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The Evolving Transition: Youth Integration in an Era of Technological Disruption and Labor Scarcity

Valentina Franca *

The integration of young people into the labour market represents one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges of contemporary societies. However, this transition is no longer occurring in a static environment; it is unfolding against a macroeconomic backdrop defined by pervasive workforce shortages and the rapid deployment of artificial intelligence. Consequently, the mechanisms through which young adults transition from formal education into professional life are fundamentally evolving. The traditional, linear pathway—moving directly from the classroom into a standard, permanent employment contract—has increasingly given way to a complex spectrum of atypical employment forms, including student work, apprenticeships, and various models of traineeships. This special section of the E-Journal of International and Comparative LABOUR STUDIES brings together four insightful contributions that critically examine the legal, economic, and practical realities of these transitional labour models across Europe.

A central theme that reverberates throughout this thematic section is the generational shift in attitudes toward employment; a shift deeply intertwined with new technological modes of work organization. Current labour market trends are shaped by Generation Z's entrance into the workforce—a demographic demonstrating a marked preference for flexibility, worker autonomy, and work-life balance, often prioritizing these elements alongside traditional employment security. The digitalization of the economy has accelerated this trend, making it easier for young workers to engage in atypical or remote work that

* Associate Professor and Researcher at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Public Administration (Slovenia). Email address: valentina.franca@fu.uni-lj.si.

accommodates their academic schedules. However, as this flexibility is increasingly mediated by the platform economy, a structural paradox emerges, because while these digital platforms offer the appeal of autonomy and self-directed scheduling, they simultaneously introduce novel complexities regarding genuine worker independence and the boundaries of traditional subordination.

Crucially, this demand for flexibility is no longer a temporary phase confined to the university years. Having become accustomed to a high degree of autonomy and project-based engagement during their formative student working experiences, young adults are bringing these non-traditional expectations with them into the broader labour market. Importantly, structural workforce shortages across multiple sectors have shifted the balance of power, granting young workers unprecedented leverage to negotiate these terms. They increasingly view structural flexibility not as a conditional perk of student life, but as a non-negotiable, fundamental requirement for their long-term careers.

Accommodating this deeply ingrained expectation inevitably creates profound friction with classic labour law frameworks. Traditional labour law is historically predicated on predictability, permanence, and strict, observable hierarchical subordination—a binary system designed to protect standard “workers” under human management. Youth transitional work, by contrast, occupies a structurally unstable, hybrid zone, which is now further complicated by the disembodied control of algorithms. It balances precariously on the boundary between civil law and labour law, and between educational skill formation and economically valuable labour. When young people operate within these digitally mediated, highly productive environments, yet remain formally classified outside of standard employment, they are exposed to significant regulatory blind spots.

The challenge for modern policymakers and legal scholars is acute: how can national and supranational systems strike a delicate balance that maintains the highly desired market flexibility, validates the educational component of these roles, and simultaneously ensures robust labour protections for a demographic vulnerable to both traditional exploitation and new algorithmic controls? The four articles in this special section tackle this intricate trilemma from diverse national and European perspectives, offering critical insights into how different legal architectures succeed—and sometimes fail—in protecting young workers without stifling the transitional mechanisms they rely upon.

The section opens with Sipka’s exploration of the Hungarian student cooperative model, a fascinating case study in the trade-off between strict

legal protection and market agility. The author details how Hungary utilizes a unique, *sui generis* legal institution where student work is mediated through cooperatives via civil law agency rules rather than traditional employment contracts. While this tripartite structure arguably diminishes classic labour law guarantees and shifts liability, Sipka demonstrates that both the market and young workers explicitly prefer this model. The extraordinary flexibility it offers, combined with significant social security and tax exemptions, provides comparative advantages that Generation Z values over traditional, rigid employment security. The paper critically evaluates the doctrinal tensions this creates, particularly when viewed against EU temporary agency work directives.

Following this, Franca and Milošević Zupančič provide a comprehensive analysis of the Slovenian context, arguing that student work must be conceptualized as more than a temporary income stream; it is a critical “laboratory” for human capital development. Their empirical insights reveal how student work actively fosters both transversal soft skills (like communication and adaptability) and job-specific competencies vital for modern employability. However, the authors also highlight the pronounced normative ambiguity in Slovenia’s legal framework. They critically examine emerging legislative proposals, such as the introduction of a specific “student self-employed status,” analysing the delicate tightrope between formally fostering dynamic youth entrepreneurship and inadvertently creating a new avenue for labour market exploitation through bogus self-employment.

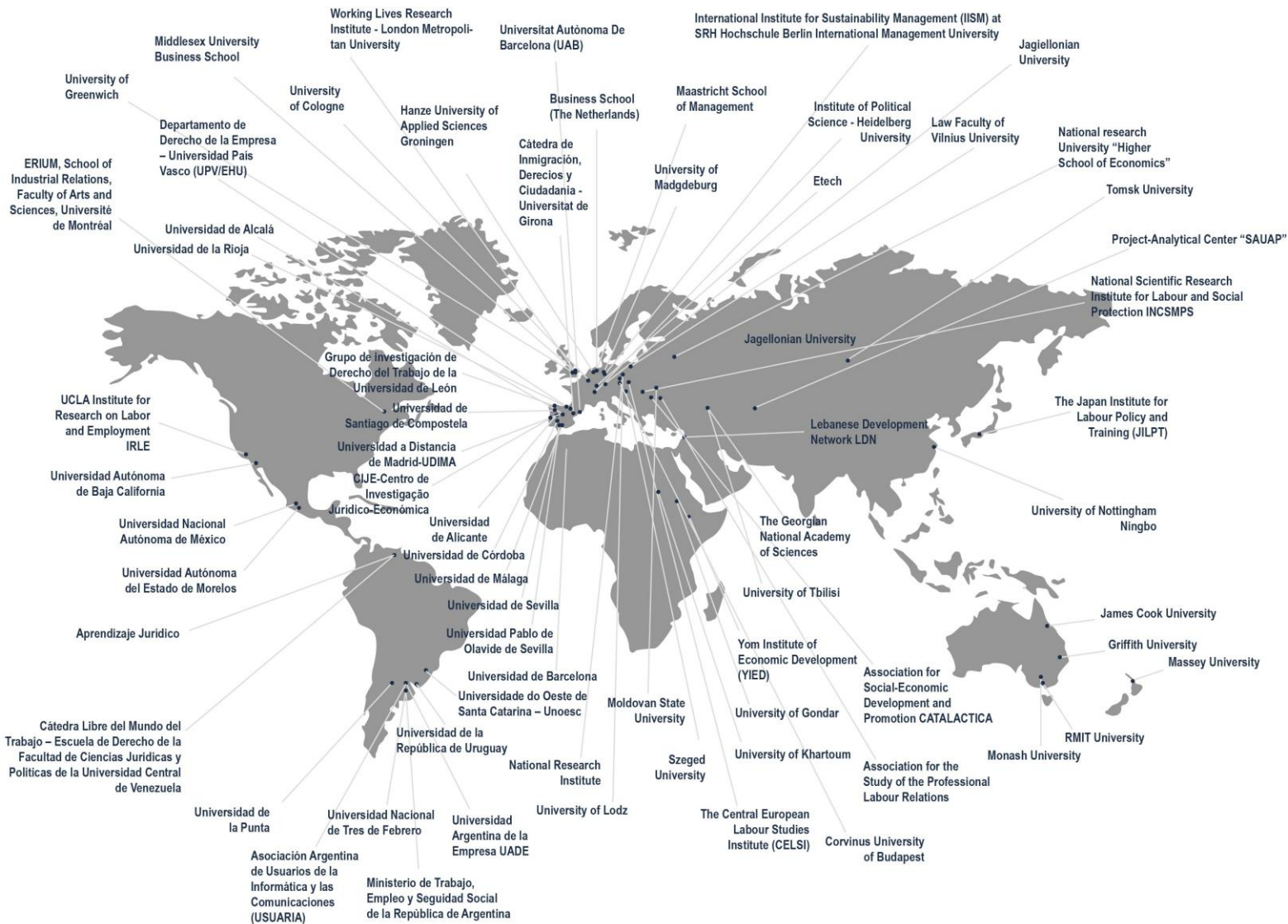
Broadening the scope to the supranational level, Impellizzieri critically examines the European Union’s ambitious 2024 traineeships package. The article unpacks the conceptually fragile legal status of traineeships—arrangements that cannot be fully assimilated into standard employment without losing their formative, educational rationale, yet are constantly at risk of being exploited as low-cost labour. Impellizzieri analyses the structural mismatch at the heart of EU labour law, specifically the tension between regulating working conditions under Article 153 TFEU and vocational training under Article 166. The paper serves as a vital warning against an uncritical “laborization” of traineeships, suggesting that poorly calibrated reforms aimed at protecting trainees might perversely normalize their use as a permanent tier of cheap, quasi-employment.

Finally, the special edition turns to Portugal, where Ribeiro explores several legal mechanisms that aim at facilitating the entry of young workers in the labour market. Among other things, this contribution assesses the practical outcomes of recent regulatory attempts to ensure decent work for young graduates entering highly regulated professions

(such as law, architecture, and engineering). Driven by commitments in the Portuguese Recovery and Resilience Plan, new legislation requires mandatory remuneration for these essential professional traineeships. However, the paper explores the paradoxical consequences of this protective measure. Faced with the financial and operational costs of mandatory pay, many professional mentors are opting out of offering traineeships altogether. The author provides a sobering look at how well-intentioned legal changes aimed at ensuring dignity in work might inadvertently create invisible barriers to entry, effectively hindering a new generation from accessing their chosen professions.

Together, these contributions underscore a critical imperative for modern labour law: as the nature of work transitions from rigid to fluid, our legal frameworks must adapt. We invite our readers to engage with these comparative perspectives, which collectively demonstrate that while the law must evolve to embrace the flexible realities of the modern school-to-work transition, it must do so without sacrificing the fundamental rights, fair compensation, and genuine skill development of the next generation of workers.

ADAPT International Network



ADAPT is a non-profit organisation founded in 2000 by Prof. Marco Biagi with the aim of promoting studies and research in the field of labour law and industrial relations from an international and comparative perspective. Our purpose is to encourage and implement a new approach to academic research, by establishing ongoing relationships with other universities and advanced studies institutes, and promoting academic and scientific exchange programmes with enterprises, institutions, foundations and associations. In collaboration with the Centre for International and Comparative Studies on Law, Economics, Environment and Work, (DEAL) the Marco Biagi Department of Economics, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, ADAPT set up the International School of Higher Education in Labour and Industrial Relations, a centre of excellence which is accredited at an international level for research, study and postgraduate programmes in the area of industrial and labour relations. Further information at www.adapt.it.

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