



Comparative Analysis of the Position and Needs of Young People in the Labour Market

Evidence from Serbia, Romania, Italy, Denmark, Ireland and Czechia

NextGen Opportunity: Bridging the Gap for European Youth

Survey results and implications for NextGen Employment and Entrepreneurship Clinics

2026



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Executive summary

This report compares the results of six partner surveys on young people's position, experiences and support needs in the labour market. Percentages are calculated within each country so that different sample sizes do not distort comparisons. The results are diagnostic and intended to guide the design of the NextGen Employment and Entrepreneurship Clinics; they should not be interpreted as nationally representative statistics.

KEY NEED / TREND: The clinics should combine employability, entrepreneurship and wellbeing support. A single narrow service would miss the way financial, skills, information and confidence barriers reinforce one another.

Employment barriers. The leading barriers are low salaries, lack of experience and insufficient job offers, but their relative weight differs sharply. Low salaries are especially dominant in Italy, while Denmark shows a stronger combination of limited offers, skills gaps and access issues. This argues for a common clinic core with country-specific emphasis.

Entrepreneurship. Interest is not the same as readiness. Serbia, Romania and Czechia show substantial consideration of self-employment, while near-term intentions remain much lower. Italy and Ireland show weaker prior consideration. Across countries, start-up finance, financial risk, business knowledge and lack of guidance form the central barrier cluster.

Support systems. Awareness and actual use of public programmes are low. The majority in every country report no awareness, ranging from 56.7% in Italy to 93.2% in Serbia. Career guidance is also uncommon, particularly in Czechia, Romania and Denmark.

Skills and education. Communication and digital skills recur across countries, alongside problem solving, languages and technical or entrepreneurial skills. Italy and Romania show the most negative assessments of labour-market preparation through education, reinforcing the case for practical, applied clinic activities.

Wellbeing. Mental wellbeing and stress management are widely viewed as important for work retention and performance. These should be integrated into employability and entrepreneurship support, rather than offered as an unrelated add-on.

Methodology and comparability

The analysis uses the six partner datasets supplied for the project. Question wording and response options were harmonised into common English categories. Multiple-response questions are reported as the percentage of respondents selecting each option; their percentages therefore do not add to 100%. For single-choice questions, percentages use the number of valid answers to that question. Missing answers are excluded only from the denominator of the relevant indicator.

Ireland administered the survey in English, Ukrainian and Arabic; the language versions were combined after harmonisation. The Czech dataset contains partial submissions, so the valid denominator is smaller for some questions asked later in the questionnaire. Italy did not include a separate programme-usefulness item comparable to the other versions, while the Czech usefulness result is based on very few answers. In comparative matrices, a hyphen means that no selection was recorded for that category, while N/A means that no comparable result was available.

The country samples used in the analysis comprise 222 respondents from Serbia, 205 from Romania, 263 from Italy, 201 from Denmark, and 200 respondents with completed demographic data from both Ireland and Czechia.

Because recruitment methods and sample composition differ by partner, country differences may partly reflect who was reached, not only true national differences. Findings are therefore best used to adapt clinic outreach and services, not to rank countries or estimate national prevalence.

1. Respondent profile

The survey covered 222 young people in Serbia, 205 in Romania, 263 in Italy, 201 in Denmark, 200 with completed demographic answers in Ireland and 200 in Czechia. The country samples differ considerably in age, education and place of residence. This is important because some later differences may reflect who was reached as well as differences in national labour-market conditions.

Age. Czechia has the youngest sample: 70.5% are aged 16-21, compared with 52.2% in Romania. Serbia and Italy are centred on the 22-25 group (53.2% and 42.6%), while Denmark reaches an older group: 86.6% are aged 22-30. Ireland is the most evenly distributed across the three age groups. Later findings on work experience and education should therefore be interpreted in relation to these age profiles.

Gender. Women make up 66.3% of the Romanian sample, 58.6% in Serbia, 52.5% in Italy and approximately half in Ireland and Czechia. Denmark is nearly balanced. Non-binary and prefer-not-to-say responses are present but small. Clinics should monitor who actually enrolls rather than assume that the survey profile will be repeated.

Residence. Serbia is strongly urban (84.2%), while Italy is predominantly rural (68.1%). Rural respondents also represent 38.5% in Ireland and 28.5% in Czechia. Denmark and Romania are more urban, though both include meaningful rural groups. These differences have direct implications for outreach, transport, scheduling and the balance between in-person and online support.

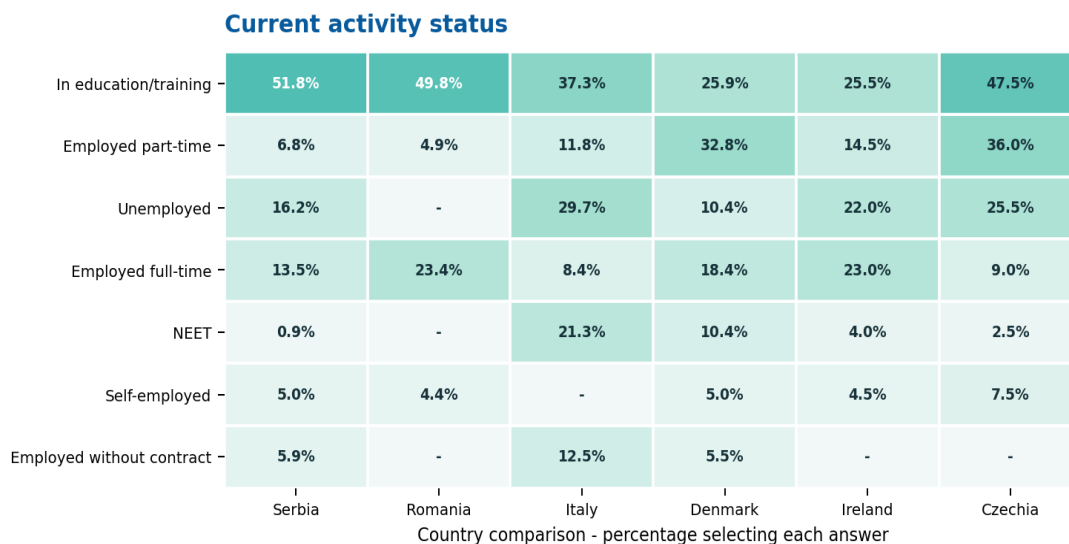
Education. Serbia is concentrated at secondary level (71.6%), while Czechia includes many respondents with primary or lower-secondary education, consistent with its younger sample. Denmark and Ireland include larger groups with bachelor or postgraduate qualifications. Italy and Romania are more mixed. Clinic content should therefore use plain language and practical examples, while allowing participants with higher qualifications to work at a more advanced level.

KEY NEED / TREND: Demographic differences should shape recruitment and delivery: the same content may need different language, pace, outreach channels and accessibility arrangements in each country.

2. Employment situation and quality

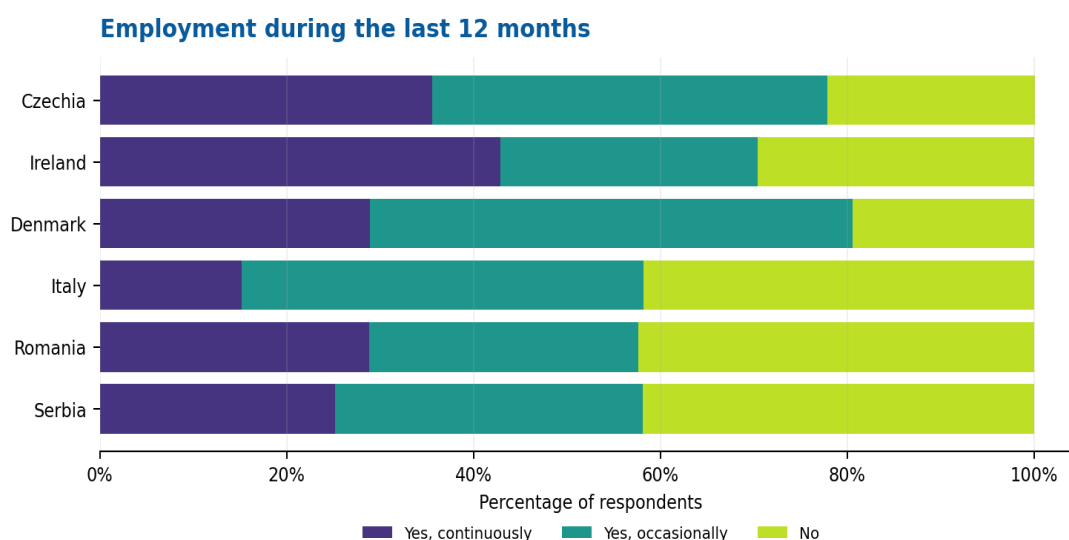
This section moves from whether young people are economically active to the quality of that activity. The results show that employment alone is not an adequate success measure: continuity, contract security, perceived stability and the match between work and education differ substantially across the six samples.

Current status varies substantially. Italy has the highest visible concentration of unemployment/NEET and work without contract, while Serbia and Romania include many young people still in education. Denmark has a comparatively large part-time employed group.



KEY NEED / TREND: Segment services by current status: job-entry support for students, intensive activation for unemployed/NEET youth, and job-quality support for those in precarious work.

Continuous employment is most common in Denmark (28.9%) and Ireland (42.9%). No employment in the previous year is highest in Serbia (41.9%) and remains high in Romania and Italy.



KEY NEED / TREND: Offer different entry pathways: first-work-experience placements for those with no recent employment and progression support for those cycling through occasional work.

Employment arrangements reveal insecurity that is not captured by employment status alone. No-contract or informal work is especially visible in Italy and Ireland, while temporary and casual arrangements are common across several countries.

Type of employment arrangement

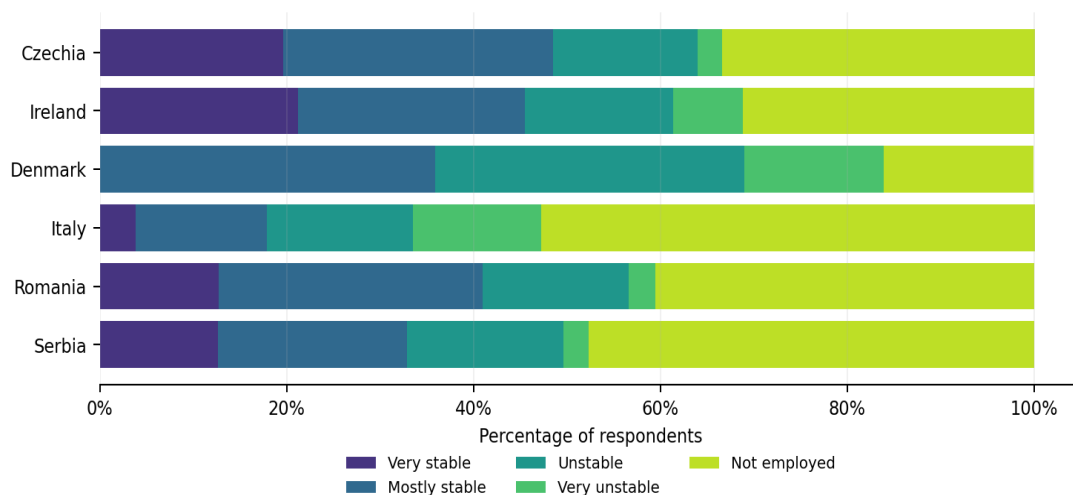
Informal/no contract	10.1%	20.8%	61.1%	13.9%	38.6%	6.2%
Temporary	32.4%	23.1%	14.6%	33.8%	24.9%	16.1%
Permanent	20.9%	36.2%	6.4%	23.4%	20.6%	8.3%
Internship	29.1%	10.8%	9.6%	10.4%	9.5%	-
Casual/short-term agreement	-	-	-	-	-	42.7%
Self-employed	7.4%	9.2%	8.3%	3.5%	6.3%	5.2%
Not employed/N.A.	-	-	-	14.9%	-	21.4%
	Serbia	Romania	Italy	Denmark	Ireland	Czechia

Country comparison - percentage selecting each answer

KEY NEED / TREND: Include basic labour-rights information, contract literacy and referral routes for young people in informal or insecure work.

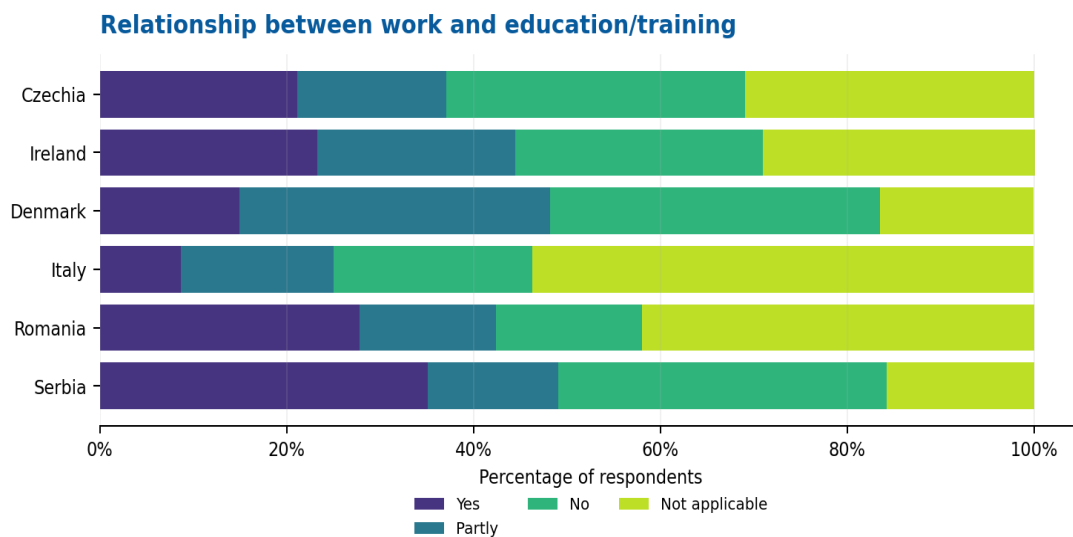
Italy reports the weakest stability profile, with large shares not employed or describing work as unstable. Denmark also has notable insecurity despite higher recent employment. Ireland and Czechia show comparatively stronger stable employment among those reached.

Perceived employment stability



KEY NEED / TREND: Track job quality and retention, not only whether a participant finds work; follow-up should record contract type and stability.

A substantial share of employed respondents work outside their field of education or only partly within it. The result points to skills mismatch as well as limited opportunity to use existing qualifications.



KEY NEED / TREND: Use skills mapping and transferable-skills exercises, then connect participants to employers and roles that better match their capabilities.

Cross-country synthesis

Comparative reading. Serbia and Romania need strong school-to-work transition support because their samples include many young people still in education. Italy requires particular attention to unemployment, NEET status and informal work. Denmark combines higher recent work exposure with part-time and unstable arrangements, while Ireland and Czechia show that even comparatively stable work does not eliminate mismatch or short-term contracting.

Monitoring implication. Clinic follow-up should distinguish between any employment and meaningful progression. A participant moving from no work to a short informal arrangement has a different outcome from a participant entering a relevant, contracted and sustainable job.

3. Access barriers and discrimination

Finding work is shaped by both individual entry barriers and wider labour-market conditions. Across the consortium, lack of experience interacts with low pay, limited offers, location and discrimination. The pattern therefore calls for practical employability support combined with employer engagement and inclusive referral pathways.

Low salaries dominate in Italy (76.0%) and Romania (55.6%); lack of job offers is strongest in Denmark (56.7%) and Italy (52.9%); lack of experience is highest in Romania and Denmark. Geographic barriers are particularly visible in Italy and Ireland.

Main barriers when looking for work

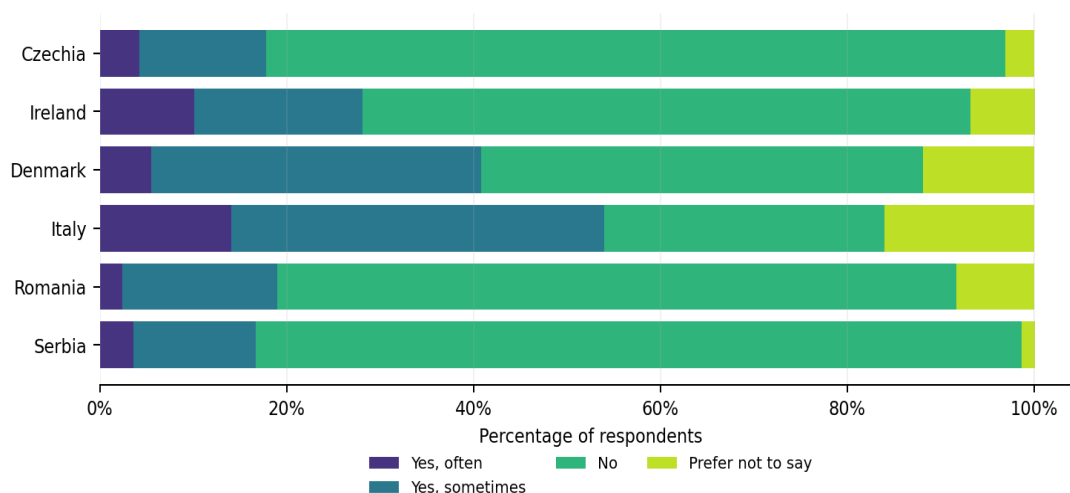
Low salaries	38.7%	55.6%	76.0%	31.3%	22.0%	48.2%
Lack of experience	44.1%	51.7%	25.5%	49.8%	31.5%	44.0%
Lack of job offers	27.5%	42.9%	52.9%	56.7%	25.5%	34.0%
Geographic location	6.3%	10.7%	50.6%	13.4%	27.0%	16.2%
Lack of relevant skills	17.6%	18.5%	12.2%	41.8%	22.5%	-
No difficulties	31.5%	19.5%	-	5.5%	7.5%	18.8%
Transport/access	-	-	20.9%	31.3%	12.0%	-
	Serbia	Romania	Italy	Denmark	Ireland	Czechia

Country comparison - percentage selecting each answer

KEY NEED / TREND: A common programme should cover experience, search skills and employer links, while national plans address pay expectations, mobility and local opportunity gaps.

Reported discrimination is highest in Italy, where 54.0% report it often or sometimes. Denmark follows at 40.8%. Lower reported rates elsewhere should not be read as proof that barriers are absent.

Experience of discrimination in job applications



KEY NEED / TREND: Create a safe disclosure and referral procedure, train coordinators in non-discrimination, and monitor outcomes for vulnerable groups.

Age, gender, ethnic background, disability, place of residence and LGBTQ+ identity all appear as reported grounds. Their importance varies with the composition of each country sample.

Reported grounds for discrimination

Age	44.4%	7.8%	16.2%	17.6%	11.8%	38.2%
Ethnic background	5.6%	2.0%	15.6%	35.8%	26.5%	23.5%
Gender	19.4%	5.4%	27.9%	7.4%	8.8%	14.7%
Place of residence	11.1%	3.9%	9.7%	2.0%	16.2%	5.9%
Disability	5.6%	-	12.3%	2.7%	22.1%	2.9%
LGBTQ+	5.6%	1.5%	-	3.4%	14.7%	5.9%
	Serbia	Romania	Italy	Denmark	Ireland	Czechia

Country comparison - percentage selecting each answer

KEY NEED / TREND: Avoid a one-size-fits-all inclusion response; partners should map local specialist organisations and referral options before recruitment starts.

Cross-country synthesis

Comparative reading. The barrier mix is not identical: pay and geography are especially visible in Italy; offers, experience and skills in Denmark; experience and pay in Romania; and location in Ireland. Serbia and Czechia show lower reported discrimination, but both still identify age and other protected or personal characteristics among those affected.

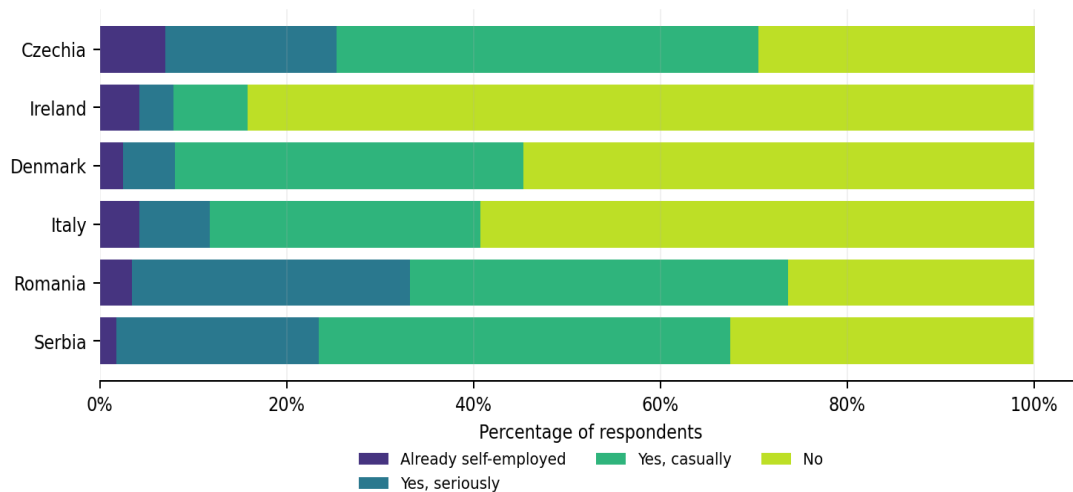
Operational implication. Coordinators should be able to respond at three levels: strengthen the participant's application and skills, connect them to inclusive employers or specialist services, and record repeated structural barriers for stakeholder dialogue.

4. Self-employment and entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial interest is widespread in some countries, but it does not consistently translate into near-term intention. The following results distinguish general openness from readiness and show which mix of finance, knowledge, mentoring and administrative support is most likely to help.

Consideration of self-employment is strongest in Romania, Serbia and Czechia. In Ireland, 84.1% report no previous self-employment or business start, and Italy and Denmark also show majority "no" responses.

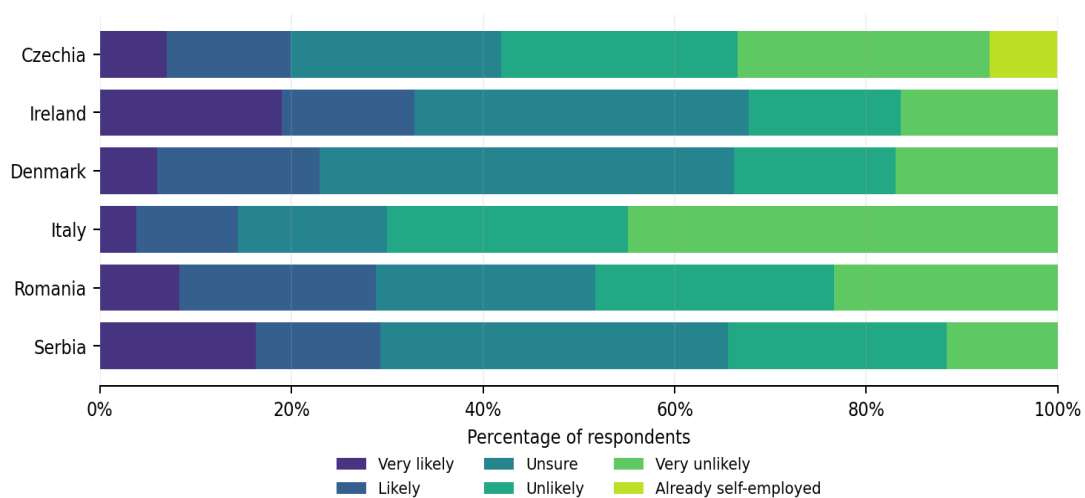
Experience or consideration of self-employment



KEY NEED / TREND: Offer an exploratory entrepreneurship pathway before asking participants to commit: idea testing, realistic information and low-risk first steps.

Near-term intention is lower than general interest. Italy has the clearest reluctance, with 70.0% unlikely or very unlikely. Serbia has a large unsure group and a comparatively high very-likely share, suggesting potential that could be converted through structured support.

Likelihood of starting a business within two years



KEY NEED / TREND: Use a short readiness assessment and provide different tracks for exploration, pre-start preparation and existing self-employed participants.

Independence, better income and flexibility are the strongest recurring motivations. Lack of suitable jobs also matters in some settings, showing that entrepreneurship is sometimes opportunity-driven and sometimes a response to weak employment options.

Reasons young people consider self-employment

Independence	60.8%	59.0%	71.6%	63.2%	28.9%	57.5%
Better income	64.0%	51.2%	34.3%	55.2%	26.4%	47.8%
Flexibility	-	48.8%	-	36.8%	30.8%	38.2%
Lack of job opportunities	21.6%	27.3%	26.9%	36.3%	25.4%	15.1%
Personal interest/idea	28.4%	23.9%	16.4%	15.9%	21.4%	25.3%
Lack of suitable local jobs	-	-	22.4%	19.4%	27.9%	-
	Serbia	Romania	Italy	Denmark	Ireland	Czechia

Country comparison - percentage selecting each answer

KEY NEED / TREND: Help participants distinguish a viable opportunity from self-employment chosen only because no suitable job is available.

Financial risk and start-up capital form the central barrier cluster. Business knowledge is especially prominent in Denmark, Romania and Czechia, while lack of mentoring is visible across countries.

Barriers to self-employment

Fear of financial risk	50.0%	48.8%	68.8%	65.7%	34.8%	69.4%
Lack of business knowledge	45.5%	51.2%	34.4%	51.2%	29.4%	50.0%
Lack of start-up capital	-	65.9%	71.4%	48.3%	43.3%	-
Lack of mentoring/support	26.1%	25.9%	37.7%	27.9%	23.4%	15.1%
Unstable market	-	-	13.6%	20.9%	29.9%	-
Complex regulation	23.4%	-	-	-	-	-
	Serbia	Romania	Italy	Denmark	Ireland	Czechia

Country comparison - percentage selecting each answer

KEY NEED / TREND: Combine financial planning, business basics and mentoring; finance referrals alone will not resolve low confidence or knowledge gaps.

Grants or micro-loans are the most requested support in Italy, Serbia and Romania. Denmark and Czechia place particularly strong emphasis on training and legal/administrative support. Mentoring is consistently relevant.

Support that would make self-employment more accessible

Grants/micro-loans	69.4%	63.4%	81.4%	52.2%	40.8%	49.5%
Business training	42.8%	51.7%	40.7%	64.7%	39.8%	54.8%
Legal/administrative support	43.2%	57.1%	52.1%	60.2%	30.3%	47.3%
Mentorship/coaching	53.6%	45.4%	49.8%	60.2%	30.8%	28.0%
Networking	39.2%	27.8%	20.5%	19.9%	27.9%	-
Coworking space	30.2%	14.6%	28.1%	17.9%	22.9%	-
	Serbia	Romania	Italy	Denmark	Ireland	Czechia

Country comparison - percentage selecting each answer

KEY NEED / TREND: Build a support package with four connected elements: practical training, mentoring, finance signposting and legal/administrative guidance.

Cross-country synthesis

A three-stage clinic pathway is recommended. The exploration stage should help young people test whether entrepreneurship suits their goals. The preparation stage should cover customer needs, basic costing, risk and legal steps. The action stage should connect viable ideas to mentoring, finance and specialist services.

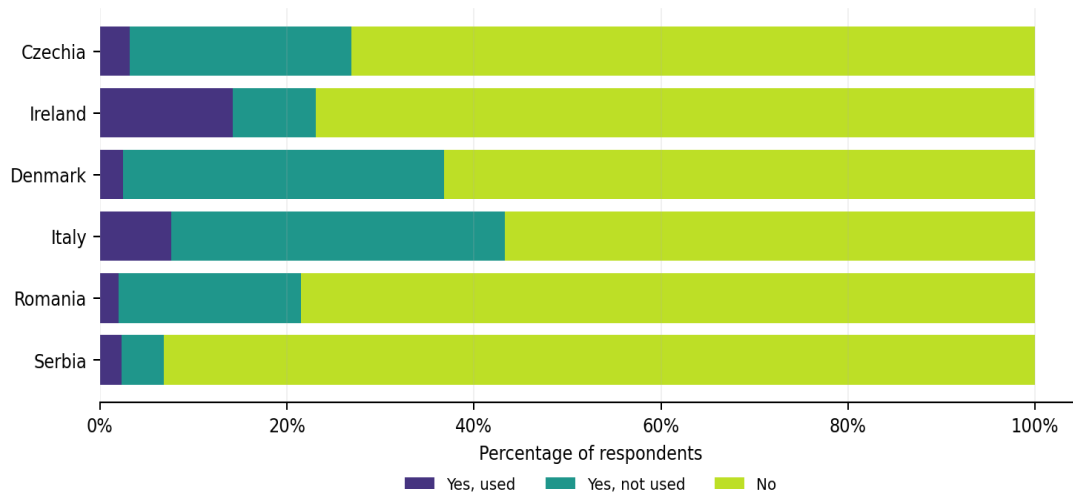
Country adaptation. Serbia, Romania and Czechia can place greater emphasis on converting interest into realistic action plans. Italy needs a stronger entry-level confidence and feasibility component, while Denmark and Czechia require clear business and administrative guidance. Ireland may need more introductory outreach before intensive business support is offered.

5. Public programmes and career support

Public support can only have an effect if young people know it exists, understand it and can reach it. The three indicators below - awareness, perceived value and accessibility - reveal a substantial navigation gap, while limited career-guidance use leaves many respondents without personalised support.

Most respondents in every country are unaware of public youth employment or self-employment programmes. Non-awareness ranges from 56.7% in Italy to 93.2% in Serbia, while actual use is low everywhere.

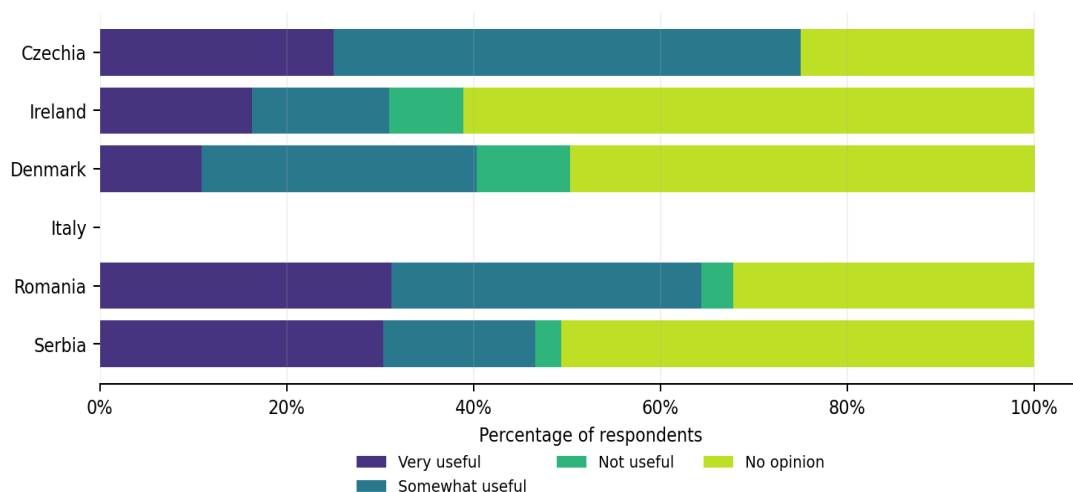
Awareness and use of public support programmes



KEY NEED / TREND: Make programme navigation a core clinic service: identify relevant schemes, explain eligibility in plain language and assist with next steps.

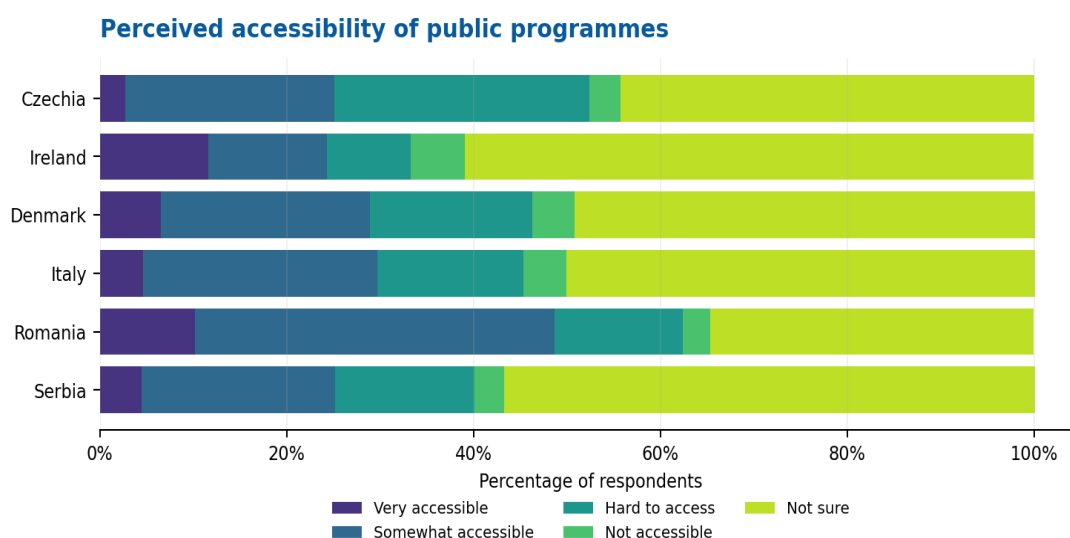
Where the question was asked, “no opinion” is common, which is consistent with low awareness and use. Romania shows a more positive usefulness assessment than several other countries. Italy did not collect a directly comparable usefulness item and Czech results are based on very few answers.

Perceived usefulness of public programmes



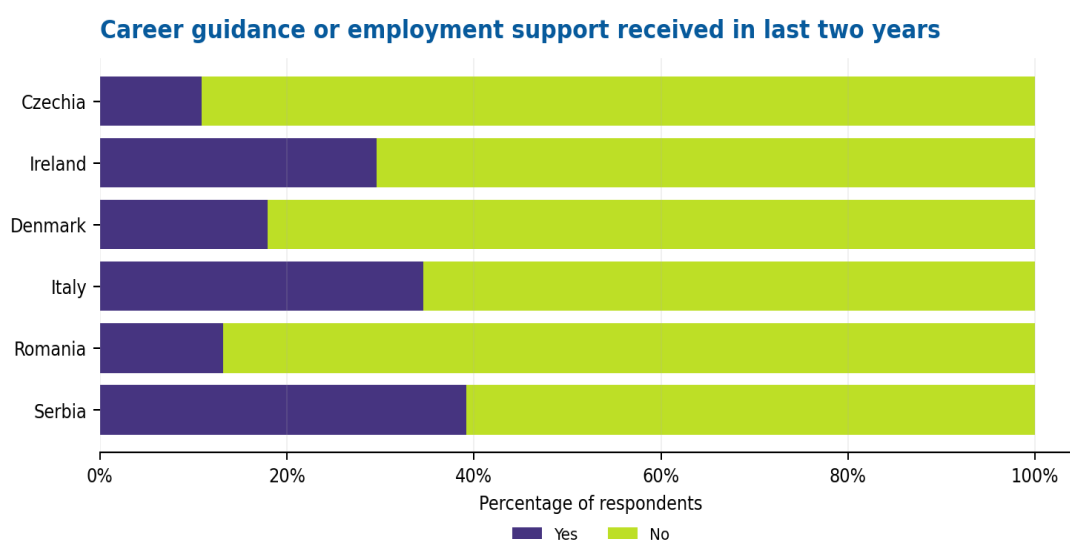
KEY NEED / TREND: Do not treat lack of opinion as rejection; first improve exposure and guided access, then evaluate usefulness among actual users.

Uncertainty dominates perceptions of accessibility. Czech respondents are more likely to describe programmes as hard to access, while other countries combine uncertainty with moderate accessibility.



KEY NEED / TREND: Clinic coordinators should test referral pathways themselves and document concrete access obstacles encountered by participants.

Career guidance is uncommon: only 10.9% in Czechia, 13.2% in Romania and 17.9% in Denmark report receiving it in the previous two years. Serbia and Italy have higher, but still minority, access.



KEY NEED / TREND: Provide repeated, individualised guidance rather than a single information session, and record referrals and follow-up outcomes.

6. Wellbeing, skills and preparation

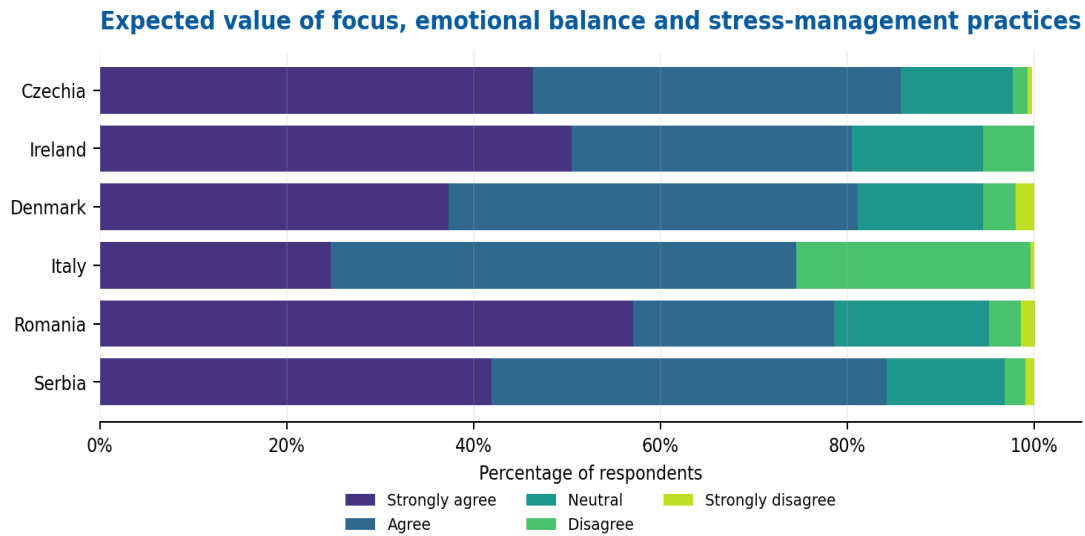
Employability is not only a matter of vacancies or qualifications. Respondents connect success with communication, digital and practical skills, but also with focus, confidence and the ability to manage stress. Their assessment of education indicates where clinics need to add applied learning.

Across all six samples, mental wellbeing and stress management are overwhelmingly considered important for staying employed and performing well. The finding is consistent despite differences in age and employment status.



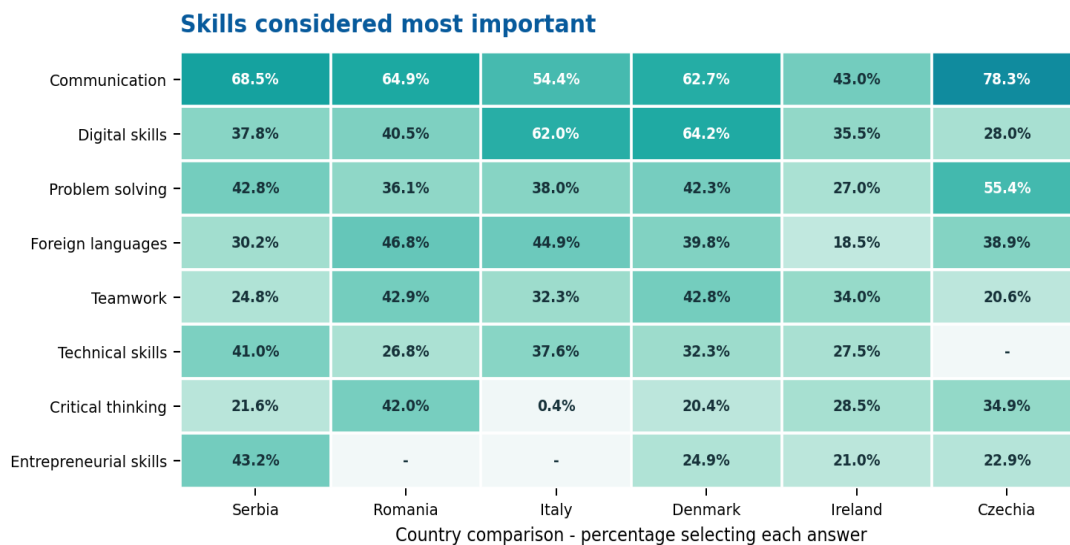
KEY NEED / TREND: Integrate stress management, confidence and sustainable work habits into both employment and entrepreneurship pathways.

Large majorities agree that practices supporting focus, emotional balance and stress management can improve work performance and employability. This provides a clear mandate for practical wellbeing content.



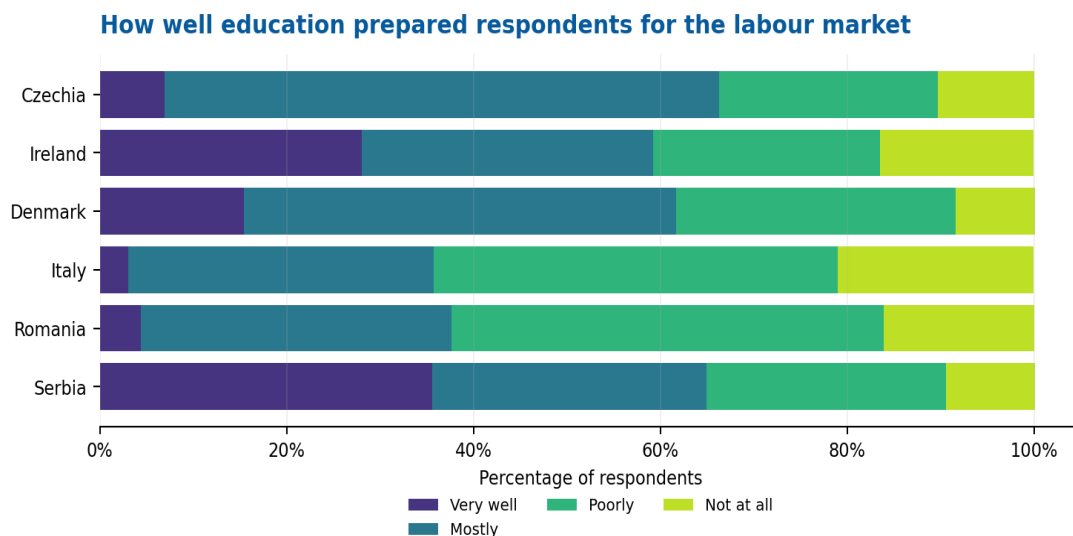
KEY NEED / TREND: Use short, applied exercises linked to interviews, workplace adjustment, workload and entrepreneurial uncertainty.

Communication is a leading need in most countries; digital skills lead in Denmark and Italy. Problem solving, languages, technical and entrepreneurial skills have different national weight.



KEY NEED / TREND: Keep communication and digital capability in the common core, then allow country modules to prioritise languages, technical, critical-thinking or entrepreneurship skills.

Italy and Romania give the most negative assessments of educational preparation: 64.2% and 62.4% respectively say “poorly” or “not at all”. Czechia and Denmark are more positive, while Ireland and Serbia are mixed.



KEY NEED / TREND: Prioritise applied learning: real tasks, employer feedback, work simulations, portfolios and direct contact with practitioners.

7. Priorities and engagement

The final structured questions connect personal experiences to wider reform priorities and willingness to participate. They show which needs clinics can address directly and which issues should be documented for cooperation with employers, institutions and decision-makers.

Higher salaries, more internships and better education are the strongest shared priorities. Italy is exceptional in the dominance of higher salaries (86.3%); Romania combines education and internships (both 63.4%); Denmark gives greater weight to employment protection and career guidance.

Priority improvements for youth employment

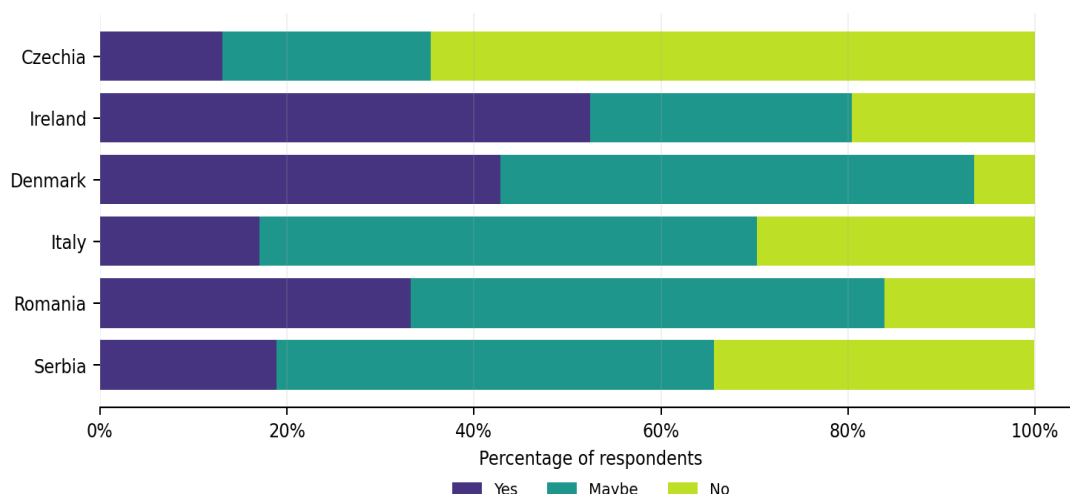
Higher salaries	59.0%	54.6%	86.3%	42.3%	26.6%	60.0%
More internships	54.1%	63.4%	21.7%	52.7%	44.8%	55.4%
Better education	34.2%	63.4%	38.4%	49.3%	26.0%	38.9%
More career guidance	41.4%	32.2%	20.5%	42.3%	31.8%	24.6%
More remote work	34.2%	26.8%	17.9%	19.4%	28.1%	34.9%
Stronger employment protection	24.3%	21.0%	33.1%	41.3%	20.8%	-
Support vulnerable groups	10.4%	11.2%	38.4%	34.3%	33.9%	-
More local jobs	15.3%	23.4%	-	22.4%	28.1%	35.4%
	Serbia	Romania	Italy	Denmark	Ireland	Czechia

Country comparison - percentage selecting each answer

KEY NEED / TREND: Clinic activity can address experience and guidance directly, while evidence on pay, protection and local jobs should feed stakeholder dialogue and policy recommendations.

Interest in further engagement is strongest in Ireland and Denmark. In Romania, Italy and Serbia, “maybe” is the largest group; Czechia shows the highest reluctance. This suggests that willingness depends on relevance, trust and the effort required.

Willingness to participate in youth employment/policy initiatives



KEY NEED / TREND: Recruit with a concrete offer, low-threshold first contact and visible benefit; convert “maybe” responses through short introductory activities rather than demanding early commitment.

8. Synthesis of open recommendations

The open responses vary greatly in detail and many respondents entered no substantive recommendation. A qualitative reading of usable comments nevertheless reinforces the structured results. Recurring themes include better-paid and more secure work, easier access to first experience, stronger links between education and practice, clearer information about support, more inclusive recruitment, local opportunities and practical entrepreneurship assistance.

KEY NEED / TREND: Young people are asking less for abstract information and more for navigable pathways: where to go, what to do next, who can help, and how to gain credible experience.

The recommendations also show that service design should not shift all responsibility onto the individual. Training and motivation matter, but respondents repeatedly point to structural limits such as wages, the number and location of jobs, discrimination, insecure work and administrative complexity. Clinics can help young people navigate these conditions while also documenting recurring barriers for dialogue with employers, public institutions and policy stakeholders.

9. Implications for NextGen Clinics

1. Use a common core with national adaptation. Every clinic should provide employability assessment, career guidance, job-search support, entrepreneurship orientation, mentoring, wellbeing support and referral to relevant services. Country plans should then emphasise the strongest local barriers shown in this report.
2. Start with individual needs and readiness. Participants differ by age, education, work history and entrepreneurial readiness. A baseline form should identify the appropriate pathway and allow progress to be measured.
3. Make experience visible and attainable. Lack of experience is a major barrier. Clinics should use practical assignments, employer sessions, work simulations, portfolios, internships and traineeship referrals.
4. Turn programme information into supported access. Low awareness and high uncertainty mean that lists of links are insufficient. Coordinators should explain eligibility, help prepare applications and follow whether referrals were completed.
5. Combine entrepreneurship inputs. Business training should be linked to mentoring, financial planning, legal guidance and finance referrals. Support should be staged according to readiness.
6. Treat wellbeing as an employability condition. Confidence, focus, emotional balance and stress management should be embedded in practical activities and discussed in relation to work retention and sustainable self-employment.
7. Monitor quality, not only participation. Suggested indicators include service type and intensity, completed action steps, skills/self-efficacy change, referrals, interviews, placements, job quality, business steps and participant satisfaction. Disaggregate key indicators by age, gender, residence, vulnerability and country where sample size permits.
8. Build inclusion and safeguarding into routine practice. Coordinators need clear boundaries, confidentiality rules, consent procedures and referral routes for discrimination, disability, mental-health or protection concerns.

10. Final comparative conclusion

The six surveys do not describe one uniform “European youth” experience. They show a shared architecture of need—experience, fair opportunities, practical skills, accessible support, financial security and wellbeing—but different national configurations. Italy’s results emphasise low pay, limited offers, geographic barriers and insecurity; Romania highlights education, internships, capital and low guidance access; Serbia combines weak programme awareness with strong interest but uncertainty around entrepreneurship; Denmark shows a stronger mix of skills, offer and access barriers; Ireland points to geographic access, uneven work quality and a need for inclusive, navigable support; Czechia combines a younger sample with limited guidance, programme-access uncertainty and a strong need for practical pathways.

The operational implication is clear: NextGen Clinics should be consistent enough to offer a recognisable common service, but flexible enough to respond to each country’s participant profile and ecosystem. Their added value will come from connecting elements that young people currently experience as fragmented—assessment, skills, information, mentoring, employer contact, entrepreneurship advice, wellbeing and follow-up—into one understandable pathway.

Prepared for the NextGen Opportunity project. This report is based exclusively on partner survey data supplied for the comparative analysis.