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## Educational and Career Plans of the Last-Grade Students at Secondary Schools in the Poznań Agglomeration

The article presents selected results of research into educational and career plans of last-grade students of general high schools, technical high schools and Level 1 vocational schools. Carried out by a team of analysts and vocational counsellors from the Career Counselling Centre for the Youth in Poznań in 2022, the survey included 17% of high-school students (1,342 people) from the city of Poznań and seventeen municipalities of the Poznań *powiat*. An auditorium survey technique was used, and data were collected using paper survey questionnaires and observation sheets. The article aims to establish what the young people intended to do after finishing school and how the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine affected their plans at the time of the research. The main finding of the study is that most of the respondents planned to continue their education after completing high school. Significantly, it was not the two global crises, but personal factors, such as the fear of not doing well enough at examinations or failing to find one's way on the labour market, that the respondents regarded as obstacles that threatened the realisation of their plans.

**Keywords:** educational and career plans, high school, Poznań agglomeration, COVID-19, war in Ukraine

### Introduction

Students' educational and career plans and the career development of graduates of various types of schools are of interest to researchers and nationwide institutions (see Bulkowski et al., 2019a; Bulkowski et al., 2019b; Dąbrowska-Resiak, 2018; Kamieniecka, 2015; Pachocki, 2018; Piorunek, 2004; Sitek & Stasiowski, 2019). A team of analysts and career counsellors from the Career Counselling Centre for the Youth in Poznań also carries out surveys on young people's educational and career plans. In 2007 and 2010, such studies were conducted with junior high school students, and in 2011, research covered technical high school students (CDZdM, 2010;

CDZdM, 2011). In 2022, a survey was carried out among the youth from the last grades at high schools of the Poznań agglomeration.

For the purposes of the research, a student's educational and career plan was defined as the totality of the ways in which the respondent envisaged achieving his/her career goals (to enter and get by on the labour market) in a timeframe defined by the respondent, and their understanding of the determinants involved: motivation, available resources and labour market needs. The research assumed that last-grade high-school students developed plans for the future and that such plans were influenced by various environments. The functioning of a young person was examined on various levels: the individual involved in action, the family and school communities in which the person performed their roles, the country and the Poznań agglomeration where they were subject to the rules of the education system and the needs of the labour market (understood as the employers' demand for employees in particular industries and occupations). On each of these levels, the determinants were identified which had an impact on the goals defined by students, the decisions they made, the actions they took, the resources they had at their disposal, together with whether and how they used them and the motivations (understood as reasons why a student chose a career goal) that guided their behaviour. The research focused on the five most important groups of resources, specifically: personal, educational, informational, human and financial resources. In this context, the personal resources included career preferences, personal and professional values and the self-assessed psycho-physical health and strengths. Educational resources referred to an individual's knowledge and skills (including occupational skills), both formally uncertified and confirmed by credentials. Informational resources comprised a student's knowledge of the education system and the labour market. Human resources were understood as the support the young person could obtain in their community, especially from teachers, closest family, peers and other significant relatives. Financial resources were defined as the funds a student had at their disposal in the form of scholarships, money received from parents/guardians and income from work or other sources.

## Methodology

The surveyed population consisted of last-grade students at three types of high schools: general high schools, technical high schools and Level 1 vocational schools from the city of Poznań and seventeen municipalities of the Poznań *powiat*.<sup>1</sup> It was divided into six groups (*strata*), based on the type of school and its location either in the city or in the *powiat*. A single-stage stratified sampling was applied, corresponding to the proportions of the *strata* defined in the population, with the

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<sup>1</sup> A *powiat* is a second-tier unit of local government and administration in Poland and roughly corresponds to a district or a country.

drawing of teams (grades in schools) proportional to their size. A 95% confidence level and 2% maximum error were adopted. The surveyed population consisted of 7,670 students. A total of 1,342 students were selected for the research sample, which represented 17% of the entire population (Table 1). Students from the drawn grades were included in the research. The survey questionnaire was completed by 699 general high school students, 382 technical high school students and 261 Level 1 vocational school students. Of this total sample, 1,145 respondents went to school in Poznań, and 197 attended schools based in the Poznań *powiat*.

Table 1. Sampling by strata (using Educational Information System data)

Population stratum	General population of the research		Sample recommended for drawing		Final sample	
	Number	Strata distribution	Number	Strata distribution	Number	Strata distribution
<b>city of Poznań total</b>	<b>6715</b>	<b>87.5%</b>	<b>1601</b>	<b>87.5%</b>	<b>1145</b>	<b>85.3%</b>
city of Poznań, general high school	3782	49.3%	902	49.3%	647	48.2%
city of Poznań, technical high school	1894	24.7%	452	24.7%	325	24.2%
city of poznań. Level 1 vocational school	1039	13.5%	248	13.5%	173	12.9%
<b>Poznań powiat total</b>	<b>955</b>	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>14.7%</b>
Poznań <i>powiat</i> , general high school	289	3.8%	69	3.8%	52	3.9%
Poznań <i>powiat</i> , technical high school	293	3.8%	70	3.8%	57	4.2%
Poznań <i>powiat</i> , Level 1 vocational school	373	4.9%	89	4.9%	88	6.6%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7670</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>1829</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>1342</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

The study was carried out using survey questionnaires. The field research was conducted by a purpose-appointed and appropriately trained team of interviewers consisting of employees and associates of the Career Counselling Centre for the Youth in Poznań. The questionnaires were administered from March to May 2022 during lessons at educational institutions. The actual field survey was preceded by pilot research.

The purpose of this article is to present selected results of the study and to answer two questions:

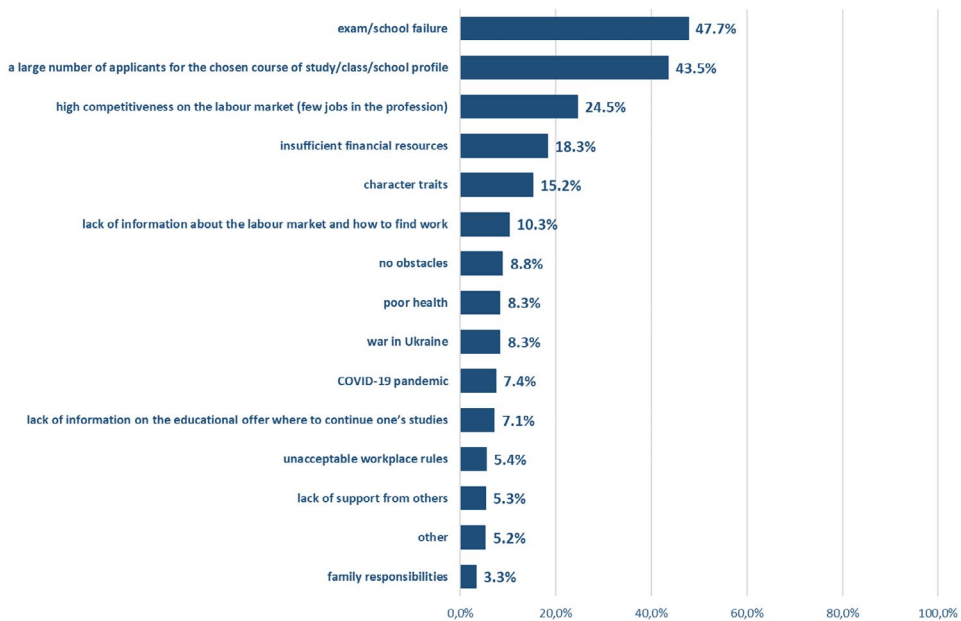
- 1) Did last-grade students at high schools in the Poznań agglomeration perceive the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine as obstacles to achieving their educational and career goals?
- 2) What did last-grade students at high schools in the Poznań agglomeration intend to do after finishing school?

### **Students' Educational and Career Plans in the Context of the Current Crises: Analysis and Discussion of Research Findings**

Underlying the implementation of the research was the observation that people develop scenarios of their own future, especially when they find themselves at turning points in their lives. Graduation from high school is one such moment (Timoszyk-Tomczak, 2003, p. 43). However, a significant proportion of young people do not have any precise educational or career plans (Bobek, 2018). For many students, thinking about the future is associated with fear and anxiety, which usually stem from ignorance and the lack of planning and risk-estimation skills (Frąszczak et al., 2019). When making decisions, young people confront their own dreams and aspirations with external realities at hand, such as the needs of the labour market (Ciereszko & Kęsek, 2019); for this year's graduates, the current conjuncture included the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

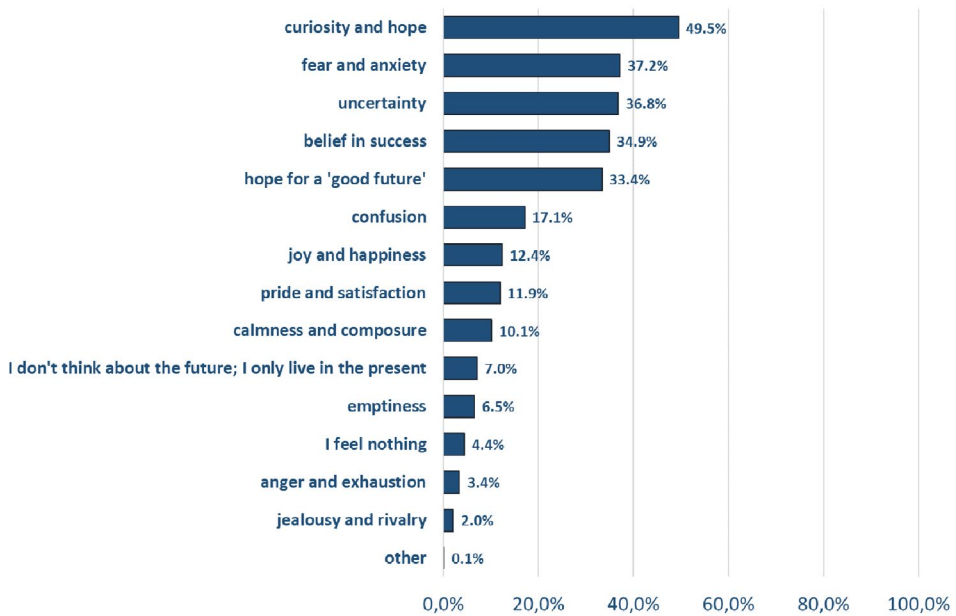
The results of the survey showed that students did not perceive these two global crises as obstacles to their educational and career goals. The respondents were not explicitly asked about the impact of the pandemic or the war on their plans, but they were requested to identify the (three or fewer) obstacles that they thought might stand in the way of their educational and career goals. Possible answers included the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. However, the students were mainly concerned about their possible school and exam failures (47.7%), the high number of applicants per place at schools of their choice (43.5%) and the high competition on the labour market, that is the scarcity of jobs available in their chosen occupations (24.5%). The COVID-19 pandemic was cited as an obstacle to achieving the goals only by 7.4% of the respondents, and the war in Ukraine by 8.3% of the respondents (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Student-perceived obstacles to educational and career goals (n = 1331)



However, the negative effects of the pandemic and the war may have been unconscious factors affecting the psychosocial condition of the respondents. The students were asked about their feelings when thinking about the future (they could choose up to three from the provided list of feelings). Interestingly, some ambivalence emerged in the respondents' attitudes to the future. The five most frequently reported feelings included those that could be classified as positive (curiosity and hope, belief in success and hope for a 'good future') and those that were imaginably difficult to experience (fear and apprehension, and uncertainty). Curiosity and hope were indicated by almost half of the respondents (49.5%), belief in success by 34.9%, and hope for a 'good future' by 33.4% of the sample. In contrast, anxiety and fear were felt by 37.2% of the respondents, and uncertainty by 36.8% (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Students' feelings about their educational and work future (n = 1337; multiple responses)



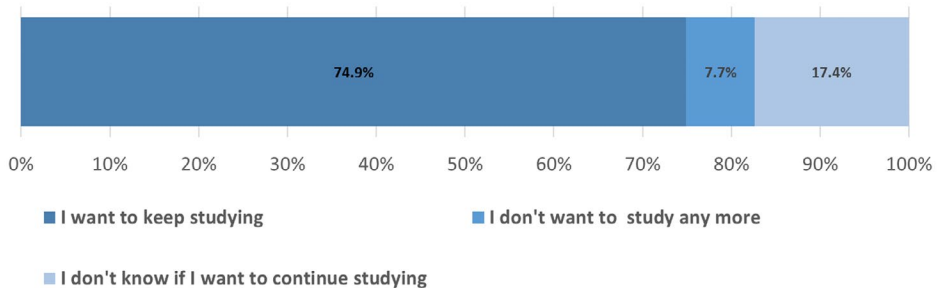
The conclusions of the factor analysis carried out in the study may valuably contribute to the investigations of the foundations of young people's ambiguous attitudes towards their future. While students generally responded similarly in the different types of school, they markedly differed in what can be called a future orientation towards work or education. These differences included the attitudes towards planning their future, therein the feelings of anxiety or security about pursuing their chosen career path.

The students of Level 1 vocational schools expressed greater anxiety about their future than the students of technical and general high schools. The former were also distinguished by being more work-oriented and—as the only ones in the sample—experienced anxiety concerning their occupational future (a combination of variables related to feelings, obstacles and readiness to redefine their goals). Regarding the situation of educational institutions in the Poznań agglomeration, these fears can reasonably be associated, among others, with the non-opening of branches in the Level 2 vocational schools and vocational qualification courses. As opportunities for continuing education are scarce (or non-existent), the youth have only slim chance at best to obtain further qualifications.

The majority of the students surveyed did not intend to stop their education on the high-school level: 74.9% of them declared that they intended to continue their studies at university. Only 7.7% of the respondents said that they would not

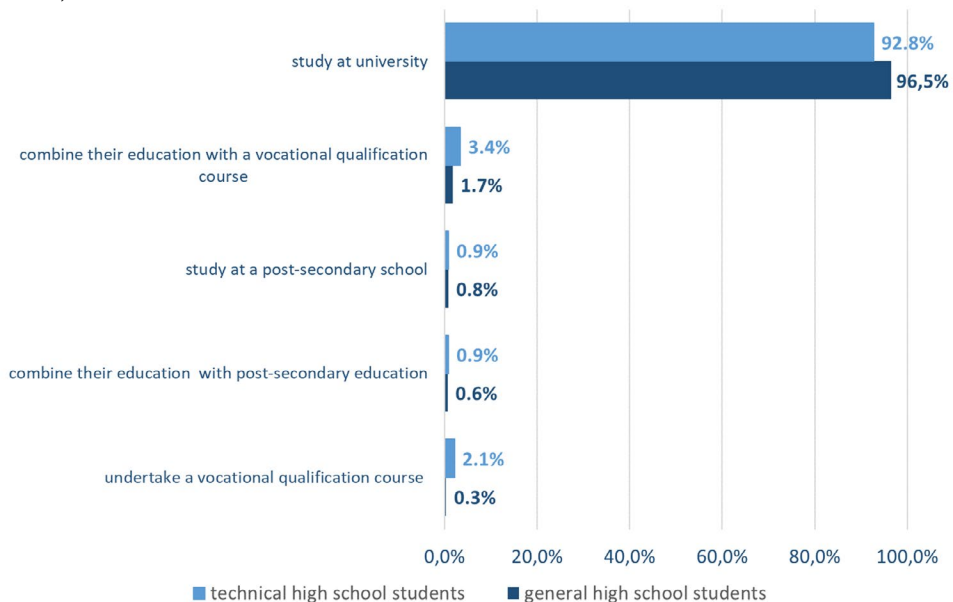
continue their education. At the same time, almost one in six students (17.4%) admitted that they had not made any decision yet (Fig. 3). Women (85.6%) exhibited more interest in continuing their education than men (65.8%). Most often, general high-school students (90.7%) expressed the wish to continue their education; technical high-school students did so less often (63.1%), and such desires were least often reported by the youth from Level 1 vocational schools (49.4%).

Figure 3. Intention to continue education after completing high school (n = 1334)



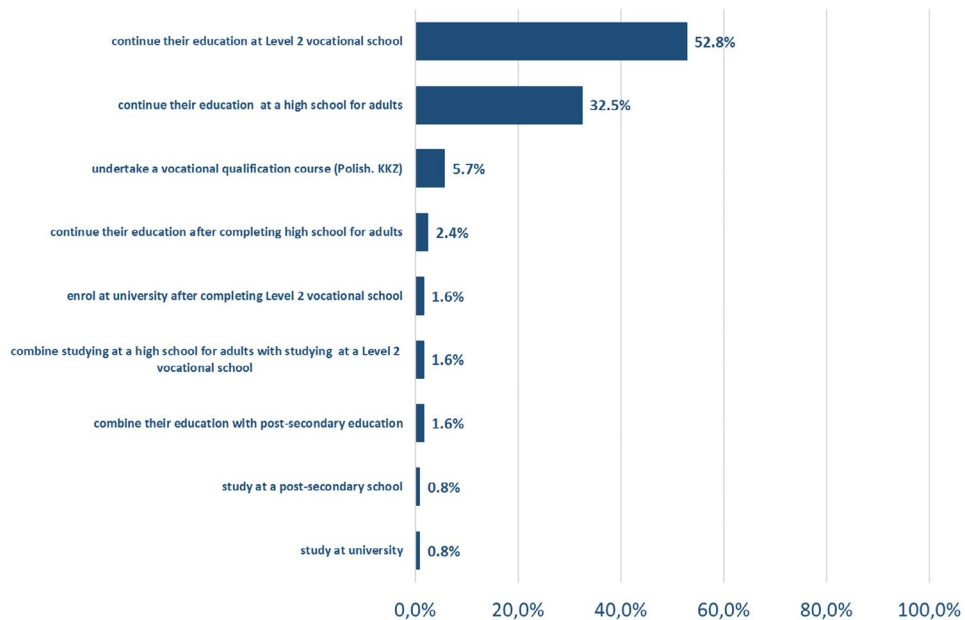
Almost all general high-school (96.5%) and technical high-school (92.8%) students who wanted to study further were planning to go to university (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Forms of further education planned by general high-school and technical high-school students (general high-school students n = 631; technical high-school students n = 235)



The young people studying at Level 1 vocational schools at the time of completing the questionnaire chose other educational options (Fig. 5). More than half of the students (52.8%) who wished to study further intended to continue their education at Level 2 vocational schools. There were significantly more men (60.9%) than women (26.7%) among them. In contrast, 32.5% of the respondents planning to carry on their studies intended to study at a high school for adults. In this case, the desire to continue education was more often declared by women (56.7%) than men (25%).

Figure 5. Forms of further education planned by the students of Level 1 vocational schools (n = 123)



As part of the survey, the respondents were asked to answer an open-ended question phrased as 'My educational and career goal is...'. The analysis of the questionnaire results made it possible to classify the educational and career goals formulated by the students into six types. These are: taking up a job, obtaining vocational qualifications without considering the context of a future job, starting one's own business, continuing education without considering the occupational context, self-fulfilment in life and no goal.

The largest number of the respondents (43.3%) defined taking up a job as their goal. Describing it, the students:

- a) indicated the educational pathway to obtaining the relevant qualification (e.g. by citing the names of universities, fields of study, training programmes, courses); or



- b) specified the occupation they would like to pursue or their preferred industry; or
- c) expressed their needs concerning future work (e.g. working with people, working remotely, work that involves travelling, working in a good atmosphere and work that gives a sense of responsibility).

Almost one in five respondents (18.4%) stated that their goal was to obtain vocational qualifications (without considering the context of a future job). For this group, the way to achieve their goal was through further education (e.g. at universities or Level 2 vocational schools).

Notably, 15% of the respondents said that their goal was to start their own business. These students depicted their plans in a long-term perspective, meticulously listing the elements of their educational and vocational plans. The respondents often stated that they wanted to continue their studies and, in parallel, to take up a job with an employer. All these activities were aimed at acquiring knowledge and experience that would be useful in running their own business in the future.

For 14.4% of the respondents, the aim was to continue their education (without considering the job context). The aspiration of this group of general high-school and technical high-school students was to enrol in their chosen degree programmes at specific universities. At the same time, the students at Level 1 vocational schools whose goal was to continue their education wanted to study at a Level 2 vocational school or at a high school for adults.

Self-fulfilment in life was a goal for only 4.7% of the respondents. Self-fulfilment should be understood here as attaining happiness and independence. The students wrote about wanting to 'succeed' or 'achieve something great.' However, in their responses the survey participants did describe what actions they planned to take to accomplish their chosen goal.

4.2% of the respondents did not define their educational and career goals (wherein 1.2% of the students did not answer the question about their educational and career goals). The respondents stated that they did not have a goal, did not know what occupation they wanted to pursue in the future or how to specify their goal. Some of the students said that they would be able to plan their future only when they knew how they had scored at their school-leaving exam (*matura*<sup>2</sup>).

The analysis of the respondents' statements showed the diversity of the students' goals and of the ways of talking about them. Most respondents found it difficult to describe their goals in the educational and vocational spheres. The respondents were laconic and only focused on a selected aspect of their careers. They rarely shared any comprehensive ideas for planning their future.

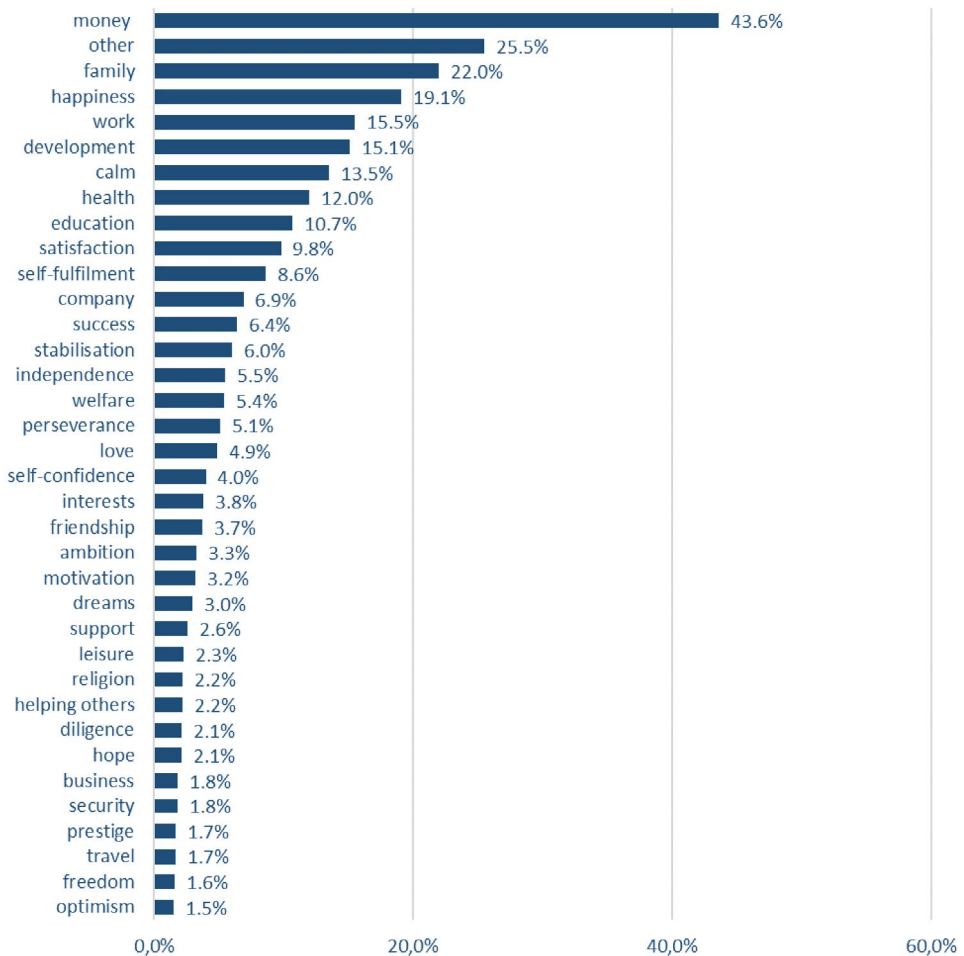
The difficulty in defining goals may be a sign that the students surveyed had not established their own hierarchy of values or reflected on them in-depth

<sup>2</sup> In the Polish education system, *matura* (the matriculation examination) is a school-leaving exam taken at the end of secondary education and required for university entrance (in this sense corresponding to the A-levels in the UK).

(Swat-Padrok, n.d.). Indeed, values perceived in terms of personal resources help people define and realise their goals in life (Cieciuch, 2013).

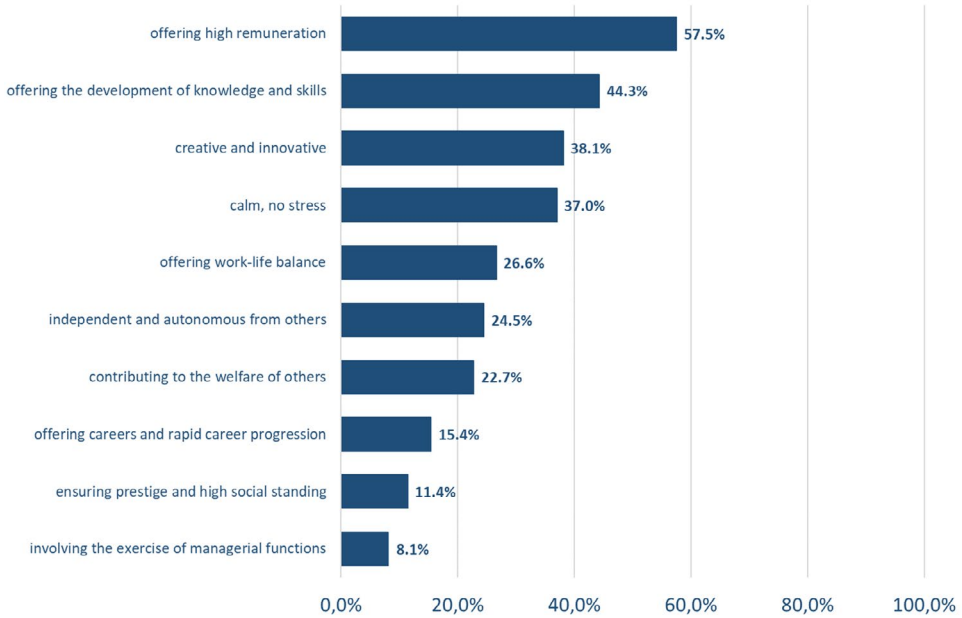
When asked to name the three values that were most important to them when thinking about their future, the students most often picked money (43.6%), as shown in Figure 6. Among these respondents, more than a half (55.9%) were the students of Level 1 vocational schools. 22% of the respondents mentioned family, and 19.1% cited happiness. These values were more often reported by women than by men.

Figure 6. Values important to students in terms of their educational and work future (n = 1004, multiple responses)



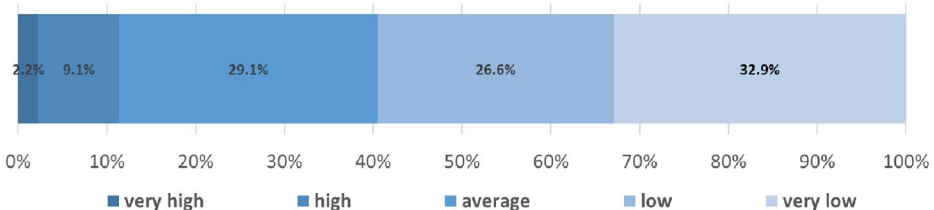
In a closed question asking what was most important to the students in their future job (Figure 7), 57.5% of the respondents chose the high salary, 44.3% opted for the development of knowledge and skills, 38.1% picked a creative and innovative job, and 37% of the students wanted a quiet and stress-free job.

Figure 7. Values in future careers (n = 1340; multiple responses)



Some support in defining one’s system of values is offered to students through activities provided not only by the intra-school career counselling system but also by the educational-preventive school programme. Meanwhile, most of the students surveyed rated the degree of teacher support in planning their educational and career paths as low and very low (59.5%), as shown in Figure 8. These findings prompt reflection on the commitment of the teaching staff to preparing students both for enter the labour market and for starting their adult lives.

Figure 8. Student-perceived degree of teacher support in educational and career planning (n=1337)



## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth noting that almost half of the students surveyed (46.9%) were not really attached to the goals they had defined and expressed a readiness to change them if they could not be achieved. The readiness to abandon one's goals for others can be negatively assessed if it is equated with the lack of in-depth reflection on the future or on the value system. On the other hand, readiness to modify one's goals may be regarded as and prove to be a key competence. Those who are flexible enough to adapt their goals to the changing external conditions will be able to find their place on the labour market. The results of the research show in which areas class educators and vocational counsellors should launch increased educational and preventive work with young people, supporting their integral development, especially in the context of values (Wieczorek, 2018). Doing work that is in line with one's values is correlated with one's sense of job satisfaction (Super, 1957). Education aims to shape creative individuals who are capable of controlling their own lives. Self-reflection on the validity of their own behaviour and dialogue with others are expected to help students better understand the world around them (Konopczyński et al., 2017). In turn, by taking preventive measures, young people will be able to resist dangers, including in their work lives. Together, prevention and education foster students' resilience to potential and real risks and teach them responsibility for the quality of their own lives and for the way they function in their communities (Gas & Poleszak, 2017).

*Translated by Biuro Tłumaczeń Arche*

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