

Appendix C: Country Spotlight Report: Ukraine

UKRAINE

YOUTH WELL-BEING, LEARNING TO EARNING

Country Spotlight

From May to July, 2023, IREX supported six youth researchers in consulting with 39 youth from diverse backgrounds around Ukraine on their experiences transitioning from school to work, or “learning to earning” (L2E). These focus groups targeted understanding the interaction between youth’s L2E journeys and their well-being. While IREX’s “Youth Well-Being Along Their Learning-to-Earning Journeys” (2023) report captures overall findings and recommendations garnered from the research conducted across three distinct contexts—Ukraine, Kenya, and Malawi—here we spotlight three themes unique to the Ukrainian participants and context and recommendations geared toward the international development community and youth-led and youth-serving programs and organizations.

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39 Youth Focus Group Participants


Gender:

15 female; 17 male


Age:

Thirty-eight 18- to 25-year-olds, one 26- to 35-year-old


Geography:

25 urban, 14 rural


Job Status:

11 unemployed; 8 short-term employed; 1 self-employed; 14 long-term employed; 5 multiple income sources


Education:

5 high school graduates, 2 community college graduates, 17 current bachelor’s students, 13 bachelor’s graduates, 1 current master’s student, 1 master’s degree graduate


Languages Spoken:

37 Ukrainian speakers and 2 Ukrainian and Russian speakers


Internally Displaced Persons:

6 participants, all within Ukraine

The full-scale invasion has had an important impact on youth employment and well-being.

In order to understand Ukrainian youth’s lived experiences during the data collection period, it is critical to unpack the impact of the full-scale invasion on their well-being and L2E journeys. While the research methods did not probe for this directly—in alignment with our “do no harm” approach—the topic emerged naturally, ranging from reflections on how the war has changed labor market demands and youth’s professional directions, to the personal tolls the stress and uncertainty have had on youth’s employment processes. In the words of one Ukrainian focus group participant, “The war affected the skill set that employers required of workers.” As a result, for this young person, the field and skills they had developed “became useless.” Another youth who was consulted built on this idea, sharing that “when you work for someone, there is a fear that tomorrow you will be fired because the country is at war, and you do not know whether the business will be profitable or not, or whether your skills will be needed.” For others, the war context erected barriers to employment opportunities, with employers avoiding hiring men who might need to serve in the army or discriminating against those with the status of an internally displaced person due to the concern that they would not be around for very long.

On a personal level, various youth expressed stress associated with uncertainty and fear for the well-being of their loved ones—impacting their ability to search for and secure work opportunities. As one focus group participant shared, “When a rocket hit my grandmother’s house nearby, it was challenging to be at the interview.” For others, this absence of stability served as a motivating factor helping them to push forward and be intentional with their employment decisions, gaining greater clarity on what they wanted to do with their lives. One youth research participant expressed that “during the full-scale war, I found myself and understood what I wanted to do. This is since you can die at any moment, so I hurried to decide on my profession as soon as possible.” In another example, a Ukrainian youth expressed:



“It has always been essential for me to know that my work has social significance, that my profession helps people. During the war, this feeling and desire intensified. Now I have chosen a career that will benefit my country the most. During the war, I thought about public organizations, the field of medicine, and something related to helping people and the state.”

While the toll the full-scale invasion has had on youth’s well-being has been documented in prior research,¹ these examples shed light on the interplay between well-being and employment at a critical historical moment that may have longer-term implications on youth’s L2E experiences. As such, it is important that youth-led and youth-serving organizations and programs—and entities that fund these efforts—consider the role that social, emotional, and skill-based supports for well-being may play in the design and implementation of effective youth workforce development programming and outcomes.

1. Chaaya, Celine, Vimala Devi Thambi, Özge Sabuncu, Reem Abedi, Awab Osman, Olivier Uwishema, and Helen Onyeaka. “Ukraine–Russia Crisis and Its Impacts on the Mental Health of Ukrainian Young People during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Ann Med Surg (Lond)*. 2022 Jul; 79:104033. doi: 10.1016/j.amsu.2022.104033.

Societal expectations and pressures influence Ukrainian youth's early workforce experiences and well-being.

The present research revealed that many Ukrainian youth start career planning their L2E journeys as early as secondary education, given that working part-time or full-time is common while completing their college degree. This emerged for many reasons, as youth expressed desires to be financially independent, based on financial needs—especially those who relocated to a new city—as well as a means of gaining the practical experience needed to secure a job upon graduation. However, the reality that youth enter the workforce while still in school can create additional personally imposed and social pressures related to what success should look like, which was found to affect youth well-being. A youth focus group participant revealed,

“I had problems with anxiety when I finished high school. Lots of my friends had diagnoses, too. Social expectations and pressure. You need to have a good life, a car, a family, and a career, and if you don't, it affects your well-being.”

Youth also shared that they regularly compared themselves to peers who have already made strides in their professional development, resulting in feelings of resentment and low self-esteem. As a youth enrolled in a bachelor's program shared, “Why do some work and I don't? Everyone is working, but I don't know who I am or my sphere. Maybe I'm studying the wrong major. I'm already 20, and I'm still unemployed.” Youth also shared that they felt stress related to navigating gaining practical, on-the-job experiences with their school demands—particularly when their professors and/or academic institutions did not support these efforts. One current university student shared,

“Even in the university, there are often controversial positions from professors: some of them recommend looking for a job to get some experience, while others always emphasize that we entered university to study, not to work simultaneously and miss lectures. So, during studying, it's an additional pressure to combine this job search or job itself with studying; you must make a choice between studying and learning, and it brings a lot of stress.”

Early career guidance and support within their communities and academic institutions could help youth to alleviate these feelings and equip them with the skills and resources they need to help navigate this stressful life transition and help them find employment opportunities that align with their values and professional goals. In addition, given that youth's L2E trajectories seem to be beginning as early as secondary education in Ukraine, it could also be beneficial to integrate comprehensive workforce development programs and support systems into earlier stages of education, to ensure just-in-time support to youth that matches their needs.



Ukrainian youth experience misalignment between their education and labor market demands.

In the midst of the full-scale invasion, youth across the Ukrainian focus groups shared how they continued to pursue their education driven by their commitments to securing a decent job, fulfilling their potential, and working toward their futures. However, despite their ambitions, many Ukrainian youth expressed that their education alone was insufficient to secure gainful employment, pointing toward a misalignment between their education and the labor market demands. As a university graduate expressed, “After university, you don’t immediately leave with the skills for work, so you still need time after it.” This bred disappointment for many youth, who expected greater success upon graduation. In the words of one Ukrainian youth consulted, this challenge also contributed to broader life stressors related to finances, noting:



“No one taught us financial literacy or that education alone is insufficient. You have to work hard and earn a living. It was a struggle, especially for me...The reality is harsh, especially in big cities where competition is high.”

This anxiety related to securing experience and opportunities that would allow them to be successful in the job market and life was reflected by many focus group participants. As one youth put it,



“I am worried about unemployment. It is impossible to find a job for students with minimal experience. Everywhere vacancies require at least one year of experience. And where [can I] get it? Even with volunteer experience, they do not take it because it is unsuitable. There are few internships. You send 20 CVs, but none of them respond. I am losing hope of finding a job.”



While not always recognized as formal job experience by employers, youth expressed how internship and volunteer opportunities—particularly during the full-scale invasion—proved incredibly fulfilling for their personal and professional development. One Ukrainian youth expressed, “When a person has a lot of informal experience in volunteering and internships, that becomes their foundation. They have some skills that can direct them in choosing a future job.” As such, it is important to consider how these experiences might be further encouraged and valued within formal academic spaces. Moreover, efforts to more adequately align educational programming to labor market needs are crucial in order to prepare youth with the skills and experiences needed to secure meaningful and stable employment both during school and post-graduation.



Efforts to support Ukrainian youth well-being and their learning to earning journeys should:

- ✓ Fund and design workforce development programming that integrates social, emotional, and skill-based well-being interventions to support employment outcomes. Monitor the evolving well-being dynamic, particularly in the context of the ongoing full-scale invasion, to ensure that interventions meet youth's current needs.
- ✓ Partner with higher education institutions and career preparation centers to offer holistic support to ensure that youth have the skills to navigate stress associated with societal pressures along their L2E journeys.
- ✓ Integrate comprehensive workforce development programs and support systems into earlier stages of education, to ensure just-in-time support to youth that matches their needs.
- ✓ Align educational programming in a flexible and responsive way to labor market needs. Generate feedback loops and accountability mechanisms between the private sector and educational institutions to ensure that these changes are sustainable and evolve alongside changing demands.
- ✓ Promote more regular communication and collaboration among educational institutions, government agencies that manage internship opportunities, and private-sector human resource actors to ensure that internships and temporary or on-the-job learning opportunities result in more regular transitions toward stable employment.
- ✓ Leverage and build upon best practices within pre-established informal and formal community networks to best support youth well-being and employment opportunities and success. In addition, it is critical to improve access and affordability of mental health services to complement these localized support systems effectively.



Ukrainian Secondary Education Degree Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys



“Even in the university, there are often controversial positions from professors: some of them recommend looking for a job to get some experience, while others always emphasize that we entered university to study, not to work simultaneously and miss lectures.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



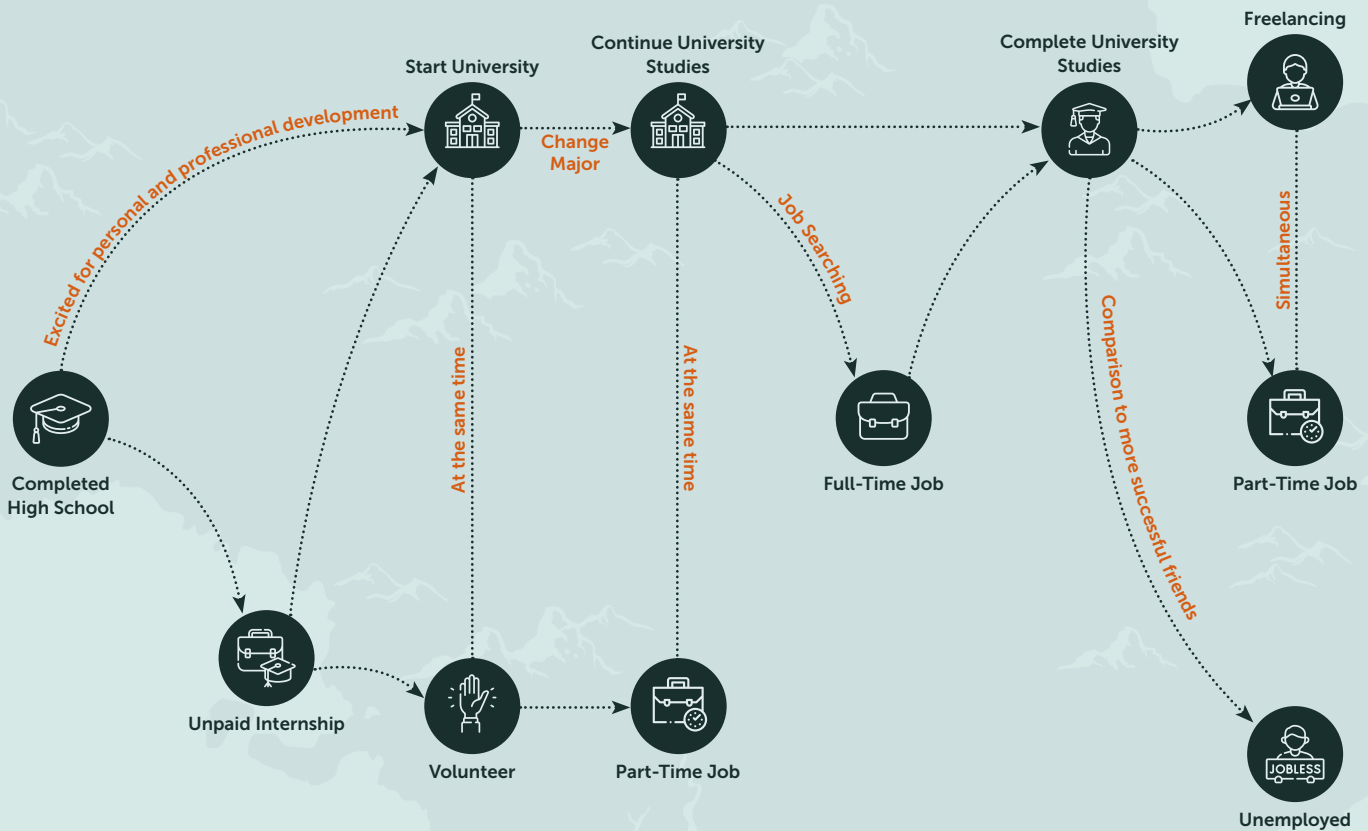
“The ability to provide for oneself and realize one’s desires increased my well-being, but all day work (24h) and a toxic team led to constant fatigue and apathy.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“I have stress due to complex work without contract. It is unstable and I feel have a physical and mental coma.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“When a person has a lot of informal experience in volunteering and internships, that becomes their foundation. They have some skills that can direct them in choosing a future job.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“When a rocket hit my grandmother’s house nearby, it was challenging to be at the interview.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“I have doubts about myself and the future and feelings of worthlessness. I do not understand own interests, there is a discrepancy between salary and work. I am in a depressive state and face a lot of pressure from people around me.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

These journeys are presented as compilations of various youth experiences with the intention of reflecting the complexity of youth L2E and well-being journeys. As such they are not aimed to be generalizable or map to all youth, but to serve to prompt dialogue and reflection related to youth experiences and supportive programming.

Ukrainian Bachelor's Degree Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys



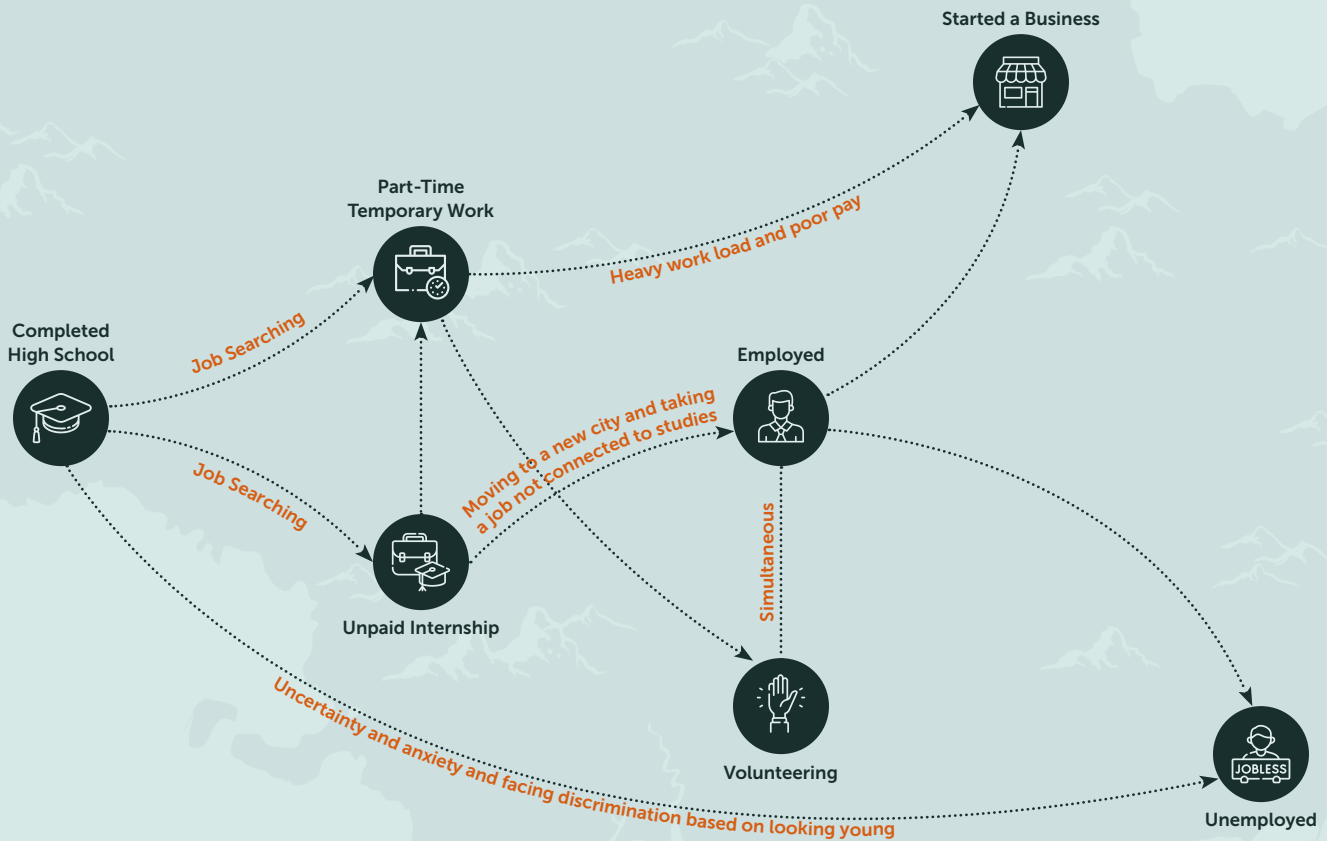
"It has always been essential for me to know that my work has social significance, that my profession helps people. During the war, this feeling and desire intensified. Now I have chosen a career that will benefit my country the most. During the war, I thought about public organizations, the field of medicine, and something related to helping people and the state."

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



"Working on mistakes, giving sense to each and every day, enjoyment of being present (living here and now) increase my well-being. Homesick, new city and unprofessional approaches from colleagues decreased my well-being."

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



"After university, you don't immediately leave with the skills for work, so you still need time after it."

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



"The war affected the skill set that employers required of workers. At one point, the field where I developed became useless."

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



"Uncertainty and anxiety and facing discrimination based on looking young"

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

These journeys are presented as compilations of various youth experiences with the intention of reflecting the complexity of youth L2E and well-being journeys. As such they are not aimed to be generalizable or map to all youth, but to serve to prompt dialogue and reflection related to youth experiences and supportive programming.