

THE COMPETENCE GAP IN THE MODERN LABOR MARKET: AN EMPIRICAL EVALUATION OF YOUTH SKILLS AND EMPLOYERS' EXPECTATIONS IN POLAND

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Abstract: *Objectives: The structural transformation of the modern socio-economic landscape, accelerated by artificial intelligence and agile management, imposes strict demands on the professional readiness of young individuals entering the labor market. The primary objective of this study is to identify and systematically evaluate the competence gap existing between secondary school graduates and contemporary employer expectations within the Silesian Voivodeship, while analyzing the capacity of practical experiential initiatives – specially the "Startup Academy for Youth", educational initiative developed by the Power Life Foundation – to bridge this misalignment. Data and Methods: The empirical foundation of this research comprises a diagnostic quantitative survey executed in February – May 2026. The research sample incorporates responses collected from 116 secondary school and university students (aged 17–24) and 57 diverse employers operating across various operational scales (micro, small, medium, and large enterprises) and sectors (IT, manufacturing, automotive, and professional services). Results: The empirical analysis reveals an acute institutional and systemic misalignment. Specifically, 92.9% of evaluated employers categorize the market readiness of youth as insufficient, matching the perspective of 50.9% of young respondents who express internal unreadiness. While youth demonstrate prominent strengths in digital tools (56.1%) and technological openness (71.9%), substantial deficits emerge in critical soft and procedural domains: individual responsibility (64.9%), resilience to psychological stress (59.6%), and holistic business comprehension (49.1%). Strikingly, 70.2% of employers prioritize developmental attitudes over formal degrees, and 91.2% strongly declare the explicit necessity of experiential project-based training programs. Conclusions: Ameliorating the competence gap necessitates a paradigmatic shift from theoretical teaching to project-based, experiential entrepreneurship frameworks. Practical initiatives incorporating cross-functional teamwork, fundamental financial literacy, and pragmatic AI utilization provide a high-fidelity reflection of corporate realities, fostering accountability and adaptability crucial for future labor dynamics.*

Key words: *competence gap, entrepreneurship education, labor market requirements, experiential learning, project management*

JEL codes: *A22, J24, O15*

1. Introduction

The dynamic development of the modern market economy, driven by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the widespread integration of artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms, fundamentally redefines the structure of demanded professional qualifications. Traditional formal education models, heavily oriented towards transferring theoretical knowledge and verifying rote memorization, exhibit a growing adaptive inefficiency in relation to rapidly changing market realities. Consequently, a phenomenon referred to in the literature as the competence gap (skills gap) is emerging in the labor market, signifying a structural mismatch between the skills possessed by school graduates and the actual requirements demanded by economic entities (Suleman, 2018). Modern economic organizations operate in an environment characterized by a high level of volatility and uncertainty, which causes rigid professional qualifications to give way to flexibility, the capacity for lifelong learning, and advanced interpersonal competences.

The analysis of scientific literature in the field of human resource management and the economics of education clearly indicates that possessing a degree in a specific field ceases to be the primary determinant of recruitment success. Increasing importance is attributed to so-called soft and behavioral competences, such as responsibility for assigned tasks, resilience to stress, or the ability to work in interdisciplinary project teams (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). From a macroeconomic perspective, the persisting structural mismatch generates significant transaction costs for enterprises, limiting their innovation and growth dynamics, while simultaneously increasing the risk of unemployment and professional passivity among individuals entering adulthood, which is reflected in official reports of public and market institutions (PARP, 2025).

This article attempts an empirical diagnosis of the scale and nature of the competence gap among young people aged 17–24 in the Silesian Voivodeship. The main research objective is to identify the key competence deficits of young workers in the opinion of employers and contrast them with the subjective assessment of their own market readiness carried out by the youth themselves. In the context of the identified discrepancies, the paper analyzes the concept

and assumptions of the 'Startup Academy for Youth' educational program, developed by the Power Life Foundation, as a purposeful didactic intervention aimed at eliminating barriers to entering the labor market through the implementation of project-based learning methodology and business simulations. The article posits that the implementation of practical, project-oriented workshops reflecting real market processes constitutes a crucial element in counteracting the competence barriers of the young generation.

2. Methodology and Data

The realization of the article's research objectives was based on the diagnostic survey method using the quantitative CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) questionnaire technique. This methodological approach ensures high scalability, total anonymity for participants, and minimizing potential interviewer bias, which is highly recommended in socioeconomic competence studies (Suleman, 2018). The empirical investigation was executed between February and May 2026 within the territorial boundaries of the Silesian Voivodeship. The study design was intentionally two-pronged, operating on two independent yet structurally complementary target groups: young individuals aged 17–24 (comprising upper secondary technical school students and early-stage university students) and active employers representing diverse operational scales and economic sectors.

The primary research tools consisted of two differentiated, highly structured electronic question sheets. To ensure robust internal validity, the questionnaire items were operationalized in accordance with the European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework (EntreComp) standards (Bacigalupo et al., 2016). The definitive research sample size comprised $N_1 = 116$ fully completed and mathematically validated questionnaires from youth and $N_2 = 57$ comprehensive responses from employers, enterprise owners, or senior human resource managers directly responsible for corporate recruitment processes. To ensure absolute objectivity and mitigate potential bias stemming from the author's institutional affiliation with the Power Life Foundation, all research data was collected and analyzed using standardized, anonymous quantitative metrics.

In direct response to the structural requirements of comprehensive empirical reporting, a systematic mapping of the sample structure is presented. This granular approach allows for cross-sectional generalization regarding the regional labor supply and demand dynamics.

Table 1 outlines the complete demographic, educational, and organizational characteristics of both surveyed components.

Tab. 1 Comprehensive structural composition of the research sample ($N_1 = 116$, $N_2 = 57$)

Sample Cohort	Structural Metric Group	Percentage (%)
Youth Cohort ($N_1 = 116$)	Educational Status:	
	Secondary Technical School	81.9
	Higher Education (University)	18.1
	Age Distribution:	
	17-19 years old	90.5
	20-24 years old	9.5
Employer Cohort ($N_2 = 57$)	Enterprise Scale:	
	Micro & Small (1–49 employees)	38.6
	Medium-Sized (50–250 employees)	26.3
	Large Corporations (>250 employees)	35.1
	Dominant Market Sector:	
	Manufacturing, Metallurgy & Energy	26.3
	Professional Consulting & HR	24.5
	IT & Modern Technologies	14.0
	Automotive Industry	8.8
	Retail, Logistics & Services	8.8
	Other	17.6

Source: Own research based on diagnostic survey data

The quantitative analysis utilized descriptive statistics frameworks, emphasizing frequency distributions, percentage weightings, and structural cross-tabulations. The inquiry directed at the youth cohort specifically isolated the subjective bottlenecks preventing immediate market entry, internal psychological anxieties, and the institutional availability of practical business education. Conversely, the employer-centric inquiry prioritized the external evaluation of state-level educational efficiency, the empirical ranking of urgent competence deficits, and the forecasting of future workplace requirements. Every numerical value introduced in the subsequent empirical sections was subjected to rigorous mathematical standardization using a dot as a decimal separator to align with uniform international publication criteria.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the gathered empirical material reveals a deep, systemic dissonance between the outcomes of institutional education and the actual needs of modern enterprises. Firstly, the general assessment of the young generation's preparation for market realities was analyzed. The results from the employer cohort indicate a striking convergence of critical opinions regarding the public education system: as many as 49.1% of evaluated employers believe that the current education system prepares youth for work in a definitely insufficient manner, and a further 43.8% evaluate it as rather insufficient. Combined, this yields a staggering 92.9% of negative institutional diagnoses from the market demand side.

This objective market evaluation directly correlates with the subjective internal anxieties of the labor supply side. When evaluated regarding their personal readiness to enter the professional arena, 50.9% of the surveyed youth explicitly declare a distinct lack of readiness, while 49.1% express varying degrees of self-perceived readiness. A clean, cross-sectional comparison of these independent metric distributions is presented in Table 2.

Tab. 2 Perception of youth preparation for the labor market (in %)

Evaluation level	System evaluation by employers	Subjective readiness of youth
	(N ₂ =57)	Youth (N ₁ =116)
Definitely insufficient / lack of readiness	49.1	18.1
Rather insufficient	43.8	32.8
Rather ready	5.3	39.6
Satisfactory / rather good	1.8	9.5

Source: Own research based on survey data (N₁ = 116, N₂ = 57).

In order to gain a profound understanding of the structure of the competence gap, employers were asked about specific deficiencies observed in young candidates. The most important identified deficits concern the area of attitudes and personality traits rather than hard knowledge. At the forefront is the lack of responsibility and independence in executing tasks (64.9% of indications), low resilience to stress and inability to cope with emotions (59.6%), and poor work organization and time management (50.9%). More than half of the employers (50.9%) also emphasize a complete lack of understanding of the realities of a company's functioning. These data are summarized in Table 3.

The paradox of the market situation is intensified by the fact that the traits marginalized by the education system constitute a key selection criterion during recruitment. As many as

70.2% of surveyed enterprises declare that the key factor deciding about employment is the candidate's attitude and their willingness to develop. Practical experience is indicated by 10.5%

Tab. 3 The most important competence gaps of young workers in the opinion of employers

Area of competence deficit	Percentage of employers' indications (%)*
Responsibility and independence in action	64.9
Resilience to stress and emotional self-regulation	59.6
Cause-and-effect thinking	52.6
Organization of one's own work and time management	50.9
Understanding the realities of work and market mechanisms	50.9
Business thinking	49.1
Interpersonal communication skills	40.4
Proactive attitude and taking initiative	40.4
Teamwork skills	35.1
Problem solving	31.6

Source: Own research (N₂ = 57).

*Percentages do not sum up to 100.0% due to the multiple-choice character of the survey question

of firms, technical knowledge by 12.3%, while formal field-specific education is a priority for a mere 2.0% of respondents. Employers recognize the strengths of youth: openness to technology (71.9%), proficiency in digital tools (56.1%), and courage in expressing opinions (56.1%). Unfortunately, the digital potential remains unexploited from a commercial perspective – youth surveys indicate that although 89.7% of them use AI tools, they do so in a purely intuitive manner, failing to translate it into generating business value. Moreover, 74.1% of young people declare a desire to start a business, but they are paralyzed by the fear of failure (43.1%) and a lack of practical knowledge (43.1%).

To deeper contextualize the architecture of this structural misalignment, the empirical investigation explored the granular, individual perceptions of the youth cohort through an in-depth analysis of their subjective socio-economic bottlenecks. Respondents were requested to explicitly isolate the primary operational and psychological frictions that paralyze their capability to launch independent business projects or smoothly integrate into the corporate environment. The aggregate data harvested from these individual responses reveals a multi-layered matrix of financial, educational, and cognitive barriers.

The paramount barrier identified by the youth is an acute deficiency in initial material resources, with 79.3% of respondents declaring a complete "lack of initial financial capital" as their primary operational obstacle. This finding aligns with contemporary international literature which states that young individuals in transitional European regions suffer from severe credit rationing and institutional asset poverty, heavily undermining their entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Caliendo et al., 2023). However, the empirical results demonstrate that financial scarcity is structurally intertwined with critical knowledge deficits. Specifically, 43.1% of young respondents explicitly identified a "lack of practical business knowledge" combined with a pervasive cognitive state of "not knowing where to begin" with project operationalization. This underscores a profound institutional failure of the regional secondary curriculum: while students are exposed to abstract macroeconomic concepts, they remain functionally illiterate regarding micro-level business execution, cash-flow modeling, or risk assessment.

Simultaneously, the research uncovers significant psychological and networking barriers that hinder youth proactivity. Emotional self-regulation issues and risk aversion are highly visible, as 43.1% of respondents experience a debilitating "fear of failure" and a severe "lack of self-confidence" regarding their market capabilities. This empirical reality directly maps onto the complaints of the evaluated employers (see Table 3), who highlighted low psychological stress resilience (59.6%) as a dominant generational deficit. Furthermore, 65.5% of young individuals reported an absolute isolation from professional networks, characterizing their primary bottleneck as a "lack of mentors, structural adult support, and reliable contacts" as well as "not knowing how to find team collaborators" .

This socio-educational diagnosis suggests that the competence gap is not merely a passive lack of hard skills, but a complex alienation loop. Young individuals desire market activity – as 74.1% express an inherent wish to establish independent initiatives – but they are structurally immobilized by a triad of resource scarcity, practical educational voids, and networking isolation. Consequently, specialized didactic interventions, such as the "Startup Academy for Youth" developed by the Power Life Foundation, act as vital institutional remedies. By introducing structured mentorship and project simulations, these initiatives directly dismantle the identified friction points, substituting abstract fear with empirical, hands-on business accountability.

3.1. Analysis of educational and systemic deficits in the opinion of youth

To fully operationalize the empirical narrative, the study extended its scope to an in-depth analysis of the qualitative trends provided by the youth cohort ($N_1 = 116$). When questioned regarding what contemporary young individuals lack most during their transitional preparation for the occupational future, the respondents outlined a profound structural vulnerability that spans socioeconomic, pragmatic, and psychological dimensions.

The thematic analysis of the qualitative output isolates material and financial anxiety as an omnipresent baseline. A significant portion of respondents indicated that youth are heavily restricted by a lack of initial financial resources and start-up capital. This material deprivation operates in tandem with what can be academically defined as institutional adult-life illiteracy. Young individuals continuously express a high degree of frustration regarding the total absence of pragmatic, civic, and structural knowledge in the secondary school curriculum. Respondents heavily emphasized lacking basic comprehension of fiscal systems, tax obligations, labor law regulations, and independent capital management.

Furthermore, the qualitative matrix exposes an existential and pedagogical vacuum. Youth report a severe deficit in career orientation, characterized by a lack of awareness regarding their internal strengths and potential professional trajectories. This is critically exacerbated by a phenomenon that could be termed the recruitment paradox of experience, where young entrants face demands for pre-existing occupational expertise, while simultaneously feeling locked out of high-fidelity skill-building roles and relegated to marginal, low-skill positions. Psychologically, this structural exclusion manifests as a pervasive crisis of

Tab. 4. Qualitative categorization of youth-perceived professional deficits

Thematic Node Category	Core Empirical Expressions and Manifestations
Resource & Capital Scarcity	Total absence of initial liquid capital and funding Inability to fund early-stage autonomous projects.
Institutional & Fiscal Voids	Total lack of pragmatic knowledge regarding taxation and law. Unfamiliarity with the operational mechanics of adult life.
The Experience Paradox	Perceived barriers by employers demanding prior expertise. Confinement to low-skill, non-developmental entry roles.
Psychological Alienation	Challenges related to self-confidence and self-efficacy. General fear of failure and risk aversion during transition.
Network & Mentorship Isolation	Absence of experienced guides and professional networks. Uncertainties regarding operational points of entry into business.

Source: Own research based on qualitative open-ended survey coding ($N_1 = 116$).

self-efficacy, characterized by intense self-doubt, low self-confidence, and a fear of systemic failure. To structurally systematize these qualitative friction points, Table 4 clusters the core thematic nodes extracted from the youth cohort's diagnoses.

In direct symmetry to these identified vulnerabilities, the study investigated the architectural parameters of an ideal educational intervention from the subjective perspective of the student cohort. When asked to construct the operational boundaries of a hypothetical, high-impact developmental program, the youth decisively leaned toward a model anchored on psychological safety, empirical gamification, and relatable expertise.

First and foremost, respondents highlighted the importance of emotional support and building self-confidence within a secure environment characterized by open, accessible communication. Second, the youth heavily prioritized experiential mechanics, including corporate simulation games, real-world case studies, and practical project execution over traditional theoretical lectures. Lastly, a critical criterion for success is the authenticity of the facilitators. Youth explicitly request direct exposure to active entrepreneurs and practitioners who can transmit pragmatic insights using accessible, demystified language rather than abstract corporate terminology. Consequently, this qualitative consensus provides a validation for the structural blueprint of the "Startup Academy for Youth" implemented by the Power Life Foundation, proving it functions as a direct response to the current institutional educational gaps.

3.2. Employer expectations and future competence requirements

The empirical inquiry subsequently contrasted the subjective anxieties of the supply side with the strategic projections of the demand side through the qualitative text analysis of the employer cohort ($N_2 = 57$). As economic organizations navigate an environment influenced by rapid technological development, the corporate reflection on the role evolution of young workers over the next five-year horizon outlines a shift toward fluid, hyper-adaptive labor frameworks.

Employers demonstrate an overwhelming consensus that traditional, time-bound desk roles are changing. The future labor landscape will be fundamentally dominated by decoupled, decentralized project-based frameworks. In this volatile ecosystem, specific domain knowledge or static field-specific degrees lose part of their historical premium, yielding to high-level cognitive flexibility and extreme learning velocity. Corporate entities explicitly state that the historical boundary demarcating institutional education and active market execution is permanently dissolving. To maintain strategic competitiveness, emerging professionals must

demonstrate digital and technological fluencies, including a general understanding and capability to utilize artificial intelligence tools.

When requested to synthesize this shifting demand into a singular, paramount competence required for future occupational survival, employers heavily isolated learning agility coupled with cognitive resilience. The contemporary market does not suffer from a shortage of raw information; rather, it suffers from a deficit in critical-analytical thinking, emotional self-regulation, and sustained focus. Employers emphasize that in an era of hyper-distraction, the capacity to filter noise, execute cause-and-effect reasoning, and maintain deep psychological stability under pressure constitutes a major competitive advantage.

This corporate diagnostic culminates in a profound body of strategic advice directed at young individuals entering the contemporary arena. The qualitative narratives generated by senior executives and recruiters converge on a dual conceptual framework: the deliberate cultivation of "T-shaped" competence profiles and the psychological reframing of technological disruption.

The optimal architectural roadmap for youth introduces the model of T-shaped skills. Emerging professionals are strongly urged to remain intellectually wide, maintaining cross-disciplinary literacy in psychology, fundamental business mechanisms, interpersonal communication, and technological competencies, which allows for complex, cross-functional organizational dialogue. Concurrently, they must develop a singular area of absolute depth, establishing verifiable expertise in a specific operational domain.

Crucially, the corporate cohort notes that technological skills and the familiarity with artificial intelligence constitute significant competitive advantages in the modern labor market. This technological competence is heavily balanced by a socio-cultural demand for behavioral accountability, professional discipline, and intellectual humility. Ultimately, the absolute convergence between the corporate demand for adaptive, T-shaped, technology-literate professionals and the youth's desire for practical, mentor-driven education underscores the critical socioeconomic utility of third-sector acceleration platforms like the Power Life Foundation.

In the perspective of the next 5 years, market requirements will undergo further radicalization. Employers predict a major increase in the importance of adaptability (61.4%), independent thinking (52.6%), and the advanced use of artificial intelligence at work (45.6%). These changes are summarized in Table 5. The response to these challenges is the model implemented by the Power Life Foundation in the 'Startup Academy for Youth'. The program

is based on the elimination of rote learning in favor of working on real business projects (which 91.2% of entrepreneurs consider the most valuable form of education). Through the requirement of timely completion of successive modules (from financial cashflow analysis, project planning and execution to the sales and marketing), young people naturally train time management, working under pressure, and responsibility for the final project outcome, which directly mitigates the identified market gaps.

Tab. 5 Key competences of the future in the perspective of the next 5 years

Future competence	Percentage of employers' indications (%)*
Adaptability and lifelong learning of new things	61.4
Mental resilience	54.4
Independent thinking and proactive initiative	52.6
Motivation and self-discipline in action	49.1
Effective interpersonal communication	45.6
Using artificial intelligence at work	45.6
Consistency, perseverance	45.6
Teamwork	33.3
Creativity and innovation	31.6
Data analysis and logical thinking	31.6
Business utilization	22.8

Source: Own research (N₂ = 57).

*Percentages do not sum up to 100.0% due to the multiple-choice character of the survey question

4. Conclusions

The conducted empirical studies justify the conclusion that the traditional system of upper secondary education does not keep pace with the transformation of economic realities, generating a deepening competence gap. The core problem lies not in the lack of hard knowledge or unfamiliarity with technology, but in the underdevelopment of behavioral and managerial competences. Youth, despite their high proficiency in navigating the digital environment, enter the labor market with a strong sense of confusion, exhibiting deficits in taking responsibility for assigned goals, cause-and-effect thinking, and resilience to stress and criticism.

An effective response to such outlined structural challenges is provided by acceleration programs based on business simulation methodology, such as the 'Startup Academy for Youth' organized by the Power Life Foundation. Research results confirm that as many as 91.2% of employers consider this type of initiative to be absolutely necessary. Through the

implementation of original business ideas from scratch, participants are forced to overcome the fear of failure, learn effective cooperation in a team, and operationalize technological tools (including AI) for business rather than purely entertainment purposes. It is recommended to undertake systemic actions towards integrating project-based teaching methods with the secondary school curriculum, which will allow for the transformation of youth attitudes from passive executors into proactive, flexible, and responsible participants of the modern labor market.

Although this study provides valuable empirical insights into the regional competence gap, certain methodological limitations regarding the sample composition must be acknowledged. First, the youth cohort ($N_1 = 116$) exhibits a significant demographic imbalance, with respondents aged 17–19 accounting for 90.5% of the sample, while the 20–24 age bracket represents only 9.5%. Consequently, upper secondary technical school students dominate the sample (81.9%) compared to university students (18.1%). This structural skewness introduces a potential sampling bias, meaning that the findings primarily reflect the perceptions of teenagers completing secondary education rather than early-stage academic students or university graduates. Therefore, any cross-sectional generalizations regarding "university students" or the holistic "youth labor supply" within the Silesian Voivodeship should be interpreted with caution. Future research should implement stratified sampling techniques to achieve a more balanced distribution between secondary school pupils and university cohorts, enabling a comparative analysis of how higher education shifts self-perceived market readiness.

Furthermore, the profound insights generated by this empirical study establish a robust foundation for defining future research directions. To maximize the socioeconomic utility of acceleration platforms like the "Startup Academy for Youth," future empirical investigations should transition from localized diagnostic frameworks to longitudinal, cross-regional evaluative designs. Specifically, subsequent research should track the long-term career trajectories of program participants over a 3-to-5-year horizon to quantitatively measure the conversion rate of project-based simulations into active corporate leadership roles or scalable market ventures.

Additionally, there is a critical scientific need to conduct comparative analyses between diverse voivodeships in Poland to isolate how regional socioeconomic characteristics and local entrepreneurial ecosystems influence the depth of the youth competence gap. Research should also deeply investigate the psychological mechanisms of cognitive resilience, exploring which

specific mentorship behaviors and gamified stress-simulations most effectively dismantle the paralyzing fear of failure observed within the emerging labor supply.

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