways	3.56	3.76	3.73	3.54	3.98	3.71	0.008**
Identifying Relevant Professional Roles	3.48	3.91	3.64	3.67	3.76	3.68	0.066
Recognition of Employer-Desired Skills	3.58	3.82	3.56	3.64	3.82	3.67	0.189
Awareness of Local Labour Market Trends	3.53	3.68	3.51	3.58	3.95	3.64	0.009**
Familiarity with Experiential Learning	3.54	3.60	3.58	3.64	3.75	3.62	0.616
Understanding Root Causes of Challenges	3.38	3.74	3.56	3.48	3.86	3.59	0.002**
Understanding Career Service Learning	3.77	3.49	2.81	3.62	4.01	3.53	0.000***
Career Service Learning and Transferable Skills	3.77	3.54	2.69	3.65	3.94	3.51	0.000***

Analysis revealed notable differences in students' attitudes toward Career Service Learning across Slovenia, Austria, Slovakia, Greece, and Serbia (Table 22). The highest-rated statement overall is the value of practical learning experiences ($\bar{x} = 4.14$), with statistically significant differences between countries. Slovak students rate this the highest (4.42), indicating a strong appreciation for direct learning. In contrast, Greek students give it the lowest rating (3.79), suggesting a potential gap in access to or recognition of practical learning opportunities. Another key difference is seen in career service learning for job readiness ($\bar{x} = 3.83$), where Slovak students again report the lowest agreement (3.58), while Slovenian students rate it the highest (4.08). This suggests that Slovak students may not view Career Service Learning as strongly contributing to their job preparation compared to students in other countries. Similarly, confidence in Career Service Learning (3.75) shows variation, with Slovak students rating themselves the lowest (3.45), while Serbian and Slovenian students express greater confidence in its effectiveness.

Another significant difference appears in motivation for Career Service Learning ($\bar{x} = 3.69$), where Serbian students rate their motivation the highest (4.00), while Slovak students report the lowest levels (3.28). This suggests that students in Serbia may have a stronger drive to engage in career-related learning activities, whereas students in Slovakia may be less motivated due to limited opportunities or perceived relevance. The evidence suggests that Slovak students value practical learning greatly but feel less motivated and confident in Career Service Learning's impact on their career readiness. In contrast, Serbian and Slovenian students show greater motivation and confidence in its benefits. These differences highlight potential disparities in how Career Service Learning is structured and promoted across different countries.



Table 22: Statistical Differences in Attitudes toward Career Service Learning

Attitudes	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Value of Practical Learning Experiences	4.22	4.31	4.42	3.79	3.99	4.14	0.000***
Openness to Learning New Skills	3.79	4.15	4.01	3.86	4.06	3.96	0.082
Willingness to Invest in Employability Activities	3.92	4.09	4.00	3.84	3.93	3.95	0.523
Career Service Learning for Job Readiness	4.08	3.82	3.58	3.79	3.90	3.83	0.013*
Career Service Learning as Knowledge Application	3.93	3.90	3.61	3.76	3.79	3.79	0.186
Actively Exploring Career Opportunities	3.56	3.65	3.96	3.70	3.93	3.77	0.018*
Confidence in Career Service Learning	3.90	3.71	3.45	3.78	3.91	3.75	0.007**
Motivation for Career Service-Learning	3.66	3.78	3.28	3.79	4.00	3.69	0.000***

Results in Table 23 highlight significant differences in students' behavioural intentions and actions related to community enterprise development across countries. The highest-rated statement is understanding personal strengths for community contribution ($\bar{x} = 3.82$), with statistically significant differences between countries. Serbian and Austrian students rate themselves the highest in this area (4.08 and 4.04, respectively), suggesting greater self-awareness of their potential impact on community development. Meanwhile, Slovak and Greek students report the lowest confidence levels (3.68 and 3.64), indicating a weaker perception of their personal role in contributing to community initiatives.

Another key difference appears in enhancing skills for the community labour market ($\bar{x} = 3.67$), where Austrian students feel the most capable (3.96), while Slovenian and Slovak students rate themselves the lowest (3.37 and 3.51, respectively). Similarly, reflecting on experiences in the community labour market ($\bar{x} = 3.64$) is highest among Serbian students (3.90) but lower among Slovak and Slovenian students (3.48 and 3.37), suggesting that some students engage more in self-assessment and learning from their experiences than others.

When it comes to actively seeking opportunities in the community labour market ($\bar{x} = 3.47$) and building relationships within it ($\bar{x} = 3.41$), Serbian students report the highest engagement (3.82 and 4.01, respectively). In contrast, Slovak students rate themselves the lowest (3.11 and 2.81). This suggests that Serbian students are more proactive in integrating into the community workforce, whereas Slovak students feel less engaged or have fewer opportunities. A particularly notable gap is seen in having a well-defined career plan for community opportunities ($\bar{x} = 3.38$), where Serbian students rate themselves the highest (3.86) and Slovak students the lowest (2.80). This suggests that students in Serbia may receive better guidance or have clearer career goals related to community development. In contrast, those in Slovakia may require more structured support in career planning.

Regional comparison highlights that Serbian and Austrian students are most prepared to contribute to community enterprise development. In contrast, Slovak students report the lowest levels of engagement and confidence across all categories. These differences highlight potential disparities in career planning resources, community engagement opportunities, and educational support available in different countries.



Table 23: Statistical Differences in Behavioural Intentions and Actions

Attitudes	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Understanding Personal Strengths for Community Contribution	3.77	4.04	3.68	3.64	4.08	3.82	0.002**
Enhancing Skills for Community Labour Market	3.37	3.96	3.51	3.81	3.81	3.67	0.000***
Reflecting on Experiences in Community Labour Market	3.37	3.72	3.48	3.74	3.90	3.64	0.002**
Seeking Opportunities in Community Labour Market	3.11	3.66	3.11	3.70	3.82	3.47	0.000***
Building Relationships in Community Labour Market	3.11	3.44	2.81	3.70	4.01	3.41	0.000***
Well-Defined Career Plan for Community Opportunities	3.27	3.40	2.80	3.63	3.86	3.38	0.000***

DISPARITIES IN SURVEY RESPONSES ACROSS COUNTRIES: STAKEHOLDERS PERSPECTIVES

The survey results reveal key insights into how stakeholders across countries perceive the significance of various labour market trends in shaping their sectors and workforce needs (Table 10). Digitalization and automation ($\bar{x} = 4.10$) and technological advancements ($\bar{x} = 4.09$) are rated among the most influential trends, with relatively high scores across all countries. However, differences between countries are not statistically significant, indicating a shared understanding of their importance in workforce transformation.

In contrast, value changes ($\bar{x} = 3.81$), globalization and international trade ($\bar{x} = 3.72$), and demographic changes ($\bar{x} = 3.70$) show significant differences across countries. Slovenian stakeholders rate value changes and demographic shifts the highest (4.50 and 4.44, respectively), suggesting that shifts in societal norms and workforce demographics play a more critical role in Slovenia than in other countries. Meanwhile, Austrian and Slovak stakeholders rate globalization significantly lower than their Slovenian, Greek, and Serbian counterparts, indicating potential regional differences in international market integration.

The importance of mental health ($\bar{x} = 3.71$) also varies across countries, with Slovenian stakeholders placing a higher emphasis (4.09) compared to Austrian and Slovak respondents, who give lower ratings. This suggests that mental health awareness and its role in workforce development may be more recognized in some regions than others.

Sustainability-related trends, such as the green economy ($\bar{x} = 3.26$), received mixed responses, with Austrian stakeholders rating them the highest (4.19) and Slovak and Serbian stakeholders rating them lower. Similarly, evolving customer and market demands ($\bar{x} = 3.60$) show significant variation, with Austrian respondents perceiving them as the least influential (3.13).

The shift toward the gig and freelance economy ($\bar{x} = 3.26$) and localization ($\bar{x} = 3.25$) are among the lowest-rated trends, with Austrian and Slovak stakeholders rating them particularly low. This suggests that freelance work and the emphasis on local products are seen as less relevant in these countries compared to others, particularly Slovenia and Greece.

Finally, the impact of wars also shows statistically significant variation. Serbian stakeholders rate its influence the highest (3.57), while Austrian respondents rate it the lowest (2.74), indicating that geopolitical factors may be perceived differently depending on regional economic and political conditions.



While technological advancements and digitalization are universally recognized as key drivers of workforce transformation, value changes, demographic shifts, and globalization show notable regional differences. Slovenian stakeholders emphasize societal shifts and workforce demographics the most, while Austrian and Slovak respondents perceive globalization, the gig economy, and localization as less significant in their sectors. These differences highlight the varying priorities and challenges different regions face in adapting to evolving labour market trends.

Table 24: Statistical Differences in the Significance of Labour Market Trends

Trend	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Digitalization and automation	4.24	4.16	3.86	4.06	4.20	4.10	0.410
Technological advancements	4.26	4.29	4.03	3.67	4.23	4.09	0.058
Remote and hybrid work models	4.09	3.71	3.89	3.75	3.83	3.85	0.579
Values changes	4.50	3.61	3.86	3.39	3.69	3.81	0.000***
Globalization and international trade	3.97	3.32	3.26	3.97	4.03	3.72	0.000***
Importance of mental health	4.09	3.39	3.43	3.75	3.89	3.71	0.050*
Demographic changes	4.44	3.68	3.29	3.39	3.71	3.70	0.000***
Sustainability and Green Economy	3.79	4.19	3.31	3.67	3.34	3.65	0.008**
Evolving customer and market demands	3.94	3.13	3.46	3.50	3.94	3.60	0.005**
Increased focus on diversity and inclusion	3.32	3.39	3.06	3.78	3.29	3.37	0.109
Shift towards gig and freelance economy	3.74	2.81	2.69	3.44	3.57	3.26	0.000***
Localization (importance of local products)	3.85	2.74	2.46	3.69	3.46	3.25	0.000***
Wars (Ukraine, Izrael)	3.15	2.74	2.83	3.28	3.57	3.12	0.009**

Analysis revealed significant differences in the challenges organizations face when integrating new employees into the labour market (Table 24). The most pressing issue overall is the shortage of employees ($\bar{x} = 3.84$), with Slovenian stakeholders rating this challenge the highest (4.41), followed by Austria (4.13). In contrast, Serbian stakeholders rate it the lowest (3.29), suggesting that workforce shortages are a more severe in some countries than others. Another major challenge is the difficulty of offering competitive salaries and benefits ($\bar{x} = 3.63$). Slovenian stakeholders again rate this issue the highest (4.38), while Austrian and Slovak stakeholders rate it significantly lower (3.16 and 3.17, respectively). This suggests that salary competitiveness is a greater concern in Slovenia than in Austria and Slovakia, where other labour market factors may be more influential.

High turnover and lack of employee retention strategies ($\bar{x} = 3.52$) also show statistically significant differences, with Slovenian stakeholders reporting the highest concerns (4.03). This highlights the ongoing difficulty in retaining employees, particularly in Slovenia, compared to Austria (3.26) and Slovakia (3.37). Regarding practical experience and education alignment with job needs, notable differences emerge. Limited practical work experience ($\bar{x} = 3.50$) is seen as a major challenge, especially in Slovenia (3.97), while Austrian stakeholders rate it much lower (2.71), reflecting better work-based learning programs in Austria. Similarly, poor alignment of educational curricula with job market needs ($\bar{x} = 3.43$) is perceived as a greater issue in Slovenia (3.79) than in Austria (2.97), indicating that Austrian educational programs may better prepare students for the workforce.



Legal and administrative barriers to hiring ($\bar{x} = 3.03$) show significant variation. Greek stakeholders rate this as a major obstacle (3.67), while Austrian and Slovak stakeholders report the lowest concern (2.58 and 2.57, respectively). This suggests that regulatory challenges may be more burdensome in Greece compared to other countries. Other challenges, such as insufficient digital literacy ($\bar{x} = 3.23$) and lack of soft skills ($\bar{x} = 3.76$), do not vary significantly between countries, indicating a shared perception of their impact on workforce integration.

Overall, the findings suggest that Slovenian stakeholders perceive workforce shortages, salary competitiveness, and employee retention as the biggest challenges, whereas Austrian and Slovak stakeholders report fewer concerns in these areas. Additionally, practical work experience and education-job alignment are seen as more problematic in Slovenia than in Austria, where such gaps may be better addressed. Meanwhile, Greek stakeholders report the highest concerns about legal and administrative hiring barriers, highlighting regional differences in regulatory burdens. These insights underscore the need for country-specific strategies to address workforce integration challenges.

Table 25: Statistical Differences in Organisational Challenges in Workforce Integration

Challenges	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Shortage of employees	4.41	4.13	3.66	3.75	3.29	3.84	0.000***
Inadequate soft skills	4.15	3.68	3.54	3.69	3.74	3.76	0.131
Lack of critical thinking and problem-solving skills	3.91	3.68	3.49	3.72	3.54	3.67	0.457
Lack of industry-specific technical skills	3.97	3.81	3.40	3.50	3.54	3.64	0.104
Difficulty offering competitive salaries or benefits	4.38	3.16	3.17	3.64	3.74	3.63	0.000***
High turnover or lack of employee retention strategies	4.03	3.26	3.37	3.50	3.43	3.52	0.032*
Limited practical work experience	3.97	2.71	3.37	3.69	3.69	3.50	0.000***
Poor alignment of educational curricula with job needs	3.79	2.97	3.29	3.56	3.51	3.43	0.016*
Insufficient digital literacy	3.29	3.19	2.94	3.50	3.23	3.23	0.297
Difficulty adapting to workplace culture	3.53	2.97	2.86	3.44	3.14	3.19	0.022*
Legal or administrative barriers to hiring	3.26	2.58	2.57	3.67	3.00	3.03	0.000***

The survey results highlight key differences in stakeholders' perceptions of the most essential competencies for successful labour market integration (Table 25). The highest-rated competency overall is problem-solving and critical thinking (4.30), with Austrian stakeholders rating it the highest ($\bar{x} = 4.52$), while Greek respondents give it the lowest rating (3.81). This indicates that problem-solving skills are more crucial in Austria and Slovenia than in Greece, where they may not be as emphasized in professional development. Similarly, communication and customer orientation ($\bar{x} = 3.97$) show significant differences, with Slovenian stakeholders placing a much higher emphasis (4.35) than Greek respondents (3.47), suggesting a stronger focus on interpersonal and customer-related competencies in some regions.

Resilience ($\bar{x} = 4.16$) is another highly rated competency, with Slovenian stakeholders rating it the highest (4.68) and Greek stakeholders giving it the lowest rating (3.4). This suggests that resilience is considered a critical factor in Slovenia but is perceived as less essential in Greece, possibly due to differing labour market conditions or cultural attitudes toward adaptability.



Collaboration ($\bar{x} = 4.05$) also shows notable regional variation, with Slovenian stakeholders rating it significantly higher (4.50) than Greek stakeholders (3.50). This suggests that teamwork and cooperative skills are considered more essential in Slovenia than in Greece. Additionally, leadership skills ($\bar{x} = 3.75$) and technical skills ($\bar{x} = 3.74$) vary significantly, with Slovenian and Serbian stakeholders rating them highly, while Austrian and Slovak respondents place less importance on them.

While digital literacy ($\bar{x} = 3.90$) and creativity ($\bar{x} = 3.98$) are rated important, they do not show statistically significant differences between countries, suggesting a shared understanding of their relevance in the labour market. Similarly, self-awareness ($\bar{x} = 4.06$) and career planning ($\bar{x} = 3.81$) receive similar scores across all regions, indicating that stakeholders across different countries perceive these competencies as equally essential.

On the other hand, labour market awareness ($\bar{x} = 3.68$) is rated significantly lower by Austrian (3.45) and Slovak (3.34) stakeholders, while Serbian respondents rate it the highest (4.06). This suggests that stakeholders in Serbia place more importance on understanding labour market dynamics than those in Austria and Slovakia.

The data collectively points to resilience, problem-solving, and communication skills being among the most important competencies for labour market integration. However, their perceived importance varies across countries. Slovenian and Austrian stakeholders strongly emphasise resilience, critical thinking, and collaboration, while Greek stakeholders rate these competencies significantly lower. Similarly, leadership and technical skills are seen as more essential in Slovenia and Serbia than in Austria and Slovakia. These differences suggest that regional variations in economic conditions, educational systems, and workplace expectations influence how different competencies are valued in the labour market.

Table 26: Statistical Differences in Essential Competencies for Labour Market Integration

Competences	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Problem-solving and Critical Thinking	4.41	4.52	4.37	3.81	4.43	4.30	0.001***
Resilience	4.68	4.29	4.29	3.44	4.19	4.16	0.000***
Self-awareness	4.26	4.13	3.91	3.94	4.06	4.06	0.539
Collaboration	4.50	4.06	4.06	3.50	4.17	4.05	0.000***
Creativity	4.06	4.03	3.91	3.69	4.23	3.98	0.098
Communication and Customer Orientation	4.35	3.81	4.11	3.47	4.11	3.97	0.001***
Curiosity and Inquisitiveness	4.15	3.87	3.83	3.67	4.11	3.92	0.136
Digital Literacy	4.15	3.97	3.80	3.67	3.94	3.90	0.196
Empathy	4.41	3.65	3.69	3.69	3.94	3.88	0.003**
Career Planning	4.03	3.65	3.66	3.778	3.94	3.81	0.264
Employability	4.09	3.68	3.69	3.56	4.00	3.80	0.055
Leadership	4.09	3.23	3.71	3.64	4.03	3.75	0.001***
Technical Skills	4.15	3.45	3.43	3.56	4.11	3.74	0.001***
Labour Market Awareness	3.97	3.45	3.34	3.56	4.06	3.68	0.004**
Self-employment skills	3.65	3.81	3.43	3.67	3.83	3.67	0.365

A closer look at the data shows significant differences in the critical skill gaps observed in recent graduates or new employees (Table 26). Among the most pressing concerns is critical thinking and problem-solving ($\bar{x} = 3.85$), with Slovenian stakeholders rating this gap the highest (4.41), suggesting that graduates in Slovenia may particularly struggle with independent thinking and analytical reasoning. In contrast, Austrian (3.81) and Slovak (3.66) stakeholders rate this gap significantly lower, indicating a relatively stronger emphasis on these skills in their education systems. Time management and organizational skills ($\bar{x} = 3.67$) also show significant differences, with Slovenian stakeholders again reporting the highest concerns (4.15), while Austrian respondents rate this gap the lowest (3.32). This suggests that Slovenian graduates may struggle more with work organization and prioritization than their Austrian counterparts.

Another notable area of concern is communication skills ($\bar{x} = 3.65$), where Slovenian stakeholders again report the highest deficiency (4.24), followed by Greek stakeholders (3.78). Austrian, Slovak and Serbian respondents give much lower ratings, suggesting that graduates in these countries may have better-developed communication abilities upon entering the workforce.

Creativity and innovation ($\bar{x} = 3.40$) is another significant skill gap, with Austrian stakeholders rating it the lowest (2.87). In contrast, Slovenian (3.79) and Greek (3.58) respondents rate it much higher, suggesting that Austrian graduates may struggle more with innovative thinking than their peers in other countries. Similarly, technical skills related to the field ($\bar{x} = 3.37$) are seen as a major gap, particularly in Slovakia (2.69), whereas Greek stakeholders report fewer concerns (3.83), suggesting that Slovak graduates may require more specialized training in their respective industries.

When it comes to digital literacy and IT competencies ($\bar{x} = 3.27$), Greek respondents rate this gap the highest (3.69), while Slovak stakeholders report the lowest concerns (2.86). This suggests that graduates in Greece may need more support in developing digital skills, whereas Slovakia has a stronger focus on IT education.

From these results, it can be concluded that Slovenian stakeholders report the highest concerns across multiple skill gaps, particularly in critical thinking, time management, and communication, suggesting that graduates in Slovenia may struggle more with these essential competencies upon entering the workforce. Austrian respondents report the lowest concerns in areas such as creativity and time management, indicating that their graduates may be better prepared in these aspects. Meanwhile, Slovak stakeholders highlight deficiencies in technical skills, while Greek respondents express concerns about digital literacy. These differences suggest that workforce preparation varies significantly across countries, with some regions needing greater focus on soft skills, while others require improvements in technical and digital competencies.

Table 27: Statistical Differences in Critical Skill Gaps in Recent Graduates

Critical skill gaps	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Critical thinking and problem-solving	4.41	3.81	3.66	3.69	3.71	3.85	0.009**
Time management and organizational skills	4.15	3.32	3.60	3.58	3.66	3.67	0.015*
Emotional intelligence and self-awareness	4.09	3.32	3.49	3.86	3.51	3.66	0.018*
Communication skills	4.24	3.48	3.40	3.78	3.37	3.65	0.004**
Adaptability to change	3.94	3.19	3.37	3.53	3.63	3.54	0.051
Teamwork and collaboration	3.88	3.06	3.34	3.53	3.34	3.44	0.027*
Leadership and decision-making	3.74	3.00	3.37	3.64	3.37	3.43	0.044*
Creativity and innovation	3.79	2.87	3.03	3.58	3.66	3.40	0.000***
Technical skills related to the field	3.71	3.16	2.69	3.83	3.43	3.37	0.000***
Digital literacy and IT competencies	3.21	3.16	2.86	3.69	3.43	3.27	0.023*



Comparing the responses across regions revealed key differences in how organizations address skill gaps (Table 27). Among the most used strategies, e-learning platforms, and online courses ($\bar{x} = 3.52$) and internal training programs ($\bar{x} = 3.49$) are widely implemented across all countries, with no statistically significant differences. This suggests that online learning and in-house training are universally recognized as standard approaches for workforce development. However, notable regional differences emerge in other skill gap mitigation strategies. Mentorship and coaching initiatives ($\bar{x} = 3.32$) are more commonly used in Serbia (3.66) and Greece (3.64), while Austrian organizations report the lowest adoption of this approach (2.68). This suggests that mentorship culture may be more assertive in Southern and Eastern European countries than in Austria. Upskilling and reskilling initiatives ($\bar{x} = 3.15$) show significant variation, with Greek organizations leading (3.50), while Slovenian organizations report the lowest engagement in such programs (2.74). Similarly, developing a clear career progression framework ($\bar{x} = 3.09$) is more common in Greece (3.58) and Serbia (3.26), while Slovenia and Austria lag (2.68 and 2.81, respectively).

Apprenticeship and internship programs ($\bar{x} = 2.97$) are most utilized in Greece (3.44) and Serbia (3.49), whereas Slovak organizations report the lowest engagement (2.49). This suggests that Southern European countries place greater emphasis on work-based learning opportunities. Collaboration with government or industry bodies ($\bar{x} = 2.86$) is another area of significant variation, with Greek (3.31) and Serbian (3.29) stakeholders reporting stronger partnerships, while Slovakia reports the lowest collaboration levels (2.09). A similar pattern is observed in cross-industry collaboration for shared training ($\bar{x} = 2.84$), where Greece (3.28) and Serbia (3.14) lead, while Slovakia (2.43) and Austria (2.58) lag behind.

Financial incentives for employee skill development ($\bar{x} = 2.63$) and job rotation or cross-functional training ($\bar{x} = 2.56$) also show striking differences. Greek (3.42, 3.39) and Serbian (3.03, 3.03) organizations are more likely to offer financial incentives and implement job rotation, whereas Austrian (1.71, 1.87) and Slovak (2.34, 2.14) organizations report significantly lower adoption of these strategies. The findings suggest that Greek and Serbian organizations are the most proactive in implementing diverse skill gap mitigation strategies, including mentorship, apprenticeships, government collaboration, financial incentives, and job rotation. In contrast, Austrian and Slovak organizations rely more on traditional methods such as e-learning and recruiting professionals with pre-existing skills while engaging less in career progression frameworks, government collaboration, and financial support for employees' professional growth. These regional differences highlight varied approaches to workforce development, with Southern and Eastern European organizations appearing more engaged in hands-on, structured employee growth strategies compared to their Central European counterparts.

Table 28: Statistical Differences in Current Skill Gap Mitigation Strategies

Skill gap mitigation strategies	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Utilizing e-learning platforms and online courses	3.24	3.87	3.49	3.58	3.46	3.52	0.230
Internal training programs	3.50	3.26	3.49	3.86	3.29	3.49	0.113
Recruitment of professionals with pre-existing skills	3.32	3.23	3.37	3.33	3.71	3.40	0.424
Mentorship or coaching initiatives	3.41	2.68	3.11	3.64	3.66	3.32	0.002**
Partnerships with educational institutions	3.18	3.16	3.23	3.19	3.20	3.19	0.999
Upskilling or reskilling initiatives for current staff	2.74	3.00	3.11	3.50	3.37	3.15	0.046*
Developing a clear career progression framework	2.68	2.81	3.06	3.58	3.26	3.09	0.010**
Apprenticeship or internship programs	2.79	2.58	2.49	3.44	3.49	2.97	0.001***
Collaboration with government or industry bodies	2.79	2.81	2.09	3.31	3.29	2.86	0.000***
Cross-industry collaboration for shared training	2.74	2.58	2.43	3.28	3.14	2.84	0.020*
Financial incentives for employee skill development	2.50	1.71	2.34	3.42	3.03	2.63	0.000***
Implementing job rotation or cross-functional training	2.26	1.87	2.14	3.39	3.03	2.56	0.000***





Findings in Table 29 indicate regional differences in the prioritization of workforce development approaches for the future. The most highly prioritized strategies overall include mentorship and coaching initiatives ($\bar{x} = 4.02$), with Slovak and Slovenian stakeholders rating them the highest (4.37 and 4.35, respectively), while Greek stakeholders rate them the lowest (3.58). This suggests that mentorship is seen as a key future strategy in Slovenia and Slovakia, whereas it may be less of a focus in Greece. Similarly, partnerships with educational institutions ($\bar{x} = 3.74$) are rated significantly higher in Slovenia (4.21) and Slovakia (4.03) compared to Austria (3.42) and Greece (3.36), indicating that Central European countries place a greater emphasis on stronger collaboration between businesses and academia.

Developing a clear career progression framework ($\bar{x} = 3.86$) is another key area where Slovenia (4.15) and Serbia (4.00) prioritize it more than Austria (3.94) and Greece (3.42), suggesting that structured career growth pathways are more valued in Slovenia and Serbia. Apprenticeship and internship programs ($\bar{x} = 3.50$) also show significant differences, with Slovenian (4.21) and Serbian (4.06) stakeholders emphasizing them far more than Austrian stakeholders (2.71), suggesting that Slovenia and Serbia see work-based learning as a critical area for future workforce readiness.

Upskilling or reskilling initiatives ($\bar{x} = 3.71$) are most highly prioritized in Serbia (4.06) and Slovenia (3.94). At the same time, Greek stakeholders rate them the lowest (3.25), indicating that lifelong learning and workforce adaptability are more urgent in Slovenia and Serbia than in Greece. Recruitment of professionals with pre-existing skills ($\bar{x} = 3.64$) follows a similar pattern, with Serbian (4.06) and Slovenian (3.97) stakeholders placing greater importance on hiring experienced talent. At the same time, Austrian respondents rate this strategy the lowest (3.13), possibly due to Austria's stronger reliance on internal training rather than external recruitment.

Other notable differences include financial incentives for skill development ($\bar{x} = 3.63$), which Slovenian (4.06) and Serbian (3.83) stakeholders prioritize more than Austrian respondents (3.19), suggesting that financial motivation is seen as a key driver for workforce skill development in some countries. Collaboration with government or industry bodies ($\bar{x} = 3.35$) is most highly prioritized in Greece (3.64) and Serbia (3.71), while Slovakia (2.80) and Austria (2.97) place much less emphasis on this approach. This indicates that Southern and Eastern European countries may rely more on external governmental support, while Central European countries may focus on other internal strategies.

The regional disparities indicate that Slovenian and Serbian stakeholders place the highest emphasis on mentorship, apprenticeships, career progression frameworks, and reskilling initiatives, while Austrian and Slovak stakeholders prioritize these methods significantly less. Greek organizations emphasise government and industry collaboration, while Austrian stakeholders are the least likely to prioritize these partnerships. These differences highlight regional variations in workforce development priorities, with Slovenia and Serbia emphasizing structured learning and career growth. At the same time, Austria and Slovakia place less focus on external collaborations and financial incentives for skill development.

Table 29: Statistical Differences in Emphasis on Future Workforce Development Approaches

Skill gap mitigation strategies	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Mentorship or coaching initiatives	4.35	3.94	4.37	3.58	3.86	4.02	0.004**
Developing a clear career progression framework	4.15	3.94	3.83	3.42	4.00	3.86	0.028*
Internal training programs	4.06	3.42	3.89	3.72	4.00	3.82	0.061
Utilizing e-learning platforms and online courses	3.82	3.35	3.91	3.53	4.11	3.75	0.032*
Partnerships with educational institutions	4.21	3.42	4.03	3.36	3.69	3.74	0.001***
Upskilling or reskilling initiatives for current staff	3.94	3.39	3.89	3.25	4.06	3.71	0.002**
Recruitment of professionals with pre-existing skills	3.97	3.13	3.63	3.36	4.06	3.64	0.000***
Cross-industry collaboration for shared training	3.76	3.39	3.63	3.33	4.00	3.63	0.052
Financial incentives for employee skill development	4.06	3.19	3.57	3.47	3.83	3.63	0.016*
Apprenticeship or internship programs	4.21	2.71	3.23	3.25	4.06	3.50	0.000***
Implementing job rotation or cross-functional training	3.65	3.10	2.94	3.33	3.74	3.36	0.006**
Collaboration with government or industry bodies	3.56	2.97	2.80	3.64	3.71	3.35	0.000***

The survey results reveal significant differences in how stakeholders across countries perceive the ways in which academic institutions can better align career education programs with labour market needs (Table 30). The most highly rated strategy overall is integrating practical internships and on-the-job training ($\bar{x} = 4.12$) with Slovenian (4.62) and Serbian (4.49) stakeholders giving it the highest ratings, while Greek stakeholders rate it significantly lower (3.44). This suggests that work-based learning is considered a top priority in Slovenia and Serbia, whereas it may be less emphasized in Greece. Similarly, promoting lifelong learning opportunities such as upskilling and reskilling ($\bar{x} = 4.04$) is rated the highest in Slovenia (4.47) and Serbia (4.34), while Greek stakeholders again report the lowest emphasis (3.42). This highlights a stronger focus on continuous learning in Slovenia and Serbia than in Greece. Enhancing partnerships between academia and industry ($\bar{x} = 4.03$) follows a similar trend, with Slovenian (4.47) and Serbian (4.34) stakeholders strongly emphasizing its importance, while Greek stakeholders rate it much lower (3.31). This suggests that Slovenia and Serbia recognize stronger academic-industry collaboration as a key to workforce readiness, whereas Greek stakeholders may perceive existing gaps in this area.

Including industry professionals in curriculum design and teaching ($\bar{x} = 4.03$) is another high-priority strategy, especially in Slovakia (4.37) and Slovenia (4.41), whereas Greek stakeholders rate it the lowest (3.22). This suggests that stakeholders in Slovakia and Slovenia see a greater need for direct industry involvement in education compared to Greece.

A key area of concern is adapting programs to respond quickly to labour market changes ($\bar{x} = 4.01$), with Slovak (4.40) and Slovenian (4.35) stakeholders rating it the highest. At the same time, Greek respondents give it the lowest priority (3.28). This suggests that flexibility in curriculum updates is seen as more essential in Central and Eastern Europe than in Greece. Focusing on soft skills development ($\bar{x} = 3.95$) is another area where Slovak stakeholders rate it the highest (4.43). In contrast, Greek respondents rate it significantly lower (3.47), indicating that soft skills training may be perceived as more crucial in some regions than others.

When it comes to increasing the focus on emerging technical skills ($\bar{x} = 3.94$), Serbian (4.26) and Slovenian (4.15) stakeholders rate it higher, suggesting that these countries see a more substantial need to integrate new technical competencies into academic programs compared to Austria and Greece. Encouraging interdisciplinary approaches in education ($\bar{x} = 3.91$) is rated highest in Slovenia (4.35) and Serbia (4.23). In contrast, Slovak (3.51) and Greek (3.47) stakeholders rate it lower, suggesting that Slovenian and Serbian stakeholders see more value in combining different fields of knowledge for better career preparation. Offering tailored career guidance and mentoring programs ($\bar{x} = 3.81$) is another area where Slovenian (4.26) and Austrian (3.90) stakeholders place higher emphasis. In contrast, Greek stakeholders report the lowest need (3.08), suggesting more substantial career counseling initiatives are more needed in Slovenia and Austria. In contrast, addressing diversity and inclusion in career education ($\bar{x} = 3.61$) shows no significant differences, suggesting a shared perception across all countries that while diversity and inclusion are important, they are not the most pressing priority for aligning education with labour market needs.

The findings demonstrate that Slovenian and Serbian stakeholders emphasise integrating internships, promoting lifelong learning, and strengthening academia-industry partnerships. In contrast, Greek stakeholders consistently rate these strategies the lowest. Slovak respondents highlight the importance of soft skills and industry involvement in curriculum development, while Austrian stakeholders show a moderate but steady prioritization across multiple categories. These differences suggest that labour market needs and education priorities vary significantly across regions, with some countries placing greater emphasis on practical, industry-aligned training. In contrast, others may focus more on traditional academic models

Table 30: Statistical Differences in Alignment of Career Education with Labor Market Needs

Alignment of career education	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Integrating practical internships and on-the-job training	4.62	3.87	4.20	3.44	4.49	4.12	0.000***
Promoting lifelong learning opportunities (upskilling/reskilling)	4.47	3.87	4.09	3.42	4.34	4.04	0.000***
Enhancing partnerships between academia and industry	4.47	4.19	3.89	3.31	4.34	4.03	0.000***
Including industry professionals in curriculum design and teaching	4.41	4.03	4.37	3.22	4.14	4.03	0.000***
Adapting programs to respond quickly to labour market changes	4.35	3.74	4.40	3.28	4.29	4.01	0.000***
Focusing on the development of soft skills	4.29	3.71	4.43	3.47	3.86	3.95	0.000***
Increasing the focus on emerging technical skills	4.15	3.94	3.94	3.44	4.26	3.94	0.003**
Encouraging interdisciplinary approaches in education	4.35	4.00	3.51	3.47	4.23	3.91	0.000***
Offering tailored career guidance and mentoring programs	4.26	3.90	3.83	3.08	4.00	3.81	0.000***
Addressing diversity and inclusion in career education	3.85	3.48	3.60	3.36	3.77	3.61	0.406

Comparing the responses across regions highlights clear regional differences in how stakeholders prioritize measures to improve youth employability (Table 31). The most highly rated strategies overall include structured internships and practical work experiences ($\bar{x} = 4.23$) and mentorship and career guidance initiatives ($\bar{x} = 4.02$), with Slovenian (4.56, 4.62) and Serbian (4.46, 4.14) stakeholders placing the highest importance on these strategies. Meanwhile, Greek respondents rate them the lowest (3.81, 3.44), suggesting that internships and mentorship programs may be less developed or less prioritized in Greece than in other regions.

Similarly, Slovenia and Serbia strongly emphasise creating industry-aligned curricula in academic institutions ($\bar{x} = 3.95$) and enhancing partnerships between academia and companies ($\bar{x} = 3.92$). At the same time, Austrian and Greek stakeholders rate these measures significantly lower. This suggests that Slovenia and Serbia recognize the need for stronger integration between education and industry, whereas Austria and Greece may already have more established models or different priorities.

Soft skills training programs ($\bar{x} = 3.87$) and continuous upskilling and reskilling initiatives ($\bar{x} = 3.84$) also show notable regional differences. Slovenian (4.38) and Serbian (4.00) stakeholders prioritize soft skills training significantly more than Austrian (3.68) and Greek (3.39) respondents, suggesting that soft skills gaps may be perceived as a more pressing issue in some countries. Similarly, upskilling and reskilling programs receive the highest ratings in Serbia (4.26) and Slovenia (4.15). At the same time, Greece (3.31) gives it the lowest importance, indicating that lifelong learning programs may be more necessary in certain labour markets.

Finally, offering financial incentives or subsidies for hiring and training young employees ($\bar{x} = 3.77$) is most strongly supported in Slovenia (4.38) and Serbia (4.20), while Austria (3.00) shows significantly lower support for such financial measures. This suggests that Central and Eastern European stakeholders may see financial support as necessary, whereas Austrian stakeholders may rely on alternative mechanisms for youth workforce integration.

Responses revealed that Slovenian and Serbian stakeholders strongly emphasize practical work experience, industry-aligned education, and financial incentives as key measures for improving youth employability. In contrast, Austrian and Greek stakeholders place less priority on these areas. Soft skills training, mentorship programs, and continuous upskilling are more valued in Slovenia and Serbia, while Austria and Greece show lower enthusiasm for these strategies. These differences suggest that labour market challenges and workforce development priorities vary significantly across regions, with some countries emphasizing hands-on learning and financial support. In contrast, others may focus on different policy approaches.

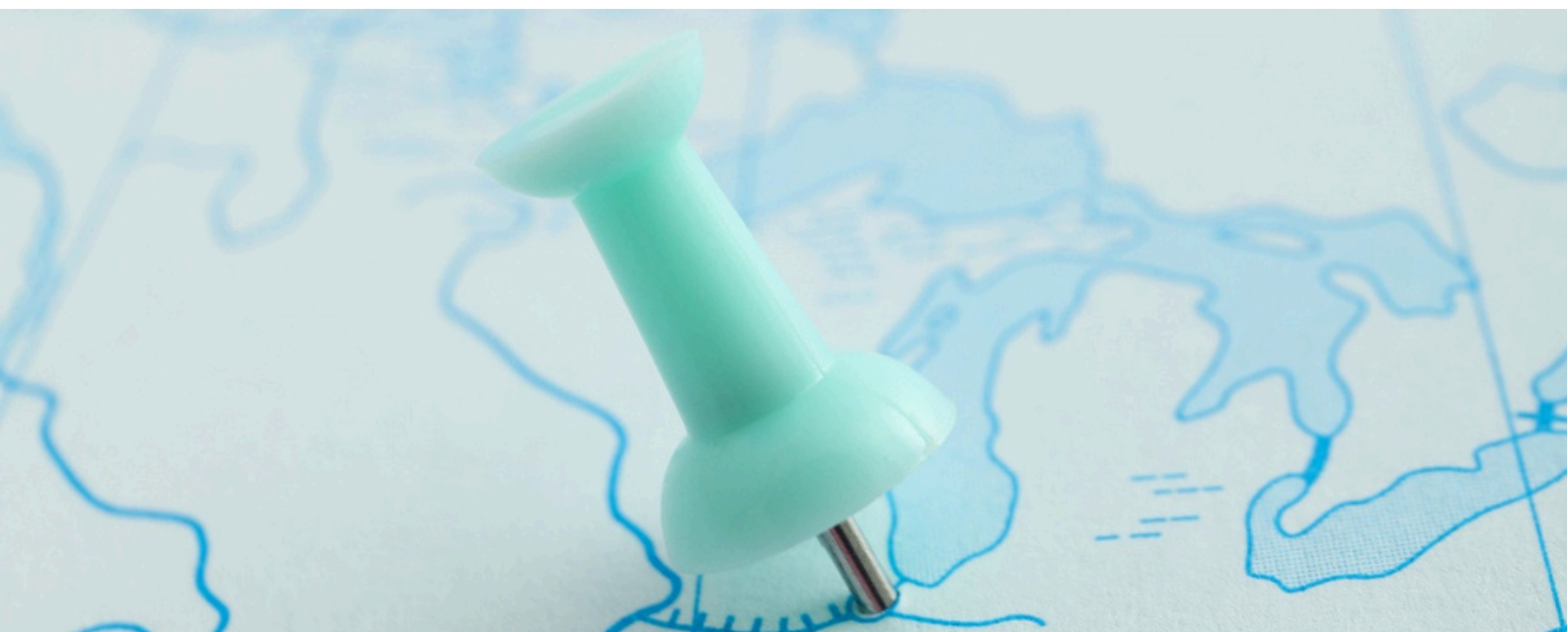


Table 31: Statistical Differences in Priority Measures for Youth Workforce Integration

Measures	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Providing structured internships and practical work experiences	4.56	4.10	4.26	3.81	4.46	4.23	0.004**
Establishing mentorship and career guidance initiatives	4.62	3.87	4.06	3.44	4.14	4.02	0.000***
Creating industry-aligned curricula in academic institutions	4.32	3.74	4.23	3.28	4.20	3.95	0.000***
Enhancing partnerships between academic institutions and companies/organisations	4.15	3.65	3.97	3.47	4.37	3.92	0.000***
Promoting digital literacy and proficiency in emerging technologies	4.18	3.81	3.89	3.44	4.14	3.89	0.014*
Ensuring equitable access to career development resources for all youth	4.21	3.77	3.83	3.58	4.09	3.89	0.096
Developing soft skills training programs	4.38	3.68	3.89	3.39	4.00	3.87	0.001***
Supporting continuous upskilling and reskilling programs for youth	4.15	3.58	3.89	3.31	4.26	3.84	0.000***
Offering financial incentives or subsidies to companies/organisations hiring and training young employees	4.38	3.00	3.60	3.58	4.20	3.77	0.000***

Analysis revealed regional differences in how organizations perceive their role in improving youth employability (Table 32). The most highly rated contributions overall include supporting soft skills development ($\bar{x} = 4.00$), providing mentorship or coaching programs ($\bar{x} = 3.97$) and offering internships and apprenticeships ($\bar{x} = 3.91$). Slovenian (4.44, 4.29) and Serbian (4.03, 4.17) stakeholders rate these contributions the highest, while Greek (3.78, 3.72) and Austrian (3.81, 3.90) respondents assign them lower importance. This suggests that Slovenian and Serbian organizations emphasize direct learning and mentorship as key workforce development strategies.

Similarly, partnering with academic institutions to align educational programs ($\bar{x} = 3.88$) is seen as particularly important in Slovenia (4.15) and Serbia (4.17), while Greek (3.42) and Austrian (3.58) stakeholders rate it much lower. This indicates that Slovenia and Serbia recognize stronger academia-industry collaboration as crucial in preparing young talent for the labour market. Organizing upskilling and reskilling initiatives ($\bar{x} = 3.73$) is another area where Serbia (4.11) stands out, while Slovakia (3.54) and Austria (3.45) place less emphasis on this approach. This suggests that Serbian organizations need lifelong learning initiatives more than their Central European counterparts.

Providing funding or resources for youth-focused initiatives (3.46) is most strongly supported in Serbia (3.97) and Greece (3.64), while Austria (3.03) and Slovakia (3.14) show the least support for financial contributions. This indicates that financial investment in youth workforce development is prioritised more in Southern and Eastern Europe than in Central Europe. Meanwhile, participating in policy discussions or advocacy for youth employability ($\bar{x} = 3.55$) is most valued in Serbia (3.83) and Slovakia (3.69). At the same time, Austrian stakeholders rate it the lowest (3.03), suggesting a lower inclination towards direct involvement in shaping workforce policies in Austria.

Ultimately, the data suggests that Slovenian and Serbian organizations are the most proactive in providing mentorship, internships, and academic partnerships to support youth employability, while Austrian and Greek organizations place lower importance on these measures. Serbian organizations stand out in their commitment to upskilling, reskilling, and financial support for youth initiatives, while Austrian and Slovak organizations are less likely to invest in funding or engage in policy advocacy. These differences highlight regional variations in how organizations contribute to workforce development, with some countries emphasizing practical training and mentorship, while others focus on different structural or economic approaches.

Table 32: Statistical Differences in Role of Organizations in Youth Workforce Development

Measures	SI	AU	SK	GR	RS	$\bar{x}$	p-value
Supporting the development of soft skills	4.44	3.81	3.94	3.78	4.03	4.00	0.044*
Providing mentorship or coaching programs for young employees	4.29	3.90	3.77	3.72	4.17	3.97	0.033*
Offering internships and apprenticeships for practical experience	4.15	3.61	3.49	3.83	4.46	3.91	0.002**
Engaging in career fairs and networking event	4.12	3.94	3.66	3.67	4.09	3.89	0.200
Partnering with academic institutions to align educational programs	4.15	3.58	4.06	3.42	4.17	3.88	0.004**
Organizing upskilling and reskilling initiatives tailored to industry	3.65	3.45	3.54	3.83	4.11	3.73	0.041*
Investing in technology or digital platforms for training and development	3.56	3.52	3.43	3.75	3.97	3.65	0.233
Promoting diversity and inclusion to support young talent	3.82	3.42	3.49	3.56	3.80	3.62	0.437
Participating in policy discussions or advocacy for youth employability	3.56	3.03	3.69	3.58	3.83	3.55	0.026*
Providing funding or resources for youth-focused initiatives	3.47	3.03	3.14	3.64	3.97	3.46	0.005**



CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The ELIX project research conducted across Slovenia, Austria, Slovakia, Serbia, and Greece has provided valuable insights into labour market trends, competency gaps, and strategies for improving career opportunities. The findings, based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses, highlight both common challenges and country-specific issues that must be addressed to ensure a better alignment between higher education and workforce demands. A key conclusion emerging from the research is the universal recognition of the importance of practical experience in preparing students for employment. Across all five countries, both students and stakeholders emphasized the need for stronger integration of internships, apprenticeships, and real-world projects into academic programs.

Employers consistently noted that graduates with work-based learning experience are more adaptable and competitive in the labour market. This finding highlights the increasing demand for hands-on learning opportunities that allow students to develop not only technical skills but also critical soft skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, and communication. Traditional academic programs, which primarily focus on theoretical knowledge, often fail to provide students with direct exposure to the challenges and expectations of the professional environment. As a result, many graduates enter the workforce lacking practical experience, making the transition from education to employment more difficult.

Key differences by country:

Country	Primary Concern	Competency Focus	Labour Market Trends
Slovenia	Misalignment between education and labour market needs	Digital literacy, soft skills, career adaptability	Digital transformation, mental health awareness
Austria	Need for AI and leadership skills in the workforce	AI expertise, project-based learning, ethical decision-making	Hybrid work models, sustainability focus
Slovakia	Gap between student perceptions and employer expectations	Problem-solving, resilience, industry knowledge	Workforce shortages, increasing gig economy
Serbia	High youth unemployment and skills mismatch	Entrepreneurship, adaptability, practical experience	Globalization and digital transformation
Greece	Need for workforce retention strategies	Emotional intelligence, adaptability, teamwork	Labour shortages, automation impact

Employers across Slovenia, Austria, Slovakia, Serbia, and Greece expressed concerns that recent graduates often struggle to adapt to workplace dynamics, including managing real-world tasks, working in multidisciplinary teams, and responding effectively to industry-specific challenges. They noted that students who had participated in structured internships or apprenticeships were better prepared for the workforce, as they had already gained familiarity with work environments, industry standards, and employer expectations. This practical exposure enhances their employability by equipping them with job-relevant skills and a greater understanding of workplace culture.

Furthermore, the research found that students themselves recognize the value of practical learning. Many expressed a strong preference for study programs that incorporate real-world applications, such as project-based assignments, company collaborations, and work placements. However, they also reported limited access to high-quality internship opportunities. In some cases, students found that internships were poorly structured, unpaid, or did not provide meaningful learning experiences, limiting their effectiveness in bridging the education-employment gap.



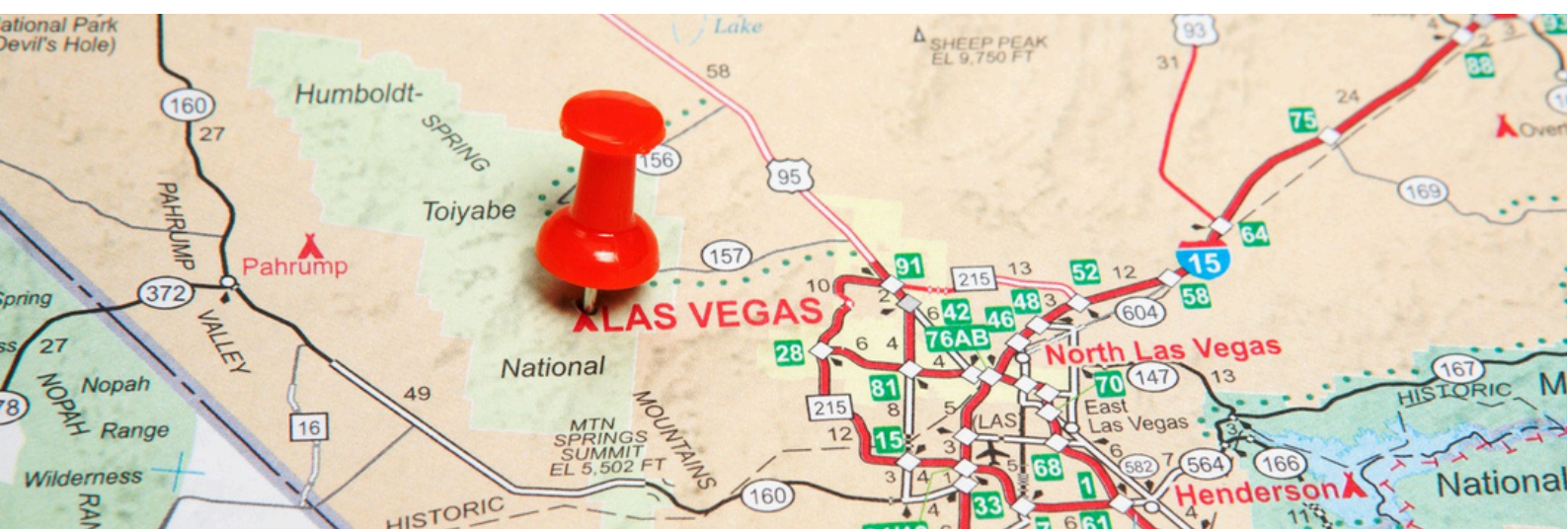
Stakeholders, particularly employers and policymakers, suggested that universities should play a more active role in facilitating partnerships with industries to ensure that students gain relevant work experience before graduation. This could be achieved through expanding internship networks, offering co-op programs where students alternate between study and work periods, and integrating practical training directly into coursework. Additionally, mentorship programs and industry-led workshops were recommended as complementary strategies to help students build professional connections and navigate career pathways more effectively.

Overall, the findings emphasize the urgent need for educational institutions to enhance work-based learning opportunities and strengthen collaborations with industry. By doing so, they can ensure that students develop the practical skills, professional competencies, and industry exposure needed to transition smoothly into the labour market and meet the evolving demands of employers.

Digitalization and technological advancements represent another major trend shaping labour market needs in all partner countries. Digital literacy, artificial intelligence (AI) expertise, and data management skills are increasingly sought after by employers. However, the degree to which these skills are emphasized varies, with Austria prioritizing AI-related competencies, while Slovenia and Slovakia focus more on general digital literacy and adaptability to automation.

A recurring theme in the research is the gap in soft skills among graduates, which employers across all partner countries identified as a significant barrier to employment. While students recognize the value of communication, adaptability, leadership, and critical thinking, they often prioritize technical skills over the development of these competencies. Stakeholders, on the other hand, stress that these skills are essential for long-term career success and that educational institutions should place greater emphasis on their development through project-based learning, mentorship programs, and industry-led training.

Despite these commonalities, the findings also reveal key differences across the partner countries. In Slovenia, the primary challenge lies in the misalignment between education and labour market needs, particularly in the areas of digital literacy and career adaptability. Austria faces an increasing demand for AI expertise and leadership skills, with a strong focus on hybrid work models and sustainability. In Slovakia, the discrepancy between student perceptions and employer expectations is particularly evident, with students emphasizing career planning and employability skills while employers highlight problem-solving, resilience, and industry-specific knowledge. Serbia struggles with high youth unemployment and a significant skills mismatch, requiring greater focus on entrepreneurship, adaptability, and practical training. Meanwhile, Greece is confronted with workforce shortages and retention challenges, necessitating a stronger emphasis on emotional intelligence, teamwork, and adaptability.



A structured table summarizes the similarities and differences between Slovenia, Austria, Slovakia, Serbia, and Greece regarding labour market trends, competency gaps, and career development strategies:

Category	Similarities Across Countries	Differences by Country
Practical Experience	All countries emphasize the importance of internships, apprenticeships, and real-world projects as critical for employability. Employers prefer graduates with hands-on experience.	Slovenia & Slovakia: Strong focus on aligning internships with market needs. Austria: Well-developed university-business collaborations. Serbia: Practical experience seen as a key tool to reduce high youth unemployment. Greece: Limited internship availability in key sectors.
Digital Literacy & Technological Adaptation	Recognized as a key competency across all countries. Students and stakeholders agree that digital skills are crucial for workforce readiness.	Austria: Strong focus on AI and data management. Slovenia & Slovakia: Emphasis on automation and general digital skills. Serbia: Need for greater digitalization in education. Greece: Slow adaptation to digital transformation.
Soft Skills Deficit	Employers in all countries report a lack of critical thinking, teamwork, leadership, and adaptability among graduates. Students acknowledge the importance but prioritize technical skills.	Austria: Leadership and ethical decision-making gaps. Slovakia: Students prioritize employability skills over soft skills. Serbia: Emotional intelligence and resilience seen as critical but underdeveloped. Greece: Teamwork and adaptability are the main soft skills challenges.
Collaboration Between Academia & Industry	Strong need for closer cooperation between universities and businesses to ensure alignment with market needs. Industry-driven curricula are recommended in all countries.	Austria & Slovenia: Existing strong partnerships but need further improvement. Slovakia & Serbia: Limited university-business collaboration; more structured engagement required. Greece: Weak alignment; employers struggle to find well-prepared graduates.
Labour Market Trends & Challenges	Workforce shortages, demographic changes, and digital transformation are common trends across all countries. Employers seek adaptable, tech-savvy employees.	Slovenia: Emphasizes mental health and flexible work models. Austria: Focus on sustainability and hybrid work. Slovakia: Increasing gig economy participation. Serbia: High youth unemployment and globalization impact. Greece: Workforce retention and skill mismatches are major concerns.
Career Planning & Employability Support	Students in all countries express a need for better career guidance, mentoring, and job market awareness.	Slovakia & Slovenia: Students actively seek structured career development programs. Austria: Strong career planning initiatives already in place. Serbia & Greece: Lack of structured career services, requiring more institutional support.



To address these challenges and improve career opportunities, several targeted actions should be taken in each country:

In Slovenia, strengthening work-based learning opportunities, enhancing digital literacy programs, and implementing structured career mentorship initiatives are key priorities.

Austria should focus on developing AI and leadership-focused training programs, enhancing interdisciplinary projects, and introducing more flexible learning models.

In Slovakia, the focus should be on improving career services, expanding entrepreneurship education, and strengthening employer engagement through networking events and job fairs. Serbia requires an increase in internship and apprenticeship programs to reduce youth unemployment, alongside the integration of soft skills training and the establishment of business incubation initiatives for student entrepreneurs.

Greece must address its labour shortages by implementing targeted upskilling programs, enhancing emotional intelligence and teamwork training, and supporting career transitions through digital education platforms.

This comparative analysis highlights the shared challenges and unique needs in each country, providing a foundation for developing targeted career development strategies. The findings underscore the critical need for a more structured and strategic approach to aligning higher education with labour market demands. Bridging the gap between student expectations and employer requirements will require stronger collaboration between academic institutions and industry stakeholders, as well as an increased emphasis on the development of both technical and transferable skills. By implementing these targeted strategies, each country can take meaningful steps toward preparing students for the evolving job market and fostering long-term economic growth.

Linking Findings to the ELIX Project Goals and Next Steps The research findings from Slovenia, Austria, Slovakia, Serbia, and Greece align closely with the objectives of the ELIX project, which seeks to bridge the gap between higher education and the labour market through the development of career management pathways and the integration of Community Service Learning (CSL) into academic training. The identified challenges, including the lack of practical experience, gaps in digital and soft skills, and insufficient collaboration between academia and industry, highlight the urgent need for structured interventions to support students' career development and enhance employability.

One of the key goals of the ELIX project is to strengthen practical learning experiences by embedding structured internships, apprenticeships, and real-world projects into university curricula. Across all partner countries, both students and stakeholders emphasized the importance of work-based learning as a critical factor in improving employability. While many universities offer internship programs, they often remain disconnected from academic coursework or lack meaningful engagement with industry. By integrating CSL principles into career management frameworks, the ELIX project aims to create structured pathways that provide students with practical experience while simultaneously addressing societal challenges.

The research findings further underscore the need for improved career management competencies among students. Many students reported feeling unprepared for the transition into the labour market due to insufficient career planning support, a lack of awareness regarding job market trends, and limited exposure to structured career development programs. The ELIX project seeks to address this by developing a comprehensive career management framework that provides structured career guidance, mentorship opportunities, and training in key employability skills. This approach ensures that students are not only equipped with academic knowledge but also develop the competencies needed for long-term career success.

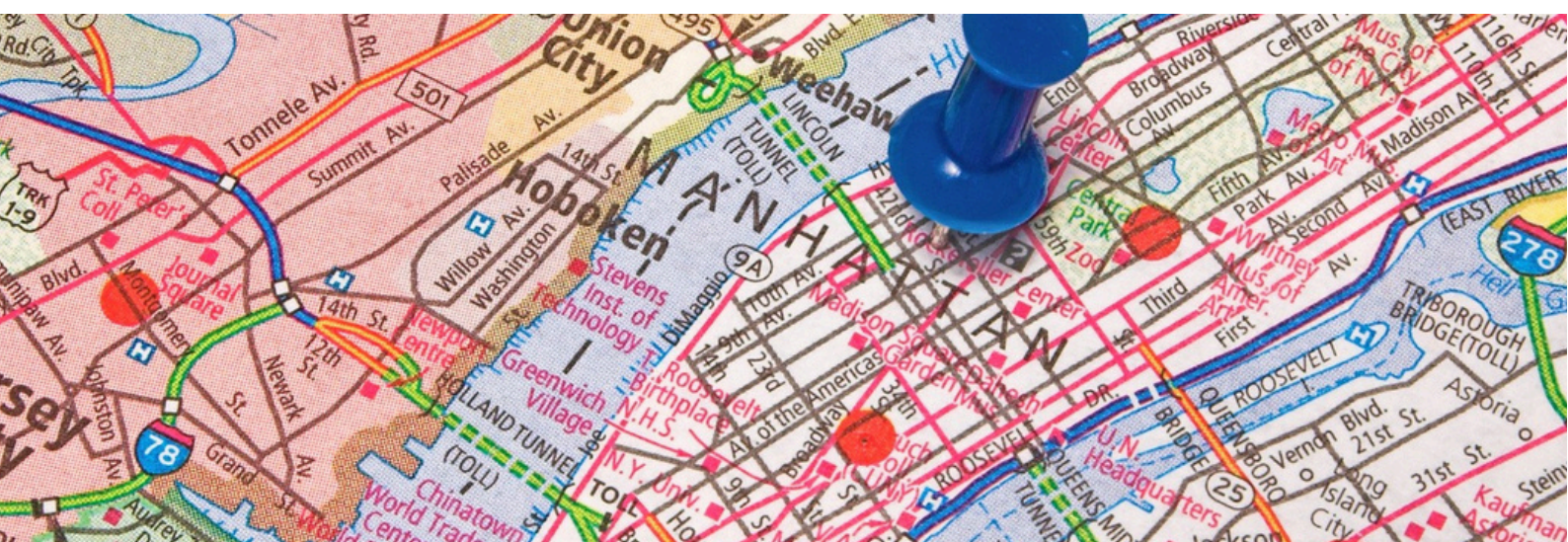


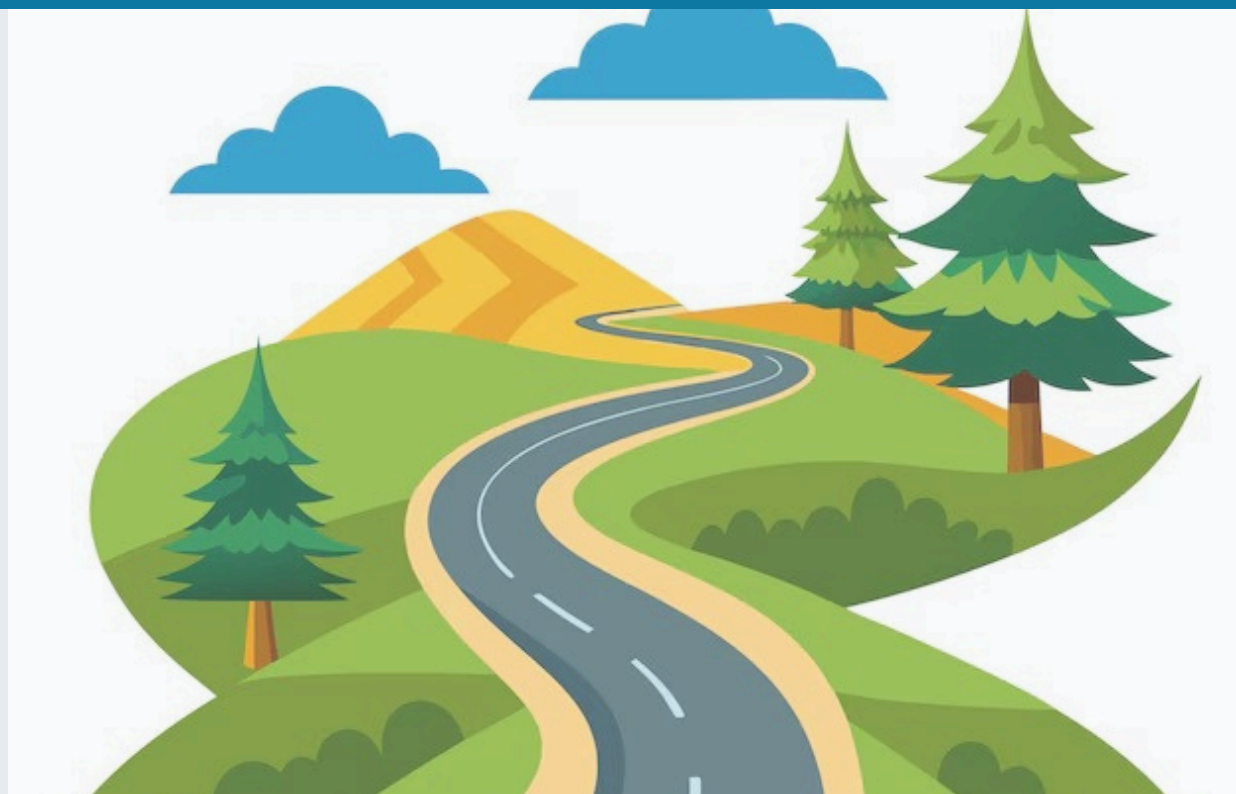
Collaboration between academia and industry emerged as another critical area for improvement. While stakeholders across all partner countries expressed the need for stronger ties between universities and businesses, current partnerships often remain fragmented or ad hoc. The ELIX project aims to formalize and enhance these collaborations by creating sustainable models for university-business engagement. Through industry-led mentorship programs, employer-driven curriculum design, and structured work placements, the project will facilitate closer cooperation between academic institutions and the labour market, ensuring that graduates possess the skills and knowledge that employers seek.

Additionally, the research findings indicate a widespread gap in digital and soft skills among graduates, which employers identified as a significant barrier to employment. While students recognize the value of communication, teamwork, and adaptability, they often prioritize technical skills over the development of these competencies. The ELIX project will integrate targeted training modules into its career management pathways framework, equipping students with critical thinking, leadership, and problem-solving skills. This will ensure that graduates are not only proficient in their respective fields but are also prepared to navigate the evolving demands of the workforce. To address these challenges and implement sustainable solutions, the next phase of the ELIX project will focus on the development of the ELIX Career Management Pathways Framework, which will serve as the foundation for structured career development initiatives in partner countries. This framework will be designed to integrate CSL methodologies into higher education curricula, providing students with hands-on learning opportunities that enhance their employability while fostering active citizenship.

The immediate next steps in the project will produce training materials and toolkits for educators and career counselors, equipping them with the necessary resources to support students in their career development. Pilot implementations will be launched across selected universities to test and refine the framework, ensuring its adaptability and effectiveness in diverse educational and economic contexts. By aligning higher education with the realities of the labour market, the ELIX project seeks to create a more dynamic, responsive, and student-centered approach to career development. Through structured career pathways, strengthened industry partnerships, and targeted skills training, the project will play a crucial role in preparing students for successful transitions into the workforce, while also promoting community engagement and lifelong learning.

The ELIX project is well-positioned to address the competency gaps and labour market challenges identified across partner countries. By developing a comprehensive Career Management Pathways Framework based on Community Service Learning, WP2 will play a crucial role in aligning higher education with workforce needs. The next steps involve finalizing the framework, developing training materials, and testing the model in selected universities to ensure scalability and effectiveness. Through these efforts, ELIX will contribute to improving career readiness, fostering active citizenship, and strengthening local and industry partnerships across Europe.





ELIX ROADMAP

European labour mobility-led Career and
Service-Learning System in Higher Education
- ELIX

2024-1-SI01-KA220-HED-000252281



Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of Center Republike Slovenije za mobilnost in evropske programe izobraževanja in usposabljanja (CMEPIUS). Neither the European Union nor CMEPIUS can be held responsible for them.