

UK study finds young adults taking longer to find work than preceding generation

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The proportion of U.K. graduates who found work straight out of university fell by nearly 30% between those born in the late 70s to those a decade younger, according to a new study involving a University of

Liverpool researcher.

Additionally, people born in the late 1980s who did not attend university were almost twice as likely to experience a turbulent start to their working lives, characterized by periods of unemployment, part-time employment, and inactivity, compared to those born in the 70s.

Published today in *Population, Space and Place*, [the study](#), which is led by UCL alongside the University of Liverpool, used Understanding Society data from The UK Household Longitudinal Study and the British Household Panel Survey to analyze the school to work trajectories of 1,860 people in three birth cohorts—those born in the periods 1974–1979, 1980–1984 and 1985–1990—across 10 years after they completed school, between the ages of 16 and 26.

The study found that the younger cohort (born 1985–1990) experienced more complex and unstable transitions into the world of work, even among those who ended up having successful careers, reflecting increased uncertainty in the labor market and the rise of "patchwork careers."

Lead author Dr. Alina Pelikh (IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education & Society) said, "Our findings suggest that the distinctive British early transition from school to work, whereby the majority of British young adults go straight from compulsory schooling into the workplace, was still prevalent among those born in mid-1970s and 1980s.

"However, early employment experiences have become more complex, diverse and precarious with periods of unemployment, part-time employment, and inactivity becoming an integral part of the early labor market experience.

"It is striking that nearly all young people born in late 80s have

experienced some sort of instability during their school-to-work transition, even those who would ultimately be considered successful in their careers a decade after finishing school.

"Our findings fit with wider research that shows millennials are reaching milestones once considered to be the markers of adulthood, such as marriage, home ownership, and stable employment, at a later stage than earlier generations."

The research found that although younger cohorts spent longer in education or vocational training, the transition into employment remained challenging. Furthermore, those from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to achieve professional and managerial occupations than their more advantaged peers.

Co-author of the study Professor Francisco Rowe, who heads up the Geographic Data Science Lab at the University of Liverpool, added, "While the 90s and 2000s saw wider access to university for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, we found that despite their qualifications, graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds experienced more turbulent transitions into work, often struggling to find a suitable job after studies and settling for jobs requiring lower qualifications."

Indeed, the study demonstrates the persistence of disadvantage over time, with 13% of those surveyed having spent long spells in economic inactivity or unemployment (seven years). In particular, those from [disadvantaged backgrounds](#) were more likely to be engaged in low skilled occupations, or experience longer periods of unemployment.

Gender also played a role in the school to work trajectories of the participants, with female school leavers most likely to experience turbulent transitions with longer spells of part-time work and inactivity.

Dr. Pelikh added, "Strikingly, more than 65% of the [young women](#) in the sample who faced precarious career paths had given birth before the age of 20. This highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of female career trajectories, especially for those without the benefit of higher education. Addressing the unique challenges women face, from balancing work and [family responsibilities](#) to overcoming entrenched biases, will be crucial if we are to make meaningful progress in closing gender imbalances."

Commenting on what these trends mean for the youngest members of the British work force, Gen Z, Dr. Pelikh said, "Based on the current labor market and economic trends, we could expect that the transitions from school to work among Gen Z are likely to be as diverse, complex and turbulent as those experienced by the millennials—and potentially even more challenging."

University of Liverpool co-author Professor Rowe, who specializes in population data science with specific expertise in human mobility, migration and geographic data science, added, "Overall, the findings of the study indicate that young people will need wider societal and government support to make a 'successful' transition into the labor market and navigate a reduction in full-time entry-level employment opportunities, and lack of well-developed long-term career pathways from entry-level to higher-level roles."

More information: Alina Pelikh et al, Increasing diversity, precarity and prolonged periods of education in the transition from school to work in Britain, *Population, Space and Place* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/psp.2771](https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2771)

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