

5. SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION AND LABOUR MARKET

DARJA MASLIĆ SERŠIĆ,¹ RUDI KLANJŠEK,² SUZANA KOŠIR²

¹ University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, Zagreb, Croatia
dmaslic@m.ffzg.hr

² University of Maribor, Faculty of Arts, Maribor, Maribor, Slovenia
rudi.klanjsek@um.si, suzana.kosir@um.si

This chapter analyses youth labour market dynamics in Croatia and Slovenia before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Results show clear signs of post-pandemic recovery, including declining unemployment and an increase in permanent contracts. However, instability persists, with high rates of temporary, part-time, and student work that delay stable career transitions and expose young people to precarity. A rise in non-standard employment further reflects structural changes in youth labour participation. Although perceived employability has improved since 2018, the NEET rate remains a concern, particularly in Croatia. The authors observe that cross-country differences emerged, with Slovenia achieving better alignment between education and employment, while Croatia showed little progress compared to pre-pandemic trends. At the same time, work values remained stable, with good pay prioritised, while the public-private sector job satisfaction gap narrowed. Still, despite policy initiatives, many young people continue to face insecurity and difficulties transitioning into sustainable employment, with long-term socioeconomic consequences.

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The school-to-work transition (STWT) describes the path from the role of student to the role of worker, and the characteristics of this transition affect the entire career path of the individual (ILO, 2019). STWT is considered a key developmental task in the individual's transition to adulthood (Grosemans, et al., 2020), and a “decent and meaningful work” which ensures work-related mental health and “independent life” is generally accepted as a criterion for the success of the process (ILO, 2019; OECD, 2017; Simões, 2022). In addition to the individual characteristics and socioeconomic background of the adolescents involved, the process is deeply influenced by the structural characteristics of the society to which they belong, such as the socioeconomic environment and institutional support. Consequently, the average duration of the process, as well as its success, are different in different countries, and a multidisciplinary perspective on STWT can enable us to understand a complex network between the individual (i.e., micro-level) and contextual (i.e., macro-level) features in the process (Blokker et al., 2023).

The common and roughest assessment of the success of STWT in a society is shown by the share of young people (usually 16-24 or 15-29 years old) who are not in education, employment or training (so-called NEET) and do not live independently (i.e., have not moved out of their parents' home). According to EUROSTAT (2023), the average NEET rate among 15-29-year-olds was 11.7% in the EU in 2022, and there are big differences between the member states. The lowest proportion was in the Netherlands (4.2 %) and the highest in Romania (19.8%). Our data aligns with Eurostat, showing Croatia's NEET rate was 11.8% in 2023 and Slovenia's was 7.8 percent.

Another rough indicator that indirectly measures STWT is the one related to the independent life of young people. Young people in the EU left their parental home at the age of 26.2 years on average. Sweden records the lowest average age of young people leaving their parental home (17.8 years) and Croatia the highest (31.8 years). Slovenia, with 27.7 years, also records an above-average age. In almost all EU Member States, young women moved out of their parental home earlier than young men (EUROSTAT, 2020). Leaving the parental home late in Croatia and Slovenia probably indicates the quality of the STWT outcome. In other words, employment that does not provide young people with enough economic resources for an independent life (e.g., Matković & Caha, 2017; OECD, 2021; Quintini & Martin, 2014) limits the ability of youth to leave their parents' home.

A recent study using EU-Labour Force Survey data (Symeonaki, Stamatopoulou & Parsanoglou, 2023) found that young age, lower pay, and better education characterise the move from weak to strong precarity. This is important because unstable employment arrangements are associated with lower loan ratings and higher income instability, which are crucial factors in solving housing problems (Dotti, Sani, & Acciai, 2017), a problem that is further exacerbated by the fact that young people in the EU face an uphill battle regarding affordable housing, especially in areas with educational and work opportunities (Cournède & Plouin, 2022; Wetzstein, 2017; World Bank, 2018).

The transition from education to work has become more complex in modern societies, characterised by rapid technological development and the disappearance of traditional lifelong occupations and careers driven by organisations. Today we are talking about the concepts of *career construction*, *employability*, and *career adaptability* as keys to lifelong active work and work-related well-being. (e.g. see, Babarović & Šverko, 2016; Hartung & Cadaret, 2017; Hirschi, 2018; Matijaš & Maslić Seršić, 2021; Rudolph et al., 2017; Savickas, 2013). In other words, young people change jobs more often and need more time to establish themselves in the labour market, either by choice or by necessity. Part-time or seasonal work for tertiary education students is becoming more and more common, as well as transitions in both directions. Young people who are employed more often return to education or training.

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 became a new social factor that likely affected adolescent STWT worldwide, but again showed the differences between societies in their resilience to such sudden and harmful events. Simões (2022) reported that indicators of STWT trends have evolved very positively for the past decade (2012–2021) in the EU. These positive trends were slightly interrupted by the COVID-19 crisis, but most of the member states showed recovery in 2022. The trends include Croatia and Slovenia, with somewhat less favourable data for Croatia. The structural characteristics of Croatian and Slovenian society that impact STWT with special reference to the COVID-19 pandemic were also the focus of the YO-VID22 project.

Our research analysed youth participation in the labour market by measuring their self-reported employment status. We focused on three categories: employed individuals, those classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), and individuals combining part-time work with education. The findings were compared with EU statistics and results from a similar pre-pandemic study

conducted in 2018, based on survey research using comparative, representative samples.

We also examined the quality of employment based on self-reported indicators such as type of contract (fixed-term or permanent), person–organisation fit, and job satisfaction. Additionally, the distribution of employment by sector-public/state versus private/business, was also analysed.

Beyond these broad indicators of the school-to-work transition (STWT) success among Croatian and Slovenian youth, we also analysed psychological mechanisms that precede these outcomes, including career planning, perceived ease of finding a job, and work values.

5.1 Participation in the labour market - youth (un)employment and the issue of age and gender segmentation

In the past decade, the employment situation for young people in Slovenia and Croatia has generally improved, both in terms of unemployment and job precarity (Figure 5.1). The effect of the pandemic is visible, but at the time of our data collection (November 2023), the average youth unemployment rate in the EU was 14.5%, indicating a return to pre-pandemic levels – the last pre-pandemic year, 2019, the average youth unemployment rate was 15.2%, peaking at 19.1% in August 2020 (EUROSTAT, 2025). The data also show that youth unemployment in Slovenia has consistently remained below the European (EU-27) average, while in Croatia just the opposite was (and still is) the case (Figure 5.1).

In Croatia, the youth unemployment rate reached a record high of 50.5% in December 2013 and a record low of 16.7% in December 2019. In Slovenia, youth unemployment followed a similar historical pattern but remained consistently lower, reflecting a generally stronger economic situation. From 1996 to 2025, the youth unemployment rate in Slovenia averaged 14.7% (Trading Economics, 2025a), peaking at an all-time high of 21.6% in April 2013 and hitting a record low of 8.1% in April 2019.

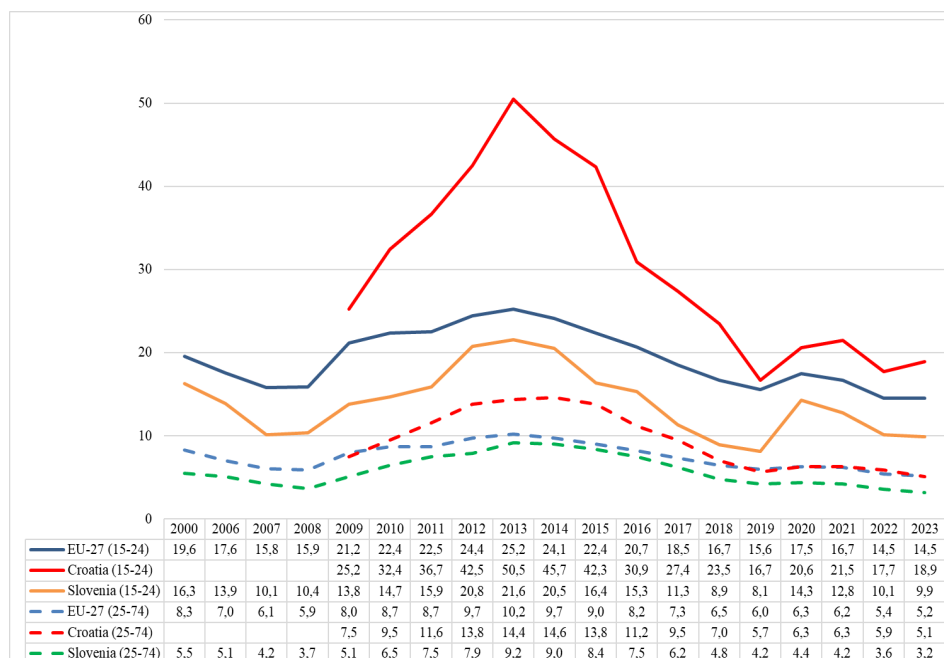


Figure 5.1: Unemployment rate, age group 15-25 and 25-74, 2000-2023, EU-27, Croatia and Slovenia (%)

Source: Eurostat – Unemployment by sex and age – annual data [une_rt_a] [Data set].

https://doi.org/10.2908/une_rt_a

As can be discerned from Figure 5.1., the youth unemployment rate followed the overall unemployment trend, but is always consistently higher. According to the most recent data from March 2025 (Trading Economics, 2025a), the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in the euro area was 6.2%, while the youth unemployment rate stood at 14.5%. This was true also for Croatia and Slovenia, where overall unemployment remains historically low: in Croatia, it was 4.5%, and 16.1% for youth; in Slovenia, 3.2% overall, and 7.3% for youth, a further improvement from 2023. Figure 5.1. also shows the cyclical nature of the labour market, in which young people are hit relatively harder by economic crises (they also find jobs more quickly during economic recoveries; Makeham, 1980; O'Higgins, 2001).

Although official statistics suggest improvements in youth unemployment, the data also highlight persistent age-based segmentation within labour markets, with young people disproportionately engaged in atypical and non-standard forms of

employment such as part-time, temporary, shift, and agency work (Klanjšek, Deželan and Vombergar, 2021; Tomić, 2015). For instance, in Slovenia, the share of youth in temporary employment peaked at 75.5% in 2015 and, despite falling to 48% by 2023, remains significantly higher than both in the general population (8.9% among those aged 25–75) and regarding historical levels (around 30% in 1996). This increased flexibility for young workers is associated with reduced job stability, which undermines their capacity for “full economic and social independence” (Ignjatović and Trbanc, 2009: 40) and affects major life decisions, including family formation (IMAD, 2008: 42). Furthermore, national youth studies reveal that the apparent improvement in youth employment is less pronounced when excluding those still in education, with self-reported unemployment rates among young people consistently exceeding official Eurostat figures (Klanjšek, Deželan and Vombergar, 202).

The results from the current (i.e., YO-VID22) study indicated that this pattern still remains in place for Slovenia, but interestingly not for Croatia. Specifically, in the Croatian sample, 40% of participants, and in the Slovenian sample, 32%, defined their status in terms of the labour market (i.e., they did not identify as students). Among these, 12% reported having no job in Slovenia (which is higher than the official rate of 9.9%) and 16.7 % in Croatia, which is lower than the official rate of 18.9%.

Next, as shown in Figure 5.2., a part of young people are not actively seeking employment or do not categorise themselves within the labour force (categories: “Not seeking job”, “Other”). If we would include participants who identify as students but are not actively studying on a regular basis, the numbers would be probably even higher, which indicates that there is a group of young people that is not engaged in institutionalised activities such as employment or education and could thus be classified as “NEET” (Not in Education, Employment, or Training).

Our data thus concurs with Eurostat findings, which indicates that in Croatia the NEET rate in 2023 stood at 11.8 % and in Slovenia at 7.8 % (EU 27 average NEET rate was 11.2%; in 2018 the NEET rate for Croatia was 15.5 and 8.8 % for Slovenia; EU 27 average NEET rate in 2018 was 13.3%). In other words, although the youth NEET rate decreased in both countries in the post-pandemic period, it remains an issue, which, as indicated by Naterer, Hazemali and Matjašič Friš (2023), deserves special attention and further research. As Andvig and Hummelvoll (2016) have shown, young people not attending school or working may develop feelings of isolation and a lack of control, which might (further) marginalise them.

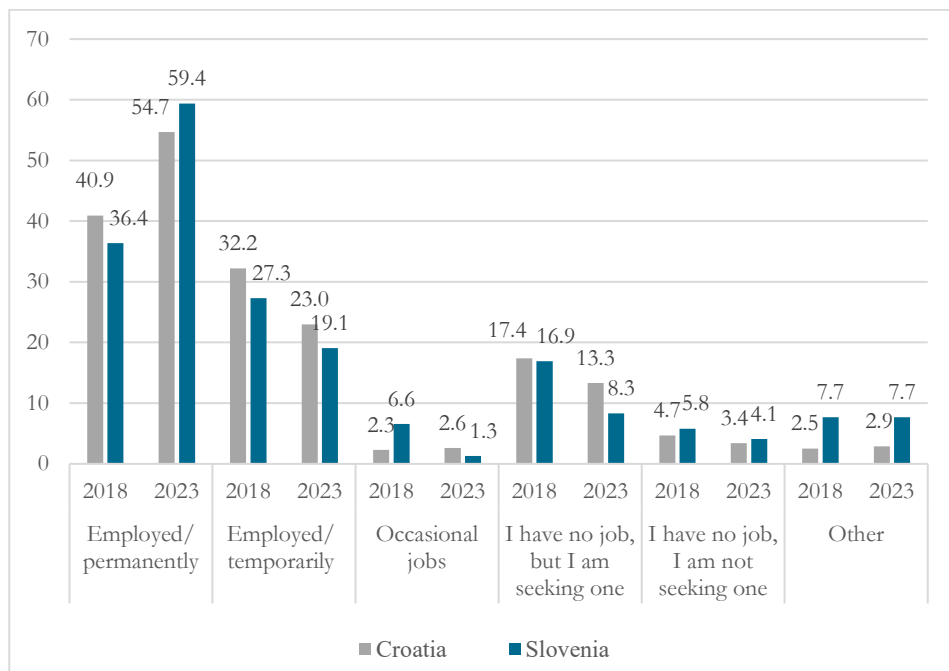


Figure 5.2: Employment status of youth, 2018-2023, by country (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Next, among the employed participants in the study, around a fifth had a fixed-term or temporary contract – 23% in the Croatian sample and 19.1% in the Slovenian – which is associated with higher objective job insecurity (De Witte & Näswall, 2003) and limits the possibility of obtaining long-term loans (e.g., housing loans). For these reasons, fixed-term employment contracts are generally considered less favourable than permanent ones, and indicate lower job quality. It is thus of no surprise that youth who have permanent employment tend to express higher job satisfaction than those who are in the most precarious position, i.e., those who have occasional jobs. Overall, job satisfaction slightly increased in Slovenia from 2018 to 2023 ($M=3.66$; $SD=1.15 \rightarrow M=3.74$; $SD=1.08$) and decreased in Croatia ($M=3.71$; $SD=1.03 \rightarrow M=3.67$; $SD=1.22$), but the change was not significant (see also Figure 5.3.).

At the time of our data collection, EUROSTAT (2023) reported significant variation across EU countries in the share of employed individuals aged 15–29, not in formal education, who were on temporary contracts. The highest shares of temporary employment in this group were observed in Portugal (40%), Spain (39%), and Italy

(38%). At the other end of the spectrum, the lowest shares were recorded in Lithuania and Latvia (both 3%), Romania (4%), and Estonia (5%). Although our data show that Croatia and Slovenia had relatively high rates of temporary employment among youth, the overall trends are positive, with a decreasing share of temporary employment in the general workforce – and consequently among young people – in both countries. In other words, in both countries, the labour market has shifted from flexible, short-term contracts toward more stable employment. These trends are primarily the result of positive macroeconomic developments, but also, to some extent, of legislation promoting stable work contracts.

In spite of these positive developments, it is important to note that there is a gender-specific pattern in this regard – young women, both in Slovenia and Croatia, more often have jobs that are less stable. Additionally, they are also more often unemployed (see Table 5.1.), which, as reported by the respondents, is something that brings hardship, including stress to young people's lives. Specifically, a majority of those who were unemployed in 2023 reported that for them life is hard and stressful (68% stated so in Slovenia and 70% in Croatia).

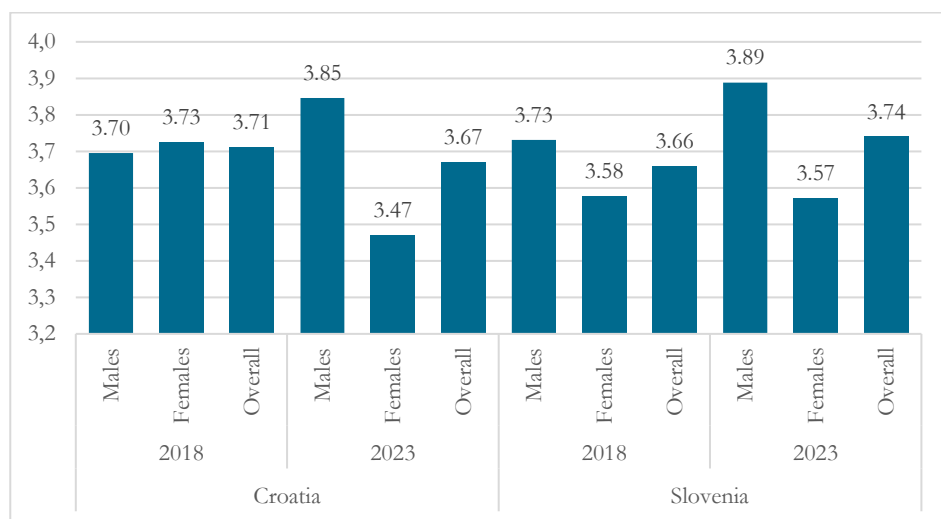


Figure 5.3: Job satisfaction (5 = very satisfied), by country, year and sex (mean score)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Table 5.1: Employment type, by gender, year, and country (%)

					Employed / permanently	Employed / temporarily	Occasional jobs	I have no job, but I am seeking one	I have no job, I am not seeking one	Other
Slovenia	2018	Sex	Males	Count	47	40	7	12	7	16
				% within males	36,4%	31,0%	5,4%	9,3%	5,4%	12,4%
			Females	Count	39	32	12	27	10	11
				% within females	29,8%	24,4%	9,2%	20,6%	7,6%	8,4%
		Total		Count	86	72	19	39	17	27
				% within sex	33,1%	27,7%	7,3%	15,0%	6,5%	10,4%
	2023	Sex	Males	Count	124	30	3	14	7	14
				% within males	64,6%	15,6%	1,6%	7,3%	3,6%	7,3%
			Females	Count	92	40	1	16	8	14
				% within females	53,8%	23,4%	,6%	9,4%	4,7%	8,2%
		Total		Count	302	216	70	4	30	15
				% within sex	48,6%	59,5%	19,3%	1,1%	8,3%	4,1%
Croatia	2018	Sex	Males	Count	177	142	10	55	16	7
				% within males	43,5%	34,9%	2,5%	13,5%	3,9%	1,7%
			Females	Count	134	103	7	77	20	12
				% within females	38,0%	29,2%	2,0%	21,8%	5,7%	3,4%
		Total		Count	311	245	17	132	36	19
				% within sex	40,9%	32,2%	2,2%	17,4%	4,7%	2,5%
	2023	Sex	Males	Count	152	47	6	31	9	7
				% within males	60,3%	18,7%	2,4%	12,3%	3,6%	2,8%
			Females	Count	120	67	7	35	8	7
				% within females	49,2%	27,5%	2,9%	14,3%	3,3%	2,9%
		Total		Count	272	114	13	66	17	14
				% within sex	54,8%	23,0%	2,6%	13,3%	3,4%	2,8%

Source: Youth Study Slovenia – FES 2018/2019 (Naterer et al., 2019) and YO-VID22, 2023

The phenomenon of women holding less secure jobs consequently helps in understanding why young women tend to be less satisfied with their jobs, especially in 2023, when this difference became statistically significant (i.e., females reported lower job satisfaction than males; $p < 0.05$; see Figure 5.3.).

Overall, the results on job satisfaction show a high degree of stability and similarity between the two countries. Average job satisfaction remained virtually unchanged in Croatia while in Slovenia it showed a slight but non-significant increase.

In sum, while unemployment and precarity in Croatia and Slovenia is decreasing, young individuals continue to face challenges. This includes relatively higher rates of unemployment and lower rates of permanent employment, especially for young women, indicating issues in the school-to-work transition.

Possible contributing factors to the higher unemployment rate among young people (ages 16–19 in our study) likely include the temporary nature of their jobs, lack of experience, and evolving labour market demands. Additional contributing factors include the misalignment between educational outcomes and labour market needs (e.g. for women this might be the result of the fact that they are less often included in STEM, which traditionally eases school-to-work transition; UNESCO, n.d.), limited availability of entry-level job opportunities, and broader economic fluctuations (Svetin, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires targeted policies, such as enhanced vocational training, incentives for youth employment, and stronger support for job placement programmes.

Our results, based on representative national samples of young people aged 16 to 29 in Croatia and Slovenia in 2023, compared with pre-pandemic data from 2018 and 2019, as well as Eurostat data on trends and differences among EU countries regarding youth labour market status indicators, thus point to several general conclusions applicable to both countries: The youth unemployment rate follows the pattern of general unemployment trends but remains considerably higher than that of the overall working population. Young women tend to be more represented among the unemployed.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the thoughts of young people on the labour market.

“So basically, in April I'm going back to work where I worked last summer in a hotel, and it's basically an office job, which is great for me, but, I mean, the conditions and the employer and colleagues and everything, but it's not a permanent job, so of course, it's not good from that perspective. And right now, since I have a little more time now,

I've been thinking about enrolling in some additional courses, but most of it, something online, so somehow I'll do something like eight hours a day every day so I can keep up with it. So yes, I plan to continue to educate myself as much as I can, but, as I said, I'm not really happy with the fact that it's very difficult, almost impossible, to get a job in my field without some connections and stuff."

(Female, unemployed, Croatia)

Although temporary employment among young people is also more prevalent than in the general working population, a shift toward more stable and permanent employment has been observed over the past decade, but again, young women trail young men in this regard. Finally, while the COVID-19 pandemic caused short-term negative trends in the labour market, no long-term effects on youth employment status or unemployment rates have been observed. The share of young people not engaged in education or employment (NEET) has decreased in both countries over the past decade (2013 vs 2023) – from 22.1 to 11.8% in Croatia and from 12.9 to 7.8% in Slovenia, but the problem of NEET still deserves attention due to its potential negative impacts on youth well-being.

5.2 Sectors of employment and education-employment alignment

Although public sector jobs tend to offer higher average wages and more stable employment compared to their private counterparts, influencing the perceptions and choices of young job seekers (Hyder & Reilly, 2022), the allure of entrepreneurial opportunities and dynamic corporate cultures in the private sector frequently attracts youth who prioritise growth and flexibility (Simões & Rio, 2020). Figure 5.4. shows sectoral distribution of youth employment in Slovenia and Croatia.

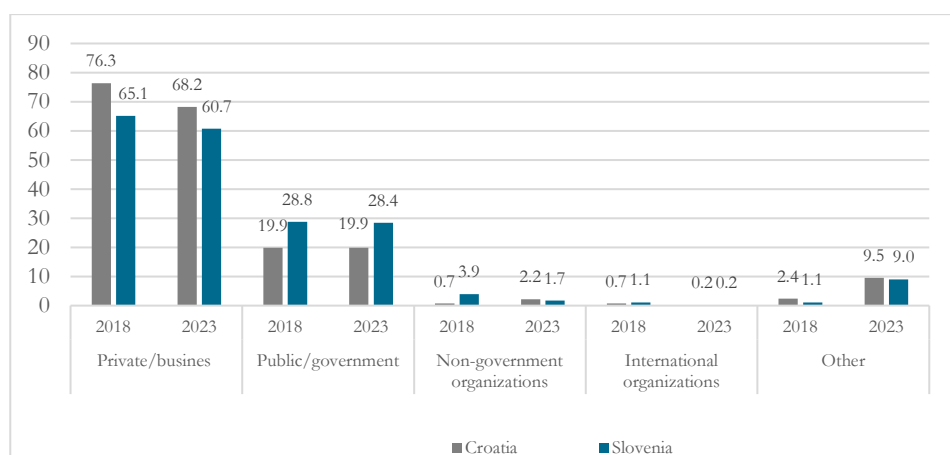


Figure 5.4: Young people employed in each sector, 2018 vs 2023, by country (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

- A decrease in the share of employment in the private business sector – from 76.3% to 68.2% in Croatia, and from 65.1% to 60.7% in Slovenia.
- An increase in the percentage of individuals who selected the response category “other” – from 2.4% to 9.5% in Croatia, and from 1.1% to 9% in Slovenia.

As can be seen, comparison between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic years in the share of individuals employed in specific sectors did not reveal major differences. However, some notable changes can be observed in both countries:

This finding is interesting, and the similar pattern in both countries suggests that it is not a methodological artefact but a meaningful trend. The fact that almost 10% of respondents did not select any of the standard answer categories may point to emerging trends in modern careers – most likely non-standard forms of employment or self-employment. This small but significant group of young workers deserves attention in future research.

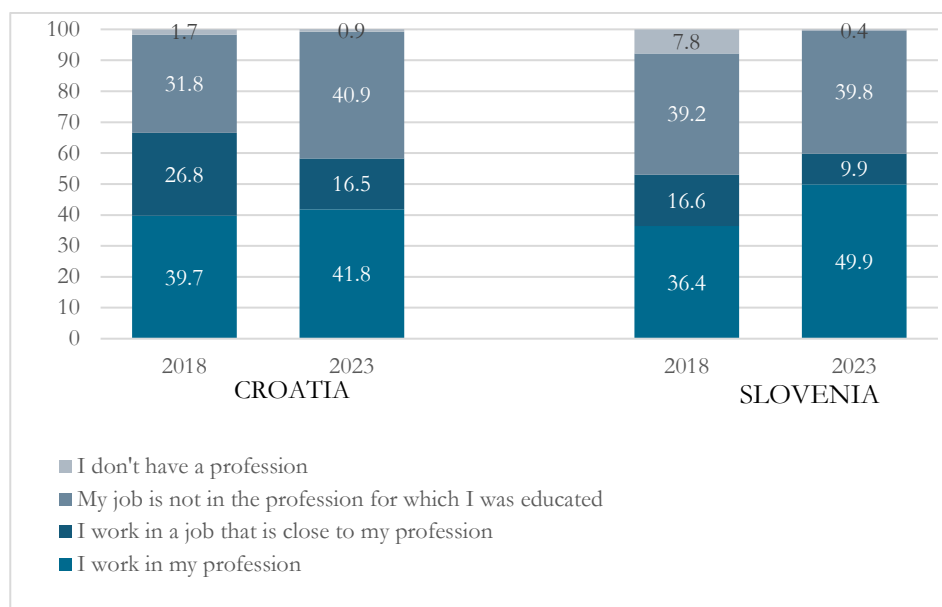


Figure 5.5: Employment and education alignment (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Next, the data on employment–education fit (Figure 5.5.) indicate an increase in the share of individuals whose employment matches their education in both countries: from 39.7% (2018) to 41.8% (2023) in Croatia, and from 36.4% to 49.9% in Slovenia. Interestingly, the share of young individuals working in jobs closely related to their profession decreased both, in Croatia – from 26.5% to 16.5% – and in Slovenia – from 16.6% to 9.9%. When we combine the percentages of individuals working either in their profession or in a field closely related to it, the cumulative share in Croatia decreased – from 66.5% in 2018 to 58.3% in 2023.

In contrast, Slovenia shows the opposite trend: the share of young individuals employed in jobs aligned with their profession or education increased from 53% in 2018 to 59.9% in 2023. Additionally, the proportion of employed young people who reported not having a profession decreased markedly in Slovenia – from 7.8% in 2018 to just 0.4% in 2023.

On the other hand, the share of young employees working in jobs unrelated to their previous education remains high and stable in both countries. In 2018, this share was 31.8% in Croatia and 39.2% in Slovenia; in 2023, it stood at 40.9% in Croatia and 39.8% in Slovenia. These findings may point to two possible phenomena:

- The education systems in both countries may not be fully aligned with labour market needs, indicating a mismatch between educational programmes and job opportunities.
- Alternatively, the labour market may be highly dynamic and flexible, characterised by the continuous emergence of new occupations and the transformation of existing ones—factors that contribute to the rise of Protean career orientations among young people (see Bazine et al., 2024).

While the first explanation calls for reforms in educational programmes to make them more responsive to current labour market demands, the second suggests that solutions do not lie in narrowly focused vocational programmes designed to meet immediate labour market needs. On the contrary, it emphasises that entering the job market is no longer a one-time occupational choice but a dynamic process of career crafting. In this view, generic competencies, lifelong learning, and proactivity are seen as key drivers of career success. Further investigation into the motives and work-related well-being of young people employed outside their field of study would

make a valuable contribution to the field. Lastly and importantly, no significant differences in terms of gender could be observed, indicating that when employed, the skills mismatch is evenly distributed across gender.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of challenges young people are facing in the labour market.

“Well, I see that most people have bad experiences with the Employment Service. I actually have an okay experience. At least my consultation person was quite helpful and even offered some jobs, maybe I was interested, that were not directly in my field but I could pass the competition based on my qualifications. So, she also offered us some other options so that I could at least do something until I found a job in my field. And even when I was coming, I remember that she also offered me the option of some additional qualifications paid for by the Exchange. I wasn't interested at the time, but I can say that she showed interest in helping me further with employment.”

(Female, employed, Croatia)

5.3 Work values, career planning, attitudes and beliefs

To gain deeper insights into school-to-work transitions, it is valuable to measure trends in work values, attitudes, and beliefs among the young population. These findings can serve as important guideposts for policymakers, educators, and employers in several ways. First, they help predict future workforce trends, as the values and attitudes of young people provide a preview of how the labour market will evolve. They also reveal what young people expect from work and how satisfied they are with their current experiences in the labour market, helping employers prepare for future recruitment and retention challenges.

In addition, young people's values, attitudes, and beliefs are indicators of broader social and economic shifts. In this context, we will examine differences in work values among youth in Croatia and Slovenia between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic periods. We will also explore their beliefs about how easy it is to find first employment, and, finally, their attitudes toward work among those already employed. Since results on job satisfaction were already shown, we will use alternative indicators that measure the extent of work alienation.

5.4 Work values

One of the key questions for employers who want to attract prospective young employees, is what is the most important thing for young people in work and employment – is it earning money, independence or something else. The figure below presents the importance of various elements of work and employment, both for youth in Croatia and in Slovenia at two different time points (2018 & 2023).

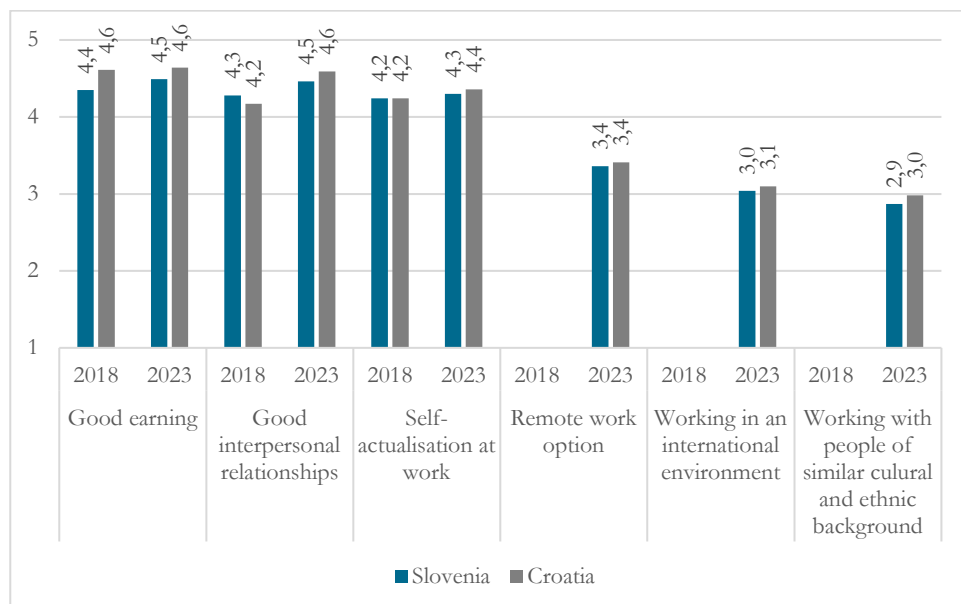


Figure 5.6: Work values (how important in job: 1 = not important, 5 = very important), by year and country (mean scores)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Three key work values were measured in both 2018 and 2023: the importance of good earnings, positive interpersonal relationships at work, and opportunities for self-actualisation (a sense of fulfilment through work and the opportunity to engage in interesting and meaningful tasks). These values remained highly important among the young population in both countries, with average scores around 4.5 on a 1–5 scale, indicating their strong significance. The values were similarly rated in the pre-pandemic year (2018) and in the post-pandemic year (2023), but the data suggest a trend of increasing importance across all three. Additional work values, measured only in 2023 – namely, the importance of remote work options, working with people

of similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and working in an international environment – showed lower overall salience. However, it is noteworthy that the opportunity for remote work was rated as moderately important in both samples. Furthermore, working in an international environment was considered more important than working with people of a similar cultural and ethnic background.

Importantly, statistically significant gender differences were identified in two key areas: a sense of achievement and pleasant interpersonal relationships. Specifically, women both in Slovenia and Croatia rated in 2023 the importance of doing meaningful and valuable work significantly higher than men ($p < .05$; this was true also for 2018, but only for Slovenia). Similarly, the importance of pleasant interpersonal relationships was rated significantly higher ($p < .05$) by women in both countries (again, in 2018 this difference was present in Slovenia, but not in Croatia). These findings suggest that female respondents, at least in 2023, value intrinsic motivators, such as personal fulfilment and social connection, in the context of employment decisions. In contrast, other factors, such as salary, remote work options, cultural similarity in the workplace, and international work environments, did not exhibit significant gender differences. This implies a shared valuation of practical aspects of employment, such as compensation and flexibility, across genders.

In sum, while both men and women value external factors such as salary and remote work similarly, women tend to emphasise more relational and meaningful aspects of employment. These insights are crucial for employers aiming to create inclusive and motivating work environments, mainly when tailoring engagement and retention strategies that resonate across gender lines.

The results demonstrate a statistically significant negative correlation between the impact of the pandemic on individuals' work situations and the importance attributed to pleasant interpersonal relationships at work ($p < .05$) in both Croatia and Slovenia. This finding suggests that individuals who experienced a greater influence of the pandemic on their work tend to slightly reduce their importance on interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Conversely, a statistically significant positive correlation was identified between the impact of the pandemic and the perceived importance of remote working opportunities, such as online work, work from home, or digital nomadism ($p < .05$). This indicates that individuals more affected by the pandemic assign increased importance to the possibility of remote

work when considering employment. Although both correlations are statistically significant, their relatively low magnitude implies modest relationships, suggesting subtle yet meaningful shifts in job-related priorities resulting from the pandemic experience. Overall, in Slovenia around a third of employed young people reported that the pandemic had negative impact on their work, while in Croatia the percentage was lower – 23.4%.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of challenges young people are facing on the labour market.

“I'm doing what I wanted to do, and the only thing I might still have challenges with is balancing work and private life and organising my free time.”

(Female, employed, Croatia)

“I think I need to balance work and high school a lot, and I want to earn as much as possible since I'm nearing the end of my studies now, so I want to become independent, and then it's a little more difficult when it comes to the financial aspect.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

The findings reveal that the pandemic has subtly shifted job-related priorities among young people in both Croatia and Slovenia, with those more affected placing less emphasis on interpersonal relationships at work and greater importance on remote working opportunities. Despite the modest strength of these correlations, they highlight meaningful changes in how employment is valued, reflecting the pandemic's lasting impact on work experiences, particularly as around a third of young workers in Slovenia and almost one quarter in Croatia reported negative effects on their jobs.

5.5 Career planning

In today's world, where a single career path can lead to countless outcomes, career planning is a crucial competence. It is developed both through formal education and through the support provided by governmental and non-governmental organisations to young people from the early stages of schooling. This competence relies on the skills of planning, goals setting, and developing a career self-concept. Individuals who have acquired this competence are more likely to find jobs aligned with their abilities and motivations, are less at risk of prolonged unemployment, and have a

better chance of achieving work-related well-being (see Šverko & Babarović, 2019; Valls, 2020).

In our study, we used the *Career Planning and Goal Setting* 5-item scale (Rogers et al., 2008) to measure the extent to which young people in Croatia and Slovenia have planned their careers. In other words, we aimed to determine to what extent their current school or employment status is the result of deliberate planning and goal setting, and how cognitively engaged they are with their careers (Figure 5.7).

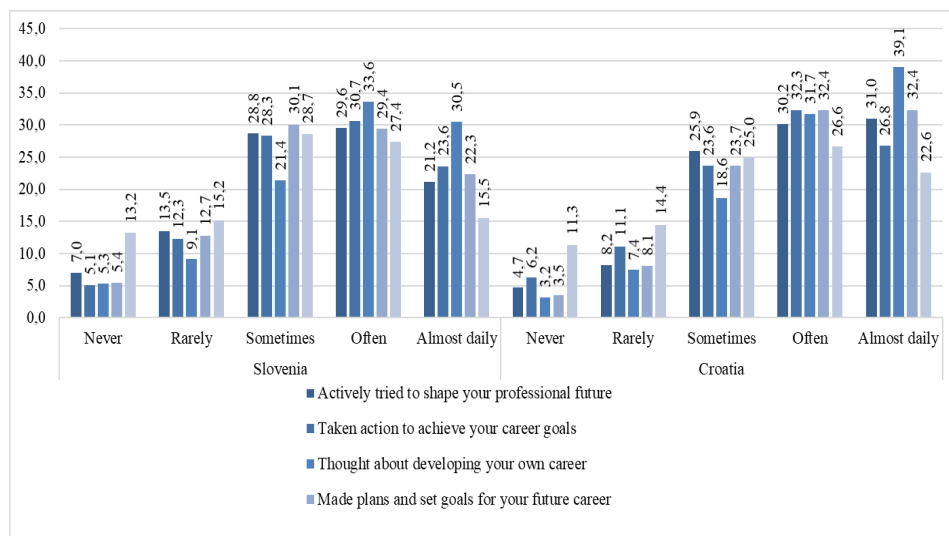


Figure 5.7: Career planning activities of youth, by country (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

The results showed that, on average, participants in both countries were fairly often preoccupied with their careers over the past six months. They reported engaging in activities such as career planning, taking steps to achieve career goals, thinking about career development, making plans and setting goals, and gathering information about opportunities for further career advancement. In Croatia, the mean score of a combined scale was 3.7 (SD=1.15), and in Slovenia, it was 3.5 (SD=1.16), on a scale from 1 to 5. In addition, the results showed significant positive correlations with the indicators of well-being: the correlation with the burnout syndrome was $-.18^{**}$ and with life satisfaction $.21^{**}$.

5.6 Attitudes and beliefs – future employability

Results related to the perceived employability of individuals enrolled in formal education (secondary and higher education) showed a significant increase in self-reported scores during the post-pandemic period. The same trend was observed in both countries, reflecting broader positive macroeconomic conditions and low unemployment rates in the general working population. Differences between the countries were not statistically significant, with values hovering around the midpoint of the scale (3 on a 1–5 scale; see Figure 5.8).

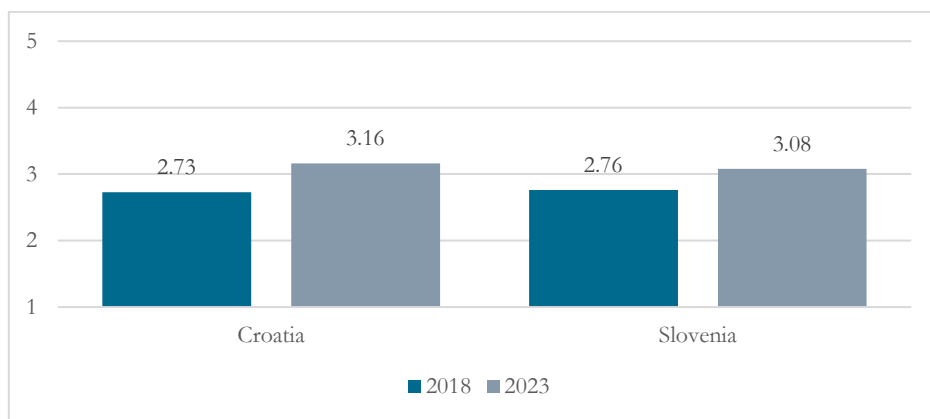


Figure 5.8: Perceived employability of individuals involved in formal education, by country and year (mean scores)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

At the same time, significant differences emerged between age groups and levels of education. In both countries, younger individuals – those in secondary education – perceived themselves as less employable compared to older individuals enrolled in higher education (the youngest group, 16-19; $M = 3.01$; $SD = .97$ vs. the oldest group, 25-29; $M = 3.31$; $SD = 1.32$ in Croatia; the youngest group, 16-19; $M = 2.84$; $SD = .94$ vs. the oldest group, 25-29; $M = 3.5$; $SD = 1.36$ in Slovenia).

5.7 Beliefs and attitudes – job satisfaction and work alienation

In contemporary labour markets, job satisfaction is increasingly recognised as a critical factor influencing the overall well-being of young individuals entering the workforce. Job satisfaction refers to the positive emotional response and general

attitude that employees have toward their jobs, encompassing various elements such as work environment, job duties, and relationships with colleagues (Gunawan et al., 2023). For youth, who often face unique challenges in adapting to professional roles, the significance of achieving a satisfactory job experience cannot be overstated.

High levels of job satisfaction among young employees are correlated with numerous positive outcomes, including enhanced work performance, lower turnover rates, and a stronger commitment to their organisations (Jung et al., 2024; Okay-Somerville et al., 2019). Research indicates that satisfied employees tend to exhibit greater levels of engagement and resilience, contributing to their overall productivity and career growth Brown et al. (2018). Conversely, low job satisfaction can lead to emotional distress, decreased motivation, and ultimately, unfulfilled potential in professional settings (Triwinanti & Sary, 2024).

Furthermore, the experiences of youth in the workplace are increasingly shaped by evolving economic conditions, organisational demands, and shifts in societal expectations. As a result, understanding the factors influencing job satisfaction for this demographic is crucial for employers wishing to foster a motivated and committed workforce. By addressing the components that contribute to job satisfaction, organisations can enhance not only the performance of young workers but also their personal and professional development (Ramgutty & Sanmukhiya, 2021; Jung et al., 2025). The effective management of job satisfaction through supportive work environments, constructive feedback, and opportunities for growth is imperative to cultivate the next generation of skilled professionals equipped to navigate the complexities of today's job market.

Analysing the European Working Condition Surveys (EWCS), Okay-Somervill et al. (2019) found that career development opportunities had a stronger impact on job satisfaction among young workers than older workers and confirmed the strongest significant direct relationship between meaningfulness and satisfaction for the 16-24 age group. The effect was proven throughout the EU, and was especially strong in the post-recession period and in the countries with liberal employment regimes. These results indirectly show that work and learning should not be viewed as separate activities. In the contemporary world, they are increasingly intertwined, and the border between the role of student and the role of worker is becoming more and more permeable.

As previously shown in Figure 5.3., job satisfaction has shown a high degree of stability and similarity between the two countries. However, significant differences were observed with respect to the employment sector, as well as somewhat different patterns in the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic years. Due to the large differences in the share of individuals employed across various sectors, we focused only on the two predominant ones: the private/business sector and the public/state sector (Figure 5.9.).

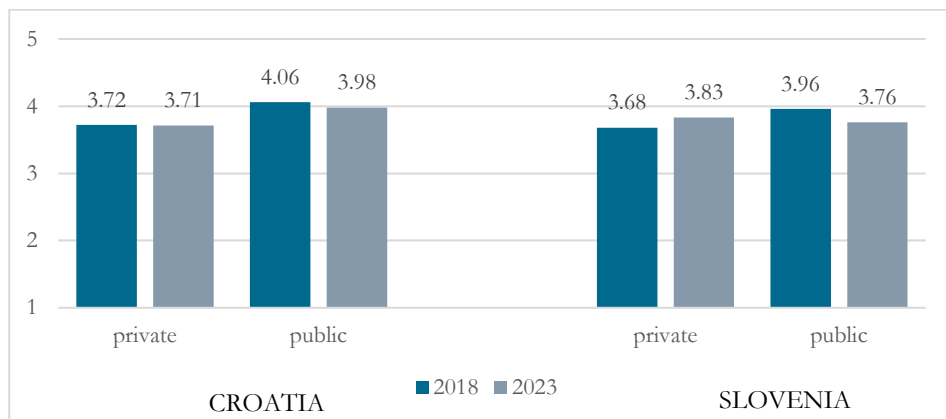


Figure 5.9: Job satisfaction in private/business and public/state sector (mean scores)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

In 2023, the difference between these two sectors was smaller and non-significant in both countries, while it was somewhat larger and significant in the Croatian sample in 2018 (the average job satisfaction was significantly higher in the public than in the private sector). We can thus again conclude that work values and job satisfaction remained highly stable during the observed period.

Lastly, we analysed the extent to which work alienation (WA) was present among youth. WA is a psychological condition where individuals experience a sense of detachment from their work, perceiving it as meaningless or lacking value. This phenomenon is particularly significant among youth, who face unique challenges in navigating their roles in educational and professional environments. Studies suggest that technological advancements, workplace dynamics, and social contexts contribute to feelings of work alienation in younger populations.

Research has identified several contributing factors to work alienation in youth, including technological impacts and societal expectations. For instance, Karayaman (2024) discusses how technological innovations can lead to feelings of insignificance and anxiety among young workers, increasing their sense of disconnection from their roles. Additionally, Metso & Kianto (2014) found that a lack of positive guidance and opportunity for professional growth in vocational settings negatively influences young individuals' perceptions of their work, fostering alienation. Moreover, the influence of injustice and cynicism in the workplace contributes to these feelings. Mohamed & Shaheen (2022) note that perceptions of organisational injustice lead to significant detachment from work, exacerbating feelings of alienation among young staff. This aligns with findings from Alfuqaha et al. (2023), which showed that alienation affects not only professionals, such as nurses, but also young adults in various occupations.

The effects of work alienation can be detrimental, leading to decreased motivation and engagement among youth. Research by Reijntjes et al. (2010) indicates that feelings of alienation may result in harmful behavioural outcomes, including aggression, particularly in situations involving peer rejection. Additional evidence suggests that alienation is linked to increased turnover intentions and a sense of loneliness among youth, creating a cyclical problem that affects their social and professional lives, as highlighted by Gözükarar et al. (2017) and (Amarat et al., 2018). Furthermore, this alienation often extends beyond the workplace. Young adults experiencing displacement in their roles may engage in negative coping mechanisms, such as isolation from social networks, which further compounds their distress and disengagement. As an indirect indicator of work alienation, we present the participants' responses to the three items of the mental distance scale from the short version of the Burnout Assessment Tool¹ (BAT-12; Schaufeli & De Witte, 2023). Figure 5.10. shows the results for both countries.

Figure 10 shows the presence of various aspects of work alienation among employed youth in Slovenia and Croatia.

As can be discerned from Figure 5.10, the most widespread aspect of work alienation is related to one not seeing his or her work being meaningful to others. This sentiment (taking together those who stated that they feel this way “often” or

¹ Burnout symptoms, measured with BAT-12 will be analysed in the next chapter.

“always”) is present among a quarter of youth in Slovenia and among a fifth of youth in Croatia. Next, around 15 % feels “strong aversion to their work” while a little more express low enthusiasm about their work.

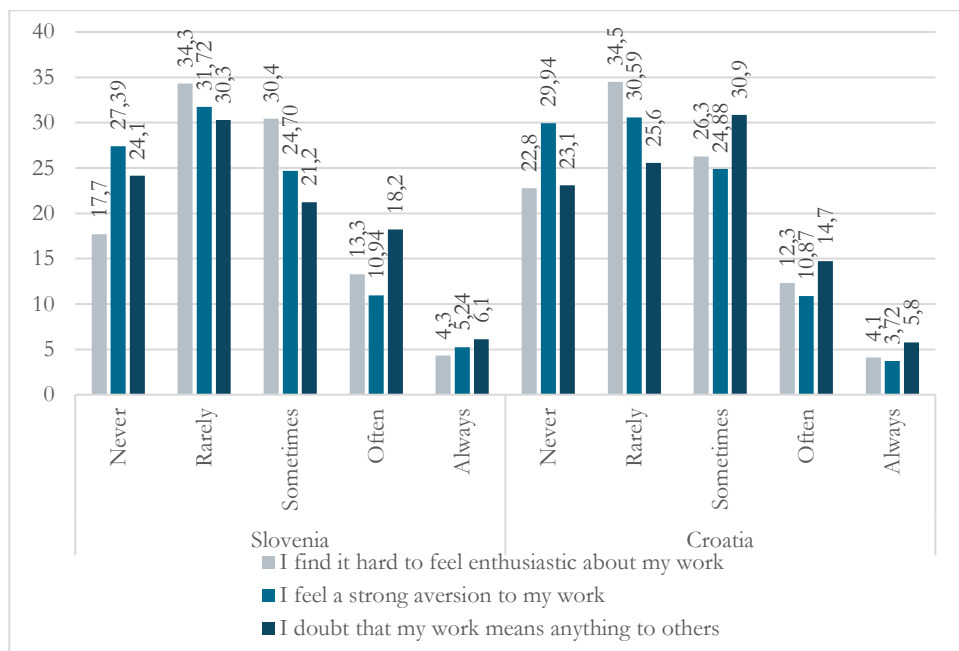


Figure 5.10: Indicators of work alienation of those employed, 2023, by Country (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of young people’s strivings on the labour market.

“So, I’m no longer in the education system. As for my current employer, I’m on notice period, but it’s not just the employer’s fault because I simply found a better offer and something that will be absolutely my profession. So, I hope for the better in any case, both in terms of the financial side and in terms of the support itself. I mean, the employer was neat in terms of everything that was written in the contract, and it was achieved. The only thing I didn’t like was the overtime, which was mostly not paid, and that wasn’t even because of the employer, but because the department I worked in was such, where it is simply believed that, under that salary, you should give more than your regular working hours.”

(Male, employed, Croatia)

The results indicated significant associations across all used measures of well-being, thus confirming what was previously indicated by various studies – that understanding work alienation among youth is critical for developing effective interventions to enhance their workplace engagement and mental health. By addressing the structural and societal factors contributing to alienation, stakeholders can create environments that foster connection and motivation among young individuals.

5.8 Conclusions and recommendations

Our results indicate that the labour market in both countries has shown signs of recovery and improvement since the peak of the pandemic, particularly through reduced unemployment and an increase in permanent contracts. However, young people continue to face considerable instability, characterised by high rates of temporary employment, student work, and part-time jobs. While these flexible work arrangements support student life, they also pose risks such as precarity, long working hours, and delayed transitions to full-time, stable employment. Additionally, the proportion of individuals who do not classify themselves within standard employment contract categories has significantly increased in both countries.

Although perceived employability among youth has increased since 2018 in both Croatia and Slovenia, the proportion of young individuals who are neither in education nor in employment (NEET) is still relatively high, especially in Croatia. At the same time, Croatia and Slovenia exhibit different trends regarding the alignment between education and employment. In Slovenia, significant improvement has been observed over the past decade, whereas in Croatia, no substantial changes have been recorded compared to the pre-pandemic period.

Work values have remained stable, with good pay continuing to be the most salient value. Differences in job satisfaction between those employed in the public/state sector and the private/business sector have shown a decreasing trend in both countries, indicating that public sector employment is gradually losing its perceived advantage in this respect.

The government has implemented various initiatives to address this issue, including vocational training programmes and incentives for employers to recruit young workers (European Union, 2025). Despite these efforts, youth unemployment remains a concern, with numerous young Croatians and Slovenians experiencing

difficulties transitioning from education to stable employment. This situation has broader socioeconomic implications, potentially resulting in delayed independence, reduced consumer spending, and long-term career impacts on affected individuals.

These general findings lead to several policy recommendations for both countries:

- Strengthen the transition from education to employment. This includes expanding and modernising vocational education and training (VET) pathways, supporting dual education models that integrate work and study, and ensuring that career guidance is introduced early and systematically across all levels of education, with special focus on young women. These strategies will help reduce the persistently high youth unemployment rate, address skills mismatches, and better prepare young people for the evolving demands of the labour market.
- Address youth employment precarity. While student work offers flexibility, its overuse as a substitute for stable employment should be reconsidered. Strengthening labour regulations, enforcing fair wages, and encouraging employers to offer standard contracts to young workers can reduce economic insecurity and improve long-term career outcomes. At the same time, policies must remain responsive to emerging, non-standard career paths and new vocational trends, ensuring that legislation evolves to provide adequate protection and support for young workers in modern job markets.
- Promote decent working conditions, especially for those in atypical jobs or shift work. Employers should be encouraged to provide flexible yet stable employment that respects rest periods, fosters self-actualisation through work, and supports strong interpersonal relationships - values highly prioritised by young people in both countries. This seems especially important when considering what the negative correlates of work alienation are.
- Institutionalise ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Regular longitudinal research and youth-inclusive policymaking are essential to track education and labour market integration. This will allow for timely responses to emerging challenges and ensure that policy remains aligned with the evolving realities of youth in a rapidly changing world.

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About the authors

Dr. **Darja Maslić Seršić**, is a Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. She teaches courses in Research Methods, Organisational Psychology, Occupational Health Psychology, and Vocational Behaviour. Her research is in the field of Work and Organisational Psychology, with a focus on work-related well-being, work motivation, and adaptive career behaviour. Her specific research interests include occupational stress, burnout, job insecurity, school-to-work transition, and unemployment. She received her degree in Psychology (1989), M.A. (1993), and Ph.D. (2000) from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, where she has been employed since 1990. Since 2012, she has held the position of Full Professor in the field of Work and Organisational Psychology. From 2016 to 2022, she served as the Head of the Doctoral Program in Psychology at the University of Zagreb. She currently serves as Head of the Chair of Experimental Psychology.

Dr. **Rudi Klanjšek**, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Maribor, Slovenia, where he earned his doctorate in sociology. His expertise covers cross-cultural research on youth, including employment, housing, well-being, and deviance, as well as globalisation, modernisation, social change, inequality, and economic development. He was previously a research fellow at Auburn University (USA) and has been a guest lecturer at European institutions such as the University of Bologna, University of Orleans, and Masaryk University. He is also a researcher at the Centre for the Study of Post-Socialist Societies (CePSS) and a member of the Slovenian Sociological Association.

Dr. **Suzana Košir**, is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Researcher at the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, Slovenia. With more than two decades of experience in higher education, her research focuses on human rights education, women's rights, gender studies, quality assurance in education, curriculum studies, educational training, and the study of ageing. She has held various academic roles and actively contributes to advancing sociological and educational research. She is a member of the American Sociological Association and serves on the international editorial board of the *International Journal of Management, Knowledge and Learning*.

