CC BY NC SA

INFRA4NEXTGEN

Topline Results

The Social Blueprint: Education, Work, and Family as Determinants of Life Chances

Rumiana Stoilova
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Yuliya Kazakova
Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute

Funded by the European Union

Topline Results

The Social Blueprint: Education, Work, and Family as Determinants of Life Chances

Rumiana Stoilova, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
Yuliya Kazakova, Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute

Introduction

NextGenerationEU aims to make European societies stronger and more resilient, delivering tangible results for citizens through a wide range of initiatives. It sets out a blueprint for a new growth model grounded in a clean, innovative, and inclusive economy, supported by digital leadership and technological sovereignty.

Within this broader framework, this report focuses specifically on the objectives of the Make it Strong pillar. These include encouraging young people to study science and technology, supporting further education and apprenticeships, providing loans and grants to young entrepreneurs, and offering assistance for the continuation of education or entry into the labour market through programmes such as Erasmus+ and the EU Youth Guarantee.

> **"...the present report investigates whether today's young people experience the same or better opportunities than previous generations, exploring how education, employment, and family domains intersect and evolve in contemporary Europe."**

Achieving these aims requires, first, sustained support for education and skills development to prepare younger generations for emerging opportunities in a technology-driven world, and second, targeted assistance for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and young entrepreneurs to foster innovation, job creation, and future economic growth.

The main objective of this report is to highlight key policy-relevant insights from the Cross-National Online Survey 3 (CRONOS-3) survey, which is a large-scale, cross-national, probability-based, mixed-mode panel conducted across eleven European countries: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, France, Hungary, Iceland, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and United Kingdom.

Fieldwork for CRONOS-3 took place between September 2024 and June 2025, comprising five 30-minute survey waves. The analysis provides empirical evidence on patterns of continuity and change across the domains of education, work, and family life in Europe, examined through a generational lens that compares the experiences and perceptions of young people with those of older cohorts.

The policy relevance of the report is rooted in the social investment perspective, which emphasises the importance of investing in, mobilising, and renewing human capital across the life course as a means of addressing social risks. Central to this approach is the principle of 'preparing rather than repairing' – that is, equipping individuals with the necessary skills and education before they face major life-course challenges, rather than compensating for the consequences of unaddressed risks after they occur (Häusermann et al., 2022).

Empirical evidence consistently shows that social investment policies support both higher employment and lower poverty. As outlined by Hemerijck (2017), such policies perform three key functions:

(1) enhancing the quality of education and training to build and maintain the 'stock of human capital';

(2) facilitating labour market and life-course transitions, thereby sustaining 'work–life balance flows';

(3) providing income protection and economic stabilization through 'inclusion buffers'.

Within this conceptual framework, the present report investigates whether today's young people experience the same or better opportunities than previous generations, exploring how education, employment, and family domains intersect and evolve in contemporary Europe.

Fairness of educational opportunities

Access to education and the quality of the obtained skills significantly influence an individual's life chances – not only through their lifetime earnings but also via a range of non-marker benefits, including personal and child health, fertility outcomes, household efficiency, and overall well-being (McMahon and Moses Oketch, 2013). Educational attainment and successful school-to-work transitions are key determinants of young people's long-term life prospects, shaping their labour market participation and occupational realisation.

Evaluating the fairness of access to education is therefore crucial for understanding young people's opportunities for upward social mobility – their ability to secure better jobs and higher positions in society, and for underpinning the 'double transition' in their life – moving from school to work, and from dependence on their parents' family to establishing their own independent lives and families.

When young people perceive their educational opportunities as unfair, they may lose confidence in the idea that individual effort and achievement can lead to prosperity, given that education remains a central mechanism of social mobility. In this sense, youth perceptions of fairness can act as an early warning signal of broader social discontent.

Data from CRONOS-3 show overall positive evaluations of educational fairness – the average score across all countries covered in the survey is 6.2 on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Does not apply at all" and 10 means "Applies completely" (Figure 1). However, young people tend to rate their chances of attaining the education they need lower than other groups in most countries. An exception is Slovenia, where young people report higher perceptions of fairness in education compared to older generations. In Finland and Czechia, perceptions of fairness are largely equal across generations. By contrast, France shows the lowest reported fairness of educational opportunities among both younger and older respondents, whereas Finland records the highest.

Figure 1. Perceptions of equal educational opportunities by country/age

Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 1 (2024). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis. Mean values based on a scale from 0 ('Does not apply at all') to 10 ('Applies completely') for the statement that everyone in the country has an equal chance to achieve the desired level of education (w1sq1).

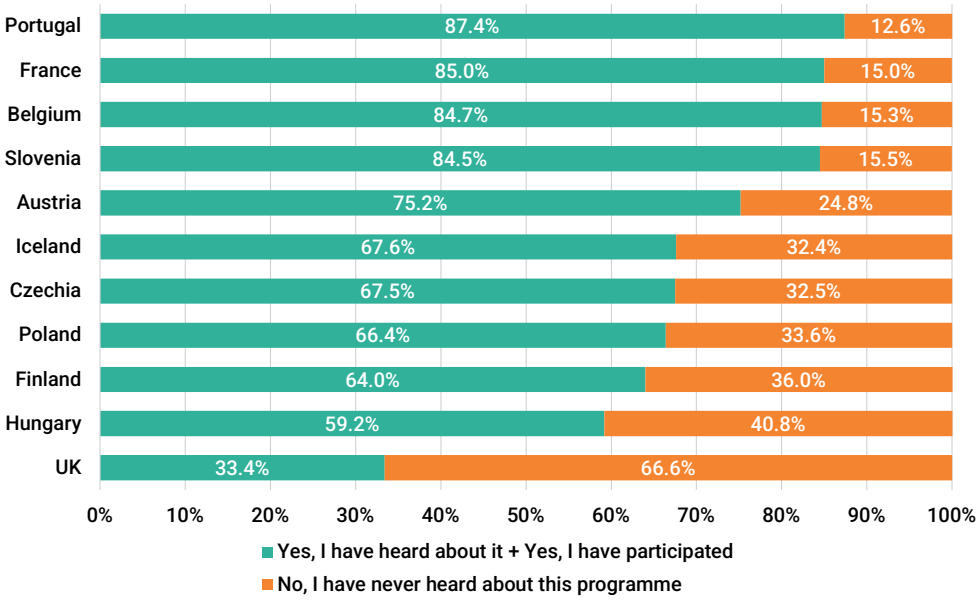
Familiarity with Erasmus+ programme

The European Union promotes education as a means of social inclusion, mobility and integration. Within this framework, the EU Erasmus+ Programme, originally established in 1987, focuses on education and training for young people, aiming to equip them with the skills and experiences necessary for a successful transition to the labour market. In CRONOS-3, respondents were asked about their familiarity with and participation in the Erasmus+ Programme (2021-27). Overall, more than half of respondents reported being familiar with Erasmus+ (Figure 2). However, actual participation remains limited – only around 4% of respondents reported having taken part in the programme.

Familiarity with the programme varies substantially across countries. The highest levels of awareness are found in Portugal (87%), France (84%), and Belgium (84%), where more than four out of five respondents have heard of Erasmus+. By contrast, familiarity is significantly lower in Finland (62%), Hungary (59%), and especially in the United Kingdom (33%). These findings indicate a clear divide in the programme's visibility. This gap may reflect differences in communication strategies and national engagement with EU educational initiatives aimed at fostering youth mobility and lifelong learning.

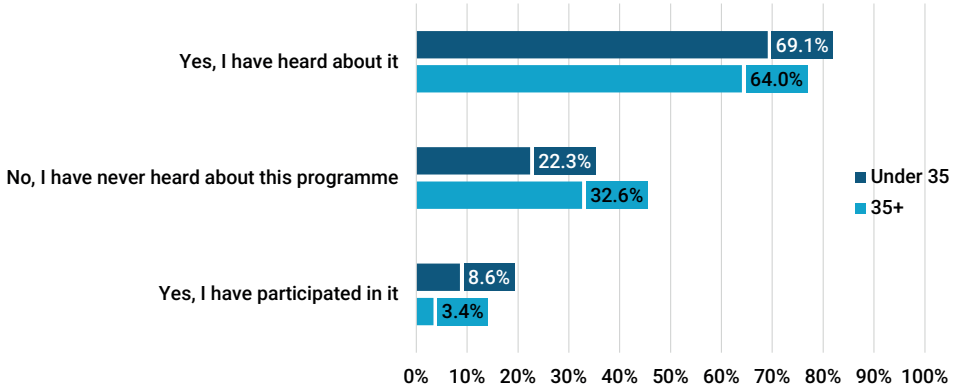
Age differences in awareness and participation reveal a clear generational pattern (Figure 3). Young people are more familiar with the Erasmus+ Programme compared to respondents aged 35 and above, with a 5-percentage-point gap in awareness between the two groups. When considering not only those who have heard about the programme but also those who have personally participated in its activities, the difference widens to 11 percentage points in favour of young people. This indicates that Erasmus+ continues to resonate most strongly with younger generations, both in terms of visibility and direct engagement.

Figure 2. Familiarity with Erasmus Programme by country



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 1 (2024). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis (w1sq8). Those that answered 'Yes, I have heard about it' and 'Yes, I have participated in it' have been combined.

Figure 3. Familiarity with Erasmus Programme by age



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 1 (2024). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis (w1sq8).

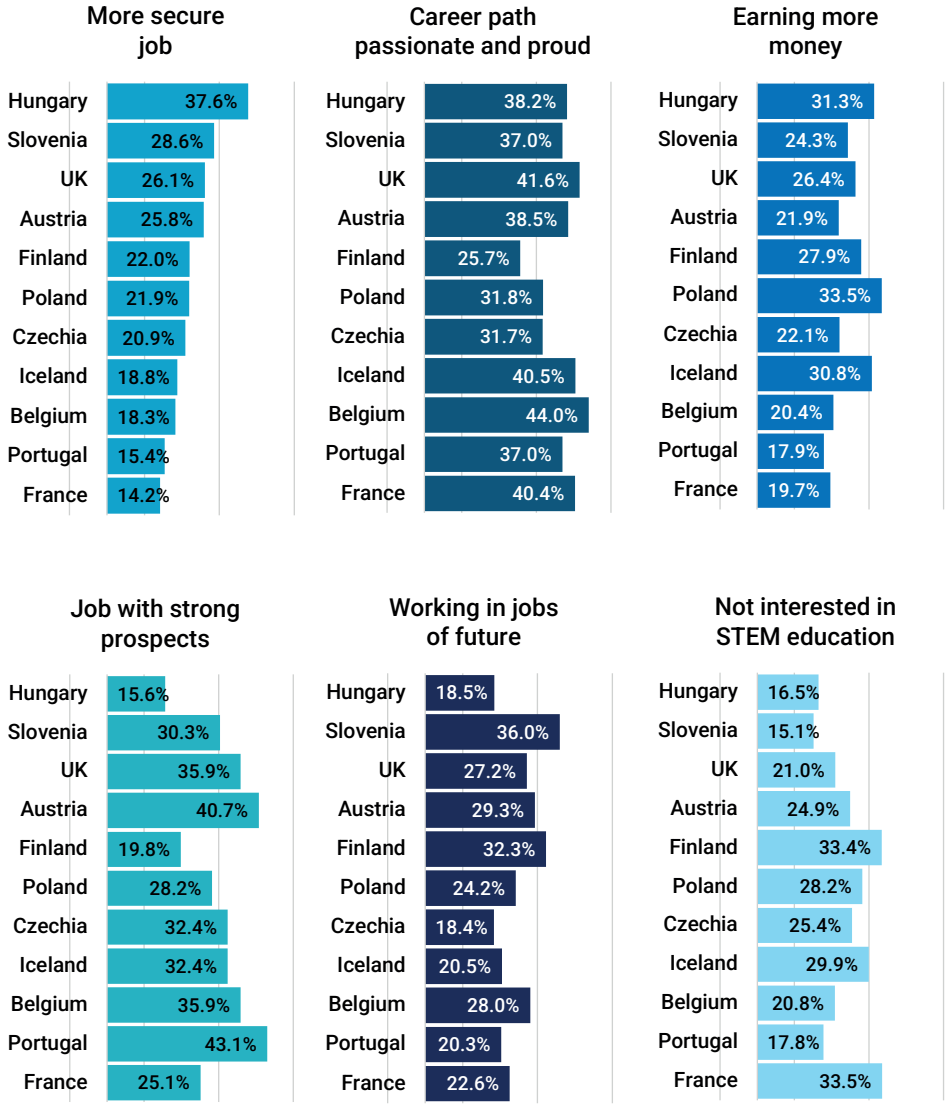
STEM education

Education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) plays a pivotal role in shaping Europe's capacity for innovation, economic competitiveness, and sustainable development. STEM fields are often seen as key drivers of technological progress and future employment growth, making the understanding of young people's motivations to pursue such studies particularly relevant for education and labour market policies.

Country-level results reveal notable differences in the factors influencing the choice of STEM education. In Belgium, the United Kingdom, France, Iceland, and Portugal, distinct motivational patterns emerge (Figure 4). In the first four countries, the main driving factor for choosing STEM education is the aspiration for an exciting and prestigious career that brings both social recognition and personal pride. Portugal, however, differs from this trend – the primary motivation there is the perception that STEM education enhances opportunities and facilitates access to stable, well-prospected employment, even if it does not guarantee it.

In the remaining countries – Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia – no single dominant motive stands out. Instead, at least two factors carry similar weight, with career attractiveness and job prospects once again being the most frequently cited reasons for pursuing a STEM pathway. Finland is the only country in the survey where respondents selected the option 'not interested in STEM education' more than any other answer option, suggesting a comparatively lower level of appeal or identification with STEM-related education among Finnish participants. French respondents showed similarly high levels of disinterest in STEM education.

Figure 4. Main motivation for embracing a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education by country

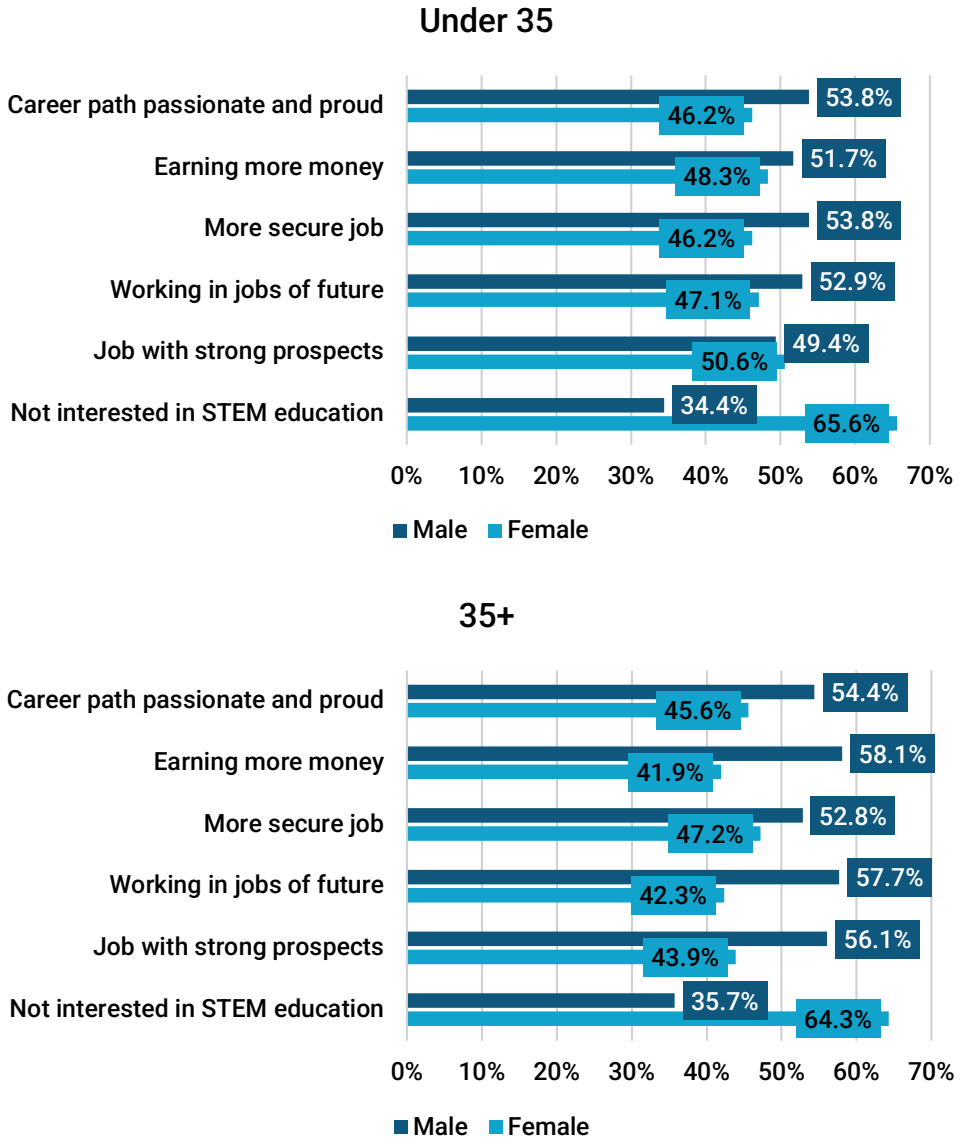


Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 1 (2024). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis (w1sq5).

Gender differences in attitudes toward STEM education are particularly striking (Figure 5). Women account for the majority of those expressing no interest in pursuing STEM studies – 65% compared to 35% of men – across both younger and older generations. Moreover, across all surveyed countries and both generations, women report lower levels of agreement than men with nearly every motivational factor for choosing a STEM field, whether related to job prospects, job stability, or social prestige (with the exception of job prospects among the younger generation, where there is no gender gap). This suggests that women not only tend to be less interested in STEM overall, but also perceive fewer incentives or opportunities associated with these pathways.

Notably, the gender gap is smaller among the younger generation for motivations related to earning more money, working in jobs of the future, and jobs with strong prospects. These smaller gender gaps point to early signs of changing attitudes, where young women increasingly recognise STEM as a pathway to well-paid and future-oriented employment. However, this convergence in motivations has not yet translated into equal levels of interest or participation in STEM fields, as structural, cultural, or self-efficacy factors may continue to discourage women from engaging with these disciplines despite ongoing policy efforts to promote gender equality in science and technology.

Figure 5. Main motivation for embracing a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education by gender and age



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 1 (2024). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis (w1sq5).

Vocational education and training

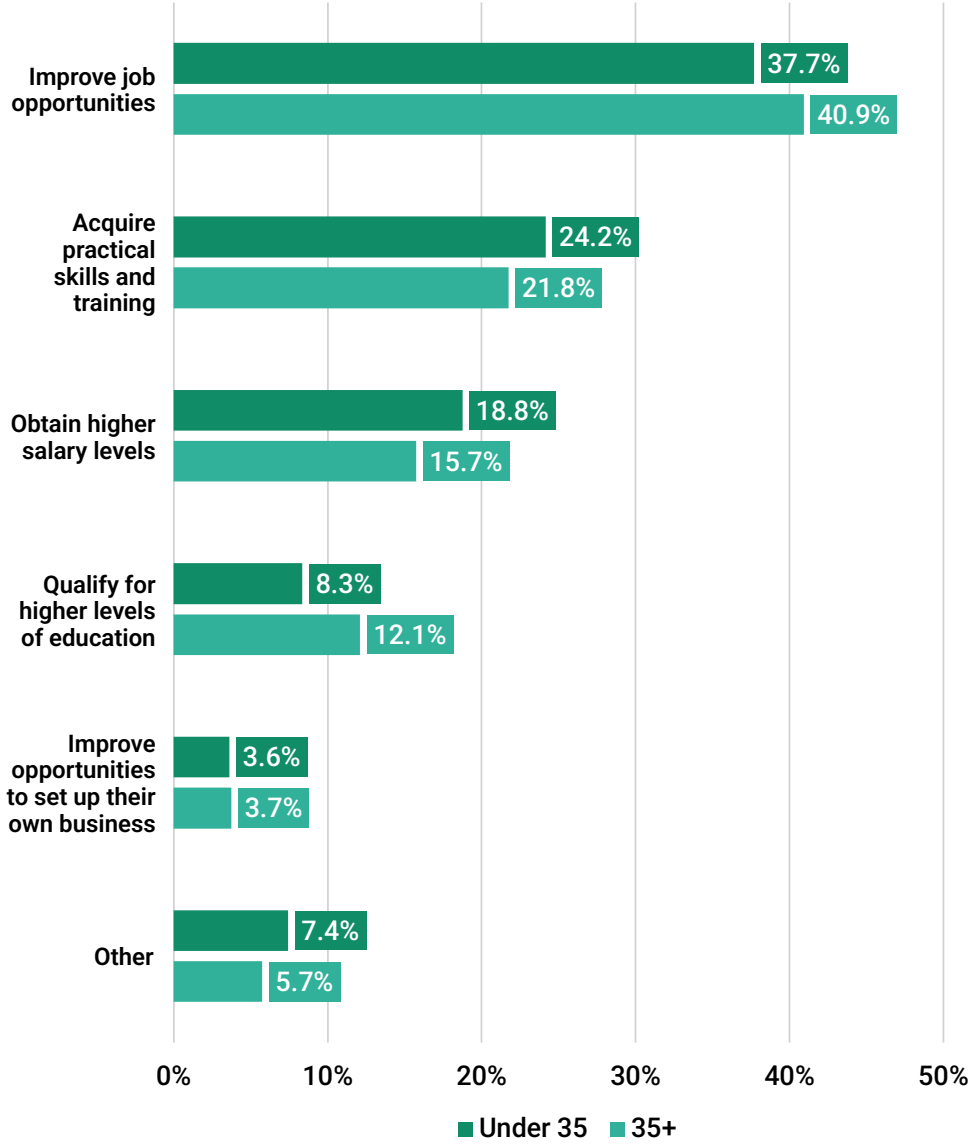
Vocational Education and Training (VET) describes educational programmes that equip learners with practical skills and competencies directly relevant to specific occupations and industries. VET aims to promote social inclusion and stability and labour market resilience by helping individuals adapt their skills to the rapidly changing world of work. It is particularly important for young people who do not pursue tertiary education and seek faster labour market integration (OECD, 2023). By aligning learning outcomes with labour market needs, VET has the potential to reduce unemployment and job-education mismatches, especially among students at higher risk of labour market exclusion. These considerations support policy efforts – such as those under the Recovery and Resilience Facility – to prioritise reforms and investments in education, skills development, and entrepreneurship (European Commission, 2021).

The CRONOS-3 survey explores the motivation of young respondents for choosing VET (Figure 6).

Across all countries, the data show that while job opportunities improvement is the primary driver for entering vocational education across age groups, younger Europeans are more motivated by salary growth and practical skill acquisition, whereas older Europeans focus more on job security and educational progression. At the same time, the overall distribution of responses is remarkably similar across age groups, with the same motivations ranking highest and lowest in both cases. This suggests that differences are more a matter of emphasis than divergence, highlighting the need for VET policies and programmes to fine-tune messaging and pathways to age-related priorities while building on a broadly shared set of motivations.

Country-level patterns show that improving job opportunities and acquiring practical skills are the most valued reasons for choosing VET in the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Finland, while the prospect of higher salary levels plays a stronger motivational role in Czechia, Austria, and France.

Figure 6. Most important reasons for young people (15-24) to go into vocational education and training by age



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 3 (2025). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis (w3sq65).

Access to the first job

Although slightly lower than the perceived fairness of access to education, young people's chances of obtaining their first job are also rated positively, with an average score of 5.5 on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates 'extremely bad' and 10 'extremely good' (Figure 7).

Overall, the general trend across countries indicates that opportunities for access to education are evaluated more favourably than opportunities for starting a career.

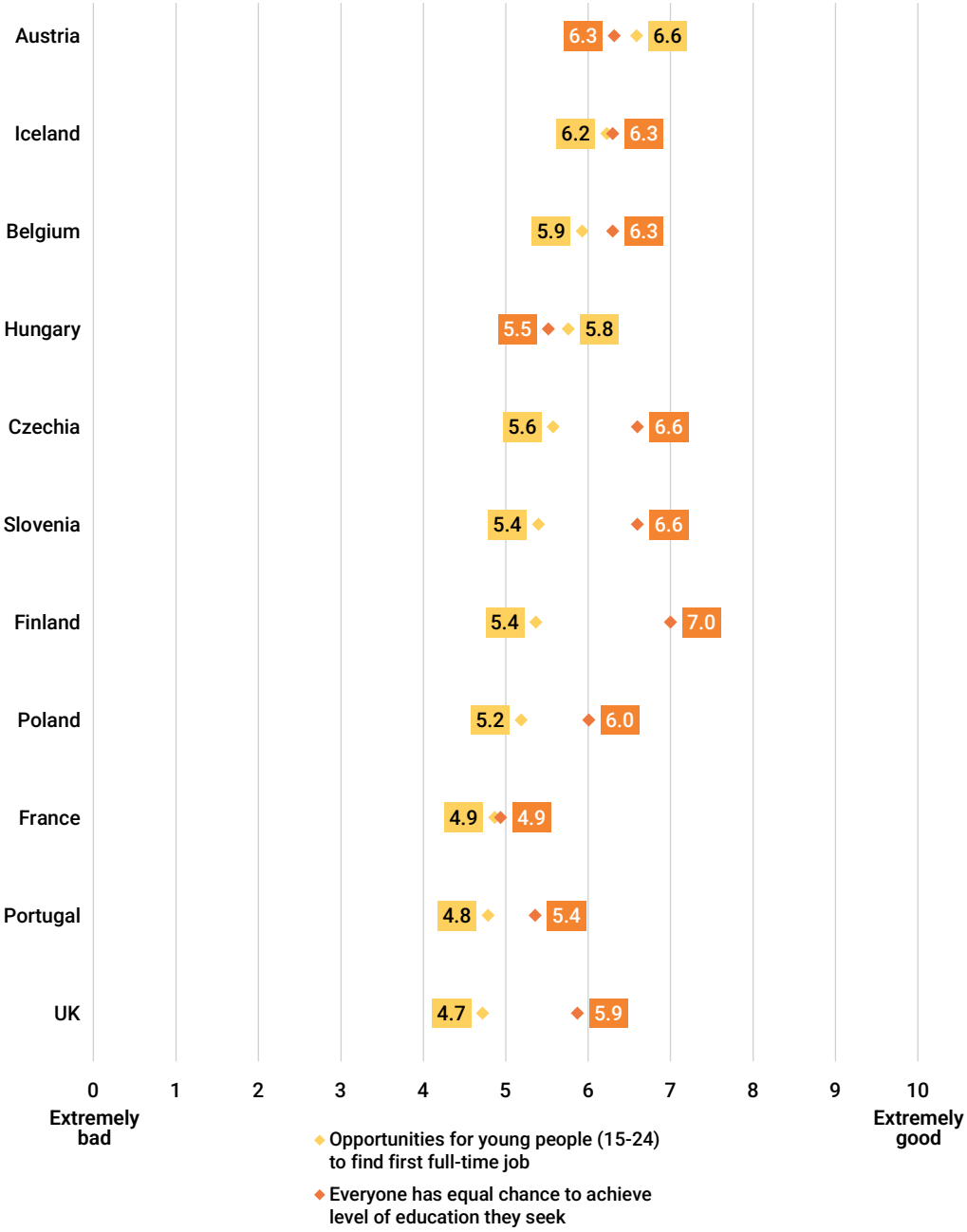
> **"Across countries, average scores for fair access to education range from 4.9 in France to 7.0 in Finland, while average ratings for young people's chances of finding their first full-time job fall within a narrower range."**

Exceptions to this pattern are found in Austria and Hungary, where average ratings for young people's opportunities to secure their first job slightly exceed those for fair access to education.

Across countries, average scores for fair access to education range from 4.9 in France to 7.0 in Finland, while average ratings for young people's chances of finding their first full-time job fall within a narrower range – from 4.7 in the United Kingdom to 6.6 in Austria.

Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 1 (2024) and Wave 3 (2025). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis. Mean values based on a scale from 0 ('Does not apply at all') to 10 ('Applies completely') for the statement that everyone in the country has an equal chance to achieve the desired level of education (w1sq1). Mean values based on a scale from 0 ('Extremely bad') to 10 ('Extremely good') for the overall opinion about the opportunities for young people (aged 15-24) to find their first full-time job (w3sq64).

Figure 7. Average scores on educational and employment opportunities by country



Job-education mismatch

A mismatch between an employee's field of study and their job requirements often results in negative outcomes such as wage penalties, lower job satisfaction, and regret over educational choices.

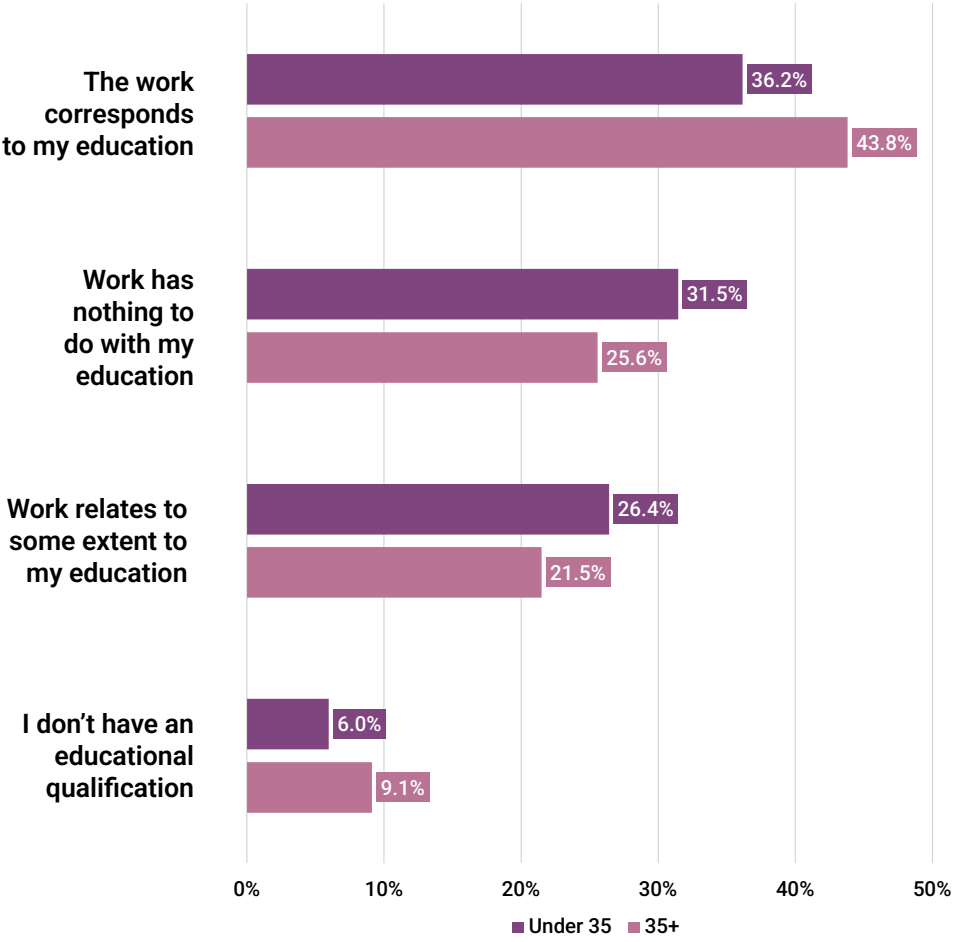
Policy initiatives across Europe aim to address the loss of human capital caused by such mismatches by elaborating strategies of developing skills, strengthening lifelong learning, and promoting practically oriented educational programmes. These efforts also target structural inequalities, as job-education mismatches tend to affect individuals from lower socio-economic background more severely.

Data from CRONOS-3 highlight clear generational differences in this regard (Figure 8). Younger respondents are less likely to report that their current work corresponds to their education – 36% compared to 44% among older employees. Conversely, a larger share of young workers state that their job has nothing to do with their field of study – 32% compared to 26% among older respondents.

"These findings might suggest that younger generations face greater challenges in aligning their qualifications with labour market demands..."

These findings might suggest that younger generations face greater challenges in aligning their qualifications with labour market demands, potentially reflecting both rapid changes in job structures and limited entry level opportunities for recent graduates. Or it could reflect that the alignment takes longer and it will increase in future. Further research is needed in this area.

Figure 8. Correspondence between job and educational qualification



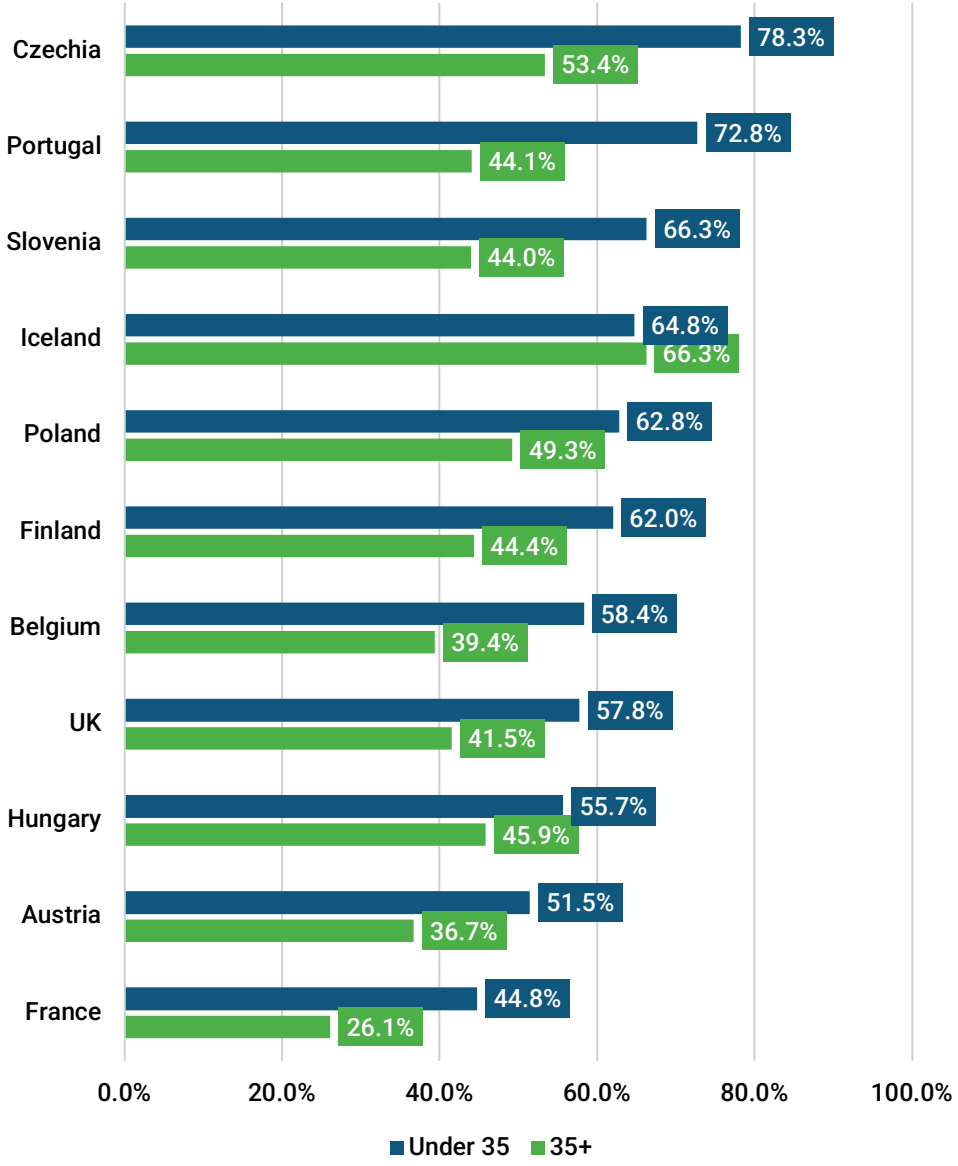
Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 3 (2025). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis (w3sq74).

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial literacy and skills (ELS) has become a central focus of several European strategic frameworks, reflecting their crucial role in preparing citizens to act effectively on economic opportunities (Baggen and Kaffka, 2022). The development of ELS is considered essential for enabling people to respond to major ongoing structural challenges such as the green transition, workforce aging, and digitalisation. According to the OECD and European Commission 'Policy brief on recent developments in youth entrepreneurship' (2020), although young people generally have higher levels of digital skills than older cohorts, they often lack confidence in their ability to start and manage their own business (OECD, 2020).

Data from CRONOS-3 illustrate these dynamics clearly (Figure 9). When asked, "Which topics would you like to see taught more in compulsory education?", young people in Czechia (78%) and Portugal (73%) expressed the strongest support for including entrepreneurship education. In most other surveyed countries between 50% and 65% of young respondents shared this view. The lowest level of support was observed in France (45%), suggesting varying levels of interest and perceived relevance of entrepreneurship education across Europe.

Figure 9. Interest in learning 'Entrepreneurship and Financial Competences' in compulsory education by country and age

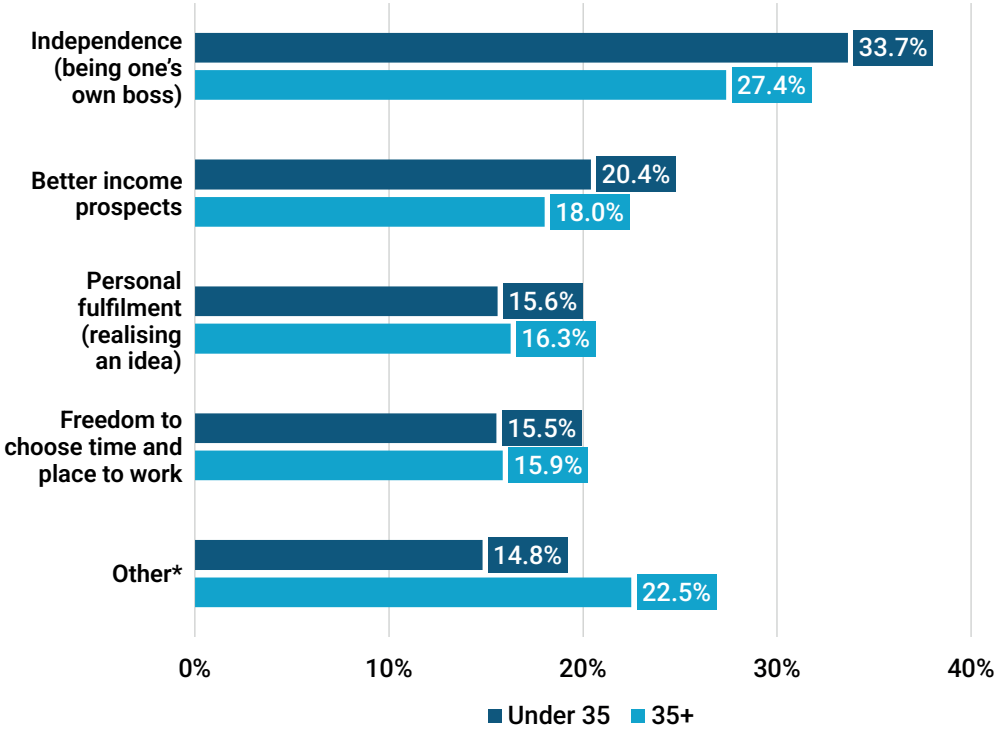


Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 3 (2025). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis (w3sq65).

As for motivations to engage in entrepreneurial activity, the main driver among young people under 35 is the desire for independence (34%), followed by better income prospects (20%) (Figure 10).

These findings indicate that, for younger generations, entrepreneurship is primarily associated with autonomy and opportunity creation, rather than purely economic necessity.

Figure 10. Main reasons driving young people to start their own business by age

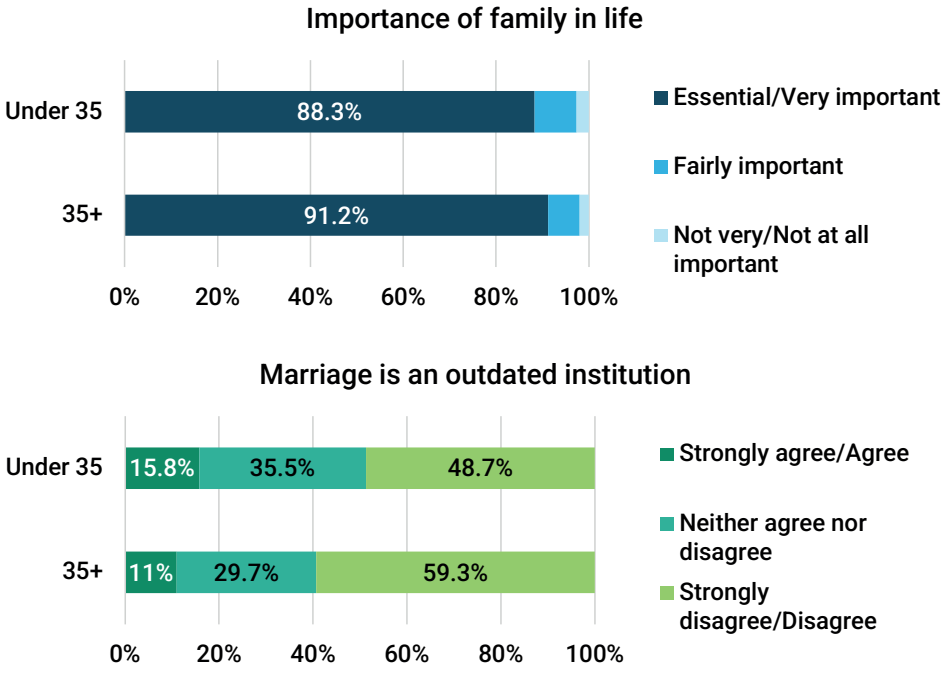


Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 3 (2025). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis (w3sq67). Other combines categories such as "Lack of employment opportunities", "Favourable economic climate", "Family tradition", "Positive societal impact", "Other" due to low sample size.

Importance of family

Another marker of the transition to adulthood, apart from work and education, is family. The CRONOS-3 data indicate that both family and marriage continue to be regarded as important institutions by both younger and older age groups. The importance of family in life remains high, with 88.3% of respondents under 35 and 91.2% of those aged 35 and over rating it as essential or very important. Similarly, only a small proportion consider marriage outdated – 15.8% among those under 35 compared with 11.0% among those aged 35 and over – suggesting that while attitudes toward marriage may be evolving, both family and marriage retain broad social relevance.

Figure 11. Attitudes towards the importance of family life and marriage by age



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 3 and 4 (2025). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis (w4sq2 and w4sq13). Both questions included five response scales, some of which have been merged for these graphs.

Family values

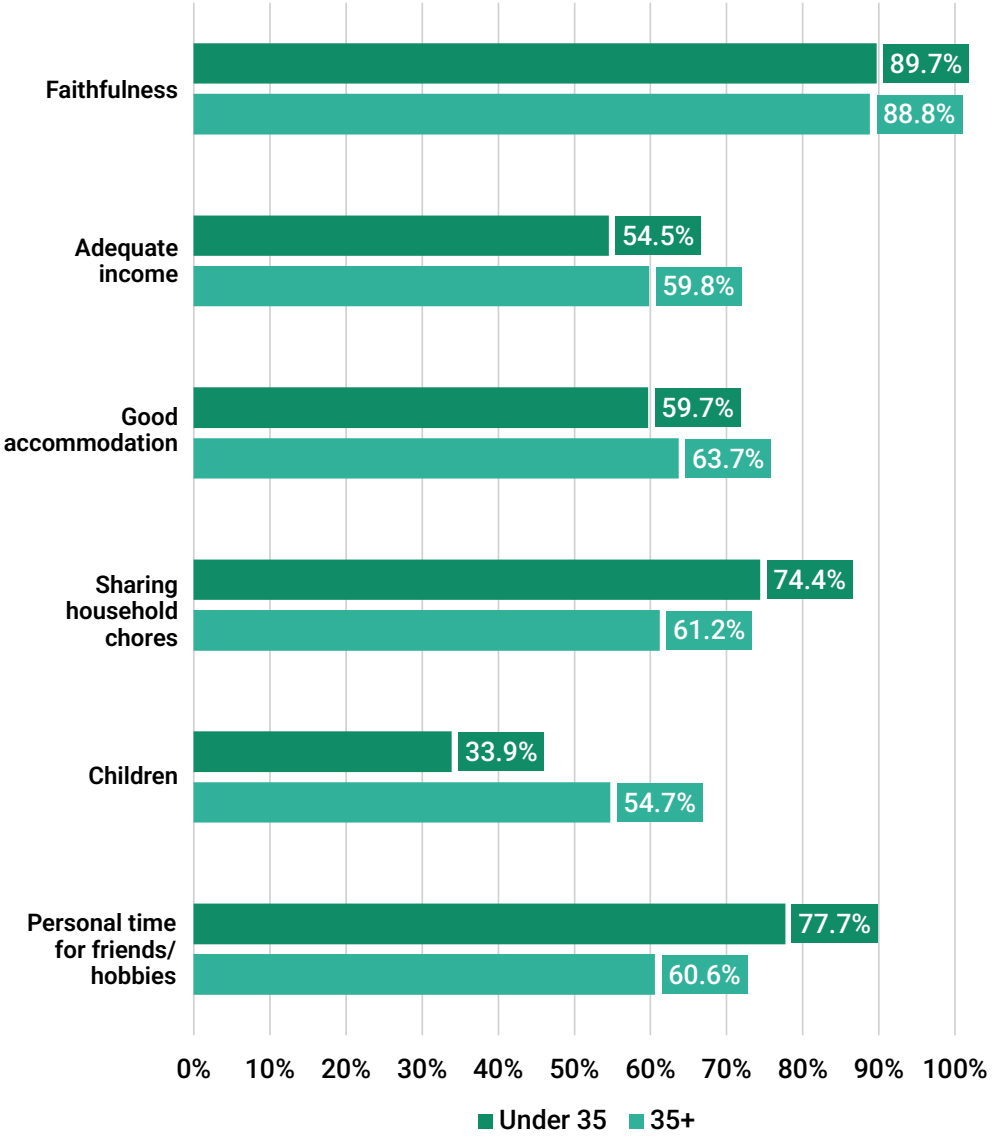
Although family and marriage remain important institutions across age groups, the significance attributed to specific aspects differs notably between younger and older respondents. Faithfulness remains almost universally valued, with approximately 89% of both age groups rating it as essential or very important (Figure 12).

However, beyond this shared value, priorities diverge. Older adults place slightly greater emphasis on practical and traditional elements, such as an adequate income (59.8% vs. 54.5%), good accommodation (63.7% vs. 59.7%), and especially having children (54.7% vs. 33.9%). In contrast, younger adults prioritise values reflecting equality and individuality: sharing household chores (74.4% vs. 61.2%) and maintaining personal time for friends or hobbies (77.7% vs. 60.6%) rank much higher for them.

The pronounced generational gap in the perceived importance of having children carries broader societal implications. As younger adults place less emphasis on parenthood, policy makers may face growing challenges related to population aging and declining fertility rates. Addressing these trends may require policies that better support work–life balance, affordable childcare, and flexible family arrangements to make parenthood more compatible with the values and lifestyles of younger generations.

Overall, while marriage remains valued across generations, its meaning and priorities are shifting. Younger adults increasingly view marriage as a partnership grounded in equality, mutual respect, and individuality, rather than as a primarily traditional family-oriented institution.

Figure 12. Importance of different aspects in a marriage/partnership by age



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 4 (2025). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis (w4sq7 – w4sq12). Share of respondents who selected "Essential" and "Very important".

Topline Results

The Social Blueprint: Education, Work, and Family as Determinants of Life Chances

Rumiana Stoilova, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, and
Yuliya Kazakova, Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute

Conclusion

The CRONOS-3 findings provide valuable evidence for assessing how well current generations of young Europeans are positioned to benefit from the ambitions of NextGenerationEU, particularly those aligned with its Make it Strong pillar. The data reveal both areas of progress and persistent gaps that are highly relevant for policies aiming to build a more resilient, inclusive, and innovation-driven Europe.

In education, young people generally perceive access as fair, yet their slightly lower optimism compared with older Europeans highlights ongoing challenges in achieving truly equal opportunities. These challenges matter for the broader goal of preparing young people for success in a fast-changing, tech-driven world. Limited participation in Erasmus+, despite high awareness in many countries, suggests that barriers to mobility and skills-building remain.

At the same time, the gender divide in STEM interest and motivations underscores the need for targeted measures that encourage more young women to enter scientific and technological fields, a key objective for strengthening Europe's digital and technological sovereignty.

Labour market outcomes further reinforce the importance of investment in skills and transitions. Younger European workers experience higher rates of job-education mismatch, signalling that many are not yet able to deploy their qualifications in productive and satisfying ways. Interest in entrepreneurship is strong, particularly as a route to independence, but the confidence and competencies needed to translate this interest into successful business creation are not yet universal. These findings align closely with the Make it Strong agenda of supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), expanding access to loans and grants

for young entrepreneurs, and promoting entrepreneurial literacy in compulsory education.

Family attitudes reveal a generational shift toward values such as equality, shared responsibilities, and space for personal development. With many young adults placing less emphasis on having children, Europe's demographic challenges may deepen unless labour markets, education systems, and family policies offer stronger support for balancing work, personal aspirations, and family life. This reinforces the importance of social investment strategies that make life-course transitions more predictable and manageable.

Overall, the evidence points to a clear policy imperative: strengthening human capital, reducing structural barriers, and ensuring smooth transitions from education to work are essential to achieving NextGenerationEU's vision of a clean, innovative, inclusive, and digitally sovereign Europe. Supporting young people through modernised education systems, high-quality apprenticeships, lifelong learning opportunities, entrepreneurship support, and mobility schemes such as Erasmus+ and the Youth Guarantee will be the key to unlocking their potential. At the same time, enabling young entrepreneurs and SMEs to thrive will help drive innovation, create new jobs, and sustain future growth.

By aligning empirical insights with strategic policy objectives, this report highlights a path toward empowering Europe's next generation to become the engine of a stronger, more resilient, and forward-looking society.

GREEN
DIGITAL
HEALTHY
MAKEITSTRONG
EQUAL

References

Baggen, Y. and Kaffka, G. (2022). Entrepreneurial literacy and skills, Publication for the committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament, Luxembourg.

European Commission (2021). Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/recovery-and-resilience-scoreboard/policies.html

Häusermann, S., Pinggera, M., Ares, M. and Enggist, M. (2022). Class and social policy in the knowledge economy. European Journal of Political Research, 61: 462-484. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12463

Hemerijck, A.C. (2017). The Uses of Social Investment; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK.

McMahon, W. and Oketch, M. (2013). Education's Effects on Individual Life Chances and On Development: An Overview, British Journal of Educational Studies, 61:1, 79-107. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2012.756170

OECD/European Commission (2020). 'Policy brief on recent developments in youth entrepreneurship', OECD SME and Entrepreneurship Papers, No. 19, OECD Publishing, Paris, available at https://doi.org/10.1787/5f5c9b4e-en.

OECD (2023). 'Building Future-Ready Vocational Education and Training Systems', OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, 31 July 2023

CC BY NC SA

GREEN
DIGITAL
HEALTHY
MAKE IT STRONG
EQUAL

Find out more about the Infra4NextGen project

infra4nextgen.com

Funded by
the European Union