

Editorial

## Challenges in School-To-Work Transition in Germany and Austria: Perspectives on Individual, Institutional, and Structural Inequalities

Brigitte Schels<sup>1,2,\*</sup> and Veronika Wöhrer<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup> School of Business, Economics, and Society, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany<sup>2</sup> Department Joblessness and Social Inclusion, Institute for Employment Research, Germany<sup>3</sup> Department of Education, University of Vienna, Austria\* Corresponding author ([brigitte.schels@fau.de](mailto:brigitte.schels@fau.de))

Submitted: 9 May 2022 | Published: 9 June 2022

### Abstract

Transitions between schools, vocational education and training (VET), and work pose important challenges for young people that influence their well-being and social positioning now and in the future. The young people themselves experience the transition phase as the formation stage of their aspirations and goals. In this process, young people are confronted with the expectations and assessments of relevant others—such as parents, teachers, employers, and career counsellors—and by the requirements that are defined in sociopolitical and institutional contexts. In these contexts, criteria of successful transitions and risky transitions worthy of special support are made relevant. German and Austrian employment-centred transition regimes are characterised by relatively high standardisation and segregation as well as a strong VET system linked to the labour market. This thematic issue brings together contributions that examine challenges in these transitions from different perspectives and related facets of social inequality. The articles address different transitions (mostly school-to-VET, but also school-to-school or unemployment to work) and their different phases: aspiration formation, changing aspirations, challenges in transitions, and concrete problems in transition processes like disconnectedness or unemployment. The articles on social inequalities are related to class, ethnicity, gender, and (dis)ability. We also place importance on balancing different methods to bring together findings from quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and participatory research.

### Keywords

employment-centred transition regime; school-to-work transition; social inequality; vocational education and training; youth

### Issue

This article is a part of the issue “Challenges in School-To-Work Transition: Perspectives on Individual, Institutional, and Structural Inequalities” edited by Brigitte Schels (Institute for Employment Research / University of Erlangen-Nuremberg) and Veronika Wöhrer (University of Vienna).

© 2022 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This editorial is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

For decades, research on school-to-work transition (STWT) has demonstrated the formative power of this life stage in developing social inequalities over the life course (e.g., Heinz & Marshall, 2003; Johnson et al., 2011; Shanahan, 2000). The transitions between schools, vocational education and training (VET), and the labour market pose important challenges for young people

that influence their social positioning now and in the future. At the same time, these transitions have become increasingly uncertain and this is moderated, to different extents, by national institutions (e.g., Buchmann & Steinhoff, 2017; Mills & Blossfeld, 2005; Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; Shavit & Müller, 1998).

Given the existing broad research on STWT, this thematic issue unavoidably falls short of adequately outlining every important facet. Hence, its contribution

is made by examining how young people have met STWT challenges in the past decade, how they form their aspirations and goals, and how they are confronted with the expectations of relevant others, such as parents, teachers, career counsellors, and (potential) employers. To provide a thematic focus, the contributions all investigate STWT in Germany and Austria—two countries with a similar employment-centred transition regime where relevant institutions, in particular schools, VET, the labour market, and further support from the welfare state, primarily prepare youth for working life (Walther, 2006).

## 2. Institutional, Individual, and Structural Perspectives in the Context of Austria and Germany

Using the examples of Austria and Germany, we look at two countries where STWT is organised in selective and standardised tracks (Kleinert & Jacob, 2019). Key decisions are already made upon completing primary school at the age of about 10, with lasting consequences for further education and labour market positions (Bol et al., 2019). The different track types after primary school can be briefly sketched as an ideal-typical academic track and vocational tracks (Nikolai & Ebner, 2012): The academic track offers eight or nine years of upper secondary education leading to university studies; vocational tracks provide four to six years of compulsory secondary education, which is either followed by vocational education in vocational schools or by apprenticeships, both of which provide occupation-specific training. Apprenticeships combine workplace training with general education at vocational schools (the “dual system”) and lead to early labour market integration. They have been particularly well-recognised internationally for easing STWT and improving the match on the market (e.g., Kleinert & Jacob, 2019; Vogtenhuber, 2014). When comparing Austria and Germany, there are some clear differences: The German apprenticeship segment is quantitatively more important, while Austria’s school-based vocational track is more differentiated regarding occupational opportunities and attracts more young people than Germany’s. The Austrian school-based vocational system also provides direct paths to a university entrance diploma (Graf, 2016).

A smooth transition along the tracks from school to VET and employment is considered the ideal successful STWT, providing continuity through its chronological and social order (e.g., Heinz & Krüger, 2001; Walther, 2006). Such normative ideas about what the STWT should look like are powerful and formative for the sociopolitical perspective on young people. Deviations from the norm, such as unemployment or longer phases of occupational orientation, determine the sociopolitical criteria of “risky” transitions requiring special support, such as publicly funded support programs (Kohlrausch, 2012). Moreover, notions of ideal-typical tracks are also important for young people themselves. Their future orien-

tations are guided by the prevailing norms of what is expected from them and what they can expect to achieve (Walther, 2006).

Unequal transition opportunities depend on several determinants and conditions (e.g., Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). Market conditions are important because the number of young people facing problems in the transition increase when the markets are tight, either at the regional level or in times of economic crises (e.g., Hillmert et al., 2017), such as the Great Recession (e.g., Schoon & Bynner, 2019) or the Covid-19 crisis (e.g., Bacher & Tamesberger, 2021). Moreover, selection procedures are important, as access to the academic or vocational tracks depends on the achieved school qualification, either because the requirements are formally regulated or as gatekeepers use qualifications as signals in selection processes (e.g., Ludwig-Mayerhofer et al., 2019). In addition, opportunities in the STWT depend on the strength of familial resources and motives that vary across social class as well as by migration background and barriers, such as those related to health and disability, and gender differences (e.g., Achatz et al., 2022; Allait, 2019; Cousins, 1998).

Questions of success, failure, and their causes are often discussed at the policy level in simpler terms of market disadvantages versus social disadvantages than how they may appear and be subjectively experienced by youth (e.g., Allait, 2019; Walther, 2005, 2015). Political definitions may not match the young people’s definition of their situation (e.g., Escott, 2012; Fuchs et al., 2018). Thus, further research is needed to expand questions about the persistence of known inequalities.

## 3. The Research Perspectives of the Thematic Issue

The articles in this thematic issue assemble different research perspectives about transitions in young people’s educational and vocational paths. The contributions each address some of the multiple issues and factors that make up the STWT from the perspectives of young people. They enrich the topic by providing more depth through different perspectives according to an article’s discipline, methods, and groups of young people in focus. Therefore, we aim to sketch a picture of this life stage through the interplay of the thematic issue’s contributions.

The articles address different transitions and phases in the STWT: The transitions between school, VET, and the labour market define critical points of decision making or social positioning. Therefore, some contributions examine the situation of young people at specific transition points. For example, Pessl and Steiner (2022) examine the situation of young people with disabilities (YPWD) two years after leaving secondary education, while Patzina et al. (2022) investigate first employment. Furthermore, several contributions reflect upon the formation of aspirations and competencies before the transition to upper secondary education, as seen in Wicht

and Siembab (2022), Eberhard et al. (2022), and Klein et al. (2022). The study by Yildiz and Ohnmacht (2022) adds that formative experiences, such as discrimination, occur early in the educational career.

Moreover, the life course perspective emphasises the need for using longitudinal analyses to examine transitions as processes. Therefore, several contributions either deal with facets of stability or change in the transition, such as Mühlböck et al.'s (2022) work on occupational aspirations, Fischer-Browne's (2022) article on the compromise formation between occupational aspirations and training occupation, or Valls et al.'s (2022) research on the alignment of occupational and educational aspirations. Furthermore, some articles investigate individual developmental processes in the transition, such as Gellermann and Fuchs' (2022) work on autonomy, Fasching and Felbermayr's (2022) research on cooperation, Wintersteller et al.'s (2022) study on young people's demands, or insecurity by Thoma and Langer (2022). These studies primarily focus on agency and strategies that are developed by young people experiencing transitions.

The articles furthermore focus on different social categories: They investigate class, ethnicity, gender, and (dis)ability to emphasise social structures. By doing so, the studies enrich the literature on the lasting influence of familial background. The studies by Wicht and Siembab, Thoma and Langer, and Yildiz and Ohnmacht look at the aspirations and experiences of young people with "migration backgrounds," while Fischer-Browne shows how parental aspirations can hold children back in the transition to VET. Additional studies highlight currently under-researched social categories, like Klein and colleagues, who focus on incomplete families. Likewise, YPWD or health problems are important groups who have received attention in political discussion, but where evidence remains limited. Fasching and Felbermayr, as well as Pessl and Steiner, focus on YPWD, while the multifaceted consequences of health and sociocognitive well-being are broadly addressed by Patzina and colleagues. The "disconnected youth" is another important group that Gellermann and Fuchs examine; by definition, this group exists outside of institutional settings and is thus also hard to reach. Other contributions that look at young people who deviate from the standard transition include the study by Mühlböck and colleagues on the young unemployed and research by Wintersteller and colleagues on participants in publicly funded support measures for early school leavers. In contrast to these perspectives on disadvantaged youth, Eberhard and colleagues show that deviations from the norm may also mean that youth with higher social backgrounds aspire for relatively low-status occupations.

The thematic issue pays attention to balancing different methods, bringing together findings from quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, ethnography, and participatory research. The contrasting research perspectives can be used to critically reflect on norms

and expectations in the STWT. While it is important to uncover whether social categories translate into different probabilities of success, it is also necessary to understand underlying subjective experiences when ascribing categorisations of "risk groups" to young people or expectations of their success. While, for example, the quantitative study by Wicht and Siembab identifies that having a migration background makes a difference in gender(atypical) occupation choice, qualitative studies by Yildiz and Ohnmacht reflect the construction of migration background in the school context and Thoma and Langer carve out the contextual variations of immigrant insecurity. A further complementary approach can be seen in Pessl and Steiner, whose quantitative analysis demonstrates career disadvantage factors amongst YPWD, whereas the participatory study by Fasching and Felbermayr shows how this group of young people become active agents of transitions. While Gellermann and Fuchs conducted narrative interviews and analyse what factors contribute to the disconnectedness of youth from educational and training institutions, Wintersteller and colleagues involve young early school leavers in the research and describe their demands for educational and training contexts to be more inclusive of diverse life courses and needs.

## References

- Achatz, J., Reims, N., Sandner, M., & Schels, B. (2022). *Disadvantaged young people find the transition from school to work particularly difficult*. IAB Forum. <https://www.iab-forum.de/en/disadvantaged-young-people-find-the-transition-from-school-to-work-particularly-difficult>
- Allait, P. (2019). Conceptualising youth: Transitions, risk and the public and the private. In J. Bynner, L. Chisholm, & A. Furlong (Eds.), *Youth, citizenship and social change in a European context* (pp. 89–102). Routledge.
- Bacher, J., & Tamesberger, D. (2021). Jugendarbeitslosigkeit und Jugend-Beschäftigung in der Corona-Krise 2020 [Youth (un)employment in the Corona crisis 2020]. *Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitische Zeitschrift*, 44(1), 34–61.
- Bol, T., Ciocca Eller, C., Van De Werfhorst, H. G., & DiPrete, T. A. (2019). School-to-work linkages, educational mismatches, and labor market outcomes. *American Sociological Review*, 84(2), 275–307.
- Buchmann, M., & Kriesi, I. (2011). Transition to adulthood in Europe. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37(1), 481–503.
- Buchmann, M., & Steinhoff, A. (2017). Social inequality, life course transitions, and adolescent development: Introduction to the thematic issue. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(10), 2083–2090.
- Cousins, C. (1998). Social exclusion in Europe: Paradigms of social disadvantage in Germany, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. *Policy & Politics*, 26(2), 127–146.

- Eberhard, V., Schnitzler, A., & Mentges, H. (2022). Why do high-performing school leavers aspire to occupations atypical of their qualification? *Social Inclusion, 10*(2), 265–277.
- Escott, K. (2012). Young women on the margins of the labour market. *Work, Employment and Society, 26*(3), 412–428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017012438576>
- Fasching, H., & Felbermayr, K. (2022). Participative cooperation during educational transition: Experiences of young people with disabilities in Austria. *Social Inclusion, 10*(2), 358–368.
- Fischer-Browne, M. (2022). Pushing higher or lower? Divergent parental expectations and compromises in occupational choice. *Social Inclusion, 10*(2), 240–251.
- Fuchs, P., Gellermann, J. F., & Kutzner, S. (2018). *Die Auszubildungsverlierer? Fallstudien zu Entkopplungsprozessen von Jugendlichen beim Übergang in das Erwerbsleben* [The losers of vocational training? Case studies of processes of decoupling of youths in the transition from school to work]. Juventa Verlag.
- Gellermann, J. F. C., & Fuchs, P. (2022). The role of autonomy in the transition to the world of work. *Social Inclusion, 10*(2), 324–334.
- Graf, L. (2016). The rise of work-based academic education in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training, 68*(1), 1–16.
- Heinz, W. R., & Krüger, H. (2001). Life course: Innovations and challenges for social research. *Current Sociology, 49*(2), 29–45.
- Heinz, W. R., & Marshall, V. W. (Eds.). (2003). *Social dynamics of the life course: Transitions, institutions, and interrelations*. Transaction Publishers.
- Hillmert, S., Hartung, A., & Weßling, K. (2017). A decomposition of local labour-market conditions and their relevance for inequalities in transitions to vocational training. *European Sociological Review, 33*(4), 534–550.
- Johnson, M. K., Crosnoe, R., & Elder, G. H., Jr. (2011). Insights on adolescence from a life course perspective. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 21*(1), 273–280.
- Klein, J., Driesel-Lange, K., & Ohlemann, S. (2022). Are adolescents in one-parent families a previously unnoticed group in inclusive career guidance? *Social Inclusion, 10*(2), 278–289.
- Kleinert, C., & Jacob, M. (2019). Vocational education and training in comparative perspective. In R. Becker (Ed.), *Research handbook on the sociology of education* (pp. 284–308). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Kohlrausch, B. (2012). Das Übergangssystem—Übergänge mit System? [The transition system—Systematic transitions?]. In U. Bauer, U. H. Bittlingmayer, & A. Scherr (Eds.), *Handbuch Bildungs- und Erziehungssoziologie* [Handbook of sociology of education and pedagogy] (pp. 595–609). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-18944-4\\_36](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-18944-4_36)
- Ludwig-Mayerhofer, W., Pollak, R., Solga, H., Menze, L., Leuze, K., Edelstein, R., Künster, R., Ebralidze, E., Fehring, G., & Kühn, S. (2019). Vocational education and training and transitions into the labor market. In H. P. Blossfeld & H. G. Roßbach (Eds.), *Education as a lifelong process* (pp. 277–323). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-23162-0\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-23162-0_15)
- Mills, M., & Blossfeld, H. P. (2005). Globalization, uncertainty and the early life course. In H. P. Blossfeld, E. Klijzing, M. Mills, & K. Kurz (Eds.), *Globalization, uncertainty and youth in society: The losers in a globalizing world* (pp. 1–23). Routledge.
- Mühlböck, M., Kalleitner, F., Steiber, N., & Kittel, B. (2022). Scarring dreams? Young people’s vocational aspirations and expectations during and after unemployment. *Social Inclusion, 10*(2), 252–264.
- Nikolai, R., & Ebner, C. (2012). The link between vocational training and higher education in Switzerland, Austria, and Germany. In M. R. Busemeyer & C. Trampush (Eds.), *The political economy of collective skill formation* (pp. 234–258). Oxford University Press.
- Patzina, A., Dietrich, H., & Barabasch, A. (2022). Health, personality disorders, work commitment, and training-to-employment transitions. *Social Inclusion, 10*(2), 369–382.
- Pessl, G., & Steiner, M. (2022). Negotiating the “maze”: SEN and the transition from lower secondary education in Austria. *Social Inclusion, 10*(2), 347–357.
- Schoon, I., & Bynner, J. (2019). Young people and the Great Recession: Variations in the school-to-work transition in Europe and the United States. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies, 10*(2), 153–173.
- Schoon, I., & Silbereisen, R. K. (Eds.). (2009). *Transitions from school to work: Globalization, individualization, and patterns of diversity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shanahan, M. J. (2000). Pathways to adulthood in changing societies: Variability and mechanisms in life course perspective. *Annual Review of Sociology, 26*(1), 667–692.
- Shavit, Y., & Müller, W. (1998). *From school to work. A comparative study of educational qualifications and occupational destinations*. Oxford University Press.
- Thoma, N., & Langer, P. C. (2022). Educational transitions in war and refugee contexts: Youth biographies in Afghanistan and Austria. *Social Inclusion, 10*(2), 302–312.
- Valls, O., Astleithner, F., Schels, B., Vogl, S., & Kogler, R. (2022). Educational and occupational aspirations: A longitudinal study of Vienna youth. *Social Inclusion, 10*(2), 226–239.
- Vogtenhuber, S. (2014). The impact of within country heterogeneity in vocational specificity on initial job matches and job status. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 85*(3), 374–384.
- Walther, A. (2005). Risks and responsibilities? The individualisation of youth transitions and the ambiva-

lence between participation and activation in Europe. *Social Work & Society*, 3(1), 116–127.

Walther, A. (2006). Regimes of youth transitions: Choice, flexibility and security in young people's experiences across different European contexts. *Young*, 14(2), 119–139.

Walther, A. (2015). The struggle for realistic career perspectives: Cooling-out versus recognition of aspirations in school-to-work-transitions. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 7(2), 18–42.

Wicht, A., & Siembab, M. (2022). Ethnic differences

in gender-typical occupational orientations among adolescents in Germany. *Social Inclusion*, 10(2), 290–301.

Wintersteller, T., Wöhrer, V., Danz, S., & Malik, M. (2022). "They really only look for the best": How young people frame problems in school-to-work transition. *Social Inclusion*, 10(2), 335–346.

Yildiz, E., & Ohnmacht, F. (2022). Educational success despite school? From cultural hegemony to a post-inclusive school. *Social Inclusion*, 10(2), 313–323.

### About the Authors



**Brigitte Schels** is an assistant professor for labour market sociology at the Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg and senior researcher at the Institute for Employment Research. Her research focuses on the reproduction of social inequality in the school-to-work transition and gender inequalities in the labour market. Her research interests are youth poverty, occupational choice, intergenerational transmission of social disadvantages, and the evaluation of transition schemes.



**Veronika Wöhrer** is a full professor of education and inequality at the Department of Education at the University of Vienna. Her research interests are in sociology of education, gender and education, and qualitative and participatory research. Currently, she is leading the Austrian case study for the CoAct project and is in the steering committee for the project Pathways to the Future: A Longitudinal Study on the Social Integration of Young People in Vienna, which is being conducted as a cooperation between the Departments of Sociology and Education at the University of Vienna.