
Guest editorial: Sustainable career ecosystems for sustainable transitions to work

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As scholars in the field of Sustainable Careers and Sustainable Career Development, we are committed to fostering reflection on the contextual and overarching factors that shape a crucial stage in a person's development. While many contemporary career theories have emphasized individual agency, we acknowledge that people do not move in a vacuum ([Baruch and Sullivan, 2022](#)). Yet, intercorrelated, multilevel contextual elements may guide, interrupt, reverse or facilitate people's career trajectories. As individuals engage with the labour market and navigate their professional lives, guided by their desires and necessities, other actors may influence their paths ([Donald et al., 2024a, b](#)). Group-, organisation- and global-level influence may reflect push and pull factors requiring individuals to go through educational and work transitions, face change movements and learning cycles to adjust to new situations, chance events or career shocks ([Akkermans et al., 2020](#)) or indirect effects of social, political, economic and technological forces. [Rabenu and Baruch \(2024\)](#) offer a comprehensive and future-oriented overview of the contextual and global challenges to career development in contemporary societies, highlighting the critical role of external factors alongside individual agency. They note the potential positive and negative impacts of AI on career trajectories and HR career management systems, as well as massive migration movements driven by wars and other factors, such as de-globalization and recession, which may motivate workers to engage in learning activities to adjust their skills in view of evolving labour market requirements and employment prospects.

Trying to catch up with the contextual influence on career development, as Guest Editors for this Special Issue, we are committed to the acknowledgment that transitions to work are not solely the result of individual efforts but are embedded within complex, multi-layered environments shaped by educational institutions, employers, policy frameworks and socio-economic conditions. This Special Issue seeks to explore what a transition to work under these circumstances entails, the complex challenges that those entering and establishing themselves in the labour market face, and how they can address them. Rapid technological advancements, shifting labour-market demands and disruptive global events (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic) have dramatically changed how younger generations approach work and what they expect from their career, emphasising the psychological indicators of a successful transition, like well-being, work-life balance, satisfaction, psychological safety and support to growth and continuity ([Barhate and Dirani, 2021](#); [Russo et al., 2025a, b](#)) above and beyond objective ones. Moreover, these factors may impact the transition from higher education to work, which is already marked by instability and ambiguity and has become increasingly complex, uncertain and uneven in recent years ([Blokke et al., 2023](#)). Indeed, contextual forces may divert new entrants' career goals and projected outcomes, potentially leading to delays or unexpected trajectories ([Gerritsen et al., 2025](#)). As a result, young people entering the labour market must navigate not only heightened competition. They are also confronted with evolving expectations for adaptability, continuous learning and employability, with potential repercussions for outcomes they may value, such as well-being, satisfaction and a sense of development, success and continuity ([Magnano et al., 2021](#)). Otherwise, the context may facilitate the transition to work. For instance, university-level support, with the provision of work-based education, the development of career resources and career self-management competencies, has been shown to bode well for a positive transition into the world of work ([Jackson et al., 2024](#); [Petruzziello et al., 2023](#)).



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Sustainable careers and sustainable career ecosystems

Within this context, the notion of career sustainability has gained prominence as a critical lens for understanding how individuals can achieve continuous, healthy and meaningful career trajectories (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). It acknowledges that contemporary careers rely on and should be analysed by accounting for, the interplay between the person, who remains the main actor of the career trajectory and the context, which encompasses the proximal and distal social spaces and major system actors that define career scenarios. This interplay happens over time, which is the third founding dimension of sustainable careers, as it entails the cycle of career-related events and decisions, along with the self-regulatory actions people take to adapt to them. A sustainable career is characterized by a dynamic balance among health, happiness and productivity (Donald *et al.*, 2024a, b). The conceptual relevance of sustainability amid the evolving nature of careers is prompting scholars to explore which transition-to-work dynamics may influence sustainable labour-market entry (Blokke *et al.*, 2023; Russo *et al.*, 2025a, b). Recent theoretical developments have proposed integrating the Career Ecosystem Theory (CET; Baruch, 2015) with the career sustainability perspective, giving rise to the concept of the Sustainable Career Ecosystem (SCE; Donald *et al.*, 2024a; Donald and Jackson, 2023). This perspective conceptualises career development as a dynamic, systemic process that emerges from continuous interaction among individuals and multiple stakeholders at the micro, meso and macro levels. By adopting this lens, it becomes possible to better capture the interdependencies and temporal dynamics that characterise contemporary transitions to work.

Goal of the special issue

This Special Issue on “Sustainable Career Ecosystems for Sustainable Transitions to Work” is positioned within this emerging research agenda. It aims to advance understanding of how the interplay between individual agency and contextual factors shapes the sustainability of early career trajectories. In doing so, the Special Issue responds to the need for a more comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to studying transitions to work, one that recognises the reciprocal relationships among individuals, organizations and society. We were delighted by the strong response to our call for papers, and ultimately, 10 manuscripts were selected for the special issue. Across the contributions, the Special Issue provides both theoretical developments and empirical evidence that collectively strengthen the conceptual value of the Sustainable Career Ecosystem perspective. The contributions to this Special Issue show that sustainable career ecosystems shape transitions to work through the interplay among individual agency, contextual factors and broader societal dynamics.

Key findings and contributions of the selected studies

All the papers presented here made important contributions to advancing our understanding of SCE through in-depth analyses of the factors and their interrelationships that may influence new entrants’ transition from higher education to the contemporary world of work. Collectively, the studies adopted a wide array of methodological and analytical approaches. This helped illuminate the conceptual definition of SCE, address measurement issues, examine its applicability in explaining how interdependencies among actors in the career environment shape new entrants’ employment readiness and potential and understand how the evolving technological landscape influences early career stages.

Pham *et al.* (2025) built on SCE theory to conduct a qualitative study and operationalise the Employability Capital Growth Model (ECGM) among Vietnamese second-year undergraduate students. They showed that students see employability capitals as crucial to a sustainable transition and that these capitals emerge through reciprocal interactions among individuals and broader educational, labour market and societal systems. Russo *et al.* (2025a, b) developed and validated the Future-Sustainable Career Scale (F-SCS), a new psychometric instrument designed to assess university students’ subjective orientation toward the sustainability of their

future careers, with Italian University students. They further expanded the notion of sustainable careers from a systemic perspective, introducing “social empowerment” as an additional indicator of sustainability and emphasising the need to account for positive sustainability outcomes for both individuals and societies. [Asad et al. \(2025\)](#) extend the SCE theory in academic environments, involving 25 early-career university teachers in Pakistan, to explore the role of smart working as a mechanism for a sustainable career start. Furthermore, their study explicitly frames the sustainability of early academics’ careers as emerging from interactions among institutional flexibility, technological infrastructures, managerial practices and professional autonomy, linking direct and indirect individual-level sustainability outcomes with institutional educational sustainability. [Donald et al. \(2025\)](#) present a cross-cultural qualitative study to validate the Weather as a Career Metaphor (WCM) approach, involving undergraduate students from India and the UK. This study contributes to the SCE theory by recognising career development practitioners and their clients as key actors in a sustainable transition into the workforce and by introducing WCM as an intervention tool to help students deconstruct their career-related narratives, understand the multidimensional influences on their career experiences and prepare for sustainable careers. [Agnihotri and Kalia \(2025\)](#) investigate how digital literacy influences graduates’ perceived employability, emphasising the role of technology in building a sustainable career ecosystem. The study provides empirical support for SCE Theory in an emerging economy, extends it through the concept of “cellulographics,” and offers practical recommendations for aligning curricula and career services with evolving labour markets. [Martini et al. \(2026\)](#) sought to understand employer engagement events (i.e. employer initiatives) and their effects on students’ perceived employability, providing empirical evidence for the co-operative efforts of higher education and employers in fostering an ecosystem conducive to sustainable careers. [Zagami \(2026\)](#) discusses a design-based research project that explores how generative artificial intelligence (AI) can be integrated into higher education curricula through participatory design to prepare students for future work, highlighting AI’s prominence as a core actor in today’s career ecosystem and culminating in the *Sustainable AI Career Ecosystem Model*. [Antonio and Chiesa \(2026\)](#) draw on the cultural transactional theory of stress and coping, alongside SCE Theory, to examine how national and global contexts shape career insecurity, coping strategies and subsequent outcomes such as psychological well-being and subjective career success in the early stages of careers. The study highlights the importance of macro-level national systems, particularly cultural differences, in influencing career outcomes. [Nopas and Lehmongkol \(2026\)](#) present a qualitative study conducted among NEETs in Thailand. Linking disengagement to situated structural and contextual antecedents, this study contributes to SCE Theory by identifying structural factors and psycho-social dynamics that together explain how sustainable career trajectories are enabled or constrained. Also, the study notes the need for context-specific ecosystem interventions. [Ma et al. \(2026\)](#) adopted a two-wave quantitative design with undergraduate students from Northwest China and demonstrated the joint influence of university and family support on career-adapting responses. Their study makes a meaningful contribution to SCET, highlighting the importance of cross-actor resource alignment during the university-to-work transition, particularly in collectivist contexts where family involvement remains highly influential.

Key insights and emerging themes

Across all contributions, a key insight is the robust support for a systemic understanding of how a sustainable transition to work can happen. Consistent with the central tenets of the SCE theory, the papers collectively portray a complex, multi-level system of interconnected actors, substantiating the claim that individual agency alone cannot explain career development. More importantly, the papers presented here add value to the seminal formulation of the SCE theory ([Donald et al., 2024a](#)) by further illuminating the multiple actors operating at the local, national and global levels, providing original insights into their inputs. Several papers identify

the key role of Higher Education institutions as providers of resources and opportunities to prepare for a sustainable career, in collaboration with other actors. Higher Education is involved in the development of employability capitals (Pham *et al.*, 2025) and, in collaboration with external employers (Martini *et al.*, 2026) or families (Ma *et al.*, 2026), in the provision of employment-related opportunities and support. These studies demonstrate the synergistic effect of the interactions among actors on sustainable career outcomes, beyond their individual contributions. Other studies further detail this insight by highlighting multiple-actor cooperation in AI-based curriculum design (Zagami, 2026), and institutional and organisational arrangements (Asad *et al.*, 2025) in predisposing to sustainable careers. Other studies emphasise macro-level factors (e.g. national culture; Antonio and Chiesa, 2026; Ma *et al.*, 2026), the intersection of macro- and meso-level actors (e.g. policy implementation, support structures; Nopas and Lehmongkol, 2026) and the interaction between local-level actors (i.e. career practitioners and clients; Donald *et al.*, 2025) that enables or constrains a sustainable career start. Altogether, these studies add to the notion that career sustainability is continuously negotiated through the interaction between the individual and the context, emphasising the interplay among different actors. A second prominent topic is the increasing role of technology within career ecosystems, in line with Donald *et al.*'s (2024a) proposition that new technologies (i.e. AI) may serve as an influential new actor. Agnihotri and Kalia (2025) demonstrate that digital literacy contributes to perceived employability by influencing career management skills, while Asad *et al.* (2025) further address the technological infrastructure that supports smart working as a mechanism supporting sustainable academic careers. Lastly, Zagami (2026) explicitly conceptualises AI as a central actor within the Sustainable AI Career Ecosystem Model, highlighting the importance of its interactions with other relevant actors in exerting its effects. A third theme concerns the ongoing challenge of conceptualisation and operationalisation of sustainable careers within career ecosystems. Although the SCE perspective (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Donald *et al.*, 2024a, b) is used throughout, the studies employ several indicators to operationalise career sustainability (e.g. perceived employability, psychological well-being, career readiness and success, adapting responses). While this diversity reflects the richness of the concept, it also signals the fragmentation of the literature on career sustainability, which results in several concepts and elements used to conceptualise it (Lent, 2026). In response, some papers in this special issue try to address this challenge. Russo *et al.* (2025a, b) focus on measurement issues by developing and validating the Future-Sustainable Career scale. They contribute to the theoretical development of the SCE perspective by including the systemic perspective as an indicator of a (future) sustainable career. Zagami (2026) provides meaningful theoretical developments by detailing how AI should be regarded within the career ecosystems of prospective entrants to the labour market. Collectively, the studies test and extend SCE Theory in new populations and contexts (including NEETs, early-career academics, undergraduate students and developed and emerging economies; Pham *et al.*, 2025; Agnihotri and Kalia, 2025; Asad *et al.*, 2025; Antonio and Chiesa, 2026; Nopas and Lehmongkol, 2026) and identify specific ecosystem elements that support or constrain sustainability (e.g. Nopas and Lehmongkol, 2026). This emphasises the need to view sustainability not as a universal phenomenon but as shaped by specific contextual features (Veles and Patton, 2026).

Implications for the advancement of the sustainable career ecosystem research

In closing the introduction to this special issue, and based on the insights presented above, we propose four core points for the research agenda to develop the SCE theory and research. The studies presented here suggest that sustainability is not the final outcome of the transition to work. Instead, sustainable careers could be regarded as a process that begins before the transition to work, with the academic experience being integral to sustainable career paths. As advanced by recent research (e.g. Russo *et al.*, 2023), universities can be regarded as sustainable career ecosystems in which multiple actors (i.e. students, families, teaching staff,

career practitioners and technology) interact to influence students' well-being, learning, identity development, employability and subsequent career trajectories. A rethinking of the academic success concept to align with SCE and longitudinal designs that follow students from higher education into employment would be particularly valuable for investigating academic experience as an element of sustainability that develops over time, and for examining how early educational experiences shape later career outcomes (Van Iddekinge *et al.*, 2024). Second, while the SCE theory acknowledges that sustainability is defined by outcomes that benefit all actors (Donald *et al.*, 2024a), most research has focused on individual outcomes. Future research should investigate how (un)sustainability during early career stages affects multiple ecosystem actors and how these outcomes are distributed across the ecosystem (Russo *et al.*, 2025a, b). Third, future research could shift attention towards investigating sustainability as a dynamic process. Building on recent scholarly proposals (Lent, 2026), future research could investigate how individuals enact behaviours to maintain, restore or enhance career sustainability and how ecosystem actors support responses to or preventive actions against, career disruptions and transition-related challenges (Antonio and Chiesa, 2026). Fourth, future research should also focus on how a sustainable career ecosystem could be intentionally designed and developed through individual-, organisational- and policy-level interventions (Lent, 2026). Particular attention should be devoted to investigating how ecosystem actors can reduce structural barriers and support sustainable career development among disadvantaged groups, including NEETs, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, neurodivergent individuals and those following non-linear transition pathways (Donald *et al.*, 2025; Santilli *et al.*, 2024).

Concluding note

The articles in this special issue advance our understanding of sustainable career ecosystems by showing that sustainable transitions to work and early-career development emerge from the dynamic interplay between individuals and multiple interconnected actors across educational, organisational, societal, familial and technological contexts. We want to extend our heartfelt thanks to all authors for their rigorous and meaningful scholarly contributions. We are grateful to the reviewers whose feedback and constructive insights enhanced the quality of this special issue. We also want to thank the Editor-in-Chief and the Commissioning Editor of Education + Training, along with the editorial team, for their unmatched support and patience, which were key to making this special issue possible.

Gerardo Petruzzello

Department of Psychology "Renzo Canestrari", University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

Nimmi P. Mohandas

Indian Institute of Management, Tiruchirappalli, India

George Joseph

Rajagiri Business School, Kochi, India, and

Giulia Paganin

*Department of Education Studies "Giovanni Maria Bertin" - Alma Mater Studiorum,
University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy*

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