

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN CAREER GUIDANCE – COMPARATIVE STUDY**Comparison of empirical research results among young people in Satu Mare and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg Counties****SUMMARY**

Parallel research conducted in the border region confirms that both sides of the frontier face similar structural problems—such as limited access to services, weaknesses in career counselling, and territorial inequalities—which hinder young people's career planning. However, certain differences can be observed in youth attitudes and the role of the family: in Romania, a slightly more goal-oriented attitude is noticeable among young people, although short-term thinking and lack of future perspective still predominate. In contrast, in Hungary, lack of motivation and a tendency to drift are more pronounced. The family serves as an important source of support in both regions, but expert evaluations differ: in Romania, excessive parental influence is often seen as a problem, while in Hungary, the lack of role models within families raises concern. Critical deficiencies can be observed in the institutional framework of career guidance in both regions, though in different forms: in Romania, difficulties are mainly due to poor rural infrastructure and limited service coverage, while in Hungary, they stem from the general lack of a structured system and effective youth support services.

INTRODUCTION

The empirical research carried out within the UNITY project enables, for the first time, a comprehensive comparative analysis of the career guidance situation in Satu Mare County and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County. A total of 416 students (207 from Romania and 219 from Hungary) and 119 professionals (55 from Romania and 64 from Hungary) participated in the study, providing a representative picture of the challenges faced in the cross-border area.

COMPARISON OF DEMOGRAPHIC DATA AND FAMILY BACKGROUND**Family support and socio-economic status**

Family support is similarly present among respondents from both Romania and Hungary, but differences are noticeable in its intensity: 75% of Romanian high school students receive either full (51%) or partial (24%) support from their families to continue their studies, while in Hungary, the share of those supported is 74%. However, the proportion of parents able to provide full support is lower among Hungarian students (34.6%), and the proportion of those receiving no support due to financial reasons is higher (13.5% vs. 7%).

Romania - Hungary

Regarding parental education levels, significant differences emerge between students in lower and upper secondary education: in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, 66.1% of lower secondary students come from families where neither parent has higher education, a figure that rises to 80.8% among high school students. A similar situation is observed in Satu Mare County. Among Romanian high school students, 8% of both mothers and fathers have higher education degrees. In contrast, the parents of Romanian lower secondary students tend to be better educated: 42% of mothers and 30% of fathers hold university degrees.

Differences in settlement structure

The distribution of students by residence highlights **notable disparities**: in the Romanian sample, 62% of high school students and 18% of lower secondary students live in rural areas, compared to 41% and 36% respectively in the Hungarian sample. These differences have a direct impact on access to services and on career guidance opportunities.

ATTITUDES AND LEVEL OF AWARENESS REGARDING CAREER CHOICE

Maturity in decision-making and firmness

Students in Hungary demonstrate a higher level of maturity in decision-making: 50% of high school students already have a clear idea about continuing their studies, compared to only 37% of Romanian high school students. Among lower secondary students, however, the situation is reversed – 69% of Romanian students already know which high school they will attend, while in Hungary this proportion is significantly lower (37%).

Preferences for subjects and fields of interest

A notable difference is that 45% of Romanian lower secondary students prefer STEM fields, while in Hungary, humanities subjects are more popular (32.2%). Among high school students, 42% of Romanians choose technical/vocational subjects, while in Hungary, this field is not a top preference for any respondent. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that 40.4% of Hungarian students attend theoretical high schools, whereas Romanian respondents mostly attend technical high schools or vocational schools.

Information-seeking habits

In both countries, the family is the main source of information – for lower secondary students, it is often the only one (Romania: 73%, Hungary: 79.1%; among high school students: 53% and 41.3%, respectively). However, significant differences appear regarding the use of formal counselling and the importance of teachers' opinions: in Romania, 62% of lower secondary and 51% of high school students ask their teachers for career-related information; in Hungary, the respective percentages are approximately 30% and 39%. The role of the internet is also substantial among high school students in both counties: 58.7% of Hungarian and 62% of Romanian students obtain their information from this source.

Romania - Hungary

MOBILITY WILLINGNESS AND FUTURE OUTLOOKS

Intentions regarding studies and work abroad

Mobility willingness is significant among students in both counties. Over one fifth (21.2%) of Hungarian high school students have concrete plans to study or work abroad in the future, while another 38.5% have not yet made a firm decision but are considering this possibility. Among Romanian students, these proportions are slightly lower but still substantial: 18% have clear plans, and 30% are contemplating this option.

Language skills and cultural capital

There are key differences in terms of language competencies. 94% of Romanian students speak English, and 42% also speak Hungarian, which represents a significant advantage on the cross-border labor market. Hungarian students' language skills are, according to the data, more limited—an aspect that may constrain their mobility opportunities.

Attitudes toward dual education

Regarding perceptions of dual education, Romanian students show higher levels of uncertainty—41% answered “maybe, but not sure.” On the Hungarian side, this proportion is 33.7%. The share of students with concrete plans in this regard is low on both sides (16.3% in Hungary, 22% in Romania).

Career objective priorities

Security and stability are top priorities in both counties, yet with differing emphases. For Hungarian students, a good salary, long-term job security, and passion for work were all rated equally, at around 4.30 on a 5-point scale. Romanian students identified the same key goals, but a higher proportion also considered social utility, helping others, and meaningful work as essential.

TECHNOLOGICAL AWARENESS AND DIGITAL COMPETENCIES

A significant gap is observed on both sides of the border in terms of consciously considering the impact of digitalization on the labor market. Only 39.4% of Hungarian high school students take these factors into account, while 27.9% have not thought about them at all. The data from Romania show a similar pattern (40% and 17%, respectively), but the lack of information appears more pronounced in Hungary.

COMPARISON OF EXPERT PERSPECTIVES

Severity of systemic issues

According to expert evaluations, the lack of future vision and motivation is the most serious issue in both countries (Hungary: 3.94 points; in Romania, this was a dominant theme in qualitative responses).

Differences emerge in the perception of specific obstacles:

- Knowledge of labor market trends and the effects of digitalization is seen as a more severe issue by Hungarian experts.

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Romania - Hungary

- The lack of parental support is considered critical in both regions but manifests differently: in Hungary, parents are poorly informed, while in Romania, excessive parental influence limits students' autonomy.
- The absence of career guidance services is perceived as a major structural problem in Hungary, whereas in Romania, it is mostly seen as a challenge of accessibility and utilization.

Accessibility and quality of services

Perceptions of career guidance services vary significantly. Only 4.7% of Hungarian experts consider the current system effective. In contrast, in Romania, the majority of respondents (41%) describe the services as accessible. Nearly 40% of them believe that well-organized career counselling services are available, with good results and reasonable accessibility. However, even in Romania, there are differences in quality and effectiveness: services are not uniform, and there are significant disparities between urban and rural schools.

In Hungary, the situation is worst in rural villages and small communities, where no respondent considers the services to be effective or widely accessible. In Romania, rural students also benefit less from specialized support, often having to rely on their families or their own information-seeking efforts.

CRITICAL DEFICIENCIES AND COMMON CHALLENGES

Commonly identified problems:

1. **Low influence of professional counselling:** The role of career advisors is marginal on both sides of the border (5.2% vs. 12.6%).
2. **Self-awareness deficits:** The issue of “not knowing what I’m good at” is widespread, indicating a lack of personal reflection and vocational development support.
3. **Lack of practical experience:** There is a high demand in both counties for empirical learning, emphasizing the need for internships and hands-on activities.
4. **Excessive family influence:** Parental opinion outweighs professional guidance, but according to experts, clear family role models are often missing.

Specific focus areas:

- **Hungary-specific challenges:** Higher NEET risk (young people not in education, employment, or training), low awareness of the technological gap.
- **Romania-specific challenges:** Significant inequalities between urban and rural areas, infrastructural limits in access to guidance and education services.

Romania - Hungary

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

General findings

The research results clearly show that cross-border cooperation is not only an opportunity but a necessity. Both regions face similar challenges, but they possess different strengths that can complement each other in mutually beneficial ways.

Strategic recommendations

1. **Joint dual education programs:** Enhancing the prestige of vocational education and adapting it to labor market needs.
2. **Development of a joint career guidance platform:** Digital solutions like Laboro.ro would be useful on both sides of the border.
3. **Institutionalized expert exchange:** Combining Hungarian professional experience with Romanian models of family support.
4. **Development of bilingual services:** Consciously leveraging the competitiveness advantages of Romanian-Hungarian bilingualism in the labor market.
5. **Coordination of mobility programs:** Offering cross-border alternatives to reduce youth migration.
6. **Joint dual education initiatives:** Strengthening professional education's image and responsiveness to employment demand.

Cross-border cooperation in career guidance not only enables a more effective response to common issues but also creates a new level of opportunity for young people. The results of the UNITY project demonstrate that joint thinking and coordinated action can offer concrete alternatives to the demographic challenges faced by the region.