

Value-driven employability: How work values and ethics shape Generation Z's career preferences

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines how Generation Z's work values and ethics differ by gender, academic discipline, and prior work experience, and how these integrated value–ethic profiles shape early-career preferences. The aim is to support universities in improving person–organisation fit and designing value-informed career-guidance interventions that foster smoother and more sustainable school-to-work transitions.

Design/methodology/approach – A cross-sectional survey of 721 undergraduates combined two validated instruments – the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ-40) and the Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile (MWEP) – with a ranking of ten job-selection factors. Group comparisons and effect-size analyses were conducted across gender, discipline, and work-experience bands.

Findings – Significant subgroup differences emerged in both values and ethical orientations. Across all groups, career progression and effective management consistently ranked as the top job selection priorities, while compensation and organizational culture were less emphasized. These insights underscore the importance of personalized, value-driven career guidance.

Practical implications – Universities can use integrated value–ethic profiles to tailor guidance, strengthen person–organisation fit diagnostics and design evaluable interventions – such as value-informed workshops – that support smoother and more meaningful transitions into work.

Originality/value – The study introduces an integrated value–ethics–employer-choice lens that links Schwartz's motivational values with Weberian ethical enactments via the joint use of PVQ-40 and MWEP. This approach reveals experience-contingent shifts in students' profiles and outlines testable mediated and moderated pathways for future employability research.

Keywords Generation Z, Work values, Ethics, PVQ-40, MWEP, Employability, Higher education

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Generation Z is the youngest cohort entering the workforce, equipped with a mindset shaped by rapid technological advancement, constant connectivity, and a demand for speed, efficiency, and instant access (Yilmaz *et al.*, 2024). For employability scholarship, the central problem is the misalignment between students' underlying work values and ethics and the value propositions of early-career roles and organisational settings. While prior studies frequently emphasise consumer behaviour, technology use or social media (Djafarova and Foots, 2022), research on Gen Z's motivations tends to examine personal values and work ethic separately. Yet these perspectives are inherently interconnected: values capture what individuals see as meaningful and motivating, whereas work ethic reflects how they believe effort, responsibility and discipline should be enacted in organisational settings. Together, they shape what students consider meaningful work, how they evaluate trade-offs (e.g. pay vs. autonomy), and whether they persist when confronted with ambiguity or pressure. When value–ethic profiles are poorly understood or are unsupported, employability interventions risk optimising for placement speed rather than value–role fit, undermining long-term engagement and career sustainability (Sortheix *et al.*, 2015; Meriac and Gorman, 2017). Recent evidence—50% of Gen Z report feeling disengaged, 40% expect to leave within two years, and 35% would quit without another job (Deloitte, 2025)—underscores the urgency of



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understanding these deeper drivers. Despite the relevance of values and ethics for employability and career guidance, research has not systematically examined how these motivational and ethical orientations combine or how integrated profiles vary across student subgroups. This gap limits the development of evidence-based frameworks that support value-informed career choices, a need increasingly highlighted in calls for higher education to align with societal expectations and students' values (AACSB, 2023). A holistic understanding therefore requires analysing both perspectives simultaneously, yet existing employability and career-guidance frameworks have not integrated these two lenses.

The objective of the present study is to analyse how key student characteristics, gender, academic discipline, and prior work experience, all shown to influence motivational and ethical orientations (Fertig *et al.*, 2022; Ramírez *et al.*, 2022), shape the combined work values and work ethic profiles of Generation Z undergraduates. This study adopts a holistic approach that examines how students' self-views (motivational values) and their views of work (ethical enactments) jointly shape their early-career preferences. These two perspectives are operationalised using two well-established frameworks: Schwartz's motivational values, assessed through the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ-40), and Weberian work-ethic orientations, measured through the Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile (MWEP). Considering these lenses together enables a more comprehensive understanding of person–organisation fit and provides a basis for value-informed employability guidance, directly addressing the need for integrated evidence to inform personalised career counselling, curriculum design, internship matching and early-career retention strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1 Generation Z: transforming the workplace

Generation Z has developed distinctive work-value systems shaped by digital immersion, economic uncertainty, pandemic disruption, growing social isolation, and heightened environmental risks (Ganguli and Padhy, 2023). Across studies, Gen Z consistently prioritises progression opportunities, competent and supportive supervision and meaningful work, alongside competitive compensation and work–life balance (Kirchmayer and Fratričová, 2018). Recent reviews also highlight preferences for frequent, developmental feedback and visible diversity and inclusion policies (Vieira *et al.*, 2024). While salary remains relevant, many students indicate willingness to trade some balance for roles offering accelerated learning and transparent advancement pathways (Janssen and Carradini, 2021). Debate persists regarding Gen Z's work ethic. Popular commentary sometimes depicts the cohort as less willing to “pay dues”, implying a weaker traditional ethic. Industry evidence suggests a redefinition rather than a decline: Gen Z reports high effort when work is meaningful, supervision is competent and fair, and organisational practices are ethical and transparent (Deloitte, 2025). On this view, commitment is contingent on value alignment rather than on organisational loyalty *per se*.

To move beyond cataloguing “what” Gen Z values, it is crucial to interrogate “why” these values matter and “with what effects” for employability. Sustainable Career Theory conceptualises careers as long-term, adaptive journeys in which employability, well-being, and meaningfulness emerge through person–context–time dynamics (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015; De Vos *et al.*, 2020). From this perspective, Gen Z's emphasis on continuous learning and work–life integration can be understood as a strategy to sustain career viability amid rapid change (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020). Complementing this lens, the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model explains how high demands (e.g. workload, role ambiguity) lead to strain unless offset by resources (e.g. mentoring, feedback, autonomy), thereby shaping engagement and performance (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) adds a motivational mechanism, clarifying how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals translate value orientations into proactive behaviours, such as seeking mentors, additional training, or mobility, while foregrounding contextual supports and barriers (Lent *et al.*, 1994). These frameworks theorise that alignment between Gen Z's values and available

resources should reduce burnout and turnover intentions, whereas misalignment and external constraints impede the realisation of career ideals.

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2.2 Integrating theoretical lenses: Schwartz's values and the protestant ethic

Existing research conceptualizes work values and work ethics as distinct yet complementary dimensions, shaping individuals' orientations toward work. Schwartz's theory (1992, 2015) defines values as broad, trans-cultural principles that guide behavior and reflect underlying motivational goals. Individual work values have been classified using a variety of taxonomies and from multiple perspectives (Ramírez *et al.*, 2022). This study draws on Schwartz's (1992) theory of value content and structure, as it is currently the most influential and widely used value theory in social sciences (Schwartz and Cieciuch, 2012). Schwartz's theory offers a theoretical framework for analyzing and measuring values toward work (Schwartz, 1992). It identifies ten broad values (security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, universalism, self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, and power) clustered into four higher-order values: self-enhancement, self-transcendence, openness to change, and conservation. These differ according to the motivational goal they express (Schwartz, 1992, 2015). Values were measured using the PVQ-40 (Schwartz *et al.*, 2001), where respondents rate their similarity to 40 portraits on a 7-point scale (1 = "totally different from me" to 7 = "identical to me")

Rooted in Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–1905), work ethic denotes beliefs that emphasise hard work, discipline, and productivity. Rather than a single construct, evidence supports a multi-attribute configuration (Miller *et al.*, 2002). Work ethics have been shown to predict key outcomes, including job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and supervisor-rated performance (Van Ness *et al.*, 2010). Accordingly, this study employs the Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile (MWEP) (Meriac *et al.*, 2013), a widely used and validated instrument. The MWEP operationalises seven dimensions—self-reliance, morality/ethics, hard work, centrality of work, wasted time, delay of gratification, and leisure—assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree", 5 = "strongly agree"), with four items per dimension.

Taken together, these lenses enable an integrated analysis: Schwartz specifies what is valued; the work-ethic tradition specifies how those values are enacted (e.g. persistence, effort regulation, time use). Prior studies rarely connect these levels for Gen Z. By examining PVQ-40 profiles alongside MWEP facets, this study explores whether, for example, high self-direction co-occurs with delay of gratification and avoidance of wasted time to produce distinctive employability behaviours (e.g. sustained skill investment), or whether value–ethic mismatches help to explain early disengagement. Thus, Schwartz and Weber are not background context but active analytical anchors for the study's conceptual model.

2.3 Universities as platforms to support value driven careers

In the last two decades, employability, specifically graduate employability, has become a key concern across various economies. Traditionally, research on labour market transitions has taken a labour-economics perspective, focusing on the time it takes graduates to secure suitable employment (Blokker *et al.*, 2023). However, the transition period extends beyond merely obtaining a job. Critical challenges include job fit, the acquisition of necessary competencies, and the ability to continuously adapt to dynamic work environments (Saman and Wirawan, 2024).

Employability remains a cornerstone for students when choosing a university, with graduate employment outcomes serving as a vital measure of institutional success (Blokker *et al.*, 2023). Higher education institutions are not just pathways to jobs; they are critical enablers of meaningful careers, promoting qualities that align with the dynamic demands of the 21st century (Monteiro *et al.*, 2019). However, the journey toward building enduring careers remains complex and ever evolving, requiring a deep commitment from universities, educators, and employers alike (Peng, 2022). Positioning employability within Sustainable

Career Theory reframes institutional aims: rather than maximising immediate placement, universities can scaffold happiness, health, and productivity over time by embedding explicit development pathways, feedback-rich pedagogy, and authentic assessment that build self-efficacy (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015)

The entry of Generation Z into the workforce marks a shift in expectations and priorities. Addressing these needs involves examining their beliefs about obstacles and helping them overcome barriers to academic and employment success (Fischer and Luiz, 2024). Within this framing, universities act as platforms for value–role fit, diagnosing heterogeneity across discipline, gender, and prior work experience, and partnering with employers to design entry roles that reflect Gen Z priorities without compromising performance requirements. (Banda, 2025).

3. Research methods and participants

All second-year students enrolled in the different bachelor programs at our institution were invited to participate through institutional email and classroom announcements. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before completing the survey. The study received approval from the university’s research ethics committee, ensuring compliance with data protection and confidentiality standards. Second-year students were chosen because all students at this stage follow a common curriculum structure and participate in employability and career-development activities, ensuring comparable exposure to academic and professional content. This provides a homogeneous baseline for examining value–ethic profiles.

Data was collected by means of a survey structured in four main blocks using the Qualtrics platform. First, a set of 40 questions was presented to calculate the 10 work values using the Portrait Value Questionnaire PVQ-40 (Schwartz *et al.*, 2001). Second, another set of 28 questions was provided to calculate the seven ethical values following the MWEP Scale (Meriac *et al.*, 2013). Third, participants ranked 10 factors (selected according to the previous literature review) according to their importance when choosing a company to work for. Finally, participants answered questions about their gender, their current academic program, and their work experience in months. Once the survey was completed, students received their PVQ-40 and MWEP profiles via email.

Figure 1 illustrates the sociodemographic information from the sample. A total of 721 students aged between 19 and 21 completed the survey across a target population of

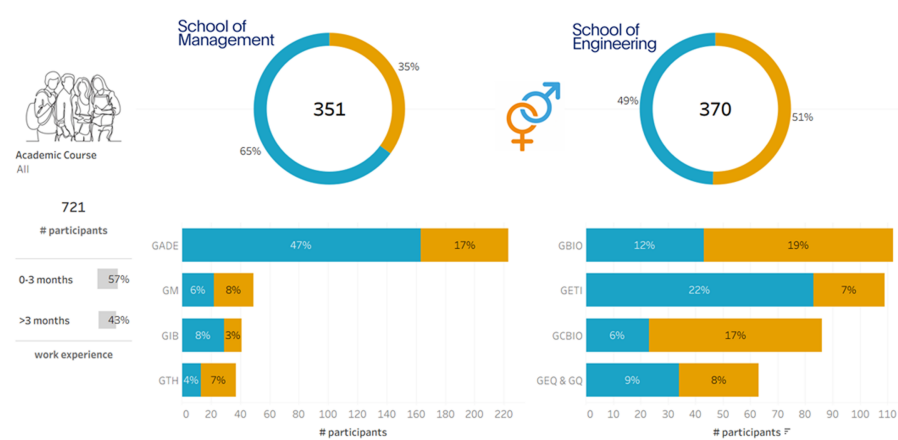


Figure 1. Distribution of participants by types of studies, gender, and work experience

approximately 1030, resulting in a response rate of around 70%. Bachelor's programs are organized in the School of Management (SM) and the School of Engineering (SE), depending on the program's profile. SM includes bachelor's programs in Business Administration (GADE), Tourism (GTH), Marketing (GM), and International Business (GIB). SE includes bachelor's programs in Biotechnology (GBIO), Engineering in Industrial Technologies (GETI), Biomedical Sciences (GCBIO), Chemical Engineering (GEQ), and Chemistry (GQ). In terms of gender, the overall sample is well-balanced, though the School of Management shows a higher proportion of male participants. Finally, students' work experience was grouped into 0–3 months or more than 3 months. This threshold aligns with the institution's standard internship model, in which a minimum of three months is required for a supervised placement that provides structured exposure to professional settings. Students with 0–3 months generally have minimal or exploratory experience, whereas those with more than three months have sustained involvement.

4. Results

Cronbach's alpha test is carried out to measure reliability or internal consistency and a 0.71 and 0.74 for PVQ-40 and MWEF values are obtained, which exceeds the general acceptance threshold of 0.7 (DeVellis and Thorpe, 2021). Thus, it can be concluded that the data have an acceptable level of internal consistency. The results follow a two-step structure. The first step analyses whether work values and work-ethic orientations vary depending on students' characteristics, helping us understand how different profiles interpret and approach work. The second step identifies which job attributes students consistently prioritise when selecting a company, thus revealing their core preferences in early-career decision-making.

4.1 Subgroup differences in work values and ethical orientations

The following research questions are formulated:

- RQ1. In general, are ethical and work values different among students enrolled in different typologies of studies (Management vs. Engineering)?
- RQ2. In general, are ethical and work values different among students considering their gender (Male vs. Female)?
- RQ3. In general, are ethical and work values different among students considering their previous work experience (0–3 vs > 3 months)?

The detailed results are presented in [Annex](#), which includes the average scores obtained from the 721 students across bachelor-program typology, gender, and work-experience group. Data is analyzing conducting parametric tests for equality of means for independent samples and paired samples with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.01$ (green) and 0.05 (orange). To complement the significance of tests and assess the practical relevance of the differences observed across student profiles, effect sizes were calculated and interpreted following [Cohen's \(1988\)](#) guidelines. For comparisons between two groups, Cohen's d was used, where values of $d = 0.20$ – 0.49 indicate a small effect, $d = 0.50$ – 0.79 a medium effect, and $d \geq 0.80$ a large effect. While multivariate methods (e.g. MANOVA, cluster analysis, regression modelling) may offer additional insights into the multidimensional structure of PVQ-40 and MWEF, they were beyond the scope of the present study's subgroup-focused research questions.

[Figures 1–4](#) present the average scores of ethical and work values using spider charts, facilitating the identification of relevant patterns for [Research Questions 1, 2, and 3](#). Statistical significance is indicated by coloured circle markers (green for 99% confidence, orange for 95% confidence), while the marker size reflects the magnitude of the effect size.

4.1.1 Research question 1: differences in ethical and work values by type of studies.

Students in the School of Engineering scored higher on the ethical dimensions of Leisure and

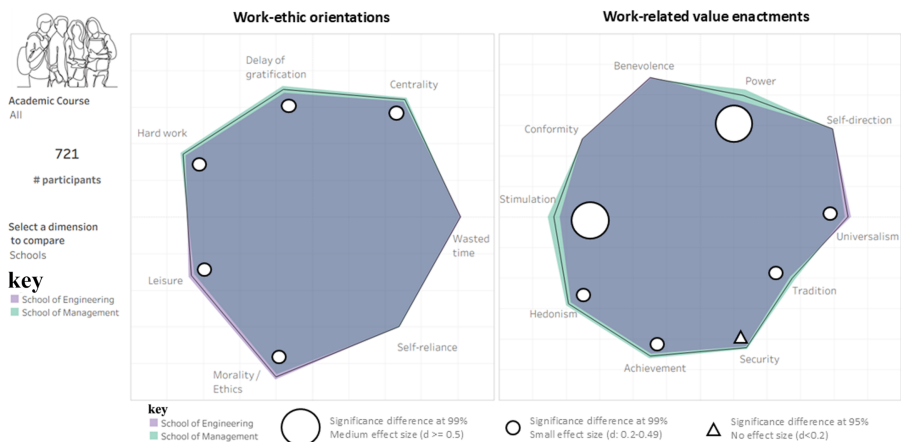


Figure 2. Average scores of ethical and work values of students organized by their school (Engineering vs. Management). Star colours represent the level of statistical significance. The black line represents the average of all

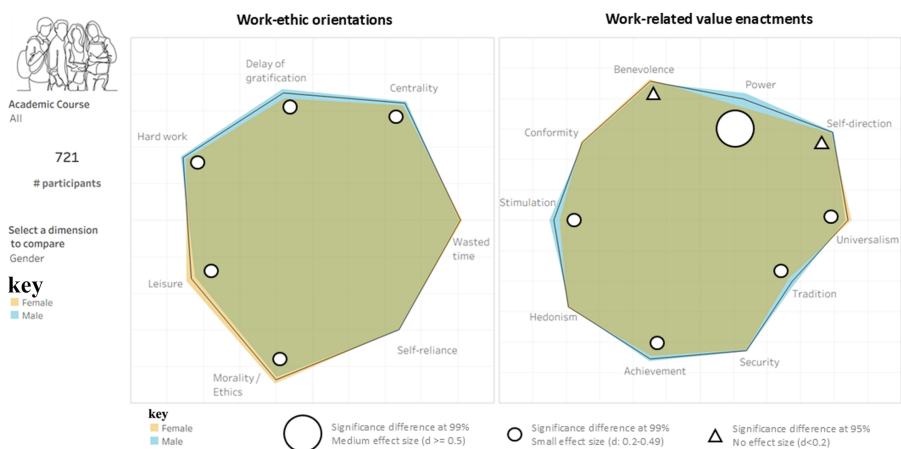


Figure 3. Average scores of ethical and work values of students organized by gender. Star colours represent the level of statistical significance. The black line represents the average of all

Morality/Ethics, both showing statistically significant differences at the 99% confidence level. In contrast, School of Management students scored higher in Delay of Gratification, Hard Work and Centrality, also at the 99% level. With respect to work values, Engineering students scored higher in Universalism (99% significance), while Management students scored higher in Power, Tradition, Achievement, Hedonism and Stimulation (all at the 99% level), as well as Security (95% level).

Regarding the practical magnitude of these differences, the effect sizes for *Power* and *Stimulation* fall within the *medium* range, indicating substantively meaningful distinctions between the two groups. The remaining statistically significant differences exhibit *small effect sizes*, suggesting more modest but still systematic group differences. Overall, these results indicate that work values and work-ethic orientations differ consistently by academic discipline.

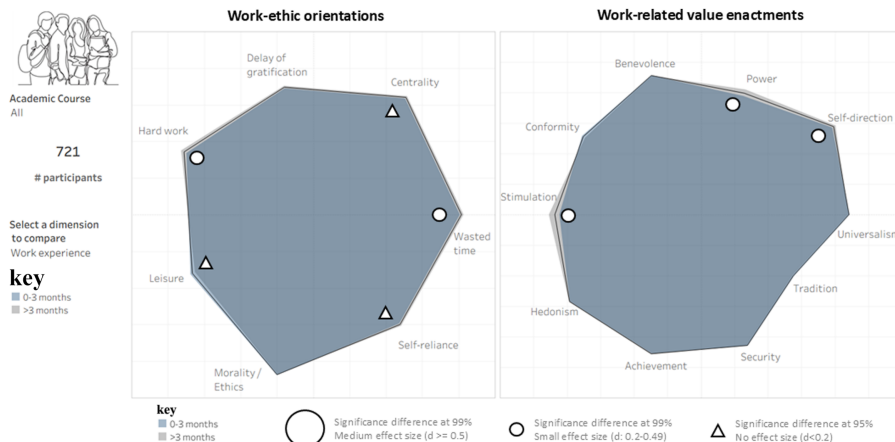


Figure 4. Average scores of ethical and work values of students organized by their previous work experience. Star colours represent the level of statistical significance. The black line represents the average of all

4.1.2 Research question 2: differences ethical and work values by gender. Female students scored higher on the ethical dimensions of Leisure and Morality/Ethics, with statistically significant differences at the 99% confidence level. In contrast, male students obtained higher scores in Delay of Gratification, Centrality, and Hard Work, also at the 99% level. With respect to work values, male students scored higher in Stimulation, Achievement, Tradition, and Power (all at the 99% level). Female students, by contrast, scored higher in Universalism (99% level), as well as Benevolence and Self-Direction (both at the 95% level).

Regarding the magnitude of these differences, the effect size for Power corresponds to a medium effect, indicating a more substantive distinction between male and female students for this value. All remaining statistically significant differences display small effect sizes, suggesting modest but consistent gender-based patterns. Overall, the results indicate systematic gender differences in both work values and work-ethic orientations.

4.1.3 Research question 3: differences in ethical and work values by work experience. In terms of ethical values, students with more than three months of work experience scored higher on Wasted Time and Hard Work (both significant at the 99% confidence level), as well as on Self-Reliance and Centrality. They also scored lower on Leisure, with a statistically significant difference at the 95% level. Regarding work values, students with more than three months of experience scored higher in Self-Direction, Stimulation, and Power, all showing significant differences at the 99% level.

With respect to practical relevance, all statistically significant differences associated with the 99% level correspond to small effect sizes, indicating modest but consistent shifts in students' motivational and ethical orientations as work experience increases. Overall, ethical and work values do differ based on work experience, although the number and magnitude of differences are smaller compared with those observed for academic discipline and gender.

4.2 Subgroup differences in early-career preferences

The second part of the analysis focuses on the job-selection factors students prioritise when evaluating potential employers.

RQ4. In general, is the ranking of factors different among students enrolled in different typologies of studies (Management vs. Engineering)?

- RQ5. In general, is the ranking of factors different among students considering their gender (Male vs. Female)?
- RQ6. In general, is the ranking of factors different among students considering their previous work experience (0–3 vs > 3 months)?

Table 1 summarizes the average ranking positions of the different factors considering the students’ profile. As in the previous section, subgroup comparisons using *t*-tests are used to determine whether differences across student groups reflect consistent patterns. This analytical approach provides insight into how distinct student profiles weigh job attributes when making early-career decisions.

Independently of students’ profiles, the following insights emerge:

- (1) *Progression* and *Management* are the top two factors, although their order switches depending on specific profiles.
- (2) *Balance*, *Integration*, *Flexibility*, and *Feedback* range from 3rd to 6th, and their ranking is relatively similar across profiles.
- (3) *Compensation*, *Technology*, *Culture*, and *Diversity* appear in the lower positions.

These results suggest that, overall, the order of preferences is quite stable, reflecting the broader characteristics of Generation Z.

5. Discussion

This study sets out to explore how gender, academic discipline, and prior work experience shape Generation Z undergraduates’ work values and ethics. Through a quantitative methodology, the study aimed to provide empirical evidence that could inform career-guidance strategies in higher education, promoting more meaningful transitions into the labour market. In interpretive terms, Schwartz’s values specify *what* students prioritise, whereas Weberian ethics specify *how* those priorities are normatively enacted in day-to-day work conduct. Thus, higher self-transcendence aligns with pro-social work orientations (e.g. stewardship), whereas higher self-enhancement aligns with status- and performance-oriented enactments (e.g. achievement striving). Likewise, openness to change tends to manifest as stimulation seeking and proactive career experimentation, whereas conservation is enacted through time discipline, diligence and conformity to organisational norms, classic Weberian motifs.

Table 1. Average ranking position of 10 factors considering the type of studies, gender, and work experience. Colour determines if there is significant statistical difference at 95% (orange colour) or significant statistical difference at 99% (blue colour)

	SE		SM		Female		Male		0-3 months		>3 months	
<i>Progression</i>	1	2.9	2	3.4	1	3.2	2	3.2	1	3.2	2	3.2
<i>Management</i>	2	3.3	1	3.2	2	3.5	1	3.1	2	3.3	1	3.1
<i>Integration</i>	3	4.5	3	4.1	4	4.3	3	4.3	3	4.3	3	4.4
<i>Balance</i>	4	4.3	6	5.3	3	4.2	6	5.2	4	4.6	6	5.0
<i>Feedback</i>	5	4.9	5	5.1	5	5.0	5	5.0	6	5.1	4	4.9
<i>Flexibility</i>	6	5.0	4	4.6	6	5.2	4	4.5	5	4.7	5	4.9
<i>Compensation</i>	7	6.0	7	6.1	7	6.4	8	5.8	7	6.0	7	6.1
<i>Technology</i>	8	5.9	8	6.6	8	6.8	7	5.7	8	6.1	8	6.3
<i>Culture</i>	9	7.5	9	7.7	9	7.7	9	7.5	9	7.7	9	7.5
<i>Diversity</i>	10	7.9	10	8.4	10	7.8	10	8.5	10	8.1	10	8.3

Source(s): Own work

5.1 Differences by academic discipline

A key finding of this study is the distinct variation in ethical and work values among students from different academic disciplines. Engineering students demonstrated a stronger orientation toward ethical principles such as integrity (Morality) and maintaining a healthy work-life balance (Leisure). Their work values emphasize Universalism, reflecting a concern for the welfare of people and the environment. In contrast, Management students exhibited a value profile cantered on dedication (Hard Work), the ability to delay gratification for long-term rewards, and viewing work as a core component of their identity (Centrality). Their work values highlighted a preference for challenge and innovation (Stimulation), personal enjoyment (Hedonism), achievement, influence (Power), and adherence to organizational norms (Tradition). Interestingly, job stability (Security) appeared to be a lower priority for this group. This profile, characterized by high levels of Hard Work, Centrality of work, and a willingness to delay rewards, closely reflects the classic Protestant Work Ethic as described by [Weber \(1958\)](#) and subsequently elaborated by [Furnham \(1990\)](#). The Weberian conception of work ethic underscores diligence, self-reliance, viewing work as a moral calling, and the avoidance of idleness, which are consistent with the attitudes displayed by these students.

These results are broadly consistent with prior research. [Cennamo and Gardner \(2008\)](#) observed that STEM students tend to endorse universalistic and socially oriented values, which align with the tendencies observed among the Gen Z engineering students in this study. Similarly, [Ng et al. \(2012\)](#) reported that business students frequently aspire to leadership roles and early career recognition, findings that resonate with the Management students' emphasis on Power, Achievement, and Stimulation (seeking innovation and challenge).

Nevertheless, the present findings extend previous research by demonstrating that, even within the Gen Z cohort, disciplinary culture appears to play a significant role in shaping work and ethical values. The Engineering students' relatively strong regard for ethics and work-life balance may reflect current efforts within STEM education to embed ethics, sustainability, and social responsibility into the curriculum. Conversely, the Management students' greater orientation toward status and tradition could suggest that, despite Gen Z's generally progressive reputation, those pursuing business-related disciplines may continue to align with more conventional corporate norms. In summary, academic discipline emerges as an important differentiator of work values. When interpreted through value theory and work ethic frameworks, these differences suggest that educational contexts may channel Gen Z's underlying values in divergent directions, thereby influencing their future engagement with work and organizations.

5.2 Gender differences in ethical and work values

This study reveals notable gender-based distinctions in the ethical and work values of Generation Z undergraduates. Male students exhibited a stronger orientation toward values emphasizing delayed gratification, the centrality of work in their identity, and the belief in hard work as a measure of success. Their work values leaned toward self-promotion (Achievement and Power), stimulation, tradition, and, to a lesser extent, self-direction, reflecting a desire for autonomy in thought and action. These findings align with Schwartz's value theory, which categorizes such traits under self-enhancement and conservation orientations ([Schwartz, 1992, 2015](#)).

By contrast, female students prioritised ethical values related to morality and leisure, alongside work values associated with self-transcendence, most notably Benevolence and Universalism, suggesting greater emphasis on social responsibility and interpersonal harmony. This pattern aligns with enduring gendered value orientations: female students scored higher in Benevolence and Universalism, consistent with communal values centred on empathy and social cohesion, whereas male students prioritised Achievement and Power, reflecting agentic traits such as ambition and influence ([Cennamo and Gardner, 2008](#)). The findings are also compatible with role congruity theory, which proposes that individuals are evaluated more favourably when behaviours align with culturally prescribed gender roles ([Eagly and Karau, 2002](#)). While prejudice was not examined directly, the results nevertheless

suggest that traditional value patterns persist among Generation Z (Twenge, 2010). They further resonate with gender socialisation theory, which attributes value formation to early-life reinforcement of gendered norms (Leaper and Friedman, 2007). In sum, gender appears to remain a salient axis along which ethical and work values diverge, even within a cohort often characterised as value-progressive, with implications for how organisations design inclusive educational and early-career experiences.

5.3 Influence of work experience

Another important dimension influencing Generation Z's professional outlook is prior work experience. Existing research indicates that such experiences play a pivotal role in shaping professional identity, with short-term engagements often generating initial enthusiasm (Carvalho et al., 2021), while prolonged exposure tends to foster a shift from idealised career expectations toward more realistic and grounded perspectives.

In the present study, students with 0–3 months of work experience placed greater emphasis on the ethical value of *Leisure*, showing a statistically significant difference at the 99% confidence level. Conversely, those with more than three months of experience scored significantly higher in ethical dimensions such as *Hard Work* and *Wasted Time* (both at 99% significance), as well as *Centrality* and *Self-Reliance* (at 95% significance). Regarding work values, students with extended work experience demonstrated higher scores in *Openness to Change*—encompassing *Stimulation* and *Self-Direction*—alongside a stronger preference for *Power*, reflecting a growing concern for social status and workplace influence.

These findings suggest a developmental progression consistent with vocational socialisation and career construction theories (Savickas, 2005). Students with limited work experience appeared to idealise work–life balance, placing greater value on *Leisure*. In contrast, those with more extensive experience prioritised *Hard Work*, *Time Use*, and *Centrality*, indicating a more pragmatic orientation shaped by early workplace exposure. This evolution aligns with the concept of reality shock, whereby individuals adjust expectations as they confront the demands and constraints of real work settings (Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg, 2003; Louis, 1980).

Students with greater exposure to professional contexts also scored higher on *Power* and *Openness to Change*, possibly reflecting increased confidence, ambition, and adaptability (Savickas, 2005). Even brief exposure to work appears to influence students' ethical and professional orientations, fostering stronger work ethics and more adaptive career attitudes.

5.4 Ranking factors according to student's profiles

Analysis of job selection criteria reveals that *Progression* and *Management* consistently rank as the most important factors for Generation Z students when evaluating potential employers, although their relative order varies across demographic groups. This pattern aligns with recent reviews showing that clearly articulated development pathways and credible managerial support are central to employer attractiveness for Gen Z (Vieira et al., 2024). This consistency underscores a broad preference within this cohort for opportunities for advancement and for effective leadership and organisational structures that scaffold early-career growth (Hofer et al., 2024).

At the other end of the spectrum, factors such as *Compensation*, *Technology*, *Organisational Culture*, and *Diversity* were repeatedly ranked lower across demographic subgroups. This should not be read as indifference; rather, within a fixed ranking task these attributes appear secondary in relative terms to growth opportunities and leadership quality, an interpretation consistent with evidence that Gen Z tends to privilege structured development, mentoring and supportive supervision, with pay important but not solely decisive (Hofer et al., 2024). Accordingly, the comparatively lower rankings for *Compensation* and *Culture* should be interpreted with caution and nuance.

Although the overall ranking pattern remains relatively stable, subtle differences linked to gender, academic discipline, and work experience indicate that demographic characteristics

still shape individual priorities. Notably, the sustained emphasis on *career progression*, *management quality*, and *work–life balance* echoes recent empirical and review evidence that younger cohorts place enduring importance on developmental pathways, supportive leadership, and boundary-respecting work design (Vieira *et al.*, 2024).

5.5 Theoretical contribution

Theoretical contribution. This study advances employability scholarship by articulating a value - ethic translation mechanism in which Schwartz's values specify what students prioritise and Weberian work-ethic dimensions specify how those priorities are normatively enacted in work behaviour (e.g. Hard Work, Time Discipline, Centrality). It also evidences experience-contingent recalibration, whereby even brief prior work experience is associated with shifts in ethical stance and work values, consistent with career construction and reality-shock accounts. Finally, it connects students' employer preferences, especially Progression and Management, to self-determination (growth/competence; relatedness via managerial support) and sustainable-career perspectives (developmental fit and viability), thereby specifying pathways from values and ethics to concrete employability choices.

5.6 Practical implications

Guided by the study's findings, three pilot targeted employability workshops were implemented to support undergraduates' transition to work. The programme translated students' self-assessed work values and ethical orientations into structured strategies for engaging with the labour market. Delivery occurred during a designated, university-wide week for Management and Engineering students held each February. Each workshop lasted two hours and was delivered by organisational psychology lecturers and career advisors. Across the week, 400 students participated.

Workshop 1: Values, ethics, and self-awareness.

Students completed the PVQ-40 (Schwartz *et al.*, 2001) and the MWEP (Meriac *et al.*, 2013) via an online assessment capturing core values, ethical orientations, job-selection priorities and demographics. Individualised reports mapped profiles (e.g. self-transcendence vs self-enhancement; hard work, leisure, self-reliance) to implications for career decisions and preferred work environments. Results were explicitly linked to Schwartz's value framework and work-ethic dimensions to convert abstract scores into actionable guidance. Results were explicitly linked to Schwartz's value framework and work-ethic concepts. Illustratively, students high in Universalism and Benevolence were encouraged to explore non-profit or strong social-mission organisations, whereas those high in Power and Achievement were directed toward competitive corporate settings. This integration helped render abstract survey scores into actionable guidance.

Workshop 2: Person–organisation alignment and labour-market mapping.

Drawing on the study's quantitative results, case studies and sector culture profiles illustrated how industries embody divergent value systems. For example, profiles emphasising Universalism and work–life balance were aligned with roles in renewable energy and socially responsible technology, whereas profiles prioritising Power and Stimulation were mapped to pathways in start-ups, consultancy and finance, where competition, innovation and early responsibility are salient.

Workshop 3: Value-informed employer forum.

A job forum connected students with employers whose stated values resonated with the ethical and professional priorities identified in the research. 48 companies participated and 300 students attended. In collaboration with the careers service, value profiles informed employer–student matching, the design of networking prompts, and follow-up activity, supporting

substantive engagement and facilitating transitions into roles aligned with Generation Z's expectations for purposeful work.

Feedback from the three workshops indicates strong engagement from both students and employer partners. Participating companies expressed interest in the value–ethic profiling approach and reported that the activities facilitated more meaningful conversations about person–organisation fit and early-career expectations. Students also evaluated the workshops positively, noting that the exercises increased their self-awareness regarding their motivational and ethical orientations and helped them articulate more informed questions when exploring potential employers. Although exploratory, these reactions suggest that value-informed guidance activities are perceived as useful and relevant by both stakeholders.

6. Conclusions

Rather than cataloguing group differences, this study clarifies how Generation Z students' motivational values are normatively enacted as work ethics and then expressed in employer-choice criteria. Interpreting PVQ-40 profiles through Weberian ethics suggests that value orientations are not merely preferences but scripts for conduct (e.g. diligence, time discipline, centrality of work) that shape what students seek from organisations (e.g. progression, credible management). This value-ethic - choice pathway contributes to a more integrated account of employability preferences than is typical in literature. Two boundary conditions temper strong claims. First, the prominence of progression and management should be read as relative salience under a fixed-ranking task and likely threshold effects for pay and culture, rather than indifference to transactional attributes. Second, observed patterns appear development-sensitive: even brief work exposure coincides with shifts toward more pragmatic ethical stances, consistent with career construction and reality-shock perspectives.

For higher education, the implication is to move beyond generic employability provision toward value-informed guidance that helps students translate motivational profiles into ethical enactments and search strategies. The pilot workshops demonstrate a practical vehicle for this translation, but future iterations should be accompanied by pre–post measures, behavioural outcomes, and fidelity checks to substantiate impact and support scale-up. For employers, signalling developmental pathways, managerial support, and role clarity is likely to be more compelling than isolated transactional cues, particularly for early-career talent. Theoretically, the study offers a tractable mechanism linking values, ethics, and choices, and generates testable propositions about mediated/moderated effects (e.g. values, ethics, criteria; experience as a moderator). Advancing this line of work will require multi-site samples, multi-source evidence, and multi-level models to assess institutional moderation. In short, treating values as motives, ethics as their enactment, and employability criteria as their choice architecture provides a more precise basis for designing—and evaluating—interventions that align graduate aspirations with organisational realities.

7. Limitations and future research

Although this study provides valuable insights for universities, it has several limitations. First, the sample is limited to students from a private university in Spain, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other institutions or cultural contexts. Future research should adopt multi-site designs that include public and private institutions, different national systems, and a wider range of academic programmes. Cross-national samples would allow tests of measurement invariance for the PVQ-40 and MWEP, and examinations of contextual moderators (e.g. labour-market conditions, funding models, employability mandates).

Second, work and ethical values were assessed through self-reports, which could introduce social desirability bias. Subsequent studies could triangulate with qualitative methods (e.g. value-elicitation interviews, critical incident techniques) and incorporate behavioural indicators (e.g. job-search intensity from platform logs) and administrative outcomes (e.g. verified applications,

interviews, internships, first destinations). Where feasible, time-stamped data and multi-informant ratings (e.g. supervisor or career-advisor assessments) would strengthen validity.

Third, although the study integrates Schwartz's values with Weberian work-ethic dimensions, further work is needed to establish how these configurations extend existing theories. Future research could test mediated and moderated pathways from values, ethics and employer-choice criteria (e.g. Progression, Management), evaluate experience-contingent recalibration (e.g. before/after internships), and situate findings within self-determination and sustainable-career frameworks. Longitudinal tracking as students gain real work experience—both during and after their internships—would be particularly valuable for assessing whether value–ethic profiles evolve as responsibilities, organisational exposure and role expectations intensify. Such developmental trajectories remain largely unexplored.

Finally, multi-level models (students nested within programmes and institutions) would clarify whether institutional context amplifies or attenuates these mechanisms. Addressing these limitations through multi-site sampling, mixed-method and multi-source measurement, will deepen both the theoretical contribution and the broader institutional applicability of value-informed employability interventions.

Annex

Table A1. Average score of ethical values considering the type of studies, gender and work experience

Ethical values	Self-Reliance	Morality	Leisure	Hard work	Centrality	Wasted time	Delay of gratification
Type of Studies comparison							
P-Value	4.933E-01	3.75E-05	2.982E-03	2.809E-04	2.399E-03	4.552E-01	3.560E-04
SE Score	3.825	4.560	3.779	3.868	4.017	4.094	3.466
SM Score	3.854	4.421	3.616	4.036	4.172	4.063	3.669
Effect Size	0.051	0.308 (S)	0.221 (S)	0.271 (S)	0.226 (S)	0.055	0.266 (S)
Gender comparison							
P-Value	4.106E-01	1.76E-07	3.733E-06	2.196E-04	2.081E-03	6.473E-02	3.596E-06
Female score	3.820	4.588	3.843	3.852	4.008	4.130	3.420
Male score	3.855	4.415	3.588	4.023	4.167	4.052	3.686
Effect Size	0.062	0.392 (S)	0.349 (S)	0.278 (S)	0.233 (S)	0.139	0.353 (S)
Work experience comparison							
P-Value	2.901E-02	5.87E-01	1.772E-02	1.034E-04	3.992E-02	2.337E-03	6.808E-02
0-3 score	3.799	4.501	3.757	3.872	4.045	4.024	3.519
3+ score	3.893	4.482	3.624	4.054	4.154	4.154	3.625
Effect Size	0.165	0.041	0.180	0.295 (S)	0.156	0.231 (S)	0.137

Note(s): The highest score is in bold, and it also includes the result of conducting parametric tests for equality of means for independent samples and paired samples with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.01$ (blue) and 0.05 (orange). Effect size following the Cohen's guidelines is included, where $d = 0.20$ – 0.49 indicate a small effect (S), $d = 0.50$ – 0.79 a medium effect (M), and $d \geq 0.80$ a large effect (L)

Source(s): Own work

Table A2. Average score of work values considering the type of studies, gender and work experience

Work values	Benevolence	Universalism	Self-direction	Stimulation	Hedonism	Achievement	Power	Security	Conformity	Tradition
Type of Studies comparison										
P-Value	2.872E-01	8.477E-04	7.058E-01	1.456E-09	1.565E-03	4.205E-03	4.176E-09	1.875E-02	9.898E-01	3.071E-03
SE Score	4.819	4.520	4.918	4.190	4.774	4.717	3.981	4.447	4.344	3.326
SM Score	4.771	4.341	4.902	4.548	4.947	4.881	4.389	4.569	4.343	3.511
Effect Size	0.079	0.249 (S)	0.028	0.506 (M)	0.235 (S)	0.213 (S)	0.503 (M)	0.175	0.001	0.220 (S)
Gender comparison										
P-Value	1.680E-02	1.142E-03	4.105E-02	1.432E-07	3.103E-01	1.230E-03	3.125E-10	2.191E-01	2.627E-01	6.611E-05
Female score	4.860	4.530	4.856	4.187	4.888	4.693	3.915	4.477	4.384	3.274
Male score	4.752	4.354	4.948	4.503	4.832	4.881	4.394	4.541	4.321	3.528
Effect Size	0.180	0.245 (S)	0.155	0.368 (S)	0.076	0.245 (S)	0.521 (M)	0.092	0.084	0.303 (S)
Work experience comparison										
P-Value	8.592E-01	5.734E-01	3.643E-03	1.432E-07	5.173E-01	2.750E-01	1.044E-03	9.795E-01	1.577E-01	7.361E-01
0-3 score	4.792	4.446	4.856	4.222	4.842	4.769	4.071	4.506	4.378	3.425
3+ score	4.800	4.416	4.984	4.554	4.878	4.834	4.322	4.505	4.297	3.403
Effect Size	0.013	0.042	0.219 (S)	0.395 (S)	0.049	0.083	0.249 (S)	0.002	0.107	0.025

Note(s): The highest score is in bold, and it also includes the result of conducting parametric tests for equality of means for independent samples and paired samples with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.01$ (blue) and 0.05 (orange). Effect size following the Cohen's guidelines is included, where $d = 0.20$ – 0.49 indicate a small effect (S), $d = 0.50$ – 0.79 a medium effect (M), and $d \geq 0.80$ a large effect (L)

Source(s): Own work

Table A3. Average score of ranking factors considering the type of studies, gender and work experience

Ranking of factors		Progression	Management	Balance	Integration	Feedback	Flexibility	Compensation	Technology	Culture	Diversity
Type of Studies comparison	P-Value	1.737E-03	4.918E-01	6.587E-09	4.398E-02	1.976E-01	4.618E-02	8.929E-01	1.689E-04	1.880E-01	1.446E-03
	SE Score	2.934	3.293	4.263	4.521	4.904	5.008	6.024	5.867	7.487	7.934
	SM Score	3.442	3.191	5.313	4.140	5.123	4.604	6.051	6.567	7.729	8.444
	Effect Size	0.234 (S)	0.051	0.501 (M)	0.150	0.096	0.148	0.010	0.281 (S)	0.098	0.237 (S)
Gender comparison	P-Value	9.572E-01	1.609E-02	4.327E-07	9.967E-01	9.133E-01	3.498E-04	3.826E-03	3.675E-08	3.655E-01	7.377E-05
	Female score	3.165	3.461	4.223	4.303	5.006	5.226	6.384	6.774	7.713	7.823
	Male score	3.173	3.098	5.220	4.302	4.988	4.488	5.790	5.749	7.546	8.468
	Effect Size	0.004	0.182	0.384 (S)	0.001	0.008	0.271 (S)	0.218 (S)	0.417 (S)	0.068	0.300 (S)
Work experience comparison	P-Value	8.581E-01	1.054E-01	4.916E-02	6.475E-01	4.472E-01	2.336E-01	7.232E-01	1.689E-01	2.676E-01	2.437E-01
	0-3 score	3.191	3.349	4.612	4.304	5.065	4.699	6.005	6.089	7.694	8.100
	3+ score	3.162	3.110	5.000	4.392	4.935	4.945	6.078	6.350	7.485	8.288
	Effect Size	0.013	0.119	0.148	0.037	0.059	0.087	0.024	0.104	0.081	0.085

Note(s): The highest score is in bold, and it also includes the result of conducting parametric tests for equality of means for independent samples and paired samples with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.01$ (blue) and **0.05** (orange). Effect size following the Cohen's guidelines is included, where $d = 0.20\text{--}0.49$ indicate a small effect (S), $d = 0.50\text{--}0.79$ a medium effect (M), and $d \geq 0.80$ a large effect (L)

Source(s): Own work

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