

Challenges in Transitioning Processes

Presha Ramsarup and Jo-Anna Russon

Introduction

We have sought to expand the social ecosystems model in the last two chapters by broadening the focus to include vocational teachers and informal working and learning. In this chapter, we continue this broadening by looking at the experiences of young people as they seek to move through life, work and learning towards better imagined futures. We do this through examining the literature on transitioning from learning to working. It is important to note at the outset that this account of transitioning is different from the just transitioning one introduced earlier in this book. However, as [Ramsarup and Lotz-Sisitka \(2020\)](#); see also [Ramsarup, 2017](#)) show, it is important to locate the transitioning individual within a wider just transitions framework if we are to break out of the current productivist assumptions of the dominant literature and practice.

We have argued that the worlds of work are undergoing radical changes. In this context, it is unsurprising that researchers report that many occupations are experiencing a heightened sense of difficult transitions ([Evetts, 2009](#); [Sawchuk and Taylor, 2010](#); [Fenwick, 2013](#)). Given the complex interrelations between work, learning and life, the boundaries and expectations of transitions through the lifecourse are also changing, both at individual and societal levels ([Field, 2012](#)). Unsurprisingly, more difficult transitions are experienced more acutely by those already disadvantaged, and their path to decent work has become typically longer and harder ([Sawchuk and Taylor, 2010](#)), with a growing number of ‘stepping stones’ on the way ([OECD, 2008](#)).

Crucially, little is still known about transitions beyond accessing the first job. Equally, a gap exists in this literature on transitioning in the context of work that crosses formal and informal contexts and forms of work beyond institutional workplace contexts. These gaps are crucial to our story in this chapter. We argue for an expanded view of transitions that takes into account interinstitutional boundary crossing between formal and nonformal learning experiences as well as transitioning into different types of work, sectors and occupations, including in the informal sector.

We conceptualize transitions broadly to include those changes that occur as people take action to move between learning and work (and vice versa), between different disciplines of knowledge and between different levels of learning and levels of practice. We use a variety of vignettes that provide insight into dynamics of transitions across a range of educational, life and work settings including farming, tailoring, catering and marine engineering. Our vignettes explore work within a broad framing understood as formal employment and/or informal and subsistence livelihoods. Together, these reveal diverse perspectives on what transitions are, how and why they can be problematic, and how different groups experience them differently. We show that current vocational education and training (VET) models fail to take a broader view of work and tend to be focused on a single job. In the context of patterns of work in Africa (but also globally), we argue that a transitions approach within a skills ecosystem framing goes beyond current dominant approaches that focus on jobs or decontextualized entrepreneurship training. We explore the implications for reimagining transitions for VET graduates in skills ecosystems dominated by informal and nonformal work and limited opportunities for formal employment.

Reviewing the transitioning literature

Transitions to work are written about in a set of overlapping ways. Here we outline three major themes that emerge from these, which allow us a vantage point from both a macro and a micro level. First, they involve a process, an outcome, one or more individuals (as it can be individual or collective) and a context (Burns, 2010; Brzinsky-Fay, 2011; Fenwick, 2013). Second, they involve three distinct processes: navigating pathways, structures and systems; transitioning between two states of being; and a sense of the whole of life as a form of transition (Ecclestone, 2009). Third, Raffe (2008) points to the macro level, using the term transition system to refer to the institutional and structural factors that shape transitions at the national level. Taken together, these approaches clearly show that transition systems are about individuals within relational webs. These are broader than education and training and involve interactions related to the organization of labour markets, social welfare systems, family structures and cultural norms. Together, they show

that mainstream notions of supply and demand to analyse entry and exit into jobs are insufficient for understanding transitions and especially transitions into jobs undergoing change.

Our focus will primarily be on how individuals experience and navigate transitions, while remembering the interplay of structure and agency as discussed in [Chapter 4](#). This leads us to draw on two further schools of transitions work: lifecourse research and critical vocationalism.

Lifecourse research

The wider sociohistorical context, institutional arrangements and social inequality at the family level all play a role in shaping the contours of the lifecourse, setting up the potential pathways for individuals to aspire to and follow, specifying relevant requirements for achievement and defining key deadlines to do so ([Heckhausen 2010](#); [Buchmann and Steinhoff, 2017](#); [Schoon and Heckhausen, 2019](#)). From this perspective, transition experiences are largely shaped by opportunities and constraints presented by the sociohistorical context and economic conditions, and within this context are dependent on individual decision making and agency.

Every lifecourse is characterized by a course of events that gives shape to life stages, transitions and turning points. We find the focus on life events useful as it helps to connect the ordering of life events and relate them to the way trajectories unfold; key events can act as ‘triggers’, and this allows us to link events to transitions in later stages of the lifecourse ([Elder, 1994](#)). The focus on events in a lifecourse is not done in a disjointed way; rather events viewed over the lifecourse allow us to ascribe social meaning very differently. How these life events emerge, how they are recognized and how people adapt to life events are also crucial as the same event or transition followed by different adaptations can lead to different trajectories ([Sampson and Laub, 1990](#); [Elder, 1994](#); [Elder et al, 2003](#)).

This leads on to the notion of turning points. [Hodkinson and Sparkes \(1997\)](#) outline three main types of turning points: structural, self-initiated and forced. Structural turning points are the result of external structures of institutions. Self-initiated turning points occur when the person concerned is instrumental in precipitating a transformation in response to a range of factors in their personal life in the field. Sometimes turning points are forced as they can be precipitated by external events and/or the actions of others such as redundancy.

Critical vocationalism

[Sawchuk and Taylor \(2010\)](#) stress that transitions are differentiated and differentiating across social groups in response to fewer good jobs being

available in primary labour markets (where formal, decent jobs are concentrated). Workers already in these labour markets largely retain the ability to positively cope with their transitions. However, those who can't access them are unlikely to have easy and positive transitions. This is not simply a matter of chance but hugely shaped by factors such as gender, race, ethnicity and disability.

Sawchuk and Taylor describe their approach as 'critical vocationalism'. They critique the vocationalist orthodoxy that workers need to be adapted to the needs of the economy (see our comments on human capital theory in [Chapters 1–3](#)). They argue that this individual and adaptive perspective has inherent difficulties in admitting structural contradictions rooted in both institutions of education and economy. Rather, they stress how the relationship between education systems and labour markets is 'shaped by the tensions, and contradictions inherent within processes of control, conflict, accommodation and occasionally resistance' (Sawchuk and Taylor, 2010: 9). Livingstone (2004) argues that a significant education–jobs gap remains under-recognized and misinterpreted within the orthodoxy. In contrast, critical vocationalism stresses the need for an understanding of context, social differences and power relations that 'define how learning capacities are productive and reproductive of uneven social and economic prosperity' (Sawchuk and Taylor, 2010: 1). Bynner (2001) notes that there is a lack of attention in the orthodoxy to the broader political climate, culture and the effects of other spheres of institutional and noninstitutional life as dimensions of the transition process.

Sawchuk and Taylor argue for a shift in gaze to highlight the variety of social variables that shape patterns of transitions. This is part of an expanded view of transitions that encompass interinstitutional transitions focused on formal and nonformal learning experiences within learning and work transitioning, as well as intra-institutional transitions that are focused on transitioning into different types of work, sectors and occupations (Ramsarup, 2017, 2020; Ramsarup and Lotz-Sisitka, 2020).

Vignettes: Transition experiences

In this section, we discuss eight transition vignettes (see [Table 7.1](#) and [Boxes 7.1–7.8](#)) that tell the stories of a range of livelihood-based lifecourse transitions as they relate to vocational education (formal and informal), work (including survivalist occupations, formal employment and self-employment) and social and institutional life contexts. The vignettes were collated from more than 60 interviews and focus groups that sought to understand the relationship between a transition experience and social variables, macro structural and economic factors, personal and socioeconomic history, and learning experiences, all of which produce or impact transition processes and outcomes (Burns, 2010).

In what follows, we synthesize these stories of transition in relation to the following questions:

1. How did individuals transition to their current context?
2. What enabling and constraining factors influenced transition processes?
3. What were their current and future aspirations?
4. What were their perceptions of how transitions could be improved?

Stories of transition

We sought to understand participants' experiences of transitions across a range of life, educational and work settings, as summarized in [Table 7.1](#). For many, the transition into their current occupational position was forced by a crisis, and their current position was characterized by limited prospects or opportunities for onward transition. The transition stories from Gulu of the small-scale farmers (see also [Chapter 5](#)) and informal market vendors were marked by social inequality at the family level and extremely challenging sociohistorical contexts and local political–ecology–economy conditions. For example, the prolonged civil war had disrupted their normal lives, with some losing parents and growing up in internal displacement camps, which also halted opportunities to stay in school or pursue higher education. In response, some turned to agriculture as a livelihood, often to support families. For others, situations of domestic violence and family breakdown forced them to find alternative sources of living. Most had little formal education and were early school leavers because of early pregnancy or marriage, or a lack of tuition fees (which were often spent on boys rather than girls). Moreover, subsequent learning opportunities tended to be restricted to various survivalist training programmes.

In Hoima, those employed in the catering sector had rarely chosen to enter the sector but were forced to choose catering as this is what the state, family or some other sponsor was prepared to fund. For example, one individual shared that their intention had been to work in the legal profession, but the government scholarship programme allocated them to hotel management. They were poor and felt that there was no alternative but to accept. Again, this parallels experiences from existing South African research ([Powell and McGrath, 2019b](#)). From a sectoral perspective, we also learnt that to gain entry to the sector many had to work as an intern for several months with no pay. Once this low-quality 'stepping stone' transition had been navigated and participants had received a formal contract, work conditions were often very challenging, including long hours and low pay. Some were also made redundant as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded and hotels had to close. Again, such slow transitions to poor-quality work have been found in South African research also ([Powell and McGrath, 2018, 2019b](#)).

Table 7.1: Transition vignettes

Name and location	Data demographics	Transition context	Role of VET
Artists <i>Uganda</i>	Interviews × 12, involved in creative arts (5 female, 7 male)	Individuals in formal (often white-collar) work but seeking to develop a career or earn extra income in the creative arts. The creative arts are underappreciated politically and culturally	Informal apprenticeship – learning from other artists
Crop farmer <i>South Africa</i>	Interview with a Black crop farmer	Black crop farmer in the Eastern Cape. Left employment in the construction sector in 1981 to buy the family farm when it was being sold by the White farmer in response to renewed anti-apartheid activism	Family apprenticeship
AEOs <i>South Africa</i>	Engagements with AEOs and Black farmers via the Amanzi for Food network	AEO–farmer learning transition: shared learning on water shortages and rainwater harvesting	Certificates/ diplomas relevant for entry into the AEO profession
Small-scale mixed crop and animal farmers <i>Uganda</i>	7 × interviews with small-scale farmers (6 male, 1 female)	Survivalist farmers. Impacted by socioeconomic challenges, and postwar NGO and government support for farming	Sporadic informal training. One participant received a diploma in agriculture
Fashion design <i>Uganda</i>	8 × trainees/ practitioners 3 × private VET directors – in the fashion industry (all female)	Tailoring training and apprenticeships in Gulu focused on quality ‘fashion’ and professional businesses as an alternative to low-quality training in basic mending and sewing	Private VET/ apprenticeships Low-quality public VET /short courses
Market vendors <i>Uganda</i>	Interviews with 7 × female subsistence-based market vendors	Survivalist market vendors in Gulu, with no alternatives and no funds for studies	No training, except informal learning in the market

(continued)

Table 7.1: Transition vignettes (continued)

Name and location	Data demographics	Transition context	Role of VET
TVET Maritime students <i>South Africa</i>	Interviews with 11 × maritime students (10 male, 1 female)	Training programmes linked to promotion of the Port of Durban maritime economy	VET students on a new maritime course
Catering sector employees <i>Uganda</i>	15 × interviews (8 male, 7 female) and a workshop with individuals in the catering sector	Hotels and restaurants in Hoima, low-paid, unstable work. Possible sector improvements linked to the oil and gas industry	A range of specialist VET training

From a lifecourse perspective, such stories illustrate how a series of events shape life transitions and turning points. However, we also heard stories of similar situations of crisis triggers and limited choice, but where other actors or events modified or redirected the lifecourse. For example, new opportunities to learn tailoring in Gulu (see [Box 7.4](#)) reoriented learners towards fashion design as a viable life choice. Equally, the introduction of a new (well-promoted and fully funded) maritime VET programme targeted at disadvantaged communities in the eThekweni case opened up a previously unimaginable route. These maritime students were Black and had either transferred from other courses or had chosen to join the course because they were unemployed despite having other VET qualifications. The availability of funding was cited as a major enabler for joining and remaining on the course in a context where many students experience problems of progression and attainment due to poverty (see also [Powell and McGrath, 2018](#)). In a similar vein, the community transition in the Alice case was initially spurred by conflict and dissonance linked to dysfunctionality and limited capacity within agricultural extension officer (AEO) services to support farmers in managing water and food shortages. The subsequent intervention created an opportunity for the cocreation of solutions between AEOs, farmers, VET and other learning network institutional partners (see also [Chapters 5, 6 and 8](#); [Lotz-Sisitka et al, 2016](#); [Sithole, 2018](#)). This type of community-based, boundary crossing, transitional learning experience counters the typical individualistic focus on transitions.

Finally, we also heard stories of transitions with more of a sense of self-initiated turning points, though still in response to challenging circumstances. For example, the Black crop farmer in the Eastern Cape ([Box 7.1](#)) left the construction industry to return to his lineal heritage, when he felt driven to buy the family farm as it was being sold by the White farmer.

Similarly, while the creative artists in Uganda chose to stay engaged in the creative arts, there was a recognition that to do so typically would be in addition to their ‘real jobs’. The vignette in [Box 7.2](#) shows the variety

Box 7.1: Crop farmer, Eastern Cape, South Africa

What made me leave the contracting industry was because I heard from my parents that the owner of the farm was selling the farm. That was at the peak of UDM movement* in the '80s. It was in 1981. I decided then that I would buy the farm. Growing up I never thought to be a farmer. My parents come from a long line of farm labourers. They never knew of any other life. We had a strong bloodline of farm labouring. Equally I witnessed first-hand the cruelty they and in fact all of us were subjected to. The White farmer who owned this property was not kind. When I heard that it was being sold, I vowed to myself that no other White farmer would come and subject my parents to cruelty in old age. I cashed in my pensions, sold my house in Port Elizabeth and took out a loan and bought this farm cash. My parents were experts in farming. It was in our blood, it was the only thing we knew how to do. I learned from my father, and he mentored me till he eventually passed on. I wanted my parents to die on the land that birthed them, not as labourers but owners.

Note: * This appears to refer to the United Democratic Front established in 1983 but actually to a more general rise in anti-apartheid activity immediately prior to its formation. UDM is the name of a political party, strongest in the Eastern Cape, but this was not formed till 1997.

of factors that restrict their vocational transitions within the creative arts. Here we see the confluence of Sawchuk and Taylor's institutional structural conditions rooted in education and the economy, mirrored in cultural attitudes towards what constitutes work, all of which restricted their progression as artists in terms of work and income. Nonetheless, they also sought to address specific community needs through the arts.

Enabling and constraining factors

Here we sought to understand the enabling and constraining factors influencing the transition stories. In the first instance, the previous section illustrates that individual stories of transition were constrained in ways that reflected Sawchuk and Taylor's critical vocationalism approach: gender injustices, uneven power relations and limiting political and cultural contexts. For example, we saw how sociocultural attitudes constrained individuals, particularly the artists who were not recognized socially or politically as belonging to a valid profession. This was also the case for those involved in catering. One chef commented: "In Uganda people despise catering, people think that maybe if you go for catering, you're a failure." This is particularly problematic for females, with some reporting that family members viewed the sector as being associated with prostitution.

Box 7.2: The creative arts, Uganda

Many initially worked as artists while unemployed, but over time recognized this was something they could continue long term, but on a part-time basis once they got a 'real job', ideally, a salaried white-collar position. Opportunities for formal training are limited, and the musicians were aware that they were unlikely to be financially sustainable (unless they become famous). They argued that, culturally, art is not considered as work or fully appreciated (except for fine art), and it is viewed as less important than the sciences and as something that is linked to the tourist industry. They complained that tax systems and copyright laws do not fully protect workers in the creative arts, which reinforces its position as a side business.

While their local communities were often dismissive of their work, they talked about developing their work in response to community needs and interests, for example, using used plastic to make art, writing poems and songs linked to community problems or promoting community awareness on particular social issues. It was also seen as a way that the artists could express themselves and deal with their own traumas in everyday life.

In both the eThekweni and Hoima cases, transition experiences illustrated the extent to which individual decision making and agency is severely constrained by sociohistorical and economic contexts, and it was not clear that targeted skills interventions sufficiently understood and were designed to account for this. For the VET students in maritime engineering in eThekweni, the fully funded nature of this policy-driven training intervention enabled students to transition into the course from either unemployment or other VET courses. Beyond this, however, students expressed concerns about the curriculum, and what they perceived as a lack of proper resources and problematic student–lecturer power dynamics. All these factors appeared to constrain their ability to learn. Some students felt overwhelmed by what they described as veiled threats of being thrown off the course. This needs to be understood within a wider level of mistrust between staff and students across South African education, and wider societal conflicts. Nonetheless, the students were confident that they would gain access to relevant occupations as a direct result of the programme. This possibly reflects a naive understanding of the role that international qualifications and sector-based experience play in transitioning into the primary labour market.

In Hoima, in line with the influx of donor and INGO investment in skills development in the region, an international donor had provided significant capital investment and supplementary technical management support and

expertise to a specialist catering college. However, employees in the catering sector in Hoima cited various constraining factors in terms of learning-to-work transitions such as a lack of school fees and lack of practical experience due to overly theoretical VET training. While they recognized that oil and gas could increase demand for hotels and restaurants, they were also acutely aware of the broader structural issues constraining progress in the sector (see [Box 7.7](#)).

We did not see much to suggest that the investment in the catering college would mitigate this due to broader challenges in the local sector. Once in the sector, young people's day-to-day lifecourses were constrained by poor working conditions, negative perceptions of the sector, sexualized stereotypes for females and a lack of occupational standards. Despite the support given to the catering skills provider in Hoima, one graduate found that their qualifications were not recognized in Kampala, where the large hotels tend to only employ graduates from high-ranking training institutions. This waitress had to retake the certificate to work for an established hotel, which incurred further costs. This is despite the establishment of the Ugandan Vocational Qualifications Framework in 2008, which should have eliminated such problems but has not overcome this lack of trust by employers in certification from providers that they do not know.

In contrast, in Gulu and Alice, we saw how networks and locally initiated training can enable learning transitions for individuals and groups within a particular sector, but in ways that more specifically target the day-to-day constraints that individuals face (as we explored in [Chapter 5](#)). For example, farmers in both countries faced multiple constraints including unpredictable weather and limited resources to mitigate this, inadequate extension services, corruption and poorly designed financial support systems. One Gulu farmer reported: "Government grants dictate who will get it. I am seen as a single person business, so I need to form a group, but people just want to get the money from the grant, and it won't help your business." Such constraints were compounded by low levels of educational attainment and dysfunctional or nonexistent agricultural extension services. The crop farmer ([Box 7.1](#)) also reported that while financially he did not have to depend on the government to survive as a farmer, he was constrained by inadequate market protections, inability to access financial support and broader system failures. He noted that the government "[say] they want Black commercial farmers, but their actions say otherwise" (see also [Maqwelane, 2021](#), who traces this to paradoxically bifurcated policy histories). However, within these stories we also saw enabling factors linked to community-based networks. In South Africa, the Amanzi for Food programme and its Imvothu Bubomi Learning Network enabled learning groups and interactions between farmers and AEOs to develop over time (see [Box 7.3](#) and [Chapters 5, 6 and 8](#); [Sithole, 2018](#)). In Gulu, it was often community-driven networking that provided

Box 7.3: AEOs and community learning transition, South Africa

The AEOs helped to mediate training materials and package information and knowledge that might otherwise have been difficult for farmers to engage with. One of the challenges identified in the field was bridging the technical divide of learning materials and farmers' knowledge, and it is here that the AEOs believed they played an important role. They saw that they were able to present this knowledge in the farmers' own language (isiXhosa) and advise on using practical examples so that farmers were able to translate this knowledge into practice on their farms.

a support system to the farmers, for example through the formation of associations to share knowledge and harness social media, and to encourage young people to develop their skills.

Similarly, the survivalist female market vendors in Gulu faced multiple constraining factors including high taxation from the local government, inadequate capital to expand their informal business, the poor reputation of market vendors, corrupt middlemen, theft, gender barriers and lack of family support. Poor road networks in rural areas also made the sourcing of goods from remote areas difficult. However, supportive informal and semiformal networks provided spaces of learning, knowledge exchange and cocreation, illustrating how informal and formal networks could play a role in helping workers (in what Sawchuk and Taylor refer to as secondary labour markets) adapt to the economy and manage complex learning to work transitions.

In Gulu, we have already noted that there are many national and international NGOs targeting livelihood development through short-term training courses. In the transition stories of the tailors, we observed that such courses offered the women inadequate training while simultaneously reinforcing a narrative that they are unstable victims who need help to live. This appears to be an example of how an intervention designed as a structural turning point can in fact continue reproducing uneven social and economic prosperity. However, we also saw a counterexample in the tailoring sector through training innovations designed and led by women who view fashion as a profession, as [Box 7.4](#) illustrates.

Individual aspirations

We also sought to capture people's aspirations and a sense of whether individuals saw themselves as on a journey to some other work. This enabled us to take the analysis beyond the often-overemphasized consequences of early transitions.

Box 7.4: Tailoring/fashion design, Gulu

There are many informal tailors in small markets in and around Gulu, most of whom have had access to short-term training courses and now offer basic services (for example, mending and making school uniforms) in order to survive. Their sense of societal value appeared to be constrained by inadequate training that reinforces stereotypes (such as 'unskilled', 'victims') and does not promote fashion design as a viable and successful path in life. Such training programmes tend not to focus on quality or business skills, and women graduate without basic skills in tailoring. As one factory director explained:

'Most of the people I have taken on for apprenticeship have mostly been people who drop out of school, people who have failed to get a job in the field they tried to study in, and people who have gone through training, but have not really benefitted from the training they had earlier on, these are people who have gone through tailoring schools.'

New training programmes are emerging that explicitly focus on quality and empowerment, demanding that the women show this talent. All the directors spoke of the need of including counselling sessions and personal support for the women, all of whom have faced severe trauma in their lives. As one noted:

'We are trying to develop the programme to include a lot of things, marketing ... I feel like they should be teaching more in business skills, personal growth, communication skills, not just the tailoring aspect of it, but also all of these soft skills that are supposed to help a person grow, be confident and feel they have a really good career, to be empowered to build a really good career in tailoring, without feeling that this is the job that people do when they don't have anything else to do.'

The trainees are now developing an active interest in fashion.

One overarching observation was that conversations about the future encompassed a mix of aspirations for both personal and community success. For some, their personal wish was to succeed in their current occupational lifecourse, and to do so in a way that benefitted others (see [Box 7.5](#)). The crop farmer ([Box 7.1](#)) also wished to see his farm fully operating as a commercial entity that could supply the surrounding district and provide decent work. He was particularly concerned about upskilling local youth in ways that might help tackle high levels of alcohol abuse in local communities. These dual community and individual aspects confirm the

Box 7.5: Small-scale farmers, Gulu, Uganda

Whether it was passion for farming or negative life events that prompted the transition into small-scale farming, most participants wanted to continue farming for life. Some were glad to be following in their family footsteps and felt that agriculture was a good way to support their family. Dreams included expanding the farm, becoming progressive commercial farmers, further education such as a degree/diploma in agriculture or information and communications technology (ICT), and establishing a training facility for extension services in the community. Many spoke of a hope and desire to increase awareness of agriculture/farming as a form of employment, particularly among the youth. As one farmer said:

'If this could be a platform for advising the youth of my age then I would encourage them to take skills development in agriculture and putting it to practice as a very important strive in fighting household poverty, and those in agriculture should start thinking of value addition to what they produce.'

findings of recent capabilities work on aspirations (for instance, [Powell and McGrath, 2019a](#); [Mkwanazi and Cin, 2020](#)) and reinforce the importance of relationality.

The young women involved in fashion design were not used to being listened to or asked about their career, reinforcing our earlier point about the importance of deliberately including individual voices in transitions work. However, on probing deeper, it became clear that they had aspirations for an improved future, for example to improve their skills as fashion designers and develop their business and management skills. Most of them indicated they would like to further their formal learning by entering a degree programme, which would enable them to become teachers. These examples illustrate that while the participants we engaged with faced extremely challenging structural and institutional forces that shaped their transitions and future opportunities, they were highly cognisant of the social variables that individuals within their communities confronted daily and aspired to respond to this in some way.

A second observation was the trend for virtually all participants involved in the catering sector aspiring to start their own business. One spoke of starting a bakery, another aspired to be a consultant in setting up commercial kitchens, and two others wanted to become managers in the sector. This demonstrates how linear notions of the supply and demand of skills are insufficient when considering transitions beyond the initial learning-to-work transition. For example, access to a broader array of skills related

Box 7.6: Maritime VET students, eThekweni

The students seem to be very happy with their current position, but it also appears that this sentiment will only persist if the programme manages to deliver on its promises. Students spoke of expectations related to transitioning from the bridging programme to maritime specific courses, the opportunity for work-based or experiential learning, continuing academic, financial and social support and ultimately the guarantee of employment opportunities.

In terms of career aspirations, the maritime student narratives all converge on the perception that they will end up in the engineering stream by virtue of the title of their qualification and the information they have received during career guidance or orientation programmes at the academy. On the other hand, a few students suggested that if the world of maritime work did not provide the promised benefits, they would use their general engineering skills to enter onshore industries or revert to their previous work pathways.

to business planning, entrepreneurship and business development may be relevant through the lifecourse.

Finally, we also saw a mixture of ideal aspirations tempered with pragmatic ideas for navigating the expected challenges, as we would expect from the recent aspirations literature. Among the informal market vendors, most expressed no interest in further learning, though one fruit and vegetable vendor in Gulu was interested in learning hairdressing and tailoring. She stated that being a market vendor involves periods of sitting around waiting for customers, and the extra time could be used for other income-generating activities. In [Box 7.6](#), for example, the maritime students clearly aspired to be employed in the maritime sector, but they also shared ideas on how they might use their current training to adapt and find work elsewhere.

In contrast to the market vendors, some of the artists aspired to go back to education, though not necessarily in the arts given the government's prioritization of science-based learning. However, most wanted to see the creative arts gain more acceptance in society alongside government recognition that it is a valid form of education and work. This aspiration for professional recognition also featured among the individuals involved in catering. Wider recognition by family and society is an important strand of the capabilities approach to education (see, for instance, [Walker, 2008](#); [De Jaeghere, 2017](#); [Powell and McGrath, 2019a](#)) and can be seen here too. Several participants spoke of their desire to raise awareness about the variety of opportunities within the catering sector (for example, in the airline industry, tourism, railways, hospitals and schools) and to challenge people's perceptions. However, [Box 7.7](#) shows the structural constraints to the sector

that may hinder such aspirations. While individual agency may be severely constrained by structural and institutional factors, this does not necessarily diminish the ability of individuals or communities to observe these and construct aspirational narratives about how they might be navigated.

Improving transitions

Finally, we wanted to understand how individuals believed that their particular transition lifecourse could be improved, either prospectively or retrospectively. Were there certain mechanisms that did or could help, for example interventions by development agencies or informal training? As noted earlier, one theme was the perceived importance of government-led professional recognition of livelihoods and the associated legal and structural protections for the sector or occupation. For example, the individuals involved in the creative arts recognized its intrinsic value to society and had experienced the arts as a way to heal and express themselves, but their work was informal. Some saw it as a means to earn an income or additional income, and some as a potential livelihood (see [Powell and McGrath, 2019b](#), for similar findings in South Africa). However, the sector was not monitored or properly regulated, which meant that formalizing their income stream or establishing basic structures for paying tax was not possible.

Tailoring is also viewed largely as unprofessional, and little more than a way to help vulnerable women cope with their life circumstances. However, building on the successful models of training for fashion design in Gulu (see [Box 7.4](#)), it was felt that access to more professional programmes in fashion design would assist transitions in the sector more broadly. Those in the catering industry also spoke of the need for more opportunities to professionalize the sector, alongside dealing with broader economic constraints that negatively impacted the sector in Hoima (see [Box 7.7](#)).

There were also calls for systemic and institutional structures that recognize the holistic nature of work (formal and informal) and their related transitions. This was particularly evident in farming. As argued by [Maqwelane \(2021\)](#), in South Africa, this included a call for more appropriate structural support to ensure that farmers can stay viable in the current market and compete competitively. This, in turn, requires a more effective agricultural extension system and public–private engagement that supports Black small- and medium-scale farmers in ways that embrace a more holistic response to the value chain. This would necessitate confronting persistent policy dualism between commercial and subsistence farmers and developing a better understanding of the roles and contributors of various stakeholders ([Maqwelane, 2021](#); see also [Lotz-Sisitka et al, 2016, 2021](#); [Pesanyi, 2019a](#)). In Uganda, participants spoke of the need to reduce top-down government directives on what to grow and when, because this

Box 7.7: Catering sector, Hoima

Participants called for more to be done to support the catering sector in Hoima to capitalize on the opportunities associated with the oil industry. In particular, there were calls for government investment in roads, power and ICT to help develop the sector and improve guest experience. Some participants also called for local people in the sector to be more entrepreneurial in meeting the needs and expectations of a growing international clientele, particularly those associated with the oil industry.

However, improving the sector as a whole was seen to be hampered by a lack of professional standards (for instance, in service, food and hygiene standards), a lack of supply chain storage and a fragmented or nonexistent supply chain, a lack of internal staff training and limited access to computers and ICT training.

Most participants had limited awareness of local content legislation linked to oil contracts, and while some hotels and restaurants have gained extra business as a result of the emerging oil sector in the region, there was limited evidence of local opportunities to capitalize on the oil industry within the catering sector. One factor in this was the need for a specialized vocational provider in Hoima with greater industry recognition.

approach does not take adequate consideration of farmers' needs. In addition, structural contradictions in education and the economy mean that those with agriculture degrees often fail to gain employment, which subsequently does not encourage farmers to enrol in formal education. Gender inequalities have also left women vulnerable and trapped in subsistence agriculture for home consumption rather than transitioning to commercial small-scale agriculture. There were also calls for better structures that protect market vendors in fruit and vegetables (see [Box 7.8](#)).

Finally, there were consistent calls for more support for localized colearning through communities of practice, knowledge hubs or by connecting higher education institutions and training opportunities with particular communities and sectors. Those involved in farming suggested that this might include more focused learning on how to apply and disseminate knowledge (general and specialist) in farmer-centred ways (see [Chapters 5, 6 and 8](#) for more discussion on this). Participants involved in the catering sector in Hoima had also begun to recognize the need for collaboration and networking as a result of their engagement with the project and expressed their desire to form a local association to enhance their local bargaining power and support graduates in the sector.

Drawing on insights from the critical vocationalist perspective, it is possible to see how professional recognition of a role or sector and basic institutional structures and protections could play a role in improving

Box 7.8: Market vendors, Uganda

Vendors reported that there is a need to reduce extortion from corrupt local government officers who take advantage of the market vendors who are unaware of tax policies. They suggested that government can further improve on security to deter theft. Indeed, it was noted that the market with the highest levels of theft has a police station just behind it.

They argued that more opportunities should be given to market vendors through collaborations with training institutions. This includes training support to saving groups that offer rich sources of learning and sharing of experiences for the vendors. They felt that guiding and improving these networks could enhance opportunities to move beyond survivalist trading.

the transition experiences of individuals in the secondary labour market. Moreover, while the significant education–jobs gaps persists and simple cradle-to-grave training cannot overcome the problems in the labour market (Livingston, 2004; Sawchuk and Taylor, 2010), the stories underpinning this chapter show the capacity for locally derived learning experiences that support work-based transitioning in both formal and informal work. This is particularly the case where transitional learning can draw on inclusive local networks and bridge the formal and informal within a particular sector such as tailoring or farming.

Towards a differentiated approach to understanding transition processes

The vignettes, drawn from across the four cases, clearly indicate the increasing complexity of transitions that are evident across the lifecourse. Across the individual transition stories we engaged with, in voicing the enabling and constraining factors, there was an intuitive conflation of personal lifecourse with critical vocationalism. The stories thus reflect the importance of valuing the voices of intended beneficiaries on the transitioning process and deliberately including such voices from the outset when conceptualizing and planning transition-based programmes or interventions within VET.

The reality emergent from the vignettes shows that, despite extensive policy reforms and donor inputs, there appears to be a disconnect between vertical enablers, which have focused on technical issues like qualifications frameworks and recognition of prior learning policies, and the horizontal community networks and local labour markets that are actually needed to activate transitions. Maqwelane's (2021) research shows significant contradictions within vertical enablers as well. This has shaped a situation that

has prevented a collaborative systems approach to individual transitions and poor local implementation and/or insignificant benefits to rural economies. All of these impact the creation of permanent and decent entry-level learning pathways, especially in rural areas and informal contexts. Some of the dimensions of these complexities are discussed further in what follows.

Education policy creates normative expectations about appropriate processes, outcomes and dispositions linked to transitions. However, these vignettes show clearly that young people are not homogenous, and they can experience an array of social and structural barriers to productive employment that may differ according to personal circumstances, social context or sector. This runs counter to the dominant school-to-work notion evident in the literature.

The stories illustrate the reality that very few youth succeed in accessing the formal economy in a seamless manner. They capture the nonlinearity of education–labour market transitions by highlighting individuals' difficult transition from the education system into employment and then subsequently transition into unemployment or back into the education system. The individuals in our transition stories broadly experienced fragile and exclusionary transitions characterized by sociohistorical contexts and economic conditions that restrict individual and community or sector-based agency, which are exacerbated by policy contradictions and failures. In the tailoring example, we saw how an intervention designed as a structural turning point can in fact continue reproducing uneven social and economic outcomes.

The transition from education to employment, and particularly the 'in-between' when young people find themselves in neither fully, is a particularly vulnerable time for youth, reinforcing the need for supportive horizontal networks as central to supporting transitioning experiences. These support systems, which are generally family, friends and colleagues, are fragile and sometimes inadequate as the youth attempt to negotiate transitions. This highlights the need to examine support for collaborative social partners and the need for supportive ecosystems. From the stories, we were able to observe instances where the complex mix of constraints was partly mitigated by enabling factors in the form of networks and bespoke training interventions and supportive informal and semiformal networks providing spaces of learning, knowledge exchange and cocreation. The transition vignettes indicate that most of the young South Africans and Ugandans we engaged with may have strong ties with members of their family or people in their community but do not necessarily have access to people outside of this immediate network who could help them to access opportunities. This recognizes a move from a focus on individuals only to a larger focus on collectives or networks that offer systems of support, as part of our wider relational story.

The role of identity, structure and agency are central issues in transitions. Oinas et al's (2018) book argues that this also involves attending more 'carefully' to young people's political activities. Transitions cannot be viewed as isolated from broader histories, politics of skills systems (and their ongoing exclusions) and structural conditions. This highlights the necessity of centring voices that reflect actual transitioning experiences and their related insights and expertise. The stories also reflected a pragmatic mix of aspirations for both personal and community success. Those we spoke to were highly cognisant of the social variables that individuals within their communities confronted on a daily basis, and they aspired to respond to these in some way. For example, aspiring to gain commercial viability, or the opportunity to teach others, reflected an ability to cite ideal aspirations tempered with pragmatic ideas for navigating the expected challenges.

Practice and policy tend to create a binary between formal and informal. However, the stories reflect formal–informal interactions and colearning, illustrating the need to explore transitions as a relational phenomenon, a type of (nonlinear) continuum. This observation works against policy and development imperatives that continually seek to support the transition from informal to formal, largely without success.

Too much of the transitions literature, particularly in the policy sphere, conceives of a first job as the terminal outcome and then looks backwards to see what is faulty before this. However, it is evident that outcomes of transitions need to be conceptualized more broadly. This means looking beyond a single job. In reality, individuals may be in a work-based transition that is not of their making to begin with, and/or that promotes ongoing transitions across the lifecourse, or that is hampered by contradictions in policy and practice systems. Equally, they may be straddling education and work, or flipping between them. We need to examine pathways not just as straight lines to jobs but multiple pathways to varied opportunities for sustainable livelihoods and for multiple pathways enabled by job families/streams of work (connected jobs). This has implications for more innovative ways to build bridges to diverse pathways, with special consideration of the role of VET in this. A social ecosystem for skills may potentially offer a more grounded and reality-congruent approach to considering transitions than the linear transition to a job model does.

Qualifications have long been viewed as *the* link between education and the world of work. This appears most relevant in the maritime and oil and gas sectoral cases we have examined, which are highly formal and internationalized. However, most of the stories we have collected indicate that qualifications are often not the central life event or turning point of a trajectory, and various other spheres of institutional and noninstitutional life are important dimensions of the transition processes (see also [Chapter 5](#)).

To contend with the structural contradictions rooted in the economy and in educational policy and institutions, we suggest that, in the differentiated labour markets observed in our stories, we can never be certain about what specific skills are needed for a livelihood opportunity or job. We thus need a conceptualization of learning-to-work transition that centralizes how we prepare people to be adaptable. [Buchanan \(2020\)](#) argues that this capability is best built through mastering particular domains of expertise, which are broad streams. The challenge is to define these domains and educate people in ways that allow them to draw out the more transferable qualities that can be applied in other contexts. Hence, the building and nurturing of adaptability emerges as an important consideration, deepening adaptive capacity in youth so they can adapt to an uncertain future. We found the construct of adaptive capacity useful to think about learning and work transitions. Adaptive capacity has many different dimensions, but there seems to be consensus on the ability of a system, institutions, groups or actors to cope and adjust to changing circumstances ([Phuong et al, 2018](#)). Whether viewed at a collective or individual level, adaptive capacity involves learning. In other words, the ‘capacity to learn’ is the most important element and always has a positive effect on increasing adaptive capacity ([Eakin et al, 2011](#)). Individual perspectives of adaptive capacity focus on individuals’ societal knowledge and technical skills ([Bos et al, 2013](#)) and their ability to harness and combine system attributes in adaptation processes. An important necessary condition for understanding the collective perspectives of adaptive capacity is the need for enabling social learning (for instance, knowledge coproduction, comanagement and sharing).

Conclusion

We have shown in this chapter why we follow authors such as Sawchuk and Taylor in rejecting the orthodox account of transitions to work. However, our approach goes further through our drawing on a relational social ecosystems approach. Our vignettes illustrate the need for a more critical and differentiated consideration of needs and local contexts. They stress how policies are too often nonfacilitating as are labour market realities. They highlight the role of networks on the horizontal dimension and the situating and conceptualizing of skills so that they facilitate and strengthen these networks. They also show that local network building is critical to supporting institution-building. The future stability of a social ecosystem depends not only on networks and relationships, but also on robust, agile and inclusive anchor organizations, like local skills providers, that are core to the networks that form the foundations of and strengthen local institutions. However, any attempt to develop local educational and training institutions needs to consider the community in which they are embedded.

This requires more support for localized colearning networks through communities of practice, knowledge hubs or connecting higher education institutions and training opportunities within particular communities and sectors. This draws attention to more locally derived learning experiences that support work-based transitioning in both formal and informal work, particularly where transitional learning can draw on inclusive local networks and bridge the formal and informal within a specific sector such as tailoring or farming. The cases illustrate that context and community change is central. Decontextualized notions of learning pathways and youth transitions are not advisable and cannot facilitate local transitions.

Ramsarup (2017) argues that learning pathways are best conceived as a complex phenomenon, constituted by dialectically interdependent planes (with a dynamic interplay between what is present and what is absent, and their interdependence). We agree. Dealing with the complexity depicted in these stories requires understanding transitions as a multiscalar phenomenon within a dynamic skills ecosystem.