

## WORK IDENTITY AND CAREER PERSPECTIVES IN FLEXIBLE LABOUR CONTEXTS

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**Abstract:** Work inclusion is among the main targets of any sustainable long-term strategy, implemented at European level through three main directions: a better inclusion of young people on the labour market, reintegration of the chronic ill persons and retention for longer periods of the elder ones by increasing the retirement age. The Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, as other previous crisis also did, brought interruptions regarding the labour market and accelerated some already existing trends, sometimes increasing gaps. Both the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the European Union drew attention on the increasing risks the new generation is facing when struggling to enter the labour market in an insecure context.

Considering this given framework, the present paper aims to shed light on the integration of the young people into work, resorting to concepts such as work identity, career construction, job insecurity and flexibility. Furthermore, the theoretical approach is enriched with the analysis of data issued by the statistical bureau of the European Union (Eurostat) regarding the participation of young people in education and on the labour market.

**Keywords:** Career, flexibility, job insecurity, work identity, young people.

### INTRODUCTION – THE CONTEXT

Work trajectories are nowadays more flexible, changing and in some situations insecure, if compared to the ones 20 or 30 years ago. The global context, economic movements, advances in technology, automatization and digitalization, all imprint an accelerated changing rhythm to the labour market, contributing thus to an increased insecurity<sup>1</sup>. More than that, crisis have an even more disruptive impact, abruptly

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Spurk, Simone Kauffeld, Annika L. Meinecke, Katharina Ebner, *Why Do Adaptable People Feel Less Insecure? Indirect Effects of Career Adaptability on Job and Career Insecurity via Two Types of Perceived Marketability*, in “Journal of Career Assessment”, 24(2), pp. 289–306.

changing existing reports, flows, expectations and reshape social existence and labour market both at hard and also soft level. Thus, the sanitary crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic affected all domains, not only medical, impacting education, economy, technology and some ways of working or studying were maintained even after the spread of the virus was tempered<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the limited freedom of movement associated with the Covid-19 pandemic enhanced the use “of various types of virtual communication, both in terms of interindividual relations and in the institutional level”<sup>3</sup>. The war in Ukraine is another major event Europe was confronted with and it also has implications on the economy and the labour market.

For young adults, work integration is a major benchmark and this process is frequently seen as a transition period from education to the labour market, sometimes continuous, other times sinuous, with periods of overlapping between scholar activities and professional ones. Insecure times are a considerable challenge for economies, countries and individuals in general, but they represent an even increased burden for young persons who are trying to enter the labour market. Stake holders are aware of these aspects and regulations that aim to protect and help the so-called NEET category (not in education, employment or training)<sup>4</sup> are implemented in the European Union member states.

In the following sections of this article, we will revisit the main theoretical approaches regarding concepts as work identity, career, job insecurity and will explore data concerning education, employment and unemployment regarding the youth population in the European Union, also emphasizing the case of Romania.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Work is one of the main activities every human being might be defined by, comprising financial, material, psychological, social and cultural aspects. Work identity was defined as a “work-based self-concept, constituted of a combination of

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072715580415>, 2016, retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1069072715580415>, accessed at 20.02.2023; Sherry E. Sullivan, Yehuda Baruch, *Advances in Career Theory and Research: A Critical Review and Agenda for Future Exploration*, in “Journal of Management”, 35(6), pp. 1542–1571, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206309350082>, 2009, retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0149206309350082> on 16.03.2023.

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed information about the definition, features and the impact of crisis and a discussion on the coronavirus pandemic and work, see Livia Pogan, *The impact of a global crisis on the world of work*, in “Sociology and Social Work Review”, Global Research Publishing House, Stockton, California (2021): 6, pp.6-14.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Porumbescu, *Covid-pandemic related restrictions on the freedom of circulation in Europe*, in “Revista Universitară de Sociologie”, Year XVIII, Issue 3/2022, p. 289, retrieved from [http://www.sociologiecraiova.ro/revista/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/RUS\\_3\\_2022-288-295.pdf](http://www.sociologiecraiova.ro/revista/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/RUS_3_2022-288-295.pdf), accessed at 04.03.2023.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Elder, *What does NEETs mean and why is the concept so easily misinterpreted?*, in “Youth Employment Programme” Employment Policy Department, International Labour Organisation, 2015, retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_343153.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_343153.pdf), accessed at 7.02.2023.

organizational, occupational, and other identities that shapes the roles a person adopts and the corresponding ways he or she behaves when performing his or her work”<sup>5</sup>. The work identity concept can not be understood outside of the social identity perspectives of building the self-identity<sup>6</sup>. Such constructivist approaches consider the process of continuous interaction with different types of groups in arriving to an image of the self, through identifying similarities that may arise from desirable values and behaviors of the group members, building thus the feeling of belonging. Besides similarities and identification with the group identity, a process of differentiation coexists, building in this way the self-concept of a person, his or her social identity. What brings the theory meaningful in this expose is the dynamic of these constructs, that reshape their signification for each individual in every social context he is exposed to, explaining in this manner that peoples’ perspectives may change over time.

Work identity is part of the broader construct of social identity and it directly impacts the way individuals act, decide, interact in their professional path. For young adults, that are entering the labour market, a matching between expectations, resources, possibilities and opportunities is necessary. The career dynamics is also understood from the perspective of the professional identity<sup>7</sup>. Career theories provide a wide range of possibilities in understanding the professional course, generally approached as a multidimensional construct and mostly include concepts as roles, tasks, process, jobs, life span<sup>8</sup>. Also, an objective part, like the steps during one’s career, and a subjective part – expectations, desires, values, are seen as corresponding to the concept, shaping individual careers. Career insecurity is generally conceptualized as a component of job insecurity, relatively recent introduced<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Kate Walsh, Judith R. Gordon, *Creating an individual work identity*, in “Human Resource Management Review”, Volume 18, Issue 1, 2008, pp. 46–61, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2007.09.001>, retrieved from [https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1053482207000563?casa\\_token=77WoqidEUUpUAAAAA:LZjbbqMJ2IzANyz7dSNKL\\_WcLvSh0FvWU\\_JmIxHGJrquMakXj2TBrFHgokYJLD0HXkAd2NuL](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1053482207000563?casa_token=77WoqidEUUpUAAAAA:LZjbbqMJ2IzANyz7dSNKL_WcLvSh0FvWU_JmIxHGJrquMakXj2TBrFHgokYJLD0HXkAd2NuL), accessed at 12.02.2023

<sup>6</sup> Henri Tajfel, (ed.), *Social identity and intergroup relations*. Vol. 7. Cambridge University Press, 1982; John C., Turner, *Towards a cognitive redefinition of the social group*, in H. Tajfel (Ed.), “Social identity and intergroup relations”, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England 1982, pp. 15–40.

<sup>7</sup> Peiqi Wang, Bin Zhang and He Huang, *Research on the Influence Mechanism of Career Insecurity on Individual Career Dynamics*, presented at “The 3<sup>rd</sup> International Academic Conference on Frontiers in Social Sciences and Management Innovation (IAFSM 2020)”, [doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20219602001](https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20219602001), retrieved from [https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/abs/2021/07/shsconf\\_iafsm2020\\_02001/shsconf\\_iafsm2020\\_02001.html](https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/abs/2021/07/shsconf_iafsm2020_02001/shsconf_iafsm2020_02001.html), accessed at 18.02.2023.

<sup>8</sup> Donald E. Super, *A theory of vocational development*, in “American Psychologist”, 8(5), pp. 185–190, 1953, retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fh0056046h0056046> accessed at 12.02.2023; Jeffrey H. Greenhaus and Ellen Ernst Kossek Greenhaus, *The contemporary career: A work-home perspective*, in “Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior”, 1(1), pp. 361–388, 2014, retrieved from <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091324> accessed at 21.01.2023.

<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Lee, Guo-Hua Huang, Susan J. Ashford, *Job insecurity and the changing workplace: Recent developments and the future trends in job insecurity research*, in “Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior”, 5, 2018, pp. 335–359, retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-09985-014>, accessed at 23.11.2022.

Job insecurity has an objective and a subjective component also, or a distinction between quantitative and qualitative job insecurity is met: “Quantitative job insecurity refers to concerns about the future existence of the present job. Qualitative job insecurity pertains to perceived threats of impaired quality in the employment relationship, such as deterioration of working conditions, lack of career opportunities, and decreasing salary development”<sup>10</sup>. In a summative approach, after synthesizing a series of existing definitions of job insecurity and building a model of the antecedents and outcomes, Shoss, refers to job insecurity from the perspective of perceptions of threat regarding the continuity and stability of the actual employment status<sup>11</sup>.

### DATA ANALYSIS

When analyzing professional paths, career trajectories and work expectancies, there are several indicators regarding the youth population that may help better understand the issue. Therefore, this section will capture information from administrative data in terms of enrolment in education, level of education attained, digital skills, employment status, involuntary temporary contracts, self-employment, unemployment and exposure to poverty and social exclusion risk.

According to the European Union, the share of persons aged 15–29 will decrease constantly, with more than three percent from 2010 to 2050. The table below shows the prognosis:

**Table 1.**

Share of persons aged 15–29 in the population

Year	Share of 15–29 age category from the total population
2010	18.4%
2020	16.5%
2050	14.9%

**Source:** Own elaboration based on the Eurostat data<sup>12</sup>.

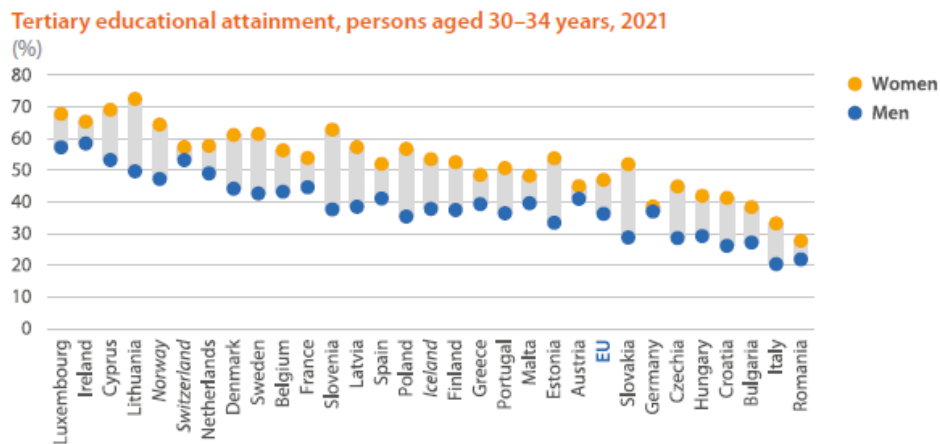
<sup>10</sup> Johnny Hellgren, Magnus Sverke, Kirsten Isaksson, *A two-dimensional approach to job insecurity: Consequences for employee attitudes and well-being*, in “European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology”, 8, 1999, pp. 179–195, retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/135943299398311>, accessed at 21.04.2023.

<sup>11</sup> Mindy K. Shoss, *Job Insecurity: An Integrative Review and Agenda for Future Research*, in “Journal of Management”, Vol. XX No. X, Month XXXX 1–29, 2017, retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0149206317691574>, accessed at 7.04.2023.

<sup>12</sup> Eurostat, *Young people in Europe - A Statistical Summary, 2022*, doi:10.2785/684958 retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4031688/15191320/KS-06-22-076-EN-N.pdf/7d72f828-9312-6378-a5e7-db564a0849cf?t=1666701213551>, accessed at 15.05.2023.

Most European countries are currently applying various public policy instruments to address the issue of aging population, including controlled immigration tools, but it is likely that “despite its great potential, immigration, by its self, will not manage to change the current ageing pattern of the population registered in many areas across the European Union”<sup>13</sup>.

Approximately one in 10 young people is an early leaver from education and training, with men being more likely to do so than women, for the European Union. In Romania, the numbers are pretty similar for both men and women, but the percentage is above the European average – 15%<sup>14</sup>. When analyzing tertiary education, the age category targeted is 30–34 years and Romanians are the Europeans less likely to have attained this level, as seen from the next figure.



**Figure 1.** The share of persons aged 30–34 years that have a tertiary level of education in the European Union in 2021.

Source: Eurostat, 2022, p. 13<sup>15</sup>.

If the European average in terms of tertiary education is around 40 percent, in Luxembourg, Ireland, Cyprus, Lithuania or Norway more than half of the 30–34 years population has reached this level of education. On the opposite, Bulgaria, Italy and Romania have the smallest shares of persons with tertiary education. In Romania, almost three out of ten women and two out of ten men were

<sup>13</sup> Alexandra Porumbescu, *The European institutional actors in handling migration*, in “Sociology and Social Work Review”, Issue 1/2018, pp. 41–48, retrieved from <https://globalresearchpublishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/The-European-institutional-actors-in-handling-migration.pdf>, accessed at 17.02.2023.

<sup>14</sup> Eurostat, *Young people in Europe – A Statistical Summary*, 2022, retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4031688/15191320/KS-06-22-076-EN-N.pdf/7d72f828-9312-6378-a5e7-db564a0849cf?t=1666701213551>, accessed at 15.05.2023.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

in the category of tertiary education attainment in 2021. From Figure 1 gender gaps are also visible for all countries, as men leave education earlier than women, even if in some cases, like Germany or Switzerland the differences are almost inexistent, while in Slovenia, Slovakia or Lithuania approximately 20 percent separate the two genders.

Another indicator targeting education, that is also important in a digital, interconnected world, defined by automatization, technological improvements and rapid spread of information, regards digital skills. From this perspective, Romanians are the Europeans less likely to have basic or above basic digital skills, according to the Eurostat<sup>16</sup>. The European average is about 70%, with more than 90% in Finland and Malta, while Romania is on the last position, with less than five in ten Romanian young females and males (aged 16 to 29) having basic or above basic digital skills.

The association of these two indicators, tertiary education attainment and digital skills appears meaningful in the division of jobs into white-collars and blue-collars ones, with the first being characterized by intellectual or cognitive effort mainly, while the second category is defined by physical effort. An increased level of education, doubled by advanced or at least average digital skills represent a must in applying for specialized, professionalized, well-paid and more secure jobs or for advancing in one's career. Young persons that leave school early, do not speak a foreign language and don't have digital skills are confronted with difficulties in finding a job and may also be more exposed to social exclusion and poverty risks.

Looking again at data, a quarter (25.3%) of young persons were considered at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Europe in 2021, while for the entire population, no matter the age, the share is around 21% (Eurostat, 2022)<sup>17</sup>. The situation of Romania is worst, the indicator reaching 35% in 2021. Looking at the European data, one can see that for all age categories Romania is situated on the first position in terms of poverty risk or social exclusion, more than one third of the population being in this situation. Information is synthesized in the table below:

**Table 2.**

Rate of population exposed to poverty or social exclusion risk in 2021

<b>Poverty or social exclusion risk in 2021</b>		
	15-29 Years	All ages
<b>Romania</b>	36%	35%
<b>EU average</b>	21%	25%

**Source:** Own elaboration based on the Eurostat data<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

Furthermore, a category of young persons is also important to be analyzed from the labour market inclusion perspective, namely the NEET. As mentioned above, this abbreviation refers to “the share of youth which are neither in employment nor in education or training in the youth population”<sup>19</sup>. In 2021 13.1% of the population aged 15–29 represented the NEET category in Europe, with a difference of more than two points between female and male. Women are more likely to be neither in education nor in employment or training than men. The lowest rates are recorded in Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland, while the highest rates are met in Italy, Romania and Bulgaria. 14% of the Romanian males aged 15 to 29 and 26% of the females from the same age category are neither in employment nor in education and training. This indicator, targeting both educational and employment status, emphasizes aspects regarding the vulnerability of youth, in terms of economic crisis consequences, difficult or even no access to online learning during the pandemic period, for example.

Moving to a type of flexible and sometimes insecure work arrangement, data regarding temporary work contracts are analyzed. Thus, almost 10% of the young Europeans worked with a temporary contract involuntary, in 2021<sup>20</sup>. This data regards the young employees that wanted a permanent contract, but could not get one, so they had to accept a temporary one. This specification is necessary because there are also situations where a temporary contract is desired, but this is not the case for the above-mentioned indicator, which is targeting insecurity and precarity aspects. The table below presents data regarding the involuntary temporary work contracts and unemployment rates.

**Table 3.**

The share of involuntary temporary work contracts and unemployment rate in Europe in 2021 for different age groups

Indicator	15–29 years	15–74 years
Involuntary temporary work contracts	10%	5%
Unemployment	13%	7%

Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data (2022)<sup>21</sup>.

The unemployment rates are also greater for the young population than for the other age categories. Thus, while for the people aged 15–29 years the unemployment rate was 13%, for those in the 15–74 years category it represents

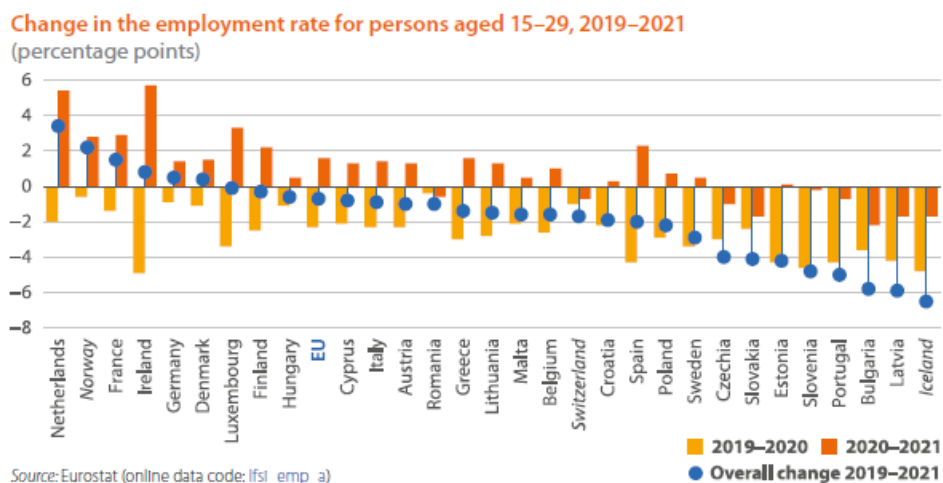
<sup>19</sup> Sara Elder, *What does NEETs mean and why is the concept so easily misinterpreted?*, in “Youth Employment Programme” Employment Policy Department, International Labour Organisation, 2015, retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_343153.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_343153.pdf), on 7.02.2023.

<sup>20</sup> Eurostat, *Young people in Europe – A Statistical Summary*, 2022, doi:10.2785/684958 retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4031688/15191320/KS-06-22-076-EN-N.pdf/7d72f828-9312-6378-a5e7-db564a0849cf?t=1666701213551>, accessed at 15.05.2023.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

approximately half (7%). There are again differences between the member states, Greece and Spain being confronted with the highest unemployment rates for the entire population and more than a quarter of the young generation is unemployed in these countries. On the other side, Czechia, Germany and Malta have the most favorable situation, with approximately 5% unemployment rates and the smallest differences between young people and the ones aged 15–74 years<sup>22</sup>.

Figure 2 captures the dynamics regarding employment rates across the continent before and after the coronavirus pandemic. It is obvious that for some countries the fluctuation of this indicator is grater, while for others no significant changes are seen. Romania and Hungary belong to this last category, here changes being unseizable. A common aspect for all the countries in the analysis is the negative evolution of the employment rate for youth from 2019 to 2020. Furthermore, in some cases, this evolution was counterbalanced in the following years and a positive trend was registered for countries such as the Netherlands, Norway or France. There are also situations when an increase regarding the employment rate appeared if comparing 2021 with 2020, but the drop during the Covid 19 crisis was not counterbalanced yet, like in Spain, Greece, Italy, Belgium, Malta or Austria, for example. And a last group of countries includes the ones with a continuous decrease in the employment rate for youth, as is the case of Iceland, Latvia, Bulgaria, Portugal and Slovenia<sup>23</sup>.



**Figure 2.** Employment rate evolution between 2019 and 2021, 15–29 years.

Source: Eurostat 2022, p. 14<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.



## DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing the negative consequences of career insecurity among young people, previous research emphasized the importance of a strong career perspective in insecure contexts, like flexible labour market, and consider a strong work identity as a major precondition<sup>25</sup>. The three main components of a strong work identity are: a clearly determined sector of desired occupations, considered work in the chosen domain as meaningful and a match between the person and the job in terms of abilities, desires and possibilities.

From the data above presented one can see that strong economies are less frequently confronted with early leaving from education, that here the unemployment rates are smaller if compared to countries that struggle to manage their financial problems. Furthermore, the developed states manage to have a young generation of more prepared men and women for the digital transformations and were also able to counterbalance the drop in employment due the coronavirus pandemic shortly after.

There are of course many cases in which young people are forced to accept flexible, insecure work arrangements, that do not fit their career perspective nor their work identity and make them vulnerable on the labour market. European stakeholders are aware of such issues and try to regulate them, in order to diminish precarity, vulnerability and social exclusion risks.

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<sup>25</sup> Rudi Wielers, Lisa Hummel, Peter van der Meer, *Career insecurity and burnout complaints of young Dutch workers*, in “Journal of Education and Work”, 35:2, 2022, pp. 227–240, retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13639080.2021.2018412>, accessed at 12.05.2023.

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