

Transformation of Labor Values Among High School Students: A Comparative Analysis for 2018–2024



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Abstract. In the context of accelerating digitalization and increasing uncertainty in the labor market, labor values of high school students become a key indicator of adaptation to future professional trajectories, which determines the relevance of this study within the field of social and economic change. The purpose of the research is to analyze the transformation of the structure of labor values among school students based on a comparative assessment of data from 2018 and 2024 and to identify stable typologies of value-based strategies under conditions of uncertainty. The methodological framework includes quantitative research methods: rank analysis to compare the significance of latent value constructs over time, cluster analysis to identify typological groups, and descriptive statistics. Scientific novelty lies in the empirical identification of the “flattening” of the value hierarchy, reflecting a shift from a rigidly hierarchical model to a polycentric configuration of labor expectations. In addition, the study substantiates three distinct value strategies:

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investment-combinational, diffuse-adaptive, and institutional-protective clusters, which represent different modes of value-based adaptation to structural labor market changes. The results demonstrate a substantial increase in the importance of work–life balance and the stability of interest in meaningful work content, alongside a declining priority of traditional markers such as long-term employment stability. These findings indicate the growing role of flexible and situational value orientations associated with Generation Z digital socialization. The main limitation of the study is the regional specificity of the sample, which restricts the generalization of the results. Future research directions include interregional comparisons and longitudinal studies aimed at deepening the understanding of value transformation processes and enhancing the applicability of the findings for career guidance policies and educational practices.

Key words: labor values, career choice, high school students, youth, rank analysis, value hierarchy, typology of value strategies, cluster analysis, labor market.

Introduction

The relevance of this study stems from systemic shifts at the intersection of labor transformation, the value expectations of a new generation, and institutional inertia – factors that create a zone of increased uncertainty for high school students when they make their career choice. We highlight three key contradictions:

- between emerging forms of employment (flexible hours, home working) and outdated organizational practices and career guidance institutions;
- between the value demands of Generation Z and persisting success criteria based on stability and hierarchy;
- between the necessity of early career choice and the radical unpredictability of the future labor market, which diminishes the effectiveness of traditional career guidance models.

In this context, it is essential to examine the dynamics of high school students' labor values: they are developed before the career is launched and serve as a “map” for future decisions. Identification of structural changes in these values helps analyze the fundamental sociocultural shifts that define how the new generation engages with the economy.

The study aims to identify and analyze structural changes in the labor values of high school students in the Omsk Region over the period 2018–2024.

The choice of the Omsk Region as a case is justified by the opportunity to get context-rich data while controlling for external factors, thereby enabling a better isolation of the internal mechanisms driving the transformation of value orientations. Considering high school students in a major Siberian region with a diversified economy yields a typologically significant cross-section relevant to youth in non-metropolitan areas with similar economic profiles.

A review of contemporary literature reveals certain inconsistencies in research on youth labor values. On the one hand, a global trend toward postmaterialist values has been established (Inglehart, Welzel, 2005), manifesting as a growing emphasis on work-life balance, self-realization, and autonomy. On the other hand, the desire for meaning and quality of life coexists in the Russian context with a high valuation of financial security and stability (Magun, Rudnev, 2010; Tikhonova, 2014) and appears more as an emerging trend than a fully realized fact. This duality reflects a

broader trend typical for the era of digitalization and employment precarization, when young people combine pragmatic and postmaterialist attitudes and develop flexible, adaptive strategies for professional behavior (VoroByova, 2021; Kolesnik, 2022).

Two main traditions dominate the theoretical field. The cultural-evolutionary tradition (Inglehart, Welzel, 2005) explains value dynamics through shifts in generational priorities, emphasizing the role of the macrosocial context. The motivational-psychological tradition (Schwartz, 2012) offers a cross-cultural toolkit for analyzing the structure and conflicts of values at the individual level. However, both traditions have limitations in their standard application for analyzing the current situation. The first tradition may point to generational differences, underestimating the impact of rapid institutional changes (gig-economy, digitalization, flexible forms of employment) and the emergence of nonlinear, adaptive career models¹ (Chirkova, 2023). The second tradition is focused on universal structures and may not always capture the specific nature of labor values in the new realities of social and labor relations, where the emphasis is on self-construction, self-organization, and continuous learning (Zheleznyakova, 2021).

Empirical studies, in turn, face certain methodological challenges. First, mass survey data (WVS, ESS) capture attitudes that may differ from actual behavior in a situation of forced choice in a heterogeneous labor market (Kormakova, Makheeva, 2022). Second, there is a problem of static cross-section. Most studies, including in-depth cross-cultural comparisons (Magun, Rudnev, 2010), provide a snapshot of values at a specific point in time, but do not allow assessing the speed and

direction of their transformation within a single social group, especially at the pre-career stage (Tolstoukhova, 2024).

These methodological gaps are complemented by the identified contradictions between the expectations of Generation Z, which is focused on balance, development, and flexibility, and the continued prevalence of “low-quality jobs” that offer neither² (Acemoglu, Autor, 2011; Tikhonova, 2014; Varshavskaya, 2019; Badwy et al., 2025).

Thus, contemporary literature demonstrates a shift from analyzing individual motivations to studying the structural configurations of values and adaptive strategies. Nevertheless, the internal heterogeneity of high school students’ values at the stage of initial professional self-determination remains understudied.

In this regard, the scientific novelty of this study is determined by the following theses:

- 1) it is necessary to shift the focus from the statement of value differences to the analysis of their dynamics within a specific, socially and territorially defined group (high school students in a large industrial region) during a period of intensive socio-economic changes (2018–2024);
- 2) it is essential to overcome the static nature of methodology through a comparative analysis of repeated cross-sections, which will allow recording not just a set of values, but also the direction and nature of structural shifts in their hierarchy;
- 3) it is advisable to supplement the traditional rank analysis with an empirically derived typology, which will reveal the internal heterogeneity of the “average” request and identify emerging strategies for adapting to uncertainty (for example, “investment-combinational” or “diffuse-adaptive”).

¹ OECD (2023). *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>; World Economic Forum (2023). *The Future of Jobs Report 2023*. Geneva: WEF. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023>

² OECD (2025). *Trends Shaping Education 2025*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/ee6587fd-en>; Eurofound (2023). *Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://assets.eurofound.europa.eu/f/279033/8ff5182599/ef23097en.pdf>

This study is aimed not at discovering new values but at comprehensively analyzing the dynamics of their structure and typology based on unique empirical data, which allow moving from describing the shift to understanding the mechanisms of the development of new normative attitudes toward labor in a generation whose professional careers are just beginning.

Based on the theoretical analysis and the identified research gap, the following hypotheses have been formulated.

H1. Over the period 2018–2024, there was a shift in the structure of the labor values of high school students in the Omsk Region toward the prevalence of postmaterialist orientations, which was expressed in a statistically significant increase in the rank significance of “work-life balance” and “professional development” while simultaneously decreasing the rank significance of “economic reward” and “employment stability”.

H2. The structure of the labor values of high school students has transformed from a rigidly hierarchical to a polycentric (flattened) configuration, which is expressed in a statistically significant convergence of the rank positions of most latent constructs and a decrease in the variance of their aggregated significance indicators in 2024 compared to 2018.

Research design and empirical base

The study is designed using the principles of comparative analysis of repeated cross-sections. The empirical basis comprises data from two mass questionnaires of high school students (grades 9–11) conducted in the Omsk Region at six-year intervals: in 2018 ($N_1 = 11,691$) and 2024 ($N_2 = 14,357$). Quota samples were used, quotas were based on data from the Ministry of Education of the Omsk Region and Omskstat on the distribution of high school students by type of settlement (town/countryside), school grade (9/10/11). Within each quota, respondents were selected randomly from the student lists of schools included in the

study. Post-stratification weighting was applied to correct for minor deviations from the quotas, weights proportional to the quota size in the general population were used. The sampling error was calculated for a 95% confidence level and maximum variance ($p = 0.5$). The databases have author certificates of state registration³.

Two different, though conceptually aligned, instruments were used to measure labor values, a choice dictated by the evolution of the research objectives:

- 2018 – multiple-choice method; respondents were asked to select no more than three of the most important labor values from a given list; this method allows determining the relative significance of a labor value based on aggregated frequencies but cannot measure the degree of preference or identify value trade-offs;

- 2024 – paired comparison method; respondents were given sequentially 45 randomly ordered pairs derived from 10 core labor values (each value appeared in nine comparisons), ensuring a symmetric and balanced instrument design; respondents assessed each pair by choosing a more important value using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = “first is much more important”, 5 = “second is much more important”, and 3 = neutral.

The transition to the paired comparison method was justified by the following considerations. First, paired comparisons simulate a real-world choice scenario, and respondents have to find a compromise between alternatives. So, this approach hinders respondents in assessing positively all values. Second, data from paired comparisons allow calculating integral preference indices with an

³ Labor values and professional self-determination of schoolchildren: Certificate of state registration of database no. 2025621054, Russian Federation: appl. 25.02.2025, publ. 06.03.2025 / I.V. Dinner, V.S. Polovinko; Career guidance activity of high school students: Certificate of state registration of database no. 2024622974, Russian Federation: appl. 28.06.2024, publ. 08.07.2024 / I.V. Dinner.

interval scale for each value at the individual respondent level. This provides a more precise analytical tool compared to the 2018 binary data.

Since the primary objective was to determine changes in the structure (hierarchy) of values rather than the dynamics of absolute individual indicators, the main focus of comparison was on rank positions, not raw data. This reframes the inquiry from “how much did indicator X change?” to “how did the configuration of priorities change?” To verify the validity of the transition to comparable ranking, an additional analysis of the 2024 data was conducted. Ranking based on calculated preference indices (interval scale) and ranking based on reconstructed choice shares (simulating the 2018 method, where a value was considered “chosen” if its index exceeded the median value) demonstrated high correlation (Spearman’s $\rho > 0.85$). This indirectly confirms that the hierarchy of constructs is sufficiently robust to the method of aggregation and reflects the overall structure of preferences. Thus, the applied approach focuses on comparing characteristics invariant to the measurement method – the rank positions of value constructs – ensuring a valid identification of structural transformations over the six-year period.

Analytical strategy

To achieve the study’s objective, an approach was adopted that focuses on comparing the relative rank positions of latent constructs within each survey wave, rather than absolute values. This mitigates the impact of differences in the measurement instruments used in 2018 and 2024 and shifts the analysis toward examining changes in the configuration and hierarchy of priorities. This strategy is implemented in the following three-tiered sequence.

1. Reconstruction of latent constructs and comparability provision. Despite near-complete semantic correspondence in the wording of labor values across the two survey waves, direct comparison of primary variables was avoided to meet the requirement for data comparability.

Instead, a two-stage procedure was implemented to transition to a common conceptual space. Based on a theoretical model of labor values and a substantive analysis of the questionnaires from both waves, a unified list of eight latent constructs was developed, as presented in *Table 1*.

To establish an algorithm for deriving comparable indicators for each time point, an aggregated measure of significance was calculated for each latent construct. For 2018, this measure was the proportion of respondents who selected at least one value belonging to the construct among their top three most important choices. For 2024, it was the average value of the integral preference indices, calculated using the Bradley – Terry – Luce model, for all values comprising the construct. The resulting eight indicators (one per construct) for each year were then ranked within their respective datasets in descending order. Consequently, for a valid comparison between 2018 and 2024, the relative rank positions of the constructs within each wave are used. This approach smooths out the influence of differing instruments and concentrates on analyzing structural shifts – a standard practice in comparative research.

2. Rank analysis. For each time point, rank hierarchies were constructed based on the aggregated data for the latent constructs. This allowed identifying general trends and macro-level shifts in the value structure.

3. Typological analysis (clustering) of 2024 data. To uncover the internal heterogeneity of the 2024 sample, the k-means algorithm was applied to the standardized values (z-scores) of the latent constructs. The selection of the optimal number of clusters (k) was based on an iterative analysis of formal statistical criteria followed by substantive validation of the resulting solutions.

Formal analysis: metrics were calculated and visualized for k from 2 to 6: the elbow method based on inertia (within-cluster sum of squares) and the average silhouette score. The elbow method did

Table 1. Latent constructs of labor values*

No.	Name of labor value	Conceptual core	Typical definition	Individual definitions
1	Economic reward	income, financial return on labor	"Work as a source of high material income"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •high wages •income level •material well-being
2	Stability and social protection	risk reduction, guarantees, predictability	"Work as a stable and protected source of employment"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •job stability •formal employment •benefits package •guarantees
3	Interesting work rich in content	internal motivation, process enjoyment	"Work as an interesting activity rich in content"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •interesting work •variety of tasks •not a routine work
4	Professional development and skill growth	accumulation of human capital	"Work as a space for professional growth"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •learning opportunities •skill development •professional advancement
5	Career advancement and status	vertical promotion and status benefits	"Work as a means for career and status advancement"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •career prospects •promotion •status •prestige
6	Autonomy and independence	Sense of agency, control over work	"Work as a space for independent decision-making"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •independence •freedom of decision-making •responsibility for outcomes
7	Work-life balance	preservation of personal resources	"Work as part of a balanced life"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •flexible schedule •remote work •work-life balance •comfortable working conditions
8	Social significance and recognition	external and internal social value of labor	"Work as a socially significant and recognized activity"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •benefit to society •recognition of merit •respect •team (as a social environment)

Source: own compilation.

not reveal a pronounced "kink", which is common for sociological data where group boundaries are often diffuse. Silhouette analysis showed the highest average score for $k = 2$ (silhouette score = 0.25); however, the score for $k = 3$ (silhouette score = 0.22) also fell within a range suggesting an acceptable clustering structure. For $k = 4$ and $k = 5$, the silhouette coefficient declined, indicating a deterioration in the distinctiveness of cluster membership.

Substantive interpretation and validation: since formal metrics did not provide a definitive preference between $k = 2$ and $k = 3$, both solutions were constructed and substantively analyzed. Clustering with $k = 2$ divided the sample into a group with pronounced instrumental priorities and a group with an undefined profile, thereby

obscuring a significant qualitative distinction between value strategies observable in the data. The $k = 3$ solution yielded statistically and substantively differentiated groups: one cluster with clear, high priorities; a second with a "diffuse" profile; and a third with a marked orientation toward security. Pairwise comparisons of means (t-tests with Bonferroni correction) confirmed that the clusters identified with $k = 3$ differed significantly ($p < 0.001$) on the key constructs forming their unique profiles. Clustering with $k = 4$ led to the fragmentation of the largest "diffuse" cluster into two subgroups that showed no statistically significant differences in mean values for any of the latent constructs ($p > 0.1$), indicating an artificial division that violated the principle of parsimony.

The final decision to adopt $k = 3$ was considered optimal, satisfying two key criteria:

1) it is consistent with the formal metrics (acceptable silhouette score);

2) it ensures maximum substantive interpretability and statistical differentiation among clusters, aligning with the research aim of identifying qualitatively distinct types of value strategies.

All calculations were performed in Python 3.11 using the scikit-learn library (v.1.4.0). Algorithm parameters: $n_init = 50$, $random_state = 42$ to ensure reproducibility.

Thus, the chosen research methodology combines the advantages of quantitative rigor and conceptual interpretability. The combination of rank analysis and clustering allows both identifying trends in the transformation of labor values and capturing internal heterogeneity and typological diversity in school students' labor values.

Research results

Rank structure of labor values in 2018 and 2024

In the first stage of analysis, rank hierarchies of labor values were constructed for the two time points. Table 2 presents the comparable ranks of key values, grouped by latent constructs to ensure a valid comparison. For each time point, an aggregated significance indicator was calculated for each latent construct. Thus, the comparison focuses not on raw data (binary vs interval) but on the relative rank positions of constructs within each wave, shifting the analytical lens toward structural shifts rather than absolute values.

To statistically verify the significance of the change in the rank structure, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was calculated between the two rank vectors (2018 and 2024). Its value was $\rho = 0.45$, which is not statistically significant for $n = 8$ ($p = 0.26$). This result formally supports hypothesis H2 regarding a structural reorganization of the hierarchy: the observed changes in rank positions cannot be attributed to random fluctuations but rather reflect a qualitative transformation of the system of priorities.

A comparison of the rank structures of high school students' labor values over the six-year period (2018–2024) yields the following conclusions.

1. *Change in the rank position of work-life balance.* The value "work-life balance" shifted from a peripheral 8th position to the 1st in the 2024 hierarchy. Within the framework of Inglehart's postmaterialist shift theory, this result may signal a movement from survival values toward self-expression and quality-of-life values among a generation socialized under conditions of relative economic security. An alternative interpretation points to the normalization of the demand for psychological well-being in public discourse and media narratives, setting a "good job" as an a priori normative benchmark for school students. Furthermore, this can be viewed as a new form of pragmatic rationality within the digital economy, where control over time and boundaries becomes a prerequisite for long-term professional stability and productivity.

Table 2. Changes in rank positions of labor values among Omsk Region school students

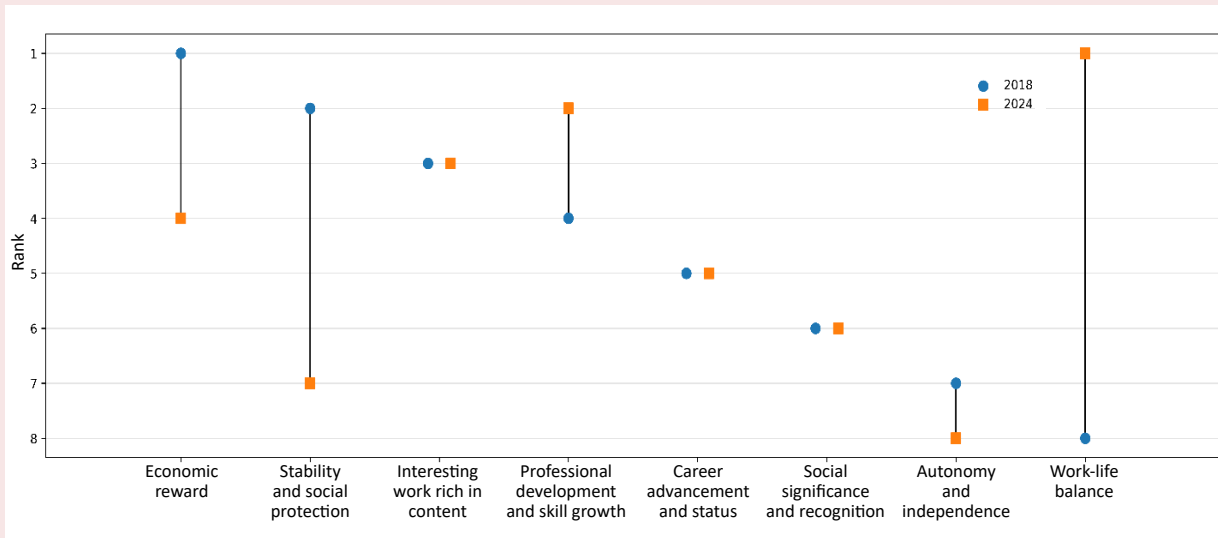
Labor value	2018	2024	Trend
Economic reward	1	4	decrease
Stability and social protection	2	7	significant decrease
Interesting work rich in content	3	3	stability
Professional development and skill growth	4	2	increase
Career advancement and status	5	5	stability
Social significance and recognition	6	6	stability
Autonomy and independence	7	8	decrease
Work-life balance	8	1	significant increase
Source: own compilation.			

The growing significance of work-life balance has also been noted in other Russian studies (Burkhanova et al., 2022; Razumova, Serpukhova, 2022), suggesting the emergence of a stable social demand for psychological well-being in the labor sphere. For the adult population, this often correlates with professional experience or family obligations. For school students, this value is formed a priori, as a normative benchmark for future employment. This suggests not merely a reaction to work experience but rather the formation of a new social standard of “good job”, assimilated through cultural narratives (media, intergenerational communication, etc.), observation of hybrid work forms development, and the growing discourse on psychological well-being. Thus, work-life balance may represent not an alternative to career building but an instrument for pursuing it more effectively and continuously.

2. *Decline in the rank positions of material and institutional values.* A pronounced shift in the rank

positions of key constructs is evident. “Economic reward” moved from 1st to 4th place, while “stability and social protection” fell from 2nd to 7th. Given that the rank correlation analysis indicated overall instability in the hierarchy ($\rho = 0.45$, $p = 0.26$), these shifts should be interpreted not as random fluctuations but as manifestations of a systemic transformation with instrumental-economic values losing their status as absolute dominants. This trend does not imply that wages and stability have lost significance but may indicate that they do not have a monopoly on professional choice anymore. Also, an adaptive rationality as a new trend is worth noting as it is characterized by readiness to change roles and skills valued higher than lifelong employment in a single position. This finding aligns with the concept of the “risk society” (U. Beck), where instability becomes a new norm, and for Generation Z, witnessing the rise of the gig economy, adaptability may be prized above permanent employment.

Figure 1. Comparative ratio of labor value ranks among Omsk Region high school students, 2018–2024, rank



Source: own compilation.

3. *Transformation of choice logic: from hierarchy to polycentric navigation.* A key finding is the “flattening” of the value hierarchy – a statistically significant convergence of the rank positions of most constructs. *Figure 1* vividly illustrates this convergence in the significance of latent constructs in 2024 compared to 2018, confirmed by a reduction in the variance of their aggregated indicators. This attests to a “flattening” of the value hierarchy rather than a mere formal change in the length of the rank scale.

This indicates that the system of professional expectations among school students has lost its clearly defined hierarchy characterized by one or two undisputed dominants. Instead, a polycentric configuration is developing with various values being of comparable weight, forming not a rigid hierarchy but a flexible “repertoire of possibilities” (Wang, Li, 2024). This phenomenon can be interpreted as an adaptation to the “risk society” (Styukhin, 2022) and the fragmentation of life trajectories. In a context where guaranteed, linear career paths (e.g., “university – single enterprise for life”) are disappearing and the future is perceived as fundamentally uncertain, the development of rigid priorities becomes ineffective⁴. The “flattened” value structure reflects strategic flexibility: a readiness to actualize different aspects of work depending on contextual opportunities and constraints. This configuration is directly linked to the digital socialization of Generation Z. The culture of multitasking, mosaic thinking, and constant switching between online activities fosters a cognitive style less inclined toward building stable linear hierarchies. What emerges instead is the need to develop skills in value-conceptual navigation – the ability to situationally sort out and combine

one’s priorities in a changing labor world (Popova, 2021). Thus, the “flattening” of the hierarchy is not a deficit of orientation but a new form of rationality suited to the challenges of instability and complexity.

The identified structural shifts correspond with findings from several other studies on youth labor values, which also note a trend toward the growing importance of work-life balance and a reassessment of the role of material factors (Burkhanova et al., 2022; Poplavskaya, 2023; Tanoto, Tami, 2024). This poses fundamentally new challenges for the education system, career guidance, and human resource management, substantiating a shift from outdated linear models to the development of navigation skills, value reflection, and the design of individualized trajectories within a polycentric labor world.

Typology of labor values in 2024: clusters and their value content

Rank analysis reflects only the overall picture, not revealing how values combine within individual preference structures. In particular, the high rank of work-life balance in 2024 does not mean it dominates across all respondents. On the contrary, there is a question: what specific values does it correlate with, and in what manner? To address it, we performed a typological analysis to identify stable configurations of labor values.

Existing theoretical typologies (e.g., those of R. Inglehart, Sh. Schwartz) were not fully confirmed by our data. Therefore, to derive empirically grounded types, the k-means algorithm was applied, as described in the methodology part of the article. The iterative process substantiated the selection of a three-cluster solution which allows getting conceptually interpretable types of value-based strategies. Their profiles (mean z-scores for the latent constructs) are presented in *Table 3*.

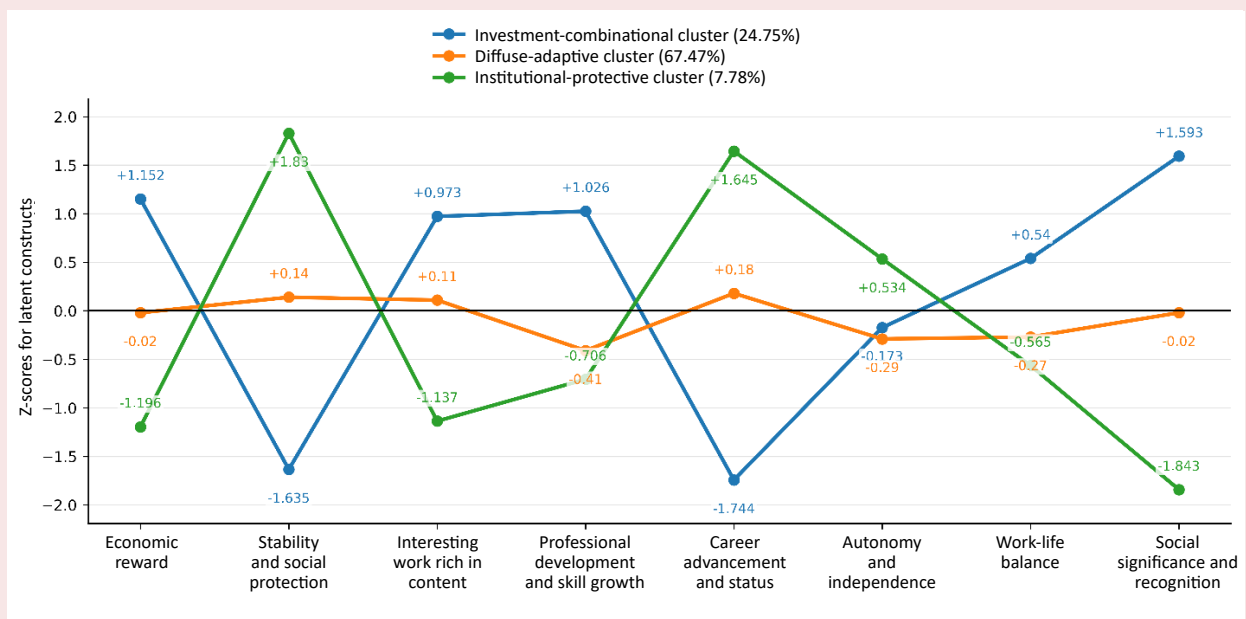
⁴ OECD (2025). Trends Shaping Education 2025. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/ee6587fd-en>

Table 3. Clusters of school students' labor values: mean z-scores for latent constructs, 2024*

Latent construct	Investment-combinational cluster (24.75%)	Diffuse-adaptive cluster (67.47%)	Institutional-protective cluster (7.78%)
Economic reward	+1.152	-0.02	-1.196
Stability and social protection	-1.635	+0.14	+1.830
Interesting work rich in content	+0.973	+0.11	-1.137
Professional development and skill growth	+1.026	-0.41	-0.706
Career advancement and status	-1.744	+0.18	+1.645
Autonomy and independence	-0.173	-0.29	+0.534
Work-life balance	+0.540	-0.27	-0.565
Social significance and recognition	+1.593	-0.02	-1.843

* k-means method: standardization (z), n_init = 50; random_state = 42, N = 14 357.
Source: own compilation.

Figure 2. Internal logic of clusters based on grouped labor values (z-scores for individual constructs)



Source: own compilation.

To verify the statistical significance of differences between the identified clusters for each latent construct, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Statistically significant differences were obtained for all eight constructs ($p < 0.001$). Post-hoc test results (Tukey's test) confirmed that

all three clusters differ significantly ($p < 0.01$) from one another on the key constructs comprising their profiles. This provides statistical justification for the conceptual interpretation of the identified types as stable value strategies. *Figure 2* illustrates the internal logic of the clusters based on grouped labor values.

Investment-combinational labor strategy (24.75% of respondents). This cluster is characterized by multiple positive extremes (professional development, interesting work content, high economic reward, and social recognition of personal achievements) alongside negative scores for stability and status hierarchy. This cluster empirically demonstrates a synthesis of self-realization and instrumental logics of labor: material success, professional development, interesting work, and social recognition function not as alternatives but as complementary elements of a unified investment strategy. It is noteworthy that these values do not compete but form a stable complex perceived by respondents as mutually reinforcing. For this group of school students, material success and professional growth are viewed as interconnected outcomes of a single investment project aimed at building a future career.

It is important to emphasize that the investment-combinational strategy is not reducible to a pragmatic focus on earnings. On the contrary, the inclusion of interesting and varied work indicates a high level of agency and an orientation toward a long-term trajectory in which professional activity is seen as a space for self-realization and the accumulation of human capital. In this sense, this cluster reflects the development of a type of professional consciousness defining success not by a single dominant value but the coherence of multiple significant dimensions.

Comparing with 2018 data, this result can be interpreted as a manifestation of a structural shift: previously, values of development and income were often separate in rankings and did not form stable ties, but by 2024 they became integrated into a unified strategy. This signals a transition from a logic of “choosing between alternatives” to a logic of comprehensive professional project design.

Diffuse-adaptive labor strategy is the dominant cluster in the sample, accounting for 67.47% of

school students. All z-scores are clustered within a narrow range, indicating the absence of a statistically distinct value core. This is not a “weakness” but a structural characteristic: values do not form a hierarchy but operate as an adaptive, mutually supportive set of alternatives. It is precisely this strategy that confirms the “flattening” of ranks observed in 2024 and underscores the necessity of moving from rank analysis to typology. Its key feature is the lack of a pronounced value core: none of the labor values demonstrate stable dominance, and scores for most constructs hover near the mean.

The observed profile can be viewed as a manifestation of an adaptive orientation characterized by the rejection of a rigid value hierarchy in favor of situational flexibility. We conditionally label it “diffuse-adaptive” but realize that this pattern may reflect either an emerging strategy for navigating uncertainty or a consequence of an unfinished process of self-determination. However, the prevalence of this profile and its conceptual correspondence with the general trend toward a “flattened” value hierarchy (see above) indirectly support its interpretation as a normative response to the “blurred” institutional trajectories in the labor sphere.

Values such as work-life balance, comfortable working conditions, economic reward, professional development, and job stability coexist without entering into stable hierarchical oppositions. This configuration reflects a contextual rationality with preferences being developed situationally, depending on external conditions and perceived opportunities.

From a scientific standpoint, this finding is of fundamental importance, as it may signal a transformation in the very mechanism of career choice. The observed profile can be regarded as a manifestation of an adaptive mindset rejecting rigid value hierarchy in favor of situational flexibility. The

mass prevalence of this strategy (67.47%) and its conceptual correspondence with the general trend of a “flattened” value hierarchy indirectly support its interpretation as a normative response to the “blurred” institutional trajectories in the labor world. This allows school students to maintain flexibility in conditions of high labor market uncertainty but simultaneously cuts their capacity for early specialization and long-term decision-making.

There are references to a similar phenomenon in recent scientific literature (Gut et al., 2023; Emelin, Rasskazova, 2024). Authors show that contemporary adolescents give priority to an unrealistically broad spectrum of criteria (well-paid, interesting, convenient, with prospects). It should be highlighted that the prevalence of the diffuse-adaptive strategy cannot be viewed solely as an individual psychological phenomenon. On the contrary, it reflects a socially conditioned state of the professional environment with no clear, institutionally anchored paths to success. Thus, this cluster captures not a deficit of orientations but a youth response to the structural uncertainty of the modern economy and labor market.

Institutional-protective labor strategy, represented by 7.78% of respondents, is characterized by a pronounced priority on *job stability*, combined with an orientation toward *career advancement* and formal status markers. Unlike other clusters, this one is focused on predictability and institutional safeguards, while values related to work-life balance, autonomy, and the content of work have relatively low significance. This strategy largely reproduces elements of the classic industrial model, typical of public administration, holding companies, and similar structures, where job security, a formal career ladder, and institutional guarantees played a central role. Notably, this type of value orientation is marginal in the context of the modern economy. Compared to 2018, the institutional-protective cluster has narrowed, which correlates with the

decline in the rank significance of job stability. This allows us to interpret this cluster as a “residual” type of career choice, persisting primarily among those school students who consider risk and uncertainty unacceptable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparison of 2018 and 2024 data suggests that the transformation of school students’ labor values affects not only the content of individual values but also the very principle of their organization. In 2018, a hierarchical model of career choice prevailed, whereas by 2024, it is giving way to flexible, weakly structured configurations. This is reflected both in the observed rank shifts and in the results of the typological analysis.

The research contributes to the analysis of the qualitative transformation of labor values structure among high school students (a case study of the Omsk Region) across three dimensions.

1. Methodological dimension: a procedure was developed and applied that enables a substantive comparison of data collected using different measurement instruments by focusing on the analysis of the rank positions of latent constructs. This approach minimized the risks of incorrect direct comparison of heterogeneous data and allowed the research to concentrate on identifying structural shifts in the system of priorities. This holds practical value for longitudinal, comparative, and repeated cross-sectional studies involving methodological updates.

2. Empirical dimension: *the study identifies the dynamics and typology of labor values among high school students in a non-metropolitan region over a six-year period*. Based on a comparison of 2018 and 2024 data, the following changes in the structure of labor values were documented:

a) a structural shift in the value hierarchy was established: the value “work-life balance” moved from eighth to first place, while the significance of “economic reward” and “job stability” declined substantially;

b) a trend toward a “flattening” of the value hierarchy was revealed – a statistically significant convergence of the rank positions of most constructs, signaling a transition from a rigidly hierarchical model to a polycentric configuration of labor expectations;

c) cluster analysis of the 2024 data differentiated three statistically stable value profiles: investment-combinational (24.75%), integrating high expectations relating to income, development, interest, and recognition; diffuse-adaptive (67.47%), characterized by the absence of a pronounced conceptual core and situational actualization of different priorities; and institutional-protective (7.78%), oriented toward stability and formal status.

Theoretical-interpretive dimension: *the study conceptualizes new strategies of career choice*. The findings allow us to formulate a hypothesis that there is a new pattern among contemporary youth that can be provisionally named “adaptive polycentricity” in the labor sphere. This hypothesis suggests that, in response to uncertainty, the value system is restructuring from a model optimized for a single career choice to one oriented toward continuous navigation. The mass prevalence of the diffuse-adaptive profile, interpreted here as

a possible manifestation of such an orientation, underscores its social significance and substantiates further investigation and conceptual development.

Practical implications of the study are the following:

- for career guidance and education: the results substantiate a shift from merely informing students about professions to cultivating skills in labor market navigation and life trajectory design.

This implies the development of new programs that account for the widespread diffuse-adaptive strategy among students and integrate diverse value motives;

- for government and regional policy: the data provide a basis for transitioning from universal to targeted youth support programs (educational pathways, career navigation, institutional guarantees) and for adjusting workforce demand forecasts in light of new value expectations;

- for corporate management: the findings allow companies differentiating HR policies and tools according to the distinct value strategies of future employees (e.g., project-based experience and development for the “investment” type; flexibility and mentoring for the “diffuse” type). They also suggest a need to reassess employer attractiveness factors, giving top priority to work-life balance and working conditions.

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