

INTRODUCTION

Research on school-to-work transitions in Europe

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The transition from school to work can be considered as an important, modern *rite de passage* in the lives of individuals. It refers to the period between the end of individuals' enrolment in initial education or training and their stable and secure settlement in the labour market. Qualifications are an important criterion in the allocation of school-leavers to jobs and the knowledge and skills obtained in education or training form the basis for career advancement and professional development. Although the transition stage is in theory only the start of a long working life, there is substantial empirical evidence that the initial labour market position determines to a large extent the subsequent working career of individuals (see, for a recent publication, Barone and Schizzerotto 2011). So, a smooth labour market integration is crucial for young people, as it not only minimises their experiences of unemployment and inactivity when entering the labour market, but also in the long run.

In practise, however, the integration process of young people into European labour markets is far from smooth. Despite rising levels of overall education and skills, as a result of the enormous educational expansion Europe witnessed in the last decades, the transition from school to work needs to be characterised as a turbulent and uncertain period. Especially since the start of the 2008 economic crisis, youth unemployment has increased strongly and it is very high at the moment. More than five million young people in the EU are unemployed now, a number that can be translated into a youth unemployment rate well over 20% (and even above 50% in some Member States). These percentages do not even include those who are continuing their education, because of the lack of available jobs. Moreover, young people who actually find work are often in flexible employment nowadays. They are more likely to start out in a temporary contract and to fear losing their job than ever before. This is all leading to young people becoming and feeling marginalised, as witnessed

by the recent social unrest (that is, youth riots and mass demonstrations) in countries such as Spain, Greece, France and the UK.

Concerns have been raised whether the current economic crisis will produce a 'lost generation' of young people. It is argued that particularly young people may become the biggest losers, because they suffer first and most, as they represent a specific group of outsiders in the labour market, who lack work experience, seniority, lobby and networks (De Vreyer *et al.* 2001). It is not only expected that young workers experience more often spells of unemployment, flexible contracts and low-quality jobs than the established work force during the current recession, but also that it has the potential to have a detrimental effect on the further career of young people, not only in terms of their future employment status, referring to 'scarring' effects (Gangl 2006; Luijkx and Wolbers 2009), but also on such aspects as family formation and social participation.

Against this background, the European Research Network on Transitions in Youth (TIY) organised in Nijmegen (The Netherlands) on 5–8th September 2012 its 20th anniversary meeting. The aim of the TIY network is to promote comparative research on transitions in youth from an interdisciplinary (sociology, economics and educational science) perspective. The main focus is on the transition from education to the labour market, but in the context of other transitions, for example to new family statuses or to independent households. It pursues this aim by providing a forum for contact among European scholars in the field, by promoting theoretical and methodological development, and by encouraging the collection and analysis of cross-national datasets. It has a particular interest in promoting the use of regular and longitudinal surveys of young people for comparative analysis. That the TIY network has been quite successful in this respect, is shown by the various collaborative research efforts that took place in the past (see, among others, Shavit and Müller 1998; Hammer 2003; Müller and Gangl 2003; Allen and van der Velden, 2011; Kogan *et al.* 2011).

This special issue of *European Societies* brings together a nice collection of papers that were presented during the 20th TIY workshop and give a state-of-the-art of research on school-to-work transitions in Europe. Although contributions on all aspects of the transition from youth to adulthood, and particularly the transition from education to the labour market were welcome for this workshop, papers on the theme of 'Transitions in youth: A 20-year perspective' were especially invited. What has research into school-to-work transitions in general, and particularly research within the context of the TIY network, achieved in the last 20 years? These achievements refer to both theoretical developments and methodological improvements. And what has research not accomplished (yet), or what studies are needed for the future? These

and related other questions are the focus of the first two papers of this special issue.

The contribution by David Raffè, one of the founding members of the TIY network and its first chairman, deals with the progress of transition-system research over the past 20 years. In his paper, he first of all describes how in the 1980s and 1990s research on school-to-work transitions took a comparative turn and how this development was shaped by theoretical origins, the political context, the availability of data and the organisation of research. It led to a demand for comparative research that aims to determine national differences in transition processes and outcomes and explain them in terms of institutional characteristics of national transition systems. Next, the author discusses the tentative answer to these two research questions and assesses its progress to date. The focus is on cross-national comparisons and on the predominantly survey-based research tradition of the TIY network. His observation is that school-to-work transitions research has made significant progress. It has documented numerous ways in which processes and outcomes of school-to-work transitions differ cross-nationally, and it has gone some ways towards explaining these national differences. Nevertheless, its achievements have been uneven. Although a little beyond the evidence presented, the author provocatively concludes that they appear more significant when viewed from a perspective which emphasises the case-oriented rather than variables-oriented approach of comparative research.

Christian Brzinsky-Fay, in his contribution on the measurement of school-to-work transitions as processes, discusses that, despite the fact that longitudinal datasets have become increasingly available during the last 20 years, the periodical character of school-to-work transitions has deserved too little attention. The established analysis of school-to-work transitions focuses on single status changes, whereas from a life-course perspective the period between school-leaving and labour market integration must be referred to as a trajectory. Especially the blurring boundaries between traditional sectors of educational provision (schools, vocational education and training, continuing education) to realise a more seamless formal education system supportive of post-compulsory education or training and life-long learning, and the flexibilisation of labour markets in European countries have led to an increasing complexity that is largely ignored when the process character of school-to-work transitions is disregarded. Even if durations are focused on (for example, the time before entering a first significant job), the application of hypothesis-testing methods such as event history analysis is often limited to single episodes, while disregarding other episodes, their sequence and composition. The author argues that sequence analysis, although explorative by nature, offers the possibility to cope with the complexity of school-to-work

transitions. Instead of a substitute, it must be seen as a complement to the powerful method of event history modelling. Actually, the explorative potential of sequence analysis could serve as a basis for the definition of meaningful events for a confirmatory event history analysis.

The third paper starts from the current situation that young people face great difficulties when first entering the labour market. Among labour market entrants the share of unemployment and temporary employment is generally high, although considerable differences in labour market integration exist across Europe. The authors of this paper, Marloes de Lange, Maurice Gesthuizen and Maarten H. J. Wolbers, investigate to what extent cyclical, structural and institutional factors explain cross-national variation in youth labour market integration. In addition, it is examined to what degree educational differences exist in the impact of these macro characteristics. To answer these research questions, data are used on young people from 29 European countries who were interviewed in the European Social Survey of 2002, 2004, 2006 or 2008 and left day-time education in the period 1992–2008. Both unemployment and temporary employment are regarded as a lack of labour market integration, compared to the situation of permanent employment. The individual level data have been enriched with relevant macro characteristics, which enabled a variables-oriented approach of comparative analysis. The results of the conducted multilevel analysis first of all show that high aggregate unemployment prevents young people from a smooth integration in the labour market. In addition, economic globalisation has a positive effect on youth labour market integration. Furthermore, the authors demonstrate that young people experience less difficulties with labour market integration as the education system is more vocationally specific. Intermediate and high educated in particular profit from the positive effect of the vocational specificity of the education system. Finally, as the employment protection legislation of incumbent workers is stricter, young people experience more difficulties when first entering the labour market, especially high educated youth.

The fourth and fifth paper of this special issue concern two case studies on countries in which secondary education has a strong labour market linkage. In these two countries, Germany and Switzerland, a widespread formalised system of vocational education and training exists with a clear occupational orientation. In general, it takes the form of a dual system, that is, apprenticeships at the workplace combined with some formal education in vocational schools. The acquired skills are specific, but encoded into broadly recognised qualifications that are highly transferable across firms or even industries. For employers, young people with vocational education and training are very attractive, since the curricula of the programmes already prepare them with the skills required for the

job. This reduces their training costs. Especially of those from apprenticeship programmes, as the dual system offers employers a possibility of screening potential workers during their training and to mould their skills to the firm's specific need. From the point of view of the participants, being an apprentice offers them the opportunities to stay employed with the same employer after the training period has finished, as they have 'a foot in the door'.

Despite its popularity in the post-war period, as in those days industry required large numbers of young people who could be trained in a relatively short period, the number of apprenticeships has recently flattened out or even declined in countries that had reasonably large dual systems (that is, the German-speaking or -surrounding countries). An important reason for this is that the dual system is not always flexible enough to adjust to current changes in the occupational structure, most notably the employment shift from manufacturing to the service sector (Blossfeld 1992). Another is that more students at the secondary level aspire to tertiary level of education. Greater numbers of young people are opting for higher education, which appears to be lowering the average educational standards of those seeking apprenticeships, thereby raising costs for employers offering these (OECD 1998). A third reason is that access to apprenticeship training is limited by the firms' supply of apprenticeship positions, which varies in a non-linear form over time following the business cycle (Dietrich and Gerner 2007). The German dual system, for instance, came under pressure in recent years, because firms were not willing to offer a sufficient number of apprenticeships. Since 2002, the demand for apprenticeship positions in Germany permanently exceeded their supply (Zwick 2007). This has led to increased difficulties for young people to find an apprenticeship. Moreover, the labour market value of apprenticeship training seems to have worsened, as the number of dual system leavers, who enrol university after graduation from apprenticeship training has increased strongly in Germany (Hillmert and Jacob 2003).

Whether social networks can help young people to find an apprenticeship is an important question in this respect. This issue is dealt with in Tobias Roth's contribution. In his paper, he starts from the notion that previous research indicated that social ties can influence the probability of successfully finding a (first) job, but little is known about the possible effect of social networks for the access to apprenticeships. Based on the existing theoretical framework that is used to explain social network effects on job search and overall success in the labour market, the author formulates a general hypothesis on the predicted positive effect of social networks on finding an apprenticeship in the German vocational training system. In addition, he deduces hypotheses on the impact of the social and

ethnic composition of the networks. Based on panel data from the 'Young Immigrants in the German and Israeli Educational System' project, collected in three federal states in Germany, the conducted multivariate analysis indicates that neither the extent nor the social and ethnic composition of young people's network has any substantial effect on successfully finding an apprenticeship position. The extensivity and social composition of their mother's network, on the contrary, matters. The analysis suggests that a large network and especially social ties to persons in the lower labour market segment help young people with low or intermediate secondary school qualification to find an apprenticeship. Nevertheless, it remains unclear from the analysis if social ties actually provided help for finding an apprenticeship or that the observed relationship between network characteristics and search success is not causal, but the result from selection effects related to homophily in social networks, that is, the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people. Future research should address this issue.

The paper by Alexander Salvisberg and Stefan Sacchi, finally, seeks to find explanations for the rising risk of unemployment after completion of vocational education and training among young people in Switzerland in the last decade. The strength of their contribution is the focus on the demand side of the labour market. Most research on school-to-work transitions relies heavily on observations of individual workers, their qualifications and other resources and jobs obtained on the labour market. Little is known and hardly any attention is paid to employer strategies in the labour market. In general, inferences about employer preferences and hiring practices are on the basis of the actual pattern of (un)employment of workers, rather than direct evidence. This paper deals with this probably most serious limitation of transition research done so far by concentrating on the long-term structural shift on the demand side of the labour market and its consequences for new entrants' chances of employment in the labour force. Their descriptive analysis of the development of vacancies for labour market entrants in the period 2001–2011 suggests that neither a growing occupational mismatch nor a general shift in the level of education to the disadvantage of young workers with vocational education and training is responsible for the rising unemployment among labour market entrants. Instead, the authors demonstrate that a decreasing part of the vacancies suited for leavers from vocational education and training remains open for them, because of the rising job requirements with regard to work experience and further education. Basic vocational education and training alone is increasingly less a guarantee for a smooth entry into the Swiss labour market.

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