

Precariousness and Young People – Youth Expectations and Labour Market Needs in Times of Precarious Employment

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Abstract

Young people entering the labour market increasingly seek meaningful work, development opportunities, flexibility, and work-life balance, while employers often report a lack of competencies, work experience, and job readiness among young candidates. This paper discusses the gap between youth employment expectations and modern labour market needs, focusing on the issues of precariousness, competencies of the future, mental health of young people, and social responsibility of organisations in the integration of young people into the labour market.

It is based on analysis of semi-structured interviews published in years 2025 in 2026 in the journal IRDO Mozaik on the topic youth precariousness, findings from counselling work with young people and from discussion in virtual consultation, organised within the project *Through Youth Work Against Youth Precariousness – Pilot Project – IRDO Institute*. The research incorporates perspectives of experts, employers, youth workers, and young people.

Preliminary findings indicate the need for stronger cooperation among stakeholders, systematic development of soft and digital competencies, improved career guidance, and measures to prevent precarious forms of employment. The paper contributes to the discussion on sustainable, inclusive, and socially responsible approaches to support young people's transition from education to employment and improve the alignment youth expectations and labour market needs in Slovenia.

Keywords: youth, labour market, precariousness, competences, social responsibility, youth employment

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1 Introduction

In contemporary labour markets, young people enter employment environments that are increasingly characterised by uncertainty, flexibilization, and a growing demand for diverse and transferable skills. Formal education systems continue to emphasise qualifications and credentials, while employers often prioritise experience, adaptability, and transversal competencies. As a result, the transition from education to work has become more complex and less predictable than in previous generations.

Precariousness is now widely used as a concept to describe these transformations. It does not refer only to temporary or insecure employment contracts, but also to broader conditions such as fragmented career trajectories, weaker social protection, and a gradual shift of responsibility from institutions to individuals. For young people at the beginning of their careers, these conditions shape not only employment outcomes but also expectations, self-perception, and long-term planning.

At the same time, young people increasingly value meaningful work, flexibility, opportunities for learning, and a balanced personal and professional life. Employers tend to emphasise responsibility, initiative, problem-solving skills, and readiness for continuous development. While these expectations are not inherently incompatible, they are often not clearly aligned in practice, which contributes to uncertainty during the labour market transition.

This paper examines how this gap between youth expectations and labour market needs is experienced and interpreted in contexts marked by precarious employment. The focus is placed on how different actors make sense of this transition and how precariousness is understood in everyday experiences.

2 Theoretical Background

The concept of precariousness has become central to contemporary analyses of labour market transformation, particularly in the context of youth employment. Building on the work of Standing (2011), precariousness can be understood through the notion of the 'precariat' as an emerging social group characterised by insecure employment, unstable income, limited labour rights, and a lack of long-term occupational identity. Rather than being a temporary deviation from standard employment, precariousness is increasingly recognised as a structural feature of contemporary labour markets shaped by flexibilization, digitalisation, and global economic restructuring.

In addition to structural explanations, Beck's (1992) concept of the 'risk society' highlights how social and economic risks are increasingly shifted from institutions to individuals, who are expected to actively manage their own employability. Within this framework, young people entering the labour market are particularly exposed, as they are required to demonstrate adaptability, resilience, and continuous skill development in conditions of uncertainty.

From the perspective of youth transitions, the shift from education to employment is no longer linear but fragmented and prolonged. Research shows that young people often experience 'yo-yo transitions', moving between temporary employment, education, internships, and periods of inactivity (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). This reflects broader structural changes in labour markets and highlights the importance of institutional support mechanisms.

Closely related is the concept of employability, which emphasises the importance of skills and competencies that enhance individuals' ability to remain competitive in the labour market (Fugate et al., 2004). However, critical perspectives argue that employability discourses may individualise structural inequalities by placing responsibility on individuals rather than addressing systemic labour market conditions.

Social capital theory further contributes to understanding unequal access to employment opportunities. As Granovetter (1973) argues, weak ties and informal networks often play a crucial role

in securing employment, particularly in contexts where formal recruitment channels are insufficient. For young people with limited professional networks, this can reinforce vulnerability and unequal access to opportunities.

Finally, Eurofound (2021) highlights that early career trajectories are increasingly characterised by temporary contracts, internships, and project-based work, with stable employment often occurring later or not at all. This prolongation of transitions contributes to delayed independence and reinforces the relevance of structural and relational perspectives on precariousness.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives frame precariousness not merely as an employment status, but as a multidimensional condition shaped by structural, institutional, and individual factors.

3 Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative research design conducted within the project *Through Youth Work Against Youth Precariousness – Pilot Project – IRDO Institute* co-financed by the Republic of Slovenia and the European Union through the European Social Fund Plus.

The empirical material consists of three interconnected sources. The first is a virtual consultation titled *Bridge or Gap? Labour Market Expectations and Youth Needs*, involving young people, experts, and representatives of support organisations. The second source includes written reflections produced by young participants during project activities. The third and central source is the Living Library method (*Živa knjižnica*), which enables narrative interviews with individuals who have diverse professional and career experiences and were published at IRDO Mozaik (in slovene language) monthly magazine.

The analysis follows an interpretative qualitative approach, combining thematic analysis with narrative interpretation. The focus is on identifying patterns of meaning rather than statistical representation. The analysis explores how participants describe uncertainty, labour market transitions, and expectations related to work and careers.

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4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Experiencing the transition into employment (Virtual consultation)

The virtual consultation '*Bridge or Gap? Labour Market Expectations and Youth Needs*' (26 May 2026) brought together young people, employers, labour market institutions, and youth support organisations to explore where mismatches emerge in the transition from education to employment.

A central theme identified across participants was that the transition into the labour market is experienced as uncertain, fragmented, and emotionally demanding, particularly for young people entering their first job search processes.

A young participant described this transition as a new and unfamiliar phase marked by uncertainty and lack of guidance: '*It is mainly a new experience, and you are not really familiar with how things actually work.*' He further highlighted the emotional strain of selection procedures and waiting for employer responses: '*It made me uncertain about where I am making mistakes, whether they are minor mistakes or whether something changed on their side.*' The prolonged nature of recruitment processes and lack of feedback were repeatedly described as factors contributing to insecurity and self-doubt among young job seekers. At the same time, the participant emphasised resilience and informal support systems as key coping mechanisms: '*This mentality helps me the most, because I already felt a bit desperate at times, thinking: will I really get this job?*'

From the perspective of labour market institutions, the transition was also described as a stressful phase for young people, especially those without prior work experience. A representative of the employment service noted: '*School has ended. A nice period has finished, and then young people are*

suddenly faced with the fact that they need to find employment.’ The same speaker emphasised that early support is crucial to prevent long-term inactivity, which can negatively affect motivation and self-confidence. Structured programmes, mentoring, and practical workshops were highlighted as key support mechanisms helping young people develop job-search skills, CV writing abilities, and self-presentation strategies.

The representative of *The Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (ZSSS)* pointed to a significant information gap regarding labour rights and employment forms: *‘Young people have access to information about job vacancies, but it is much harder for them to access information about their rights and forms of employment.’* He also stressed that many young people lack awareness of the long-term consequences of different employment arrangements, particularly regarding social security, pensions, and healthcare coverage: *‘Young people do not have sufficient information about social security and the importance of standard employment contracts, whether fixed-term or permanent.’*

A recurring concern raised was the increasing tendency towards precarious forms of work, particularly disguised self-employment: *‘Employers increasingly try to push young people into one-person sole proprietorships, which moves them from employment into the market of services.’* According to participants, this shift can significantly reduce social security protection and increase vulnerability to income instability.

From the employer perspective, recruitment was described as a mutual selection process rather than a one-sided evaluation. One speaker compared job searching to a process of mutual matching: *‘Job searching is not an exact science, but rather a subjective process where two sides with different needs meet.’* He further emphasised that employers are often solving concrete organisational problems rather than simply hiring employees, and therefore value initiative, adaptability, and problem-solving capacity over formal credentials alone.

Across all stakeholder groups, a shared conclusion emerged: the transition into employment is not primarily hindered by a lack of jobs or skills, but by insufficient communication and misaligned expectations between actors in the system.

Rather than fundamentally opposing values, the findings suggest that youth expectations and labour market demands often coexist without being explicitly discussed or negotiated. This lack of structured dialogue contributes to misunderstandings and reinforces feelings of uncertainty among young people.

4.2 Understanding of labour rights and employment structures

One of the recurring issues is the limited understanding of labour rights and employment systems among young people. While job-search strategies are generally known, knowledge about employment contracts, social security systems, pensions, and long-term consequences of different forms of work is often limited.

This lack of information increases exposure to precarious forms of employment, particularly in early career stages. Participants emphasise the need for earlier inclusion of labour market education within formal education systems, rather than expecting young people to acquire this knowledge only after entering employment.

This finding also reflects a broader institutional gap between formal education and labour market literacy, which contributes to unequal preparedness among young job seekers.

4.3 Experiencing labour market transitions through the Living Library narratives

Across the full set of narrative interviews conducted within this study, a high level of thematic convergence emerges despite differences in professional backgrounds, institutional contexts, and labour market positions of the respondents. The analysis indicates that youth labour market transitions

are increasingly understood as non-linear, extended, and characterised by uncertainty, where outcomes depend on the interplay between formal education, transversal competencies, and social capital.

A consistent finding across interviews is that the transition from education to employment is no longer perceived as a single-entry point, but rather as a prolonged process of exploration, adaptation, and continuous learning. Young people often enter the labour market without clearly defined pathways and must gradually construct their careers through accumulated experience. This process is frequently described as emotionally demanding, particularly due to unclear expectations, limited feedback from employers, and uncertainty regarding personal competence and career direction.

Within this context, precariousness is understood both as an employment condition and as an experiential reality of early career phases. While some narratives associate precarious work with insecurity, fragmented income, and limited social protection, others highlight its potential as a space for flexibility, experimentation, and skill development. This dual interpretation suggests that precariousness operates along a continuum of experiences rather than as a strictly negative category.

Another key finding is the partial misalignment between youth expectations and labour market demands. Young people tend to prioritise meaningful work, flexibility, personal development, and work–life balance, whereas employers emphasise responsibility, adaptability, initiative, and problem-solving capacity. This misalignment is not primarily value based but rather reflects insufficient communication and the absence of early alignment between stakeholders.

All narratives strongly confirm the increasing importance of transversal competencies in contemporary labour markets. Beyond formal qualifications, employers increasingly assess communication skills, collaboration, adaptability, resilience, and the ability to take initiative in real working environments. In addition, the ability to recognise when support is needed and to actively seek help emerges as a key professional competence. As one respondent emphasised the role of literacy in contributing to unequal preparedness among young job seekers.

A further cross-cutting dimension is the growing importance of social capital. Access to employment opportunities is frequently mediated through informal networks, mentoring relationships, and personal connections rather than formal recruitment channels, contributing to unequal access to opportunities and reinforcing structural inequalities among young job seekers.

Finally, youth support structures are consistently identified as important mediating mechanisms in reducing uncertainty and strengthening employability. Career guidance services, mentoring programmes, and experiential learning environments are described as spaces where young people can develop both practical knowledge about labour market systems and transversal competencies necessary for navigating complex career trajectories.

Overall, these patterns suggest that precariousness emerges through accumulated transitions across early career trajectories rather than through isolated employment episodes.

This pattern of fragmented and uncertain transitions is further reinforced by structural inconsistencies between educational pathways and labour market expectations. To better understand these dynamics, the following section examines how misalignment between education and employment is systematically produced rather than individually experienced.

4.4 Structural production of misalignment between education and labour market expectations

The findings suggest that the misalignment between youth expectations and labour market demands should not be understood as an individual-level mismatch or a value-based conflict, but as a structurally produced phenomenon emerging from fragmented institutional logics.

Educational systems tend to prioritise formal qualifications, theoretical knowledge, and long-term developmental competencies, while labour market entry is increasingly shaped by expectations of immediate employability, practical experience, and demonstrated adaptability. Employers, operating within competitive and time-sensitive organisational environments, often require work-ready profiles that can contribute to tasks from the outset. These differing temporal and functional logics create a structural gap in how readiness for work is defined and assessed.

At the same time, labour market institutions typically function as intermediaries rather than integrators between these systems. Their role is often focused on matching individuals to available opportunities and providing short-term support measures, rather than systematically aligning expectations between educational pathways and employer requirements. As a result, feedback loops between the three spheres remain weak or indirect.

This institutional fragmentation contributes to uncertainty in early career transitions, as young people receive partly contradictory signals about what is expected in the labour market. While education emphasises long-term development and broad competencies, initial labour market entry often rewards immediate practical fit and prior experience. The absence of coordinated alignment mechanisms reinforces the perception of a “gap” between education and employment.

Importantly, this gap is not static but is continuously reproduced through the separation of institutional responsibilities. Each system operates according to its own internal logic, which limits the possibility of shared definitions of competence, readiness, and employability.

Overall, the misalignment is therefore better understood as an institutional coordination problem rather than an attitudinal or motivational discrepancy between young people and employers.

4.5 Precariousness, Interpretation and Structural Implications

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Building on the structural analysis of misalignment, precariousness is understood as a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon rather than a uniform labour market condition.

Precariousness is experienced differently depending on access to resources such as education, social networks, and prior work experience. While some participants associate precarious employment with insecurity, financial instability, and lack of long-term planning, others perceive it as a space of flexibility and autonomy that enables exploration of different career paths. This indicates that precariousness operates along a continuum of experiences rather than a binary category of ‘secure’ versus ‘insecure’ employment.

Uncertainty in the labour market is increasingly normalised, particularly among younger generations. Young people often anticipate multiple career transitions and changing forms of work, reflecting broader structural shifts such as short-term contracts, project-based work, and hybrid employment forms.

However, prolonged uncertainty can have significant psychological effects, including stress, reduced self-confidence, and anxiety about future employability. These findings align with broader research on the health and well-being impacts of precarious employment (Benach et al., 2014).

At the same time, agency plays an important role. Young people actively construct strategies to navigate uncertainty through transferable competencies and social networks. Skills such as adaptability, communication, networking, and continuous learning function both as employability requirements and as coping mechanisms within flexible labour market conditions.

Social capital remains a key structural factor shaping labour market outcomes. Employment opportunities are often mediated through informal networks rather than formal institutional channels, reinforcing inequalities in access to stable employment.

Overall, precariousness is not only a labour market condition but also a social and relational phenomenon shaped by the interaction between institutional structures, economic conditions, and individual capabilities.

4.6 Competencies and the role of youth support structures

Across all data sources, transferable competencies are consistently described as essential for navigating contemporary labour markets. These include adaptability, communication skills, critical thinking, networking abilities, resilience, and continuous learning.

Youth work plays an important role in strengthening these capacities. Participants involved in project activities describe increased awareness of labour rights, improved understanding of career pathways, and greater confidence in dealing with uncertainty. Mentoring and experiential learning are often mentioned as particularly valuable forms of support.

5 Conclusion

Precariousness in contemporary labour markets cannot be understood as a single employment condition. It is better described as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by structural arrangements, social relations, individual competencies, and subjective experiences of security and insecurity.

One of the central insights of this study is that the relationship between youth expectations and labour market demands is not primarily oppositional. Instead, it is marked by insufficient communication and a lack of structured alignment between different actors. Expectations on both sides are often compatible but not explicitly coordinated.

The findings also highlight the role of youth work as a mediating space that supports young people in developing competencies, understanding labour market structures, and building confidence in navigating uncertain transitions. Through mentoring, counselling, and experiential learning, youth work contributes to reducing vulnerability associated with precarious employment.

From a broader perspective, improving youth transitions into the labour market requires earlier and more systematic career education, stronger integration of labour market literacy into formal education, and closer cooperation between educational institutions, employers, youth organisations, and policymakers.

Future research could further explore these dynamics in comparative contexts and combine qualitative insights with quantitative analyses to better understand how expectations, competencies, and labour market conditions interact.

Overall, the study contributes to understanding precariousness not as an employment outcome, but as a transition condition embedded in institutional communication gaps.

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