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Barriers in Career Planning for Students in Poland and Italy*

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Abstract

In the face of dynamic changes in the labour market, this study analyzes the barriers to career planning among students in Poland and Italy. It serves as a crucial tool for understanding the challenges faced by young people. A diagnostic survey was conducted among management students at the WSB Merito University in Poland, and Università degli Studi del Sannio-Benvento in Italy to identify the main difficulties and barriers to career planning. The research sample was selected purposively, focusing on management students as a representative group

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of young individuals facing career planning challenges, in accordance with best practices in social science research. The results indicate regional differences: in Poland, issues related to the requirement for full availability and transportation difficulties are predominant, while in Italy, low wages and employment instability are more prevalent problems young people face. Students in both countries actively seek to gain practical experience through work and participation in various training programs. The study highlights the need to focus on developing effective support strategies for students, addressing these differences and better aligning education with labour market demands and contributes to the development of a career management model that supports young people in transitioning from the education system to the labour market. The research findings represent an attempt to create a career management model that supports young people in transitioning from the education system to the labour market.

Keywords: career planning, professional development, professional barriers, labour market, support for students.

Introduction

In light of the dynamic changes in the global labour market, career planning and management have become increasingly complex. Accelerating economic, technological, and social changes affect both individuals and various groups of employers. These changes have contributed to the emergence of concepts such as “boundaryless organizations” and “boundaryless careers” characterized by flexibility, multidirectionality and dynamism. In the literature, these concepts are contrasted with traditional career paths, which were confined to a single, stable professional environment.

The contemporary professional environment is characterised by increased competition, economic uncertainty, and rapid technological development, significantly impacting the decision-making processes of young individuals entering the workforce. Therefore, analysing and understanding the barriers in students’ career planning is essential to meet the challenges of the modern labour market and support young people in effectively shaping their career paths.

Given this context, the study focused on identifying and analysing barriers to career planning among students in Poland and Italy. The selection of these two countries was dictated by their different socio-economic contexts and the specifics of higher education, allowing for an understanding and comparison of the challenges faced by students in diverse environments.

The main objective of the study was to determine the specific factors that constitute barriers in career planning for students and how these barriers differ between Poland and Italy. This study aims not only to identify barriers but also to understand their causes and impact on students' career decisions. The results are intended to serve as a basis for developing recommendations for effectively supporting young people in transitioning from the education system to the labour market, providing them with appropriate tools for effective career planning and realisation, including the proposed career management model.

Literature review

A career is a series of professional experiences accumulated by an individual throughout their working life. The paradigm of the modern career assumes that it is “a dynamic process involving the continuous pursuit of marketable competencies and knowledge that is useful in the marketplace” (Lanthaler & Zugmann, 2000, pp. 201–202) and views it as “the property of the individual” (Bohdziewicz, 2008). J. Lees points out that a true career is never the result of chance (Lees, 2008, p. 27). The objective and subjective elements of a career also form the foundation for creating an individual's career capital and must be continuously revitalized, renewed, and strengthened (Bańka, 2007, p. 53). Career planning is a set of appropriate policies, programs, or actions that regulate the movement and life cycle of employees over time, offering a long-term perspective on development. Modern career concepts and models assume that the process of creating, planning, and realizing a career is continuous and spans the entire life of an individual, meaning that individuals should actively manage their career development. Career models help to understand the dynamics of career decisions, skill development, role changes, and the paths individuals follow in their professional lives. The autonomy of individuals, who independently shape their professional careers, is reflected in theories such as the “boundaryless career” (Arthur et al., 1989, p. 18) and the “protean career” (Hall, 2004, pp. 1–13). The protean career theory encompasses two dimensions and posits that individuals direct their career development activities by defining success criteria based on a personal value system (values-driven career orientation) and independently manage their careers, demonstrating adaptability to a changing environment and internal autonomy in making career

decisions (self-directed) (Briscoe et al., 2006, pp. 30–47). The boundaryless career involves overcoming various barriers and combines dimensions such as physical mobility, defined as the individual's ability to overcome structural barriers like changing jobs, employers, or sectors, and psychological mobility, referring to the individual's readiness and ability to adapt to career changes, as well as openness to new challenges and development opportunities. Other models, such as the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, pp. 106–123), also consider the biographical interdependencies between work and other life spheres, describes how individuals manage their careers by adjusting various aspects of their lives - such as authenticity, work-life balance, and career challenges based on changing circumstances. Within this model, these priorities can shift dynamically, allowing for flexible career decisions that respond to internal needs and external events (Simmons et al., 2021, p. 2).

The process of individualizing career paths and moving away from the traditional, linear career model towards newer, more diversified career patterns stems from deeper changes occurring in social, cultural, and economic spheres (Piorunek, 2021). Faced with high variability and uncertainty in various areas of life, individuals no longer assume that their entire career will be tied to one organization, as the current unstable organizational environment does not guarantee long-term employment with a single company (Negoiță, 2020, p. 29).

The process and significance of career development planning for students

The process of planning the students' career development is a key element in the context of higher education, aimed at preparing students for effective entry into the labour market and managing their own professional path. Career planning for students encompasses both the identification of individual aspirations and professional goals, as well as mapping out paths to their realization. This process requires students to engage in self-awareness, reflection on their own skills, interests, and labour market opportunities. Career planning is not only an educational process but also a tool for personal development (Becker-Pestka et al., 2017, p. 68). This process is also significant for building self-esteem and social competencies.

Students employ various strategies in planning their career, from practical actions like internships to self-development and pursuing personal passions. Modern job market poses new challenges for young people, especially with the rise of globalisation and rapid technological development forcing students to continuously adapt their plans and strategies. A recent study showed that despite being aware of the current state of the job market, students did not admit to adapting different career planning strategies despite treating their career planning seriously (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020, pp. 435–455). This finding suggests that students might have difficulties navigating the fast changes in the labour market and might need additional assistance in understanding the newest requirements. A study by Benati and colleagues (Benati et al., 2023, pp. 403–415) showed that graduating students while still confident and carrier-oriented did not intend to put a stronger emphasis on their career planning. In this context, the ability to flexibly respond to changing conditions and seize unplanned opportunities becomes a key skill. Developing these competencies within higher education is not only a response to labour market needs but also an investment in students' professional futures, enabling them to effectively manage their careers in a dynamically changing world.

Opportunities and limitations of the labour market

In today's world, careers are perceived in various ways – as a series of occupations, as the accumulation of experiences, as tools for self-expression, and as a process of adult development (Newman, 2011, pp. 136–143). Many students aspire to succeed in their careers. Some will achieve their goals, while others will encounter professional barriers. The issue of career barriers began to attract the attention of researchers in the late 1980s and has since become a hot topic in management studies (Cardoso & Moreira, 2009, pp. 177–188). Nearly all university graduates encounter barriers when entering the labour market.

Career planning by students in Poland and Italy is a complex process, influenced by a variety of factors at both micro and macroeconomic levels.

From a microeconomic perspective, higher education graduates face challenges such as unstable employment, a shortage of job opportunities, and intense labour market competition. Macroeconomic threats include demographic, technological, and social changes. Economic recessions and the

COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated unemployment and disrupted key sectors, while the level of innovation influences the demand for graduates' specialised skills.

Career adaptability is a necessary strategy that should be adapted by young people entering the job market. The field of study plays a significant role in access to professional opportunities. The choice of academic specialisation often shapes the career path, and some fields of study may offer limited employment opportunities. Gender, as a factor influencing educational and professional choices, also matters. A recent study showed that with the higher degree women obtain rises the level to which considerations about family and parenthood affect their career decision-making process (Rudnák et al., 2023, pp. 231–248).

In the context of contemporary labour market challenges, one significant threat is the increasing number of people employed in precarious work. Fixed-term employment is the predominant form of employment among young people, often accepted due to their entry into the labour market (Samek Lodovici & Semenza, 2012, pp. 11–21). This is linked to the fact that young people are acquiring their first professional experience and training for their profession. This type of employment, initially intended as a step towards more stable salaried work is increasingly becoming the norm. This phenomenon has far-reaching consequences for both individual workers and the labour market. Lack of employment stability and uncertainty about future career prospects can lead to decreased worker motivation, limit their professional development opportunities, and negatively impact their psychological well-being. It has been reported that precarious work negatively impacts careers of young people during school-to-work transition and potentially affecting their employability in the long term with the so called “scarring effect” (Samek Lodovici & Semenza, 2012).

The situation of young university graduates in the labour market in Poland and Italy is not optimistic. According to EUROSTAT data from 2020, in Italy, 22% of people with higher education remain unemployed, a significant problem in the labour market in that country (Eurostat, 2020). In Poland, the unemployment rate among people with higher education in 2022 was 2%, one of the lowest in Europe (OECD, 2022). The Education and Training Monitor 2020 report reveals that only 58.7% of young Italians aged 18–34 secure em-

ployment within 1–3 years of graduating, considerably lower than the EU-27 average of 80.9% (EDaTM, 2020). In Poland, this figure is 84% (EdaTM, 2020).

In the educational context, Italy remains in the group of OECD countries where secondary education is more popular than higher education. This may affect the structure of the labour market and the availability of employment for people with higher education. Moreover, the percentage of people dropping out of school in Italy in 2011–2012 reached a very high level of 45%. Although reduced in 2021 to 15.8%, it remains one of the highest in the European Union (Perchinunno et al, 2019, p. 241).

These data indicate significant challenges faced by young graduates in Poland and Italy. A high percentage of fixed-term employment and a low percentage of graduates with higher education in the employment structure may indicate limited opportunities for stable employment and professional development for young people in these countries. In the context of long-term trends in the labour market, these data underline the need to focus on strategies supporting young graduates in their transition to the labour market and in creating more stable and satisfying career paths.

The transition from education to the labour market requires significant effort from the younger generation, but most importantly, self-awareness, courage, and readiness to change decisions (Savickas, 1997, p. 254).

In the context of employee qualifications, Italy is characterised by the lowest percentage of overqualified workers in their positions (13%) and simultaneously the highest percentage of underqualified workers (22%) compared to other OECD countries. However, the annual AlmaLaurea survey of university graduates in 2014 revealed that Italians with higher education perform much better in the international market than their counterparts in the domestic market (OECD, 2013). Young, highly educated Italians working abroad generally have higher and faster-growing salaries, more stable employment contracts, and perceive their skills as more suitable for their roles compared to the same group employed in the Italian labour market (AlmaLaurea, 2014). In the more recent graduate survey as much as 45.3% of graduates declared that they would be willing to work abroad (AlmaLaurea, 2023) These observations suggest that the issue in employing suitably qualified candidates may stem from the demands of the companies rather than the competencies of the candidates themselves.

Among the microeconomic conditions in Poland, one can distinguish the improper identification of needs by employers or the reluctance of job seekers to improve their skills, enhance qualifications, or undergo training (Kowalik & Magda, 2021, pp. 5–22).

The pace of the school-to-work transition (STWT) in Italy is significantly slower compared to other European countries, including Poland. In a 2021 study by Pastore and colleagues, it is estimated that the actual duration of STWT in Italy can be up to 30 months (Pastore & Rocca, 2021, pp. 1579–1600). Opportunities to undertake paid work during university studies also significantly influence the pace of STWT. Another potential barrier to entering the workforce immediately after graduation could be corruption, which is pervasive in Italy. According to Transparency International data, Italy has a perceived corruption index of 52 – one of the highest in the EU (Pastore & Rocca, 2021, pp. 1579–1600). Corruption in the labour market can not only limit the professional opportunities of young Italians but also negatively affect their motivation for further development. As much as 21.9% of young Italians (YCharts, 2023) struggle with unemployment compared to 11.1% of young Poles according to the latest 2023 data (YCharts, 2023). It is estimated that as much as 28.9% of Italians below 34 years of age are not engaged in work, education, or training (Neither in Employment nor in Education or Training, NEET). This carries a range of potential threats not only for the individuals but also for the entire economy. Young Italians face difficulties in achieving financial independence and starting a family (Giacobone, 2020).

Italy and Poland are also grappling with a high level of brain drain. Just before the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019, as many as 122,000 Italians declared residence abroad. However, it is estimated that the actual number of emigrating Italians could be up to 2.6 times higher than reported (Anelli, 2023, pp. 218–252). This group is most often composed of young, highly educated individuals, specialists, scientists, and innovators. Despite actions taken by the Italian government (600 million euros allocated to support returning scientists), brain drain continues to progress. The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed the mass exodus, but the Italian Association of Doctoral Candidates and Researchers warns that soon, even 15,000 researchers employed on short-term contracts by Italian universities may start looking for jobs in other

countries offering safer employment conditions. Since 2008, about 2 million young Italians have emigrated abroad.

The current situation of young people in the labour market in Poland and Italy can undoubtedly be described as one of the most important social and political problems not only in the country but also in Europe as a whole. The data clearly indicate the need to focus on strategies supporting young graduates in their transition to the labour market and on creating more stable and satisfying career paths.

Selected methodological assumptions of own research

The research was conducted during the summer semester of the 2022/2023 academic year. The diagnostic survey method was used in the research process. The measurement tool was a custom-designed questionnaire consisting of 11 questions, some of which were based on a 5-point Likert scale, while others allowed for multiple responses, and it was made available in electronic form. The study was anonymous, and participation was voluntary.

A total of 283 management students from WSB Merito University in Gdańsk, Poland, and Università degli Studi del Sannio-Benevento in Italy participated in the study. However, due to some participants not meeting formal criteria, the final number of respondents of both genders was 202, including 102 respondents from Poland (66 women, 36 men) and 100 respondents from Italy (70 women, 30 men).

The questions formulated in the research instrument served as a tool to provide answers to the formulated research problems in the form of questions:

Q1. What actions do students in Poland and Italy undertake to achieve their professional goals?

Q2. What problems do they encounter in the labour market in both countries?

Q3. What support can they expect during their studies in realizing their own professional plans?

Statistical analysis

The survey data was processed using Excel (Microsoft). Correlations described in the results were tested using Spearman's correlation. Data distribution was tested with the Shapiro-Wilk normality test. Alpha levels for all tests were set at 0.05% with 95% confidence intervals. Statistical analysis was performed with SPSS 25.0 statistics software package (IBM).

Results

Upon analysing the obtained research results, it can be concluded that both Polish and Italian students, when defining their professional goals, similarly indicated securing a stable and certain professional situation, as well as being entrepreneurial and creative. Half of the Polish respondents of both genders identified being independent as their primary professional goal, whereas among Italian respondents, the key goal is work-life balance. For Italian women, undertaking new challenges is also an important goal, while for Polish women, work-life balance is emphasised. Notably, only women (albeit not too often) declared their professional goal to be working for the greater good.

The vast majority of students work in order to achieve their professional goals, in both Poland (69.70% women and 66.67% men) and Italy (97.14% women and 93.33% men). They also participate in qualification/specialist courses or webinars (36.36% women and 44.44% men in Poland and 77.14% women and 80.00% men in Italy). Respondents also indicated that they utilise opportunities offered by their university such as Erasmus, job fairs, and meetings with practitioners (15.15% women and 22.22% men in Poland and 37.14% women and 53.33% men in Italy), and also engage in internships and student practices to achieve their professional goals. Important aspects also include promoting one's image on social media, participating in conferences and seminars, and reading professional literature. Italian students dominated significantly when it came to using those opportunities. On the other hand only Polish respondents declared helping at the family company as part of their career pathway (Figure 1).

When asked about their expectations about potential future job, majority of respondents (over 60%) scored highly in categories such as high sal-

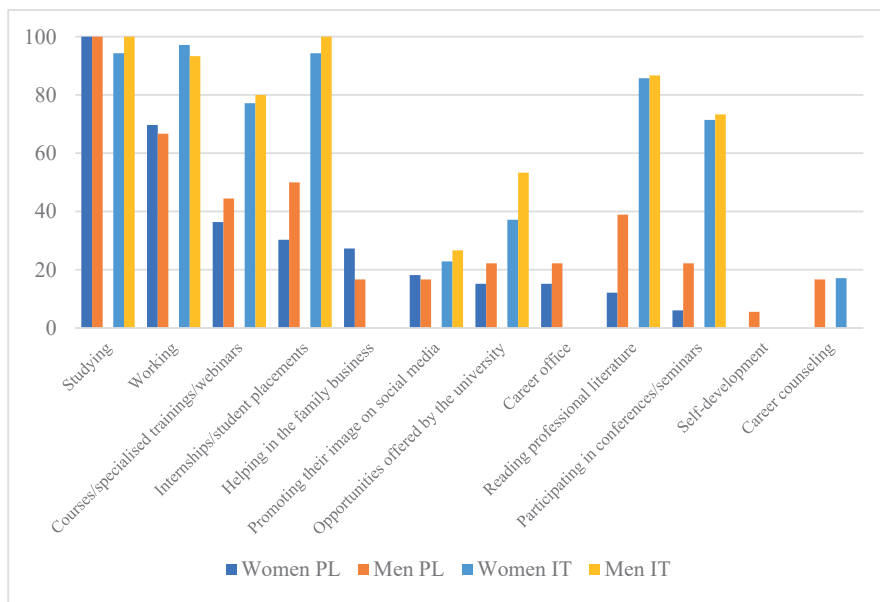


Figure 1. Actions students declared undertaking in order to achieve their career goals. Responses are divided by nationality and gender

Source: Based on own data.

ary, long term contract, qualification improvement opportunities, competent personnel and fair work ethics. There were some differences between nationalities, where Polish respondents were more likely to be incentivised by non-material means (gym memberships, company car etc.) while Italian respondents declared higher interest in the opportunities to work on the newest available equipment.

During the analysis of the relationship between perceived barriers in the labour market and country, a significant correlation was identified between Italian respondents and low salary ($r_s = 0.427, p = 0.0001$), excessive requirements ($r_s = 0.427, p = 0.0001$), unstable working conditions ($r_s = 0.492, p = 0.0001$), experiencing discrimination ($r_s = 0.197, p < 0.05$), lack of work consistent with the chosen field of study ($r_s = 0.262, p < 0.01$), and experiencing unethical behaviours ($r_s = 0.644, p = 0.0001$). Significant correlation was

also noted between Polish respondents and expectations of full availability from the employee ($r_s = 0.384$, $p = 0.0001$) and inconvenient commute to the workplace ($r_s = 0.393$, $p = 0.0001$).

During the analysis of the relationship between barriers in the labour market and gender, a correlation was demonstrated between women and experiencing discrimination ($r_s = 0.215$, $p < 0.05$) and the lack of jobs related to the field of study ($r_s = 0.248$, $p < 0.01$). Among men, a correlation was shown with the lack of opportunities for development/promotion ($r_s = 0.206$, $p < 0.05$).

The analysis of research results conducted among students in Poland and Italy has allowed for the identification of barriers in career planning, which can be outlined as follows:

Job market obstacles: Students in Italy experience more pronounced problems related to low salaries, unstable working conditions, and discrimination. In contrast, Polish students mention difficulties related to their limited availability and inconvenient commuting to work.

Gender differences in perceiving barriers: In both countries, women more frequently report experiencing discrimination and a lack of work in line with their education, while men more often encounter issues related to development and career advancement opportunities.

The significance of macro and microeconomic factors: Research results emphasise the influence of both macroeconomic factors (e.g., demographic changes, economic conditions) and microeconomic factors (e.g., types of employment contracts, competition in the job market) on career planning.

Proposals, recommendations

The analysis of socio-economic contexts in Poland and Italy reveals various barriers that significantly impact students' career plans. Understanding these differences can contribute to developing more effective support strategies for young people, better tailored to the specifics of individual labour markets and cultural expectations. Based on the literature and conducted research, the authors identified key elements of a career-managing model, which is founded on a flexible approach to career planning, adapting professional de-

velopment strategies to students' individual needs and the changing labour market conditions.

The career management model 5F (Flexible, Focused, Fair, Fulfilling, Forward-Looking) proposed by the authors considers both practical aspects of gaining experience, work-life balance, and the importance of advisory support. This approach better prepares students for contemporary professional challenges, increasing their chances of success in the labour market. Each of the five pillars of the model is presented as an equivalent element of the framework (Figure 2).

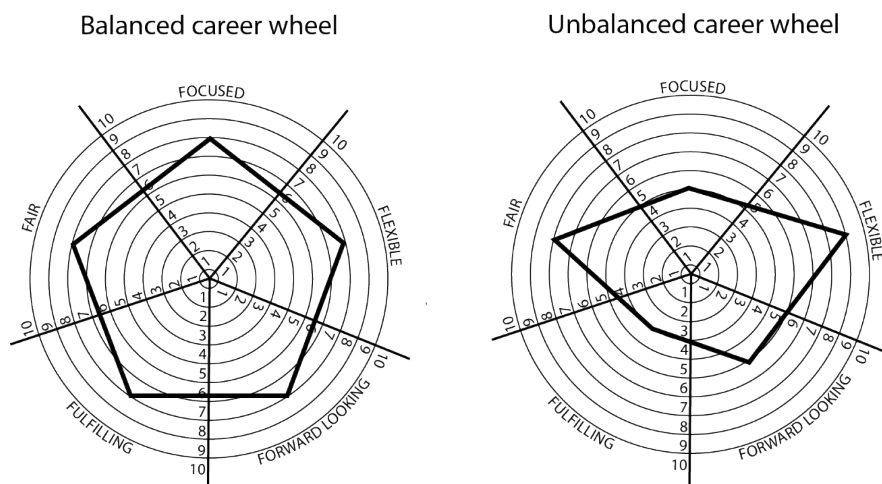


Figure 2. The 5F Career Management Model

Source: Author's elaboration.

Flexibility refers to the ability to adapt to changing market conditions, which is particularly crucial in dynamically evolving sectors of the economy. The model posits that a career should be approached as a dynamic process, wherein students regularly assess their competencies and professional goals, adjusting their plans to align with current market demands.

Focused emphasises the importance of individual responsibility for career planning and development. Students must remain focused while making

independent decisions and actively seeking opportunities for growth. This includes participating in courses and training programmes, building a professional image, and leveraging social media to promote their competencies.

A key aspect of the model is also the **fair balance** between professional and personal life. Research has shown that, in particular, Italian respondents regard this balance as an essential component of job satisfaction. **Fulfilling**, as a pillar of the model, reflects the necessity of gaining experience in real-world work environments. Respondents emphasised the importance of internships, placements, and involvement in family businesses, which enable the acquisition of skills valued by employers. Universities serve as a source of **forward-looking** institutional support, focusing on equipping students with the skills and competencies required to navigate future labour market challenges through career counselling and practical development programmes (e.g., internships, Erasmus). The functional stages of the model include analysis and planning, active engagement, and adaptation and development. In the first stage, self-awareness is crucial, involving the assessment of one's competencies, career goals, and professional preferences, alongside an evaluation of the labour market to identify promising sectors and professions. Subsequent steps involve actively gaining experience through internships, placements, and participation in training programmes, building professional networks, as well as maintaining flexibility and balance between professional and personal life, which requires continuous self-improvement and readiness for change.

The "5F" Career Management Model represents a holistic approach that considers both the individual needs of students and the evolving demands of the labour market. Its application can contribute to enhancing the competitiveness of young people in the job market while providing greater satisfaction in achieving their professional goals.

Conclusion

In the current labour market situation characterised by competitive threats, differences in the perceptions of Italian and Polish students regarding obstacles in the job market suggest that the cultural, economic, and technological context in both countries influence career planning challenges. Faced with labour market challenges, a passive attitude can prove highly risky, as adapt-

ability, the ability to change previously planned actions, and the modification of initial career goals are now essential. Openness to change and a willingness to take risks may be key elements of effective career development for young individuals.

The research highlights the complexity of the career planning process for students, emphasizing differences between Poland and Italy as well as between genders. In Poland and Italy, higher education systems do not fully meet the needs of the labour market, which often makes it difficult for young people to align their education with employers' requirements. In both countries, this gap hinders students' career planning and the achievement of stable employment.

Undoubtedly, higher education institutions should actively support students in career planning by offering career counselling and practical development opportunities to better prepare them for entering the job market.

By integrating elements such as flexibility, autonomy, balance, practicality, and institutional support, the proposed 5F model aims to address the challenges of the modern world of work. While still requiring further validation and refinement, it has the potential to support young individuals in consciously and effectively managing their careers.

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