University of Maribor

FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME OF EARLY STAGE RESEARCHER TRAINING[1]

1. BASIC DATA

Mentor's name and surname	**Prof. dr. Simona Šarotar Žižek**	Mentor's register number at ARIS (SICRIS):	**30059**
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Research programme (RP) leader's name and surname:	Prof. dr. Žan Jan Oplotnik	RP leader's register number at ARIS (SICRIS):	19448
Title of research programme:	Adaptation of the Slovenian economy and Slovenia's development identity in the EU	RP's Register number at ARIS (SICRIS):	P5-0027
Research organisation (RO) of University of Maribor, where training shall be conducted:	Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Maribor	RO Register number at ARIS (SICRIS):	0585
Research field according to ARIS classification:	5. Social sciences 5.02 Economics	Research field according to EURAXESS classification	Economics

2. DEFINITION OF RESEARCH PROBLEM AND GOALS OF DOCTORAL RESEARCH[2]

Starting point of research task of the early stage researcher and its position in the research programme, where the mentor is included, work hypothesis, research goals and foreseen result with emphasis on an original contribution to science:

In today's digitally marked business world, the future generation of new employees, with their specific set of beliefs, views, skills, and knowledge, faces numerous challenges and opportunities that significantly influence their readiness to enter the labor market and their experiences in the work environment (Lazar et al., 2023). At the same time, in line with contemporary economic and social developments, enrolment in universities is increasing, while youth employment is becoming

[1] *Term early stage researcher (ESR) is written in male form and used as neutral for women and men.*

[2] *Research and study programme of training have to harmonise with contents of the research programme, where the mentor is a member.*

an ever greater challenge (Trolian et al., 2018). Young people are going through early adulthood, which, from a career perspective, is marked by two major transitions: the transition from high school to college and the transition from completed tertiary education to the job market (Papalia et al., 2009; Nadya and Farozin, 2021). The period they are in can be called the exploratory phase, in which the main milestones are the precise specification of career paths, the formation of career goals, and the practical application of career knowledge and skills in professional roles (Zunker, 2006; Bimrose et al., 2015) . At the same time, many future young employees face challenges in choosing a career path, adapting to the work environment, lack of practical experience, and high levels of competition in finding employment, which affects not only their employability but also their career development (Chen et al., 2022). This reinforces their career-related concerns (Hartono and Gunawan, 2017) and leads to career anxiety (Nadya and Farozin, 2021).

The market is characterized by increasing age segmentation of labor, rising youth unemployment, growth in casual and part-time work, as well as a visible trend of growth in tertiary education and a later transition from education to employment (Lavrič et al., 2011; in Fiedler et al., 2020). The transition from education to employment has objectively deteriorated, is taking longer and is uncertain, while the conditions for a successful transition are becoming more stringent. In addition to all this, due to radical changes in the labor market, regular employment is becoming increasingly unattainable for many young people. Competition in the labor market is intensifying, young people are taking longer to achieve stability, education alone does not guarantee them employment, and their success depends on personal experience and circumstances. These constraints, combined with potential personal difficulties, can quickly lead to mental distress and blockages, as well as a feeling of living on the margins of society and social exclusion (European Commission, 2002; in Fiedler et al., 2020).

The aforementioned issues are also highlighted in the European Commission's White Paper, which states that employment is the first prerequisite for young people's integration into society. Employment is equated with concepts and feelings of self-esteem, adulthood, independence, financial resources, and the expansion of social contacts. On the other hand, young people who do not have access to work or are unemployed find it more difficult to find their place in society, achieve economic independence, and are exposed to the harmful feelings of marginalization, unemployment, and social disintegration. At the same time, expectations regarding the knowledge, abilities, adaptability, mobility, and skills of young people are increasing, which simultaneously increases the pressure on them (European Commission, 2002; in Fiedler et al., 2020).

Despite the general shortage of staff in Slovenia and numerous measures and policies to support youth employment (European Parliament, 2025), the proportion of unemployed young people entering the labor market is increasing. Therefore, authors such as Krumboltz (2009), Savickas and Portfeli (2012), Koen et al. (2012) argue that it is crucial to prepare young adults for entering the labor market before they complete their education. At the same time, unsuccessful job searches have an extremely negative impact on young people's self-image and mental health, leading to loneliness, feelings of insecurity, and isolation (European Parliament, 2025).

Accelerated technological change, artificial intelligence, digitalisation and environmental crises are transforming or eliminating existing jobs, while at the same time bringing new, previously unknown jobs to the fore (Erjavec, 2026). We are increasingly witnessing flexible and shorter forms of work, which require new skills from employees and present them with new, previously unknown challenges (Ažman et al., 2012). The latter requires employees to acquire new knowledge and skills (competences) in order to keep their jobs and maintain their overall employability, and, in the next

step, to be able to actively contribute to strengthening a sustainable, digital, and innovative economy (Erjavec, 2026). At the same time, employers increasingly value their employees' knowledge, skills, and abilities (competences) for creativity, teamwork, taking responsibility, etc. In addition to intellectual intelligence, emotional intelligence and social skills are also becoming increasingly important. In the context of today's world of work, we can say that an individual (in the role of an employee) is successful to the extent that they are able to adapt and change according to circumstances. The opportunity for today's generation of new employees is therefore not hidden in employment, but in employability. An important part of the latter is the ability to plan and manage one's career (Ažman et al., 2012).

Competencies can be broadly defined as an individual's ability to effectively apply their knowledge and skills in a variety of complex and unpredictable situations. However, lifelong competencies cannot be ensured through education alone, as competencies are developed throughout life. Accordingly, there are two possibilities: gaining or losing (even becoming obsolete) competencies (Požarnik, 2006). At the same time, the extension of working life and the associated active participation in society, the aging population, migration flows, etc. bring with them ever-new needs for the effective development of key competences – basic skills (Drofenik, 2011; in Ažman et al., 2012).

Today's information society is characterized by a large amount of information, which can lead to information overload, while at the same time, employees in the workplace are faced with constant changes, e.g., when information technology takes over the tasks of employees or even replaces workers, etc. Accordingly, the key competencies of young people entering the labor market today are closely linked to constant social changes and the changing needs of the information age (Ažman et al., 2012).

Work and life are marked by the rapid integration and widespread use of digital technologies in everyday life. These technologies mainly refer to invisible and sophisticated technological infrastructure that enables individuals and groups to carry out various activities and social interactions outside the typical spatial and temporal frameworks or limitations. Digital technologies have thus had a significant impact on the way people do things (Vanden Abeele et al., 2018) and enable remote working, constant access to and use of diverse information, connection with others located in geographically distant areas, and thus interaction with the environment in completely new and innovative ways (Vanden Abeele and Nguyen, 2022). This transformation of society as a result of the digital revolution and the associated constant mobile connectivity undoubtedly brings many benefits to individuals, but at the same time also presents numerous challenges and risks (Vanden Abeele et al., 2018; Vanden Abeele and Nguyen, 2022).

In today's digital age, the integration of modern technologies into the workplace has changed the way organizations operate and the way employees perform their tasks. Digital tools and platforms offer unparalleled access to information, resources, and colleagues, promote greater autonomy, and improve our social, working, and leisure lives (Vanden Abeele, 2021; Vanden Abeele & Nguyen, 2022). However, these benefits come with significant challenges, particularly in relation to employee well-being. The pressure to stay constantly connected, manage digital overload, and maintain boundaries between work and private life can lead to stress, burnout, and reduced overall satisfaction among employees (Derks & Bakker, 2014; Tarafdar, Cooper, & Stich, 2019). The latter can affect the work ability of employees, which decreases and can manifest itself in long-term sick leave.

Individuals (including employees) do not strive for stress, but rather for well-being or prosperity. Well-being is more than just the absence of illness or pathology; it has a subjective (self-assessed)

and objective (attributed) dimension; it can be measured at the level of individuals or society; it represents elements of life satisfaction that cannot be defined or explained, or that are primarily influenced by economic growth (SDRN, 2005). The meaning of well-being remains controversial; the key difference is between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being and objective and subjective measures (SDRN, 2005). Ryan and Deci (2001) explore the hedonistic tradition, in which psychologists have focused on assessing subjective well-being. This consists of three elements: life satisfaction, the presence of positive mood, and the absence of negative mood. Together, these elements constitute subjective emotional well-being. Ryan and Deci (2001) mention that eudaimonistic theorists argue that well-being and happiness are different, as not all sources of pleasure lead to well-being. Their self-determination theory argues that there are three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—and theorizes that the fulfillment of these needs is essential for psychological growth and well-being (Ryan & Deci 2001). Eudaimonic or psychological well-being can also be measured. Ryff (1989) developed structured self-assessment instruments to measure six dimensions of eudaimonic or psychological well-being: purpose in life, mastery of the environment, autonomy, personal growth, positive relationships with others, and self-acceptance. Four constructs—control, autonomy, self-actualization, and enjoyment—can be accurate measures of positive functioning and subjective quality of life.

The benefits for people with high subjective emotional well-being are that they have stronger social relationships than less happy people (Diener and Seligman 2002). Multiple studies have shown that people with higher levels of subjective emotional well-being were more likely to be married (Marks and Fleming 1999; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, and Diener 2003), and high subjective emotional well-being has been shown to be a strong predictor of marital satisfaction (Glenn and Weaver 1981). Employees who are in a more positive emotional state receive higher ratings from supervisors and better pay at work (Diener, Nickerson, Lucas, and Sandvik 2002). Satisfied employees are better at their jobs and therefore help other employees in various ways (Diener and Seligman 2004). In stressful situations, a positive emotional orientation is associated with more effective coping and better overall outcomes (Fredrickson and Joiner 2002). Well-being is also associated with health and longevity, although the links between them are far from fully understood (Diener and Seligman 2004). High subjective emotional well-being is associated with fewer suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Diener and Seligman 2002).

In a digitally connected world, a new and still evolving concept of (digital) well-being is becoming increasingly important. Although there is no universally accepted definition of this concept, it generally refers to an individual's subjective experience of achieving a balance between the advantages and disadvantages of constant digital connectivity (Vanden Abeele, 2020; 2021; Vanden Abeele & Nguyen, 2022). Due to the ubiquitous integration of technology into all aspects of modern life, it is impossible for individuals to remain unaffected by its effects (Uslu, 2025). While young people use digital devices on a daily basis for leisure and everyday activities, as well as for professional and/or academic purposes, spending an excessive amount of time with these technologies can have an extremely negative impact on their well-being (Polkotuwe Gedara, 2024). On the other hand, high levels of digital well-being can contribute to higher academic achievement and employability among young people (Vrana, 2014; Lopez Islas, 2013).

As organizations continue to adopt and integrate digital technologies, the concept of (digital) well-being has also emerged as a critical area of concern in human resource management. While it remains a fluid and evolving concept, (digital) well-being is increasingly recognized for its importance in maintaining employee productivity, engagement, and mental health in the workplace (Vanden

Abeele & Nguyen, 2022; Büchi, 2021). It is precisely the well-being and prosperity of people that form the foundation of the socially responsible "Well-being Society 6.0" (Šarotar Žižek et al., 2021).

In summary, the current generation of young adults is one of the first to have grown up completely surrounded by technology and does not know a world without it, which is why it faces previously unknown challenges of life in the digital world. Despite various policies and programs to promote youth employment, youth unemployment remains a pressing social problem. Young people face a lack of experience, uncertainty, and unstable forms of employment, while the labor market is becoming increasingly uncertain and digitized, bringing new stressors and simultaneously exacerbating existing ones. Today, as we live in a period of digital revolution marked by constant and rapid changes that also significantly affect the labor market, it is crucial to understand young people and their well-being, as well as their readiness to enter the labor market.

Working hypothesis and working methods.

Working hypothesis: The (digital) well-being of young people and their competence have a significant impact on their perception of their own employability, as well as on their entry into the labor market (employability, unemployment).

As part of a systematic review of scientific and professional literature, we will identify relevant literature, define key data from primary sources, evaluate the quality of primary research, and interpret the findings. We will use methods of scientific description, compilation, and comparison, which will enable us to synthesize the findings and identify key concepts (predecessors and consequences). As part of the development of the original measuring instrument, we will conduct content validity tests, involving scientists and experts (interviews, focus groups).

When collecting data in the empirical part of the research, we will follow the principles of random sampling and do everything to ensure this. Data for the quantitative part of the research will be collected using computer-assisted online surveys.

Data analysis will include the following techniques:

1. The bias of the common method, dimensionality, convergent and discriminant validity will be tested using factor analysis (CFA, EFA).

2. The relationship between concepts will be tested using statistical methods for testing linear relationships (correlation, regression, structural equation modeling).

In order to ensure greater validity of the quantitative research, we will also conduct preliminary qualitative research in the form of focus groups with young people.

The work is expected to proceed in several phases, namely:

PHASE 1 – Preparation of the outline and development of the instrument, which includes a review of the current scientific literature, a synthesis of current scientific knowledge on the research problem, and the preparation of conceptual starting points, the development of hypotheses, the definition of research methods, and the development of original measuring instruments for selected constructs.

PHASE 2 – Design of the theoretical part and preliminary research, which includes writing theoretical foundations based on defined concepts and testing measurement instruments.

PHASE 3 – Conducting the main research, which includes activities such as: testing measurement instruments, identifying representative samples, collecting data, and organizing the database.

PHASE 4 – Model design, which includes the development of proposals for measures to improve the situation on the labor market, as well as the preparation of necessary proposals for measures in the field of youth employability.

PHASE 5 – Evaluation, which includes the completion of the doctoral dissertation and its defense, as well as the publication of articles in journals with an impact factor.

Research objectives.

The theoretical part of the research will be based on a review of scientific and professional literature by domestic and foreign authors. The theoretical knowledge and starting points obtained will be upgraded and supplemented in accordance with the results of the empirical part of the research and the latest theoretical findings.

Based on the presentation of the problem, the main objectives of the research are:

- to review the literature on youth employability and unemployment, their (digital) well-being, competence, and readiness to enter the labor market,

- to develop a new measurement instrument for measuring the concepts in the model of (digital) well-being of young people and their competence, and its impact on their entry into the labor market (employability and unemployment/employment),

- define and obtain a representative research sample,

- conduct a preliminary quantitative survey among young people in Slovenia and test the newly developed measurement instrument,

- test the validity and reliability of the newly developed measurement instrument,

- conduct a preliminary qualitative survey in the form of focus groups with young people transitioning to the labor market and, based on these, examine the experience of selected constructs among students,

- test the relationships in the empirical model,

- present the results and findings of the empirical research,

- develop proposals for improving the situation and helping young people enter the labor market,

- based on previous research, as well as our own theoretical and empirical research, to develop an original model focusing on young people and their readiness to enter the labor market (employability, unemployment) based on selected concepts,

- expand and enrich existing theoretical frameworks with the findings of our own research and original model.

Expected results with an emphasis on original scientific contributions.

The key original contribution will be the development of an original model based on quantitative and qualitative findings, which will include key insights for understanding young people who are actively entering the labor market and enable them to transition more easily into the labor market (employability). The comprehensive model will help young people to better prepare for the

challenges of the modern working environment, form realistic career expectations, and develop the necessary knowledge and skills. At the same time, the results of the model will help organizations, experts, academics, and policymakers who want to better understand the internal psychological resources, values, expectations, competences, and work attitudes of the future generation of the workforce (young people) and adapt their strategies for retaining and attracting new employees accordingly.

Through a systematic review of Slovenian and foreign scientific and professional literature, the research will provide a comprehensive overview of current theoretical knowledge on selected constructs, their dimensions, measurement methods, related concepts, ways of strengthening them, factors that influence them, etc. The fact that this is the first study of its kind in the Slovenian cultural and geographical area also contributes to its originality.

The results will also contribute to proactive policy-making at the national and European level by developing measures based on an analysis of the situation. It is crucial that work remains a fundamental value and a human right that enables the survival of society and the individual, and above all gives the individual dignity and the opportunity to help shape the community to the best of their ability. As a society, we are partially approaching the consequences of the negative effects of digitalisation, but at the Slovenian level, we do not have a sufficiently comprehensive approach to the challenges of digitalisation to strengthen its positive effects and address its negative effects at the same time. Therefore, a systematic review of the negative impacts and proposed measures in the field of the labor market (youth employability) and social welfare will be an important result of the research.

The originality can also be justified by the fact that, for the purpose of effective implementation of the empirical part of the research, existing measurement instruments for measuring the level of selected constructs will be redesigned and adapted. In doing so, we will verify the validity of the newly designed measurement instruments in the Slovenian geographical environment, followed by the design of a validated and verified measurement instrument that can be used for a variety of future research both in Slovenia and globally. This will ensure greater validity of quantitative research.

In addition, the qualitative method of in-depth interviews will contribute to science by adapting or upgrading the measurement scale of the construct of digital well-being. Despite its growing relevance and importance, (digital) well-being does not have a uniformly accepted definition or measurement scale. By reviewing Slovenian and foreign scientific and professional literature, as well as gathering the views of experts from various fields on the experience of this construct in the context of students, a new measurement scale for digital well-being will be developed, adapted to the context of students in Slovenia.

In this way, we will indirectly contribute to the establishment of conditions for a "Well-being Society 6.0," which represents an important non-technological social innovation.

3. STUDY PROGRAMME

Foreseen study programme, to which early stage researcher shall be enrolled in academic year 2026/2027:

The 3rd-cycle study programme in Economic and business sciences, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Maribor

4. DESCRIPTION OF WORK AND TASKS

Carries out scientific and research projects. Participates in the development of research programs. Provides expert cooperation with clients commissioning research tasks. Prepares reports and papers on research. Monitors and coordinates research work in accordance with funding agreements. Ensures safe and healthy working conditions. Organises and instructs employees and students on the use of personal protective equipment and other safety measures. Performs other related tasks as instructed by the supervisor. Participates in working and standing committees of UM bodies and members or other members. Replaces colleagues and superiors in their absence (by authorization). Participates in annual and other inventories. Performs other related tasks as assigned by superiors.

5. REQUESTED LEVEL OF EDUCATION

VII/2. tariff group

6. REQUESTED FIELD OF EDUCATION

business sciences, economics, other social sciences

7. KLASIUS SRV

Level 7: Second-cycle higher education and equivalent education/second-cycle higher education and equivalent education

8. KLASIUS P

0488 - Inter-disciplinary programmes and qualifications involving business, administration and law

9. REQUESTED KNOWLEDGE

Computer skills: MS Windows, Word, Excel, Internet, e-mail, SPSS. Lisrel, Smart PLS, …. Business skills Soft skills

10. REQUESTED SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS

/

11. REQUESTED LANGUAGES

Active knowledge of Slovenian and English.

12. REQUESTED WORK EXPERIENCE

/

13. FORESEEN POSTDOCTORAL TRAINING

We intend to lay the foundations for postdoctoral training so that it can be carried out at research organizations abroad or at home. Therefore, we will also prepare applications for funding for postdoctoral research on the intended topic or, more specifically, depending on the postdoctoral researcher's vision. If the need arises (i.e., a position becomes available at a member institution due to retirement or other reasons), employment is also possible.

Mentor's signature:

SIMONA ŠAROTAR ŽIŽEK

Digitalno podpisal SIMONA ŠAROTAR ŽIŽEK
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Research programme leader's signature:

Žan Jan Oplotnik

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Name and surname of Dean or authorised person[3]:
Prof. dr. Polona Tominc

Signature of dean or authorised person:

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Place and date:

Maribor, 27. 01. 2026

[3] The training program is signed by the dean of the member where the ESR's employment and training will take place.

Stamp: