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**Comparative Analysis of Generation Z's
Perceptions of Sustainable Careers in the Czech
Republic and Finland**

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ABSTRACT:

Due to the constantly changing labour market, the importance of long-term, meaningful, and viable careers is growing. Questions regarding what makes a career sustainable have received more attention in academic research, but this attention has focused primarily on long-term career development and objective outcomes. There is little known about how young people at the beginning of their careers interpret career sustainability in their own words and how these meanings are shaped by the national context in which their careers are developing. This thesis addresses these questions by comparing two countries with different institutional backgrounds in the European Union, namely the Czech Republic and Finland. The aim is to examine how members of Generation Z interpret and define the concept of a sustainable career in the early stages of their professional lives and whether these interpretations reflect differing national conditions in the labour market and welfare system. The sustainable career framework by De Vos et al. (2020), which conceptualises career sustainability as a dynamic balance between health, happiness, and productivity across the dimensions of person, context, and time, serves as the primary theoretical foundation. National context is examined through Walther's (2006) typology of transitional regimes, positioning Finland as a universalist regime and the Czech Republic analytically closer to an employment-centred configuration. The empirical basis consists of twelve semi-structured individual interviews, six per country, conducted with higher-educated early-career participants meeting Generation Z membership criteria. Data were analysed using theory-informed thematic analysis following the procedure consisting of six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings suggest that all three indicators of career sustainability were reflected in the participants' perceptions, even though they lacked prior knowledge of this framework. The balance between meaningful work, psychological well-being, and professional growth represents how they perceive career sustainability. A key analytical finding is that individuals at the beginning of their careers were guided by the logic of temporary compromises and consciously accepted current stress and uncertainty as a time-limited investment in future career stability. The most pronounced cross-national differences were observed in structural conditions. Whereas Czech participants operated in a more accessible labour market, Finnish participants faced greater challenges in the labour market despite stronger social support. Notably, the protective nature of the Finnish social security system did not translate into a less stressful career experience under current economic conditions. Considering that the study is based on twelve interviews with early-career participants with higher education, the findings offer an interpretive perspective on how a specific group of young individuals constructs the meaning of career sustainability, but not general conclusions about Generation Z as a whole.

KEYWORDS: Comparative analysis, The Czech Republic, Finland, Sustainable career, Generation Z, Early career stage

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Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILO	International Labour Organization
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RQ1	Research Question 1
RQ2	Research Question 2

1 Introduction

This thesis explores how early-career Generation Z individuals interpret and define the concept of a sustainable career, and how this differs in the two national contexts of the Czech Republic and Finland. As a concept, career sustainability has received growing attention in academic research, but we know comparatively little about how young people, who are currently entering the labour market, interpret it, considering their own early-career experience. Instead of focusing on objective career preferences, this study observes the subjective meanings that young people with work experience attribute to career sustainability and how macroeconomic, social and work conditions in each country shape these meanings and interpretations.

This introductory chapter presents the background of the study. It identifies research gaps, leading to the formulation of the selected research questions and objectives. The chapter also provides working definitions of key terms used throughout the thesis, a delimitation of the study, and an overview of the overall structure.

1.1 Background of the study

In recent years, career trajectories have undergone several significant changes. Reduced job security as a result of globalisation and rapidly changing technologies has increased the attention paid to individual career agency (Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). Moreover, the rise of the gig economy and ongoing digitalisation have further contributed to making long-term employment stability weaker (Omar & Jamil, 2025). This has led to shifting away from stable, linear models of careers towards less predictable paths (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). Along with these changes, the growing interest in sustainable careers has highlighted the importance of long-term, viable careers. As defined by De Vos et al. (2020), a sustainable career encompasses a sequence of career experiences shaped by the ongoing interaction between the individual, the context, and time, with career sustainability understood as a dynamic balance between three interrelated indicators:

health, happiness, and productivity. This framework serves as the primary theoretical basis of the present study.

Although the existing literature emphasises long-term, dynamic career development, career sustainability may also be analytically relevant to the early career stages. Research suggests that difficult entry into the labour market can have consequences for both career development and personal outcomes (Blokker et al., 2023). At the same time, work-related values begin to take shape during early employment experiences, with the first work experience carrying particular weight in this process (Drewery et al., 2023; Blokker et al., 2019). Members of Generation Z are currently navigating this formative stage under conditions of considerable labour market uncertainty, bringing with them career expectations that combine a strong orientation towards meaning and flexibility with an equally strong need for security and stability (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Böhlich & Axmann, 2021). However, Generation Z should not be treated as a homogeneous group. According to De Boer and Bordoloi (2022), work value preferences among Generation Z individuals differ by nationality, suggesting that this generation should not be understood without a national context of the individuals. The structural environment in which early careers unfold may therefore be one of the shaping factors in how career sustainability is perceived.

Career opportunities and expectations are shaped not only by individual values but also by the institutional, labour market, and social protection conditions of the national context in which a career develops (De Vos et al., 2020). The Czech Republic and Finland were selected for this study on the basis of their contrasting institutional configurations within Walther's (2006) typology of transitional regimes: Finland represents a universalist regime, in which residency-based social protection enables career experimentation without immediate labour market pressure, while the Czech Republic corresponds analytically to an employment-centred configuration, in which social protection is tied to labour market participation and stable employment functions as a structural necessity. This institutional contrast is further reinforced by divergent macroeconomic realities: the

Czech Republic records one of the lowest youth unemployment rates in the European Union, while Finland records one of the highest (World Bank, 2026b, 2026d), illustrating that institutional support does not straightforwardly translate into easier early-career experiences. By comparing these two contexts, this thesis examines whether different national labour market and welfare conditions are reflected in how Generation Z interprets career sustainability.

1.2 Research gap

Against the background of the current developments, there remain some questions within academic research that receive less attention and offer space for further exploration.

First, while previous studies have examined the career expectations of Generation Z in isolation (e.g. Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Jayatissa, 2023), less attention has been paid to how individuals at the beginning of their careers interpret the concept of career sustainability itself and specifically how they understand its dimensions in their own words. What is documented in existing literature is mostly about Generation Z's expectations from a career in general, but not about how this generation understands the framework through which career sustainability can be assessed in the long term.

Second, while De Vos et al. (2020) identified the national level, including legislative frameworks, institutional environment, and social measures, as one of the contextual layers, there is less comparative research that examines how different national environments shape perceptions of sustainability. This opens the door for deepening the current findings, especially in a European context. Studies that systematically compare how young people in institutionally different countries interpret career sustainability are rare, and this study therefore offers an analytical argument to address this gap.

Finally, the dominant methodological approach in Gen Z career research is quantitative questionnaire surveys, which are suitable for identifying general trends but less so for capturing the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to their career experiences (Jayatissa, 2023). Since careers involve not only objective circumstances but also individual interpretations and evaluations (Russo et al., 2023), there is space for qualitatively oriented research that can approach these meanings more directly.

Based on the above, this master's thesis responds to these gaps by examining how career sustainability is interpreted by early-career Generation Z members in Finland and the Czech Republic, how these interpretations relate to the health, happiness, and productivity dimensions of the De Vos et al. (2020) framework, and whether they differ in ways that reflect the contrasting structural conditions of the two national contexts. Given that the study draws on twelve interviews with higher-educated early-career participants, the findings are not intended to generalise across Generation Z as a whole, but to offer interpretive insight into how a specific group of young adults in two structurally distinct contexts constructs the meaning of career sustainability.

1.3 Research questions and objectives

Taking into account the identified research gaps, the following research questions were formulated for the purposes of this study:

RQ1: How do members of Generation Z interpret and define the concept of a sustainable career during the initial stages of their professional development?

RQ2: How do national contexts relate to the perceptions and expectations of sustainable careers among Generation Z in the Czech Republic and Finland?

To explore these research questions, this study defines the following objectives:

(1) To explore how Generation Z members in the early career stage understand and define a sustainable career, with specific attention to how they interpret the dimensions of health, happiness, and productivity in relation to their own professional experiences.

(2) To examine how the welfare and labour market conditions of Finland and the Czech Republic are reflected in how young people in each country situate their perceptions of career sustainability.

(3) To compare the career sustainability perceptions of Generation Z members across the two national contexts and identify whether and how these perceptions differ in ways that relate to the current specific conditions of each country.

1.4 Definitions of key concepts

Below are listed the working definitions to be used for the context of this thesis:

Sustainable career

A sustainable career is understood as a sequence of career experiences unfolding across various contexts and life domains over time, shaped by the ongoing interaction between the individual, their context, and the life stage they are at. Rather than a fixed state, career sustainability is a dynamic condition characterised by the simultaneous and mutually reinforcing balance of three interconnected indicators: health, happiness, and productivity, none of which can be achieved at the lasting expense of the others (De Vos et al., 2020).

Generation Z

According to the definition by Schroth (2019), Generation Z refers to individuals born between 1995 and 2012. This thesis focuses specifically on those members of this generation who are recently entering the labour market and beginning to form their career expectations.

National context

For the purposes of this thesis, national context is defined as the set of institutional, labour market, and social protection conditions within a given country that shape the structural environment in which careers develop. Drawing on the context dimension of De Vos et al.'s (2020) sustainable careers framework, analysed with the help of Walther's (2006) typology of transition regimes, national context is understood here as encompassing three interrelated aspects: labour market conditions, including employment rates, entry barriers, and job availability for young people; welfare and social security arrangements, meaning the institutional logic governing access to social protection during career transitions; and the perceived career opportunities these structural conditions generate for individuals entering working life.

Early career stage

The early career stage is the period encompassing first professional encounters during and after formal education, when individuals enter the labour market, gain their first work experience, and gradually begin to form their professional identity and career direction (Greenhaus & Callanan, 2006).

1.5 Structure of the study

This thesis consists of six chapters, arranged in a logical order to continuously address the research questions. Starting with this first chapter, which briefly introduces the topic, identifies the research gap, formulates the research questions and objectives, defines the key concepts, and, at the end, states the study's delimitations. The second chapter is based on the structure of the sustainable career framework developed by De Vos et al. (2020) and aims to present the theoretical background. Leading into the research section, the following chapter describes the methodology, specifically the research design, participant selection, data collection, and analytical approach. The presentation of the results is the concern of the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter discusses the presented findings, relates them to the literature in order to answer the research questions.

Additionally, the fifth chapter includes theoretical and practical implications. The final chapter summarises this thesis by providing a short conclusion of the main findings, identifies limitations, and, lastly, suggests directions for future research.

1.6 Delimitations of the study

In order to ensure that this research is methodologically feasible and analytically focused, several delimitations have been established.

The empirical research is geographically restricted to two national contexts (the Czech Republic and Finland), selected on the basis of their contrasting institutional configurations within Walther's (2006) typology of transition regimes. It should be noted that Walther (2006, 2022) did not formally assign Central and Eastern European countries to any of his four regime types, given the complexity and diversity of post-socialist transformation processes. The Czech Republic is therefore positioned in this study as analytically closer to the employment-centred configuration based on the structural characteristics of its welfare and labour market arrangements. The findings of this study are not intended to be generalised to Generation Z in other national contexts, as different welfare and labour-market arrangements may result in distinct career-sustainability dynamics.

It should also be acknowledged that contemporary career trajectories, particularly among Generation Z, are increasingly shaped by international mobility, cross-border work opportunities, and location-independent employment models (Baruch & Reis, 2016; Wąsowicz-Zaborek & Oleksiuk, 2026). Career sustainability for this generation may therefore be perceived not only within a single national context but also in relation to wider international career opportunities. However, this study focuses only on the national level, as the early career stage represents the period in which individuals first encounter specific national labour market conditions, institutional structures and social protection measures that form the basis for the initial construction and perception of career sustainability.

The target population is delimited to members of Generation Z with work experience gained through a combination of employment and studies, or through post-graduate work experience. Individuals without any work experience are excluded, as the study focuses on the specific definitions based on real experience rather than just abstract expectations. The study does not go beyond the early career stage and does not aim to represent the entire generational cohort throughout all life stages.

Finally, this thesis examines career sustainability within the framework of De Vos et al. (2020), with Walther's (2006) typology of transition regimes serving as the supporting analytical basis for the context dimension. A broader institutional or cross-framework comparative analysis is not the aim of this study.

2 Theoretical background

This chapter presents the theoretical background upon which the entire thesis is constructed. It begins by presenting the conceptual model of sustainable careers by De Vos et al. (2020), which serves as the main analytical framework of the study. Subsequently, the person dimension of the model is developed through the characteristics of Generation Z, its values, career expectations and behaviour in the labour market. The chapter further analyses the context dimension, with focus on national context as defined in section 1.4, systematically describing the national conditions of the Czech Republic and Finland as two different examples of the European welfare spectrum and placing their comparison within the framework of Walther's (2006) typologies of transition regimes. Later, the time dimension of the model is elaborated, with a focus on the early career stage as a formative period of career development. This is followed by the overview of the three key indicators of a sustainable career, health, happiness and productivity, and their analytical function within this study. Lastly, the final subsection explicitly formulates the integrated conceptual framework for this master's thesis, which is used to address the research questions and objectives as presented in section 1.3 of this study.

2.1 Sustainable career framework

This section introduces and explains the primary theoretical framework of this thesis. Understanding this framework in detail is a necessary starting point for analysing how members of Generation Z perceive career sustainability in the early stages of their professional development in the Czech and Finnish national contexts.

The idea of a sustainable career, as described by De Vos et al. (2020), is based on the simple yet important notion that a career remains sustainable when a person's work benefits them over the long term, provides a sense of purpose, and does not harm their health or personal life. The authors define a sustainable career as a sequence of career experiences unfolding across various contexts throughout an individual's life, enabling

them to achieve and maintain health, happiness and productivity in the contexts in which their career develops (De Vos et al., 2020). Career sustainability, therefore, goes beyond the individual and includes the relational conditions of the surrounding environment.

To systematically capture this concept, the authors proposed a process model that encompasses three groups of indicators: health, happiness, and productivity, and three dimensions through which a career can be analysed: the person, the context, and time. The model is illustrated in the Figure 1.

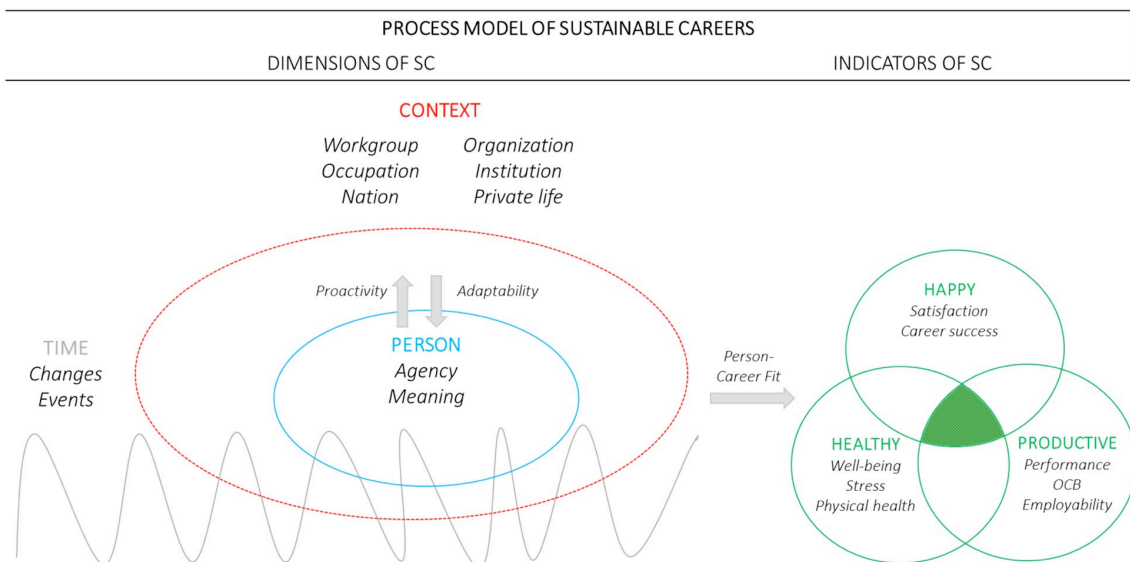


Figure 1. Conceptual model of sustainable careers. De Vos et al. (2020, p. 3).

As shown in Figure 1, this model puts particular emphasis on balance and dynamics. De Vos et al. (2020) highlight that the three indicators simply are not separate goals that can be achieved independently of one another. A career in which a person is high-performing but burned out in the long term is not sustainable, just as a career that brings personal satisfaction but gradually weakens employability. This interconnectedness is further shaped by the three dimensions of person, context, and time, which capture the idea that sustainability is never a fixed state, but it emerges from the ongoing interplay between who the individual is (person), the environment they operate in (context), and the

life stage they are at (time) (De Vos et al., 2020). This dynamic perspective forms the core of the entire model and provides a solid foundation for this master's thesis.

2.2 Person dimension: Generation Z

Within the conceptual model proposed by De Vos et al. (2020), the person dimension places the individual at the centre of career sustainability as the primary actor and owner of the career. This dimension comprises two interrelated components: agency and meaning. Agency encompasses both proactive career shaping, such as planning, pursuing development opportunities, or negotiating employment conditions, and reactive adaptation to external career events and changes. Meaning refers to the individual's capacity to reflect on what matters to them in both professional and personal life and to translate these value orientations into career decisions that maintain a dynamic person-career fit over time. This ongoing alignment between who the person is, what the person needs, and what the career provides in terms of health, happiness, and productivity is what De Vos et al. (2020) identify as a central point.

The generational approach in career research rests on the premise that individuals born within the same historical and social period share formative experiences that give rise to common values and behavioural patterns, which is a foundation laid by Mannheim (1952) and widely adopted in subsequent generational studies. In the work environment, this idea can be clarified by recognising that members of the same generation tend to develop similar career attitudes and expectations compared to preceding cohorts. The analytical value of this approach, however, does not rest on the assumption of generational uniformity. As de Boer and Bordoloi (2022) demonstrate, nationality operates as a powerful differentiator of work values within Generation Z, and any generational characterisation is therefore necessarily approximate and must be anchored in its specific contextual conditions. With this in mind, the following two subsections examine who Generation Z is as a labour market actor and what career values and expectations characterise this cohort.

2.2.1 Generation Z entering the labour market

Generation Z, also referred to as iGen or post-millennials, includes individuals born between approximately 1995 and 2012 (Barhate & Dirani, 2022), and together with Generation Y represents the most active age group among the working population. According to Deloitte research (2025), these two cohorts are estimated to make up 74% of the world's workforce by 2030. The possible reason why there are significant differences in Generation Z from other previous generations is the fact that Internet access, cell phones, and social media have become an integral part of their cognitive and social worlds (Katz et al., 2021). This close relationship with technology has influenced the learning process, professional identity formation, and conditions of the labour market itself, providing Generation Z with a competitive edge through digital literacy. However, it has also created a more challenging environment for entry-level positions.

It becomes clear that the global labour market environment in which Generation Z is to enter makes this transition anything but easy. Slower trade growth, rising trade policy uncertainty, and the accelerated adoption of AI are changing labour market prospects in ways that disproportionately affect new entrants to the workforce (ILO, 2026). The COVID-19 pandemic has also influenced these challenges, hitting this generation at a critical point in the transition, as many members were completing their education or starting their careers amid economic instability and fundamental changes in the organisation of work (Wąsowicz-Zaborek & Oleksiuk, 2026). Together, these structural conditions define a labour market entry that is significantly more complicated and less predictable than those encountered by previous generations.

These structural circumstances are reflected in Generation Z's characteristic approach to job mobility. Research conducted by Chomątowska et al. (2022) found that 70.8% of respondents considered experience across multiple employers a natural part of career development, and 83.4% viewed changing employers as a normal course of action under current conditions. On the other hand, the same study identifies a notable paradox.

Despite the openness to mobility, most members of Generation Z simultaneously prefer stable, permanent employment. Additionally, Böhlich and Axmann (2021) revealed that in spite of assumptions about their indifference toward the labour market, members of this cohort are, in fact, motivated and engaged, though their understanding of loyalty and career success differs from that of previous generations. For Generation Z, changing employers does not seem to be a departure from commitment, but more a strategy for career growth. This represents a pattern that can be connected to the agency component of the person dimension, as described by De Vos et al. (2020), in which proactive career shaping and pragmatic adaptation to structural conditions are equally essential to long-term career sustainability.

2.2.2 Career values and expectations

The career values of Generation Z are driven by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, shaped by the specific historical and cultural context (Barhate & Dirani, 2022). While research identifies several consistent value clusters across studies, de Boer and Bordoloi (2022) demonstrate that national context is one of the key factors, which will be developed in greater depth in the following chapter.

At the core of Generation Z's career orientation lies a strong intrinsic motivation. De Boer and Bordoloi (2022) found that intrinsic motivational values such as learning, skill development, visible work results, and creativity ranked as the most important value constructs across all nationalities they studied, with learning as the highest-rated individual work value. According to Barhate and Dirani (2022), members of this generation are intrinsically motivated. It is particularly so in situations when their work aligns with their personal values and when their supervisors recognise and implement their ideas. Jayatissa (2023) identifies this alignment between personal and organisational values as a recurring theme in Generation Z career research and links it to career satisfaction and engagement. This value congruence also has behavioural

consequences. As reported by Deloitte (2025), 89% of Generation Z consider meaning at work to be very or somewhat important to job satisfaction and well-being, and that this generation is willing to reject employers whose values conflict with their ethical beliefs, for example, in areas of diversity, inclusion, or environmental responsibility.

Another feature of Generation Z's intrinsically oriented nature is their significant emphasis on work-life balance and flexibility. According to the results of Drewery et al. (2023), work-life balance was ranked as the most important attribute of an ideal job, with its importance remaining stable regardless of the amount of work experience. Research by Deloitte (2025) also shows that only 6% of Generation Z employees consider obtaining a leading position at the company to be their top career goal, implying that they care about the quality of their work more than about the opportunity to get promoted. Regarding their job mobility preferences, nearly one-third (31%) of Generation Z workers plan to move to another company in the next two years due to a desire for better work-life balance, a sense of purpose, and learning opportunities (Deloitte, 2025), which reflects similar logic as mentioned earlier in this section.

Despite this strong intrinsic orientation, Generation Z proves to be highly sensitive to issues of financial stability and job security, and this is one tendency that employers tend to systematically underestimate. De Boer and Bordoloi (2022) rank stability, including pension provision, benefits, and certainty about the future, in second place among value constructs. Böhlich and Axmann (2021) found that job security is the most important factor for Generation Z when choosing an employer, and that while employers are broadly aware of this preference, they consistently underestimate the intensity with which it is held. This sense of financial anxiety appears to be increasing. Deloitte (2025) reports that 48% of Generation Z did not feel financially secure in 2025, compared to 30% in 2024, with more than half having little financial reserves, adding that if they feel dissatisfied with their salary they are less likely to perceive their work as meaningful. This is what affects the happiness indicator of career sustainability as described by De

Vos et al. (2020). What makes this relevant for the purposes of this study is that financial insecurity and a lack of meaningfulness at work tend to reinforce one another.

A further consistent finding is related to the tendency of Generation Z towards continuous learning, professional growth, and mentoring. According to Barhate and Dirani (2022), members of this generation tend to prioritise lateral development of competence rather than vertical movement through hierarchy, and the presence of mentoring and support from a direct supervisor is an important factor in their career satisfaction and organisational commitment. Drewery et al. (2023) found that opportunities for professional training and development possibilities were one of the most important attributes of an ideal employer for Generation Z. A survey by Deloitte (2025) confirms that learning and development were among the top three reasons that prompted Generation Z to select an employer, but identifies a discrepancy between the expectations of this generation from their superiors and reality. They look for mentorship, coaching, and assistance in maintaining a proper balance between life and work, whereas the majority perceive that the managers are more focused on overseeing day-to-day tasks.

In summary, the career values of Generation Z reflect a complex combination of intrinsic motivation, pragmatic concerns about security, and a need for flexibility, meaning, and development. What is relevant for the purposes of this thesis is the conclusion that the above-mentioned values are not independent of each other and can be directly connected with all three of the career sustainability indicators. Namely, the value for work-life balance in relation to the health indicator, the search for meaning and value fit in relation to happiness, and the importance of competency, mentoring, and adaptability in relation to productivity. On the other hand, as pointed out by de Boer and Bordoloi (2022), these values are not universally valid but are very much context-dependent, influenced by both national and organisational environments within which career development takes place. Understanding this value structure is therefore not sufficient

on its own, as it also requires examining the contexts in which these values can or cannot be realised in practice, which is the subject matter of the next chapter.

For this thesis, Generation Z is not treated as a homogeneous group. Instead, generational identity is used as a sensitising concept to examine how young people in early career stages articulate career values such as meaning, flexibility, stability, and development.

2.3 Context dimension: National context

The context dimension of De Vos et al.'s (2020) sustainable career model identifies more than one layer of context. From the immediate work environment and organisational policies to sectoral structures and legislative frameworks, the national level stands as one of the key context layers of career sustainability. According to De Vos et al. (2020), these contextual conditions shape all three sustainability indicators. Following this logic, health through workload regulation and access to healthcare, happiness via work-life balance arrangements and career satisfaction, and productivity by labour market opportunities and investments in skills development. The same person, with the same career values and competencies, may indeed achieve a different level of career sustainability depending on the national context in which their career develops, as De Vos et al. (2020) explain by the dynamic person-career fit conditioned by context.

To examine how national context shapes the career sustainability of Generation Z, this study compares Finland and the Czech Republic. According to Walther's (2006) typology of transitional regimes, these two countries represent different institutional configurations for career transitions. Finland represents the universalist regime, whose main characteristics are inclusive social protection and institutionally supported career experimentation. The Czech Republic is an example of a more complex case, because Walther (2006, 2022) explicitly did not assign Central and Eastern European countries to any of his four regime types. The reason that made such classification analytically

untenable was the dynamics and diversity of post-socialist transformation. Nonetheless, later Walther (2016, p. 14) highlighted that post-socialist welfare systems represent 'a complex mixture of ex-Socialist structures and orientation towards Western models', and the Czech Republic's welfare logic, with its contributory insurance principle, employment-based entitlements, and limited transitional protection, shares the defining features of the employment-centred configuration more closely than of any other regime type. It is on this structural basis, rather than on Walther's direct assignment, that the Czech Republic is, for the purposes of this study, analytically positioned to the employment-centred regime.

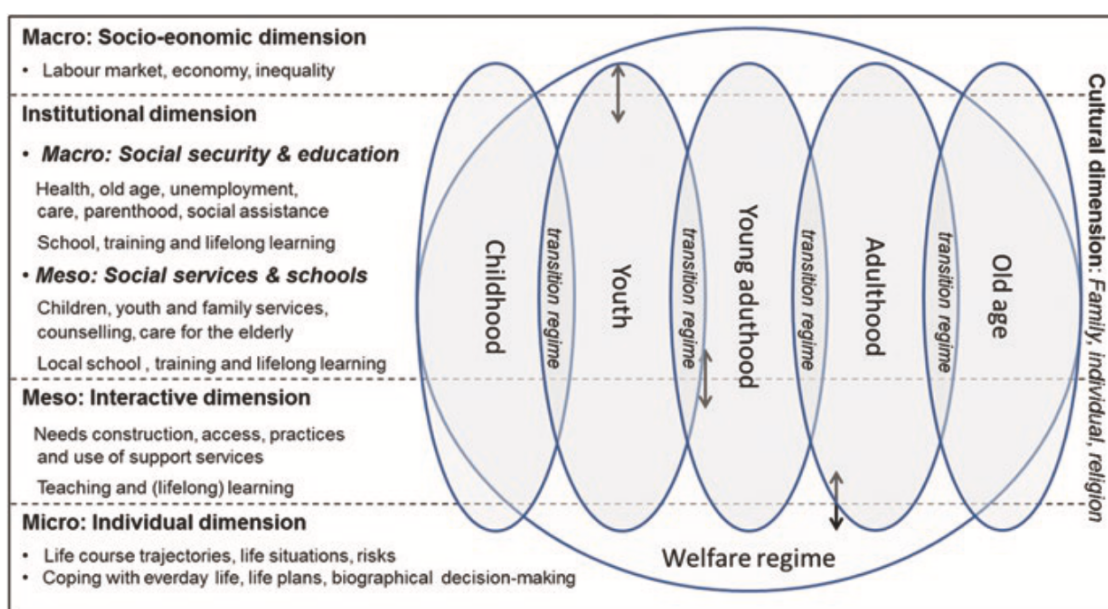


Figure 2. Dimensions of transition regimes. Walther (2016, p. 14).

The conceptual development from welfare regimes to transition regimes, and the analytical dimensions this move entails, is illustrated in Figure 2 (Walther, 2016). As described in Figure 2, the transition regimes specify the welfare regime concept by incorporating the cultural and biographical dimensions that shape transitions across different contexts. The following sections describe the national context of each country through a similar analytical lens, welfare model, labour market conditions, and social protection, providing the foundation for the comparative interpretation of the empirical findings.

2.3.1 The Czech Republic

As a hybrid post-communist welfare model, the Czech Republic combines Bismarckian insurance principles with features of post-socialist universalism (Sirovátka & Ripka, 2020). The system is further characterised by Sirovátka and Ripka (2020) as one having relatively low social expenditure yet comparatively favourable welfare outcomes, achieving one of the lowest at-risk-of-poverty rates in the EU despite social protection spending significantly below the European average. The nature of the system is mostly contributory, financed through mandatory wage contributions that are jointly paid by employers and employees (Sirovátka and Ripka, 2020). In terms of Walther's typology, the Czech Republic is not formally assigned to any of the four regime types, as Walther (2006, 2022) explicitly refrained. Nevertheless, the employment-centred characterisation is analytically appropriate for this study. The contributory principle governing access to social benefits, the dependence of protection levels on prior employment history, and the structural expectation of stable labour market entry as the foundation of social protection reflect the defining logic of this configuration (Walther, 2006), and the Czech system's combination of Bismarckian insurance principles with residual transitional support places it closer to this type than to the universalist, liberal, or under-institutionalised alternatives. This configuration shapes career sustainability conditions in a slightly different way compared to Finland. While access to healthcare is near-universal, covered through compulsory health insurance funds providing broad population coverage (Sirovátka & Ripka, 2020), the contributory principle means that the happiness and productivity dimensions of career sustainability are more directly tied to stable employment, as benefits during career transitions are both time-limited and earnings-dependent.

The Czech labour market offers relatively favourable entry conditions at the moment. It can be described by a labour force participation rate of 78.0% (OECD, 2025), an overall unemployment rate of 3.2% (World Bank, 2026c) and youth unemployment at 9.2% (World Bank, 2026b), with both unemployment indicators being among the lowest figures in the EU. The structural barriers to labour market entry, therefore, appear to be relatively low. According to Strielkowski (2025), the Czech Republic's consistently high

employment rates, relatively egalitarian wage structure, and well-targeted active labour market policies have together contributed to keeping unemployment among the lowest in the European Union, even during periods of economic turbulence. In terms of living standards, a GDP per capita of €22,480 (Eurostat, 2026a) and a gross minimum wage of €924 per month (Eurostat, 2026b) place the Czech Republic at roughly half the income level of Finland, reflecting a standard of living in which financial security is a more pressing concern for early-career individuals. In summary, for those entering the Czech labour market, these conditions appear to provide quite smooth access to employment and lower entry barriers. This supports the productivity dimension of career sustainability, yet the combination of weaker transitional protection and a lower standard of living than in Finland creates structural conditions in which a pragmatic orientation towards stability and financial security represents a rational, contextually grounded career strategy.

2.3.2 Finland

Finland represents an example of the social democratic Nordic welfare model, characterised by universalism of social rights, high decommodification, and financing primarily through general taxation (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Saari & Tynkkynen (2020) described the Finnish welfare regime as one based on the institutional principles of individualised rights characterised by a residential model, and universal coverage of social risks. According to them, these conditions have remained constant since the 1970s. The role of the social protection budget is to act as an automatic stabiliser during times of recession, increasing in response to the crises of the early 1990s and post-2008 (Saari & Tynkkynen, 2020). Within Walther's (2006) universalist transitional regime, the transition to the labour market is institutionally understood as a period of personal development and experimentation rather than economic integration. This is a configuration that shapes career conditions in terms of all three sustainability indicators identified by De Vos et al. (2020). Publicly financed healthcare and comprehensive social insurance reduce existential risk and support the health dimension during career transitions, family policy measures, including childcare and parental leave, create

structural conditions relevant to happiness and work-life balance, and active labour market policies sustain long-term employability and productivity (Saari & Tynkkynen, 2020).

The Finnish labour market from the macroeconomic point of view, however, offers a somewhat different reality. Despite a relatively high labour force participation rate of 79.6% (OECD, 2025) and a GDP per capita of €43,010 (Eurostat, 2026a), Finland's overall unemployment rate stands at 10% (World Bank, 2026a), and youth unemployment remains disproportionately high at 21.5% (World Bank, 2026b). These two labour market indicators are currently about the European Union average. Wages are not regulated through a statutory minimum wage as in the Czech Republic, but through sector-specific collective agreements (Eurofound, 2025). This reflects the country's strong tradition of social partnership. Research further suggests that Finland's transition from education to work is comparatively more complex than in other Nordic countries such as Norway and Sweden (Lorentzen et al., 2018). It is mainly because of more reported cases of NEET status and labour market exclusion, particularly among young women. Lorentzen et al. (2018) attribute this to the specific characteristics of the Finnish labour market and the family policy. When looking into the results reported in the Finnish Youth Barometer survey carried out by Nuorisotutkimus (2025), Finnish youth consider employment as their greatest factor of stress. There is, therefore, a visible discrepancy between career development opportunities guaranteed by the institutions of the welfare state and the real-life experiences of young individuals. As a result of these conditions, young people can find themselves more often in a difficult position, when they are trying to search for career opportunities in such a competitive labour market. With regard to productivity and happiness indicators of career sustainability, these national conditions may affect how career sustainability is perceived among young individuals.

2.3.3 Comparative overview

The national backgrounds described in the preceding sections reveal two structurally distinct configurations through which welfare institutions can shape the perception of career sustainability among Generation Z individuals. As summarised in Table 1, these differences span the underlying logic of social protection, labour market entry conditions, and the broader standard of living within which careers develop.

Table 1. Comparative overview of the Czech Republic and Finland. (Author's own elaboration, based on Eurostat (2026a); Saari & Tynkkynen (2020); Sirovátka & Ripka (2020); Walther (2006); World Bank (2026a,b,c,d)).

	The Czech Republic	Finland
Welfare model	Hybrid Bismarckian post-socialist	Social democratic Nordic
Walther (2006) regime	Employment-centred*	Universalist
Social protection basis	Employment and contribution-based	Residency-based
Unemployment rate (2026)	3.2%	10%
Youth unemployment (2025)	9.2%	21.5%
GDP per capita (2025)	€22,480	€43,010

*This positioning is the author's analytical conclusion based on the structural features described in section 2.3.1.

The most fundamental difference between the two countries lies not in the generosity of their welfare systems as such, but in the underlying logic through which social protection is organised. In Finland, entitlement to benefits is residency-based, meaning that social protection remains accessible independently of employment status, which provides a structural safety net during periods of labour market inactivity or career transition (Saari & Tynkkynen, 2020). In the Czech Republic, by contrast, the system operates on a contributory principle, where entitlement to most benefits is conditional on prior employment and wage contributions, making the level of protection during career transitions directly dependent on previous work history (Sirovátka & Ripka, 2020).

This distinction carries particular relevance for Generation Z, whose career trajectories are characterised by mobility and non-linear progression, as the structural conditions for absorbing career risk differ considerably between the two contexts. Within Walther's (2006) typology, these differences reflect two fundamentally different institutional understandings of how youth career transitions should be supported. The Finnish universalist regime institutionally enables career experimentation by absorbing the risk of temporary labour market exit, thereby creating structural conditions for career orientations on meaning, development, and work-life balance. The Czech employment-centred regime, on the other hand, positions stable employment as both the primary mechanism of social protection and the foundation of career sustainability, which renders a pragmatic orientation towards security and financial stability a structurally rational rather than merely individual response. This contrast forms the supportive basis for the empirical part of this study.

For this thesis, national context is used as an interpretive lens rather than as a deterministic explanation. The analysis examines whether participants refer to labour market conditions, welfare support, employment insecurity, or national opportunity structures when explaining their career expectations.

2.4 Time dimension: Early career stage

In the conceptual model developed by De Vos et al. (2020), the time dimension captures the changing aspects of career sustainability throughout a person's life. De Vos et al. (2020) do not perceive career as a fixed state or a set of isolated goals. They describe it as a cyclical, self-regulating process. In this process, individuals constantly adjust to changes that are reshaping their person-career fit over time. In other words, career sustainability is neither attainable nor unattainable. It can be diminished if there is no competence development and a decrease in employability occurs, or it can be regained through the process of career management. This dynamic perspective underlines that

the value of any given career resource is not constant but varies depending on the life stage and contextual conditions.

The time dimension is relevant to this study because it directs analytical focus on a specific period of a career and not on a career as a whole. As De Vos et al. (2020) emphasise, career sustainability looks different at each stage of professional life, and understanding it requires grounding analysis in the demands and developmental tasks of the stage under examination. For the purposes of this thesis, that stage is the early career, the period during which members of Generation Z are currently building the foundations of their career paths within the distinct national contexts of the Czech Republic and Finland. The next section examines what makes this stage analytically significant and why it represents a formative moment in the development of career sustainability.

2.4.1 The importance of the early career stage in career development

The early career stage is mostly understood in career research as extending beyond the formal moment of labour market entry. Work experiences acquired during studies, through internships, part-time employment, or cooperative education placements, are an example of meaningful and formative layers in career development. Drewery et al. (2023) provided empirical support for this understanding. Based on a large cross-sectional survey of Generation Z cooperative education students, they found that changes in work values occur more frequently at the first work placement when compared to the following ones. This suggests that the earliest professional encounters carry a significant formative weight. Situated within De Vos et al.'s (2020) model, this finding implies that the process through which individuals begin to align their values, competencies, and career expectations with the realities of work starts earlier than at the conventional boundary between education and employment.

The formal entry into the labour market nonetheless remains a critical point within this broader stage. Blokker et al. (2023), in a systematic review spanning 28 years of research, argue that it constitutes the foundational step towards building a sustainable career, with the experiences of this period carrying consequences that extend well beyond initial outcomes into subsequent career transitions. Drawing on Super's (1980) career stage model, the early career stage is associated with distinct developmental tasks centred on the formation of professional identity and the gradual establishment of person-environment fit. Zacher and Froidevaux (2021) extend this perspective through a lifespan lens, situating these tasks within a broader developmental trajectory that links early career experiences to long-term career outcomes. Particularly consequential in this regard are what Akkermans et al. (2018) describe as career shocks. Akkermans et al. (2018, p. 4) define them as "a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career." Early career individuals are especially vulnerable to such shocks, as they are still in the process of building the career competencies and professional experience needed to navigate disruptions effectively (Blokker et al., 2019; Blokker et al., 2023). Research on the scarring effects of difficult early career starts further underscores this vulnerability. It has been shown that a poor labour-market entry can carry lasting negative consequences for long-term career development and later life outcomes (Blokker et al., 2023), suggesting implications for both the productivity and health indicators of the De Vos et al. (2020) framework.

Another viewpoint is introduced by Gerritsen et al. (2024) and their qualitative study, which found that none of the early career participants identified productivity to be a main concern during the school-to-work transition, describing health and happiness instead as prerequisites for productivity. This finding suggests that the weighting of the three sustainability indicators is not uniform across career stages, and that the early career stage has its own internal sustainability logic that deserves attention on its own terms. It also connects directly to the values profile of Generation Z described in Chapter 2.2. If meaningfulness and work-life balance are the primary criteria against which this

generation evaluates professional life, then the early career stage is precisely where those criteria are first tested against reality. Whether this alignment is achievable in practice depends, as Chapter 2.3 has shown, also on the structural conditions of the national context, and it is this intersection of personal values, institutional conditions, and career stage that forms the analytical core of the empirical part of this thesis.

For this thesis, the early career stage is understood as a formative period in which individuals begin to test their career values against labour-market realities. This means the analysis attends not only to how participants define a sustainable career in the abstract, but also to how the specific pressures and opportunities of early working life shape that understanding in practice.

2.5 The indicators of a sustainable career

De Vos et al. (2020) introduce three key interconnected indicators of career sustainability: health, happiness, and productivity. The authors are explicit that these indicators should not be treated as separate goals, since a career that is productive but damaging to well-being, or satisfying but gradually eroding employability, cannot be considered sustainable in the full sense of the word. What binds the three together is the concept of dynamic person-career fit, that is, the degree to which a career continuously meets the individual's needs in all three respects simultaneously (De Vos et al., 2020).

Health, in this framework, refers to the physical and mental well-being of the individual in relation to their career demands. For the purposes of this study, it is understood primarily as a question of whether working conditions remain in sustainable alignment with the individual's psychological capacities over time. As the preceding chapters have shown, this is shaped both by the expectations Generation Z brings to professional life and by the structural conditions of the national context, with the Finnish and Czech welfare arrangements offering considerably different levels of support when those capacities come under strain. In this study, the health dimension will therefore be

explored through participants' accounts of how they relate work-related stress, burnout risk, and work-life balance to their understanding of a long-term sustainable career, and whether the structural conditions of their national context are perceived as supporting or constraining this dimension.

Happiness captures the subjective dimension of career sustainability, understood as the experience of meaningfulness, satisfaction, and alignment between personal values and professional life (De Vos et al., 2020). As demonstrated in section 2.2, this is the indicator most central to how Generation Z evaluates career quality, with value congruence and a sense of purpose functioning as primary criteria in career decisions. Searching for meaningful work is not purely an individual matter. It can be influenced at the same time by the opportunities and constraints referring to the national labour market environment. In this study, the happiness dimension will therefore be explored through participants' accounts of what gives them a sense of meaning and satisfaction at work, how they relate value alignment to their career decision-making, and whether they perceive their national context as enabling or limiting the pursuit of meaningful work.

Productivity extends beyond current job performance to include future employability and the capacity to remain relevant in a changing labour market (De Vos et al., 2020). As section 2.4 highlighted, this is a particularly pressing concern at the early career stage, where the foundations for long-term employability are being established under conditions of significant structural uncertainty. Whether a career provides sufficient space for competence development is again not only a personal question but one that is conditioned by the national context, with the Finnish and Czech models creating meaningfully distinct structural conditions in this regard. In this study, the productivity dimension will therefore be explored through participants' accounts of how they understand career effectiveness, what role continuous learning and skill development play in their career thinking, and how they relate these to the opportunities and constraints they perceive in their national labour market context.

De Vos et al. (2020) propose that health, happiness, and productivity should be understood as interdependent indicators, maintained in balance such that progress in one domain does not come at the lasting expense of the others. Gerritsen et al. (2024) offer partial empirical support for this, as some participants retrospectively described how prioritising productivity had come at the cost of their health and happiness, suggesting that the relative weighting of the three indicators is experienced as dynamic rather than fixed. Health, happiness, and productivity, therefore, serve in this study as the primary analytical categories through which the career narratives of Generation Z members in Finland and the Czech Republic will be examined, and through which the research questions and objectives outlined in section 1.3 will be addressed.

2.6 Conceptual framework of the study

The literature review presented the theoretical basis on which this thesis is built. The primary framework used for organising the content is the conceptual model of sustainable careers by De Vos et al. (2020). The model integrates the person, context, and time dimensions of careers into one whole, which offers a structure for analysis to address this research, while it can accommodate individual career perceptions, structural national conditions, and the early career stage. Each of the three dimensions has been explained in connection to this research. The person dimension through the career values and expectations of Generation Z, the context dimension through the contrasting welfare and macroeconomic conditions of Finland and the Czech Republic, and the time dimension through the formative character of the early career.

As a supportive framework for the comparative analysis of the context dimension, this thesis uses Walther's (2006) typology of transition regimes. While De Vos et al. (2020) include the national level as one of the contextual layers shaping career sustainability, the model does not provide a comparative analytical tool for assessing different national institutional arrangements. Walther's (2006) typology addresses this by allowing a structured characterisation of how Finnish and Czech environments differ in the support they

offer during career transitions. The two frameworks are therefore not used in a parallel way but in combination, where De Vos et al. (2020) define what is being investigated, and Walther (2006) structures the conditions under which the two contexts are observed.

Together, the three dimensions of the sustainable career model and the two supporting frameworks provide the integrated analytical lens through which the empirical findings of this study will be interpreted.

3 Research methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to specify and explain the research methodology used in this study. It starts with research philosophy and approach, followed by the presentation of the research design. After that, the sampling strategy, data collection method, and data analysis procedure are described in detail. The last section concludes this chapter by outlining issues related to the study's trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research philosophy and approach

Saunders et al. (2019) defined research philosophy as a set of assumptions about how knowledge is developed and what is considered valid knowledge within a specific area of investigation. These philosophical assumptions shape the way a researcher understands reality and knowledge, and in turn guide the choice of research design, data collection methods, and approach to interpretation.

This study represents an interpretivist research philosophy. Interpretivism, as explained by Saunders et al. (2019), argues that social reality is not an objective structure waiting to be discovered, but is actively constructed and interpreted by individuals through their experiences, meaning, and context. Since this study intends to understand the subjective interpretations and definitions, this approach aligns with the research purposes. Considering the subjective nature of career development and its dependence on the specific context, careers should not be reduced to universal formulas or investigated only by numerical indicators. The interpretivist approach, therefore, provides a way to capture these subjective and meaning-oriented understandings of how young individuals make sense of their career experiences, what health, happiness, and productivity mean to them in their own terms, and how this is shaped by the national context.

According to the philosophical position followed here, the study adopts a subjectivist ontology, in which reality is socially constructed and experienced differently by

individuals, and an interpretivist epistemology, in which knowledge is co-created in dialogue with participants rather than extracted objectively by the researcher. Reflexivity on the researcher's own values and background is acknowledged as part of the research process.

In terms of research approach, this study follows a theory-informed qualitative approach. The sustainable career model by De Vos et al. (2020) served as the primary organising framework, and its three indicators of health, happiness, and productivity, along with its three dimensions of person, context, and time, provided sensitising concepts that guided the structure of the interview guide and the initial analytical categories. However, the analysis also remained open to meanings and themes emerging from participants' own accounts that could not be anticipated in advance. The framework was therefore used as an analytical lens for interpreting participants' understandings rather than as a fixed set of hypotheses to be confirmed. This approach is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) understanding of thematic analysis as a theoretically flexible method that can be applied within various epistemological positions while remaining attentive to participants' own accounts.

3.2 Research design

A qualitative research design primarily aims to understand meaning, experience, and interpretation rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses, and that is what makes it ideal for examining how or why individuals interpret something in specific ways (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Regarding the research questions of this study, this qualitative approach allows participants to express their perspectives and understandings in their own words, through semi-structured interviews.

Career sustainability, as conceptualised by De Vos et al. (2020), is an individual-level phenomenon shaped by continuous interaction among the person, the context, and time, and the unit of analysis in this study is accordingly the individual. Although the

study is framed by two specific national contexts, its primary focus is on how individuals within those contexts make sense of and construct their career experiences. The comparative dimension of the design is supported by an equal number of participants from each country, which allows for a structured examination of whether and how national context is reflected in participants' understandings of career sustainability.

The comparative analysis was conducted in three steps. Interviews from each country were first analysed separately in order to identify themes within each set of transcripts. Second, the themes were compared across the Czech and Finnish groups to identify similarities and differences in how participants understood career sustainability. Lastly, these similarities and differences were interpreted by following the sustainable career framework. The results of this interpretation are presented in Table 5.

3.3 Sampling strategy

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling strategy in which participants are selected based on criteria that relate directly to the research purposes (Saunders et al. 2019). Because of its potential that allows the researcher to identify people who are likely to provide in-depth and relevant information, this strategy is widely used in qualitative research. Given the comparative design of this thesis, purposive sampling was applied to ensure a meaningful cross-country comparison.

At the beginning, a set of specific inclusion criteria was developed for the purposes of this study. To meet these criteria, participants had to belong to Generation Z, which means that their year of birth was between 1995 and 2012 (Schroth, 2019). Another requirement was that they had to be actively working or combining studies with employment relevant to their career paths for at least 6 months at the time of the interview. This threshold was applied to ensure that participants had sufficient labour market presence to reflect on career sustainability in relation to actual practice rather than abstract expectations. Regarding the residency, participants had to be born in and

currently living, working, and studying either in the Czech Republic or Finland. This criterion was selected mainly to ensure that their experience was grounded in the national context of the particular country under observations. However, no restrictions were imposed on industry or field, as this study is concerned with Generation Z's career perceptions in general and does not focus on any specific professional orientation. The final criterion required all participants to be higher education students or recent graduates in order to narrow the broad population of Generation Z and support analytical comparability across the two national groups.

Overall, 12 people participated in this study, with six of them coming from the Czech republic and six from Finland. A detailed overview of their profiles is presented in section 4.1. The sample was balanced by national group to ensure that neither context was over- or under-represented, supporting the comparative analysis. For a qualitative study of this scope, a sample of 12 participants is consistent with the aim of achieving depth of understanding rather than broad coverage, as Creswell and Poth (2018) note that smaller samples are often more appropriate in interview-based qualitative research where the concern is with meaning and individual experience. The researcher selected and contacted the participants herself with the use of already existing personal connections and broader university networks.

To summarise, the sample consists exclusively of higher-educated early-career individuals, and participants differed in field of study, employment status, and length of work experience. These differences add richness to the data, but cross-country comparisons should be interpreted with appropriate caution, as not all observed variation can be attributed solely to national context.

3.4 Data collection

Semi-structured individual interviews were used for the data collection regarding this research. This type of interview is commonly used in qualitative research because,

besides maintaining some solid structure, it also allows the interviewer to follow up on participants' responses and permits the conversation to develop in directions the participant naturally takes (Saunders et al., 2019). This flexibility aligns with the aim of this study to explore how participants make sense of their career experiences in terms of career sustainability.

To support the quality of the interview guide and make sure the questions were clear and well-structured, two pre-test interviews were conducted before starting the actual data collection. These 2 trial participants fulfilled the inclusion criteria defined for this study, but they were not included in the analysis dataset. In response to the comments and observations, the guide was edited in order to ensure that all the questions were understandable and did not assume any prior understanding of career sustainability theory.

The interview guide used for the final data collection was structured in eight thematic blocks and is available in Appendix 1 of this thesis. The first block established each participant's current career situation and their transition into working life. The second block explored career orientation and values, inviting participants to reflect on what matters to them professionally and what has shaped their decisions. Labour market and national conditions were observed in the third block, specifically examining how participants perceive the job market and social system in their country and whether these conditions feel enabling or constraining. The focus of the fourth block was career trajectory and development. This was observed by asking participants to reflect on their current career stage and future orientation. The fifth, sixth, and seventh blocks explored well-being and work-life balance, meaning and satisfaction at work, and career development, together with future employability. The aim of these three blocks was to cover the dimensions of the participants' career experience without introducing theoretical language. In the eighth block, the concept of a sustainable career was introduced explicitly by asking participants to define a sustainable career in their own words before presenting the three indicators of health, happiness, and productivity. The reason for putting the block

containing the theoretical concept last was to allow participants to speak from their point of view before giving them the theoretical concept.

As for the language, English was chosen for both the guide and interviews. This helped to support the comparability of the findings. Even though all of the participants had enough proficiency to share and discuss their careers and perspectives, due to the fact that English was not a native language of any of them, there might have been a limited depth or nuance.

The Microsoft Teams platform was selected for the online form of the interviews. The virtual format was intended to prevent any logistical obstacles, since the participants were located in different cities in two countries. Individual interviews ranged from 40 to 50 minutes in length, although it depended on the participant's own elaboration. At the beginning of the session, the background of the researcher and the study's purposes were introduced first, followed by a request for permission to record the meeting and to use the Microsoft Teams transcription AI tool. Regarding that, everyone was assured that the transcript would be manually checked and edited by the researcher. Reminded of the option to skip any question or to stop the interview at any time, without consequences, was also made in advance. Afterwards, clear verbal approval of understanding and consent with the procedure was required before the start of the interviews. At the end and after the detailed review, participants could request a copy of their transcript and make any corrections they felt necessary before the start of the analysis.

3.5 Data analysis

For the purposes of this research, data were analysed through the theory-informed thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative method to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning across a dataset. As the base for the theory-informed analysis, the sustainable career model by De Vos et al. (2020) was used to guide the initial coding and

organisation of themes. However, the analysis remained open to meanings and patterns emerging from participants' own accounts, and the sustainable careers framework was used as an analytical lens for interpreting participants' understandings.

The six-phase analysis began with repeated reading of all 12 interview transcripts to develop familiarity with the material and capture initial impressions. In the second phase, each transcript was coded line by line, with codes tracking how participants described their career experiences in relation to well-being, meaning, and professional development, as well as how they reflected on the conditions of their national context. In the final section of each transcript, codes also captured participants' spontaneous definitions of career sustainability and their views on the actors responsible for it and the relationship between the three indicators. The third, fourth, and fifth phases involved grouping codes into potential themes, reviewing and refining these themes against the full dataset, and defining each theme clearly in relation to the research questions. A summarising table was constructed in the final phase, by which the analysis was illustrated into one whole with relevant quotations.

The comparative part of the analysis followed the three-step procedure described in section 3.2, whereby interviews from each country were first analysed separately, then compared across the two national groups, and finally interpreted in relation to the national context.

Tables 2 and 3 present the coding and theme structure of this data analysis. Table 2 covers the seven themes that were derived from the theoretical categories of the sustainable career framework, namely person, context, time, health, happiness, and productivity, and includes illustrative quotations from one of the national groups. In addition to that, Table 3 contains themes that emerged from the final section of the interview guide. The separation of Table 3 serves mainly to highlight the point at which the participants were introduced to the concept of a sustainable career explicitly and invited

to reflect on its meaning, the actors responsible for it, and the relationship between its indicators.

Table 2. Overview of the thematic analysis, part 1. (Author's own elaboration).

Category	Codes	Theme	Illustrative quote
Person	value shift, salary deprivation, identity formation, intrinsic motivation	Change in career values with growing experience	"Salary was definitely the number one when I started, of course. But right now it is more about the values that we mentioned...." (C, The Czech Republic)
Time	unplanned entry, career shock, formative stage, direction finding	Formative nature of an early career	"If I think about me like four years ago and me right now, so it's a big, big difference because right then I didn't know where I want to go, what I want to do." (K, Finland)
Context	contract insecurity, field mismatch, entry barriers, job availability	Challenging labour market entry conditions	"Also many companies offer only limited contracts which is also not very convenient because as a young woman let's say I'm not very happy to see that..." (A, The Czech Republic)
Context	welfare trust, system unfamiliarity, benefit cuts, institutional security	Awareness and perception of social protection	"At the moment, they're doing a lot of cuts to the social system, especially for students. So at the moment, they're just trying to push the students out of the benefits, basically." (G, Finland)
Health	stress tolerance, work-life balance, burnout risk	Health as a temporary sacrifice	"I'm thinking about that. I'm really young, and I have a lot

			of time to slow down later and not be as busy as I am right now. So the path, or, like, right now, it's not that I want it for me, but I still need to collect work experience, and I can't get it any other way."
			(C, The Czech Republic)
Happiness	value alignment, meaningful work, employer fit	Value alignment and meaning as keys to satisfaction	"I personally, I need my work to be somehow meaningful to me personally. If I couldn't, I could never be doing something that is really dull and meaningless."
			(L, Finland)
Productivity	work experience, support, skill development	Learning as the foundation for career development	"I think it's very important to develop some skills that I can offer to a future employer, right? This whole position is very beneficial for skill learning."
			(A, The Czech Republic)

Table 3. Overview of the thematic analysis, part 2. (Author's own elaboration).

Category	Codes	Theme	Illustrative quote
Sustainable career	unfamiliar term, long-term orientation, stability,	Conceptual understanding of career sustainability	"Okay, so for me, it is a career that is making me feel like I am not stuck and that I can grow. So something that keeps me like on my toes, but at the same time, it's giving me a purpose and it's giving me a stability for a

			long term." (D, The Czech Republic)
Actors	shared responsibility, individual role, employer role, state role	Responsibility understood as shared	"My responsibility is to be productive then you can be happy. The culture needs to be there. The systems need to work. They need to help you mentally and physically." (K, Finland)
Indicators	mutual reinforcement, health first, situational importance	Indicators considered as interconnected	"Yeah, I would say that it really goes hand in hand, these three aspects. Like, of course, if you are not healthy, you are not in good shape, you are going to be less productive. If you are not productive, you probably are more stressed, so you are not happy." (F, The Czech Republic)

3.6 Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

Rigour in qualitative research can be evaluated by using the four aspects of trustworthiness. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), these include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility stands for the extent to which the findings presented truly capture the perspectives of the participants. In this research, credibility was ensured through various actions. Specifically, the two trial interviews were held before the start of data collection. The transcripts were edited by the researcher after the automatic transcription.

Participants were also offered the opportunity to review their transcripts. All conclusions were reached based on participants' own interpretations, and quotations are used throughout the findings chapter to provide the reader with an opportunity to evaluate how well the data presented support the conclusions reached. Credibility was also supported by comparing interpretations across participants from both countries.

Transferability concerns the degree to which findings may be applied in different contexts. While statistical generalisation is not the purpose of qualitative research, thick description, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), can be accomplished by providing enough contextual detail that allows one to determine whether findings are applicable in other contexts. Regarding transferability in this research, the detailed description of participant characteristics, including age, country, field, employment status, and length of work experience, was provided.

Dependability focuses on the consistency and transparency of the whole research process. In this case, the dependability was supported by maintaining a coding document throughout the analysis procedure, in which initial codes, revised themes, and documented analytical notes were recorded. This document was also used to track the decision-making process. The analysis followed the clearly defined six-phase structure by Braun and Clarke (2006), as outlined in section 3.5.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings have been influenced by the participants' perspective rather than by any personal biases held by the researcher. Reflexivity was used to address this issue, which involved an understanding of the background and assumptions of the researcher, considering also the possibility of the researcher's influence on the process of interpretation. Since this research is comparative, the danger of using interpretive assumptions drawn from one culture within the comparative analysis of the other was also considered. The same applies to the tendency to interpret participants' responses within the conceptual framework and not in terms of what they actually said. To manage these risks, the researcher kept on

returning to the original data and noted the reasoning behind interpretive decisions. Confirmability is further supported in the findings chapter by linking all claims directly to participant quotations, ensuring that conclusions can be traced back to the data.

Regarding the ethical considerations related to this research, participation was voluntary, and all participants were aware of the purpose of the study, their rights, and the following procedure prior to the start of the interview. Afterwards, verbal consent was obtained. Anonymity was maintained by using letter codes (A-L), and no personal details that could enable the identification of individual participants were revealed in the findings. All recordings and transcripts were stored securely within the university-managed Microsoft 365 environment. These materials were accessible only to the researcher, in accordance with GDPR requirements and the guidelines of the University of Vaasa and will be deleted after receiving the final assessment.

The following chapter proceeds with the analysis following the explained methodology.

4 Research findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings from the analysis of 12 semi-structured interviews conducted with six participants from the Czech Republic (A-F) and six from Finland (G-L). Analysis follows a theory-informed thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006), and the sustainable career model by De Vos et al. (2020) is the main analytical lens used. The structure of this chapter reflects the logic of the conceptual framework explained in section 2.6 and offers a detailed overview of all participants. At the beginning, the person and time dimensions are examined through participants' understanding of their own career agency and the formative character of the early career stage. This is followed by the context dimension, addressing national labour market conditions and perceptions of social protection. Findings related to the three indicators of career sustainability: health, happiness, and productivity, are presented next, and in the end, this chapter offers a cross-cultural comparison and a synthesis of key findings.

4.1 Overview of participants

The research was constructed around interviews with 12 participants from Generation Z aged from 20 to 28 years, while 6 of them represented each focus country. The sample was chosen purposefully following the inclusion criteria described in section 3.3. Table 4 provides a detailed overview of all participants involved for a better understanding of their personal profiles.

Table 4. Overview of the participants. (Author's own elaboration).

ID	Gender	Age	Country	Length of experience	Current field	Status
A	Female	24	CZE	1,5 years	Controlling	Combination of a full-time job + postgraduate studies

B	Female	22	CZE	9 months	Human resources	Combination of a full-time job + undergraduate studies
C	Female	24	CZE	3 years	Taxes and accounting	Combination of a part-time job + postgraduate studies
D	Female	23	CZE	8 months	Project management	Combination of a full-time job + postgraduate studies
E	Male	24	CZE	1 year	Tax advisory	Freelancer with completed Bachelor's degree
F	Male	26	CZE	3,5 years	Marketing	Combination of a full-time job + postgraduate studies
G	Male	26	FIN	8 months	Media relations	Combination of a part-time job + postgraduate studies
H	Female	20	FIN	7 months	Security and administration	Combination of a part-time job + undergraduate studies
I	Female	22	FIN	8 months	Marketing	Combination of a full-time job + undergraduate studies
J	Female	23	FIN	1 year	Business processes automation	Combination of a part-time job + undergraduate studies

K	Male	28	FIN	4 years	Business development and sales	Combination of a full-time job + postgraduate studies
L	Male	25	FIN	1 year	Business analysis	full-time job with completed Master's degree

The sample is quite balanced from a gender perspective, with 7 women and 5 men, and career lengths ranging from 7 months to 4 years. The majority of the sample combines work experience with university studies, which corresponds to the typical profile of the early career phase in both countries. Two exceptions can be found: the interviewee E, who, after graduating with a bachelor's degree, began his career as a freelancer, and the interviewee L, who recently graduated with a master's degree. These differences add analytical richness to the data by introducing varied perspectives on early career experiences, while both participants remain relevant to the sample as they have combined work with studies within recent years.

4.2 Person and time

Regarding the person and time dimension of De Vos et al.'s (2020) model, two themes have emerged from the analysis. The first theme captures shifts in values as work experience increases, and the second covers the perception of the current career stage among the research participants. Together, this section explains how they understood their own role in career development and the significance they attribute to the early stage in shaping their long-term career paths.

4.2.1 Change in career values with growing experience

One pattern that frequently appeared in both national groups of this sample was the description of a retrospective process in which career values changed as a result of growing work experience. This was not a matter of complete reconsideration, but more of a gradual shift from an initial focus on financial compensation to a greater emphasis on meaning, values, and a positive work environment.

Among Czech participants, this was usually described through a continuous shift from focus on salary and job stability towards the appreciation of good workplace relationships and value alignment. Interviewee A said: "I started as a young girl who thought that she would do some intern work here, some administrative things, and paperwork... my motivation and expectations from work environments definitely changed and grew." (A, The Czech Republic). Additionally, Interviewee C described this reorientation more directly: "Salary was definitely the number one when I started, of course. But right now it is more about the values that we mentioned, like some personal stuff in the company that we know each other, that we feel comfortable with each other. So the environment in general." (C, The Czech Republic).

A similar shift was also noted among Finnish participants, though the framing was less about relationships and more about values. Interviewee L reflected: "I think if you would have asked me the same question a couple of years ago, I would have preferred much more money over the personal values. But one of the value changes I have personally had is that maybe I have somehow realised that money is not everything in corporate life." (L, Finland). Similarly, Interviewee J is aware of this change in her thinking: "I think I was younger, and I was like, oh, I can do whatever as long as I get paid enough. But I think I have realised now that it really does matter what you do." (J, Finland).

Overall, the data suggest that this reorientation is more a characteristic aspect of the early career stage itself than the result of a specific national context, as it is evident in

both compared groups and is influenced more by time and experience than by institutional conditions.

4.2.2 Formative nature of an early career

For the majority of participants, career entry was unplanned, and it was mostly about taking the opportunity. Their career directions, therefore, evolved naturally from spontaneous internships or job offers. Although the labour market entry was more of a reactive nature, participants reflected on it as a defining moment, not as a missed chance of planning their own direction.

Interviewee E explained most clearly how he perceives this: "Yeah, yeah, I would say it's a formative period. I think the first two years of my career will set the course for my career in 20 years. Yeah, so I think it's the start is really, really important." (E, The Czech Republic). As for the start of her career, Interviewee C described more specifically this transition: "No, it was all more spontaneous, really, because as we said, I started the summer internship randomly and then stayed here. So back then, I didn't know I wanted to become a tax advisor." (C, The Czech Republic).

Among participants from Finland, the formative aspect of the early career stage was described less through a sense of foundation and more through the openness to continue with experimentation. As described by Interviewee J: "I'm definitely still finding my way. I think I would like to try different. Like this, I've now worked a year in one kind of job, and I still want to try different ones, like completely different technologies to work with." (J, Finland). Interviewee K, who has four years of experience, explained that over the years he was able to found the right way: "If I think about me like four years ago and me right now, so it's a big, big difference because right then I didn't know where I want to go, what I want to do." (K, Finland)

A subtle but analytically relevant difference emerges in how the two groups of participants perceive the formative nature of this stage. Czech participants more often described it in terms of building foundations, while Finnish participants tended to focus on seeking and exploring their own path. Both orientations reflect what career research identifies as characteristic of the early career stage, understood as a period of identity formation and gradual establishment of career direction, as described by Zacher and Froidevaux (2021) and situated within the time dimension of De Vos et al.'s (2020) model.

4.3 Context

The analysis focused on examining the national context, one of the layers of the context dimension defined by De Vos et al. (2020), using Walther's (2006) typology of transitional regimes as the supportive framework for cross-cultural comparison. As a result of the data analysis, two main themes were identified in this dimension. Access to the labour market in a given country is covered by the first theme, while the second examines participants' subjective awareness and perceptions of the country's social system. Both themes illustrate how current conditions within a particular country influence participants' early career experiences.

4.3.1 Challenging labour market entry conditions

The current state of the labour market was described in a significantly different way across the participants from these two national groups. In the Czech Republic, the labour market was broadly described as accessible, however, with some specific limitations. In contrast to that, in Finland, the recent situation posed a real challenge with several conditions making the entry to the labour market genuinely difficult.

In general, Czech participants portrayed it as a market in which employment was accessible, but not always in a field that matched their qualifications or under contracts that

felt secure. Interviewee C summarised it as: "I think whoever wants to find a job will find a job. I'm not sure if in the specific field, but I don't think it's currently a big problem to find a job for students or graduates; there might not be a match in the field between what the person studied and what they will be doing as a job." (C, The Czech Republic). Regarding the mentioned limitations, Interviewee A mentioned a problem with atypical job contracts, that are becoming more common: "Also many companies offer only limited contracts which is also not very convenient because as a young woman let's say I'm not very happy to see that I have limited contract because what will happen in a year right I would like to feel much more secure in this position." (A, The Czech Republic).

On the other hand, participants from Finland described the labour market as more challenging. Interviewee I shared her experience of trying to enter the labour market last summer: "Well, at the moment it's reeeally bad. It's bad. There are no jobs... Like last summer I applied to 47 different positions and didn't get any of those. And I have a really long CV. Like, I've been working for a while now, and I have references and everything, but I still didn't have the things needed for the jobs." (I, Finland). A possible structural explanation was presented by Interviewee L, pointing to the displacement of young workers by more experienced candidates due to the global economic situation: "All the big stock-listed and also non-stock private-owned companies are announcing the layoffs. And this actually creates unhealthy supply and demand for the job market, where highly experienced people with 20 to 30 years of work experience are currently unemployed." (L, Finland).

This contrast may reflect the macroeconomic disparity described in section 2.3. Additionally, the analysis illustrates how different the context dimension can be under various structural conditions. The employment-centred logic of the Czech context creates a labour market that is generally accessible. The universalist regime in Finland should, on the other hand, support career experimentation and mitigate labour market risks, but in the current situation, its ability to fulfil this role becomes limited.

4.3.2 Awareness and perception of social protection

Perceptions of the social protection system notably varied when comparing these two national contexts. Although the differences were not about individual satisfaction, they were mostly related to awareness, visibility, and the extent to which participants took the system into account when considering their own career paths.

Most of the Czech participants viewed social protection generally as a sense of security instead of a specific system they actively understood or navigated. Interviewee B was very explicit about this: "I have not used any support yet, but I know they are there, and I feel safe because of them." (B, The Czech Republic). However, Interviewee C provided a more detailed description of how, in her view, the social welfare system affects young people, and suggested that limited knowledge in this area actually motivates them to search for employment: "I think the social system motivates young people to get work really young and take care of themselves, because we do not really feel social security as from how is the system working right now or we do not know about it at all." (C, The Czech Republic).

There was a marked difference in the Finnish participants' responses. Social protection was described in much greater detail and included specific forms of support such as Kela benefits or unemployment unions. Several of them also had direct knowledge of recent policy changes affecting these forms of support. Interviewee G described the perception of the current cuts: "At the moment, they're doing a lot of cuts to the social system, especially for students. So at the moment, they're just trying to push the students out of the benefits, basically." (G, Finland). Interviewee H made a distinction between the intended logic of the system and its current capacities: "I believe it works in a supportive way. However, it is not enough at the moment. Umm, I do not blame the system because they are doing everything in terms of supporting students and other people in need. However, it's not sufficient, and the support they are able to provide isn't enough to cover everyday expenses... and rent." (H, Finland).

The cross-country pattern resulting from the analysis corresponds closely to what Walther's (2006) typology would predict. According to that, the Czech Republic's social protection operates mainly through employment, which makes it to some extent invisible for those who are already working. In Finland, it is more structurally embedded in everyday life, meaning its recent erosion is experienced concretely and described in specific terms. The structural conditions shaping access to health, happiness, and productivity as explained by De Vos et al. (2020) differ in this case not only in what they offer but in how visible and reliable participants perceive them to be.

4.4 Indicators of a sustainable career

The focus of this section moves on to examining three indicators from the model developed by De Vos et al. (2020). Based on the analysis, one theme related to each indicator emerged. Health appeared to be the most overlooked aspect in this career stage, as it was perceived more as a necessary compromise. Happiness, on the other hand, dominated the discussions in all interviews, with the emphasis placed primarily on the values and meaningfulness of work. Productivity was perceived through the accumulation of experience. All three indicators were implicitly present in the collected data, and participants discussed them without using specific theoretical terminology or prior knowledge of the sustainable career model.

4.4.1 Health as a temporary sacrifice

Health was not explicitly mentioned in the data in terms of well-being, but rather through a specific way of thinking in which the current workload was perceived as a short-term cost worth accepting in exchange for future career gains. From perspective of participants from both national groups, stress and a heavy workload were often described as something to be consciously accepted at this stage, while expecting conditions to improve once their careers stabilised.

The trade-off, as mentioned above, was observed among participants from the Czech Republic, especially among those who combined full-time work with university studies. Interviewee C acknowledged this in response to the question what she thinks about her working life as a whole: "It's hard to say right now because I'm working a lot, I think, and it's more stressful than I want it to be. But I'm thinking about that. I'm really young and I have a lot of time to slow down later and not be as busy as I am right now. So the path or like right now... it's not that I want it for me, but I still need to collect work experience, and I can't get it any other way." (C, The Czech Republic). Interviewee F also reflected on the structural side of this issue, highlighting the shared responsibility of employers: "Like, even though, like, I'm studying full-time and working full-time, it's really hard to, let's say, find some balance, which wouldn't lead to burnout, but burnout shouldn't really be happening in the work environment. I believe that the employer shouldn't let you go that way, so that the employee would be really burned out." (F, The Czech Republic).

Similar logic was also communicated by some of the Finnish participants. By sharing her own experience and understanding of making compromises, Interviewee I described a week of her life in detail: "There has been a lot of like sleepless nights. Like one night, I stayed up until like 6am because I had like 2 projects to finish... I studied until 4.30am because I had to, but it was only for a week, so I had to make some compromises. But like in the long run, I just know... I just have to have like a blank space when I don't do anything." (I, Finland). Interviewee H shared a bit of a different but still valid point of view, acknowledging that her current job was not fully compatible with her mental health, but due to the current labour market situation, she was accepting it: "Yes, I take into consideration the possible burnout and other negative side effects the job might bring. However, since I am not in a position where I would freely be able to choose any job I want. I am accepting the fact that I will have to stick with any job I will get and the job I have, even though it isn't perfectly in balance with my mental health." (H, Finland)

The observed pattern suggests that health, as a career sustainability indicator, was not absent from how they think about their careers, but the participants perceived it more as a present compromise to be made to achieve stability in the future. The health indicator of De Vos et al. (2020) encompasses both physical and mental well-being, though, among participants in this study, the physical aspect received less attention, as the answers were focused more on psychological well-being. Overall, the data suggests that early-career individuals may be inclined to defer this indicator, whether due to a desire to gain experience or because of the challenging labour market, as mentioned in the case from Finland.

4.4.2 Value alignment and meaning as keys to satisfaction

Happiness was one of the most naturally and spontaneously mentioned indicators across all 12 interviews. The central concern was not whether work should be meaningful but how to find or maintain an environment in which it was. Three elements appeared repeatedly throughout the whole sample. Specifically, these involved the interplay between personal and organisational values, the experience of visible and purposeful contribution, and the quality of workplace relationships.

By most Czech participants, the value alignment was described as a condition rather than a general preference. Interviewee B stated: "I think I wouldn't work in companies that are against my values. For example, in a lottery or some nicotine equipment, so yeah, I would say that I need the work to collide with my values" (B, The Czech Republic). The experience of meaningful work from a slightly different perspective was presented by Interviewee E, who connected it directly to his professional impact: "What matters the most to me at my job is that I'm actively helping people who seek my help, which means that I don't have to really sell myself. People find me, and they really appreciate that I help them." (E, The Czech Republic).

The participants from Finland demonstrated a shared set of values through equally strong convictions, even to the point of being willing to make financial sacrifices in exchange for meaningful work. When asked how important it is to have a job that corresponds to personal values, Interviewee I described a hypothetical compromise that directly captures this mindset: "But for example, like in the future, if the question were, would I rather work at a place like I could get maybe? 25 grand a year or maybe like 200 grand a year. But the 200 grand would like be really against my values and my beliefs and everything. I wouldn't even consider it." (I, Finland). By broadening this to a social dimension, Interviewee L mentioned a specific example of how contributing to climate-related challenges gave him a sense of purpose that went beyond personal career satisfaction: "I could never be doing something that is really dull and meaningless. It doesn't link personally, I have my values. So, for example, my current work is positively contributing to the climate-related challenges, and I personally truly enjoy that. So I can probably tell my friends that I'm positively doing something good for society and globally as well." (L, Finland).

The findings suggest that alignment of values and a sense of meaningful contribution were not secondary concerns but primary criteria used to evaluate the work environment. This finding corresponds to the happiness indicator in the model by De Vos et al. (2020), which describes happiness as the result of a balance between personal values and professional life, and is consistent with what was identified in section 2.2 as a characteristic feature of Generation Z's career orientation. This pattern was found to be equally evident in each of the two national groups under observation, suggesting that it reflects the personal dimension of the model rather than the context dimension.

4.4.3 Learning as the foundation for career development

Productivity was perceived primarily in terms of skill development, experience gain and gradual development of professional competencies, independent of performance

indicators or promotion. Most of the participants reported that at this stage of their careers, their main focus was on learning and personal growth.

The emphasis among Czech respondents was on accumulating transferable skills and experience that would strengthen their position in the labour market over time. This was articulated clearly, for example, by interviewee A: "I think it's very important to develop some skills that I can offer to a future employer, right? This whole position is very beneficial for skill learning. Like I didn't even know how to use SAP system before, and right now I'm quite experienced in it. I'm still learning, of course, but I have some solid ground let's say." (A, The Czech Republic). For some, learning new things at work also meant rediscovering a passion for learning. Interviewee D gave a specific example in which she highlighted the importance of gaining new knowledge in her work over academic studies: "I like taking on new challenges. That's why I also kind of accepted the other project, just because I know that I'll have the opportunity to learn a lot. And I think that right now I value more this like real time learning over the school type of education. So I would say that with the job, I kind of rediscovered my love for learning in a way that was kind of gone for a while." (D, The Czech Republic).

The Finnish participants shared the idea of continuous learning, even though they linked it more often to a sense of urgency regarding the future relevance of skills in a constantly changing work environment. Interviewee H was convinced that learning should go beyond the immediate demands of her current job: "I really value the degree and active learning. And even though once I graduate, I will still want to keep learning and gain more knowledge in the important matters." (H, Finland). A more direct answer was provided by Interviewee G, who emphasised the importance of being open to continue learning new things: "The worst thing, for example, as a student or a recent graduate, is to stop learning, because then you wouldn't get far in your career or in your life in general. So you have to be constantly learning." (G, Finland).

The data reveal a widely shared understanding of productivity as a developmental process more than a measure of actual performance. All participants consistently cited learning, developing skills, and gaining relevant experience as key aspects of productivity at this stage of their careers. In both cases, a focus on continuous learning appeared to be a personal value, driven more by a genuine motivation for growth than by any kind of external pressure. This finding relates to the productivity indicator in the model by De Vos et al. (2020), which considers long-term employability and continuous competency development essential for career sustainability. It is also consistent with the pattern observed in section 4.2, where the early career stage was generally understood as a formative period that sets the basis for future career success.

4.5 Cross-cultural comparison

The degree of convergence between the two national groups of participants appeared to be the key finding of the cross-cultural comparison. In both sets of interviews, career sustainability was described using similar terms, putting emphasis on long-term continuity, aligned values, and personal growth, and the three indicators were perceived as interconnected rather than separate. A shared responsibility of multiple actors for career sustainability was recognised in each group, although the weight attributed to specific actors differed. Where the findings of this study differ most markedly is in the structural conditions that shape career entry and social protection, which are closely linked to each country's background, as discussed in section 2.3. After introducing the specific terms for the first time to the participants, three additional themes related to the perception of a sustainable career emerged from the analysis. Lastly, this section offers a comparative overview of findings as a conclusion of the findings chapter.

4.5.1 Conceptual understanding of career sustainability

Although none of the research participants was familiar with the concept of sustainable career prior to the interviews, almost all of them defined it in a way that corresponded

closely to its theoretical understanding of De Vos et al. (2020). Most of the participants from both observed countries shared one pattern by perceiving career sustainability as something oriented towards the long term instead of an immediate accomplishment.

Among Czech interviewees, this long-term orientation was typically associated with a focus on growth and a sense of autonomy. Interviewee D offered the most detailed definition: “Okay, so for me, it is a career that is making me feel like I am not stuck and that I can grow. So something that keeps me like on my toes, but at the same time, it's giving me a purpose and it's giving me a stability for a long term. And we're not talking long term, like five years, but we're talking like 10, 20 years. You know, like, extremely long-term.” (D, The Czech Republic).

Long-term orientation was also consistently addressed by the Finnish participants, but compared to the Czech ones, they tended to combine it with more personal autonomy. Interviewee H described sustainable career as: “I believe that for me it means that, well, basically long-term employment, that personally, with my sustainable career, I would be able to work in one or a few companies long term, and also remain, I'm keeping in touch with my values and supporting my own goals as well as being financially stable and making my own choices.” (H, Finland).

The alignment between the participants' own definitions and the framework proposed by De Vos et al. (2020) is relevant for analysis specifically because it occurred spontaneously. Without any previous knowledge of this concept, participants from both countries developed definitions that reflect the model's essential characteristics such as lasting continuity, value alignment, and a sense of personal growth and meaning. This suggests that the indicators identified by De Vos et al. (2020) align with the intuitive perceptions held by early-career Generation Z individuals within both observed national contexts regarding their working lives, and that career sustainability as a conceptual framework reflects experience prior to its definition.

4.5.2 Responsibility understood as shared

Who bears the responsibility for making a career truly sustainable was a question that addressed a cross-country contrast between the participants. While all of them acknowledged the presence of multiple actors, the weight they tended to attribute to each of them differed in the sense of the Czech and Finnish national context.

Focus on the individual responsibility and the employer role was mostly articulated among Czech participants, with the role of the national context being often completely excluded from consideration. Interviewee C expressed this directly by highlighting the employer's responsibility: "I'm not like counting on the social system or state in general because I don't want to be dependent on it. It feels really unstable for me. If I want to get to a company that will try to make a good environment well... I will try to find this company, and it will probably help me achieve this. Yeah, maybe there must be some kind of cooperation between all three actors, but right now I feel it is mostly about the individual and the employer." (C, The Czech Republic).

Finnish participants understood the responsibility more systematically and emphasised the interconnection between the three actors. It is more of a collective process, according to the response of Interviewee K: "So I think it's a big system. Everybody needs to take their part. And we can't just, I can't like blame, oh my company is bad because they don't do that, they don't do this. But the company could say, yeah, the state is bad, and the state would say, yeah, but everybody needs to carry their own responsibility. So I would say we all need to carry our responsibility, we all need to work to achieve a sustainable career and create a sustainable environment." (K, Finland).

This contrasting perception of responsibility corresponds to the national contexts described in section 2.3 and further illustrated in section 4.3. In the Czech context, where social protection operates mostly through employment, responsibility for career sustainability naturally rests with the individual and the employer. On the contrary, in the Finnish context, where the state is a more visible and structurally embedded actor

in everyday life, responsibility is understood as shared among all three levels. One possible explanation is that participants not only hold different views on responsibility for achieving a sustainable career but also reflect the structural conditions of the systems in which they daily operate.

4.5.3 Indicators considered as interconnected

Across both groups participants tended to describe the indicators as interconnected rather than independent when health, happiness, and productivity were suggested explicitly. However, there were three slightly different patterns emerging from the data, which appeared across both nationalities without being more specific for only the Czech or Finnish participants of this research.

First recurring pattern was a model of mutual reinforcement, in which health, happiness, and productivity were viewed as parts of a single interconnected whole. Interviewee F explained it this way: “Yeah, I would say that it really goes hand in hand, these three aspects. Like, of course, if you are not healthy, you are not in good shape, you are going to be less productive. If you are not productive, you probably are more stressed, so you are not happy, and I would really say that it goes hand in hand.” (F, The Czech Republic).

Secondly, it was the pattern of positioning health and happiness as prerequisites to achieve productivity. Interviewee K illustrated this by saying: “Health and happiness, I think they come first and productivity come right after them. But if the health and happiness is not there, I don't think anybody could be productive. So maybe you could be productive to some limit. But after that, I think you will have like burned out.” (K, Finland).

Lastly, there was a situation pattern, with the relative importance of individual indicators depending on the structural conditions of the person's career. Interviewee H described this in terms of job security: “If a person is in a long-term job contract, they are able to

pay more attention to their mental health and happiness and salary. Whereas if they are working part-time or unsure of their employability, um, they might have to stick with a job that isn't really beneficial for their mental health. So I think it depends on the type of situation people are in at the moment.” (H, Finland).

The three mentioned patterns appeared in the data across both national groups of participants, suggesting that the perceived relationship between the indicators is shaped more on the individual level than by specific national conditions. This is also consistent with how De Vos et al. (2020) frame health, happiness, and productivity as mutually dependent, and propose that some kind of interconnection is recognised intuitively by participants in both contexts.

4.5.4 Summary of comparative analysis

Overall similarities and differences between the Czech and Finnish participants are summarised in Table 5, reflecting the presented findings. The table follows the structure according to the identified themes and provides a structured overview with a brief interpretation.

Table 5. Comparative analysis by themes. (Author’s own elaboration).

Theme	Czech participants	Finnish participant	Interpretation
Change in career values with growing experience	Shift to relationships and environment	Shift to values and meaning	Shared pattern, different emphasis
Formative nature of an early career	Building foundations, establishing direction	Continued exploration and experimentation	Shared orientation, different structural context
Challenging labour market entry conditions	Accessible but limited in field match and contract quality	Difficult, high competition for entry-level	Markedly different conditions

Awareness and perception of social protection	Implicit sense of security, limited knowledge	Explicit awareness, currently under strain	Reflects Walther's (2006) typology of transitional regimes
Health as a temporary sacrifice	Stress tolerance, high expenses, vision of future stability	Stress tolerance, compounded by limited labour market choice	Similar logic, different structural driver
Value alignment and meaning as keys to satisfaction	Value alignment, meaningful work, employer fit	Value alignment, meaningful contribution, and social impact	Shared priority, different relational focus
Learning as the foundation for career development	Individual skills for future positioning	Continuous learning as personal value	Shared orientation, similar framing
Conceptual understanding of career sustainability	Long-term stability, growth, purpose	Long-term stability, values, personal autonomy	Shared understanding, different emphasis
Responsibility understood as shared	Individual and employer, state mostly excluded	All three actors, systemic understanding	Reflects institutional logic of each national context
Indicators perceived as interconnected	Interconnected and mutually reinforcing	Health and happiness first, productivity follows	shared view, different emphasis on hierarchy

The overview confirms two broad patterns across the findings. First of all, the convergence between the participants from two different countries is most pronounced in the person and time dimensions, where career values, perceptions of early career and the very understanding of career sustainability suggest similar orientations regardless of national context. This can mean that these patterns are more characteristic of early career than of any particular national background. In the context dimension, the divergence is most clearly structural, where labour market conditions and social protection differ not only in their nature but also in how visibly and concretely they are reflected in participants' everyday career thinking.

4.6 Synthesis of key findings

The findings address both research questions through the framework described in section 2.6. In summary, they point to a consistent pattern in which the person and time dimensions of the sustainable career framework tend to produce convergence across the Czech and Finnish participants, while the context dimension reflects differences that are more clearly based on the structural character.

All three indicators were present in the data without participants' prior familiarity with the theoretical framework. The approach to health relied on a temporally deferred logic whereby the present stress was accepted as a means toward future success. Happiness was the most recurring one, revolving around value alignment, purpose, and good relations within the work environment. Productivity was a matter of development involving learning and competency development. After direct confrontation with the indicators, all participants tended to them as interconnected, but with different emphasis either on mutual reinforcement, a hierarchical ordering with health and happiness as prerequisites, or a situational weighting dependent on career security. Career entry was mostly reactive and retrospectively understood as formative. Priorities shifted gradually from financial towards meaning-based with growing experience. These patterns appeared consistently across both national groups, suggesting that they reflect the early career stage more than any particular national setting.

According to responses from Czech participants, the labour market was broadly accessible but imperfect in terms of field match or atypical contract conditions. Additionally, the social system remained mostly invisible and responsibility for career sustainability was located primarily with the individual and the employer. Finnish participants, on the other hand, described labour market entry, which posed more pronounced structural barriers. They had better knowledge of the welfare system, but it was perceived as insufficient in the current situation. Responsibility was understood in more systemic terms across all three actors. These differences may reflect the institutional logics identified

through Walther's (2006) typology of transition regimes and suggest that the context dimension of the model operates under markedly different conditions in these two countries at the moment.

Even though none of the participants was familiar with the concept of a sustainable career before the interviews, the intuitive definitions aligned closely with De Vos et al.'s (2020) framework. This spontaneous convergence suggests that the framework of De Vos et al. (2020) resonates with how early-career individuals experience their working lives, even without previous familiarity with the concept, and provides the analytical basis for the discussion that follows.

5 Discussion

This chapter discusses the implications of the findings presented in Chapter 4 in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature. The aim of this chapter is not to summarise what participants said, but to interpret what their accounts suggest about how early-career Generation Z individuals perceive career sustainability, how national context shapes the conditions, and how career sustainability is addressed in the early career stage. The discussion is organised around these three arguments, with the one about early career sustainability involving temporary trade-offs to be highlighted, since it has not been fully captured yet by existing literature. Theoretical and practical implications are addressed in the final parts of the discussion.

5.1 Generation Z understands sustainable careers as balance, not only success

With focus on the first research question that asks how do members of Generation Z interpret and define the concept of a sustainable career during the initial stages of their professional development, the findings suggest that participants understood it not only as a measure of achievement but also as a balance of specific factors. This balance was described in terms of the simultaneous presence of meaningful work, mental well-being and professional development. Participants generally described these three elements not as separate priorities but as mutually dependent conditions, where the absence of one was seen to compromise the others.

These findings relate to what the existing literature identifies as characteristic of Generation Z career values. Studies by Barhate and Dirani (2022) and Böhlich and Axmann (2021) showed that there is a high importance placed on meaningfulness, value alignment and psychological well-being among Generation Z individuals. Additionally, Drewery et al. (2023) identified work-life balance to be the most consistently valued characteristic of an ideal job across levels of work experience, especially for this cohort.

The present findings suggest that for the participants in this study, these priorities are not separate but constitute a single evaluative logic, in which health, happiness, and productivity are experienced as mutually necessary conditions rather than competing trade-offs. This interconnected structure is what De Vos et al.'s (2020) model proposes, and the fact that participants arrived at this understanding without prior familiarity with the framework provides qualitative support for its relevance as a description of how career sustainability is experienced at the individual level.

A further observation concerns the relationship between this conceptual understanding and the national context. While de Boer and Bordoloi (2022) demonstrate that work value preferences within Generation Z can vary considerably across national contexts, the present findings suggest that the conceptual understanding of career sustainability itself may be less sensitive to national differences. Participants in both groups described career sustainability in similar terms, which may indicate that, at least among the participants in this study, the shared experience of early career shapes how sustainability is understood, regardless of the institutional environment in which it is pursued. The context dimension of De Vos et al.'s (2020) model shapes the conditions under which sustainability can be realised, but the findings suggest that it may not substantially alter how sustainability itself is conceptualised.

5.2 National context shapes the conditions for achieving sustainability

In relation to the second research question, which observed how national contexts relate to the perceptions and expectations of sustainable careers among Generation Z in the Czech Republic and Finland, the following suggestions emerge from the analysis. According to the findings, the national context did not substantially change participants' understanding of the concept of career sustainability. In this case, the national context shaped the structural conditions under which that understanding could be pursued. Career values and aspirations were broadly similar across participants from the Czech

Republic and Finland. Where they differed was in the labour market realities they navigated and the social protection systems they perceived around them.

This pattern is consistent with what De Vos et al. (2020) describe as the contextual dimension of the sustainable career model, which identifies the national institutional environment as one of the key layers conditioning career sustainability. The present findings provide a concrete illustration of how this dimension operates in two specific national contexts at a particular point in time. Labour market entry appeared to be a structural barrier among Finnish participants. This could also reflect the youth unemployment rate of 21.5% (World Bank, 2026b) in Finland, which is currently among the highest in the EU. As described by Czech participants, the labour market there was more accessible. The one limitation was that available positions didn't always align with the study field, contract quality, or values fit, which may reflect a youth unemployment rate of 9.2% (World Bank, 2026d), one of the lowest in the EU. These two structures appear to have produced different career experiences among the participants. Exclusion from the labour market was the dominant concern among Finnish participants, while among Czech participants, the concern was more often about the quality and conditions of available work.

The comparison also points to a pattern that the theoretical framework does not straightforwardly anticipate. Based on Walther's (2006) typology of transitional regimes, a universalist system, with its residency-based protections and institutionalised support for career experimentation, might be expected to buffer young people more effectively against labour market uncertainty compared to an employment-centred system, in which access to protection depends on prior employment. The findings partially support this expectation. Social system literacy was higher, awareness of available benefits was more detailed, and the state was more naturally included as an actor in reflections on career sustainability, among the Finnish participants. However, the relationship between institutional type and subjective career experience was not straightforward. Participants from Finland reported greater labour-market anxiety and uncertainty, while those from

the Czech Republic expressed more optimism about their immediate career prospects. One possible interpretation is that this reflects not a failure of the Finnish system as such, but a consequence of current economic conditions in which the labour market that the universalist regime is designed to protect young people from has itself become inaccessible. The safety net remained, but the ground from which people might fall had shifted. This relationship between institutional design and present-day economic context, where a more protective system does not automatically produce a less stressful career experience, is not extensively addressed in existing comparative career research and may represent one of the more contextually specific contributions of this study.

5.3 Early career sustainability involves temporary trade-offs

A pattern that cuts across both the person and time dimensions of the findings, and which deserves particular analytical attention, is the logic of temporary trade-offs. Participants from both national groups consistently described accepting conditions that they themselves recognised as unsustainable in the present, framing this acceptance as a deliberate and time-bound investment in future career sustainability. This logic appeared in two associated forms.

The first concerned health. High workloads, stress, and, in some cases, even experiences of burnout were described by participants in both countries as something they consciously tolerated at this stage of their careers. What has driven this tolerance is mainly the expectation that it would improve in the future, when a more stable career foundation is established. The present was framed not as a sustainable state but as a necessary path toward one. Participants were not unaware of these costs, but placed them within a longer time horizon, accepting present discomfort as something temporary and worth enduring at this stage of their careers.

The second form concerned career direction. For most participants, entry into the labour market was reactive rather than planned, shaped by available opportunities instead of

deliberate choices. Yet this reactive entry was almost universally reframed retrospectively as formative and consequential, a starting point that, despite its unplanned character, was understood as having set the conditions for future development. Here too, a temporary condition, uncertainty and lack of direction at entry were accepted and subsequently reinterpreted as part of a longer developmental trajectory.

This pattern extends the model proposed by De Vos et al. (2020), which conceptualises career sustainability as a dynamic and cyclical process rather than a fixed state, and which acknowledges that sustainability can be diminished and regained over time. The present findings add a more specific dimension to this. For early-career individuals, the process of building career sustainability appears to involve a conscious and temporary suspension of some indicators, particularly health, in the expectation that they can be recovered once the career foundation is more secure. Blokker et al. (2019) provide partial empirical grounding for this, demonstrating that career competencies accumulated in the early career stage carry long-term consequences for employability and career direction. The present findings suggest that participants themselves are aware of this developmental logic and actively build their behaviour around it, even without formal knowledge of the theoretical framework.

5.4 Theoretical implications

The findings provide qualitative support for the relevance of De Vos et al.'s (2020) sustainable career model at the individual level. Participants understood health, happiness, and productivity as mutually dependent conditions, navigated national structural contexts that shaped how those conditions could be pursued, and engaged in a logic of temporary trade-offs consistent with the model's understanding of sustainability as a dynamic, cyclical process. This thesis contributes by showing how early-career participants make sense of the health, happiness, and productivity indicators in their own words, without prior familiarity with the framework.

A second contribution concerns the context dimension. Although the national level is partially identified by De Vos et al. (2020), this dimension has received less empirical attention in qualitative research. This study illustrates how the context dimension of sustainable career theory can be explored through national labour market and welfare conditions, by combining the framework with Walther's (2006) typology of transitional regimes. The combination suggests a possible analytical approach for future comparative research in this area.

A third contribution relates to Generation Z career research. Previous studies have mostly relied on survey-based methods (e.g., Chomałowska et al., 2022) and systematic reviews (e.g., Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Jayatissa, 2023). The presented findings suggest that what the literature documents as Generation Z career preferences reflects, at the individual level, a logic that aligns with the sustainable career framework. This points to the value of qualitative approaches in making the internal structure of career values more visible.

5.5 Practical implications

According to the findings of this research, a set of practical implications was proposed for employers, career development professionals, universities, and policymakers.

The formative nature that participants attributed to the early career stage suggests a practical consideration for career development professionals and universities. Career guidance may consider moving beyond helping young people find employment more towards helping them critically assess the sustainability of career opportunities, explicitly including discussions of health, happiness, and productivity trade-offs. This would be useful both before and after entering the labour market and could be implemented in the form of interactive group workshops or individual consulting. Given that the majority of participants combined university studies with employment, universities could also consider offering a more flexible environment. That would give working students more

space to manage both commitments and support to reduce the trade-offs. Possible options are, for example, implementing more adaptable scheduling or recognition of work experience for academic credit.

The finding that Generation Z individuals in the Czech Republic and Finland tend to evaluate their work environment based on an interconnected set of criteria, in which meaningful work, psychological well-being and opportunities for development are not separate requirements but mutually reinforcing factors, may be useful for employers. An environment that offers growth but undermines well-being, or one that provides security without any deeper purpose, may be perceived as insufficient for Generation Z individuals and can lead to increased mobility. Employers should therefore recognise that psychological safety and opportunities for development are not supplementary benefits but standard conditions. In addition, the findings indicate that good relationships in the workplace play an important role, although the particular form of these relationships varies across countries. Czech participants seemed to link career satisfaction more to relationships between colleagues and an overall atmosphere in the team. For Finnish participants, on the other hand, managerial support and individual development opportunities seemed to be more prominent. These contextually shaped expectations may be useful to consider by employers who design the work cultures for early-career employees in both the Czech Republic and Finland. Specifically, for the Czech Republic, more frequent small internal gatherings between employees could be beneficial to strengthen the collective. In Finland, on the other hand, regular one-on-one meetings with a superior could increase the individual support from managers and work recognition.

Labour market access alone is not enough. Young people also need conditions that support meaningful, healthy, and developmental career paths. Findings from both national groups suggested a tendency to accept stress, heavy workload and healthy compromises during the early career stage. In this regard, policymakers could consider if the current working conditions and market entry norms reinforce this support and if targeted

support for career development could help to reduce the pressure that leads young people to normalise unhealthy compromises at the career start.

The specific priorities differ by country. The data from Finnish participants suggest that the current combination of cuts in social support and a challenging labour-market entry may represent not only an economic downturn but also an obstacle to their career development. The early career stage, which shapes career values, resilience and direction, may be disrupted for a significant proportion of young people as a result. Increased attention to labour market entry and maintaining adequate transitional support could therefore be seen as an investment in the long-term sustainability of young people's careers from the perspective of policymakers in Finland. This support should focus on reducing early-career uncertainty and improving labour market entry. In the Czech Republic, the findings concern access to information. Not because the participants were not concerned about the social system, but rather because they lacked more proactive communication of relevant information from the side of the policymakers. Supporting the visibility and sharing of information about social support options for young people, for example, through a targeted social media campaign or newsletters in cooperation with educational institutions, could help address this without structural changes. Overall, the support should also be shifted towards improving the quality of work, career development, and protection against normalising unhealthy compromises. This could be ensured by increased financial stability in the form of student benefits, since most of the Czech participants combined work with university studies not only to gain experience but also to cover everyday expenses.

6 Conclusion

The final chapter serves as an overall summary of the findings of this study, with an emphasis on answering both research questions directly. This includes a brief summary of the content of this thesis, starting from the identification of research questions to their conclusion. Limitations of the study are introduced in another part of this closing chapter to ensure transparency and the objective consideration of how to use and interpret these findings correctly. Building on the limitations, further research directions are being proposed by the author. Finally, the statement on the use of AI throughout the thesis process is outlined.

6.1 Summary of the study

The aim of this thesis was to examine how members of Generation Z in the early stages of their careers interpret and define the concept of a sustainable career, and how these interpretations relate to the Czech and Finnish national contexts. Based on the identified research gap, the following research questions were formulated to proceed with the research and observe how early-career Generation Z individuals understand career sustainability, and how institutional and working conditions in both countries shape the context in which this understanding is formed and applied.

The sustainable career framework of De Vos et al. (2020) was used to build the theoretical foundation, together with the supporting framework of the typology of transitional regimes according to Walther (2006), to establish a comparative dimension within the national context, supplemented by current macroeconomic indicators of the labour market of both countries. Together, these two frameworks provided not only the conceptual basis for the theoretical part but also a guide for the interviews and the theory-informed analysis.

Data were collected through twelve semi-structured individual interviews conducted with members of Generation Z who met the inclusion criteria as further defined in section 3.3. The sample consisted of six participants from each country covering a wide range of fields, career lengths and work/study statuses. Data analysis was conducted through theory-informed thematic analysis in accordance with the six-phase framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006), with the study's underlying theoretical frameworks providing a basis for the predefined analytical categories that structured the coding and thematic organisation.

The findings from Chapter 4 suggest the presence of all three indicators of the sustainable career model across the entire sample, even though participants did not use the framework's specific terminology. The health indicator was primarily captured through stress, which was considered acceptable because it was understood as an investment in future career capital. Happiness represented the most spontaneously discussed dimension, aligned with values, meaningfulness, and the quality of workplace relationships. Productivity was understood as a formative process, with Czech participants describing it as more individually driven, while Finnish participants more frequently pointed to managerial support and a supportive environment as enabling conditions. Upon direct confrontation with the three indicators, participants perceived these indicators as interdependent rather than as independent goals. Regarding the national context, both groups are currently oriented toward structurally distinct labour markets. Czech participants occupy a market that is accessible but comes with certain imperfections, while the Finnish participants are currently in a market that is very challenging at this point. The social system was perceived as relatively opaque in the Czech case and as highly transparent in the Finnish case, though currently under significant political and fiscal pressure.

In response to the first research question, the findings suggest that members of Generation Z in this study interpret career sustainability as a dynamic balance between health, happiness, and productivity rather than as a fixed measure of achievement. These three

conditions were understood as mutually dependent, and participants arrived at this understanding without prior familiarity with the theoretical framework. The early career stage was characterised by a logic of temporary trade-offs, in which present stress and uncertainty were accepted as a necessary and time-bound investment in future career stability.

Regarding the second research question, the findings suggest that national context does not relate to how career sustainability is perceived, but it still shapes the structural conditions behind this perception. Although career values and aspirations were to some extent similar in both groups, labour market accessibility, social system visibility, and the perceived role of the state as an actor in career sustainability differed. These differences correspond closely to Walther's (2006) typology of transitional regimes, suggesting that the context dimension of De Vos et al.'s (2020) model operates in markedly different ways in the two European countries at this particular point in time.

Overall, this thesis shows that the interviewed Generation Z participants understood sustainable careers primarily as a balance between well-being, meaningfulness, and development. While these values appeared across both national groups, the perceived conditions for achieving them differed. Czech participants described a more accessible labour market but often accepted compromises in work quality, while Finnish participants described stronger welfare support but greater difficulty entering the labour market. These findings suggest that sustainable career perceptions are both individually constructed and structurally conditioned.

6.2 Limitations

In connection with this study, the following limitations were identified. The first relates to the sample itself. Because the study is based on 12 interviews with higher-educated early-career participants, the findings are not intended to represent Generation Z as a

whole. Instead, they provide qualitative insight into how a specific group of young adults interprets career sustainability.

Second, the sample involves only higher-educated participants, which narrows the profile of early career experience. Furthermore, participants were selected using personal and university networks of the researcher, which means that the sample may represent individuals who fit well in their professional and institutional environments. Those individuals whose future is uncertain due to unemployment, field mismatch or precarious work may think differently about career sustainability.

Third, all interviews were conducted in English. Since it is not a native language of any of the participants, nor of the researcher, it may have limited the depth of some responses. However, it supported comparability, and all participants were able to navigate the interview in a fluent way.

Fourth, cross-country comparison may also reflect individual differences, not only national context. Not all background variables were balanced across the sample, and there could have been differences in answers that were based on individual perspectives, rather than shaped by welfare and labour market conditions.

Fifth, the national context was interpreted through participants' own perceptions, not measured independently. The findings could therefore reflect the subjective experience at a specific time, not the objective structural conditions of any of the countries under observation.

Sixth, this research is not longitudinal in nature, despite the fact that the sustainable career theory is temporal. Career sustainability can have different meanings throughout the different career stages and life contexts, and the design of this research could capture only how participants understood and experienced it during the early career stage.

Therefore, it cannot be determined solely from this study whether the temporary sacrifices made by the participants would contribute to sustainable careers in the future.

Finally, the interpretation of data might have been influenced by the researcher's own national and cultural background. Awareness of these issues was considered throughout the whole analysis by ongoing reflexivity, as described in section 3.6. However, the possibility of interpretative biases affecting the findings cannot be fully eliminated.

6.3 Directions for future research

Limitations of this study further suggest some directions for further research. First, the replication of the study using a sample that is intentionally diverse could enhance the analytic base of the conclusions reached by the study. In future studies, it may be worth observing individuals with unstable career paths, such as those who are unemployed, those working in fields unrelated to their field of study, or those combining multiple jobs at once. This way, it may be possible to get a clearer picture of what early career experience is about in its various forms, not only in the specific case of higher-educated, employed individuals in this thesis.

The second point is that the connection between the welfare system and the actual economic environment could be studied independently. Future research may develop longitudinal or combined studies that focus on the changes in perceptions of career sustainability in institutionally different countries, depending on the development of the labour market situation. This will enable us to determine whether the differences found in this study are characteristic of a particular period or of the institutional setting in question.

Additionally, the generalisability would have been more considerable if the comparison had been made at levels covering more than two countries by broadening the scope of comparison according to Walther's (2006) categorisation, since the liberal and under-institutionalised regime categories have not been included in this analysis. Including

countries from these categories would allow a systematic test of whether the patterns observed in this study hold across other welfare configurations.

Finally, the current research focused solely on participants' subjective interpretation of career sustainability at an early career stage. Future research can further enrich this interpretation by designing quantitative or mixed-methods studies that examine actual career outcomes alongside subjective experiences. In doing so, longitudinal analysis can be used to examine whether participants who frame current strain as an investment, in fact, achieve greater career sustainability in later stages, or whether the act of postponement itself becomes an unresolved structural pattern.

6.4 Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence tools were used responsibly and on a limited, clearly defined scale in the processing of this thesis, mainly to identify grammatical errors, search for synonyms and ensure the academic level of the language, since the author of the thesis is not an English native speaker. All AI-generated suggestions were carefully reviewed and considered separately in order to ensure that the meaning of the original content stayed unchanged.

Throughout the process, ChatGPT was used for initial brainstorming and framing of the topic. However, the final topic, scope, and structure were developed by the author herself. To continuously track any grammatical errors and identify suggestions for improving the academic style of the text, the AI tool Grammarly was applied. During the interviews, the AI tool implemented in Microsoft Teams provided automatically generated transcripts. These were checked and manually corrected by the author after each interview.

Artificial intelligence tools were not used to generate full texts, analyse, interpret, or summarise any research data. All analytical work was performed solely by the author, and the suggestions presented were developed based on the author's own judgment.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview guide

- *Introduction, who am I, where am I studying...*
- *The purpose of the research briefly described without revealing the sustainable career topic in specific terms*
- *Approximate length (40-50 minutes)*
- *Information about the anonymity, procedure, rights and after-interview steps*
- *Asking for permission (recording, AI transcription)*

<p>Block 1 Background (Warm-up)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do you live and work (the country)? • What did you study, or recently graduate from? • Can you tell me more about your current/most recent work experience? (What kind of work is it, how did you get the position, how long are you there, how is it related to your study field?) • How has it been, moving from studies into work? • How would you describe your career stage at the moment?
<p>Block 2 Career orientation and values (Person dimension)</p> <p>RQ1, Obj. 1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you made any conscious choices regarding your career direction so far? (choosing a particular employer, role, or sector) <i>Why/how?</i> • When you think about your working life, what matters most to you? <i>Can you give me a specific example?</i> • Does your current work reflect what matters to you? <i>What has driven your career decisions the most so far? (salary, stability, or something more personal)</i> <i>Has that changed over time after having more experience?</i>
<p>Block 3 Labour market and national conditions (Context dimension)</p> <p>RQ2, Obj. 2, 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe the job market for young people in your country right now? <i>What factors make it easier/harder, such as job availability or contract types...</i> • Do you think the social system in your country influences the career choices of young people? <i>Personal example?</i> • Thinking about your own career, in what ways do you feel the conditions in your country shaped the options, expectations, or choices you have? <i>Supportive or constraining environment?</i>

	<p><i>Do you feel you can choose work that matters to you, or do you feel pushed towards stability first?</i></p> <p><i>What do you think would need to change for young people's careers to work better here?</i></p>
<p>Block 4</p> <p>Career trajectory and development</p> <p>(Time dimension)</p> <p>RQ1, Obj. 1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you feel like you are still finding your own way in your career, or does it feel more settled? <i>What has shaped that feeling most?</i> • Did anything happen in your career that made you rethink your direction? <i>Did that affect your thinking about long term career views?</i> • At this stage, do you think much about where your career is heading in the future, or is your focus more on the present? <i>What shapes that orientation? (your own priorities, the uncertainty...?)</i> <i>Is it shaping your values for the future? How?</i>
<p>Block 5</p> <p>Well-being and work-life balance</p> <p>(Health)</p> <p>RQ1, Obj. 1</p> <p>RQ2, Obj. 2, 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think about stress, burnout, or mental well-being when you consider a job/career path? <i>Has this been something you have personally experienced or witnessed?</i> <i>How much pressure would you say is still okay at this stage?</i> <i>Where is the line for you?</i> • Can you imagine continuing your current type of work long-term without it damaging your health or personal life? • Do you feel that the conditions in FIN/CZE give you a sense of security if things at work become difficult? <i>Has this influenced how you think about career or employer selection?</i>
<p>Block 6</p> <p>Meaning and satisfaction at work</p> <p>(Happiness)</p> <p>RQ1, Obj. 1</p> <p>RQ2, Obj. 2, 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes a career meaningful or satisfying for you? <i>Does it emerge automatically?</i> • How important is it that your employer shares the same values as you? <i>Can you think of a situation where a mismatch in values affected your work?</i> <i>Do you have a personal line between financial security and value alignment?</i> • Are there enough opportunities in your country for work that is well-paid and meaningful at the same time? <i>Does this shape your options specifically?</i>
<p>Block 7</p> <p>Career development and employability</p> <p>(Productivity)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does doing well in your career mean to you personally? <i>Has that changed over time?</i> • Is it important for you to keep learning and developing new skills at the moment? <i>Do you feel the support in this from your employer?</i>

<p>RQ1, Obj. 1 RQ2, Obj. 2, 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there enough opportunities in your country for young people to grow professionally and build long-term employability, in your opinion? <i>What can make it easier or more difficult?</i> • Do you somehow think about your future employability? <i>Are you confident/uncertain that your skills will remain relevant?</i>
<p>Block 8 Understanding of a sustainable career</p> <p>RQ1, RQ2 Obj. 1, 2, 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What comes to your mind when you hear 'sustainable career'? <i>Have you ever heard about it?</i> <i>How would you explain it in your own words?</i> <i>What do you think makes a career sustainable?</i> • Some researchers define three indicators of a sustainable career: health, happiness, and productivity. What do you think about it? <i>Are they equally important in a career, or maybe some matter more to you?</i> <i>Do you think this opinion has changed over time?</i> • Is it realistic, in CZE/FIN today, to build a truly sustainable career? <i>Why? Obstacles?</i> <i>Do you think young people here face different pressures than in other countries?</i> <i>What do you think causes that?</i> • Who has the responsibility for making a career sustainable, in your opinion? <i>Would it be you, your employer, or the state?</i> <i>Why would you say so?</i> <i>Has this changed over time?</i>

Would like to add anything else to this topic? Something that was not covered or came to your mind later, and you would like to include it in any of your answers?

- *Conclusion and thank you*
- *Repeating the confidentiality, rights, and next steps*
- *Offering an option to get a copy of the transcript for final check before the analysis*
- *Sharing my contact information*

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