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WAGE EXPECTATIONS AND WORK PREFERENCES OF GENERATION Z: PROFILES, DETERMINANTS, AND EMPLOYER BRANDING IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract. This paper aims to identify the wage expectations of Generation Z students in the Czech Republic, determine their key determinants, and develop wage profiles capturing specific combinations of career aspirations, competence self-concept, work preferences, and value orientations among the emerging generation of university graduates. Based on a quantitative questionnaire survey conducted among 594 university students, the study identifies the key determinants of wage expectations—gender, field of study, level of study, preferred work location, and competence self-concept—and analyses their relationship with attitudes towards employee loyalty, job stability, and willingness to deliver extra-role performance. Four distinct wage profiles of Generation Z students are identified based on expected gross starting salary: the Stability-Oriented Regional Profile, the Mainstream Stability Profile, the Corporate-Metropolitan Profile, and the High-Ambition Independent Profile. A specific combination of competence self-concept, career aspirations, employer and location preferences, and orientation towards stability characterises each profile. The paper also compares students' wage expectations with actual starting salaries offered by selected Czech and European employers, thereby assessing the degree of alignment between subjective expectations and labour-market realities. The findings show that higher wage expectations are not associated with unconditional work engagement but rather with a conditional performance orientation consistent with the logic of a reciprocal psychological contract. The study further identifies a retention paradox: the most competent and ambitious segment simultaneously reports the lowest willingness to remain with an employer over the long term. The results provide practical implications for employer-branding strategies and recruitment communication targeted at different Generation Z segments and contribute to the development of educational, remuneration, and human-resource policies in the Czech Republic and the broader European context.

Keywords: Generation Z; wage expectations; employer branding; work preferences; wage profiles; competence self-concept; employee loyalty; psychological contract; retention paradox; labour market; university students; employers; gross starting salary

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the European labour market has undergone a major transformation driven by digitalisation, advances in artificial intelligence, demographic change, and the transition towards sustainable business models. Although economic growth has slowed in some countries (OECD, 2026), most European employers continue to face shortages of qualified workers (Pemberton-Frings & Ilie, 2026). This trend is particularly evident in technical fields, information technology, industrial production, logistics, and healthcare (Cedefop, 2024). Generation Z—young people born approximately between 1997 and 2012—is entering this environment, gradually replacing older cohorts in the labour market while bringing new work values, expectations, and approaches to employment.

Research indicates that Generation Z places considerable importance on work–life balance, work flexibility, opportunities for professional development, and meaningful work when selecting an employer (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Rani & Suneja, 2025). Young graduates no longer perceive employment solely as a source of income, but also as a means of personal fulfilment and development. Organisational culture, the quality of workplace relationships, and employers' emphasis on social responsibility and sustainability also play an important role (Thang et al., 2023). At the same time, members of Generation Z expect to change jobs more frequently than previous generations, and their organisational loyalty tends to be lower than that of Generations X or Y (Ravid et al., 2025).

European employers, by contrast, emphasise somewhat different priorities. In addition to professional knowledge, they increasingly require the ability to work independently, responsibility, resilience to stress, problem-solving skills, and effective communication (Līce et al., 2023; Vasilescu et al., 2026). The importance of adaptability and willingness to engage in continuous learning is also growing (OECD, 2021). In an environment of rapid technological change, employers expect graduates to acquire new knowledge and competencies throughout their careers. Many employers also report a mismatch between graduates' expectations and the realities of working life, particularly regarding starting salaries, work effort, and willingness to remain with an organisation over the long term (University of Limerick, 2025).

This paper aims to identify the wage expectations of Generation Z students in the Czech Republic, determine their key determinants, and develop wage profiles capturing specific combinations of career aspirations, competence self-concept, work preferences, and value orientations among the emerging generation of university graduates. The paper also compares these expectations with actual starting salaries offered by selected Czech and European employers. The findings are interpreted with regard to their implications for employer-branding strategies targeting different Generation Z segments, as well as for the development of educational, remuneration, and human-resource policies in the Czech Republic and the broader European context.

The research problem is therefore situated at the intersection of three dimensions: students' subjective expectations, employers' requirements, and available information on starting remuneration. This approach makes it possible to more accurately assess whether stated wage requirements reflect merely individual aspirations or are associated with the field of study, location, expected career trajectory, and self-assessed competencies. It also provides a basis for practical recommendations for both employers and higher education institutions.

2. Review of Literature: Generation Z

When Millennials entered the labour market, considerable attention was devoted to their work preferences and expectations. Today, a similar focus has shifted to Generation Z, which is gradually entering the labour market and becoming a significant component of the workforce. Although no generation can be regarded as a homogeneous group, certain common trends in values and expectations can be observed, reflecting broader social, economic, and technological changes (Rudolph et al., 2021; Kundlwana et al., 2026).

Growing up amid economic uncertainty, geopolitical change, and the ubiquity of digital technologies can be regarded as important formative influences on Generation Z (Lanier, 2017; Scholz & Rennig, 2019; Vraňáková et al., 2026). This cohort is often described as a generation of digital or mobile natives because many of its members do not remember a period without the internet and social media (Schroth, 2019). This experience affects how they search for information, communicate, and compare potential employers.

Experience of uncertainty does not, however, imply a weaker work orientation. Research suggests that Generation Z may place strong emphasis on economic security, stability, career advancement, professional development, and high-quality employee benefits (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Pham et al., 2024; Al-Moteri et al., 2025). At the same time, this generation is sensitive to privacy protection in the digital environment (Rózsa et al., 2024), openness to diversity, and fairness in the workplace.

Other important characteristics of Generation Z include entrepreneurial orientation, expectations of autonomy, and a need for regular feedback. Although this generation is strongly associated with digital communication, it continues to value personal contact, clear communication, and ongoing recognition of performance in the workplace.

These characteristics have direct implications for employer branding, defined as the strategic development of an employer's image to attract and retain talented employees (Vieira et al., 2024). Generation Z actively searches for information about potential employers through digital channels and evaluates not only remuneration but also development opportunities, organisational culture, the credibility of communication, and the alignment between the employer's values and its own values (Garai-Fodor & Jäckel, 2024; Thang et al., 2023; Mugunzva & Manchidi, 2024; Rani & Suneja, 2025; Iyer et al., 2026). Effective recruitment communication, therefore, requires a segmented approach that reflects Generation Z's internal diversity.

For this study, the same generational label may encompass students oriented towards stability and regional employment as well as students characterised by high mobility, strong confidence in their technical competencies, and substantial wage expectations. Understanding the wage expectations, employer preferences, and career visions of different student groups, therefore, provides an important basis for targeted recruitment communication and human-resource strategies.

This perspective is also important for interpreting wage expectations. When Generation Z students are treated as a single group, their requirements may easily be characterised as generally high or unrealistic. A profile-based approach, by contrast, makes it possible to distinguish whether a higher wage requirement arises from field-specific specialisation, geographical mobility, competence self-concept, or a broader conception of a fair employment relationship.

3. Research Methodology

The empirical part of the paper is based on primary quantitative research conducted via an online questionnaire. The research design was developed to capture selected aspects of Generation Z's transition into the labour market, particularly wage expectations, work preferences, self-assessed competencies, loyalty towards employers, and perceptions of future career development. The objective was not merely to describe respondents' stated attitudes, but also to identify relationships between expected starting salary and selected personal, educational, disciplinary, and value-related characteristics.

The questionnaire was developed in March 2026 and structured into five thematic sections. Before the main data collection, the research instrument was pilot tested with a sample of 50 respondents. The pilot study assessed the clarity of the wording, the logical sequencing of items, and the time required for completion. Minor wording adjustments were made based on the feedback received. The questionnaire consisted exclusively of closed-ended items using nominal and ordinal scales. Data were collected in May and June 2026 through online distribution of the questionnaire. The target population comprised students from different fields and levels of higher education who were approaching full entry into the labour market. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of social-science research. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no data that could enable the retrospective identification of individual participants were collected. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the method of data processing, and the survey's anonymous nature.

The questionnaire included respondents' identifying characteristics; items on wage expectations and work preferences; self-assessed competences; loyalty and work attitudes; and career perspectives.

The survey was divided into four analytical areas. The first focused on wage expectations and their determinants, particularly their relationship with gender, nationality, level of study, field of study, preferred work location, and competence self-concept. The second examined work preferences and employer orientation, especially whether the expected starting salary differed by preferred employer type. The third addressed loyalty, stability,

and performance orientation. The fourth focused on profiling respondents by their expected starting salary and interpreted wage expectations as part of a broader professional and value orientation.

This structure enabled the connection between the descriptive and analytical levels of the research. First, the basic distribution of respondents' expectations was established; relationships between variables were then tested; and finally, wage expectations were interpreted through a set of profiles. This procedure was selected so that the expected salary would not be analysed merely as an isolated economic value, but as an element of a broader work and career orientation.

The procedure is also important from the perspective of the practical use of the results. Employers do not generally work only with the broad category of "graduate"; they also consider the field of study, location, expected salary, degree of mobility, and likely stability of the employment relationship. A combination of these dimensions, therefore, corresponds more closely to actual recruitment decision-making than the isolated analysis of a single variable.

Statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Given the ordinal nature of most variables and the failure to meet the assumptions of normality, predominantly non-parametric methods were applied. Relationships between categorical variables were tested using Pearson's chi-square test and, where appropriate, Fisher's exact test. The strength of associations was expressed using Cramér's V and the phi coefficient. Differences between groups were tested using the Mann–Whitney U test and the Kruskal–Wallis test, followed by post hoc comparisons with a Bonferroni correction. Ordinal relationships were quantified using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, and Wilson 95% confidence intervals were calculated for selected proportions.

For the profile analysis, respondents were divided into four groups according to expected gross monthly starting salary: up to CZK 35,000; CZK 35,001–45,000; CZK 45,001–60,000; and more than CZK 60,000. These groups are not the result of cluster analysis but are analytically defined wage profiles that enable systematic comparison of respondents by expected financial remuneration.

An indicative wage analysis of employers relevant to graduates in economics, management, technical disciplines, and information technology followed the questionnaire survey. Its purpose was to situate respondents' stated wage expectations within the broader context of publicly available information on remuneration in the Czech and German labour markets. The analysis did not seek to determine the exact starting salaries actually paid, but to create a comparative framework for an indicative assessment of the alignment between respondents' expectations and market data.

The wage analysis was conducted separately for economics-and-management and technical-and-IT profiles because these groups differ in the types of positions available, their sectoral setting, and demand for qualifications. Separate analysis is also important given the composition of the research sample, in which economics and management students accounted for 69.4% of respondents, while technical and IT students represented 20.2%. A combined analysis could therefore obscure field-specific differences.

Czech employers were selected based on the TOP Employers 2026 ranking and supplemented with companies relevant to graduates in the fields under examination. Germany was selected for international comparison because of its geographical proximity, economic links with the Czech Republic, and importance in students' considerations of employment abroad. Since companies generally do not publish a single standard graduate salary, the values were constructed as indicative ranges based on triangulation of job advertisements, salary portals, and sectoral benchmarks. Where company-specific information was unavailable, the range was derived from advertisements for comparable positions in the relevant sector.

Target Group and Characteristics of the Research Sample

The target group of the questionnaire survey comprised students at universities and tertiary professional schools in the Czech Republic who fell within the age definition of Generation Z. This group was selected deliberately because it is in the transition phase between education and the labour market, when perceptions of future

employment, expected remuneration, preferred type of employer, and conditions for entering working life are being formed.

Respondents were selected using purposive sampling with elements of snowball sampling. The questionnaire was distributed through social media, student associations, academic contacts, and lecturers at cooperating higher education institutions. This approach enabled students from different institutions, fields, and levels of study to be reached. However, the sample cannot be regarded as representative of the entire population of Generation Z students in the Czech Republic.

A total of 594 valid questionnaires were included in the final analysis. Men accounted for 54.9% of respondents, women for 44.8%, and two respondents did not report their gender. The largest age group consisted of respondents aged 22–24 years (46.1%), followed by those aged 21 or younger (38.7%). Respondents aged 25–27 accounted for 13.1%, while the 28–30 age category was represented only marginally (2.0%).

By level of study, bachelor's students predominated (69.4%), while students in follow-up master's programmes accounted for 28.3%. By field, economics and management students were the dominant group (69.4%), followed by technical and IT students (20.2%) and humanities or social science students (9.1%). Czech nationals represented 87.5% of the sample, while international students accounted for 12.5%, most commonly Ukrainian and Slovak nationals.

The research sample can therefore be characterised as predominantly Czech, university-based, and strongly oriented towards economics, management, technical disciplines, and information technology. Although the sampling method limits the generalisability of the findings, the sample's size and internal differentiation provide a suitable basis for analysing relationships among wage expectations, work preferences, and attitudinal characteristics of students entering the labour market.

The selected target group is also important because it is at a stage when work expectations are still becoming established. Some respondents may already have gained experience through part-time jobs, internships, or reduced-hours employment, but most remain between the education system and full labour-market participation. The findings, therefore, capture students' perceptions at a point when they have already been influenced by contact with practice but have not yet been fully shaped by long-term professional experience.

4. Research Results

This section presents the results of the quantitative questionnaire survey on the wage expectations, work preferences, competence self-assessment, loyalty, and career orientation of Generation Z students. The presentation is organised into four analytical areas. The first focuses on wage expectations and their determinants. The second examines the relationship between wage expectations and preferred employer type. The third analyses the associations among wage expectations, loyalty, stability, and willingness to engage in extra-role performance. The fourth synthesises the partial findings into four wage profiles of Generation Z students. Conversions from Czech koruna to euros are indicative and are based on an exchange rate of EUR 1 = CZK 24.195.

4.1 Basic Characteristics of the Attitudes Examined

Respondents' wage expectations were concentrated primarily in two middle ranges. The most frequently reported expected gross starting salary was CZK 35,001–45,000, approximately EUR 1,447–1,860 (40.4%), followed by CZK 45,001–60,000, approximately EUR 1,860–2,480 (37.4%). Lower expectations of up to CZK 35,000, approximately up to EUR 1,447, were reported by 14.8% of respondents, while 7.4% indicated the highest category of more than CZK 60,000, approximately more than EUR 2,480. Most respondents, therefore, did not approach future employment with extremely high wage demands, but with expectations corresponding to qualified junior or entry-level professional positions.

This distribution is also important for interpreting the subsequent analytical section. Most respondents fall within ranges that can be considered realistic for qualified entry-level positions, yet high enough to create

pressure for transparent salary communication by employers. The highest wage category is numerically smaller but analytically important because it concentrates specific attitudes towards mobility, performance, and stability.

Respondents generally did not perceive their own wage expectations as markedly detached from labour-market reality. A total of 41.4% stated that their expectations approximately corresponded to market conditions, 37.4% considered them slightly higher, and 7.7% regarded them as substantially higher. Salary was also an important factor in employer choice: 56.9% described it as very important, and a further 33.7% described it as one of several important characteristics of employment.

Preferences regarding employer type were divided mainly between private companies (42.8%) and multinational corporations (41.1%). Self-employment or work in a start-up was selected by 11.8%. In terms of work location, regional cities in the Czech Republic predominated (54.9%), Prague or Brno were preferred by 34.3% of respondents, and working abroad by 10.8%, most commonly in Western Europe.

This distribution indicates that respondents do not unequivocally prefer either a corporate or an entrepreneurial environment. Their perceptions combine more traditional employee career paths, an orientation towards the private sector, and interest in self-employment. This combination is important for employer branding because it shows that employer attractiveness need not be based solely on organisational size, but also on opportunities for development, autonomy, and meaningful work involvement.

Respondents assessed their competencies predominantly positively. Professional preparedness for practice was rated as medium by 43.1% and as rather high by 41.1%; digital competences were evaluated even more favourably, with 44.8% reporting an above-average and 24.9% an excellent level. Advanced language proficiency was declared by 64.3% of respondents, while most rated their soft skills as either rather or highly developed.

It should be emphasised, however, that these are subjective self-assessments rather than objective tests of competence. Their importance lies primarily in showing how students perceive their preparedness and how this perception influences the formation of wage expectations.

Loyalty and stability emerged as important but not one-dimensional work values. If satisfied with their employer, 40.4% of respondents would be willing to remain for more than ten years. Job stability was described as very important by 56.9% and as essential by 28.3%. Respondents most often associated loyalty with high-quality performance and reliability (46.5%), rather than merely with length of service. Willingness to provide extra-role performance was predominantly conditional: 50.8% would work overtime occasionally when required, while 30.3% would do so regularly if their effort was appropriately recognised.

Respondents' career visions were differentiated. The most common vision of an ideal working life in ten years was self-employment or owning a business (37.4%), followed by a stable position in a Czech company (23.6%), employment abroad (20.2%), and a managerial role in an international company (13.1%). The findings, therefore, reveal a combination of entrepreneurial, stability-oriented, international, and corporate aspirations.

4.2 Wage Expectations and Their Determinants

The first analytical area examined whether respondents' wage expectations differed according to selected individual, educational, and attitudinal characteristics. The results show that expected starting salaries are not randomly distributed across the sample, but are systematically associated with gender, nationality, level of study, field of study, preferred work location, and competence self-concept.

A key initial finding concerns the relationship between wage expectations and the importance respondents attach to salary when choosing an employer. The proportion of respondents who described salary as their highest priority or as a very important factor increased from 45.5% in the lowest wage category to 86.4% in the highest category ($\chi^2(3, N = 594) = 28.55$; $p < 0.001$; $V = 0.219$; $\rho = 0.239$; $p < 0.001$). Higher wage expectations are

therefore not merely stated views of future income, but are associated with a greater decision-making weight assigned to salary in employer selection.

An overview of the main determinants is presented in Table 1. Median wage categories are supplemented by indicative euro equivalents.

Table 1. Wage expectations by key determinants (N = 594)

Determinant	Comparison	Test statistic	p	Effect size	Median, lower group	Median, higher group
Gender	women vs. men	$\chi^2(3) = 49.04$	< 0.001	V = 0.288	CZK 35,000–45,000, approx. EUR 1,450– 1,860	CZK 45,000–60,000, approx. EUR 1,860– 2,480
Nationality	Czech vs. other	$\chi^2(3) = 12.93$	0.005	V = 0.148	CZK 35,000–45,000, approx. EUR 1,450– 1,860	CZK 45,000–60,000, approx. EUR 1,860– 2,480
Level of study	Bachelor's vs. Master's	$\chi^2(3) = 33.36$	< 0.001	V = 0.240	CZK 35,000–45,000, approx. EUR 1,450– 1,860	CZK 45,000–60,000, approx. EUR 1,860– 2,480
Field of study	other vs. technical/IT	$\chi^2(3) = 28.04$	< 0.001	V = 0.217	CZK 35,000–45,000, approx. EUR 1,450– 1,860	CZK 45,000–60,000, approx. EUR 1,860– 2,480
Preferred location	regional cities vs. Prague/Brno	$\chi^2(4) = 27.41$	< 0.001	V = 0.152	CZK 35,000–45,000, approx. EUR 1,450– 1,860	CZK 45,000–60,000, approx. EUR 1,860– 2,480
Competence self- concept	lower vs. higher	$\chi^2(1) = 24.25$	< 0.001	$\phi = 0.202$	—	—

Note: For gender and nationality, the direction of the differences was confirmed by Mann–Whitney U tests (U = 30,684; $p < 0.001$; U = 15,346; $p = 0.003$). For the level of study, U = 25,240; $p < 0.001$. Following the Bonferroni correction, the post hoc pairwise comparison for location confirmed a statistically significant difference only between regional cities and Prague/Brno ($p < 0.001$; $\alpha = 0.017$).

Source: Authors

Gender was the strongest individual differentiator of wage expectations. A salary above CZK 45,000, approximately above EUR 1,860, was expected by 56.4% of men compared with 30.8% of women. The highest category, above CZK 60,000 or approximately EUR 2,480, was reported by 12.3% of men and 1.5% of women ($\chi^2(1) = 24.68$; $p < 0.001$; $\phi = 0.204$; OR = 9.16). This is a difference in expectations, however, rather than in actual earnings.

Higher expectations were also associated with nationality, level of study, and field of study. International respondents were more likely than Czech respondents to expect a salary above CZK 45,000 (59.5% vs. 42.7%) and above CZK 60,000 (16.2% vs. 6.2%; $\chi^2(1) = 9.56$; $p = 0.002$; $\phi = 0.127$). Follow-up master's students were more likely than bachelor's students to expect more than CZK 45,000 (60.7% vs 38.8%), particularly in the CZK 45,001–60,000 range. Among technical and IT students, the category above CZK 60,000 was more frequent than among students in other fields (16.7% vs. 5.1%).

The spatial dimension was evident, particularly in relation to Prague and Brno. A salary above CZK 45,000 was expected by 55.9% of respondents preferring Prague or Brno, compared with 36.2% of those oriented towards regional cities. Respondents preferring employment abroad reported this level in 53.1% of cases, although after Bonferroni correction, the difference between regional cities and employment abroad was not statistically significant.

Competence self-concept also played an important role. Respondents who simultaneously rated their professional, digital, and language competences in one of the two highest categories expected a salary above CZK 60,000 more than four times as often as other respondents (14.2% vs. 3.3%; $\chi^2(1) = 24.25$; $p < 0.001$; $\phi = 0.202$). Statistically significant associations were found particularly for professional preparedness, digital competences, and language skills; soft skills were not independently significant.

In summary, higher wage expectations were concentrated among men, international students, follow-up master's students, technical and IT students, respondents oriented towards Prague or Brno, and respondents with a strong competence self-concept. Together, these characteristics suggest the existence of a group in which higher financial expectations are linked to disciplinary, spatial, and self-perceptual dimensions.

From an interpretive perspective, none of the identified determinants should be viewed in isolation. Gender, field of study, location, and competence self-concept are likely to overlap in respondents' actual decision-making. Higher expectations cannot therefore be explained by a single factor, but rather by an accumulation of characteristics that jointly reinforce graduates' perception of their higher market value.

4.3 Work Preferences and Employer Orientation

The second analytical area examined whether wage expectations differed by preferred type of employer. Given the distribution of responses, the principal comparison was between respondents who preferred a private company and those who preferred a multinational corporation. Only respondents who selected one of these two options were included in this part of the analysis ($n = 498$).

A statistically significant difference in the distribution of wage expectations was found between the two groups ($\chi^2(3, N = 498) = 15.31$; $p = 0.002$; $V = 0.175$; $U = 26,376$; $p = 0.002$). Respondents oriented towards multinational corporations most frequently reported the CZK 45,001–60,000 category, approximately EUR 1,860–2,480 (47.5%). By contrast, among respondents preferring private companies, the CZK 35,001–45,000 category, approximately EUR 1,447–1,860, predominated (42.5%). A salary above CZK 45,000, approximately above EUR 1,860, was expected by 54.9% of respondents oriented towards multinational corporations, compared with 38.6% of those preferring private companies.

The significance of this result does not lie in an association between multinational corporations and exceptionally high incomes. The proportion of respondents expecting more than CZK 60,000 (approximately EUR 2,480) was almost identical in both groups: 7.4% among those preferring multinational corporations and 7.9% among those preferring private companies. Multinational corporations are, therefore, in respondents' perceptions, associated with a higher-middle-class salary standard rather than exceptionally high remuneration. Their attractiveness is based on expectations of more predictable, stable, or standardised remuneration.

In practical terms, multinational corporations are perceived as environments offering a more predictable remuneration structure, clearer career paths, and standardised development programmes. Private companies need not be regarded as less attractive. Still, they may be associated with a different type of work experience, closer proximity to decision-making, or a different form of professional development.

4.4 Loyalty, Stability and Performance Orientation

The third analytical area examined whether wage expectations were related to respondents' perceptions of loyalty, job stability, and extra-role performance. The findings show that higher wage expectations are not automatically associated with stronger performance-based loyalty, but are linked to a different relationship with stability and a more conditional understanding of work effort.

Preference for performance-based loyalty did not differ significantly across wage groups ($\chi^2(3, N = 594) = 2.19$; $p = 0.533$; $V = 0.061$). A targeted comparison of the highest wage category likewise showed no statistically significant difference ($\chi^2(1) = 1.75$; $p = 0.186$; $\phi = 0.054$; Fisher's exact test $p = 0.211$). Although respondents who understood loyalty in performance terms were represented somewhat more frequently in the highest wage category, the difference was not statistically significant. Performance-based loyalty, therefore, does not appear to explain higher wage demands in this sample directly.

A different pattern emerged for job stability. Stability remained important across all wage groups, but its relative importance declined as the wage profile increased. Stability was described as essential by 93.2% of respondents in the lowest category, up to CZK 35,000 or approximately EUR 1,447; 88.3% in the CZK 35,001–45,000 group, approximately EUR 1,447–1,860; 82.0% in the CZK 45,001–60,000 group, approximately EUR 1,860–

2,480; and 68.2% in the highest category, above CZK 60,000 or approximately EUR 2,480 ($\chi^2(3, N = 594) = 18.23$; $p < 0.001$; $V = 0.175$).

A similar downward trend was found for willingness to remain with a satisfactory employer over the long term. More than ten years was reported by 45.5% of respondents in the lowest category, 47.5% in the CZK 35,001–45,000 group, 34.2% in the CZK 45,001–60,000 group, and only 22.7% in the highest category above CZK 60,000 ($\chi^2(3, N = 594) = 15.17$; $p = 0.002$; $V = 0.160$). Respondents with the highest wage expectations, therefore, did not reject stability but assigned it less weight than respondents with lower expectations.

The relationship between the highest wage expectations and willingness to provide extra-role performance was ambivalent. Respondents expecting more than CZK 60,000 (approximately EUR 2,480) were more likely to report willingness to work overtime regularly if their effort was recognised (40.9% vs 29.5%).

At the same time, they were less likely to report willingness to occasionally work overtime when required (31.8% vs 52.4%). They were more frequently represented in the limited-to-no willingness category (27.3% vs 18.2%). The difference in the distribution of responses was statistically significant ($\chi^2(2, N = 594) = 6.93$; $p = 0.031$; $V = 0.108$), but after combining regular and occasional willingness into a binary measure of overall willingness to provide extra-role performance, it was no longer statistically significant ($\chi^2(1) = 2.20$; $p = 0.138$; Fisher's exact test $p = 0.159$).

This finding suggests that respondents with the highest wage expectations are not generally more willing than others to work beyond their formal duties. Rather, they differ in how strongly they condition their work effort on recognition and corresponding reciprocity. The combination of a high importance attached to salary and conditional willingness to provide extra-role performance was reported by 36.4% of respondents in the highest wage category, 24.3% in the CZK 45,001–60,000 group, 10.8% in the CZK 35,001–45,000 group, and 15.9% in the lowest category up to CZK 35,000. As wage expectations increase, the conditional nature of work effort therefore becomes more pronounced.

Taken together, these findings can be described as a retention paradox. The group with the highest wage expectations simultaneously shows the lowest stated willingness to remain with an employer over the long term and the most strongly conditional approach to extra-role performance. For employers, this means that candidates with high wage demands and a strong competence self-concept may not automatically be the easiest to retain if their expectations of a fair and reciprocal employment relationship are not met.

The retention paradox is important for employers because it highlights the distinction between a candidate's ability to create high value and the likelihood of long-term retention. A higher wage requirement may be associated with greater self-confidence, technical specialisation, and mobility, rather than with stronger organisational loyalty. For this group, a competitive salary alone is therefore insufficient; quality of management, recognition of performance, and a clear perspective for further development are also important.

4.5 Wage Profiles of Generation Z

Based on the expected gross starting salary, respondents were divided into four analytical wage profiles: up to CZK 35,000 (approximately EUR 1,447; $n = 88$; 14.8%); CZK 35,001–45,000.

EUR 1,447–1,860 ($n = 240$; 40.4%); CZK 45,001–60,000, approximately EUR 1,860–2,480 ($n = 222$; 37.4%); and more than CZK 60,000, approximately more than EUR 2,480 ($n = 44$; 7.4%). These profiles are not the result of cluster analysis but rather an analytical classification that enables salary to be interpreted in relation to respondents' broader characteristics.

The Stability-Oriented Regional Profile, with expectations up to CZK 35,000, is associated with lower financial expectations, regional orientation, and a strong emphasis on stability. Job stability was described as essential by 93.2% of respondents in this profile, and 45.5% would remain with a satisfactory employer for more than ten years. The profile consists mainly of bachelor's students, economics and management students, and women. Competence self-concept is lowest in this group, although entrepreneurial aspirations are pronounced: 47.7% identified owning a business as their principal career vision.

The Mainstream Stability Profile, with an expected range of CZK 35,001–45,000, represents the largest share of the sample. It is characterised by an economics-and-management orientation, regional preferences, a high emphasis on stability, and the greatest willingness to remain with a satisfactory employer for more than 10 years (47.5%). The profile combines a stability orientation with an entrepreneurial vision, reported by 44.2% of respondents. At the same time, 44.2% in this profile perceive their expectations as higher than the labour market reality, indicating potential for mismatch upon entering employment.

The Corporate-Metropolitan Profile, with an expected range of CZK 45,001–60,000, represents a transition towards a stronger corporate and metropolitan orientation. A multinational corporation was preferred by 52.3% of respondents, and Prague or Brno by 40.5%. Compared with the lower profiles, this group has a stronger competence self-concept, a greater representation of technical and IT fields, a higher proportion of follow-up master's students, and a predominance of men. Career visions are differentiated: a stable position in a Czech company, self-employment, and work abroad are all represented to a meaningful extent.

The High-Ambition Independent Profile, with expectations above CZK 60,000, is the smallest but most distinctly defined group. Men account for 90.9% of the profile [95% CI: 78.8–96.4%], a strong competence self-concept was reported by 72.7% [95% CI: 58.2–83.7%], technical and IT orientation by 45.5% [95% CI: 31.7–59.9%], and high importance attached to salary by 86.4% [95% CI: 73.3–93.6%]. The profile is associated with Prague, Brno, or employment abroad, with work abroad being the most frequent career vision (40.9%).

The absence of a managerial career vision in the highest profile is noteworthy [95% CI: 0.0–8.0%]. The highest wage expectations, therefore, do not correspond to hierarchical managerial ambition, but rather to an expert, technical, or geographically mobile career orientation. This profile also expresses the strongest conditional relationship between salary and performance: 40.9% reported regular willingness to work overtime if recognised, but 27.3% limited or rejected work beyond formal duties, and willingness to remain with an employer for more than ten years fell to 22.7%.

The synthesis of the profiles reveals two principal axes of differentiation. The first represents a transition from a stability-oriented, regionally oriented stance to a mobile, metropolitan one. Lower profiles are more strongly associated with regional embeddedness, stability, and longer expected tenure. In contrast, higher profiles are associated with Prague, Brno, employment abroad, technical and IT orientation, and lower stated willingness to remain over the long term. The second axis represents a transition from a moderate competence self-concept to a strongly stated sense of professional, digital, and language competence.

The profile classification also has practical significance because it shows that the same wage category may be associated with different types of career motivation. Lower wage expectations do not necessarily imply lower ambition, but may reflect regional embeddedness, a stability orientation, or an entrepreneurial vision. Conversely, the highest wage expectations may be linked not to managerial aspirations but to an expert self-concept, technical orientation, and mobility.

A major cross-cutting finding is the gender dimension of wage expectations. The proportion of men increases with each wage category, and the gender asymmetry is most pronounced in the highest wage category. Overall, the findings show that Generation Z students place considerable importance on salary, but their expectations are not uniform. Some respondents associate future employment with stability, regional embeddedness, and a long-term employment relationship. In contrast, others are oriented towards corporate environments, metropolitan labour markets, technical and IT specialisation, employment abroad, and greater reciprocity between performance and remuneration.

4.6 Economic Analysis of Selected Employers

The economic analysis supplements the questionnaire findings with an indicative comparison of publicly available wage data for selected employers relevant to graduates in economics, management, technical disciplines, and information technology. Its purpose is not to determine the exact starting salary at individual companies, but to create a reference framework against which respondents' wage expectations can be interpreted with appropriate caution.

The selected employers span the main sectors where graduates from the examined fields may find employment. For economics and management graduates, these include banking, insurance, auditing, consulting, energy, the automotive industry, retail, real estate development, and consumer industries. For technical and IT graduates, the focus is on the automotive and rail industries, energy, petrochemicals, automation, information technology, construction, and aerospace.

The inclusion of the economic analysis is important because it links students' subjective expectations to indicative data on salaries offered. The questionnaire survey alone would primarily reflect respondents' perceptions, whereas the wage analysis provides a framework for a cautious assessment of the approximate reasonableness of their responses. It does not, however, verify the individual bargaining positions of particular graduates; rather, it contextualises the findings.

4.6.1 Employers Relevant to Graduates in Economics and Management in the Czech Republic

The Czech sample of employers relevant to economics and management graduates includes major organisations in financial services, auditing, consulting, energy, industry, retail, and consumer markets. It comprises both institutions traditionally associated with economics education, such as banks, insurance companies, and consulting firms, and large industrial and commercial enterprises in which economics-related competences are applied in management, controlling, finance, marketing, sales, procurement, and project coordination.

Table 2 presents selected attractive employers for economics and management graduates in the Czech Republic. The stated wage ranges are indicative and do not represent uniform starting salaries guaranteed by individual companies. Where no company-specific figure for a graduate or junior position was available, the interval was derived from comparable sectoral data.

Table 2. Selected attractive employers for graduates in economics and management in the Czech Republic: profile and an indicative gross monthly starting salary range.

Company	Sector	Brief profile	Indicative gross monthly starting salary range
Česká spořitelna	Banking	Winner of the Banking and Investment category in the TOP Employers 2026 ranking; one-year graduate programme with rotations across departments.	CZK 30,000–38,000, approx. EUR 1,240–1,571
Komerční banka	Banking	Second place in the Banking and Investment category; one-year paid trainee programme open to economics graduates.	CZK 30,000–35,000, approx. EUR 1,240–1,447
KPMG	Consulting and audit	Winner of the Consulting, Audit and Tax category; a Big Four firm with strong recruitment of economics graduates into audit and tax services.	CZK 38,000–46,000, approx. EUR 1,571–1,901
Deloitte Czech Republic	Consulting and audit	Second place in the Consulting, Audit and Tax category; junior positions in audit, tax, and consulting.	CZK 35,000–43,000, approx. EUR 1,447–1,777
ČEZ Group	Energy	Overall winner of the TOP Employers 2026 ranking; economics-related positions, particularly in finance, sales, and customer services.	CZK 38,000–48,000, approx. EUR 1,571–1,984
Škoda Auto, a.s.	Automotive industry	Winner of the Automotive and Technology Industry category; economics-related positions in finance, controlling, marketing, sales, and procurement.	CZK 38,000–46,000, approx. EUR 1,571–1,901
Generali Česká pojišťovna	Insurance	Winner of the Insurance category; trainee programme with rotations across sales, product management, and IT.	CZK 35,000–45,000, approx. EUR 1,447–1,860
IKEA	Retail and e-commerce	Winner of the Retail and E-commerce category; recruitment of graduates into retail, logistics, and store management.	CZK 32,000–40,000, approx. EUR 1,323–1,653

Company	Sector	Brief profile	Indicative gross monthly starting salary range
CENTRAL GROUP	Real estate and development	Winner of the Real Estate and Development category, a major Czech residential developer is also recruiting for finance and project-management positions.	CZK 38,000–48,000, approx. EUR 1,571–1,984
L'Oréal	Consumer industry	Winner of the Consumer Industry category; graduate positions in marketing, sales, and finance.	CZK 35,000–45,000, approx. EUR 1,447–1,860

Note: The amounts presented are indicative ranges and do not represent uniform starting salaries officially guaranteed by individual companies. The conversion into euros is indicative and is based on an exchange rate of EUR 1 = CZK 24.195.

Source: Authors' own processing based on EduFórum (2026), Alma Career (2026), Indeed.com (2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026e, 2020g), Jobs.cz (2026), and Kurzy.cz (2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

The Czech sample of economics and management positions indicates that starting salary ranges extend approximately from CZK 30,000 to CZK 48,000 per month, or around EUR 1,240–1,984. The median of the midpoints of the individual ranges is approximately CZK 40,000, or EUR 1,653. Lower ranges were identified mainly in certain banking and retail graduate programmes, whereas higher ranges occurred in auditing, consulting, energy, industry, and real estate development. Differences between employers should, however, be interpreted as indicative of the general wage framework rather than as a precise ranking of individual companies by remuneration attractiveness.

4.6.2 Employers Relevant to Graduates in Economics and Management in the German Labour Market

The German labour market was selected as the reference market for international comparison. The sample includes large multinational companies operating in banking, insurance, consumer industries, information technology, energy, and manufacturing (see Table 3). These companies were included because they offer positions or graduate programmes suitable for graduates in economics, finance, business, or management.

Table 3. Selected attractive employers for graduates in economics and management in the German labour market: profile and indicative gross monthly starting salary range

Company	Sector	Brief profile	Indicative gross monthly starting salary range
Deutsche Bank	Banking and investment	One of Europe's largest banks, a structured Graduate Programme for economics and finance graduates.	approx. EUR 4,800–5,200
Allianz	Insurance	A major European insurance group headquartered in Munich; graduate programmes in finance and risk management.	approx. EUR 4,000–4,600
BNP Paribas	Banking and investment	A major European banking group; graduate programmes including corporate banking.	approx. EUR 4,200–4,800
Unilever	Consumer goods	A global corporation; graduate programmes focused on marketing, finance, and sales.	approx. EUR 3,600–4,200
Nestlé	Food industry	A global food company; graduate programmes in marketing, finance, and supply-chain management.	approx. EUR 3,600–4,200
L'Oréal	Consumer industry	A global cosmetics group; graduate positions in marketing, sales, and finance.	approx. EUR 3,600–4,200
SAP	IT and software	A major European software corporation; business positions in sales, finance, and corporate administration.	approx. EUR 4,000–4,800
Shell	Energy	A multinational energy company, business positions in finance, sales, and commodity trading.	approx. EUR 3,800–4,400
Siemens	Industry and technology	A global technology group; business positions in finance, controlling, and sales.	approx. EUR 3,600–4,300

Company	Sector	Brief profile	Indicative gross monthly starting salary range
Volkswagen Group	Automotive industry	The parent group of Škoda Auto offers graduate and trainee programmes also available in finance, controlling, and procurement.	approx. EUR 3,600–4,200

Note: The amounts presented are indicative gross monthly salary ranges in euros. They are based on information relating to specific employers and sectoral benchmarks.

Source: Authors' own processing based on Glassdoor (2026b), PayScale (2026), Fintiba (2026), and the StepStone Salary Report 2026 (2026a).

In the German sample of economics and management positions, indicative ranges extend from approximately EUR 3,600 to EUR 5,200 per month. The median of the midpoints of the individual ranges is approximately EUR 4,025. The highest values in the compiled sample were mainly observed in banking and investment services, while lower values were particularly observed in some consumer-industry positions. It should again be emphasised that some values were derived from sectoral benchmarks and should therefore not be interpreted as exact salary figures guaranteed by individual employers.

4.6.3 Employers Relevant to Graduates in Technical and IT Fields in the Czech Republic

The Czech sample of employers relevant to technically educated graduates includes companies operating in the automotive and rail industries, energy, petrochemicals, automation, information technology, construction, and aerospace (see Table 4). The selection is based on leading positions in the relevant categories of the TOP Employers 2026 ranking. It is supplemented by companies of particular importance for the employment of technical and IT graduates.

Table 4. Selected attractive employers for graduates in technical and IT fields in the Czech Republic: profile and indicative gross monthly starting salary range

Company	Sector	Brief profile	Indicative gross monthly starting salary range
Škoda Auto, a.s.	Automotive industry	Winner of the Automotive and Technology Industry category; Tech-Trainee programme with rotations.	CZK 45,000–55,000, approx. EUR 1,860–2,273
Škoda Group	Rail vehicles	Second place in the Automotive and Technology Industry category; manufacturer of trams and trains, formerly Škoda Transportation.	CZK 42,000–50,000, approx. EUR 1,736–2,067
ABB Czech Republic	Automation and electrical engineering	Third place in the Automotive and Technology Industry category; manufacturing and technology activities in energy and automation.	CZK 40,000–46,000, approx. EUR 1,653–1,901
ČEZ Group	Energy	Winner of the Energy, Gas and Petrochemicals category and overall ranking winner; ČEZ Potentials graduate programme.	CZK 38,000–48,000, approx. EUR 1,571–1,984
ORLEN Unipetrol	Petrochemicals and energy	Second place in the Energy, Gas and Petrochemicals category, a major petrochemical group operating in the Czech Republic.	CZK 40,000–48,000, approx. EUR 1,653–1,984
Seznam.cz	Information technology	Winner of the Information Technology category, a major Czech internet company with strong recruitment of developers.	CZK 45,000–55,000, approx. EUR 1,860–2,273
Microsoft Czech Republic	Information technology	Second place in the Information Technology category, the Czech subsidiary of the global software corporation.	CZK 45,000–55,000, approx. EUR 1,860–2,273
STRABAG	Construction	Winner of the Construction category; one of the largest construction groups operating in the Czech Republic and Europe.	CZK 40,000–50,000, approx. EUR 1,653–2,067

Company	Sector	Brief profile	Indicative gross monthly starting salary range
Metrostav	Construction	Second place in the Construction category, a major Czech construction group with a scholarship programme for technical students.	CZK 40,000–50,000, approx. EUR 1,653–2,067
Honeywell	Aerospace and automation	Winner of the Aviation and Aerospace category; research and development activities in Brno.	CZK 42,000–50,000, approx. EUR 1,736–2,067

Note: The amounts presented are indicative ranges. Where no information was available for a specific employer and graduate position, the range was derived from comparable junior positions in the relevant sector. The conversion into euros is indicative and is based on an exchange rate of EUR 1 = CZK 24.195.

Source: Authors' own processing based on EduFórum (2026), Alma Career (2026), Indeed.com (2026c, 2026d, 2026f), Kurzy.cz (2026b), DobráPráce.cz (2026), and Metrostav (2026).

In the Czech sample of technical and IT positions, indicative ranges are approximately CZK 38,000–55,000 per month, or around EUR 1,571–2,273. The median of the midpoints of the individual ranges is approximately CZK 45,500, or EUR 1,881. Higher values were recorded, particularly in information technology, the automotive industry, and selected development positions. Within the compiled sample, technical and IT positions therefore display a higher indicative wage level than economics and management positions. This finding cannot, however, be generalised to the entire Czech labour market because the employer sample was not constructed to be representative.

4.6.4 Employers Relevant to Graduates in Technical and IT Fields in the German Labour Market

The German sample of technically oriented employers includes multinational industrial, technological, automotive, aerospace, chemical, and electrical-engineering companies (see Table 5). Given the industrial structure of the German economy, these companies represent a relevant reference group for comparing employment opportunities available to technically educated graduates.

Table 5. Selected attractive employers for graduates in technical fields in the German labour market: profile and indicative gross monthly starting salary range

Company	Sector	Brief profile	Indicative gross monthly starting salary range
Siemens	Industry and technology	A global technology group; a two-year Siemens Graduate Program with international rotations for technical disciplines.	approx. EUR 3,800–4,500
Volkswagen Group	Automotive industry	The parent group of Škoda Auto offers graduate, trainee, and doctoral programmes for technical fields.	approx. EUR 3,800–4,500
BMW Group	Automotive industry	A major German automotive group; graduate programmes for mechanical and electrical engineers.	approx. EUR 4,000–4,700
Airbus	Aerospace industry	A European aircraft manufacturer; technical positions in research, development, and production.	approx. EUR 4,000–4,800
Bosch	Automotive components and technology	A global technology and industrial group headquartered in Germany, a major employer of mechanical and electrical engineers.	approx. EUR 3,800–4,400
ABB	Automation	A global technology group focused on electrical engineering, robotics, and industrial automation.	approx. EUR 3,800–4,400
Schneider Electric	Electrical engineering and automation	A French technology group with a strong position in energy management and automation.	approx. EUR 3,800–4,400
BASF	Chemical industry	A major chemical group headquartered in Ludwigshafen; graduate programmes for chemical and process engineers.	approx. EUR 4,000–4,600

Company	Sector	Brief profile	Indicative gross monthly starting salary range
Continental AG	Automotive components and technology	A global supplier of technologies and components for the automotive industry.	approx. EUR 3,800–4,400
Rolls-Royce Deutschland	Aerospace industry	The German division of the British Rolls-Royce Group focused on the development, production, and servicing of aircraft engines; technical positions for mechanical and aerospace engineers.	approx. EUR 4,000–4,800

Note: The amounts presented are indicative gross monthly salary ranges in euros. They are based on information relating to specific employers and sectoral benchmarks.

Source: Authors' own processing based on StepStone (2026b), Glassdoor (2026a), PayScale (2026), and Fintiba (2026).

In the German labour market, indicative ranges for technical positions extend from approximately EUR 3,800 to EUR 4,800 per month. The median of the midpoints of the individual ranges is approximately EUR 4,150. Differences between individual companies are relatively small, which may partly reflect the fact that some data are derived from common sectoral benchmarks. The values should therefore be interpreted as an indication of the wage framework for technical graduate positions in Germany rather than as a precise comparison of the individual remuneration policies of the selected employers.

4.7 Comparison of the Czech and German Samples

A comparison of compiled samples indicates that technical and IT positions in the Czech Republic offer higher indicative starting salaries than economics and management positions. The median midpoint is approximately CZK 45,500, or EUR 1,881, for technical and IT positions and approximately CZK 40,000, or EUR 1,653, for economics and management positions. In Germany, the difference between the two groups is smaller: the median is approximately EUR 4,150 for technical positions and EUR 4,025 for economics and management positions.

Using the indicative exchange rate of EUR 1 = CZK 24.195, the German medians correspond to approximately CZK 100,400 for technical positions and CZK 97,400 for economics and management positions. The nominal ratio of the German to Czech value is therefore approximately 2.2 for technical positions and 2.4 for economics and management positions. These ratios cannot be interpreted as precise wage differentials because they do not account for price levels, taxation, social-security contributions, living costs, working hours, or the structure of total remuneration.

Direct comparison is also limited by differences in how wage data are defined. The German StepStone Salary Report uses total annual gross remuneration, standardised to a forty-hour working week, and may include bonuses, commissions, and other variable components, whereas Czech job advertisements generally report the basic gross monthly salary. The geographical location of positions is also important, both in Prague, Brno, and economically strong Czech regions and in German federal states such as Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, and Hesse.

Overall, the analysed sample confirms a higher nominal wage level in the German labour market than in the Czech environment. At the same time, it shows that differences between economics-related and technical occupations are not identical across contexts: in the Czech sample, the difference between technical/IT and economics/management positions is more pronounced, whereas in the German sample, the wage ranges of the two occupational groups are relatively similar.

For interpreting Generation Z expectations, this difference is particularly important among respondents considering employment abroad. Higher nominal salaries may increase the attractiveness of international employment, but they do not in themselves indicate the net economic advantage of such a decision. Students and higher education institutions should therefore work not only with nominal salary figures but also with information on living costs, taxation, social security contributions, and career prospects.

Limitations of the Economic Analysis

The analysis has several limitations. It is based on advertised salaries, public estimates, and sectoral benchmarks rather than on salaries actually paid. The results may be affected by differences in job content, location, applicant requirements, and remuneration structure.

Data from anonymous salary portals may not be verified or methodologically harmonised and may therefore reflect the sector's general wage level rather than the specific remuneration policies of individual employers. The companies were not selected through probability sampling. The findings cannot therefore be generalised to the entire Czech or German labour market and serve only as an indicative framework for comparing respondents' wage expectations.

5. Discussion

The findings confirm that Generation Z is not a homogeneous group, but exhibits substantial internal differentiation (Rudolph et al., 2021). Students' wage expectations are influenced by gender, level and field of study, location, nationality, and competence self-concept. Higher expectations are particularly evident among men, technical and IT students, and respondents oriented towards metropolitan centres. Gender differences in expectations may be related to disciplinary composition, confidence in wage negotiation, and labour-market information (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). The higher wage expectations of technical and IT students correspond to growing demand for digital competences (Líce et al., 2023; Vasilescu et al., 2026).

Job stability is important across all profiles, but its importance declines as wage expectations increase. The highest wage profile shows lower willingness to remain with a single employer over the long term. Stability is understood more as the sustainability of one's position in the labour market than as continued employment within one organisation (Pham et al., 2024; Al-Moteri et al., 2025). High wage requirements are associated with expectations of reciprocity, recognition, and development (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Rani & Suneja, 2025). The findings therefore support the need for differentiated approaches to Generation Z by both employers and higher education institutions (Vieira et al., 2024).

Research Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

The findings must be interpreted in light of several limitations. The research is cross-sectional and captures respondents' expectations at only one point in time; it therefore cannot track their development or verify how they translate into actual employment decisions after labour-market entry. A further limitation is the purposive sampling method with elements of snowball sampling, which prevents generalisation to the entire population of Generation Z students in the Czech Republic. The sample's disciplinary composition further limits representativeness. Economics and management students account for 69.4% of respondents, whereas technical and IT fields are less strongly represented despite displaying important differences in wage expectations. Another specific limitation is the small size of the highest-wage profile, which includes only 44 respondents. Findings relating to this group should therefore be regarded as indicative, even though Wilson's confidence intervals were used for selected proportions.

A further limitation is the use of competence self-assessment. The findings do not reflect objectively measured levels of professional, digital, language, or soft skills, but rather respondents' perceptions of their own preparedness. Competence self-concept is important for wage expectations, but cannot be equated with an objectively verified level of labour-market readiness.

Future research should follow respondents longitudinally and compare their stated expectations with actual working conditions after entering employment. Comparative research across types of higher education institutions, fields of study, and regions would also be beneficial, as would qualitative research focusing on the highest wage profile. Particular attention should be devoted to identifying the sources from which students construct their wage expectations and to the role played by higher education institutions, employers, social media, job portals, and personal experience.

6. Conclusions

The aim of the paper was to analyse the wage expectations, work preferences, competence self-concept, and career orientation of Generation Z students in the context of their transition into the labour market. The study was based on a quantitative questionnaire survey conducted among university students and supplemented by an indicative economic analysis of selected employers operating in the Czech and German labour markets. The findings show that the expectations of the emerging generation of employees cannot be reduced solely to demands for higher pay or a general preference for flexibility. Wage expectations instead form part of a broader set of values, career perceptions, perceived competencies, and expectations towards employers.

The empirical findings confirm that Generation Z is not a homogeneous group. Expected starting salaries differ significantly according to gender, field of study, level of study, preferred work location, and competence self-concept. Higher wage expectations are concentrated particularly among men, follow-up master's students, technical and IT students, individuals preferring Prague or Brno, and respondents with high self-assessments of their professional, digital, and language competences. These findings suggest that any mismatch between graduates' expectations and actual labour-market opportunities is not universal but structured and differentiated by specific respondent characteristics.

A major contribution of the study is the identification of four wage profiles among Generation Z students. These profiles show that expected salary is not merely an economic figure, but also reflects different forms of career reasoning. Lower-wage profiles are more closely associated with regional embeddedness, an emphasis on stability, and a longer-term perspective with an employer. Higher profiles are more often associated with technical and IT orientation, a stronger competence self-concept, a metropolitan or international work orientation, and a more conditional relationship with extra-role performance. The highest wage profile also exhibits a retention paradox: high wage demands and a strong competence self-concept coexist with lower willingness to remain with an employer over the long term.

The indicative economic analysis of selected employers showed that respondents' wage expectations must be interpreted in the context of specific fields, employer types, and geographical labour markets. In the Czech sample, technical and IT positions displayed higher indicative starting salaries than economics and management positions. In contrast, in the German sample, the differences between the two occupational groups were less pronounced. The German labour market also showed a substantially higher nominal wage level. However, these differences cannot be interpreted without considering price levels, taxation, social-security contributions, living costs, and the structure of total remuneration.

The contribution of the paper lies primarily in linking the analysis of Generation Z wage expectations to work preferences, competence self-concept, and career visions. The findings indicate that employers should not approach the emerging generation through a uniform strategy. A segmented approach appears more effective, distinguishing between candidates oriented towards stability and regional embeddedness, candidates preferring corporate and metropolitan environments, and highly ambitious candidates who combine higher wage demands with expectations of transparent performance conditions, recognition, and reciprocity in the employment relationship.

The findings also show that managing graduates' expectations should begin before labour-market entry. Transparent information about salaries, employer requirements, and career development opportunities can help students assess their market position more accurately. It also enables employers to formulate offers that are clear, credible, and targeted towards specific applicant segments.

In conclusion, Generation Z enters the labour market with high sensitivity to remuneration, but also with differentiated conceptions of what constitutes an attractive and fair employment relationship. Employers, therefore, need to communicate salary terms, development opportunities, performance expectations, and recognition principles openly. For higher education institutions, the findings highlight the importance of career guidance, the development of a realistic competence self-concept, and the establishment of systematic links between students and practice. Further research should focus particularly on longitudinally examining how

students' stated expectations translate into actual work behaviour after labour-market entry. For employer-branding practice, the results further imply that recruitment communication aimed at the High-Ambition Independent Profile should move beyond traditional narratives of "stability and security" and replace them with a transparent definition of the psychological contract, including clear performance criteria, a direct link between performance and remuneration, and guaranteed professional autonomy. By contrast, for the Stability-Oriented profiles, location and the prospect of long-term employment remain central pillars of employer branding.

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