

ROADMAP IN SLOVENIA

Introduction

In the Slovenian higher education landscape, as in other European countries, a growing disparity is evident between the academic knowledge and skills acquired through higher education and the competencies required by the increasingly dynamic and technologically advanced labour market. Globalization and digital transformation introduce new challenges that demand high levels of adaptability and lifelong learning. However, traditional higher education models often fail to adequately foster the development of transferable skills such as critical thinking, complex problem-solving, interdisciplinary collaboration, and innovation. One of the key challenges of the Slovenian higher education system is the lack of systematic and sustainable cooperation between higher education institutions, economic entities, and local communities. Studies (e.g., Education at a glance: OECD indicators. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) indicate that practical training programs, which facilitate the early integration of students into the workforce, are often insufficiently developed or implemented on a limited scale. The absence of systematic linkages between academia and the labour market results in a misalignment between employer expectations and graduate competencies, impeding their employability. In the study Empowering Individuals through Career Guidance and Lifelong Learning, CEDEFOP reports that employers frequently claim that while young graduates possess the necessary theoretical knowledge, they often lack practical experiences and soft skills, such as communication abilities, teamwork, entrepreneurial thinking, and adaptability to rapidly evolving business environments.

Additionally, students' perceptions of the relevance of their academic programs significantly influence their educational and professional trajectories. A lack of clear connections between academic curricula and subsequent employment opportunities can lead to diminished motivation for study, consequently contributing to higher dropout rates from higher education institutions. Like other European nations, Slovenia is witnessing an increasing trend of early university dropout rates, highlighting the need for innovative teaching approaches that enhance student engagement in real-world social and economic processes during their studies. The ELIX Project directly addresses the core challenges of the Slovenian higher education system by introducing innovative pedagogical methods that enhance student engagement and improve their employability. One of the central strategies of the project is the implementation of Community Service Learning (CSL), a transformative approach that bridges academic education with professional and societal environments. The Slovenian higher education model still predominantly relies on traditional educational approaches, emphasising theoretical knowledge while focusing less on developing practical competencies.

This results in limited opportunities for experiential learning, allowing students to apply their acquired knowledge in real-world contexts. The ELIX Project acknowledges the critical role of developing transferable competencies, such as entrepreneurial thinking, innovation, digital literacy, resilience, and interdisciplinary collaboration—competencies that employers identify as essential for success in the modern labour market as stated in the study of European Commission Education and training monitor: Skills for the digital era. Furthermore, the project promotes collaborative partnerships between universities, businesses, and non-governmental organisations, fostering a sustainable ecosystem where students gain practical experience and develop key competencies for their future careers. By integrating CSL into academic curricula, the ELIX Project allows students to apply their knowledge and skills to address real-world societal and economic challenges in cooperation with local communities and organizations. In doing so, the ELIX Project not only bridges the gap between higher education and the labour market but also contributes to greater social inclusion, the promotion of active citizenship, and the strengthening of competencies for sustainable development. Through a comprehensive approach to education, the project establishes the conditions for the long-term enhancement of the quality of higher education in Slovenia and the improved success of graduates in transitioning to the workforce.



Overview of completed tasks

UNM actively contributes to the development of localised career pathways by fostering collaboration among key stakeholders and implementing strategic initiatives to enhance career opportunities and civic engagement with the following tasks:

Task 1: Organized and coordinated participants, including labour market actors, career consultants, and community stakeholders, for the Localized Career Pathways, Think Tank Series.

Task 2: Facilitated focused discussions and interactive workshops over two days to identify and refine local career pathways. These sessions fostered stakeholder collaboration, promoting a shared understanding of local challenges and opportunities to drive targeted and effective interventions.

Task 3: Conducted an in-depth analysis of labour market trends and challenges to inform discussions and develop innovative solutions.

Task 4: Collaborated with stakeholders to create a comprehensive roadmap with actionable steps for enhancing career opportunities within partner communities. Partner organisations collected qualitative feedback through surveys and interviews, assessing the impact of think tank sessions, toolkit guidance, and teaching programs on student learning and community engagement.

These efforts resulted in a strategic roadmap for advancing career development and civic engagement at the local level. This roadmap identifies and refines existing career pathways and adapts them to evolving community needs, fostering meaningful and targeted interventions.

Achieved goals and results

In the following, we present specific results achieved through the completed tasks (previously presented). The first part outlines the findings from the think tank focus groups, followed by an in-depth analysis of the survey on labour market trends, competencies and youth employability conducted with students and stakeholders.

Think Tank Series

STUDENTS

Basic information

Number of participants: 38 students: 22 bachelor students (3rd year) Management and Business and 16 master students (1st and 2nd year) Management and Business

Date of implementation: 11/11/2024 and 12/11/2024

Mode of delivery: Live in UNM lecture rooms



Results

Most students agreed that the social trends that have the greatest impact on the labour market are changing values, digitalisation, environmental demands, and migration flows. Some added demographic change, global-local development, the wars in Ukraine and Israel, and, for one respondent, the importance of mental health. All respondents mentioned a lack of communication and digital skills; most also mentioned the ability to work in stressful situations, teamwork, and some also mentioned leadership skills and critical thinking. When asked what opportunities there are to integrate knowledge of social phenomena into their studies and career planning, most mentioned networking and collaboration with practitioners, more work experience, and mentoring from practitioners. Most students would like online courses and e-learning, online databases, social networks, podcasts, and participation in forums. Some students also want applied project work based on current challenges in business and outside of business.

Table 1: Thematic analysis of students' statements on social and market trends, skills gaps, and training delivery

Themes	Categories	Codes	Quotes
The impact of social trends on the market	Changing values	-Young people are demanding working from home, and flexible working hours, while leisure time is gaining in importance -Society is demanding a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture	-... the most important social phenomenon is the change in values. I regularly see in my work that young people place more importance on leisure than proving themselves at work, getting a pay rise and being promoted ... Young people want to work from home, flexible working hour ... (Interviewee 1) -The change in values brings with it an emphasis on an inclusive and fair culture in the workplace. (Interviewee 13)
	Digitalisation	-Artificial intelligence replaces certain jobs and creates new ones -Digitalisation requires digital marketing	Digitalisation and the impact of technology. Digitalisation and AI are replacing some jobs but also creating new professions. (Interviewee 2) -Digitalisation, together with the change in value, requires an innovative approach such as digital marketing. (Interviewee 9)
	Environmental requirements	Extreme weather events, the energy transformation, the trend towards eco-products and the reuse of materials are driving the sustainable transformation of companies and jobs	- Occurrence of extreme weather events (e.g. flooding), concern about the energy transformation (electric cars, solar self-sufficiency, etc.) ... (Interviewee 3) - The fight against climate change, the growing trend towards environmentally friendly products and the reuse of materials ... have an impact on the search for sustainable solutions and the creation of new jobs in the field of sustainable development ... (Interviewee 7)
	Migration flows	Migration flows affect the increased share of low paid jobs	The most important social phenomenon now, in my view, is the migration flow to Europe, which in turn affects other trends. There are more migrants coming from the eastern countries, e.g. in haulage companies. (Interviewee 4)
	War in Ukraine and Israel	The war in Ukraine and Israel affects the deterioration of the European market	The challenges of sustainable development and the wars in Ukraine and Israel. In particular, the war in Ukraine affects the competitiveness of the European market due to the high price of electricity and the depletion of the budgetary resources. (Interviewee 5)

	Demographic change	Ageing population has an impact on the shortage of certain jobs	<i>... demographic challenges, such as an ageing population and a declining working population, leading to labour shortages in certain areas. (Interviewee 8)</i>
	Globalisation and localisation	Globalisation and localisation require companies to adapt to a rapidly changing environment	<i>Globalisation and localisation require companies to adapt to a rapidly changing international and local environment. Therefore, companies need employees who have intercultural competences and are ready for change. (Interviewee 7)</i>
	Mental health	The social importance of mental health is not sufficiently recognised in the workplace	<i>There is a growing awareness of mental health in society, but the market is not really responding. There is still a lot of pressure on employees. (Interviewee 7)</i>
Competence gaps for inclusion in the higher education curriculum	Communication and digital competencies	Increased integration of digital and communication skills in applied projects	<i>I would like to see more content to improve digital and communication skills. The best way to do this is through applied projects. (Interviewee 16)</i>
	Flexibility	More flexibility to work in simulating stressful environments	<i>The flexibility to work in stressful environments. The current work environment is increasingly stressful, and many people are unable to adapt. (Interviewee 1)</i>
	Teamwork	More teamwork in applied projects	<i>I would like to see more emphasis on the teamwork and communication in my programme, for example in applied projects. (Interviewee 4)</i>
	Leadership	More leadership skills in applied projects	<i>I would like to further develop my communication and leadership skills so that they help me in my professional life. (Interviewee 8)</i>
	Critical thinking	More critical thinking, based on practical examples	<i>Developing critical thinking about which risks paying particular attention to in critical situations in practise. (Interviewee 9)</i>
How to integrate missing content into the higher education curriculum	Professional work and networking with labour market experts	-Networking with labour market experts -Networking and organisation of events (conferences, workshops, events) with practitioners -Increased integration of work placements in the curriculum	<i>The most necessary and effective forms of support for study and career development would be networking and mentoring by experienced professionals who provide guidance and support; networking with labour market experts, more networking and events such as conferences and workshops with practitioners, more practise and participation in projects that enable the application of theoretical knowledge in practise, and of course more practise in the curriculum (Interviewee 3).</i>
	Practical workshops and applied project tasks	Workshops with challenges and data, more applied project assignments	-We should introduce more seminars and project assignments that enable a deepening of certain current issues that the market needs. (Interviewee 4) -Practical workshops to analyse real economic data to better understand the impact of certain factors and develop critical thinking. (Interviewee 9)
	Online tools	Online courses and e-learning, online databases, social networks, podcasts, forums	<i>There is a need to introduce various online tools such as webinars and e-learning, online databases, social networks, podcasts, participation in forums/groups, etc. (Interviewee 7)</i>

STAKEHOLDERS

Basic information

Number of participants 36 (12 from companies, 12 from NGOs and 12 from research organisations)

Date of implementation: 13/11/2024 and 14/11/2024

Mode of delivery: live in the UNM conference rooms

Results

The participants unanimously emphasised that social trends such as changing values, digitalisation, demographic change, and migration flows have a major impact on the labour market. Individual participants also pointed to the demands of environmental protection, global-local impact, the importance of mental health, and reflection. Among the main occupational gaps, respondents highlighted the lack of technical and caring professions. They also emphasised the need for communicators who can lead effectively, motivate staff, and connect with the external environment. Future professions include digital media content creators, particularly influencers, and digital professionals, such as experts in artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and augmented reality. Most respondents pointed to a lack of key skills such as communication, initiative, teamwork, flexibility, and collaboration, while individuals also emphasised empathy. They unanimously suggested more internships in degree programs and networking with experts from the labour market as important steps to improve the curriculum. In addition, the use of various online tools to develop skills and gain practical experience was suggested.

Table 2: Thematic analysis of students' statements on social and market trends, skills gaps, and training delivery

Themes	Categories	Codes	Quotes
The impact of social trends on the labour market	Changing values	Key social trends such as: -Individualisation of society, lack of cooperation, -Disrespect for authority, -Lack of altruism, -Young people's demands for quick solutions, high incomes, and more free time are leading to more conflicts	<i>Nowadays, everyone looks after themselves, people no longer respect authority, everyone expects quick solutions ... and young people want to work from home, flexible working hours, high salaries ..., which leads to more conflicts between workers and in society in general. (Interviewee 3)</i> <i>-There is also a lack of co-operation between people, but also between sectors, for example between higher education and business. Business must also take responsibility for educating students. (Interviewee 22)</i>
	Digitalisation	-Artificial intelligence replaces certain jobs and introduces new ones -Digitalisation reduces creative thinking and leads to a lack of certain jobs	<i>- Digitalisation and AI create new jobs such as influencers, which means that young people want to be just that and not work ... (Interviewee 5)</i> <i>- Digitalisation is negative ... young people can't no longer think, there is no more creativity, they don't go into caring professions and other professions where you have to work physically ... This leads to a lack of jobs. (Interviewee 19)</i>
	Migration flows	Migration flows affect labour supply, especially in low wage sectors	<i>Migration flows change everything, especially labour supply, by filling gaps in the labour force, especially in sectors where demand for labour is high, e.g. construction and care. (Interviewee 8)</i>
	Demographic change	The ageing of society is affecting the shortage of certain jobs	<i>I would immediately say demographic change, the ageing of society, and the shortage of staff in care homes and in healthcare. (Interviewee 1)</i>
	Mental health	The younger generation is not immune to pressure, so there is a lot of absenteeism	<i>Because the younger generation is not as resilient to pressures in society and in the workplace, there is a lot of absenteeism. (Interviewee 14)</i>
	Environmental requirements	Climate change affects the sustainable transformation of companies	<i>-Climate change requires companies to adapt to sustainable transformation. (Interviewee 3)</i>
	Globalisation and localisation	Globalisation and localisation require employees to adapt to	<i>Globalisation and localisation require employees to adapt to dynamic market</i>



			<i>and local specificities through flexibility, innovation, and adaptability (Interviewee 7).</i>
	Civil society participation	Civil society participation at all levels of society requires a willingness to co-operate	<i>I would add that public participation, deliberation, requires us to participate. And this is about the willingness to develop joint solutions, not just to give opinions. (Interviewee 7)</i>
Labour market trends with emerging job roles	Technical and caring professions	Shortage of technical and caring professions	<i>The shortage of skilled labour in technical and caring professions is becoming an increasing challenge for society, as it affects the smooth functioning of industry, and the provision of high-quality care to the population. (Interviewee 33)</i>
	Communicators	Shortage of staff who can lead and communicate well	<i>There is a serious shortage of staff who know how to motivate, inspire, engage, coordinate... this is useful everywhere, not just here. And in the end, AI alone do not anything. (Interviewee 21)</i>
	Content creators for digital media	Content creators for digital media (influencers)	<i>With the rise of digital platforms, the demand for content creators who know how to appeal to the audiences is increasing. Influencers are in high demand. (Interviewee 37)</i>
	Digitalisation experts	AI, virtual reality experts	<i>The use of AI, and virtual reality, is expanding into areas such as education, healthcare and entertainment, increasing the need for experts in this field. (Interviewee 15).</i>
Gaps in students' competences and curriculum integration	Communication skills	More content on communication and work organisation with feedback on progress	<i>There is a lack of soft skills, organisational skills. They also don't know how to evaluate what is important to them. More work should be done on this, and they should receive feedback. (Interviewee 19)</i>
	Flexibility in practise	More flexibility through simulation of stressful environments	<i>The flexibility to work in stressful environments. More simulation of a stressful environment. (Interviewee 1)</i>
	Self-initiative through problem solving	Self-initiative through practical problem solving	<i>Self-initiative, which is linked to what you know and can do, and problem solving with practical real-world problems - not running away from things you don't know but facing up to solving real world problems (Interviewee 8).</i>
	Teamwork and collaboration	Teamwork and collaboration through teamwork	<i>I put a lot of emphasis on teamwork, and collaboration. You must recognise that you are part of chain. And linked to that, co-operation between institutions. (Interviewee 9)</i>
	Empathy through role-play	Empathy and altruism through role play	<i>We must teach them empathy and altruism; otherwise, our generation will not be able to live in old age. Who will look after us? Preferably through role-play, they must try it out for themselves. (Interviewee 4)</i>
Developing a roadmap for youth employability and the involvement of higher education institutions and the world of work	Professional work experience and networking with labour market experts	-Increase the integration of professional work placements into the curriculum -Career Day	- The experience, the internship, where students can get to know the staff and we can get to know them. (Interviewee 33) - A careers day for employers is useful, with a presentation on one profession, with handouts and everything... We'd be happy to come to you. (Interviewee 5)
	Online tools	Virtual simulations and workshops, platforms	<i>I suggest utilising platforms such as LinkedIn, Glassdoor, Indeed and Handshake, that allow students to explore job opportunities and connect with employers, while tools such as Practice Labs and Virtual Internships offer the opportunity to gain practical skills and participate in real projects (Interviewee 7).</i>

Summary of the findings of the focus groups at the University of Novo mesto

Focus groups with 38 students from the University of Novo mesto and 36 stakeholders revealed that social trends such as changing values, digitalization, and migration clearly have a major impact on the labour market. The students focused on environmental requirements and the stakeholders on demographic changes. Communication and digital skills, flexibility, initiative, teamwork, leadership, and critical thinking were highlighted as key skills often lacking in the labour market. Both groups agree that study programs need to be improved by emphasising practical skills and links to the labour market. Both suggested integrating professional practice more into the curriculum and increasing cooperation with experts from the field. The students suggested practical workshops and applied project tasks based on current economic challenges as additional steps to improve employability. Students also expressed a desire to have access to online courses and databases and to participate in forums. The use of online tools such as LinkedIn, Glassdoor, and Indeed can help students research job opportunities and labour market requirements and connect with employers. In addition, virtual simulations such as practice labs and virtual internships allow students to develop practical skills and gain experience in real-life projects, further preparing them for the challenges of the modern labour market.

Quantitative analysis

Survey on Labor Market Trends, Competencies, and Youth Employability for Students

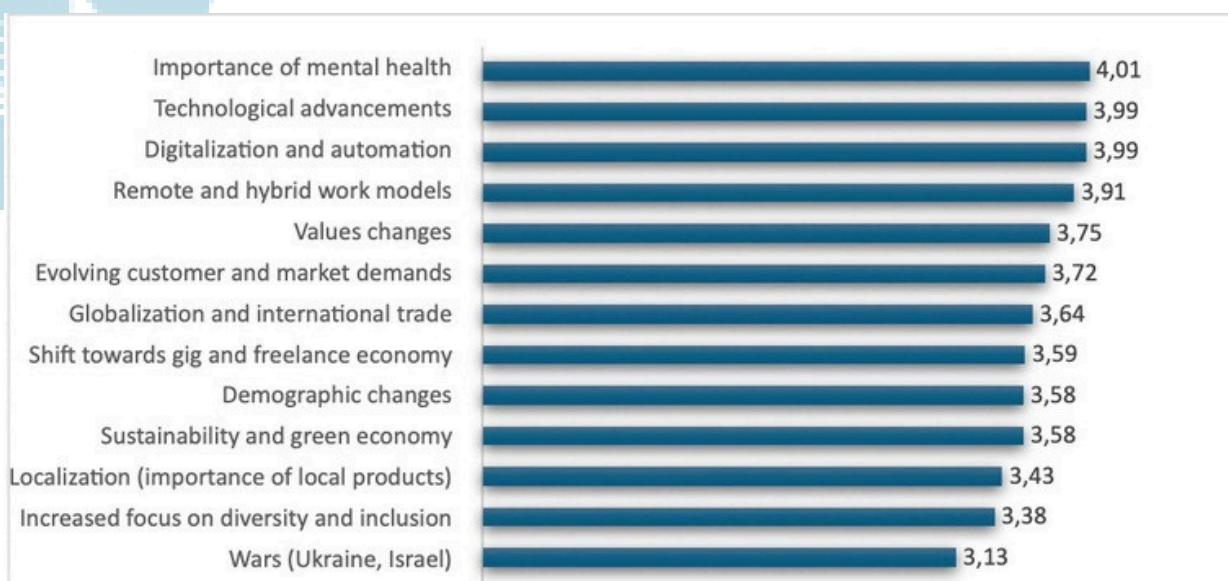
This initiative seeks to explore current labour market trends, identify essential competencies, and develop effective measures to enhance youth employability. Your insights as a key stakeholder are invaluable in helping us align career education with market needs, address skill gaps, and foster collaboration between higher education institutions and industry.

Perception of Current Social Phenomena

Initially, we asked a group of students to assess the importance of selected current social phenomena. We found that all of the listed social phenomena are considered important to very important by students. The students identified mental health as the key social factor ($\bar{x} = 4.1$; $\sigma = 1.015$), followed by digitalization and automation ($\bar{x} = 3.6$; $\sigma = 1.36$) and technological advancements ($\bar{x} = 3.99$; $\sigma = 1.025$), which are reshaping the nature of work, with the possibility of hybrid and remote work models ($\bar{x} = 3.91$; $\sigma = 0.959$) being the fourth most important factor. According to the average values, the factors deemed important but ranked lower are wars, focus on diversity and inclusion, and localization (the importance of local products).



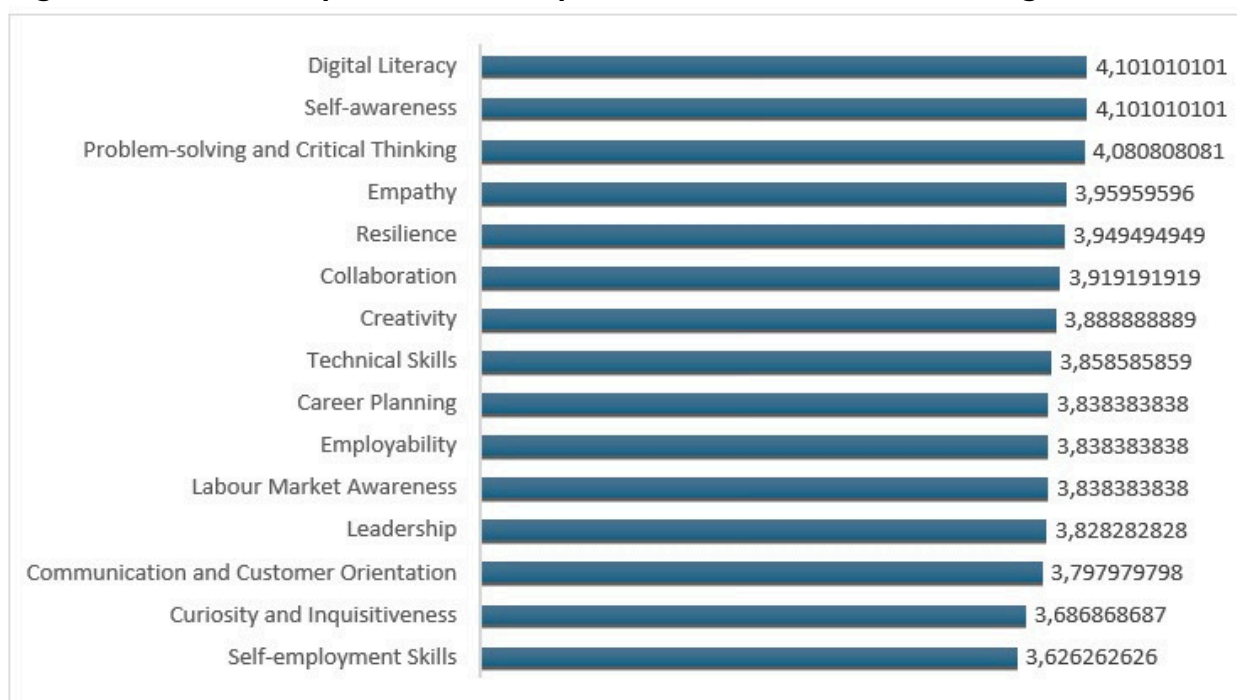
Figure 1: Perception of Current Social Phenomena



Essential Competencies for Labor Market Integration

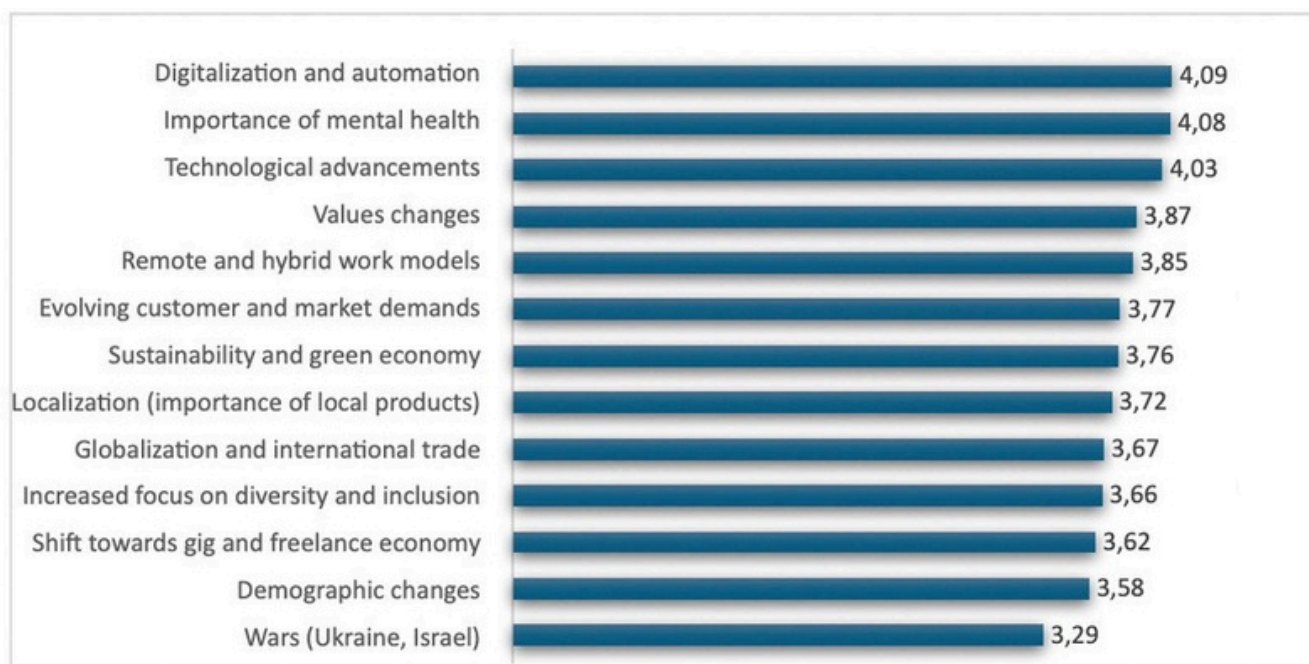
According to respondents, the key competencies for a successful transition from education to the labour market are digital literacy ($\bar{x} = 4.10$; $\sigma = 0.995$), self-awareness ($\bar{x} = 4.10$; $\sigma = 0.974$), problem solving and critical thinking ($\bar{x} = 4.08$; $\sigma = 0.955$). Other competencies, such as empathy, cooperation, and resilience (so-called soft skills), are also important. However, self-employment skills, as well as curiosity and inquisitiveness, are considered less important.

Figure 2: Perceived Importance of Competencies for Labour Market Integration



We asked students to what extent each of the above trends requires them to develop competencies to better adapt to the needs of the labour market and society. Students believe that they will need to develop competencies to a considerable extent in all the areas mentioned. The most significant areas for competency development are digitalization and automation ($\bar{x} = 4.09$; $\sigma = 0.959$), mental health care ($\bar{x} = 4.08$; $\sigma = 1.047$), and technological advancement ($\bar{x} = 4.03$; $\sigma = 0.886$). On the other hand, wars and demographic changes are perceived as requiring less investment in competencies.

Figure 3: Need for New Competencies Due to Emerging Trends

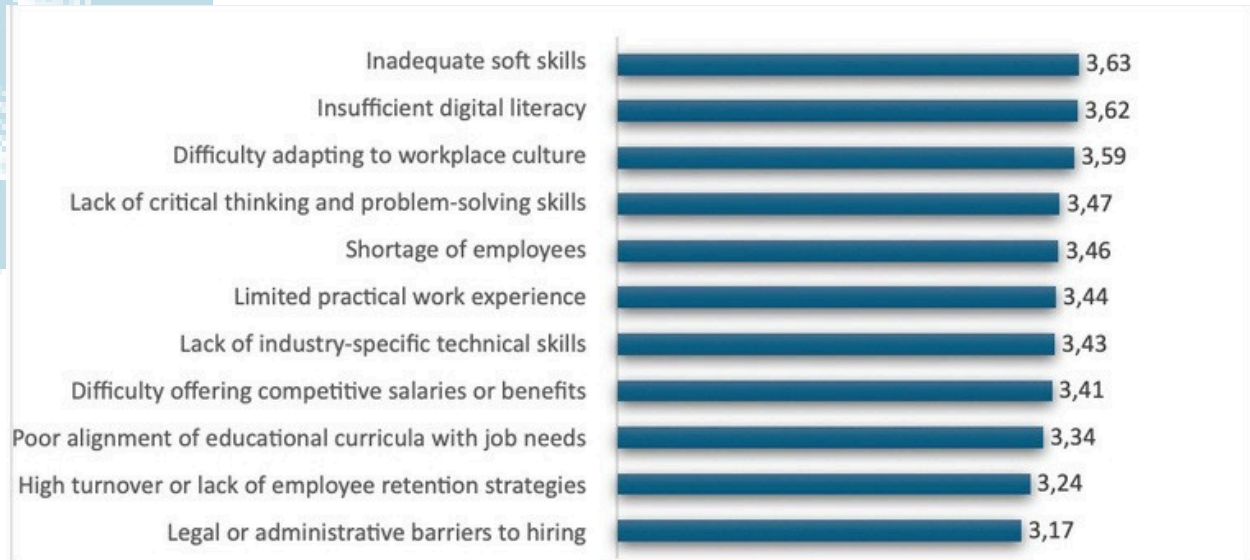


Students believe they are moderately well prepared to address the challenges and competency gaps listed. They assess that they lack appropriate soft skills ($\bar{x} = 3.63$; $\sigma = 1.046$), are not adequately digitally literate ($\bar{x} = 3.62$; $\sigma = 1.037$), and anticipate difficulties in adapting to workplace culture ($\bar{x} = 3.59$; $\sigma = 0.979$). They also recognize potential problems arising from a lack of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, practical experience, and specific technical and professional knowledge. However, they are least concerned about turnover or a lack of employee retention strategies, as well as legal and administrative barriers to employment.

Support for Academic and Career Development

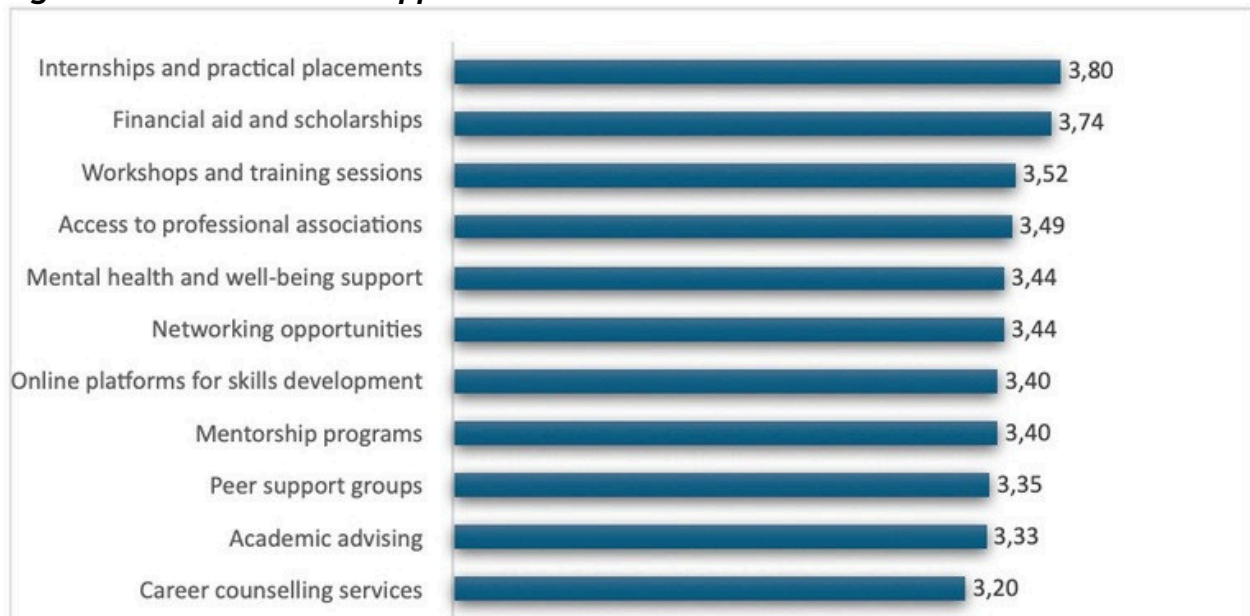
Based on students' self-assessment of their involvement in shaping their career paths, we find that they are moderately engaged. They are primarily involved in engaging internships or practical placements, participating in career workshops or webinars and using online platforms to learn about social phenomena. They are less involved in collaboration on project addressing societal issues or in networking with professionals and alumni. This suggests that while students actively seek experiential learning opportunities, there may still be gaps in structured career guidance and support mechanisms that could further enhance their career development. They would recommend using all the mentioned activities for shaping career paths, as outlined above.

Figure 4: Self-Perceived Readiness to Address Competency Gaps and Challenges



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Figure 5: Effectiveness of Support in Academic and Career Growth



They provided suggestions and comments on how universities can better support students in preparing for the labour market while addressing social needs. In order to better support students in preparing for the labour market, universities could focus on the following areas:

- Offering more career-oriented workshops and lectures.
- Providing practical training opportunities, collaborating with employers, and developing soft skills.
- Increasing cooperation between universities and the labour market.
- Incorporating more practical teaching, focusing on skills relevant to students' future careers.
- Introducing more current topics that are close to students' interests.
- Organizing seminars and workshops based on real-life examples and from various fields.

- Offering workshops tailored to specific student groups with a particular interest, as roundtable discussions tend to be too general and not engaging.
- Promoting continuous learning and offering more opportunities for practical internships.
- Organizing more field trips, such as visits to companies, and encouraging participation in business events.
- Holding events with successful entrepreneurs who can serve as role models for students, providing first-hand information about the real world.
- Providing more opportunities for practical internships in companies at the right level, addressing questions from students.
- Organizing more career days, seminars, and lectures both locally and internationally, with student-friendly transport and entrance fee options.
- Ensuring that universities focus not only on current theories but also on practical knowledge that will be useful in students' future jobs.
- Promoting internships in various companies and involving students in hands-on experiences.

Knowledge about Career Service Learning

As part of the research, we also examined students' understanding of current social issues and the labor market. We found that students are moderately aware of current issues. They report that they understand the concept of Career Service Learning and its purpose in higher education ($\bar{x} = 3.77$; $\sigma = 0.967$), as well as how Career Service Learning can help them develop transferable skills (e.g., teamwork, problem-solving, leadership) ($\bar{x} = 3.77$; $\sigma = 1.018$). They moderately recognize the skills and qualifications that employers seek in their area of expertise, are aware of the main challenges currently facing the community and are quite well-informed about the potential career pathways available in their field of study.

Figure 6: Understanding of Community Issues and Labour Market



Attitudes toward Career Service Learning

Regarding their understanding of community issues and labour market students' self-assessment show, that they are quite familiar with these topics. They recognise practical learning experiences as valuable for their career development ($\bar{x} = 4.22$; $\sigma = 0.910$) as well they believe Career Service Learning can enhance their readiness for the job market ($\bar{x} = 4.08$; $\sigma = 0.933$). However, we observe lower motivation to engage in Career Service Learning activities as part of their education ($\bar{x} = 3.66$; $\sigma = 0.960$) and lack of commitment to actively exploring career opportunities during their study time ($\bar{x} = 3.56$; $\sigma = 1.022$).



Figure 7: Attitudes toward Career Service Learning



Behavioural Intentions and Actions

Students assessed the competencies in community enterprise development by rating the following statements, as shown in Figure 9. They are aware of their personal strengths and how they can contribute to the community labour market ($\bar{x} = 3.77$; $\sigma = 0.855$). They are moderately skilled in continuously working on enhancing skills and knowledge relevant to the community labour market ($\bar{x} = 3.37$; $\sigma = 0.965$) and in self-reflection of own experiences in the community labour market to identify the area of improvement ($\bar{x} = 3.37$; $\sigma = 0.965$). We observe the lower level of readiness to actively seek out and embrace new opportunities and challenges within the community labour market ($\bar{x} = 3.11$; $\sigma = 1.039$) and to effectively build and maintain relationships with community members and stakeholders to support the community labour market ($\bar{x} = 3.11$; $\sigma = 0.999$).

Figure 8: Behavioural Intentions and Actions



Survey on Labor Market Trends, Competencies, and Youth Employability for Stakeholders

Labor Market Trends and Challenges

The most significant trends shaping the labour market and influencing workforce needs (Figure 10) are value changes ($\bar{x} = 4.50$; $\sigma = 0.564$), demographic changes ($\bar{x} = 4.44$; $\sigma = 0.746$) and technological advancement ($\bar{x} = 3.62$; $\sigma = 1.037$) as well as digitalisation and automation ($\bar{x} = 3.62$; $\sigma = 1.037$). Otherwise, stakeholders recognise all factors as medium to quite important as they are mental health issues, new remote and hybrid work models, globalization and international trade. In their opinion, the war and the increased focus on diversity and inclusion are expected to have less impact on the labour market.

As shown in Figure 11, the major challenges organizations face in integrating new employees into the labour market include a shortage of employees ($\bar{x} = 4.50$; $\sigma = 0.821$), as well as difficulty offering competitive salaries or benefits ($\bar{x} = 4.38$; $\sigma = 0.739$). Other significant challenges faced by organizations include inadequate soft skills ($\bar{x} = 4.15$; $\sigma = 0.784$), high turnover or lack of employee retention strategies ($\bar{x} = 4.03$; $\sigma = 0.937$), limited practical work experiences, lack of industry-specific technical skills, lack of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as poor alignment of educational curricula with job needs. Challenges such as insufficient digital literacy or legal and administrative barriers to hiring are considered less significant.

Figure 9: Significance of Trends in Shaping Labour Market and Workforce Needs

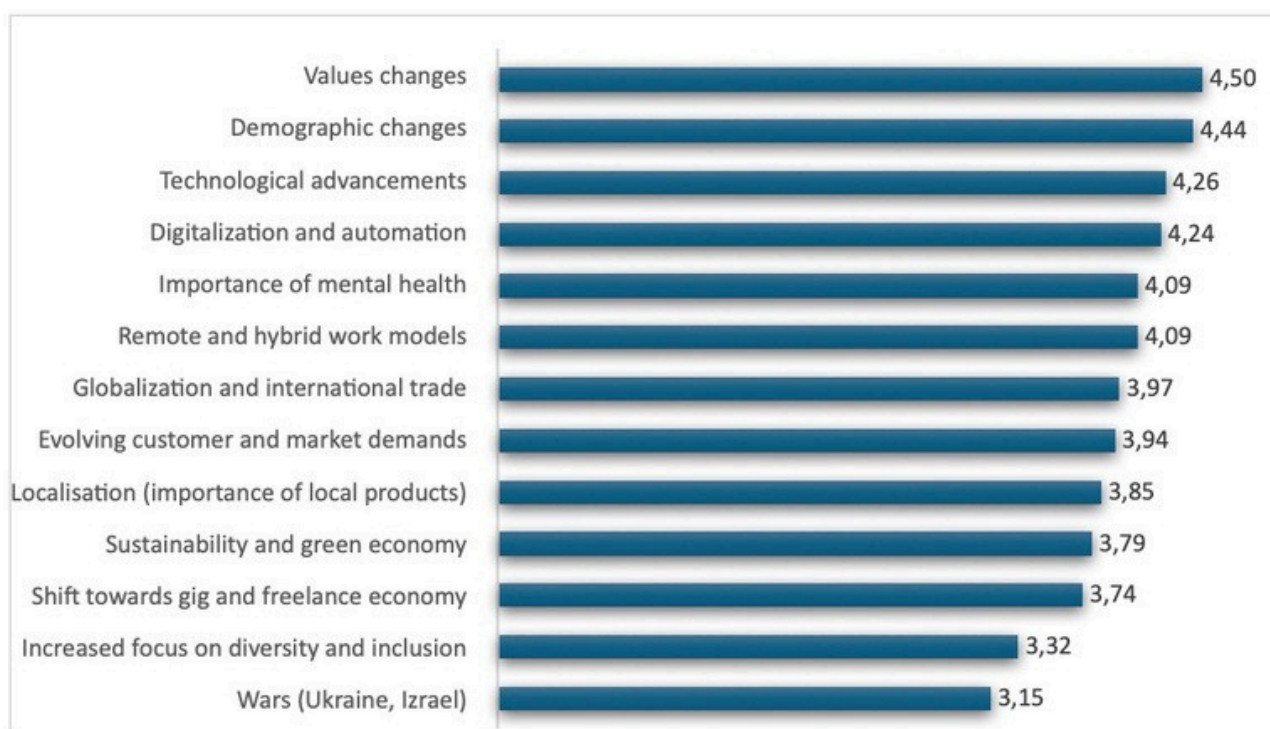
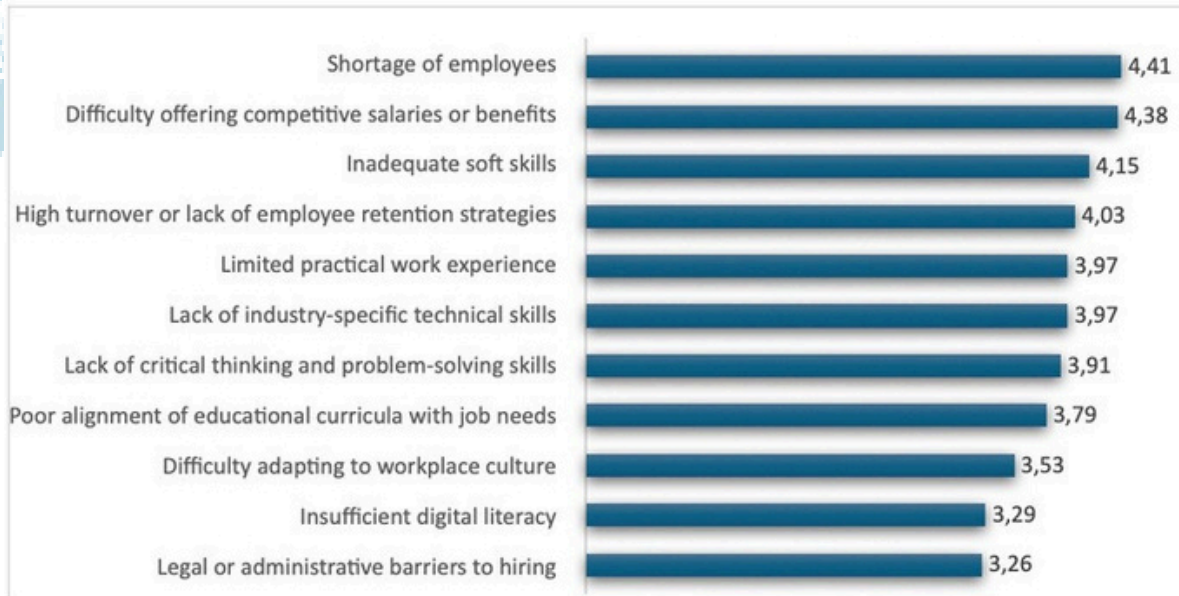
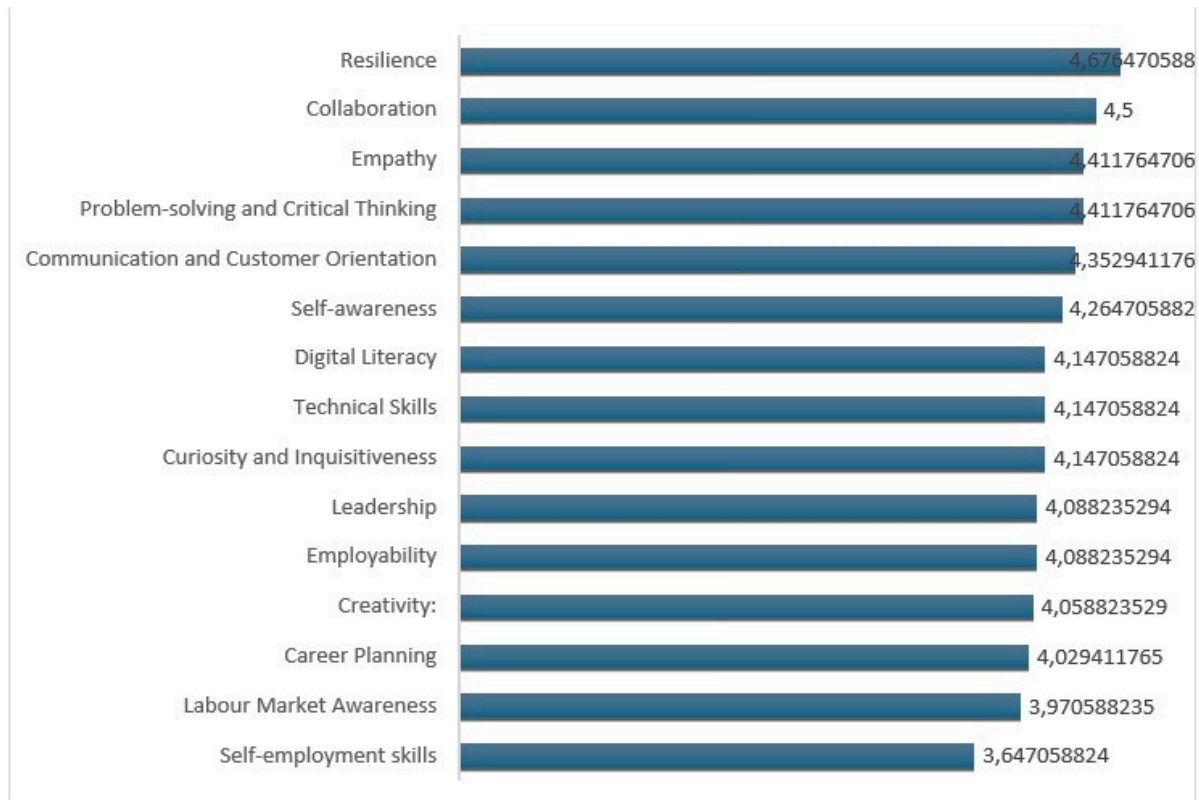


Figure 10: Challenges in Integrating New Employees into Labour Market



According to the stakeholders, all listed competencies are crucial for successful labour market integration (figure 11). Among them, resilience ($\bar{x} = 4.68$; $\sigma = 0.475$) and collaboration ($\bar{x} = 4.50$; $\sigma = 0.615$) are the most important, followed by empathy ($\bar{x} = 4.41$; $\sigma = 0.609$) and problem-solving and critical thinking ($\bar{x} = 4.41$; $\sigma = 0.609$). Self-employment skills appear to be less important.

Figure 11: Essential Competencies for Labour Market Integration

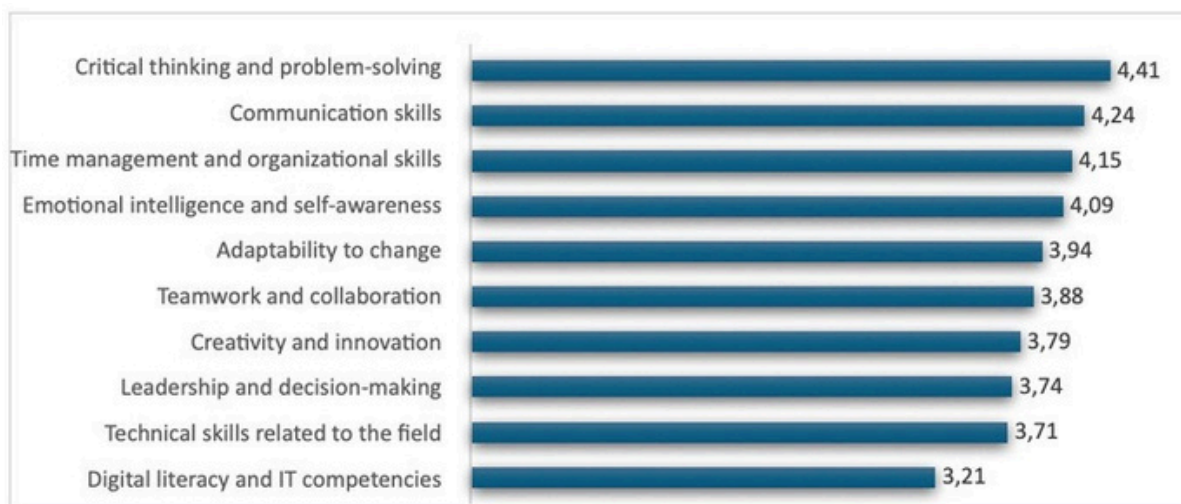


Impact of Trends on Competencies and Skill Gaps

We checked with stakeholders how critical the followingskill gaps are (Figure 13), that they have observed in recent graduates or new employees. Stakeholders notice that graduates lack critical thinking and problem-solving ($\bar{x} = 4.41$; $\sigma = 0.475$), communication skills ($\bar{x} = 4.24$; $\sigma = 0.781$), as well as time management and organizational skills ($\bar{x} = 4.15$; $\sigma = 0.744$). A large deficit is recognised with emotional intelligence and self-awareness, adaptability to change, teamwork and collaboration. However, recent graduates or new employees are generally strong in digital literacy and IT competencies.

To address the recognized skill gaps, organizations often use various approaches, such as internal training programs, mentoring and coaching, recruiting professionals with pre-existing skills, and utilizing e-learning platforms and online learning. They also frequently engage in partnerships with educational institutions and collaborate with government or industry bodies. Some organizations have internship programs, upskilling or re- skilling initiatives, cross-industry collaborations for shared training, and the development of clear career progression frameworks. Less common are the implementation of job rotation or offering financial incentives for employee skill development.

Figure 12: Critical Skill Gaps in Recent Graduates or New Employees



To address the recognized skill gaps, organizations often use various approaches, such as internal training programs, mentoring and coaching, recruiting professionals with pre-existing skills, and utilizing e-learning platforms and online learning. They also frequently engage in partnerships with educational institutions and collaborate with government or industry bodies. Some organizations have internship programs, upskilling or re- skilling initiatives, cross-industry collaborations for shared training, and the development of clear career progression frameworks. Less common are the implementation of job rotation or offering financial incentives for employee skill development.

Figure 13: Organizational Approach to Addressing Skill Gaps



Organizations are aware that, in accordance with the rapidly changing business environment and the demands of the labour market, they must develop and adapt human resource management models and approaches. Their future prioritization of methods to address skill gaps will focus on mentorship or coaching initiatives ($\bar{x} = 4.35$; $\sigma = 0.597$), apprenticeship or internship programs ($\bar{x} = 4.21$; $\sigma = 1.038$), enhanced cooperation with educational institutions ($\bar{x} = 4.21$; $\sigma = 0.487$). The development of clear career progression frameworks, as well as financial incentives for employee skill development must receive greater emphasis in services development. Internal training programs, e-learning platforms and online courses, upskilling and reskilling, job-rotation, cross-industry collaboration will also remain important models for strengthening employee's competencies in the future.

Figure 14: Future Prioritization of Methods to Address Skill Gaps



Social Phenomena and Career Education

The role of academic institutions in better aligning career education programs with labour market needs is also very important. This is why we asked stakeholders how academic institutions could approach reducing the skill gap and successfully integrating graduates into the labour market. Stakeholders rated all listed approaches as very to extremely important. They strongly recommend integrating practical internships and on-the-job training ($\bar{x} = 4.62$; $\sigma = 0.551$), promoting lifelong learning opportunities ($\bar{x} = 4.47$; $\sigma = 0.706$), enhancing partnerships between academia and industry ($\bar{x} = 4.47$; $\sigma = 0.615$), as well as including industry professionals in curriculum design and teaching ($\bar{x} = 4.41$; $\sigma = 0.925$). The faster adaptation of study programs to respond quickly to labour market changes and encouraging interdisciplinary approaches in education are also highly recommended. Special focus should also be placed on developing soft skills.

Figure 15: Improving Alignment of Career Education with Labour Market Needs



Stakeholders gave some specific examples of collaboration between them and educational institutions that have been effective in addressing mentioned issues:

- We engage through professional visits, lectures, and expert training. Students of pedagogy come to us for
- internships as part of their practice. They need to complete 8 sessions. The goal of the internship is to familiarize them with the operation of youth centres and employment opportunities, although many of them... As a high school, we regularly collaborate with employers through mandatory student internships, meetings with employers, and organizing career days for employers and students. We also carry out... Mentoring, scholarship, and internship programs have been successful so far, but there is not enough collaboration from academic institutions with companies regarding possible internship programs. It is very dependent... Our organization serves as a learning base for social work students and collaborates in the practical education of students from the Faculty of Social Work. I provided mentoring to students at my workplace. I am responding in the role of an employee at an academic institution; as I understand, this survey is intended for us, but employees in working organizations. This may skew the results of the research if we are not considered. We collaborate excellently with the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana in preparing materials for foreigners who are preparing for or already active in the labor market. They also provide materials for independent work in the home environment if they cannot attend...
- Collaboration of employees on master's theses, filling out surveys; delivering lectures and workshops by employees at educational institutions; active participation in career days organized by educational institutions. We collaborate on specific programs for developing youth competencies. We collaborate with higher education institutions. Study while working. Our organization offers internships for students and runs a Workplace Training program. We also collaborate with high schools, where we conduct workshops based on their needs. We involve students in study internships and mentoring for trainees. We collaborate with academic institutions to promote entrepreneurship and also for internships. In practical work, we observe that young people learn the most because they get a feel for what it is like to work in a particular field.
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Improving Youth Employability

Stakeholders rated the listed specific and actionable measures for effectively implementing a plan to improve youth employability as extremely important. They strongly recommend mentorship and career guidance initiatives ($\bar{x} = 4.62$; $\sigma = 0.493$) and providing structured internship and practical work experiences ($\bar{x} = 4.56$; $\sigma = 0.705$). They are also strongly in favour of offering financial incentives or subsidies to organizations hiring and training young employees. Additionally, they support creating industry-aligned curricula in academic institutions and the development of soft skill training programs.

We asked stakeholders how significant the following ways are in which their organization can contribute to the successful implementation of measures to improve youth employability. The majority is willing to support the development of soft skills ($\bar{x} = 4.44$; $\sigma = 0.613$) and providing mentorship or coaching programs for young employees ($\bar{x} = 4.29$; $\sigma = 0.719$). Partnering with academic institutions to align educational programs, offering internships and apprenticeships for practical experiences, and engaging in career fairs and networking events are also high on their priority list. However, stakeholders are less willing to participate in policy discussions or advocacy for youth employability, invest in technology or digital platforms for training and development, or provide funding or resources for youth-focused initiatives.



Figure 16: Importance of Measures for Enhancing Youth Employability



Comparative analysis – Introduction of main findings and recommendations

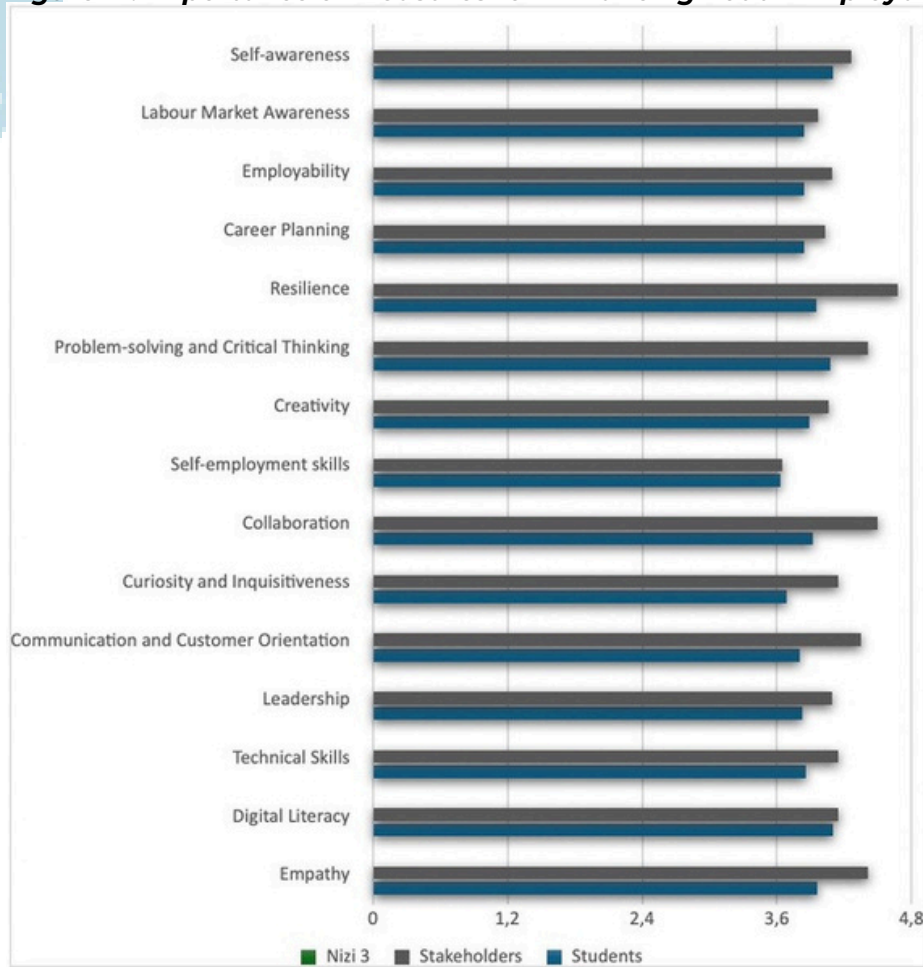
The qualitative research, based on interviews with students and stakeholders, and the quantitative research, which enabled tracking data from a selected sample, provided valuable insights into the current challenges of the labour market, the competencies required to manage these challenges, the readiness of students for the transition to the labour market, and the need for aligning competencies with the demands of the economy (stakeholders).

The comparison of students' and stakeholders' perspectives highlights both alignment and divergence in their views on the labour market and necessary competencies for success.

Both studies reveal the following:

- While both groups recognize the importance of soft skills, digital literacy, and practical learning experiences, stakeholders place greater emphasis on resilience, collaboration, and adaptability, while students are more focused on technical skills and digital literacy. The importance of practical experience is emphasized, with both groups recognizing that internships and collaboration with companies significantly help students transition to the labour market. Both groups rated digital skills as crucial for a successful entry into the labour market. Students identified mental health as a key factor influencing the labour market, followed by digitalization, automation, and technological advancements. Hybrid and remote work models were also significant, with students placing substantial importance on understanding these social trends. Digitalization and automation were seen as reshaping the nature of work. Stakeholders emphasized values, demographic changes, and technological advancements as the top social trends. Demographic changes and digitalization were also considered crucial. While both groups identified similar social trends, stakeholders placed more importance on demographic changes, while students prioritized mental health and the evolving work environment, such as remote work. Students highlighted digital literacy, self-awareness, problem-solving, and critical thinking as crucial competencies for entering the labour market. They recognized soft skills such as empathy, cooperation, and resilience as important but placed less emphasis on them compared to technical skills. Their main competency development areas were digitalization and mental health care. Stakeholders placed the highest importance on resilience and collaboration, followed by empathy and critical thinking. They also emphasized soft skills, but unlike students, they rated resilience and collaboration more highly.

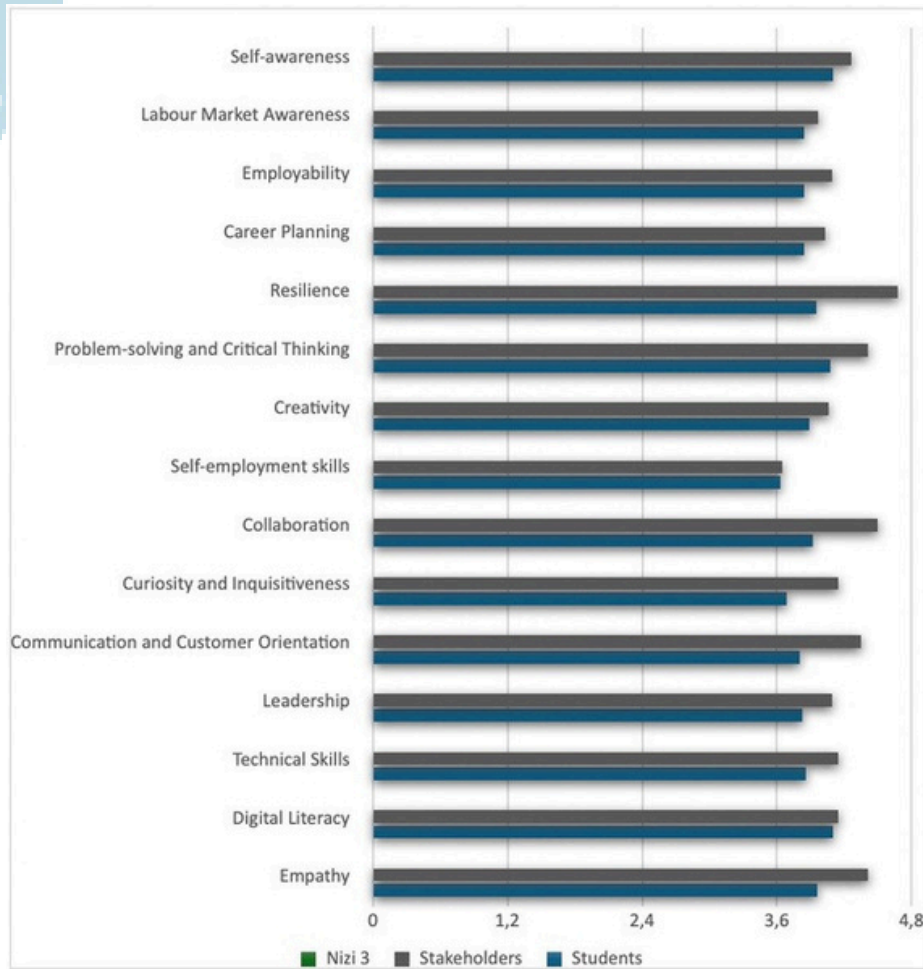
Figure 17: Importance of Measures for Enhancing Youth Employability



- Stakeholders also identified gaps in critical thinking and problem-solving skills in recent graduates. Students self-assessed their readiness for the labour market, identifying significant gaps in soft skills, digital literacy, and workplace culture adaptation. They expressed concerns about the lack of critical thinking and practical experience but were less worried about turnover or legal barriers. Stakeholders observed that recent graduates struggled most with critical thinking, communication, time management, and adaptability. They also highlighted the lack of industry-specific technical skills and alignment between educational curricula and job market needs. Students valued practical learning experiences, believing they enhance career readiness. They recognized the potential benefits of Career Service Learning but showed less motivation to engage in such activities. Students also wanted more access to online resources to improve their employability. Stakeholders strongly recommended integrating practical internships, industry partnerships, and soft skills development into education. They supported mentoring and career guidance initiatives and endorsed stronger collaboration between academia and industry to improve employability. Students believe that their education should focus more on practical workshops, applied projects, and integration with industry professionals to improve employability. Stakeholders also recommend a focus on integrating internships, promoting lifelong learning, and enhancing industry-academia partnerships. They emphasize curriculum alignment with industry needs and soft skills development.

The key to improving youth employability lies in bridging these perspectives, particularly by fostering more collaborative efforts between education institutions and industry/stakeholders and providing students with opportunities to develop both soft and technical skills that align with labour market demands.

Figure 18: Key competences perceived by stakeholders and students



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The key to improving youth employability lies in bridging these perspectives, particularly by fostering more collaborative efforts between education institutions and industry/stakeholders and providing students with opportunities to develop both soft and technical skills that align with labour market demands.

Based on research results, we recommend the following actions:

- By implementing these guidelines, educational institutions, stakeholders, and local communities can foster a more connected and prepared workforce that is equipped to navigate the challenges of a rapidly changing labour market.



Next planned activities

Based on the findings of the research and considering the role of the University of Novo mesto, there are next steps proposals to improve career opportunities in community:

1. Strengthen Practical Experience Integration and collaboration with local businesses and industries to expand internship and work-placement opportunities for students. Both students and stakeholders emphasized the importance of practical experience (e.g., internships) for improving employability and easing the transition from education to the labour market.
 - UNM can leverage its existing connections with stakeholders to facilitate these partnerships.
 - UNM can create mutually beneficial projects, internships, and real-life case studies that provide students with hands-on experience.
2. Expand Digital Literacy Programs and develop targeted workshops and courses that focus on digital literacy and technological advancements.
 - UNM can offer specialized training programs in digital tools, software, and emerging technologies. By collaborating with tech companies, the university can introduce certificate programs focused on areas like coding, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and data analysis, ensuring that students are well-prepared for the digital economy. UNM can introduce courses and webinars that focus on remote work skills, such as digital communication, project management tools, and virtual teamwork strategies. These programs will help students adapt to modern work environments and meet the demands of a hybrid workforce.
3. Promote Soft Skills Development: Incorporate soft skills training (e.g., teamwork, communication, adaptability, resilience) into the curriculum.
 - UNM can integrate soft skills development into its curriculum, through workshops, group projects, and extracurricular activities.
 - UNM could collaborate with local stakeholders to design workshops and courses that focus on these essential competencies.
4. Create Lifelong Learning Opportunities: Develop continuing education programs for professionals and alumni to promote lifelong learning and career advancement.
 - UNM could offer short-term certifications, micro-credentials, or online courses that allow individuals to update their skills as market demands evolve.
5. Focus on Mental Health Support: Develop comprehensive mental health and well-being programs to help students navigate the stressors of academic and career transitions.
 - UNM could integrate well-being practices and resources into the student experience.
6. Enhance Career Services and Guidance: Strengthen career counselling services by offering more personalized career advice, networking events, and mentorship opportunities. UNM can create partnerships with local stakeholders to support these initiatives.
 - UNM can organize career guidance workshops, job search support, and networking events that link students with potential employers in their communities.
7. Foster Industry-Academia Collaboration: Increase collaboration with local industries by involving industry experts in curriculum design, research projects, and teaching.
 - UNM can regularly consult with industry partners to review and revise its curriculum, ensuring that students are prepared for current job market demands. The university can also set up advisory boards with industry professionals to provide ongoing feedback and guidance on program relevancy.

