
Title of the project:	NEXT-UP – Navigating the Next Normal: Innovative Approaches to Enhancing Youth’s Education-Employment Transitions in Post-COVID-19 Europe
Contact:	Lara Maestriperi (PI)
Web page:	https://portalrecerca.uab.cat/en/persons/lara-maestriperi
Area:	Education, labour market, covid19, youth, intersectionality, machine learning

What?

NEXT-UP (2025-2028) addresses the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on youth transitions from education to employment, with a particular focus on growing inequalities and labour market shifts across Europe.

It aims to explore and forecast the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on the transition of youth from school/education to work/employment, focusing on co-creating evidence-informed, future-oriented policies and programs, alongside innovative stakeholder engagement. NEXT-UP emphasises inclusivity, particularly supporting disadvantaged groups for equitable job access in an intersectional perspective.

The project focuses on the nexus between youth employment policies, stakeholder perceptions, and youth agency in educational and career choices. Triangulating insights from various methods, NEXT-UP fosters a social innovation model to facilitate effective interactions among diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, employers, and youth organisations, to co-create and implement effective strategies for youth transitions. Informed policies and sustained social innovations through NEXT-UP are expected to lead to responsive and resilient European educational and employment systems, innovative educational programs, and enhanced support for young people entering the workforce. This will significantly impact the formation of social innovation ecosystems to address youth employment challenges in the post-pandemic era and promote social and economic inclusion across Europe.

Who?

NEXT-UP is promoted by an international consortium led by the University of Tampere. On behalf of Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, the project is driven by **Lara Maestriperi** (PI).

Lara Maestriperi holds a Ph.D. in Sociology and Social Research, granted by the University of Trento (2011). She is distinguished researcher “Ramon y Cajal” in the Department of Political Science at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. She is also a member of i-GOP-UAB's Research Group on Innovation, Governance and Public Policies.

The project brings together a consortium of 11 partners from 9 countries, including 8 universities (6 of which are part of the ECIU network), 1 private association, 1 student union, and 1 UN-affiliated intergovernmental organization, supported by an international advisory board:

1. Tampere University, Finland (Coordinator)
2. University of Stavanger, Norway
3. University of Aveiro, Portugal
4. Center for Research in Higher Education Policies, Portugal
5. University of Twente, Netherlands
6. Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain
7. University of Trento, Italy
8. Heidelberg University, Germany
9. Tallinn University, Estonia
10. European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, Austria
11. National Union of Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (SAMOK), Finland

Why?

Youth employability has been a key focus of EU policy, reflected in the initiatives such as Youth Employment Support (YES) and the European Youth Guarantee. Although youth unemployment has decreased from 24% in 2013 to 13.9% by 2023, it remains twice as high as the adult rate, and the rate of youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET) still exceeds the EU target by 2.7%. The COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated these challenges, leading to increased inactivity, underutilisation of youth skills, and a growing skills mismatch between young job seekers and employers. Given that one socially excluded young person can cost society up to EUR 1.2 million euro, addressing these issues is now more critical than ever.

How?

NEXT-UP integrates the *Quadruple Helix Model for social innovation* with concepts such as youth agency, intersectionality, and policy learning to enhance the theoretical and practical understanding of YTSTW processes. Methodologically, the project combines the Living Lab approach, machine learning, psychometric surveys, systematic literature review, longitudinal and focus group interviews, statistical methods, agent-based modelling, and policy design.

Building on lessons from the COVID-19 experience and the identified emerging labour market trends, NEXT-UP will develop the typologies of education-to-work transitions and forecast the potential skills gaps to inform our foresight activities. We will

collaborate with policymakers, youth, educators, and employers to co-develop actionable, evidence-informed, and future-proof policy recommendations. These recommendations aim to support young people in their transition from education and training to employment, promote social and geographical mobility, and mitigate the risks of youth unemployment, underemployment, and social exclusion.

IGOP's team oversees leading WP2 "Perceptions of youth" which seeks to empirically explore the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on young people's experiences and perceptions of both horizontal and vertical transitions (Micro-level). During this WP, the UAB team will lead the collection and analysis of about 125 longitudinal qualitative interviews in 5 countries in Europe. A systematic literature review and two waves of life-course interviews will be carried out. Country reports will be issued, and a cross sectional and intersectional analysis will be performed and encompassed in a final comparative country report.

When?

January 2025 – June 2028

Call: The project is funded by the European Union in the framework of the call *A sustainable future for Europe* (HORIZON-CL2-2024-TRANSFORMATIONS-01). The grant amount is 2,914,873.50 €, The UAB's budget is: 304.745.00€