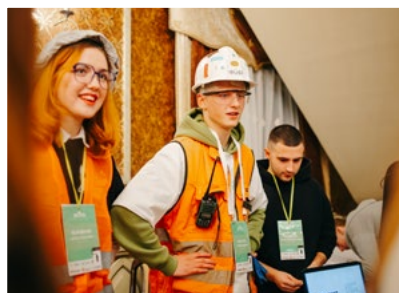


YOUTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Final Report, 31st of March 2025



Executive summary

This youth-led assessment was commissioned by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) Ukraine Country Office for Scruples Research to identify youth's voices and experiences to ensure that NRC's programming is both youth-responsive and youth-centric. Conducted over four months, from September to December 2024, the assessment covered Northern Ukraine (Chernihiv and Sumy oblasts, specifically Shostka raion), Eastern Ukraine (Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, and Donetsk), and Southern Ukraine (Mykolayiv, Odesa, and Kherson).

This study focused on exploring the barriers war-affected youth experience in transitioning from Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) or high school into employment, unemployed youth, including gaps in skills and limited access to market-relevant opportunities. It also aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the preparedness of youth for livelihoods by evaluating their access to life skills and market demands needed for their active involvement in the local labour force, which is not only crucial for Ukraine under war conditions but also for the reconstruction and recovery phases of the country. Additionally, the assessment highlighted challenges youth face in their meaningful participation in decision-making at local, regional and national levels, including traditional socio-cultural norms, gender roles and responsibilities, regulations, policies and structural barriers that limit their ability to participate in decision-making as well as taking on leadership roles. This assessment aims to guide NRC and other humanitarian interventions that empower war-affected youth to overcome these challenges and realise their full potential by providing a deeper understanding and perspective.

Key Findings



Top 3 Insights

- TVET continues to carry a stigma, which deters young people from selecting vocational careers.
- Mental health issues hinder motivation, restricting young people's willingness to seek employment or enter training programs.
- The number of youth councils, centres and led-organisations should be increased along with long-term funding opportunities.



Opportunities

- Enhance outreach in rural areas
- Improve availability of services
- Engage youth as stakeholders



Top 3 Challenges

- Centrally located TVET facilities
- Power outages and unstable internet connectivity
- Prejudice against TVET education and professions

Youth access to TVET education and employment opportunities highly depends on their proximity to central locations and the frontline. The impact varies significantly depending on whether youth live in urban or rural areas, with proximity to the frontline and access to available infrastructure also shaping their opportunities. According to the youth who participated in FGDs, inadequate transportation infrastructure (10%), absence of nearby TVET institutions (13%), along with financial constraints (14%) that made transportation unaffordable, particularly for those displaced and from marginalised groups residing in rural and remote hromadas of Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Sumy further increased difficulties in accessing TVET for youth, as TVET centers are primarily located in urban areas. These challenges underscore the need to expand TVET through mobile units and hybrid delivery models tailored to underserved areas.

The demand for TVET programmes is growing as per the representatives of the Government of Ukraine, societal stigma for both female and male youth surrounding TVET professions remains a barrier. Despite the increasing need for TVET programmes to equip youth with skills for non-traditional roles, such as welders, carpenters, and electricians, negative attitudes toward these roles continue to present a significant challenge. TVET careers are widely perceived by youth as less prestigious and financially rewarding compared to white-collar professions. However, recent changes to the higher education admission system—combined with increasing competition and a growing preference for university education—have made access to higher education more difficult. As a result, more young people are enrolling in TVET programs, though often motivated by conscription exemptions rather than genuine interest in vocational pathways. Although TVET registrations increased up to 80,000 across Ukraine in 2024 (Approximately 50,000 in 2023) as per the representatives of the Government of Ukraine, this was mainly male youth enrolling to avoid conscription.

Youth across Ukraine face a wide range of barriers that limit their participation in TVET programmes and access to employment. The most commonly reported obstacles include limited local job opportunities in rural and frontline areas (15% of youth), financial constraints that hinder participation in TVET and employment (14% of youth), and poor internet connectivity (12% of youth), which restricts access to online learning platforms. A further 13% of youth reported societal stigma surrounding TVET as a significant deterrent, with many perceiving vocational careers as less prestigious than university education. Youth also reported dissatisfaction with outdated curricula and low-quality instruction (10%) and the lack of hands-on training opportunities (11%), which undermine job readiness. Following, legal and documentation barriers were highlighted by 9%, with IDYs and Roma youth especially affected by missing IDs, diplomas, or registration papers. Shortages of qualified facilitators trained in youth and adult education were flagged by 7%, particularly in digital and remote learning settings.

Economic instability and the undervaluation of vocational professions in Ukraine have created a significant disincentive for youth to pursue TVET pathways or commit to long-term careers in technical fields. Low wages in the formal sector were identified as a major concern by 12% of youth who participated in FGDs, with many highlighting that entry-level positions often offer minimal pay despite requiring significant training and effort. For example, formal internships or jobs in TVET-related fields such as mechanics, construction, or agriculture frequently offer wages as low as 10,000 UAH per month, while informal roles—such as those in fast food or retail—can pay up to 25,000 UAH, making them more attractive despite their instability and lack of legal protections. This wage disparity contributes to a perception that TVET is not worth the investment, particularly when paired with exploitative labour practices. 9% of youth reported being offered unpaid “probation” periods or positions without formal contracts, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and without access to basic labour rights like health insurance or pension contributions. Internally displaced youth (IDY) were particularly affected, as they often face urgent financial needs and are more likely to accept low-paid or informal work in the absence of stable options.

The war in Ukraine has had a profound impact on the mental, emotional, and psychosocial well-being of youth, with widespread consequences for their engagement in education and employment. According to FGDs, 17% of youth reported experiencing persistent feelings of emptiness, anxiety, and hopelessness, particularly those living in frontline areas or who had been displaced. Constant exposure to air raids, drone attacks, insecurity, and trauma has created an environment of fear and uncertainty, making it difficult for youth to concentrate, plan for the future, or sustain motivation for learning and professional development. Particularly among IDYs, mental health challenges are further intensified by the emotional toll of relocation, social isolation, and the pressure to adapt to unfamiliar communities. These youth reported heightened levels of stress, guilt, and disorientation, particularly when disconnected from peer networks or lacking access to stable housing,

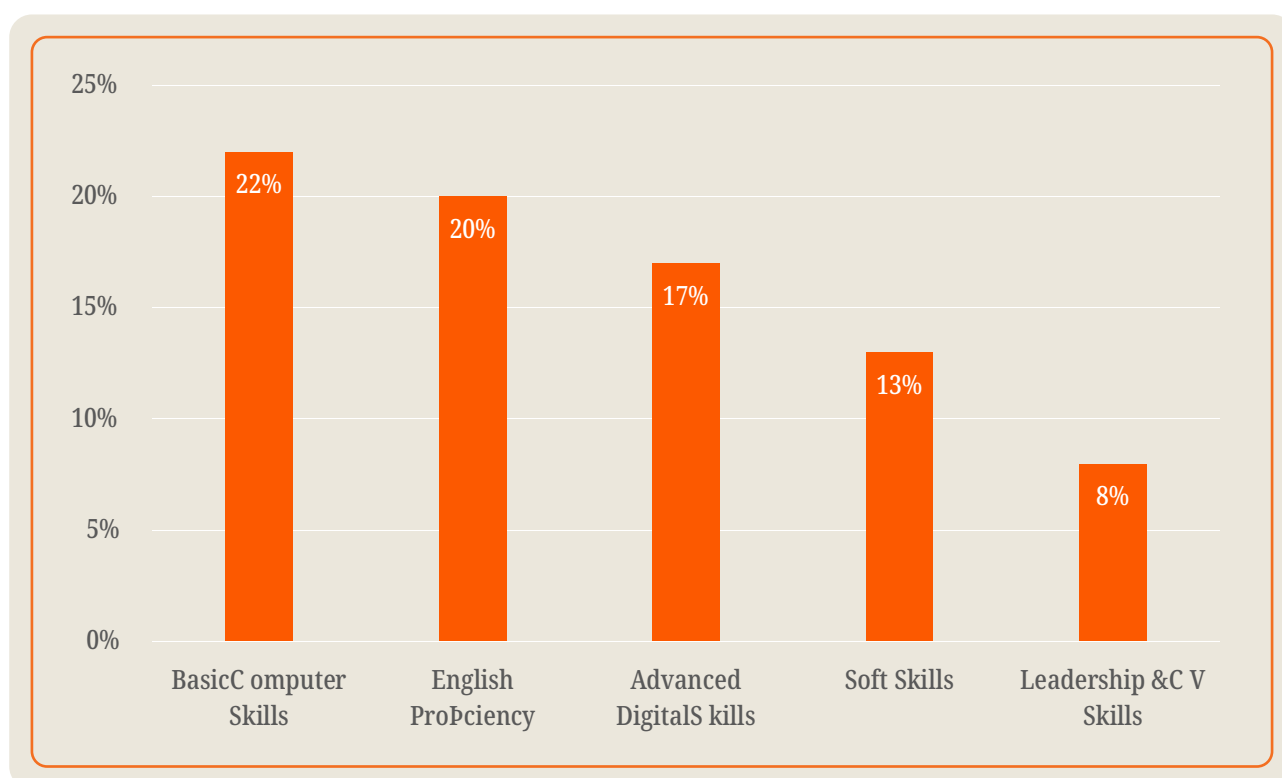
employment pathways, or support services. Social isolation was reported by **10%** of youth, with many noting that the absence of supportive relationships significantly worsened their emotional health and reduced engagement with TVET or job opportunities.

Youth in Ukraine engage through both formal mechanisms, such as youth councils and youth centres, and informal structures, including youth-led organisations, volunteer initiatives, and digital networks. Youth councils, established at municipal, rayon and hromada levels and have shown success in promoting youth engagement in some regions. For example, in Zaporizhzhia and Lviv, informants reported that youth councils have contributed to local development initiatives and advocated for inclusive programming. However, **43%** of youth in FGDs noted that many youth councils still prioritise recreational or cultural events over skills development, employment support, or TVET-related initiatives. This perception is often linked to councils' limited autonomy, with multiple informants indicating that local administrations influence the agenda, which can restrict opportunities for youth-led decision-making.

The current misalignment between TVET curricula and labour market needs is a critical barrier to youth employability in Ukraine. **10%** of youth reported that the content of their training was outdated or irrelevant to actual job requirements, with informants noting that some institutions still rely on obsolete software and equipment—such as teaching programming on outdated systems like Windows 98. This gap is particularly problematic in fast-evolving sectors like IT.

Youth across Ukraine have expressed a strong demand for capacity-building in both technical and soft skills to better align with labour market expectations. According to FGD data:

- **22%** of youth identified basic computer literacy—including proficiency in Microsoft Office, Excel, and online tools—as the most essential technical skill for employment.
- **20%** prioritised English language proficiency, particularly for accessing remote work and international job markets in sectors such as IT and digital services.
- **17%** reported a need for advanced IT and digital skills, including social media management, app development, and coding.
- **13%** emphasised the importance of soft skills such as adaptability, teamwork, and problem-solving, which are often lacking in formal TVET programmes.
- **8%** requested leadership training, CV-writing workshops, and entrepreneurship education to improve job readiness and career navigation.



Key Recommendations

By strategically directing resources toward high-impact, scalable initiatives, meaningful progress can be achieved in expanding TVET education, enhancing youth mental health, and fostering civic engagement among war-affected youth in Ukraine. Three key actions stand out as particularly transformative:

Short Term Recommendations

1. Expand Mobile and Digital TVET Access

Objective: —————>
Increase access to TVET for displaced youth and those residing in rural, remote and frontline areas.

Recommended Action:

- a. Deploy mobile training units to underserved communities, ensuring flexible, location-adaptive learning.
- b. Develop e-learning platforms with hybrid (online and in-person) modules that provide certifications aligned with market demands.
- c. Partner with telecommunications providers to subsidise data costs, ensuring affordability and digital inclusion.

2. Provide Financial Support to TVET Students

Objective: —————>
Remove financial barriers to participation in and completion of TVET.

Action:

- a. Introduce cash-based support (CBI) and vouchers covering tuition, transportation, and learning materials.
- b. Target subsidies towards low-income and displaced youth, prioritising those at high risk of dropping out.
- c. Develop a scholarship fund in collaboration with donors and private-sector stakeholders to enhance long-term sustainability.

3. Improve Mental, Psychosocial and Emotional Well-being of Youth

Objective: —————>
Improve access to MHPSS services for youth, particularly those who are displaced or residing in frontline and rural/remote areas.

Action:

- a. Deploy mobile MHPSS teams in rural/remote, frontline, and hard-to-reach areas, integrating psychologists, social workers, and youth facilitators.
- b. Establish and scale digital MHPSS platforms, including confidential tele-counseling services, SMS-based support lines, and mobile apps offering self-help tools tailored for youth.
- c. Partner with telecom providers and youth organisations to disseminate information on available services and increase digital literacy for MHPSS access.

Medium Term Recommendations

1. Strengthen Youth Councils and Informal Networks

Objective: —————>

Build the capacity of both formal and informal youth-led structures to increase the meaningful participation and engagement of youth at local, regional and national levels.

Action:

- a. Provide technical and financial support to youth councils and youth-led grassroots networks, particularly for displaced youth and those residing in rural, remote, and frontline areas.
- b. Advocate for more independent youth council structures and mechanisms in close collaboration with national, regional, and local authorities, to ensure that youth councils can operate with greater autonomy, free from undue political or administrative influence, while maintaining constructive partnerships that support youth-led priorities and local authorities.

2. Integrate MHPSS Services Into Education and Livelihoods Programmes

Objective: —————>

Ensure that MHPSS services are integrated into TVET and livelihoods programmes by both governmental, non-governmental and private sector actors.

Action:

- a. Equip teachers/facilitators with skills to recognise and address psychosocial distress among students. This includes training in Psychological First Aid (PFA) and classroom strategies that promote social and emotional learning (SEL) in the TVET system.
- b. Advocate to the Government of Ukraine for including structured MHPSS components, such as stress management, emotional regulation, and social-emotional learning, within TVET programme curricula.
- c. Advocate for and collaborate with employers to implement workplace wellness and staff-care initiatives, including regular mental health check-ins and referral pathways to professional support.

Long-Term Recommendations

1. Align TVET Curricula with Market Demands

Objective: —————>

Ensure that TVET programmes, align with employer demands and emerging job sectors by advocating for stronger cooperation between public-private partnerships, along with civil society.

Action:

- a. Conduct regular labor market assessments to identify high-demand skills, ensuring curricula remain relevant.
- b. Facilitate stronger public-private partnerships between the Government of Ukraine and the private sector, including co-designing training modules to maximise employability outcomes.