



LAPIN YLIOPISTO  
UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND

**Marcela Gómez-Abundis**

**Building Tomorrow's Workforce: How Youth Workers  
Can Prepare Youth for a Dynamic Labour Market**

Master's Thesis  
Faculty of Art and Design  
Spring 2025

University of Lapland, Faculty of Art and Design

Title: Building Tomorrow's Workforce: How Youth Workers Can Prepare Youth for a Dynamic Labour Market

Author: Marcela Gómez-Abundis

Degree programme: Service Design Strategies and Innovation

The type of the work: master's thesis

Number of pages: 74

Year: 2025

## **ABSTRACT**

As the world of work rapidly evolves due to technological, social, and economic changes, young people increasingly face uncertainty in navigating their careers. This thesis explores how youth workers can support young individuals in developing capabilities for a dynamic labour market. Grounded in the Capability Approach, Futures Thinking, 4D Education, and Service Design, the study investigates the role of non-formal learning environments in enhancing employability and personal growth.

Employing Participatory Action Research, the study engaged youth workers and experts across Europe through qualitative interviews, co-creation sessions, and interactive workshops. Insights from the CAREer Diary project—an Erasmus+ funded initiative involving the author—provided a foundational framework, further extended by additional design-based enquiry.

Findings emphasise the importance of holistic, personalised support in cultivating essential future-oriented skills such as adaptability, resilience, and agency. The research concludes that youth work, guided by futures thinking and service design, significantly strengthens young people's ability to manage career transitions.

This thesis offers practical, practitioner-informed insights and tools for youth workers, educators, and policymakers. It advocates for an integrated, values-driven approach linking personal development with evolving labour market needs, ultimately empowering young people to navigate future careers confidently.

**Keywords: Youth Work, Capability Approach, Futures Thinking, Employability, Service Design**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The creation of this research has been a journey in every sense. I have travelled far and wide, met incredible people, and learnt from the best. This thesis has made it clear that reflection is not just a practice but a way of life—something I will carry with me.

I am grateful for the opportunity provided by the Master of Service Design Strategies and Innovation (SDSI) programme, which recognised potential in me and allowed me to grow and explore this discipline. We learnt by doing, testing, and making mistakes at joint institutions: the Art Academy of Latvia, the Estonian Academy of Arts, and Lapland University.

My sincere thanks go to all the teachers and staff of the program. To my classmates, you have undoubtedly become a significant part of my life and the greatest friends I could have hoped for over these past two years. My heartfelt gratitude also extends to the new friends I made along the way in these wonderful locations.

I am deeply grateful to my family and friends, who from near and far have continuously cheered me on, patiently listened to my uncertainties, celebrated each milestone, and provided unconditional support and encouragement, motivating me throughout my academic journey.

To all my participants—particularly youth workers, NGO leaders, experts, and professionals involved in youth environments—who shared their experiences and reflections with remarkable honesty and openness: thank you. Your insights have enriched this research immensely, continually reminding me of the profound impact your work has in shaping meaningful futures for young people.

Special thanks to the members of the CAREer Diary project for providing me with the opportunity to collaborate and learn from your outstanding efforts as youth workers. My appreciation also goes to my fellow co-creators of the diary: Julien, Riccardo, Arianna, Joseph, Marco, Luca, Vlada, Luz, Avy, Giacomo, and Chiara. I am grateful for our memorable time together in Alpignano and for your warmth and inclusiveness from the very start.

Additionally, I want to acknowledge all youth workers who strive tirelessly to shape the future of upcoming generations through non-formal education and the younger generations themselves, who courageously embrace whatever the future may hold.

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>2</b>
Table of Contents.....	3
List of Figures.....	5
List of Tables.....	6
<b>Abbreviations and Glossary.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.1. Background of the research .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.2. Research motivation.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.3 Research goals and research questions .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1.4. Research scope.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1.5 Thesis structure overview .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1.6. Ethical consideration.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2.1. Introduction to Literature Review.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2.2. Theoretical Foundations .....</b>	<b>13</b>
2.2.1 Capability Approach Theory .....	14
2.2.2 Capability Approach and Employability .....	15
<b>2.3 Education, Youth Workers, and Skill Development.....</b>	<b>16</b>
2.3.1 Foundational and Lifelong Learning.....	17
2.3.2 The Role of Youth Workers in Career Development .....	17
<b>2.4 Future of Work and Evolving Skill Demands.....</b>	<b>19</b>
2.4.1 Future of Work and Skill Demands .....	19
2.4.2 Core Career Skills: Soft and Digital.....	21
2.4.2.1 Soft skills .....	21
2.4.2.2 Digital Competencies .....	22
2.4.3 Education for the Age of AI: CCR's 4D Framework .....	23
<b>2.5 Service Design as an Integrative Framework .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>2.6. Foresight Thinking and Strategic Career Planning.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>2.7 Systems Thinking in Career Development.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>2.8 Research Gaps and Emerging Trends .....</b>	<b>28</b>

<b>3. RESEARCH DESIGN .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>3.1 Research Design Approach.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>3.2. Research method .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>3.3. Research target.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>3.4. Data collection .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>3.5 Data Analysis Strategies .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>4.1 Thematic Analysis Overview.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>4.2 Holistic View of Learning .....</b>	<b>33</b>
4.2.1 Career Navigation as a Learning Journey.....	34
4.2.2 Critique of Education Systems.....	36
4.2.3 Non-formal and Experiential Learning.....	37
4.2.4 Lifelong & Evolving Learning Practices.....	38
4.2.5 Reflective and Self-Directed Learning.....	39
4.2.6 Conclusion: Holistic Learning as Career Development .....	40
<b>4.3 Capability Approach &amp; 4D Competency Framework: Theoretical Lenses in Practice .....</b>	<b>41</b>
4.3.1 Capability Approach.....	41
4.3.2 4D Competency Framework.....	47
<b>4.4 Individual Agency &amp; Career Adaptability .....</b>	<b>53</b>
4.4.1 Career Adaptability and Flexibility .....	53
4.4.2 Navigational Agency & Decision Pressure .....	54
<b>4.5 Future of Work, Trends &amp; Technology .....</b>	<b>56</b>
4.5.1 Structural Shifts in Employment.....	56
4.5.2 Employer Behaviours.....	56
4.5.3 Work Environment Evolution .....	57
4.5.4 Technological Disruptions .....	58
4.5.5 Digital Adaptation Challenges .....	58
4.5.6 Conclusion .....	59
<b>4.6 Service Design &amp; Youth Work: From the micro-to-macro level.....</b>	<b>59</b>
4.6.1 Micro-level: Youth Workers .....	59
4.6.2 Meso-Level: Organisational Practice and Program Design .....	61
4.6.3 Macro-Level: Youth Policy Stakeholders .....	61
4.6.4 Conclusion .....	62
<b>4.7 Thematic Analysis Conclusion.....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>4.8 Aligning findings with existing literature .....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>5. DESIGN WORKS .....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>5.1 Expanding the CAREer with Futures Thinking: From Research to Reflective Tools .....</b>	<b>66</b>
5.1.1 Design Rationale .....	66

5.1.2 Design Concept.....	66
5.1.3 How It Works .....	68
5.1.4 Intended Use.....	69
<b>6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION.....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>6.1. Discussion.....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>6.2. Practical implication.....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>6.3. Future studies .....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>7. CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>LIST OF REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Appendix 1. CAREer Diary Process .....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Appendix 2. Design works.....</b>	<b>78</b>

List of Figures

- Figure 1.** Integrated Theoretical Framework: From Agency to Anticipation
- Figure 2.** CCR 4D Competencies Framework
- Figure 3.** Sub-competencies Framework | 4D Education CCR
- Figure 4.** Research Method Phases
- Figure 5.** First Inductive Coding
- Figure 6.** Holistic View of Learning: Thematic Map
- Figure 7.** Holistic View of Learning: Thematic Mind Map
- Figure 8.** Capability Gaps: Constraints on Youth Agency
- Figure 9.** Multi-Layered Constraints on Youth Agency: A Capability Gaps Model
- Figure 10.** Conversion Pathway: From Opportunity to Capability
- Figure 11.** From Credentialism to Capability: A Systemic Reframing
- Figure 12.** Mapping the Character Dimension
- Figure 13.** Mapping the Skills Dimension
- Figure 14.** Mapping the Meta-Learning Dimension
- Figure 15.** Modular Career Portfolio: Visualising Youth Adaptability Strategies
- Figure 16.** Decision Clarity Funnel: Purpose as a Filter for Navigational Pressure
- Figure 17.** Future of Work: Key Thematic Shifts Impacting Youth Transitions
- Figure 18.** Youth Work as a Multi-Level System: A Service Design Perspective
- Figure 19.** Thematic Analysis Mind Map: Five Interconnected Themes in Youth Work and Career Development
- Figure 20.** Theme-to-Literature Crosswalk Matrix

## List of Tables

**Table #1.** Core Soft Skills for Career Adaptability and Employability

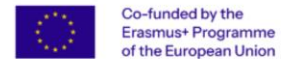
**Table #2.** Core Digital Skills for Career Adaptability and Employability

**Table #3.** Stakeholders Description

**Table #4.** Thematic Analysis Table

**Table #5.** Futures Thinking Tools

This research is based on data and outcomes from the Erasmus+ project Take CARE of your CareER, funded by the European Union under grant agreement 2023-3-IT03-KA210-YOU-000182666. The author acknowledges the contributions of all project partners and participants.



## Abbreviations and Glossary

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CCR	Center for Curriculum Redesign
EU	European Union
FAR	Futures Action Research
HR	Human Resources
ILO	International Labour Organization
LLL	Lifelong Learning
NEET	Not in Employment, Education, or Training
NFL	Non-Formal Learning
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
PAR	Participatory Action Research
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VET	Vocational Education and Training

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Background of the research

The global labour market is undergoing significant changes, driven by technological advances, economic shifts, and evolving societal expectations. Automation, artificial intelligence, and the rise of platform-based economies are not only reshaping industries but also redefining the skills and mindsets required for sustainable careers. Young people today face increasingly fragmented transitions from education to employment, where traditional linear career pathways have changed, and adaptability has become essential.

Despite a modest global decrease in youth unemployment rates—estimated at 12.8% in 2025, marking the lowest level in 15 years (Reuters, 2024)—significant disparities persist across regions and demographic groups. In the European Union, the youth unemployment rate stood at 14.5% as of early 2025 (Eurostat, 2025), while approximately 20.4% of young people globally were classified as not in employment, education, or training (NEET) in 2023, with two-thirds of this group being women (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2023).

For NEET youth aged 25–30, the challenges extend beyond securing employment: they include structural exclusion, skills mismatches, and diminished agency over their career trajectories. Traditional employability initiatives often focus narrowly on hard skills acquisition, overlooking the broader capabilities young people need to navigate uncertainty and complexity. Recent research highlights that self-awareness, adaptability, critical reflection, and career self-management are no longer ancillary competencies—they are fundamental survival tools in the new labour market landscape (ILO, 2023).

Yet many existing support systems, including formal education and standardised career counselling, remain anchored in outdated models that prepare youth for static roles rather than dynamic ones. In this context, youth work and non-formal learning offer unique potential. Their flexible, relational, and participatory nature makes them ideal environments for enabling future-ready capabilities: reflection, resilience, systems thinking, and agency.

## 1.2. Research motivation

At the start of my research journey, I was driven by a growing awareness: the labour market is evolving at a pace that outstrips many people's ability to keep up. As I watched my peers, especially younger ones, I realised that job anxiety is a problem that many people face today. Unlike older generations, who often had straight career paths from school to retirement, today's young people are entering a world where stability is not the norm and uncertainty is everywhere.

Anxiety about AI and automation replacing people as workers is one of the main worries in this situation. In my opinion, these technologies are not threats; they're tools. However, to

effectively use these tools, individuals must possess the necessary skills. What's at stake is not just employment but our capacity to remain adaptable, self-aware, and proactive in the face of change. The real question is: how can we prepare people, especially young people, to navigate a future that hasn't fully arrived yet?

This question took a practical and personal turn when I discovered and joined Project CAREer, an Erasmus+ funded initiative focused on youth employability. The project trains youth workers to guide empathy and career reflection in young people, not through conventional teaching, but through non-formal education, emotional intelligence, and self-reflection tools. In a few words, the CAREer Diary was designed to be a space for young people to engage in structured self-reflection, identify their goals, and begin designing their own paths forward.

This project was a great learning experience for me. It not only deepened my knowledge in career adaptability, upskilling, and personal development but also exposed me to a vibrant ecosystem of youth workers, educators, and peers from across Europe. These were people deeply committed to empowering the next generation, not just with information but with mindset and tools. I was particularly struck by the potential of non-formal learning methods to help bridge the gap between today's educational systems and tomorrow's jobs.

Being a part of CAREer provided me with firsthand knowledge of the complex, multilayered system in which young people are growing up: one shaped by shifting economies, social pressures, and rapidly evolving technologies. Additionally, it demonstrated the enormous, frequently unrealised potential of European programmes such as Erasmus+, SALTO, and others that offer youth access, mobility, and development opportunities—tools that, if used more extensively, could have a transformative effect.

These experiences reinforced a belief central to my research: that career development is no longer just about choosing a job; it's about building capacity for change. It's about understanding trends, anticipating disruptions, and turning uncertainty into opportunity. And that kind of mindset doesn't come from fear. I'm motivated by a simple, radical idea: the future of work doesn't have to be feared; it can be designed if we know ourselves and what comes ahead.

That's why I'm drawing on my background in service design and innovation to explore how we can reframe career development as a design challenge. Using tools like futures thinking, user-centred research, and systems thinking, I aim to contribute new strategies that support youth workers helping youth navigate a future in flux.

### **1.3 Research goals and research questions**

The goal of this thesis is to develop strategies for helping young people thrive in a labour market that is unpredictable, disrupted by technology, and has shifting career paths. This study explores the relationship between self-reflection and forward-thinking, arguing that youth

employability in the twenty-first century necessitates both the ability to plan one's future and the ability to adapt to change.

Traditional systems, such as formal education and standardised career guidance, frequently fall short of providing young people with the reflective and anticipatory skills necessary to navigate uncertainty, even as they increasingly struggle to "find themselves".

Through the lens of the Erasmus+ CAREer project—a collaborative initiative with NGOs in Estonia, Italy, and Spain—this research demonstrates how non-formal learning and youth work can fill this gap by growing self-awareness, resilience, and future-readiness.

### Research Objectives

- Explore Critical Future Skills: Find out what skills employers in AI-driven, hybrid work environments are looking for in new employees, such as digital literacy, emotional intelligence, and the ability to make decisions ahead of time.
- Examine the part of non-formal learning: Investigate how grassroots programmes like CAREer encourage self-directed learning and the ability to change careers.
- Include strategic foresight directly in your work with NEET youth by drawing on theoretical insights (e.g., Capability Approach or Service Design) and the knowledge of stakeholders (youth workers, HR professionals and psychologists).

### Key Contributions

- Theoretical: Positions the capability approach and service design as complementary frameworks for understanding youth agencies in uncertain labour markets.
- Practical: Demonstrates the CAREer project's reflection tool as a replicable model for promoting self-awareness and future-readiness through non-formal learning.

### Main Research Question

*How can youth workers effectively prepare young people to navigate an evolving labour market, and what strategies will best support their adaptability and resilience in future employment contexts?*

### Sub-Questions

1. What are the key career skills projected to be most essential in the future workforce, and how are these skills evolving in response to labour market transformations?
2. In what ways does non-formal learning contribute to the development of these future-orientated skills and broader career readiness among youth?

3. How can youth workers integrate reflective practices with foresight-based approaches to support youth in designing meaningful and adaptive career pathways?

#### **1.4. Research scope**

This study focuses on the role of youth workers in preparing young people aged 25–30 who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) for a rapidly changing labour market with a specific emphasis on non-formal learning methodologies. The research is grounded in the CAREer project—an 18-month Erasmus+ KA2 initiative implemented by three partner NGOs: EUnexus (Estonia), YOUth Connect (Italy), and El Eco del Arte (Spain). Funded under the European Union’s Erasmus+ programme, CAREer addresses workforce dissatisfaction and career disorientation among youth by developing reflective tools to help them build resilience, identify purpose, and transition into meaningful employment.

The scope centres around three interconnected dimensions:

- Collaboration with youth workers and project managers from the three NGOs to analyse how non-formal programmes (e.g., training courses in Spain and Italy) promote career adaptability, self-awareness, and digital readiness.
- CAREer's reflection tool for NEET youth was co-created and tested, with feedback from stakeholders being incorporated throughout the project's stages.
- Professional insights from HR professionals, career counsellors, and psychologists are included in multi-stakeholder perspectives.

Geographically, the study prioritises the European context, leveraging virtual interviews and cross-border collaboration to capture transnational perspectives. While the CAREer project operates in Estonia, Italy, and Spain, findings aim to inform scalable strategies for youth employability support across the EU.

This research combines participatory action research (PAR), which involves people directly in the design process, with futures action research (FAR), which looks ahead to understand the skills needed in today’s landscape and connects practical tools with future planning advice.

A complete picture of how non-formal learning ecosystems can help NEET youth deal with uncertainty and plan meaningful career paths is made possible by qualitative data from youth workers, NGOs, and professionals.

#### **1.5 Thesis structure overview**

This thesis is organised into seven main chapters:

- Chapter 1 – Introduction: Establishes the background, research motivation, objectives, questions, and scope of the study.

- Chapter 2 – Literature Review: Explores key theoretical frameworks including the Capability Approach, 4D Education, Service Design, and Futures Thinking. It also discusses youth work, skill development, and emerging labour market trends.
- Chapter 3 – Research Design: Describes the methodological approach, including participatory action research, interviews, and futures research. It outlines the data collection and analysis process.
- Chapter 4 – Results and Findings: Presents thematic findings based on the data collected, highlighting themes such as holistic learning, capability building, career adaptability, and the role of youth workers.
- Chapter 5 – Design Works: Introduces the CAREer Diary tool, explaining its concept, development, and application within the project context.
- Chapter 6 – Discussion and Implications: Interprets the findings, linking them to theory and practice, and discusses implications for youth work and employability strategies.
- Chapter 7 – Conclusion: Summarises the key insights, reflects on the research process, and proposes areas for future research.

## **1.6. Ethical consideration**

This research adheres to strict ethical guidelines to ensure participant rights, data privacy, and informed consent. Participation will be entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time. The research will be non-exploitative, ensuring no harm or undue pressure on participants while avoiding socioeconomic or gender-based biases.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Introduction to Literature Review**

In a world of fast-changing technology, shifting populations, and economic uncertainty, we need to change how we think about employability to prepare young people for the future of work. In the current labour market, where adaptability, creativity, and foresight are keys, traditional models that focus primarily on formal education and technical qualifications are falling behind. This literature review explores an integrated framework that connects human capability development, non-formal education, system design, and future-orientated thinking as critical pillars for youth career development.

Central to this analysis is the Capability Approach, introduced by Amartya Sen (1999) and expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2000), which shifts the focus from resource accumulation to real freedoms—the genuine opportunities individuals have to pursue lives they value. In the context of youth employability, this perspective highlights the need to move beyond

credentialism toward enabling young people to develop agency, resilience, and reflective learning capacities.

Youth workers play a key role in this situation because they are not only teachers but also people who help build skills through mentoring, hands-on learning, and other non-formal educational activities (Robeyns, 2005). Non-formal education, characterised by flexibility, responsiveness, and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Werquin, 2008), offers young people alternative pathways for developing critical 21st-century skills such as emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and collaborative problem solving—competencies increasingly prioritised by employers in rapidly evolving sectors (World Economic Forum, 2025).

The Future of Work discourse underscores the urgency of preparing for disruptions brought by automation, AI, and globalisation (Gratton & Scott, 2016; Schwab, 2016). These transformations highlight the growing value of soft skills, digital fluency, and career adaptability, pushing education systems and career support services to rethink their approaches.

In response to these challenges, service design offers a strategic, user-centred methodology for crafting career support systems that are more responsive to the evolving needs of young people (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011). Participating young people in the planning of interventions as co-creators closes the gap between policy, education, and the needs of the real world, making the ideas of capability expansion a reality.

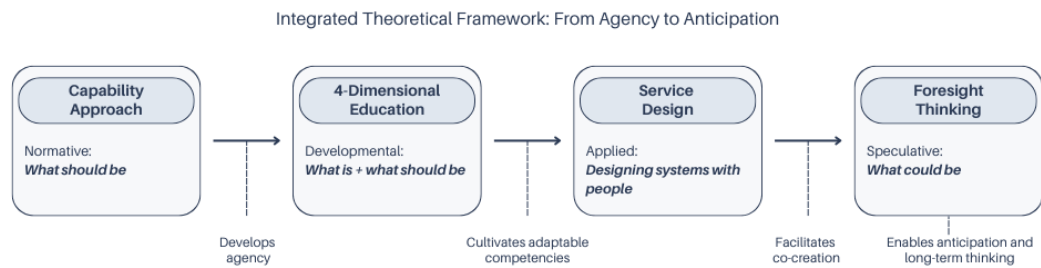
Finally, foresight thinking equips young people to actively design, navigate, and adapt their career pathways in a world of profound uncertainty.

Along with six related ideas—a capability approach, the role of youth workers, non-formal education, the future of work, service design, and foresight thinking—this literature review makes a full and future-ready plan for helping young people take care of their careers. The following sections will explore each of these main ideas in more detail, setting up the theoretical and practical framework that will guide the research inquiry.

## **2.2. Theoretical Foundations**

These frameworks were chosen for their balanced perspective, based on different foundational logics: some normative (*what should be*), some descriptive (*what is*), and some speculative (*what could be*).

Bringing these frameworks together helps people gain power through education, allowing them to act, join in creating systems, and prepare for and influence the future.



**Figure 1.** Integrated Theoretical Framework: From Agency to Anticipation

The four frameworks—Capability Approach, 4-Dimensional Education, Service Design, and Foresight Thinking—are combined in this diagram to create a single progression model for youth empowerment. Every framework offers a different perspective: anticipatory (foresight), developmental (4D), applied/systemic (service design), and normative (capability). Together, they represent a shift from passive learning toward proactive, co-designed participation in shaping future possibilities.

### 2.2.1 Capability Approach Theory

The Capability Approach, pioneered by Amartya Sen (1999) and further expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2000), offers a transformative lens for understanding human well-being, shifting attention from mere resource ownership to real freedoms—the capabilities people have to pursue the lives they value. Unlike traditional economic models that equate success with material wealth or formal qualifications, the capability approach emphasises the diverse personal, social, and environmental factors that influence an individual’s ability to transform available resources into meaningful outcomes (Robeyns, 2005).

At its core, the Capability Approach argues that development and empowerment should be assessed not by inputs such as education levels or financial assets but by the actual opportunities individuals have to achieve valued "functionings", such as meaningful employment, social participation, and self-determination (Sen, 1999).

This distinction is particularly significant when evaluating the employability of young people. Even though a large number of young people have official credentials, structural obstacles, skill gaps, or small social networks may prevent them from having the true freedom to find steady, satisfying work.

A crucial element within the capability approach is the role of conversion factors—the social, personal, and environmental conditions that determine how effectively individuals can translate available resources into capabilities (Alkire, 2002). For instance, even if a young person receives training in digital literacy (a resource), whether or not that skill improves their employability depends on several factors, including accessibility to dependable internet (environmental), inclusive hiring practices (social), and self-confidence (personal).

To establish youth work as a crucial location for enabling agency, the thesis bases this research on the capability approach. By creating non-formal learning environments that assist young people in developing new skills and gaining the self-awareness, resilience, and foresight necessary to succeed in an unpredictable and rapidly evolving labour market, they can serve as "conversion agents". In the context of preparing youth for the future of work, the capability approach demands a shift from focusing narrowly on technical skill acquisition to encouraging broader agency, adaptability, and reflective learning capacities.

### 2.2.2 Capability Approach and Employability

The capability approach provides a powerful redefinition of employability, moving beyond the traditional view that acquiring formal qualifications automatically leads to meaningful employment. In this framework, employability is not merely the possession of credentials or discrete skills, but the real freedom to access, pursue, and sustain fulfilling work pathways (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2005). This reframing is essential when considering young people who are not employed, educated, or trained (NEET), a population for whom structural, social, and personal barriers often constrain opportunities despite formal skill acquisition.

Conversion factors are pivotal to this comprehension; they are the conditions influencing how individuals can convert resources, such as education or vocational training, into valued functionings (Alkire, 2002). Social factors, like labour market discrimination—including gender and generational bias—can limit their access to employment, confidence, and advancement (Fouad & Kantamneni, 2008; Triana, Jayasinghe, & Pieper, 2019). Environmental conversion factors, especially in rural areas, can also make it difficult for people to fully engage in work or education. These factors include lack of digital access, limited infrastructure, and geographic isolation (Callejo-González & Ruiz-Herrero, 2024; Chen et al., 2023). At the individual level, factors such as health, learning confidence, and prior schooling have a significant impact on how people approach lifelong learning and job market opportunities (Tuckett & Field, 2016; Smith & Sinkford, 2022).

If these factors are overlooked, youth employability initiatives run the risk of being superficial, emphasising skill supply while neglecting the structural obstacles that hinder their effective application.

Importantly, the capability approach also reasserts the importance of agency in career development. It positions young people not as passive recipients of skills or job placements but as active agents capable of designing and steering their career pathways, provided that the right enabling conditions are created. This has profound implications for youth workers, who act not only as skill facilitators but also as conversion agents—mentoring, scaffolding opportunities, building confidence, and fostering resilience within non-formal education environments (Werquin, 2008; Robeyns, 2005).

Moreover, in a labour market increasingly shaped by automation, precarious work, and evolving skill demands (Schwab, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2020), employability must be redefined as a dynamic, future-ready capacity. The capability approach suggests that preparing young people for employment is not simply about matching current labour market needs but also about empowering them to anticipate, adapt to, and co-create emerging opportunities.

By applying the capability approach, this research advocates for a broader vision of youth development—one that integrates technical training with reflective practice, resilience building, and systemic change-making. Employability, thus, becomes not a static outcome but a living capability: the ongoing capacity to navigate, design, and thrive within an unpredictable world of work.

### **2.3 Education, Youth Workers, and Skill Development**

While formal education provides foundational knowledge and credentials, it often fails to equip young people with the adaptive, reflective, and relational skills necessary to navigate evolving career landscapes (World Economic Forum, 2020; Schwab, 2016). The non-linear, fluid, and technologically driven futures that young people now face are difficult for traditional educational systems to prepare for because they are usually focused on steady and linear career paths. Recognising these limitations, the Capability Approach highlights the critical role of education in expanding individuals' real freedoms and opportunities (Sen, 1999). However, this growth needs more than just gaining technical skills; it requires developing qualities like agency, resilience, and strategic thinking—traits that often come from informal and hands-on learning experiences.

Non-formal education, defined as structured learning outside the formal school system, has emerged as a key mechanism for building these capabilities. Through community-based initiatives, mentoring, youth leadership programmes, and reflective practices, non-formal education cultivates transversal skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence (European Commission, 2016). These skills, often overlooked in traditional curricula, are increasingly recognised as critical for employability in the digital and knowledge economies.

At the heart of this non-formal learning ecosystem are youth workers. Positioned as facilitators, mentors, and designers of learning environments, youth workers play a pivotal role in enabling young people to develop their capabilities.

Their work extends beyond the transmission of information; it involves creating spaces where young people can engage in reflective practice, experiment with new identities, build self-confidence, and develop future-orientated mindsets (Youth@Work Partnership, 2021).

Youth workers act as critical conversion agents, helping young people translate resources and skills into tangible opportunities by addressing personal, social, and environmental barriers (Robeyns, 2005; Alkire, 2002).

For instance, by helping a young person identify volunteer work as proof of project management abilities, a youth worker can improve employability profiles that formal certification systems frequently overlook.

Furthermore, non-formal education's flexible, responsive nature allows it to adapt quickly to emerging labour market trends, integrating new competencies such as digital literacy, entrepreneurial thinking, and cross-cultural communication (Marr, 2022). In doing so, youth workers help bridge the widening gap between formal education outcomes and the real-world demands of the future of work.

Thus, education, in the context of youth development and employability, must be redefined as an evolving, holistic journey. Youth workers, through non-formal education practices, are at the forefront of cultivating the adaptive, self-directed learners needed for sustainable and meaningful career pathways in an uncertain world.

### 2.3.1 Foundational and Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is of high importance within the capabilities framework because it provides the means for individuals to continuously develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to expand their capabilities and achieve valued functionings throughout their lives.

Expanding on this perspective, longer life expectancies and evolving career patterns demand continuous skill development across the lifespan (Gratton & Scott, 2016). This growing emphasis on adaptability and lifelong learning is further reinforced by major reports, such as the Future of Jobs Report 2025 (World Economic Forum, 2025), the Digital Transformation Labour Market Report 2023 (OECD, 2023), and the Work Tech 2050 Executive Summary (Institute for the Future, 2020), all of which highlight the need for dynamic skill acquisition to remain resilient in future labour markets.

Within the capability approach, education must be understood not as a one-time achievement but as a continuous process of capability expansion. Lifelong learning (LLL) — the ongoing development of skills, knowledge, and adaptability across the lifespan — is crucial for maintaining and enhancing individuals' real freedoms (Sen, 1999; Laal, 2011).

Lifelong learning helps young people to respond to new opportunities, overcome transitions, and exercise agency over their career paths. Foundational skills alone are not enough. For youth workers, encouraging this learning mindset is crucial to empowering young people for resilient, meaningful engagement in society throughout their lives, not just for their first job.

### 2.3.2 The Role of Youth Workers in Career Development

Youth workers play a critical role in enhancing young people’s employability, entrepreneurial mindset, and career development through non-formal education, mentorship, and experiential learning. While a uniform definition of youth workers is elusive across various contexts, their contributions are widely recognised in research, practice, and European youth policies (Youth@Work Partnership, 2021).

At the heart of their practice, youth workers contribute to enhancing employability and entrepreneurship by equipping them with the critical attitudes, behaviours, and competencies demanded by the labour market. They support the development of skills such as creativity, innovation, critical thinking, collaboration, and resilience—skills increasingly essential for navigating an unpredictable world of work (European Commission, 2020).

Youth organisations also offer young people the opportunity to gain practical experience, build competent identities, and develop entrepreneurial skills through participation in projects and leadership roles.

Mentorship is a core method through which youth workers facilitate capability building. Experienced mentors provide guidance, support, and access to networks, helping young people envision realistic career pathways and build confidence. Peer mentoring models further extend these benefits, allowing more experienced youth to support their peers in skill recognition and personal development (Laal, 2011).

Experiential learning represents another fundamental pillar. Youth workers create “learning by doing” environments where young people can apply soft and hard skills in real-world contexts, bridging the gap between education and employment. Experiential learning not only improves practical competencies but also helps identify skill gaps and strengthens young people’s reflective learning capacities (Kolb, 1984).

Beyond skill development, youth workers offer personalised career support by providing advice, coaching, and guidance to help young people understand labour market dynamics, educational pathways, and self-marketing strategies. Tools such as Youth Pass facilitate the recognition of non-formal and informal competences, enhancing young people’s employability profiles (European Commission, 2020).

Reaching out to under-represented groups, giving room to personal growth, and helping them reintegrate into school, training, or work are all important parts of youth work that furthers social inclusion. Moreover, youth workers engage in networking and collaboration with stakeholders such as employers, education providers, and policymakers, thus embedding youth work within broader employability and entrepreneurship ecosystems (Youth@Work Partnership, 2021).

Despite increasing recognition of their value, youth workers face professionalisation challenges. Issues such as the lack of a consistent professional identity, tensions between youth work’s social ethos and economic expectations, resource constraints, and difficulties in evidencing impact remain significant.

Nevertheless, opportunities such as the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027), the European Youth Work Agenda, and cross-sectoral partnerships offer pathways to strengthen youth workers' visibility, quality, and influence within the visibility, quality, and influence of educational and labour workers within education and labour market frameworks are important considerations.

Youth workers are more than just skill trainers; they are facilitators of capability development, enabling young people to develop the competencies, confidence, agency, and networks required to thrive in complex and changing career landscapes. Through mentorship, experiential learning, career support, and systemic engagement, youth workers help expand the real freedoms that form the core of sustainable career development within the capability approach framework.

## **2.4 Future of Work and Evolving Skill Demands**

### **2.4.1 Future of Work and Skill Demands**

The future of work is increasingly defined by rapid technological change, automation, globalisation, and emerging socioeconomic structures. These forces are reshaping the labour market, challenging traditional models of career preparation and requiring the development of new, dynamic skill sets (World Economic Forum, 2020).

New research consistently shows that technical skills alone are insufficient for future labour markets. Transversal skills, such as adaptability, creativity, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and entrepreneurial spirit, are increasingly important for resilience and long-term employability (Schwab, 2016; OECD, 2019). The Future of Jobs Report (World Economic Forum, 2020) notes that complex problem-solving, self-management, and social influence skills will drive future employment opportunities, while routine tasks will increasingly be automated.

These developments highlight the importance of promoting dynamic capacities rather than static qualifications. Employability must be redefined not as a one-time achievement but as a continuous process of adaptation, reflection, and opportunity creation (Sen, 1999). The ability to learn and relearn becomes a foundational capability (Laal, 2011), critical for maintaining agency across multiple career transitions over the course of an extended working life.

Digital literacy, intercultural competence, and entrepreneurial mindsets are now crucial for navigating the complexities of globalised and digitalised work environments (European Commission, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated trends toward remote work, highlighting the importance of self-directed learning, resilience, and virtual collaboration competencies (International Labour Organisation, 2021).

In this context, non-formal learning emerges as a key mechanism for equipping young people with these essential capabilities. Reports such as the Digital Transformation Labour Market Report 2023 (OECD, 2023) and the Work Tech 2050 Executive Summary (Institute for the

Future, 2020) emphasise the importance of fast, targeted learning through short courses, community workshops, volunteer programmes, and online certifications for critical real-time skill updates. These flexible learning paths are very important for closing the "employability gap, especially for people who do not have access to formal education or digital infrastructure.

Without training programmes for everyone, automation could concentrate job opportunities in high-skilled urban hubs, making inequality worse. The Future of Jobs Report 2025 (World Economic Forum, 2025) warns that even as demand for AI, renewable energy, cybersecurity, and big data specialists rises, employers struggle to find candidates with the right blend of technical and soft skills.

Demographic shifts further highlight the necessity of career adaptability. Extended working lives challenge traditional social policies and career structures, requiring individuals to pursue flexible, multi-stage career trajectories that incorporate sabbaticals, skill reinventions, and interim job experiences (Gratton & Scott, 2016). Meanwhile, younger generations are increasingly entering an "on-demand economy", characterised by freelance work and digital entrepreneurship (Schwab, 2016).

Technological, demographic, and organisational changes have led experts to reconsider the fundamental structures of labour. AI-driven advancements in voice recognition and data analytics are automating repetitive tasks while simultaneously creating new opportunities for workers to transition to human-centred roles (Lee, 2018). This vision aligns with the depiction of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, where AI, big data, and the Internet of Things foster deeper collaboration between humans and machines, blurring conventional job boundaries (Schwab, 2016).

Organisational structures are also evolving. Organisations are encouraged to adapt through hybrid work models, flexible teams, and strategic task reallocations (Gratton, 2022). Projections suggest that 20–25% of workers in advanced economies could sustain remote work three to five days per week without productivity loss; however, maintaining creativity, mentorship, and workplace cohesion will require deliberate strategies (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021).

The intersection of technological transformation and longer working lives demands a radical rethinking of career development. Reimagined mid-career education, portable skills, and flexible employment structures are necessary to challenge outdated retirement models (Gratton & Scott, 2016). At the same time, digital platforms are reshaping the labour market by connecting talent to tasks globally and bypassing traditional employment systems (Babson & Koller, 2011). Access to broadband infrastructure is thus becoming a crucial determinant of economic participation, particularly in knowledge-based sectors.

A recurring theme across these analyses is the enduring value of uniquely human capabilities. While AI excels at analytical and repetitive tasks, attributes such as social intelligence, empathy, leadership, and creative problem-solving remain difficult to automate (Schwab, 2016; Lee, 2018). As jobs become more connected to technology, these human skills are expected to

become more important, requiring focused efforts in education and programmes for young people to develop them.

Finally, digitalisation and automation do not define the future of work in isolation. A complex, symbiotic relationship between technological advancement and human expertise will shape it. How societies invest in education systems, inclusive digital infrastructure, and forward-looking youth development policies will determine whether these transformations lead to greater inclusivity and adaptability—or to deepening inequality and exclusion.

#### 2.4.2 Core Career Skills: Soft and Digital

The core skills necessary for success in the modern labour market differ profoundly from those valued in previous generations. The accelerating pace of technological change, automation, and global connectivity demands that young people develop not only technical expertise but also strong soft skills and digital competencies (Dhir, 2021; Marr, 2022). As employment structures continue to evolve unpredictably, the ability to collaborate across diverse teams, embrace continuous learning, harness digital tools, and sustain emotional intelligence has become fundamental (Butterfield, 2010; Brown & Lent, 2013; Gardenswartz, Cherbosque, & Rowe, 2008). This section explores these core capabilities, beginning with pivotal soft skills and then examining essential digital competencies that underpin modern employability.

##### 2.4.2.1 Soft skills

Soft skills are a set of interpersonal, emotional, and cognitive competencies that enable people to interact effectively, lead collaboratively, and adapt positively to change (Riggio & Tan, 2014; Marr, 2022). Unlike technical skills, soft skills are transferable across sectors and occupations, making them key capabilities for sustainable employability.

**Table #2.** Core Soft Skills for Career Adaptability and Employability

<b>Skill</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Reference(s)</b>
Emotional Intelligence and Empathy	Ability to recognise and manage emotions is crucial for building inclusive, cohesive teams.	Gardenswartz et al. (2008); Espinoza et al. (2010); Riggio & Tan (2014)
Collaboration, Communication, and Leadership	Ability to work effectively across teams, communicate clearly, and guide initiatives in an adaptive manner.	Brown & Lent (2013); Dhir (2021)

Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving	Ability to objectively analyse information and devise novel solutions in complex environments.	Butterfield (2010); Espinoza et al. (2010)
Adaptability and Flexibility	Willingness and ability to adjust behaviours and strategies in response to changing conditions.	Marr (2022); Barn & Sandkuhl (2022)

Table #1 summarises the key soft skills identified as critical for young people’s employability and resilience in future labour markets. As highlighted across the literature, these core soft skills are not merely desirable workplace traits; they constitute essential capabilities for navigating an uncertain, technology-driven future. Developing emotional intelligence, collaboration, critical thinking, and adaptability empowers young people to exercise agency and build sustainable, evolving career paths in an increasingly complex labour market.

#### 2.4.2.2 Digital Competencies

Digital competencies encompass a wide range of skills necessary for effective participation in a connected, automated, and data-driven world (World Bank, 2020; Marr, 2022). As organisations increasingly integrate artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, cloud computing, and big data into their operations, digital capabilities are no longer optional but essential for sustained employability (Brown & Lent, 2013).

**Table #2.** Core Digital Skills for Career Adaptability and Employability

Skill	Description	Reference(s)
Digital Literacy	Confident, critical, and creative use of ICT for communication, collaboration, and information management.	Marr (2022); World Bank (2020); Dhir (2021)
Data Literacy	Ability to interpret, create, and communicate data to inform decisions and strategies.	World Bank (2020); Barn & Sandkuhl (2022); Marr (2022)
Technical Proficiency	Basic familiarity with coding, digital tools, AI-driven software, and automation processes.	Espinoza et al. (2010); Riggio & Tan (2014); Marr (2022)
AI Awareness	Understanding AI’s applications, operations, and ethical considerations is crucial for effective collaboration with emerging technologies.	Riggio & Tan (2014); Marr (2022)

As stated in Table #2, navigating the increasingly digitalised future of work requires digital competencies like technical proficiency, data literacy, digital literacy, and AI awareness.

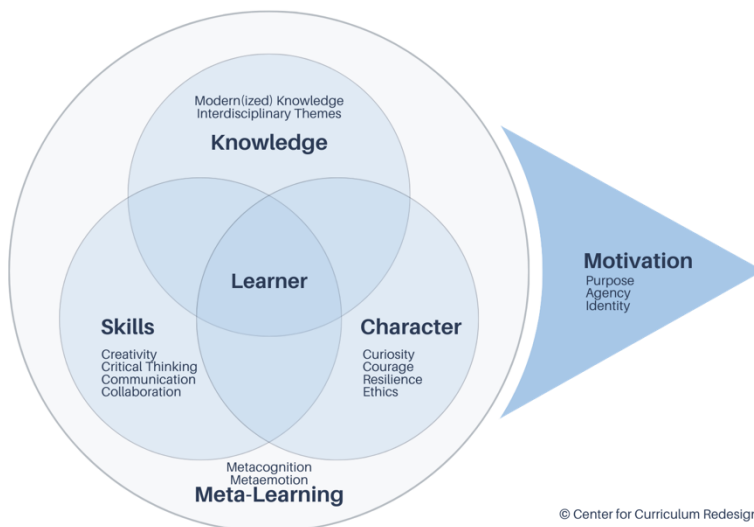
### 2.4.3 Education for the Age of AI: CCR’s 4D Framework

As global education systems grapple with the accelerating pace of technological change, particularly the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), there is an urgent need to rethink what, how, and why students learn. Addressing this imperative, the Center for Curriculum Redesign (CCR) proposes the Four-Dimensional (4D) Framework—a comprehensive, future-oriented educational model designed to equip learners with the capabilities necessary to navigate a world shaped by rapid innovation, volatility, and complexity (Center for Curriculum Redesign, 2024).

At the core of the CCR approach is the concept of “education engineering” which advocates for a precise, interdisciplinary, and contextually relevant curriculum design. Rather than treating education as mere knowledge transmission, CCR’s framework integrates conceptual understanding, skill application, personal development, and reflective learning.

The 4D Framework encompasses four interrelated dimensions:

- **Knowledge:** Conceptual depth and real-world applicability in subject areas. (What students know)
- **Skills:** Application of knowledge through creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. (How students use what they know)
- **Character:** Engagement with the world through values such as ethics, resilience, wisdom, and courage. (How students engage with the world)
- **Meta-learning:** Self-regulation and reflection, including metacognition and metaemotion. (How students reflect)




**Figure 2. CCR 4D Competencies Framework**

*Adapted from Source: Center for Curriculum Redesign (2024).*

*<https://curriculumredesign.org/our-work/4d-competencies-framework>*

In this sense, the CCR framework rethinks the goal and structure of education in the AI era, going beyond simply defining what ought to be taught. By striking a balance between academic content and reflective learning, ethical engagement, and personal growth, schools are positioned to serve as both knowledge-transmission hubs and sources of stability and change in an unpredictable world.

 <b>CENTER for CURRICULUM REDESIGN</b> <small>Making Education More Relevant</small>		<b>Competency/Subcompetency Framework</b> Rev 1.2 - January 2024 <small>© Center for Curriculum Redesign - All Rights Reserved</small>			
	Competency	Emphasis	Code	Subcompetency	Associated Constructs
<b>SKILLS</b> (how we use what we know)	<b>Creativity</b>	Imagination	CRE1	Developing personal tastes, aesthetics, and style	Originality, Inspiration, Ingenuity, Inspiration, Inventiveness, Vision, Idea Generation, Cleverness
			CRE2	Generating and seeking new ideas	
			CRE3	Being comfortable with risks, uncertainty, and failure	
			CRE4	Connecting, reorganizing, and refining ideas into a cohesive whole	
			CRE5	Realizing ideas while recognizing constraints	
	<b>Critical Thinking</b>	Decision-Making	CRI1	Identifying, clarifying, and organizing information	Analysis, Problem Solving, Analytical Thinking, Effective Reasoning, Logical Reasoning, Critique, Systems Thinking, Design Thinking
			CRI2	Assessing validity and quality of information	
			CRI3	Weighing pros and cons of alternative choices	
			CRI4	Applying sound reasoning to decision-making	
			CRI5	Reflecting critically on one's own reasoning and assumptions	
	<b>Communication</b>	Dialogue	COM1	Asking questions and actively listening	Active Listening, Debate, Discussion, Presenting, Speaking, Explaining, Understanding, Conversation
			COM2	Sharing one's vision and inspiring others	
			COM3	Clearly and concisely articulating ideas or messages	
			COM4	Communicating with fidelity across distinct modes and mediums	
			COM5	Adapting messages according to audience	
	<b>Collaboration</b>	Leadership	COL1	Taking and sharing responsibility with others	Cooperation, Teamwork, Group Cohesion, Group Chemistry, Dependability, Goal-Oriented, Results Orientation, Execution, Efficiency, Conflict Resolution, Relationship Skills, Social Intelligence, Negotiation, Delegation, Mentorship, Respect for Diversity, Socialization, Community
			COL2	Optimizing team resources and unique skills and perspectives of individuals	
			COL3	Navigating and resolving interpersonal conflict	
			COL4	Giving and receiving constructive feedback	
			COL5	Actively supporting and showing compassion for team members	
<b>CHARACTER</b> (how we behave and engage in the world)	<b>Curiosity</b>	Open-Mindedness	CUR1	Seeking to understand deeply	Exploration, Wonder, Openness to Experience, Passion, Self-Direction, Motivation, Initiative, Drive, Enthusiasm, Appreciation
			CUR2	Surveying opportunities and exploring novel experiences	
			CUR3	Seeking different perspectives to broaden understanding	
			CUR4	Envisioning and prioritizing one's interests and passions	
			CUR5	Finding joy in learning and being a lifelong learner	
	<b>Courage</b>	Risk-Taking	COU1	Pursuing ambitious goals, despite risks	Bravery, Confidence, Determination, Fortitude, Perseverance, Persistence, Toughness, Zeal, Audacity, Inspiration, Energy, Vigor, Zeal, Cheerfulness, Humor, Optimism, Self-Esteem, Confidence, Responsibility, Accountability, Humbleness, Modesty, Heroism, Charisma, Inspiration, Followership, Leading by Example
			COU2	Leading with initiative and accountability	
			COU3	Engaging with others in a vulnerable way	
			COU4	Acknowledging one's strengths and weaknesses	
			COU5	Believing in one's agency and self-efficacy	
	<b>Resilience</b>	Resourcefulness	RES1	Persevering through challenges and seeking help when needed	Perseverance, Grit, Growth Mindset, Persistence, Stability, Self-Discipline, Effort, Diligence, Commitment, Self-Control, Tenacity, Resourcefulness, Self-Esteem, Confidence, Dealing with Ambiguity, Feedback, Spunk, Productive Failure, Consistency, Commitment, Focus
			RES2	Building strong social networks	
			RES3	Establishing and maintaining effective habits	
			RES4	Managing stress to maintain performance	
			RES5	Motivating oneself via meaning or purpose	
<b>Ethics</b>	Fairness	ETH1	Identifying and describing ethical concepts, rights, and responsibilities	Integrity, Virtue, Decency, Authenticity, Genuineness, Benevolence, Humaneness, Conscientiousness, Respect, Justice, Equity, Morality, Fairness, Kindness, Altruism, Inclusiveness, Tolerance, Abnegation, Acceptance, Honesty, Truthfulness, Trustworthiness, Loyalty, Love, Helpfulness, Generosity, Charity, Devotion, Forgiveness, Belonging, Civic-Mindedness, Citizenship, Equality, Consideration	
		ETH2	Making ethical decisions and standing up for the rights of others		
		ETH3	Understanding and showing compassion for the perspectives of others		
		ETH4	Recognizing and implementing one's moral code		
		ETH5	Contributing to the broader group or community		
<b>META-LEARNING</b> (learning how to learn)	<b>Metacognition Metaemotion</b>	Adaptability	MET1	Adapting flexibly to meet each situation's specific needs	Reflection, Self-Awareness, Empathy, Thinking about Thinking, Self-Concept, Observation, Presence, Self-Management, Authenticity, Patience, Equanimity, Composure, Acceptance, Tranquility, Sensibility, Consciousness, Meditation, Self-Actualization, Interconnectedness, Interdependence, Oneness, Spirituality, Happiness, Existentiality, Balance, Wisdom, Compassion, Caring, Sharing, Decorum, Tact, Gratitude, Beauty, Growth, Social Awareness, Cross-Cultural Awareness
			MET2	Reflecting on processes, learning, and identity	
			MET3	Understanding one's emotions and reactions	
			MET4	Being mindful of one's body and its needs	
			MET5	Determining goals, plans to achieve those goals, and reviewing one's progress	
			MET6	Monitoring comprehension and managing information accordingly	
			MET7	Evaluating one's actions and their consequences	
			MET8	Considering other points of view	
			MET9	Recognizing, engaging, and empathizing with the emotions of others	
			MET10	Cultivating positivity, patience, and compassion	

**Figure 3.** Sub-competencies Framework | 4D Education CCR

Centre for Curriculum Redesign. (2024, January). 4D Competencies Framework. Center for Curriculum Redesign. Adapted from: <https://4dedu.org/competencies-professional-development/>

The CCR framework uses subcompetencies to enrich and operationalise primary competencies, as seen above. Understanding complex real-world abilities is deeper and more actionable in this manner. In conclusion, the CCR model is a forward-thinking educational paradigm that supports lifelong capability development by addressing not just what people must know and

accomplish but also who they become and how they adapt. Its focus on human-centric skills, resilience, and reflective learning makes it ideal for training people for a turbulent, technology-driven global workforce.

By cultivating both technical excellence and human adaptability, the CCR framework exemplifies how education can serve as a catalyst for expanding individuals' real freedoms—empowering them not merely to survive, but to actively shape the uncertain futures they will encounter.

## **2.5 Service Design as an Integrative Framework**

Service design is a strategic, user-centred framework that operationalises theoretical perspectives, including the Capability Approach and Futures Thinking, in the context of non-formal education. Service design, grounded in collaborative and iterative methodologies (Stickdorn et al., 2018), offers a framework for youth workers to organise systems that effectively address the changing needs and aspirations of NEET youths. When applied with consideration, it facilitates the integration of disparate services into unified ecosystems aimed at enhancing individual agency and promoting long-term employability.

The Capability Approach shares core philosophical ground with service design's emphasis on co-creation and user-centricity (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011). The inclusion of stakeholders throughout the design process mirrors the focus on conversion factors—those social and environmental conditions that determine how individuals translate resources into valued outcomes. Holistic service mapping aligns with this framework by assisting practitioners in identifying and dismantling barriers that restrict youth agency and engagement in non-formal education.

Service design serves as a conceptual and operational bridge that converts theoretical goals into context-sensitive, scalable interventions, so it is more than just a collection of procedures. Its systemic and multidisciplinary approach guarantees that programs can create future resilience in marginalised youth populations in addition to being responsive to current needs.

## **2.6. Foresight Thinking and Strategic Career Planning**

Foresight thinking, sometimes described as the art and science of anticipating future developments, is a structured approach to examining what might lie ahead to inform current decisions (Loveridge, 2009). Rather than seeking to predict a single, definitive future, foresight prompts us to explore a spectrum of potential outcomes and novel pathways. In the realm of strategic career planning, this perspective is especially valuable for youth workers and experts seeking to equip young people with the skills, mindsets, and resilience needed to succeed in a fast-changing labour market (Voros, 2003).

At its core, foresight is a tool for expanding our mental horizons and identifying critical uncertainties (Hines & Bishop, 2015). It involves systematically collecting signals of emerging change—whether technological, social, economic, political, or environmental—and interpreting how these forces might interplay over time. By doing this, youth workers can shift their focus from merely responding to changes in the labour market to actively creating programmes and support systems that consider the opportunities and challenges facing them. Professionals with specialised knowledge of the intersections between cutting-edge employment trends and developing skills can enhance this process even more.

By applying foresight thinking, youth workers and experts can effectively address not only immediate career development needs but also anticipate new demands and trajectories that could potentially help communities (Voros, 2003; Hines & Bishop, 2015).

This alignment of present actions with future possibilities strengthens individual employability and cultivates the broader adaptability, creativity, and critical reflection required for young people to thrive in the decades to come (Loveridge, 2009).

## **2.7 Systems Thinking in Career Development**

Systems thinking is a holistic approach to understanding complex issues by recognising interrelationships among different components rather than viewing them in isolation (Senge, 1990). It emphasises the importance of feedback loops, dynamic interactions, and patterns over time, encouraging practitioners to look beyond immediate causes and symptoms and uncover deeper structural influences. Within the context of career development, systems thinking reframes youth employability not merely as an individual skills issue but as a systemic challenge embedded within broader educational, economic, social, and technological environments.

For youth workers, adopting a systems thinking perspective is critical to designing interventions that respond to the full complexity of young people’s lives. Barriers to employability—such as limited access to quality education, unstable housing, mental health challenges, digital exclusion, and labour market discrimination—rarely exist alone. Systems thinking enables youth practitioners to identify these interconnected factors and design holistic programmes that address root causes rather than treat symptoms in a fragmented manner.

Moreover, systems thinking complements service design and foresight-based approaches by reinforcing the importance of user-centred, adaptive, and iterative strategies.

By recognising that systemic conversion factors have a significant influence on individual agency, systems thinking supports initiatives to increase real freedoms within the framework of the Capability Approach. Youth development programmes can more effectively remove structural barriers and establish settings where young people are empowered to pursue meaningful, sustainable futures by taking a systemic approach.

## **2.8 Research Gaps and Emerging Trends**

Although non-formal learning (NFL) is increasingly being acknowledged as an essential setting for cultivating critical career skills like self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and adaptability, this has not yet resulted in a steady alignment with the changing needs of the labour market of the future. Although foresight thinking provides a useful lens through which to view new capabilities such as collaborative problem-solving, digital resilience, and anticipatory decision-making, there is still little practical application of these insights in routine NFL operations. Current frameworks frequently place more emphasis on reactive or short-term skill development than on proactive, long-term strategies that could better prepare young people for long-term career flexibility.

Additionally, studies reveal a recurring discrepancy between the skills developed through experiential NFL—such as emotional intelligence and teamwork—and how employers perceive or value them. There is still a dearth of data on how reflective tools like the CAREer Diary can close the gap between future-oriented skill development and labour market expectations, despite models like the Capability Approach emphasising the role of choice, agency, and enabling environments in transforming skills into meaningful opportunities.

Emerging trends indicate a number of areas that require further investigation. These include how employers perceive soft and digital skills acquired in the NFL, how foresight methodologies can be methodically incorporated into youth programmes, and how meta-learning and self-reflection can be successfully promoted in informal settings. Designing youth interventions that combine learner-driven, participatory models with labour market foresight is also imperative to make sure that the NFL adapts to change and actively empowers youth to influence it.

## **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **3.1 Research Design Approach**

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist and constructivist paradigm. It recognises that knowledge is socially co-constructed through interaction, dialogue, and shared meaning-making among participants. A qualitative approach was selected to capture the rich, contextualised experiences and perceptions of key actors, including youth workers, NGO practitioners, HR professionals, and policymakers, allowing for an in-depth examination of underlying beliefs, practices, and system-level tensions that may not. The research was organised into three linked parts: working together on the CAREer Diary project, conducting interviews for a case study, and analysing existing data with some aspects of futures action research (FAR).

### 3.2. Research method

This study takes a 'Research about Design' approach (Fallman, 2008) to look at how non-formal learning tools, like the CAREer Diary, fit into larger systems that help young people find jobs. The research was carried out in three connected stages to gain a deeper understanding of how young people reflect on their careers within non-formal learning (NFL) environments.

#### Phase 1: Participatory Action Research (PAR) Foundation

The research journey began with active involvement in the CAREer Diary project—a non-formal learning intervention co-developed with youth workers and young participants. This phase was informed by the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), a democratic and iterative methodology that positions participants as co-researchers and emphasises co-creation, reflection, and the practical relevance of research to social change (McIntyre, 2008). PAR served both as a practice-based foundation and an epistemological commitment, generating reflexive insights that informed the design and focus of the subsequent phases.

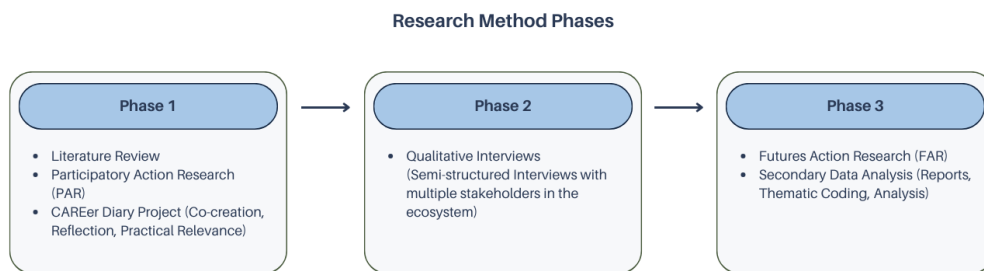
#### Phase 2: Qualitative Interview-Based Case Study

Building on the experiential learning from the CAREer Diary project, the second phase involved a qualitative, interview-based case study. Following Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) model of meaning-making through dialogue, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders across the non-formal learning ecosystem, including youth workers, NGO representatives, HR professionals, and a policymaker. The bounded case—the youth support ecosystem—was examined through multiple perspectives, consistent with the case study tradition in qualitative research (Yin, 2018), enabling a deeper understanding of system complexities, tensions, and opportunities.

#### Phase 3: Futures Action Research (FAR) and Secondary Data Analysis

The final phase incorporated elements of Futures Action Research (FAR), combining strategic foresight methodologies with critical reflection (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015). Secondary data, including relevant policy documents, organisational reports, and competency frameworks related to youth employability and future skills, were systematically analysed.

Dominant narratives, emerging silences, and underlying presumptions regarding the future of work and youth development were mapped using thematic coding and discourse analysis techniques. In order to ensure that practitioner voices were complemented by macro-level foresight perspectives, this phase expanded the qualitative investigation into systemic and anticipatory domains.



**Figure 4.** Research Method Phases

Together, these three phases provided a comprehensive, multi-layered exploration of how youth workers can enhance future-readiness and career adaptability among young people in an increasingly uncertain labour market.

### 3.3. Research target

The study's participants are important players in the youth employability ecosystem, each of whom contributes in a unique but connected way to determining how young people are equipped for the workforce of the future. Based on their organisational setting, professional experience, and connection to the research question, a total of twelve participants were interviewed.

**Table #3.** Stakeholders Description

Stakeholder	n	Who they are	Why Are They Relevant
Youth Workers	4	Frontline practitioners engaging directly with young people through diverse non-formal learning (NFL) methods.	Central actors in the study, providing insights into challenges, strategies, and realities of preparing youth for future employability outside formal education.
NGO Representatives	4	Professionals working within non-governmental organisations are focused on youth development programs.	NGOs often design and implement large-scale NFL interventions, bridging policy, practice, and community needs. Their perspectives illuminate systemic and organisational influences on youth's employability support.
Experts HR, Career Counsellors	3	Human Resources managers and career counsellors engaged in workforce planning, recruitment, and future skills identification.	Offer critical insights into evolving employer expectations, skill demands, and the intersection between youth competencies and labour market readiness.
Youth Policy Stakeholder	1	A professional from a European-level youth support structure, involved in capacity building, training strategies, and policy advocacy for youth work.	Provides a transnational perspective on youth employability trends, policy frameworks, and capacity development initiatives across the European youth work field.

### **3.4. Data collection**

Data collection took place in two main phases, combining direct engagement with participants and expert interviews. The first phase occurred during the CAREer project's second mobility period (24 February–6 March 2025), where semi-structured, in-person interviews were conducted with youth workers, NGO practitioners, subject-matter experts, and young participants. These 40-minute sessions followed a flexible interview guide, exploring experiences with skill development and perspectives on career adaptability.

Participants also completed an open card sort exercise to explore how they naturally group and prioritise soft skills. Each card represented an individual skill, and participants clustered them based on personal relevance, offering qualitative insights into their internal frameworks for understanding future competencies.

Although informal methods like proof-of-concept testing and guerrilla surveys were used elsewhere in the CAREer project, they were not directly applied in this study. Nonetheless, they influenced the participatory tone adopted in the primary research activities.

A second set of semi-structured interviews was conducted virtually in February and March 2025 with expert stakeholders, including HR professionals, career development specialists, and youth policy leaders. These conversations focused on labour market trends, emerging skill demands, and systemic barriers to youth employment.

All participants were informed of the research purpose and their voluntary involvement. Consent for recording and transcription was obtained, and strict confidentiality measures were followed to ensure anonymity.

Complementing the interviews, secondary data was gathered through systematic desk research. Key sources included policy briefs, organisational reports, and frameworks addressing youth employability, non-formal learning, and the future of work.

### **3.5 Data Analysis Strategies**

QualCoder, an open-source program made specifically for qualitative data analysis, was used to transcribe and analyse the qualitative interview data. In order to guarantee both data-driven insights and theoretical coherence, the analytical process used an iterative, hybrid thematic analysis approach that combined inductive and deductive strategies.

First, an open coding inductive cycle was carried out. Every transcript was carefully examined, with significant passages highlighted and initial categories left to develop naturally from the data without the use of pre-existing frameworks. The goal of this grounded phase was to bring participants' viewpoints and stories to the surface on their own terms.

A hybrid thematic analysis was used after this initial coding. Emergent categories from the data were methodically compared to the main ideas and themes found in the literature review using a comparative method. When necessary, this deductive refinement entailed rearranging,

combining, or expanding categories to produce a final thematic framework that incorporated both fresh perspectives from the field and conformity to accepted theoretical models concerning youth employability, foresight thinking, non-formal learning, and the capability approach.

Complementary thematic and discourse analysis techniques were used to analyse secondary data, such as policy documents, organisational reports, and future skills frameworks. This made it possible to map prevailing narratives, silences, and presumptions regarding youth development and the nature of work in the future, giving the results of the primary interviews a macro-contextual layer.

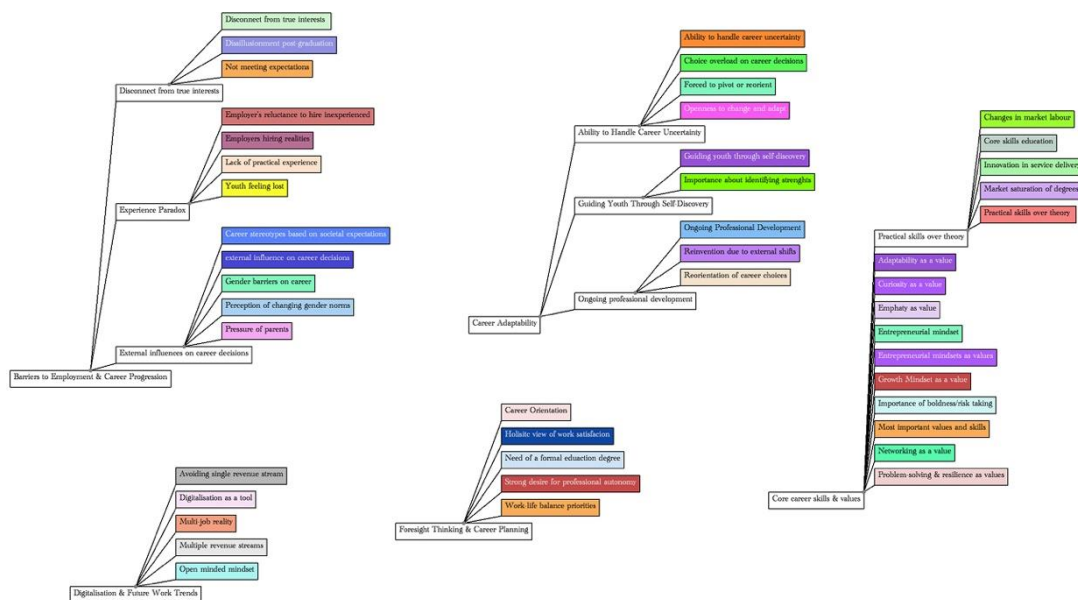


Figure 5. First Inductive Coding

## 4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### 4.1 Thematic Analysis Overview

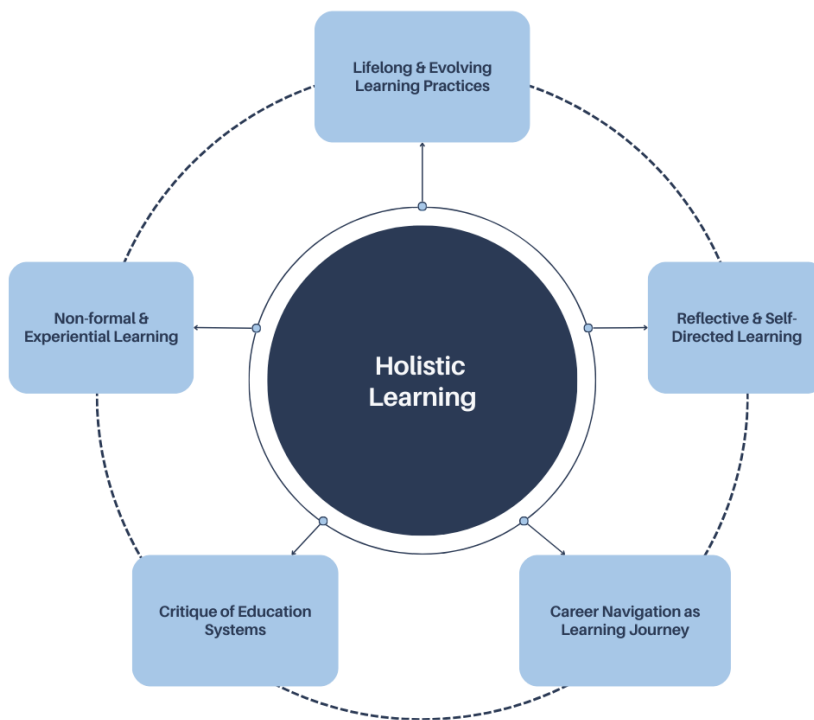
The main themes that arose from a qualitative thematic analysis are presented in this chapter. Five interrelated themes that represent both the systemic and individual aspects of youth employability were found: (1) Holistic Learning; (2) Capability Approach & 4D Competencies; (3) Career Adaptability & Individual Agency; (4) Future of Work, Trends & Technology; and (5) Service Design & Youth Work. These themes shed light on the obstacles young people encounter during learning and employment transitions, as well as the part youth workers play in creating adaptable, future-focused support networks. Every theme is based on the opinions of the participants and fits within the theoretical frameworks of the study.

**Table #4.** Thematic Analysis Table

#	Theme	Sub-themes	Linked Research Questions	Purpose in Analysis
1	Holistic View of Learning	Non-formal & Informal Learning; Lifelong Learning; Critique of Education Systems; Role of Youth Workers	RQ1, RQ3	Rethink learning as a dynamic, relational, and lifelong process that goes beyond formal systems by highlighting how youth develop skills through non-linear experiences, reflection, and belonging.
2	Capability Approach & 4D Competencies	Capability Gaps; Conversion Factors; 4D Competency Framework; Functionings vs. Credentials	RQ1, RQ2	Rethink youth employability by highlighting systemic obstacles and valuing holistic growth above and beyond academic credentials.
3	Individual Agency & Career Adaptability	Agency & Empowerment; Adaptability & Resilience; Reflective Practices	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Determine how youth can actively navigate uncertainty and redefine success on their terms through reflective practice, identity, and purpose.
4	Future of Work, Trends & Technology	Digital Adaptation Challenges; Employers Behaviours; Structural Shifts in employment; Technical disruptions; Work environment evolution	RQ2	Identify future-oriented skill demands and implications.
5	Service Design and Youth Workers	Co-Creation; User-Centred Design; Iterative Program Development	RQ1	Emphasise how youth workers can co-create responsive, human-centred learning environments as system designers.

## 4.2 Holistic View of Learning

This first theme critically examines two common assumptions in career development: that formal education is the main determinant of career success and that young people are automatically work-ready upon graduation. Insights from thematic analysis and expert interviews challenge these notions, revealing that youth career pathways are far more complex and deeply personal. Rather than following linear trajectories defined by skill acquisition, young people prioritise self-reflection and seek meaningful ways to engage with their future.



**Figure 6.** Holistic View of Learning: Thematic Map

This diagram illustrates the five interdependent subthemes that constitute a holistic approach to learning as identified in this study. Each dimension—career navigation as a learning journey, critique of education systems, non-formal & experiential learning, lifelong & evolving learning practices, and reflective & self-directed learning—functions not in isolation but as part of an integrated ecosystem. Together, they reflect the complex realities of youth development and the pivotal role of youth workers in designing flexible, human-centred learning environments.

#### 4.2.1 Career Navigation as a Learning Journey

<b>Codes</b>	Career Expectations; Identifying needs of young people; Learning-to-Work Transitions
--------------	--

Rather than following a linear trajectory, career development emerged from this study as an emotionally charged, non-linear, and contextual learning process. Participants highlighted that young people are not simply making rational decisions—they are navigating uncertainty, economic pressure, and a desire for meaningful identity formation. As one participant shared,

*“So, when we spoke with young people, we often heard their concerns about job security and stability. Those were the topics that came up most often in conversations – worries about their future, their chances of employment, and their desire to do something meaningful.” (P05)*

The data confirms that assumptions or top-down strategies cannot identify youth needs. Rather, co-creation through proximity, dialogue, and continuous feedback is required. As several practitioners stated,

*“We ask each young person what they need and guide them, rather than pushing our own preferences. We’re here to be facilitators, not to dictate anyone’s path.” (P05)*

Formal and informal needs assessments play a crucial role in tailoring interventions:

*“We always do a needs assessment of the target group—finding out what they want—before designing any projects.” (P08)*

However, it is a challenge to identify the real needs of young people; this isn't because those needs don't exist, but because they're often not spoken about, change over time, and are affected by social norms. Young people may express goals that are easy to see, like finding a job or learning new skills. But their deeper needs for approval, safety, and self-knowledge may be hidden. As one participant said,

*“It's about understanding what they want, not what we think they need.” (P08)*

From a capability approach perspective, not listening to real needs stops support from having a positive impact. Therefore, we should view identifying needs as a means of connecting with and learning from young people, rather than a mere checklist. When youth are directly involved in shaping their developmental journeys, their engagement deepens, and their sense of agency grows—two key ingredients for long-term success.

As another youth worker mentioned,

*“So many of them don’t know what they’re good at because no one’s asked. Our role is to hold up the mirror.” – (P04)*

Without this mirroring, support systems risk offering inadequate solutions that reinforce disengagement. This is why practitioners mentioned the value of tailoring learning environments to specific groups. As mentioned,

*“Every group is different. As a facilitator, I always redesign the session based on what I see in the room.” (P07)*

These perspectives suggest that one-size-fits-all approaches are inappropriate in non-formal settings, where responsiveness to group dynamics plays a crucial role in engagement and learning outcomes. This underscores the importance of cultivating *situational awareness*—the facilitator’s ability to read, adapt, and respond in real time to shifting group dynamics.

This new way of thinking about career development as a learning journey is important for youth workers, who can help people find their paths. The ability to create safe, adaptive, and reflective environments is key. It determines whether young people just receive information or whether they develop the skills they need to thrive in an uncertain future.

This theme also highlights how career development is entangled with identity, reflection, and social belonging. It cannot be reduced to teaching application skills or transmitting job market information. As one participant shared,

*“Career guidance isn’t just about job applications—it’s about building resilience and understanding how to navigate the job market.” (P02)*

Similarly, another participant reflected:

*“You have to give them enough space so they can develop themselves personally and professionally.” (P04)*

These insights reframe career navigation not as a product to deliver but as a capability to nurture—through space, dialogue, and experiential learning. Participants also spoke to the importance of belonging and social recognition as critical but often overlooked dimensions of employability. Career navigation, then, is not just about acquiring tools but feeling seen and supported within a larger ecosystem of trust.

#### 4.2.2 Critique of Education Systems

---

<b>Codes</b>	Formal education disconnects from practical skills; Formal education in real world practice; Foundational Learning
--------------	--

---

Participants across roles expressed consistent frustration with the disconnect between formal education and the realities of work and life. Rather than equipping young people to adapt to complex, unpredictable environments, traditional education often stops at credentialing—leaving a gap between qualifications and readiness. As one participant observed,

*“In most jobs—unless it’s something like medicine—what you studied isn’t that important. What really matters is how you manage yourself. Can you work well with others? Do you manage your time effectively? Can you communicate, resolve issues, and adapt? These are the things that make someone stand out.” (P09)*

This critique echoes the Capability Approach’s concern that formal systems may provide resources, such as degrees, without ensuring that young people can convert them into real opportunities (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000).

Several participants noted that many young people exit education without understanding how to navigate the labour market, interpersonal dynamics, or their own development. One participant stated,

*“They’re well-prepared; they might have lots of formal education, but maybe they don’t have experience because it’s hard to get into the market.” (P01)*

Beyond technical training, participants emphasised that foundational learning—such as teamwork, empathy, and self-regulation—is often neglected. One participant remarked,

*“You’re asked to do a test to test your skills, but you’re never asked to self-assess.”*  
(P011)

This highlights a broader concern that education rarely fosters reflective practice. Another individual pointed out that the system frequently overlooks the impact of skills on individual lives, student lives, community lives, and future careers. These omissions result in graduates who may hold credentials but feel unprepared for real-world collaboration and decision-making.

Moreover, participants pointed out how formal systems fail to recognise the diverse identities and prior experiences that students bring. As one participant explained,

*“Many degree programmes fail to recognise the diverse backgrounds of students. People don’t come in as blank slates—each person has previous experiences, skills, and education that can be valuable in different career paths.”* (P011)

This reinforces the need for education that is inclusive not just of academic content but of identity, history, and non-formal experience.

From a Service Design perspective, the issue lies in the lack of a user-centred approach; education remains largely top-down and rigid, rarely adapting to the realities of students.

Several participants described how youth workers step in to bridge this gap, designing complementary environments where young people can develop soft skills through practice, reflection, and dialogue. As one participant noted,

*“We think non-formal education complements formal education because the latter doesn’t address many life skills.”* (P08)

Without systemic reform, formal education runs the risk of turning into a ritual that doesn't provide young people with the necessary skills. It may provide the knowledge—but not the know-how. This insight aligns with the work of Werquin (2008) and Popa (2011), who argue that formal systems often overlook competencies critical for real employability.

#### 4.2.3 Non-formal and Experiential Learning

---

**Codes**

Non-Formal Education vs. Formal Education; Exchange & Mobility; Belonging

---

Non-formal and experiential learning emerged as pivotal themes in enabling youth to develop real-world skills, confidence, and a sense of identity. Unlike formal education, which participants critiqued as rigid and outdated, non-formal settings were described as flexible, relational, and deeply responsive to youth needs.

Experiential learning theory supports this idea, framing knowledge not as delivered content but as reflection on lived experience (Kolb, 1984). From a Capability Approach perspective, these programs act as conversion spaces, turning potential opportunities into meaningful agency through participation, feedback, and freedom to fail safely.

Participants also highlighted how international mobility experiences—such as exchanges, volunteering, and training—serve as transformative tools for youth development. These are not merely educational trips, but values-based interventions that support identity-building and capability expansion.

*“Even if I was doing this just for fun, this is actually something I can use when I’m trying to get a job. It’s something that proves my experience.” (P011)*

one participant shared. Tools like the *Youthpass* were seen as important bridges, helping young people articulate and recognise the personal growth embedded in these experiences.

However, this theme also surfaced structural tensions. Participants expressed concern about the lack of formal recognition of non-formal education in policy and employment systems. These gaps in recognition limit its perceived legitimacy, despite its clear contributions to employability and personal development.

Furthermore, participants emphasised the importance of delivering NFE with methodological integrity. *“Not all volunteering is non-formal learning,”* one participant warned. *“It needs to be done properly and following the methodologies and principles.”* Intentional design and reflection can dilute the transformative potential of NFE.

This connects to a broader concern: non-formal education is too often positioned as a “band-aid” to fill gaps left by formal education. Yet the data strongly suggest it should be recognised as a primary site of learning—not a supplement, but a reimagining of what education can be.

Finally, the theme links closely to youth belonging. One participant remarked,

*“We noticed that a lot of young people don’t feel this—they don’t feel like they belong to something.” (P010)*

Non-formal spaces, on the other hand, are among the few environments where young people feel seen, valued, and connected. These ecosystems are not just about skill acquisition—they’re about becoming.

#### 4.2.4 Lifelong & Evolving Learning Practices

---

**Codes**

Lifelong Learning; Pedagogical Innovation; Adaptive Learning

---

The main discussion around this sub-theme explains the importance of learning as a continuous, dynamic process that extends far beyond formal education. Youth workers and

educators described how learning must adapt to shifting life contexts, economic demands, and personal growth. One participant mentioned,

*“Education doesn’t end with high school or university; it’s lifelong.” (P05)*

Lifelong learning enables individuals to sustain agency throughout life by expanding their capacity to pursue valued outcomes. This viewpoint is consistent with CCR's 4D framework (2024), which emphasises the necessity of meta-learning in a career landscape that is constantly evolving due to rapid technological advancement. It enables young people to continuously reinterpret their experiences, adapt strategies, and stay responsive to emerging futures.

Participants emphasised that lifelong learning must be future-facing and inclusive of multiple learning pathways. While some referenced traditional lifelong learning formats, others stressed more informal or modular forms, including self-guided learning, short vocational trainings, and online platforms. As one participant explained,

*“They should learn to educate themselves continually—through online platforms, reading, or short vocational trainings.” (P05)*

These varied approaches point to a broader redefinition of education—not as a one-time credential but as an evolving relationship with knowledge, practice, and purpose.

While the discourse around lifelong learning in this study was overwhelmingly positive, the absence of references to disengagement or fatigue may mask difficult realities—particularly for young people who associate learning with failure, judgement, or institutional mistrust.

Lifelong learning should be viewed as a right to develop, one that is based on curiosity, individual agency, and relevance to lived experiences, rather than as a requirement or duty.

What the data makes clear is that lifelong learning is not a privilege or aspirational ideal. It is a practical necessity in a world of continual change. Empowering young people to embrace this mindset means equipping them not only with new knowledge but also with the meta-cognitive and emotional tools to manage their growth, uncertainty, and direction across the life course.

#### 4.2.5 Reflective and Self-Directed Learning

---

<b>Codes</b>	Guidance During Reflection Process; Guiding Youth Through Self-discovery; Identifying Strengths; Importance of Self-reflection; Most Important Values and Skills; Strengths Based Approach
--------------	--

---

This subtheme highlights how reflective practice and self-awareness are foundational to youth empowerment. Participants described how young people often struggle not from lack of ability but from lack of opportunities to make sense of their experiences. Reflection, in this context, is not an afterthought—it is the very mechanism through which learning is internalised, and agency is built. As one participant put it,

*“We kind of go straight to the next step, and we don’t take a moment to think, okay, what does this actually mean?” (P011)*

This rush toward performance without pause often robs young people of the chance to develop self-understanding and clarity.

Self-discovery was framed as a prerequisite for meaningful participation in work, learning, and society. Participants stressed the importance of creating space and tools—such as guiding questions, strengths assessments, and structured reflection prompts—that help youth understand who they are becoming, not just what they can do.

Others pointed to the importance of external affirmation.

*“Having someone else validate that which you already feel inside—that’s where confidence begins.” (P011)*

noted one participant, underscoring the relational nature of reflection. Reflection is not merely introspection—it is often a social act of being seen, mirrored, and recognised.

The capability approach offers an important lens here: reflection functions as a conversion factor, transforming raw experience into usable agency. However, many described these practices as reliant on youth workers or mentors. Few participants spoke about how young people could sustain reflective habits independently, raising questions about the long-term transferability of these skills.

The findings suggest that cultivating self-awareness and personal agency must be more than a programmatic goal—it must be designed as a lifelong habit that youth can internalise, personalise, and continue on their own terms.

In sum, reflective and self-directed learning is not a side effect of education—it is its most empowering outcome. When youth are supported in recognising their inner resources, articulating their values, and narrating their growth, they are more likely to act with confidence, direction, and purpose across complex life transitions.

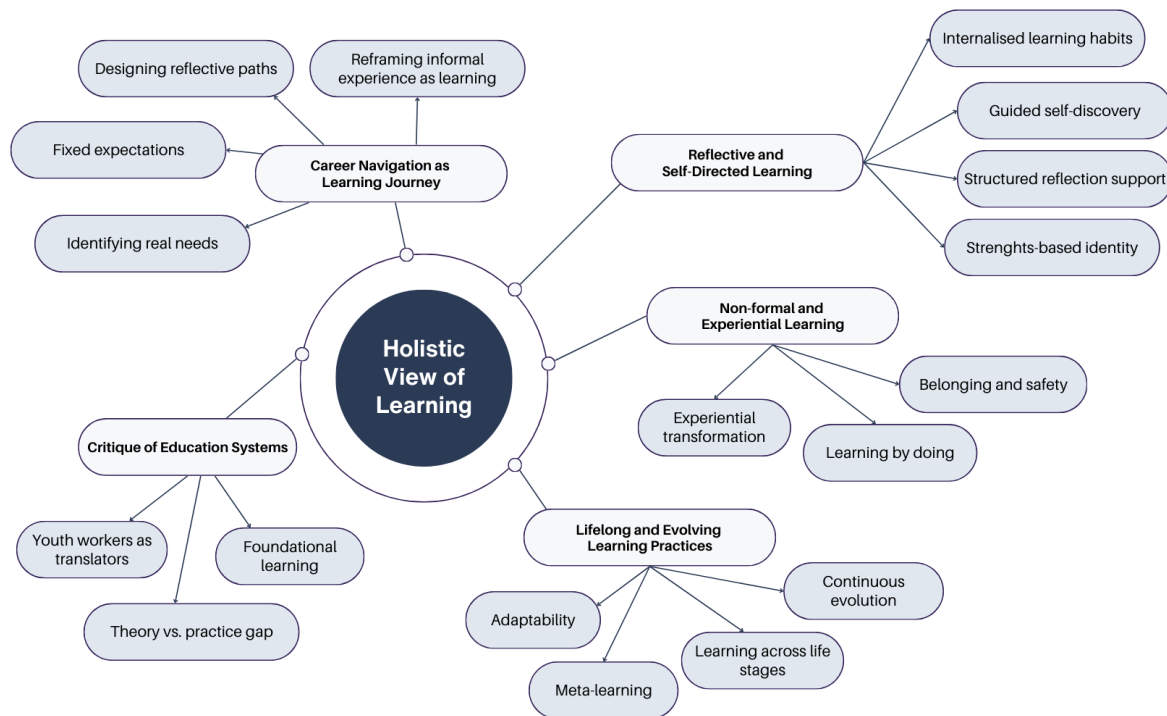
#### 4.2.6 Conclusion: Holistic Learning as Career Development

The findings in this chapter go against the idea that young people's development can be viewed in a simple, step-by-step way, and show that formal education on its own has its limitations.

Instead of thinking about career readiness as a list of qualifications, participants described it as the result of a general, ongoing learning process. This process includes thinking about yourself, developing your identity, feeling part of a group and adapting to new situations.

Youth workers play a critical role in enabling this transformation. This level of responsiveness exemplifies holistic learning in practice: education that listens, adapts, and responds to learners as full human beings. It affirms what literature and field insights increasingly show—non-

formal learning, reflection, lifelong adaptability, and co-designed experiences are not optional add-ons; they are essential.



**Figure 7.** Holistic View of Learning: Thematic Mind Map

This mind map illustrates the five interdependent subthemes that form a holistic approach to youth learning, as identified through qualitative analysis.

### 4.3 Capability Approach & 4D Competency Framework: Theoretical Lenses in Practice

Through the dual lenses of the 4D Competency Framework (CCR, 2024) and the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000), this theme re-examines the qualitative data. In addition to determining which competencies or capabilities are supported, the goal is to comprehend how, by whom, and under what circumstances they are developed.

The shift from descriptive coding to comparison-based theorising demonstrates the practical application of abstract frameworks. This chapter contrasts participants’ statements with concepts like meta-learning, conversion factors, and functionings.

#### 4.3.1 Capability Approach

#### 4.3.1.2 Capability Gaps

---

**Codes**

Psychological & Emotional Constraints; Social & Cultural Biases; Structural & Institutional Barriers

---

This subtheme reveals that many young people are not held back by a lack of potential but by multi-layered constraints that prevent them from converting their resources into real opportunities. Based on the Capability Approach, this highlights how institutional, social, and internal factors can impede functioning even in the presence of formal resources (such as mobility or education programmes).

Psychological and emotional constraints were one of the most pervasive forms of limitation identified. Participants spoke of disillusionment post-graduation, where expectations of linear success gave way to existential uncertainty.

*“But then you graduate 4–5 years later, maybe living away from home and spending money, and suddenly at 24 or 25 you say, ‘Now what?’” P01*

Fear of the unknown also emerged as a significant inhibitor—

*“I see a lot of fear, embarrassment, ‘what’s going to happen?’... and I think it’s very personal but also widely felt in society.” (P06)*

Rather than a lack of ability, this fear is a result of a lack of confidence in one's ability to navigate—a metacognitive block that prevents action even in the face of external opportunities.

In parallel, cultural and social biases shaped young people's sense of possibility. Restrictive narratives—from parental pressure to career stereotypes—acted as invisible scripts shaping youth decisions. One participant highlighted how societal perceptions frame Gen Z as entitled or inflexible:

*“Some managers, if they had a negative experience with one Gen Z candidate, might generalise, ‘All these youngsters are that way.’” (P03)*

Cultural narratives also emerged as a limiting force. Participants described how external expectations—whether from family, school, or media—shaped young people's aspirations in ways that narrowed their perceived futures. As one participant noted,

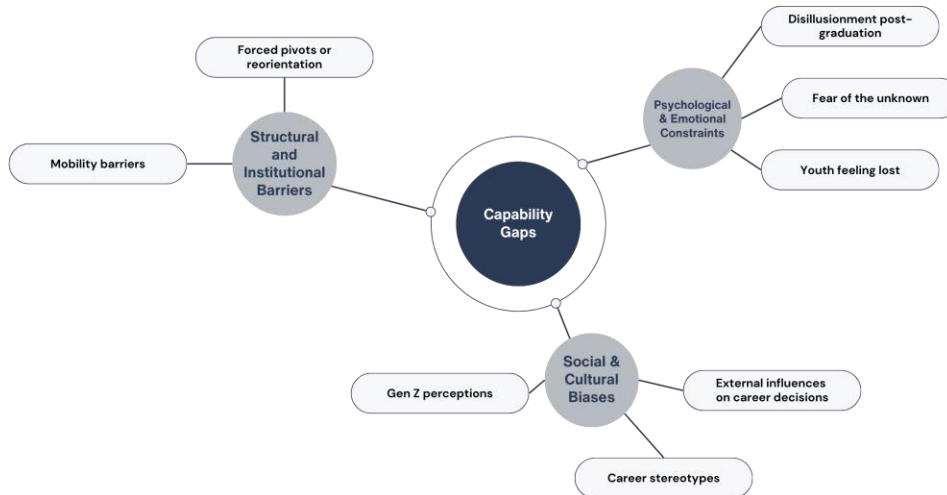
*“They don’t get to try different things—they get told who they are.” (P10)*

These biases distort how young people are perceived and, more critically, how they perceive themselves. As several noted, what youth most want is “to feel recognised, loved, and useful within the community.”

Lastly, these social and personal limitations are exacerbated by institutional and structural barriers. Participants shared how complex bureaucracies—such as visa forms or grant applications—discouraged mobility. Economic instability, shifting labour markets, and a

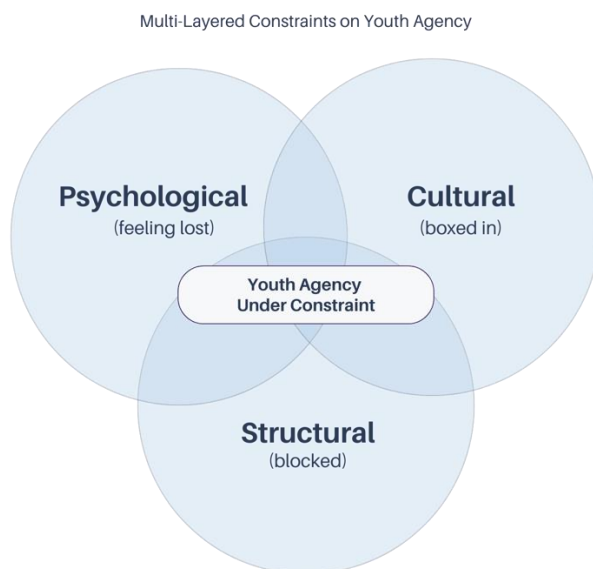
mismatch between credentials and opportunities forced some to pivot their careers out of necessity rather than choice.

The result is a landscape where youth capability is stifled not by laziness or ignorance but by invisible constraints—mental, cultural, and systemic—that make real agency elusive. Acknowledging these layers is essential to designing interventions that do more than deliver content—they must dismantle the conditions that block capability from becoming functioning.



**Figure 8.** Capability Gaps: Constraints on Youth Agency

This diagram illustrates the multi-dimensional nature of capability gaps as described by youth workers, experts, and NGOs in this study.



**Figure 9.** Multi-Layered Constraints on Youth Agency: A Capability Gaps Model

This Venn diagram demonstrates the three interconnected layers of constraint that restrict the agency of young people.

The psychological dimension refers to the feelings of perplexity, anxiety, or disappointment that frequently accompany formal education. The cultural dimension captures how societal norms, preconceptions, and outside factors influence or restrict career choices. Systemic barriers, like inflexible gender norms, labour market precarity, and bureaucratic roadblocks, are all part of the structural dimension.

Youth suffer a compounded loss of agency when these pressures overlap, as they frequently do. Support systems need to concentrate their efforts at this intersection, not only by providing resources but also by empowering youth to navigate, think critically, and take meaningful action despite these limitations.

#### 4.3.1.3 Conversion Factors: Conditions That Shape Capability

---

<b>Codes</b>	Social; Environmental; Personal
--------------	---------------------------------

---

The analysis identifies three key types of conversion factors: environmental, personal, and social. These are the often invisible conditions that determine whether young people can truly exercise agency, even when opportunities exist.

For example, environmental conversion factors like language barriers were frequently cited as limiting access to international mobility programmes or training opportunities. As one participant noted,

*“I was not feeling confident in my language skills,” (Y04)*

This reflection encapsulates how perceived inadequacy, rather than actual inability, can prevent young people from even considering such options.

Personal factors, meanwhile, include psychological stress, identity confusion, and internalised self-doubt. One participant described this disconnection as,

*“In my experience—and this might vary by country—it’s common to see young people lacking energy, clear perspectives, or a defined vision for the future.” (P07)*

This illustrates how a lack of inner clarity or confidence can hinder decision-making, even when external options are available. These are not deficits in capability per se, but barriers to converting capability into action.

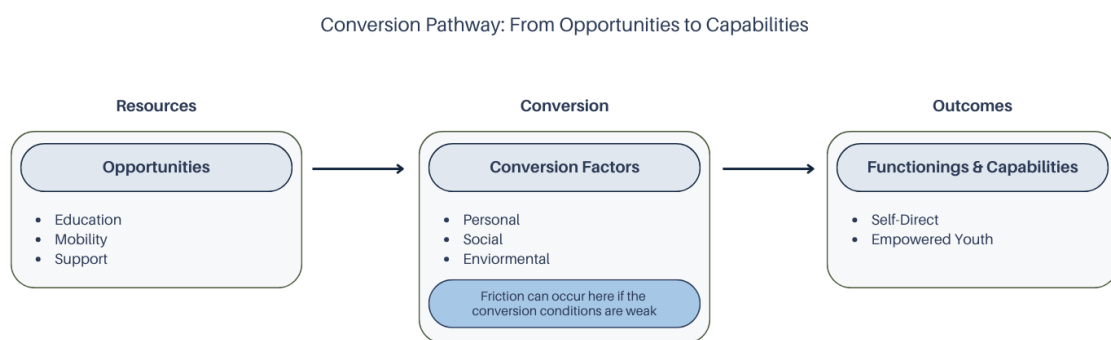
Social factors—especially family pressure and the absence of mental health support—emerged as powerful influencers that shaped young people’s decisions, sometimes without them

realising it. Even when motivated, young people may find their choices constrained by relational expectations or systemic neglect. One participant noted how,

*“[Parents] they want their children to stay close and not explore too far.” (P04)*

In such cases, opportunities are technically present but emotionally or socially inaccessible.

These findings confirm that resource provision cannot be the sole determinant of youth development. Access alone is insufficient without addressing the conditions that govern whether it becomes usable. Youth workers are not merely content facilitators—they are architects of readiness, helping young people identify and dismantle the hidden psychological, social, and environmental barriers that block their path to meaningful agency.



**Figure 10.** Conversion Pathway: From Opportunity to Capability

This flowchart illustrates how youth development, as understood through the Capability Approach, depends not only on the availability of opportunities but also on the quality of conversion factors.

Personal, social, and environmental conditions—such as mental health, language access, or family pressure—determine whether a young person can transform available resources into meaningful outcomes. If conversion factors are weak or absent, capability development is stalled, regardless of resource availability.

#### 4.3.1.4 Functionings vs Credentials: Limits of Qualifications

<b>Codes</b>	Ability to plan career; Disengagement; Employer's reluctance to hire inexperienced; Lack of practical experience; Market saturation of degrees; Need of a formal education degree; Practical skills over theory; Recognition of non-formal education; Reinvention due to external shifts; Reorientation of career choices
--------------	---

At its core, this sub-theme challenges the widespread assumption that credentials alone are sufficient indicators of readiness or capability. The real measure of educational value is

functioning—that is, the demonstrated ability to apply skills, adapt to change, and make meaningful choices in the real world.

Participants frequently described a systemic mismatch between what formal education signals (e.g., degrees, qualifications) and what the labour market or life demands: practical experience, adaptability, and critical soft skills. One participant explained:

*“They don’t have experience. That’s the biggest issue. It’s a bit of a catch-22: ‘I won’t give you the job because you don’t have experience, but if you don’t give me a job, I’ll never get that experience.’” (P01)*

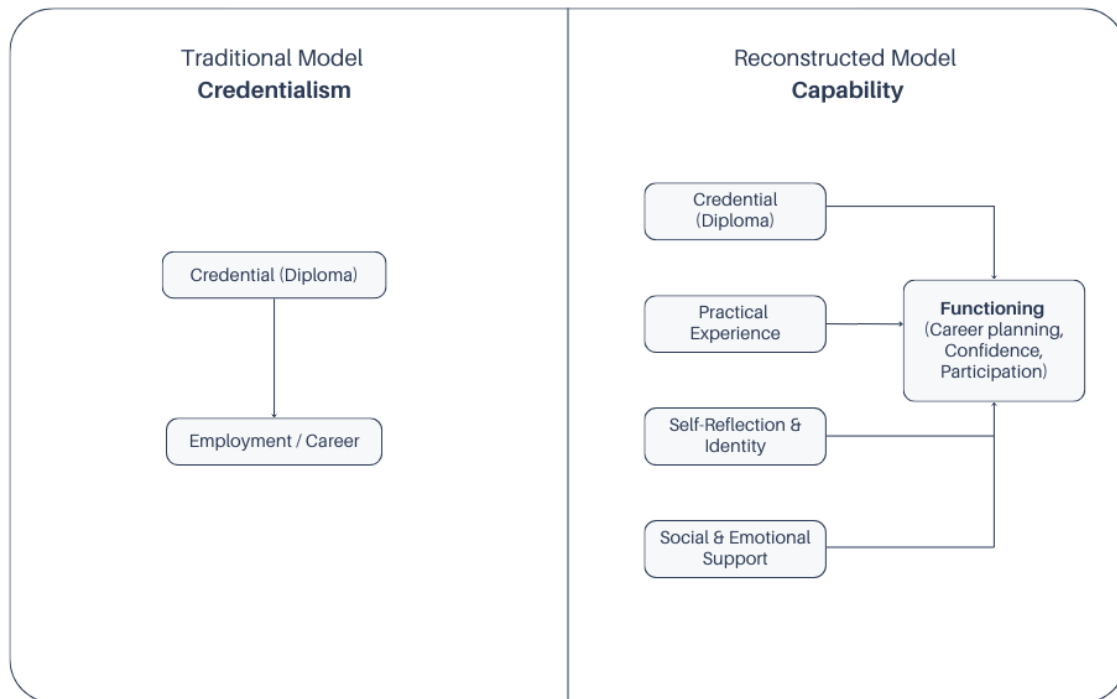
This paradox highlights a fundamental constraint: structural bottlenecks prevent the conversion of education outputs into functioning. Credentials signal potential, but without space for application, reflection, and contextualisation, they fall short. As another participant noted:

*“We study a lot, but we don’t have practical competencies. When you enter the job market, you need something specific that we don’t have.” (P07)*

These constraints are further exacerbated by credential inflation. Degrees have become a baseline rather than a differentiator, undermining their perceived value. One respondent pointed out:

*“Now everyone has a degree and maybe a master’s—that’s no longer so special.” (P02)*

A degree, in this context, is only meaningful if it can be activated through appropriate support, recognition, and real-world alignment. A credential is useless if you don't know how to use it. True youth development needs more than just credentials; while credentials may provide access, it is the youth's capability that determines their ability to navigate it.



**Figure 11.** From Credentialism to Capability: A Systemic Reframing

This reframed model emphasises that true development is not about what young people hold but about what they are able to do and be.

#### 4.3.2 4D Competency Framework

This study uses the 4D Competency Framework, created by the Center for Curriculum Redesign (CCR) model, to understand how youth workers, NGOs, and educators think about and support these deeper aspects of development through non-formal learning environments.

##### 4.3.2.1 Character

<b>Codes</b>	Confidence; Curiosity; Emotional Intelligence; Empathy; Boldness; Open Minded Mindset
--------------	---

The data reveals that the development of character competencies—such as curiosity, empathy, emotional intelligence, and confidence—is not an innate process but a relational and experiential one. Participants consistently described character not as a fixed trait but as a competency that is cultivated through safe environments, reflective practices, and emotional modelling. As one participant noted,

*“You have to be bold—have no fear and ask questions.” (Y01)*

These moments of encouragement were described as catalytic for growth. Similarly, self-awareness and reflectiveness were named as core mechanisms of youth empowerment. One participant stated,

*“Self-awareness is the core—it underpins self-regulation and adaptability.” (P03)*

These observations are in line with the 4D Competency Framework, which views character as the cornerstone of sustained success in ambiguous situations. Participants, however, positioned character as primary—a necessary precondition for agency, adaptability, and resilience—in contrast to conventional systems that favour knowledge or skills over character.

Importantly, these character traits were not being taught directly but emerged from the culture of non-formal learning environments: through modelling, affirmation, and freedom to take risks. In this way, youth workers function as architects of emotional safety and identity exploration.

*“One important value is curiosity. A curious person doesn't wait for instructions—they go out and learn.” – (P02)*

*“Confidence is very important—feeling secure enough to speak up or ask for help.” (P03)*

*“Empathy for building relationships with others... that's what lets them keep a job, not just get one.” (P08)*



**Figure 12.** Mapping the Character Dimension

#### 4.3.2.1 Skills

<b>Codes</b>	Collaboration/Team Work; Communication; Critical Thinking; Cultural Awareness; Digital Literacy; Entrepreneurial Mindset; Problem-solving & resilience as values; Technology/Digital Skills
--------------	---

“How we use what we know”

The skills dimension of the 4D Competency Framework—comprising collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving—emerged clearly across the dataset as central to youth development.

However, participation in structured, experiential, and relational settings has shown these competencies to develop organically rather than through direct instruction. In the context of peer-led projects or mobility programmes, young people have been observed to develop their collaborative skills by navigating group dynamics.

*“Every kind of work that you do, you have to collaborate; you have to work also with other people, and this kind of soft skill can give you the skills to communicate properly and to understand the others properly.” (P10)*

As one participant pointed out, facilitation—rather than information—is often what makes collaboration possible.

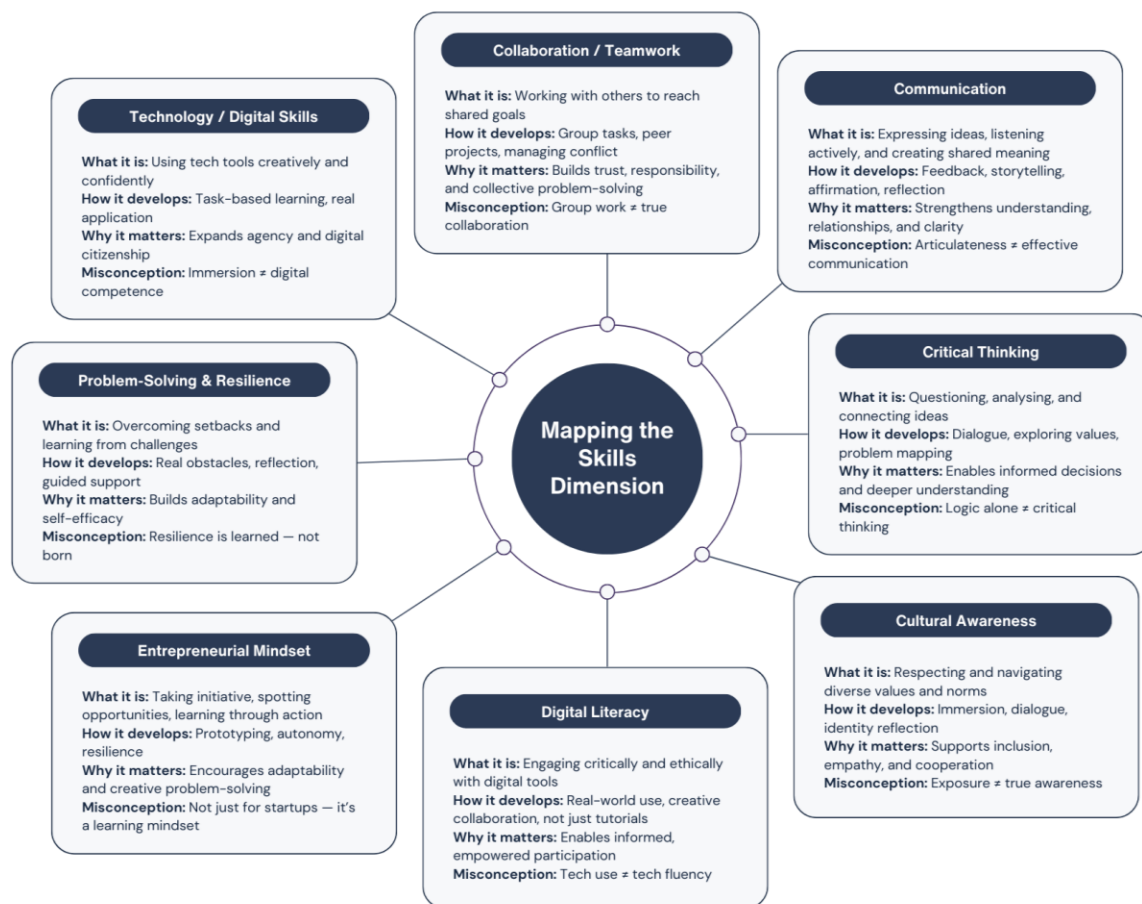
Similarly, role-playing, feedback, and storytelling were how communication skills emerged rather than formal literacy. Participants emphasised the importance of creating reflective spaces where young people could learn to express themselves and listen actively.

Adaptability, often described as flexibility in the face of change, was seen as vital in helping youth move through uncertainty. As one expert put it,

*“Problem-solving, stress management, resilience—those are vital qualities. We all have the capacity for stress management, resilience, and problem-solving, but whether we develop them is another story. Nonetheless, from a hiring perspective, it’s a big plus if you see they handle issues effectively.” (P01)*

Resilience, another crucial ability that is defined as the ability to bounce back from setbacks with wisdom rather than as toughness, was closely linked to this adaptability.

Although references to entrepreneurship and digital skills were less frequent, the underlying theme of initiative—seeing challenges as opportunities—was evident. These competencies are not “extras” but essential to functioning in complex and uncertain environments. We cultivate these competencies not by delivering information but by enabling action. In this context, youth workers serve as design facilitators, curating real-world learning environments that not only teach but also practise these skills.



**Figure 13.** Mapping the *Skills* Dimension

#### 4.3.2.2 Meta-learning

---

<b>Codes</b>	Growth Mindset as a value; Ongoing Professional Development; Openness to change and adapt; Self-awareness /reflectiveness; Self-management; Tolerance of ambiguity/uncertainty
--------------	--

---

Participants emphasised that young people's empowerment is based on their capacity to learn, adapt, and grow over time rather than just their learning outcomes.

These skills show that being ready is not about being certain or perfect. Instead, the ability to deal with uncertainty, to be open to change, and to keep going through difficult times has been identified as the most important skill for dealing with the challenges of life and work in a dynamic world.

*“Often we see these strengths as purely career-related, but across your lifetime, you’ll face many situations, and your strengths are the core assets that help you live better and also to overcome challenges.” (Y01)*

Research on this topic shows that encouraging young people to have a growth mindset is not just about telling them to be positive. It is about helping them see mistakes as chances to learn and understand that failure is a normal part of growth.

Self-management and continuous improvement, on the other hand, were portrayed as habits that are a part of thoughtful, trust-based settings where people support one another, rather than just as personal obligations.

Each of these characteristics depends on and supports the others. Being self-aware makes a growth mindset possible. Adaptability strengthens self-management. Tolerance of ambiguity enables professional evolution.

These findings underscore that meta-learning is not merely about acquiring knowledge; it is about becoming a person capable of learning, changing, and acting with awareness.

In this capacity, youth workers function as learning coaches, helping young individuals internalise the idea that identity is not static and that learning is an ongoing process.



**Figure 14.** Mapping the Meta-Learning Dimension

## 4.4 Individual Agency & Career Adaptability

### 4.4.1 Career Adaptability and Flexibility

---

<b>Codes</b>	Adaptability as a value; Avoiding single revenue stream; Multi-job reality; Multiple revenue streams
--------------	--

---

This subtheme reveals a critical evolution in how young people engage with the concept of work. Rather than viewing careers as linear trajectories with predictable outcomes, participants described a reality marked by instability, opportunity, and continual redefinition. Adaptability, once treated as a soft skill, was framed as a core value for success.

Participants also mentioned the "multi-job reality", where having several roles—either in a certain order or all at once—is normal. These choices show a more important idea: that

planning for money and security is about doing things like having a varied set of investments, thinking carefully about decisions, and being able to use skills in different ways.

This change calls into question long-held beliefs about vocational identity, job security, and career preparedness. It reinforces the view of work as dynamic, distributed, and co-constructed.

In this context, youth workers serve a new function—not just preparing young people for a job but helping them develop the meta-capacity to shape, reshape, and sustain their professional identities across shifting terrains.



**Figure 15.** Modular Career Portfolio: Visualising Youth Adaptability Strategies

This diagram illustrates a non-linear, modular approach to career development using data from youth workers, experts, and young people. Today's youth are constructing career portfolios made up of various modules, each of which represents a distinct kind of engagement, skill development, or revenue generation, as opposed to moving through a single, vertical pathway. Part-time jobs, freelance contracts, community service, mobility experiences, and deliberate reskilling or reflective pause are a few examples.

#### 4.4.2 Navigational Agency & Decision Pressure

---

<b>Codes</b>	Choice overload on career decisions; Finding a purpose
--------------	--

---

Participants explained how having so many options can cause cognitive overload instead of empowerment.

*“Nowadays, there are many ways to study, train, and work abroad... and that can create a lot of anxiety or pressure.” (P01)*

This highlights an even more serious issue: clarity cannot be achieved by choice alone. When options multiply without structured guidance, young people may experience paralysis, fear of missing out, or pressure to make the “perfect” decision.

Closely connected to this is the theme of finding a purpose. Youth workers reported that young people are not just looking for a job—they’re looking for direction, identity, and meaning.

*“They want to feel like what they’re doing matters.” (P10)*

There is an interplay between these two codes; this suggests that purpose acts as a filter: it helps youth sort through choices by aligning them with personal values. Without it, choices become noise.

Together, these findings challenge the myth that “more options” equal “more freedom”. Instead, they underscore the critical role of youth workers as facilitators of navigational agency.

They assist youths in converting overwhelming freedom into purposeful direction by fostering contemplative settings and providing emotional support.



**Figure 16.** Decision Clarity Funnel: Purpose as a Filter for Navigational Pressure

This diagram illustrates how the abundance of career choices, while often framed as empowerment, can create confusion and emotional pressure for young people. As the options widen, clarity often diminishes—unless filtered through a sense of purpose. According to participant insights, the concept of "purpose as filter" serves as a pivotal moment: it assists

young individuals in sorting through external expectations and internal uncertainty, enabling them to make decisions that are more meaningful and aligned. This model emphasises that freedom alone is not sufficient for agency—purpose, reflection, and guidance are essential conversion factors.

## 4.5 Future of Work, Trends & Technology

### 4.5.1 Structural Shifts in Employment

---

Codes	Diversification; Economic Growth; Labour Market Change
-------	--

---

To begin with, the workplace is undergoing a fundamental transformation. This subtheme encapsulates the macro-level forces that are changing the nature of work, its accessibility, and its requirements. Participants emphasised that the labour market is becoming more fluid and fragmented, which challenges conventional wisdom regarding steady job roles and linear career progression. As one participant mentioned,

*“In Europe, we talk about lifelong guidance because people will need to reorient again and again.” (P02)*

These changes reflect a more profound rethinking of what it means to be employable, not just employment supply. The need for dynamic skills like resilience, adaptability, and cross-functional skill sets is replacing fixed qualifications.

This shows that the labour market operates as a living system, which is decentralised, dynamic, and influenced by several feedback loops. Young people in this situation need to get ready for a dynamic environment where reinvention is commonplace rather than a set role.

### 4.5.2 Employer Behaviours

---

Codes	Employer Criteria, Employers Hiring Realities
-------	---

---

Beyond credentials, this subtheme highlights a recurring disconnect between what employers seek and what young people are ready to provide. This disconnect extends to experience, confidence, and fit. Participants described a hiring culture still largely driven by formal indicators.

Others, however, warned of a change, recognising that credentials are no longer enough and that traits like flexibility, collaboration, and digital literacy are becoming more important. Still, the transition is uneven, and young people often find themselves caught between outdated expectations and emerging demands.

These dynamics call into question the idea that fulfilling formal requirements equates to employability. Rather, it draws attention to the fact that employers are using two overlapping logics: one that relies on credential-based signalling and another that is becoming more and more influenced by capability-based fit. This friction particularly affects young people who lack traditional experience but possess relevant skills gained through lived experiences or informal learning.

Participants also described how directional clarity influences hiring outcomes—young people who can clearly articulate their goals and purpose are more likely to stand out. This aligns with the idea that employability is not just a technical match but a narrative one: employers want to see coherence between who someone is and what they’re applying for.

Given this, youth workers once more show up as crucial facilitators, helping young people to not only prepare for interviews but also to articulate their identities in ways that align with the changing values of the market.

#### 4.5.3 Work Environment Evolution

---

<b>Codes</b>	Flexible Workplaces; Hybrid Work; Lack of Human Interaction; Work Environment
--------------	---

---

This subtheme examines the profound changes occurring in the structured, social, and physical environments in which work is conducted. Participants spoke of a shift toward flexible and hybrid models, which are increasingly seen not as perks but as expectations.

Demands for emotional health, autonomy, and a work culture that reflects personal values are driving these changes. Flexibility is more than just practical; it's a reflection of a larger cultural movement in the workplace towards trust and personalisation.

But this change has its drawbacks. People were worried about losing touch with each other and feeling lonely in digital and hybrid meetings. As one participant reflects,

*“Although there are more opportunities, human interaction is becoming less present.”*  
(P04)

As autonomy rises, there is a greater chance of disconnection and fragmentation, particularly for young people who are still establishing their networks and professional identities.

What exactly is a work environment used for, then? Interpersonal contact, emotional safety, and adaptability must be built into it rather than left to chance if it is to cultivate teamwork, creativity, and development.

These findings challenge the assumption that physical presence is outdated or irrelevant. Instead, they argue for intentional design: environments (physical or virtual) that are responsive to psychological needs, not just economic efficiency.

#### 4.5.4 Technological Disruptions

---

Codes

Artificial Intelligence, Digitalisation as a Tool, Emerging Technologies

---

This subtheme reflects the changes brought about by automation, artificial intelligence, and emerging technologies. These changes are redefining the nature of work and the skills needed to succeed in it. Participants across sectors acknowledged that AI is not a future possibility—it is a present force:

*“One major concern is the rise of AI.” (P03)*

*“AI is growing fast and changing everything.” (P10)*

Others reflected on the need to prepare youth for roles that may not yet exist. As one participant emphasised:

*“The world is changing rapidly. Many of the digital skills we teach today might be obsolete tomorrow.” (P03)*

Importantly, participants did not view digitalisation as a threat but rather as a tool that, when intentionally deployed, can enhance learning, creativity, and access. However, these benefits are not evenly distributed: access, confidence, and critical digital literacy remain uneven, especially for marginalised youth.

#### 4.5.5 Digital Adaptation Challenges

---

Codes

Challenges of digitalisation

---

To continue with the last topic, the primary difficulties are that, despite the widespread belief that young people are digitally literate, the reality is more uneven and fragmented.

Participants identified major obstacles to adjusting to rapidly evolving technologies, including those related to confidence, expectations, emotional engagement, and technical access. Now, digital saturation has created both dependency and fatigue. Another participant noted,

*“That’s all changing, and probably it needs to change—but it can’t be assumed everyone’s on the same page.” (P04)*

The widespread belief that all young people are "digital natives" is contested by this theme. It reveals that access does not equal literacy and that literacy does not automatically translate into critical, confident, or creative use of technology.

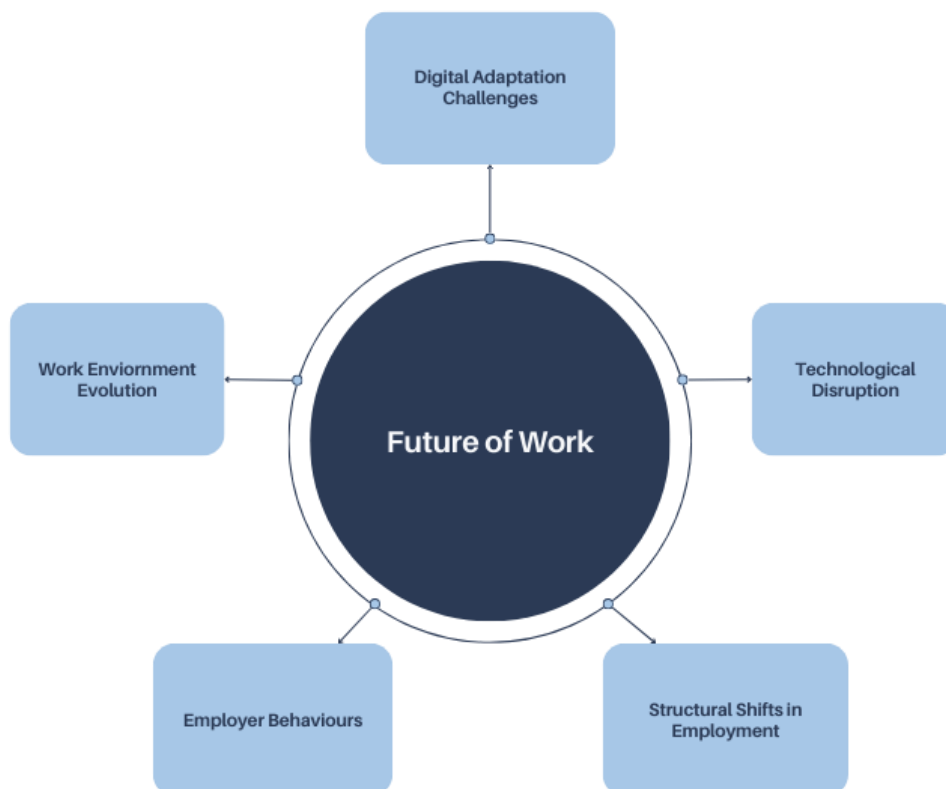
Digital tools can both increase agency and exclusion, depending on their context. Some people find that technology opens doors for them, while others find that it causes new kinds of friction,

especially when tools are introduced without consideration, support, or consideration for the diversity of learning styles.

#### 4.5.6 Conclusion

The findings across this theme reveal that the future of work is not arriving—it is unfolding in real time, and young people are already navigating its consequences.

The evidence suggests a world in transition, from structural shifts in employment and employer expectations to changing work environments and the emergence of artificial intelligence. However, these changes do not equally impact all young people. While others run the risk of falling behind, those who have access to mentorship, digital literacy, and thoughtful career planning are better equipped to adjust.



**Figure 17.** Future of Work: Key Thematic Shifts Impacting Youth Transitions

This mind map shows the five main subthemes this study identified as influencing work's future.

### 4.6 Service Design & Youth Work: From the micro-to-macro level

This last theme entails applying a systemic approach from micro-to-meso levels and integrating a service design lens into the role of youth workers.

#### 4.6.1 Micro-level: Youth Workers

Youth workers, at the micro level, function as relational anchors in a sometimes underfunded ecosystem. Far from being precisely defined or institutionally recognised, the function of the youth worker is often found retrospectively, through lived action rather than formal appointment. One participant recalled:

*“They discovered me as a theatre improv teacher and said, ‘You are doing youth work!’” (P04)*

This anecdote reflects a larger truth: many youth workers enter the field through non-traditional or experiential routes rather than standardised career paths. Their professional identity is frequently shaped by practice—through mentoring, facilitation, or creative engagement—before it is formally referred to as "youth work".

Although their entrance might be unusual, this does not imply lack of qualifications. On the contrary, their legitimacy results from a special mix of contextual awareness, interpersonal skill, and experiential knowledge—often overlooked by formal systems.

However, their flexibility and adaptability can lead to structural blind spots. Participants described recurring challenges around recognition, burnout, and feeling unsupported by systems that rely on them but rarely centre them.

Still, their work clearly shows transforming power even under these circumstances. Young people test ideas, change identities, and investigate directionality by means of reflective environments; they act as designers of them. One of the participants said,

*“And then, in this youth exchange, I realised, Oh my God—this has changed my direction.” (P011)*

From the perspective of service design, youth workers engage in real-time innovation by responding, adapting, and co-creating learning environments that formal systems seldom match in terms of emotional resonance or agility.

This relational approach allows them to provide consistent, personalised support, filling critical gaps in formal employment systems. Colvin et al. (2020) affirm this role, emphasising that youth workers, through consistent relational support, effectively develop assets and promote resilience among youth. These relational supports provide stability and continuity, essential for empowering youth to successfully navigate transitions and disruptions in their career trajectories.

The most important fact is this: young people grow when they feel safe, important and trusted. And youth workers are often the only people who make these conditions happen. This means

youth workers are the human interface of capability, and their environments—however improvised—are places where systems either fail or succeed.

#### 4.6.2 Meso-Level: Organisational Practice and Program Design

---

<b>Codes</b>	Expand Networks; Organisations' Status-quo; Project Development
--------------	---

---

Youth work organisations are situated at a crucial juncture at the meso level, connecting systemic strategy with individual practice. In addition to offering services, participants described these organisations as learning environments that were both community-focused and useful.

The significance of growing networks—not only for resource access but also as a means of mutual reinforcement and co-learning—was one recurrent theme. To develop projects that more fully represent the realities of young people, NGOs were presented as forums for group development where they could collaborate with peers, local governments, or international partners.

However, some of the participants reported a conflict between project development and organisational continuity despite this innovation. Short-term funding cycles continue to have a significant impact on the field, forcing NGOs to continuously shift their focus towards "the next proposal", frequently at the expense of staff well-being or strategic depth.

In addition to inspiring creativity, having to think about multiple projects at once can lead to uncertainty and exhaustion. It is challenging to invest in long-term capacity, reflection, or professional development because the current system frequently prioritises output over infrastructure.

From the perspective of service design, the meso-level is a crucial layer for system innovation. Youth-serving organisations have to strike a balance between responsiveness and sustainability, as well as agility and structure. Funding and policy must value not only the work that these organisations do but also how they change, adapt, and take care of the people who keep them going to support youth work in a meaningful way.

#### 4.6.3 Macro-Level: Youth Policy Stakeholders

---

<b>Codes</b>	Future of Youth Workers; Networking as Youth Workers' Organisations; Politics; Public Sector Collaborations
--------------	---

---

Participants explained that system-level actors, such as funding organisations, governmental entities, or transnational networks, are essential in determining the course of youth development. Thematic agendas, capacity-building initiatives, or strategic frameworks

frequently accomplish this. Even though these frameworks were useful, people on the ground occasionally felt that they were too abstract or disconnected from their immediate needs. A few participants expressed uncertainty about defining more general priorities or their relationship to the day-to-day realities of youth work.

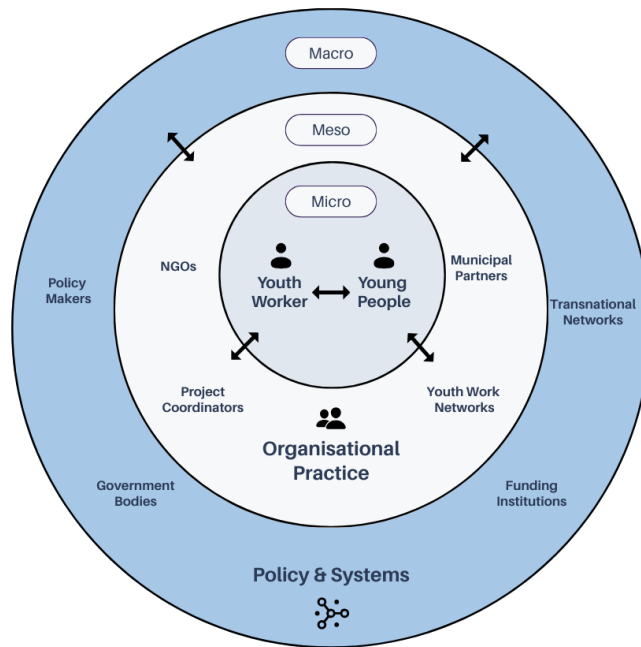
This highlights a structural issue with youth policy: although actors at the macro level can direct the field, their influence is only useful when it aligns with and reacts to practice. This emphasises the need for improved feedback loops between policy and implementation from the standpoint of service design, making sure that organisations and youth workers are not just delivering strategies but are also forming them based on lived insight. In the end, macro systems ought to be made to listen, adjust, and facilitate meaningful, context-sensitive practice in addition to providing guidance.

#### 4.6.4 Conclusion

This theme shows that working with youth involves much more than just providing services or activities. It is an intricate and adaptable process that links organisational learning, real-world experience, and the overall systemic picture.

At the micro level, youth workers work with young people to create learning spaces that respond to their needs in real time. At the meso-level, organisations try to balance being flexible; they do this by managing projects while also trying to stay true to their purpose and be sustainable. And, looking at the big picture, the people who make policy shape the strategic environment. But they only do a successful job if they get feedback from what is actually happening.

In service design, youth work is a human-centred innovation ecosystem. In this ecosystem, trust, iteration, and co-creation are not mere additions but integral components of its operation. The results suggest that for youth work to be as effective as possible, all parts of the system need to work together better, think about what they are doing, and respond to what is happening. This means designing not only for young people but with them, and not only for delivery but for adaptability, alignment, and long-term capability-building.



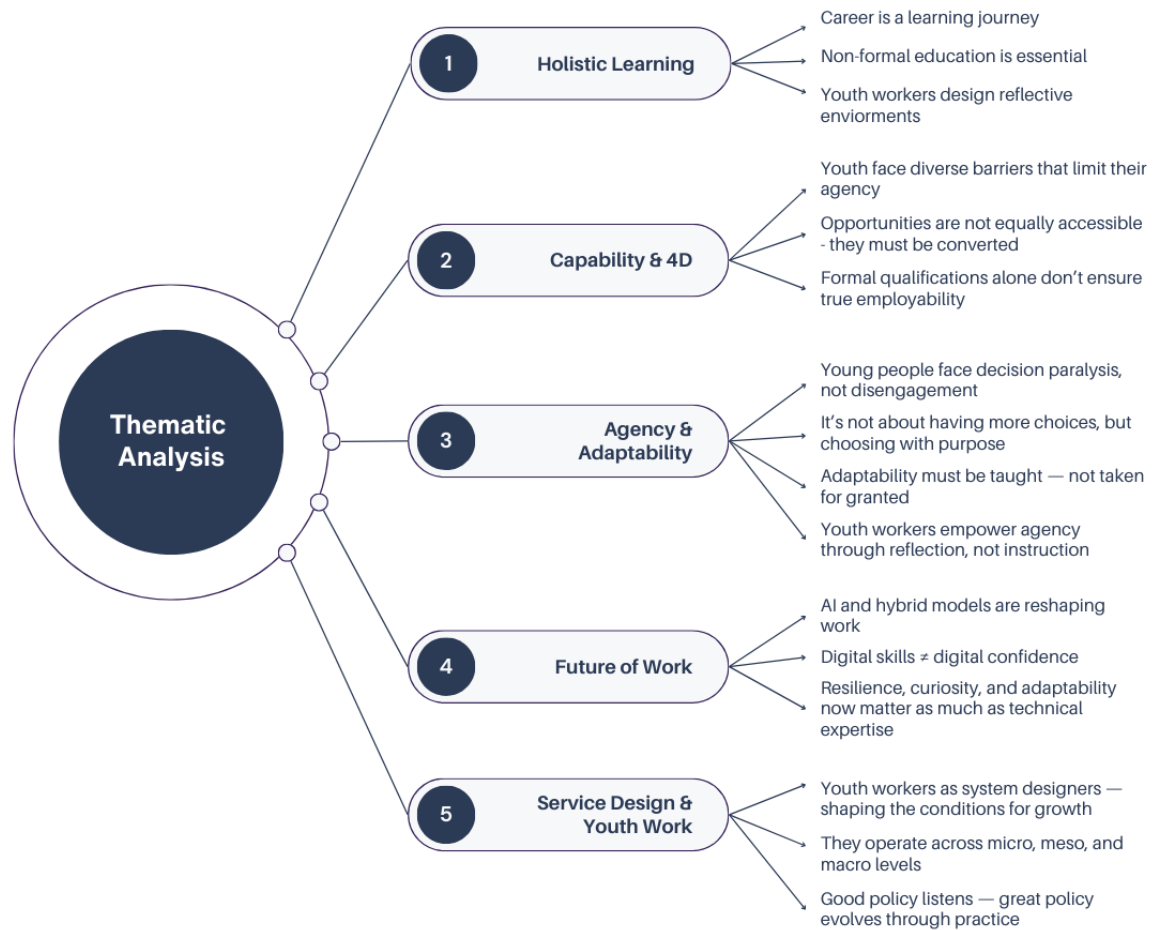
**Figure 18.** Youth Work as a Multi-Level System: A Service Design Perspective

This diagram shows youth work as a micro, meso, and macro system. In the micro, youth workers design adaptive and reflective learning environments with youth. NGOs and networks coordinate resources, projects, and strategy and practice at the meso level. The macro level includes policy, funding, and institutional actors that shape strategy.

#### 4.7 Thematic Analysis Conclusion

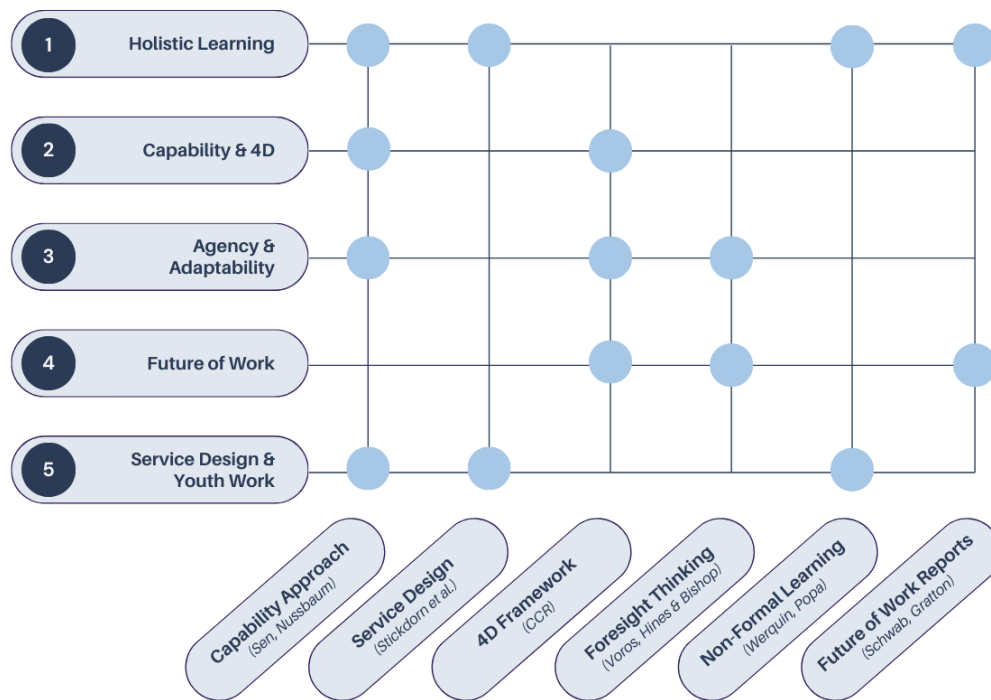
The study's findings demonstrate that career development for young people is a holistic process that incorporates formal education, informal learning, and introspection rather than a linear path linked to institutions or organisations. Young people are navigating identity, agency, and uncertainty in addition to learning new skills. The first theme demonstrates the critical role that youth workers play in creating flexible learning environments that normalise growth, self-awareness, and exploration. The second theme expanded on this by demonstrating the importance of granting real freedom—not just access to resources but also the capacity to transform those resources into worthwhile outcomes—using the Capability Approach and the 4D Competency Framework. Youth workers served as important conversion factors by promoting agency, confidence, and pertinent competencies, while psychological, social, and structural capability gaps were identified. The third theme highlights how difficult it is to choose a career in a world with so many options and changing standards. Young people are not disengaged; rather, they are looking for autonomy, purpose, and alignment. They also need assistance to clearly navigate uncertainty. The future of work surfaced in Theme 4 as a design challenge as well as a disruption. The labour landscape is changing due to digitisation, hybrid work, and changing employer expectations; this calls for not only technical adaptation but also

critical foresight and system thinking. Theme 5 demonstrated that youth work is a form of service design. The findings from all five themes reach the same conclusion: youth development is more complex than credentialing or content delivery.



**Figure 19.** Thematic Analysis Mind Map: Five Interconnected Themes in Youth Work and Career Development

#### 4.8 Aligning findings with existing literature



**Figure 20.** Theme-to-Literature Crosswalk Matrix

This matrix maps the relationship between each of the five central themes and the core conceptual frameworks drawn from the literature. It shows how the analysis is not only grounded in participant narratives but also rigorously aligned with existing research and theory. For instance, the Capability Approach (Sen, Nussbaum) connects strongly with themes on holistic learning, competence development, and agency. The 4D Competency Framework and foresight thinking provide tools to interpret adaptability and future-readiness. The service design lens (Stickdorn et al.) offers a systematic view of how youth workers operate across levels of influence, while literature on informal learning (Werquin, Popa) and the future of work (Gratton, Schwab) contextualises key structural challenges. This crosswalk demonstrates how theory and data inform one another, building a robust foundation for analysis and recommendations.

The Holistic View of Learning theme is backed by four connected areas of research—the Capability Approach, Service Design, the CCR 4D Framework, and Non-Formal Learning—showing a strong, multi-faceted foundation. This alignment reflects the complex, layered nature of youth development, where learning is understood not only as skill acquisition but as identity formation and agency-building across contexts.

The idea of capability approaches and 4D competencies is closely linked to its theoretical foundations, directly taking from Sen, Nussbaum, and the 4D model to outline the conditions and skills needed for effective functioning in real life of capability approaches and 4D competencies maintain a more focused yet deeply embedded relationship with their theoretical base, drawing straight from Sen, Nussbaum, and the 4D model to frame the conditions and competencies that enable real-life functioning.

## **5. DESIGN WORKS**

### **5.1 Expanding the CAREer with Futures Thinking: From Research to Reflective Tools**

#### **5.1.1 Design Rationale**

Based on research, improving young people's employability requires more than just matching skill development with the demands of today's labour market. It emphasised the importance of developing traits such as flexibility, agency, and foresight, which are frequently overlooked in traditional career support systems.

These systems usually prioritise immediate job readiness over young people's ability to navigate a future that is unpredictable and changing quickly. This criticism is in line with more general worries about out-of-date models that disregard the reality of more flexible, multi-stage career paths and assume they are linear.

To address this gap, the study recommends embedding futures thinking to enable young people to reflect on their past, make sense of the present, and actively shape their future.

Participants repeatedly stressed the value of identity exploration, introspection, and imaginative planning—particularly in times of uncertainty.

Building on the CAREer Diary's foundation of self-reflection, a new "Futures Thinking" chapter is proposed. This addition invites people using the diary to extend their reflective practices toward future possibilities, encouraging structured imagination, identity exploration, and adaptive planning. The extended diary functions as a dynamic tool that recognises career development as a non-linear, lifelong journey shaped by both personal agency and external uncertainties.

#### **5.1.2 Design Concept**

To translate these findings into action, a new chapter titled *Designing Futures* was added to the CAREer Diary. This section features guided, hands-on activities that encourage young people

to think ahead, build resilience in the face of uncertainty, and connect their personal development to wider social and technological shifts.

The chapter focuses on sparking imagination. It invites participants to explore what's possible, not just what's predictable.

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

CHAPTER 9  
**DESIGNING FUTURES**

WHAT IF YOUR CAREER ISN'T A STRAIGHT PATH — BUT A FUTURE YOU CAN SHAPE?

In today's world, preparing for the future isn't just about having the right skills. It's about imagining new possibilities, adapting to change, and making decisions even when things feel uncertain.

This chapter invites you to explore your possible futures — and build the mindset to approach them with confidence and creativity.

**ACTIVITY 1: "TIME TRAVEL"**

Close your eyes and imagine it's 10 years from now. You've grown, changed, explored, and created a life that feels meaningful, exciting, and truly aligned with your values and identity. You're not just doing what others expected—you're doing what feels right for you. You've made choices, taken chances, and adapted along the way.

Now, zoom in on a typical day in that future life:

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?	
WHAT DOES YOUR TYPICAL DAY LOOK LIKE?	

CAREER

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

WHO IS AROUND YOU?	
WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL PROUD?	

**HOW REFLECT:**

WHAT SMALL ACTIONS TODAY CAN BRING YOU CLOSER TO THAT LIFE?  
Who or what could support you in taking that first step?

WHAT MINDSETS WILL HELP YOU HANDLE UNCERTAINTY ALONG THE WAY?  
When things change, how do you usually respond—and how would you like to respond?

CAREER

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

**ACTIVITY 2: "FUTURE WHEEL" — EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES**

This activity is all about stretching your imagination and thinking ahead. It's based on the **Future Wheel**, a tool invented by Jerome C. Glenn to help people explore how one idea can lead to many different outcomes — some exciting, some challenging, and some surprising.

**THINK OF IT LIKE A BRAINSTORM FOR YOUR FUTURE.**

Here's how to do it:

- PICK ONE FUTURE IDEA**  
In the center of your page, draw a big circle. Inside, write one possible path you might want to explore. (Example: Start my own paper, work in another country, live in my job)
- DRAW OUT THE RIPPLE EFFECTS**  
Make three kinds of branches coming out of your circle:
  - Opportunities:** What cool things might come from that? (New equipment? Freedom? Creative work?)
  - Challenges:** What might be tricky? (Money? Pressure? Stress?)
  - Skills or habits:** What would you need to learn or work on? (Confidence? Time management? Tech skills?)
- TAKE A STEP BACK AND LOOK AT YOUR MAP**  
You might even add second layers — like "If that happens, then what?" This is where your imagination can really run wild.

CAREER

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

TRY IT:

CAREER

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

THINK ABOUT IT:

WHAT PARTS OF THIS MAP EXCITE YOU MOST?  
What makes that idea feel exciting or meaningful to you?

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT?  
What's something you're still unsure about in this path?

WHAT COULD YOU TRY NOW TO EXPLORE THIS PATH JUST A LITTLE?  
What's one small action you could take this week — even just 10 minutes?

Your career won't be a straight line — and that's a good thing. This activity helps you get ready for the twists and turns by showing you how one decision can lead to all kinds of new directions.

AND THAT'S WHERE YOUR POWER LIES: IN BEING READY, CURIOUS, AND OPEN TO WHAT COULD COME NEXT.

CAREER

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

ACTIVITY 3: "HORIZON SCAN, WHAT IS CHANGING AROUND YOU?"

The world is always changing — and those changes shape what kinds of jobs, skills, and lifestyles will be possible in the future. A horizon scan helps you pause and look around.

**What trends, technologies, or shifts are starting to show up — even if just a little?**

This activity helps you notice what's emerging now, so you can imagine how it might affect your future.

1. START BY LOOKING AROUND YOU.

Think about things that feel new, different, or growing — in your school, community, social media, or the world of work. **These are called trends or shifts.** A trend is something that seems to be happening more and more, even if it's just starting now.

2. WRITE DOWN UP TO 3 TRENDS OR CHANGES YOU'VE NOTICED

Why? Because that's enough to notice patterns — without feeling overwhelmed. Pick ones that feel real, interesting, or even a little confusing. They could be about:

- Technology (e.g. more people using AI tools)
- Ways of working (e.g. hybrid or freelance jobs)
- Social or lifestyle changes (e.g. more focus on mental health or sustainability)

3. USE THE TABLE TO EXPLORE HOW EACH CHANGE MIGHT CONNECT TO YOUR FUTURE.

TREND OR CHANGE	HOW IT STANDS OUT TO ME	HOW IT MIGHT AFFECT MY FUTURE
Tech skills are expected almost everywhere	Even jobs in hospitality or admin ask for digital tools I haven't used	I need to build my digital confidence to feel ready for more opportunities

CAREER

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

REFLECTION

FEELINGS

How do you feel about uncertainty now?

FININGS

What gives you confidence in shaping your future?

FUTURE

How will you keep reflecting and adapting over time?

CAREER

### 5.1.3 How It Works

This addition functions as a guided reflection canvas, inviting participants to work through prompts and visual tools that support deep, personal insight.

Participants engage in activities that help them:

- Envision multiple futures—embracing both exciting possibilities and potential challenges.
- Explore identity by connecting personal strengths and passions with evolving life contexts to shape flexible career stories.
- Strengthen adaptability by mapping out strategies for learning, resilience, and navigating future transitions.

The chapter reinforces the idea that career paths are dynamic, not predetermined—framing uncertainty as a chance for agency and growth, not fear.

To make futures thinking both accessible and meaningful, the chapter includes three purpose-built tools. Each is shaped by insights from the study's thematic analysis and inspired by actual foresight thinking methods. The table below outlines each tool's purpose, how it works, and how it helps young people navigate change and build meaningful career directions.

**Table #5.** Futures Thinking Tools

<b>Tool</b>	<b>What It Is</b>	<b>Why Is It Relevant</b>	<b>Appendix Figure</b>
Future Wheel	Visual map that explores the ripple effects of one future idea or possibility. Participants identify opportunities, challenges, and skills related to a chosen path.	Encourages structured imagination, critical thinking, and planning beyond first reactions. Builds awareness of complexity.	Appendix 2, Figure 1
Horizon Scan	Trend-spotting activity where participants identify 2–3 changes happening in the world (e.g., digitalisation, mental health focus) and reflect on how those might affect them.	Builds futures literacy, connects personal reflection to wider societal changes, and promotes adaptability.	Appendix 2, Figure 2
10 Years Time Travel	Reflective exercise where participants imagine a meaningful day in their life 10 years from now.	Builds vision, purpose, and identity reflection. Strengthens self-awareness and identity reflection.	Appendix 2, Figure 3

#### 5.1.4 Intended Use

The Futures Thinking chapter of the CAREer Diary can be used by young people on their own in printed or digital format, as well as youth workers in non-formal learning settings. (These tools are illustrated in Appendix 2, Figures 1 to 3.)

In this context, youth workers take on a broader role—not just as mentors, but as “systems guides” who help participants link their personal reflections to wider social, economic, and technological shifts.

This expanded approach shifts youth work from simply teaching skills to enable future readiness to empowering young people to anticipate change, adapt confidently, and actively shape their place in a rapidly changing workplace.

#### 5.2 Future Research Directions

While this study offered a conceptual expansion of the CAREer Diary through the addition of a futures thinking component, further empirical work is needed to test, refine, and validate its impact.

Future research will pilot the updated diary in varied non-formal learning settings, specifically during the events planned for the CAREer Diary project that will take place during June 2025.

Further studies should also examine how youth workers engage with and facilitate futures thinking. Exploring their training needs, motivations, and the systems that support them in becoming effective “futures guides” would help scale and sustain this approach. Understanding these dynamics is essential for embedding futures thinking more broadly into youth work.

Lastly, there is potential to extend these methodologies into other non-formal education formats, such as hands-on workshops, digital storytelling, or gamified career planning activities. Creating a broader ecosystem of futures literacy within youth work could help young people navigate employment changes and position them to actively shape the future trajectories of their communities and societies.

## **6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION**

### **6.1. Discussion**

This research was born out of a generation’s curiosity about navigating not only the labour market but also finding one’s purpose while living in an unpredictable system that is changing faster than ever thanks to emerging technologies. While the goal was to find those strategies for youth to follow, this study revealed that employability cannot be reduced to a list of skills or formal qualifications. Instead, it comes from the way capabilities (the freedom to act and be), contexts (the social and cultural conditions), and conversion factors (the things that help or hinder turning resources into actual outcomes) work together.

As one of many conversion factors, the CAREer Diary project allowed me to immerse myself in the world of youth work and non-formal education, where youth workers perform as system designers — crafting flexible, relational learning environments that allow self-discovery and reflection.

Formal education was repeatedly critiqued for being detached from labour market needs and the lived realities of learners. While degrees signal qualification, they do not necessarily translate into readiness. Participants described a “disconnect from real life” and “lack of practical experience”, highlighting a system that teaches knowledge but not how to convert that knowledge into action. The concept of “functionings” becomes useful here: credentials alone are not functionings unless they are activated. The education system, when static and one-size-fits-all, risks producing passive accumulation over active transformation.

Moreover, the data surfaced deeper conversion barriers — psychological (fear, disillusionment), structural (credentialism, lack of recognition), cultural (stereotypes, parental pressure), and environmental (language, access). Youth are not only underprepared by institutions but often internally constrained by fear, uncertainty, and a lack of reflective space. The data strikingly describes young people as lost: they have credentials but lack direction, and

they have opportunities but lack the confidence to pursue them. This is not failure in the individual sense—it is system failure. One participant observed, "They don't know their strengths because no one has asked them." The implication is clear: career guidance must begin with identity work, not job matching. It must create psychological safety before skills development can be effective.

While the biggest contradiction is that the labour market demands adaptive, reflective individuals, education systems rarely cultivate these attributes. The findings show that formal education, while necessary in some domains, frequently fails to translate into real-world readiness. A degree is not the same as being employable. Many participants reported a misalignment between what youth are taught (theory-heavy content) and what they need (practical, adaptive skills). In this light, non-formal education (NFE) emerges as counter-system. NFE was described as dynamic, adaptive, and rooted in relational trust. Through youth exchanges, facilitated reflection, and experiential methods, young people are given space to explore—not just careers, but themselves. These are “conversion spaces”: environments where potential becomes capability, and capability becomes confidence. Participants spoke not just of teaching soft skills but of surfacing them—through storytelling, gamification, and co-created experiences.

Importantly, this approach aligns with Kolb’s experiential learning cycle, the 4D competency emphasis on meta-learning, and foresight’s visioning exercises. Together, they show that learning is not something done to young people, but with and through them.

The integration of multiple findings addressed the main research question: How can youth workers effectively prepare young people to navigate an evolving labour market, and what strategies will best support their adaptability and resilience in future employment contexts?

First, the research highlighted that career development is no longer a linear process; instead, it must be understood as an evolving, lifelong journey of self-reflection, learning, and adaptability. Youth workers emerge as critical facilitators in this process, not only by delivering skills training but also by creating relational, reflective spaces where young people can develop self-awareness, agency, and foresight capacities. This holistic approach reframes youth's employability support as a systemic, human-centred practice rather than a skill delivery model.

Thematic findings from the "Core Career Skills" and "Future of Work" analyses addressed the first sub-question: What are the most important career skills for the future, and how are they changing in response to labour market changes? The research confirmed that emotional intelligence, adaptability, critical thinking, digital literacy, and foresight capabilities are increasingly essential. These results are consistent with more general labour market reports, but they also provide an important layer: participants emphasised that it is not only technical; it is not just upskilling that matters but also reflective, anticipatory mindsets capable of navigating continuous change.

The second sub-question — *What is the role of non-formal learning in cultivating these skills and supporting career readiness?* — was clearly answered through multiple themes. Non-

formal education, particularly as facilitated by youth workers, provides the experiential, relational, and adaptive environments necessary for cultivating emotional intelligence, reflection, critical thinking, and lifelong learning habits. The CAREer Diary intervention exemplifies how structured reflection tools within NFL settings can translate abstract competencies into tangible career development capacities.

Finally, the third sub-question— *“How can youth workers balance self-reflection practices with foresight-driven strategies to help youth design meaningful career pathways?”*—was answered through the study’s findings on the integration of foresight thinking, systems thinking, and service design principles into youth work practice.

This research argues that preparing youth for the future of work is not simply about equipping them with a fixed set of technical skills. It is about building reflective, adaptable, and foresightful learners capable of designing their own paths through uncertain futures.

By adopting futures-oriented and user-centred methodologies, youth workers can move beyond reactive support to proactive career co-design, helping young people navigate uncertainty, recognise emerging opportunities, and envision adaptable career trajectories.

Institutions prepare young people for static roles in dynamic systems. They teach *“what is”* rather than *“what could be”*. In contrast, participants emphasised the need for career imagination—the ability to prototype life paths, anticipate shifts, and design one’s future with agency. Foresight tools like the Future Wheel and Horizon Scans, introduced in the design work, represent a concrete way to translate this into youth work practice. The integration of these tools is not an academic addition; it is a structural correction. It prepares youth not for a job, but for life in motion.

## **6.2. Practical implication**

This study provides useful information for those who work with young people, non-formal education organisations, and career support institutions. By using the CAREer Diary model, youth workers can help young people to be more confident, more adaptable, and more ready for the unknowns of their future careers. Co-creating and testing future-focused career tools with NEET youth could refine our understanding of what works.

Organisations that provide education can include reflection and planning for the future in their programmes. This will make them more relevant when it comes to meeting the needs of future job markets. Services that provide advice on education and careers could make things better by supporting people to learn by themselves, exploring what might happen in the future, and helping people to be strong.

Ultimately, policymakers and funders can utilise these findings to support initiatives that extend beyond skill instruction, assisting young individuals in acquiring the deeper skills necessary to thrive in a constantly evolving work environment.

## **6.3. Future studies**

While this study developed a conceptual framework for expanding the CAREer Diary to include futures thinking, the intervention has not yet been formally tested with the NEET target group. This represents an important limitation, as the tool's practical effectiveness, accessibility, and impact on youth agency and employability have not been empirically validated.

Future research should focus on piloting the expanded CAREer Diary with NEET youth during upcoming non-formal education events. Iterative testing, participant feedback, and adaptive refinement will be essential to ensure that the tool is responsive to diverse needs and contexts. By engaging directly with the target group, future studies can generate richer evidence on how futures-oriented reflection practices contribute to skill development, confidence-building, and career adaptability among vulnerable youth populations.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In order to support young people navigating a labour market that is becoming more and more unstable, this study focused on developing adaptability, agency, and foresight. The study, which drew from the CAREer Diary project and was based on a constructivist, participatory methodology, showed that youth workers are the key to transforming non-formal learning environments into places where future-oriented skills can be developed, which goes beyond traditional models of employment readiness.

One other main argument is that career success in the 21st century is not defined by immediate employability alone but by the deeper capability to reflect, adapt, and proactively engage with an evolving world of work.

The research also developed a tangible contribution: an expanded CAREer Diary model integrating structured reflection with futures thinking, offering a scalable and adaptable intervention to strengthen youth career resilience. While further testing with NEET youth remains necessary, the conceptual foundation laid here advances theoretical, practical, and systemic understandings of youth employability support.

Ultimately, the study invites a reframing of youth work itself—not as remedial support for employment gaps, but as a proactive, imaginative force that empowers young people to become active designers of their futures in a rapidly changing global landscape.

Conducting this research has reinforced the idea that designing for the future is inherently an ongoing and adaptive process. Working alongside youth workers and participants, it became clear that building agency and resilience is not a static achievement but a dynamic and evolving practice. This journey has deepened my commitment to participatory and future-orientated methodologies and to the belief that empowering young people to navigate uncertainty is one of the most significant contributions we can make to society.

This thesis doesn't promise to solve the problems in the world of work, and it doesn't suggest that youth work can fix social unfairness on its own. But it does suggest this: if young people

have the right attitude, the right tools, and the right support, they won't feel lost and confused about what to do next; they could find their true north star by themselves.

And if we really want to help the next generation, we should stop asking them to *"just be resilient"* and start giving them the tools and real power to shape their lives.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

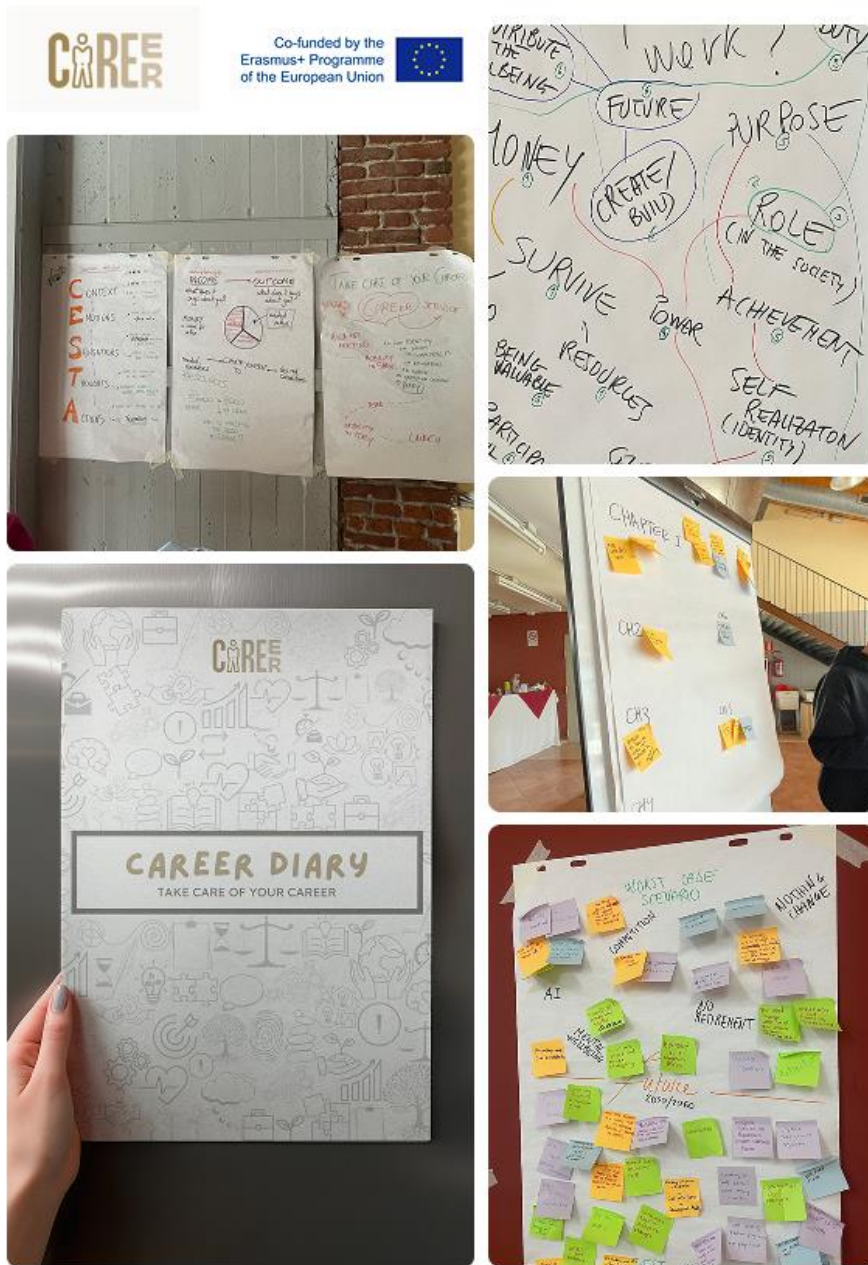
- Alkire, S. (2002). *Valuing freedoms: Sen's capability approach and poverty reduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Alkire, S. (2005). Why the capability approach? *Journal of Human Development*, 6(1), 115–135.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/146498805200034275>
- Appleby, Y., & Bathmaker, A. M. (2006). The new skills agenda: Increased lifelong learning or new sites of inequality? *British Educational Research Journal*, 32(5), 703–717.
- Axelos. (2021). The 5 principles of service design thinking. <https://www.axelos.com/resource-hub/blog/the-5-principles-of-service-design-thinking>
- Babson, O., & Koller, T. (2011). *The human cloud: How today's changemakers use artificial intelligence and the internet to transform work*.
- McGraw Hill. Barn, B., & Sandkuhl, K. (2022). Enterprise modelling and adaptation: An overview. *International Journal of Information Management*, 62, 102434.
- Brown, S. D., & Lent, R. W. (2013). *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Butterfield, L. D. (2010). *Critical thinking skills: Essential components for 21st-century learning*. Elsevier.
- Callejo-González, J. J., & Ruiz-Herrero, J. A. (2024). Factors influencing the decision of young adults to remain in their rural environment: Social origin, education and gender. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 102, 1–12.  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S074301672400010X>
- Chen, M., Bolt, G., Yu, L., & Hooimeijer, P. (2023). The impact of the residential environment on Chinese older people's aging-in-place intentions: A mediation and moderation analysis. *Cities*, 136, 104278.  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0197397523001686>
- Colvin, S., White, A. M., Akiva, T., & Wardrip, P. S. (2020). What do you think youth workers do? A comparative case study of library and afterschool workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 119, 105537.
- Dhir, S. (2021). *The changing face of work and careers*. Springer.
- Espinoza, C., Ukleja, M., & Rusch, C. (2010). *Managing the millennials: Discover the core competencies for managing today's workforce*. Wiley.
- European Commission. (2016). *New skills agenda for Europe*. Publications Office of the European Union.
- European Commission. (2017). *The European digital competence framework for citizens (DigComp 2.1)*.
- European Commission. (2020). *The youth work and youth employability report*. European Union.
- Fallman, D. (2008). The interaction design research triangle of design practice, design studies, and design exploration. *Design Issues*, 24(3), 4–18. <https://doi.org/10.1162/desi.2008.24.3.4>
- Gardenswartz, L., Cherbosque, J., & Rowe, A. (2008). *Emotional intelligence for managing results in a diverse world*. Davies-Black Publishing.
- Gratton, L. (2022). *Redesigning work: How to transform your organization and make hybrid work for everyone*. MIT Press.
- Gratton, L., & Scott, A. (2016). *The 100-year life: Living and working in an age of longevity*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Hillenbrand, E., Karim, N., Mohanraj, P., & Wu, D. (2015). Measuring gender-transformative change: A review of literature and promising practices. CGIAR. <https://cgspace.cgiar.org/bitstreams/bc0a8a92-b301-4972-be11-5c0875c6f742/download>
- Hines, A., & Bishop, P. C. (2013). Framework foresight: Exploring futures the Houston way. *Futures*, 51, 31–49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2013.05.002>

- Hines, A., & Bishop, P. C. (2015). *Thinking about the future: Guidelines for strategic foresight* (2nd ed.). Houston Foresight.
- Holmes, R., & Jones, N. (2013). *Gender and social protection in the developing world: Beyond mothers and safety nets*. Zed Books.
- Institute for the Future. (2020). *Work Tech 2050 executive summary*.
- Intellias. (2023). *Service design principles: A guide to creating exceptional customer experiences*. <https://intellias.com/service-design-principles/>
- International Labour Organization. (2021). *Youth and COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being*. ILO.
- International Labour Organization. (2024). *Global employment trends for youth 2024: The Americas*. ILO. <https://doi.org/10.54394/IAQW7329>
- Kai-Fu, L. (2018). *AI superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the new world order*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice Hall.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Laal, M. (2011). Lifelong learning: What does it mean? *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 28, 470–474. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.11.090>
- Le Monde. (2024, September 11). *Salaires: légère avancée sur les inégalités femmes-hommes dans le monde*. [https://www.lemonde.fr/emploi/article/2024/09/11/salaires-legere-avancee-sur-les-inegalites-femmes-hommes-dans-le-monde\\_6312285\\_1698637.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/emploi/article/2024/09/11/salaires-legere-avancee-sur-les-inegalites-femmes-hommes-dans-le-monde_6312285_1698637.html)
- Marr, B. (2022). *Future skills: The 20 skills and competencies everyone needs to succeed in a digital world*. Wiley.
- McIntyre, A. (2008). *Participatory action research*. Sage Publications.
- McKinsey Global Institute. (2021). *The future of work after COVID-19*.
- McKinsey & Company. Milojević, I., & Inayatullah, S. (2015). *Futures thinking and strategy development: Applying foresight in government*. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2023). *Digital transformation labour market report 2023*. OECD Publishing.
- Popa, F. (2011). Recognition of non-formal learning in Europe: Challenges and opportunities. *Youthpass and Recognition Essays*, 3, 1–12.
- Reuters. (2024, August 11). *Global youth unemployment decline seen falling further, report finds*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/global-youth-unemployment-decline-seen-falling-further-report-finds-2024-08-11>
- Reuters. (2025, February 12). *Unemployment dips in Latin America in 2024, but inequality gap grows, ILO says*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/unemployment-dips-latin-america-2024-inequality-gap-grows-ilo-says-2025-02-12/>
- Riggio, R. E., & Tan, S. J. (2014). *Leader interpersonal and influence skills: The soft skills of leadership*. Routledge.
- Robeyns, I. (2005). The capability approach: A theoretical survey. *Journal of Human Development*, 6(1), 93–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/146498805200034266>
- Robeyns, I., & Byskov, M. F. (2023). The capability approach. In E. N.

- Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy (Summer 2023 ed.). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/capability-approach/>
- Schwab, K. (2016). The fourth industrial revolution. World Economic Forum.
- Sen, A. (1999). Development as freedom. Oxford University Press.
- Service design 101. (n.d.). Nielsen Norman Group. Retrieved February 11, 2025, from <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/service-design-101/>
- Senge, P. M. (1990). The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization. Doubleday/Currency.
- Smith, S. G., & Sinkford, J. C. (2022). Gender equality in the 21st century: Overcoming barriers to women's leadership in global health. *Journal of Dental Education*, 86(3), 255–262. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jdd.13059>
- Stickdorn, M., & Schneider, J. (2011). This is service design thinking: Basics, tools, cases. BIS Publishers.
- Stickdorn, M., Hormess, M. E., Lawrence, A., & Schneider, J. (2018). This is service design doing: Applying service design thinking in the real world. O'Reilly Media.
- Triana, M. C., Jayasinghe, M., & Pieper, J. R. (2019). Perceived workplace gender discrimination and employee consequences: A meta-analysis and complementary studies considering country context. *Journal of Management*, 45(2), 741–769. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206318776772>
- Tuckett, A., & Field, J. (2016). Skills and lifelong learning: Attitudes to learning. University of Wolverhampton. [https://wlv.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/2436/620608/Skills\\_and\\_lifelong\\_learning\\_-\\_attitudes\\_to\\_learning.pdf](https://wlv.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/2436/620608/Skills_and_lifelong_learning_-_attitudes_to_learning.pdf)
- Voros, J. (2003). A generic foresight process framework. *Foresight*, 5(3), 10–21. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14636680310698379>
- Werquin, P. (2008). Recognition of non-formal and informal learning: Country practices. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
- White, J., Sepúlveda, M. J., & Patterson, C. J. (2021). Understanding the well-being of LGBTQI+ populations. National Academies Press. <https://books.google.com/books?id=lucREAAAQBAJ>
- WiredGov. (2021). Service design and public sector innovation. WiredGov.
- World Bank. (2020). The human capital index 2020 update: Human capital in the time of COVID-19. World Bank Group.
- World Economic Forum. (2020). The future of jobs report 2020. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020>
- World Economic Forum. (2025). The future of jobs report 2025. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). Case study research and applications: Design and methods (6th ed.). Sage.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1. CAREer Diary Process



Appendix 1, Figure 1. Images during the process of co-creating the CAREer Diary during the second mobility of the project.

## Appendix 2. Design works

Appendix 2, Figure 1. Template for 10 Years Time Travel Exercise

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE  
DESIGNING FUTURES

**CHAPTER 9  
DESIGNING FUTURES**

**WHAT IF YOUR CAREER ISN'T A STRAIGHT PATH — BUT A FUTURE YOU CAN SHAPE?**

In today's world, preparing for the future isn't just about having the right skills. It's about imagining new possibilities, adapting to change, and making decisions even when things feel uncertain.

This chapter invites you to explore your possible futures — and build the mindset to approach them with confidence and creativity.

**ACTIVITY 9-1 "TIME TRAVEL"**

**Close your eyes and imagine it's 10 years from now.** You've grown, changed, explored, and created a life that feels meaningful, exciting, and truly aligned with your values and identity. You're not just doing what others expected—you're doing what feels right for you. You've made choices, taken chances, and adapted along the way.

Now, zoom in on a typical day in that future life:

<b>WHAT ARE YOU DOING?</b>	
<b>WHAT DOES YOUR TYPICAL DAY LOOK LIKE?</b>	

**CAREER**

CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES

CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE  
DESIGNING FUTURES

**CHAPTER 9: DESIGNING FUTURES**

<b>WHO IS AROUND YOU?</b>	
<b>WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL PROUD?</b>	

**NOW REFLECT:**

**WHAT SMALL ACTIONS TODAY CAN BRING YOU CLOSER TO THAT LIFE?**  
Who or what could support you in taking that first step?

**WHAT MINDSETS WILL HELP YOU HANDLE UNCERTAINTY ALONG THE WAY?**  
When things change, how do you usually respond—and how would you like to respond?

**CAREER**

Appendix 2, Figure 2. Example of a Future Wheel Mapping Exercise





**ACTIVITY 3: "HORIZON SCAN, WHAT IS CHANGING AROUND YOU?"**

The world is always changing — and those changes shape what kinds of jobs, skills, and lifestyles will be possible in the future. A horizon scan helps you pause and look around:

**What trends, technologies, or shifts are starting to show up — even if just a little?**

This activity helps you notice what's emerging now, so you can imagine how it might affect your future.

**1. START BY LOOKING AROUND YOU.**

Think about things that feel new, different, or growing — in your school, community, social media, or the world of work. **These are called trends or shifts.** A trend is something that seems to be happening more and more, even if it's just starting now.

**2. WRITE DOWN UP TO 3 TRENDS OR CHANGES YOU'VE NOTICED**

Why? 3? Because that's enough to notice patterns — without feeling overwhelmed. Pick ones that feel real, interesting, or even a little confusing. They could be about:

- Technology (e.g. more people using AI tools)
- Ways of working (e.g. hybrid or freelance jobs)
- Social or lifestyle changes (e.g. more focus on mental health or sustainability)

**3. USE THE TABLE TO EXPLORE HOW EACH CHANGE MIGHT CONNECT TO YOUR FUTURE.**

TREND OR CHANGE	WHY IT STANDS OUT TO ME	HOW IT MIGHT AFFECT MY FUTURE
Tech skills are expected almost everywhere	Even jobs in hospitality or admin ask for digital tools I haven't used	I need to build my digital confidence to feel ready for more opportunities

**REFLECTION**

**FEELINGS**

How do you feel about uncertainty now?

**FINDINGS**  
What gives you confidence in shaping your future?

**FUTURE**  
How will you keep reflecting and adapting over time?

Note: The full CAREer Diary is available [here](#).

More information about the resources and process [in this link](#).