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Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2021-01-22

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Sargsyan, M. & Cairns, D. (2020). Home or away? Pathways to employment for the highly qualified in Armenia after the velvet revolution. *Young*. 28 (3), 259-274

Further information on publisher's website:

10.1177/1103308819861793

Publisher's copyright statement:

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Home and away? Pathways to employment for the post-independence generation in Armenia after the Velvet Revolution

Abstract

In this article we take a detailed look at the employment situation in Armenia for the post-independence generation, focusing on students and graduates on the verge of or who have already entered the labour market. Theoretically, we acknowledge insights from youth scholars, including the idea of the transition from education to work as a journey, and possible ways in which Armenian youth diverge from Anglophone and European norms. Following a discussion of our research context, we discuss two specific pathways that involve entering the local labour market and moving abroad respectively. As evidence, we draw on interviews conducted with 51 young Armenians in the months following the Velvet Revolution of 2018. Discussion highlights factors that inhibit highly qualified youth from finding jobs at home, including perceptions of corruption, and some success stories, and reflections on the belief that better opportunities can be found in other countries.

Keywords

Armenia; Youth; Employment; Transitions; Mobility; Migration

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1991, the youth generation in Armenia have faced many challenges. Low pay, a limited range of opportunities and perceptions of corruption in the

labour market are just some of the reasons why young people feel disadvantaged, to the extent of feeling socially and economically excluded from society (Mkrtichyan et al. 2016; Vartikyan and Ghahriyan, 2017). Armenia has also long been a country of outward migration, not only to Europe and the United States but also Russia, especially in regard to seeking work (Zenian, 2002). The post-independence labour market situation therefore creates a major dilemma for youth in Armenia, particularly those seeking to initiate and sustain a professional career: a choice between accepting what may be a limited range of poor quality life chances at home and the challenge of moving abroad.

In explaining why the transition from education to work is challenging for the highly qualified in Armenia, we can identify contextual factors that have contributed to making entering the labour market difficult. This extends to both geographical location and recent historical experience. Armenia is located in the South Caucasus, at a point of intersection between the Russian Federation and the West, and has had to cope with major events such as a major earthquake, the transition from Communism and neighbourhood conflicts with Turkey and Azerbaijan. All these issues are of significance in shaping life chances, but in this article we wish to shift emphasis away from contextual factors and towards understanding the experiences of highly qualified Armenian youth at ground level, using original empirical evidence gathered from students and graduates mostly in the capital city of Yerevan during the summer and autumn of 2018.

This is a timely moment at which to conduct research with Armenian youth, something that provided the initial impetus for our research. The 2018 Armenian Velvet Revolution has led to a change in political leadership but it is as yet unknown if this will lead to change in the social and economic position of youth, including the feeling that they can escape their labour market marginality at home. Through conducting our fieldwork in the months immediately

after the events of April and May 2018, we have to opportunity to assess what impact political change has on future plans for work.

Transitions in a transition society

Underpinning this article is the proposition that there are different pathways to the labour market open to youth and young adults in post-independence Armenia: not only different careers according to skill level, field of study and area of interest and expertise but choices differentiated by spatial location. Our main research questions therefore focus upon elaborating upon two specific directions: staying in Armenia and entering the local labour market and moving abroad for the next step in an incipient career.

We do of course acknowledge that transitions to work can be difficult for young people in all countries, and in all sectors of the labour market, not only those living in a society undergoing political transition. We also accept that there are important lessons

In some respects, in conceptualizing the transition from education to work as a journey, we are following the precedent of how youth researchers have traditionally conceptualised youth labour market entry processes. Explanations of how this happens are varied, but usually involve consideration of socio-demographic factors (especially gender, social class and locality) alongside economic and political context, with the tension between the two encapsulated in terms such as ‘structured individualization’ (see, e.g. Roberts 1995; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Côté and Bynner 2008). Looking at the ‘individualization’ part of the equation, we can see that how youth and young adults see themselves in terms of skills and abilities matters as does how others, including educators and employers, see them. ‘Structure’

on the other hand takes into account a wide range of issues, including the health of the local labour market, particular the quantity and quality of opportunities on offer. But the general idea is that young people will negotiate a path through whatever obstacles they encounter through using their own initiative and resources, conceptualized in terms of ‘agency,’ and eventually find an appropriate job.

This process is not without its problems. Paraphrasing Furlong and Cartmel (2007, 34-44), the process through which young people find jobs is thought to have become elongated, unpredictable and highly differentiated due to developments such as post-industrialization, flexible specialization and precariousness, ultimately marginalising youth within societies, especially in regard to their labour market position (see also MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Standing 2011). Therefore, not only has the quality of work thought to have declined but finding a secure job has become more complicated compared to the assumed ease with which previous generations entered the labour market, although in truth this may be something of a ‘golden age’ perspective (see Goodwin and O’Connor 2005).

The popularity of ‘transitions’ among youth researchers across Europe and in Anglophone societies suggests that there must be a high degree of resilience in this archetype. The extent to which we can apply this model to our Armenian research context is another matter due to divergence related to the recent historical experience we have previously cited and an evident imperative to be spatially mobile, an issue that impacts on youth in semi-peripheral countries and rural locales of developed societies (see, e.g. Author xxxx; Farrugia et al. 2014).

The ‘journey’ sometimes takes place spatially as well as occupationally.

Therefore, while we can draw some parallels between our own observations and theoretical and empirical precedents, there will be a degree of adaptation to the norms of the Armenian youth experience.

Employment in Armenia

A further contextual factor concerns the issue of employment in Armenia, including the prevalence of unemployment. To provide some indication of the state of the national labour market, data from the World Bank estimates the current (September 2018) unemployment rate at just over 18 per cent for the overall population. This contrasts with an equivalent figure of 1.9 per cent at the time of Armenia's declaration of independence in 1991; in other words, a market contrast with the Soviet period.¹

While taking a statistics-based approach to employment in Armenia would no doubt yield some interesting results, our main focus in this article is not upon identifying broad trends but rather seeking to reach an understanding of employment pathways among the post-independence generation. Some developments from the period after independence we already know about; for example, employment and entrepreneurialism (Roberts et al. 1998). Looking at studies on this issue from Armenia, the youth employment situation tends to be described in somewhat *negative* terms, to say the least.

The 'Youth in Armenia Study' provides some insight into local employment issues (Mkrtichyan et al. 2016). Colloquially referred to as the 'Shell Study' due to being based on the German Shell Youth study, the report looks at the aspirations, values and lifestyles of 14-to-29 year olds in Armenia with emphasis on their relationship to the Soviet legacy and the future development of Armenian society. This includes coping with economic and political

instability, such as the high unemployment rates, and the influence of a wealthy minority upon the country's development.

Among the findings of this work are that problems exist in sourcing the necessary financial resources for acquiring a 'good professional education.' The role of parents is also emphasized in securing labour market entry, and specific difficulties in finding jobs that correspond to area of specialization. This situation is attributed to factors such as patronage and nepotism in the process of finding a job: in fact, only 35.4 per cent of the sample of 1,200 respondents worked in their chosen profession, with 13.5 per cent having jobs related to their specialization (Mkrtichyan et al. 2016, p. 22, 40). In total, 55 per cent of respondents over the age of 23 (i.e. those who have finished their studies) were not employed when surveyed, with a significant gender/martial gap; 67.2 per cent of married males were employed while 76.6 per cent of married women were not (Mkrtichyan et al. 2016, p. 39).

Reasons for this situation are self-evident for some Armenian authors: the collapse of Soviet Union, the consequences of the Karabakh conflict and the earthquake of 1988, and the transition from an economic system grounded in state socialism to one based on neoliberalism, wherein vested interests often prevail (Vartikyan and Ghahriyan 2017, 66). The outcome is an exclusion of youth from Armenian society – culturally, socially and economically – due to their lack of access to material resources.

The highly qualified mobility imperative

Some additional mention should be made of the mobility imperative that many ambitious young people face. The idea that many young people must move abroad to realize their ambitions is hardly a new proposition in youth studies. There are in fact quite obvious reasons why mobility seems more or less mandatory for many highly qualified youth. Certain

professional pathways are hard to access and geographically unevenly spread. One must move to the employer rather than find an employer close to home, quite possibly after having submitted to a highly competitive international entry procedure (Author xxxx). This explains why the idea of a ‘mobility imperative’ has become well established in the study of international mobility and migration, leading to a conceptualization of the professional career as essentially peripatetic (see, e.g. Ackers 2004).

Whether a difficult labour market situation leads to attempts to enter foreign labour markets remains to be seen, but the idea that ‘mobile transitions’ are now a reality for many young people is becoming widely acknowledged in recent studies (see especially Robertson et al. 2018). We therefore seek to contribute to this current debate in this journal, using our Armenian ‘case study’ to extend the parameters of this discussion beyond what might be referred to as the ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ through looking at young people located at a point of intersection between east and west.

Approach

We therefore wish to move towards in this article an understanding of the choices such young people make, and have made for those looking back on past experiences, with a view to contributing to this spatialization of transitions, also bearing in mind the significance of locality in regard to the challenges facing those wishing to stay. In respect to our methodology, we have taken a qualitative approach, conducting 51 interviews with Armenian young people. Most of this work was undertaken in the capital city of Yerevan between July and September 2018 by Author A, with interviewees found through various means including visits to workplaces, training institutions and NGOs.

In regard to selection, this is a ‘purposeful’ sample (Patton 2002), constructed through targeting young people in work or who are still studying but approaching labour market entry. While it would have been preferable to have a representative group, there is no reference framework for establishing such a sample. All of those who were included can however be considered part of what might be termed the ‘post-independence generation’ in Armenia, including those who are currently planning their future careers or those who did so in the years following independence. The interviews were conducted in English, Armenian and Russian according to the interviewees’ preferences, transcribed and where necessary translated into English by Author A.

Table 1 in the appendix presents an overview of the sample, with names changed where necessary to protect the identities of interviewees. Included are details of age, gender, occupation and present location. Also provided is an indication of whether the interviewee plans to stay or leave Armenia. As this table shows, several of our interviewees are outside what might be regarded as the typical youth age band. This is due to the fact that we needed people from the post-independence generation with actual experience of passing through the transition from education to work, so that they might report on their outcomes. This includes people who have moved abroad and others who have remained in Armenia.

As we noted in the introduction, we will look at two basic pathways to employment: entering the labour market in Armenia and moving abroad to take advantage of international opportunities. These routes emerged from an initial appraisal of our evidence when it became clear that, even when allowing for some ambiguity and uncertainty among those planning their future career paths, most interviewees were orienting themselves towards home or abroad. In what follows, we will examine both pathways and outline some of the insights emerging from our material.

Staying at home

As the details provided in Table 1 imply, around one third of our interviewees have definitive plans to stay in Armenia or already entered the local labour market and intend to remain within it. We might also add that not all of those who wish to move abroad will necessarily do so due a lack of appropriate opportunities or a change of mind, and direction. For this reason, and despite the apparent popularity of the outward pathway, we should not underestimate the significance of staying at home to work.

Attachment to home

There are many reasons why this pathway is popular. For some interviewees, their emotional attachment to Armenia is so intense that they cannot envisage moving abroad, even if they are not able to find work in their specialist field. One of our oldest cases, *Artak*, was in such a position. A graduate in International Relations of Yerevan State University, he became an entrepreneur. He decided to create what he terms 'his own job' as he was not happy working for others and felt such jobs were badly paid. And while he has travelled extensively to the EU and Russia to the EU and Russia as a tourist and for business he told us that even if he had a job offer from abroad he would say no.

Having one's own business has also been an attractive option for *Christina*, a specialist in Italian language and literature. Her plan is to have her own business in Armenia as she recognizes the difficulty of finding work with such a narrow specialization:

It's not really hard to find a job in Armenia, the thing is what kind of job one wants to find. Certainly, well paid positions are very competitive, yet a qualified specialist will certainly sooner or later find a good job in Armenia.

Therefore despite the pessimism present within some of the literature we cited early there are those who remain positive, if pragmatic, about their prospects at home.

Other interviewees take a more balanced approach. *Haykaz* is a 27-year-old PhD student, studying Economics at the Armenian State Economic University. He has already entered the local labour market, finding his first job in a bank when in the first year of his preceding Masters' programme:

I applied for a vacancy, passed the exams, all the stages, and got the position. I work now at the same place, having achievements and developments in regard to my career in banking. [I know it is] hard to find a job in Armenia, but regardless of the field and expertise, a good and highly qualified specialist will certainly find a job.

Interestingly, *Haykaz* has travelled abroad during his studies but not with a view to settling in another country. His approach has been to take advantage of different mobility programmes that are open to Armenian students, including an exchange visit to the US to study at Harvard University. Significantly, he sees himself using his accumulated knowledge and skills in Armenia while remaining open to working in the US at some stage in the future.

Finding a job in Armenia

Further reflections on entering the local labour market are provided by *Sona*, a 22-year-old recent graduate of the American University of Armenia (AUA), where she studied at the Department of English and Communications. She currently works at the Armenian Volunteer

Corps as a Programme Assistant, a job she has had for the past ten months. When asked about how she managed her transition to the labour market, she mentioned that this was difficult due to the country itself undergoing significant change:

I can't give you a concrete answer to the question of whether it is easy or difficult to find a job in Armenia as the country is in the middle of an interesting transition. Finding a job depends on different circumstances. It was easy for me, as I was well prepared for it and had an experience in working at the admission's office of the university. And I think that finding a job in Armenia is certainly easier for the young.

This is an interesting perspective in the sense that *Sona* believes that young people in Armenia are better placed to find work, presumably compared to their older counterparts. Her own experiences of finding work hint at a more specific set of circumstances: working in her university's admissions being of instrumental importance. The exceptionality of this position may explain why not everyone shares *Sona's* opinions. For instance, *Diana*, a 28-year-old graduate in Linguistics, feels that finding work is especially difficult for recent graduates and has become harder, not easier, in the last five years due to the political situation being more unstable.

Another important path to work among the highly qualified is internship. As is the case in much of Europe and the US, such indeterminate forms of working are popular in Armenia, providing an initial point of entry to employment. This was the case for *Armine*, a 32-year-old dentist, who undertook an internship during her final year of university. And when internships are successful this can lead to a job, as was the case for *Armine*:

It was very easy for me, as I was offered the chance to stay after the internship and continue working as a full-time doctor. But what I have heard from others and friends

is that it is very difficult to find a job in Armenia because the market is small and we have many graduates.

This form of work placement therefore can become an entry mechanism to full-time employment but there is no guarantee of this happening and the best positions are much sought after, meaning not everyone can benefit.

Looking at other factors that enable the transition from education to work to take place in Armenia, the importance of social contacts was repeatedly emphasized by the interviewees, as was the competitive nature of job opportunities, with this competition sometimes bringing with it negative experiences. This scenario is illustrated in the case of *Maria*, a 26-year-old economist at Yerevan State Economic University, who works as a project coordinator as well as being a PhD student. Despite her relatively young age, *Maria* has already had an eventful career that has been marked both by success and difficulty:

Before starting my position at the university, I worked for a consulting company. During that period of my career, I had several opportunities. First I applied for an assistant position at the *Ernst & Young* consulting company but was offered an auditor job instead. I passed IQ, auditing, English, Russian and Armenian language test. From 50 candidates for one position they selected me. At that time there were three more offers and I was thinking for four days about which one to pick. Eventually I decided to reject this offer from *Ernst & Young* as auditing takes more time and energy. My classmates who have worked for the company said they sometimes stay up to eleven o'clock at night. So I rejected that offer and accepted an offer from a consulting company which was later bought and is currently owned by *Deloitte*. I was overloaded with obligations and it was very difficult, yet I loved the job because I was learning a lot from it. I would even work during weekends, being of course paid for the extra work.

However, I was given a hint from my team leader, with a subtext, that nobody has progressed based on knowledge or hard work alone, and there should be a personal/physical relationship if I wanted to succeed in the company.

This somewhat unpleasant realization became a reason for Maria to leave the job, and thanks to her abilities, good grades and connections, she immediately found a position in academia.

Corruption

Looking at other negative aspects of the Armenian labour market, there is a widespread believe among our interviewees that corruption plays a part in constricting opportunities, with particular emphasis upon bribery. Two of our interviews have actually witnessed such practices taking place. *Nune* and *Seda* both work in the same Cosmetics Shop in Armenia, both being recent graduates of Yerevan State University; *Nune* studied Psychology and *Seda* Romano-German Languages. They found their jobs through an agency, and both think that finding a job in general Armenia is not a problem. The issue according to *Nune* is what kind of job the person is looking for and in which industry. Specifically, to work within educational institutions requires some inducement to be made. As she explains:

The system is corrupt. You should have connections and pay a bribe of about 3,000 US dollars for a job in a school. Prices for higher education are even worse. We hope that with this new government things will change. I even know several cases where people who got their positions through a bribe were fired after the revolution and its anti-corruption campaign.

Despite this situation, *Nune* is optimistic that recent political events in Armenia, specifically the change of government in spring 2018, will make a difference, although *Seda* is more pragmatic:

I see no sense or point in paying 3,000 USD for a position in a school where the salary is about 140-150 USD and besides, I didn't study and pay fees for six years to then pay for an appointment. People get positions through connections, and they may not have good qualifications, but connections and the bribe come first. At least that was the reality before the revolution.

They are now both satisfied with their salary at the cosmetics shop and see themselves as staying in Armenia. *Seda*, with her specialism in Linguistics, did once have a dream of studying at Cambridge but now thinks that it is very expensive and doesn't think she can ever fulfil this ambition.

Within the labour market

In looking at what influences success in regard to finding a job, another issue that features heavily in our interviewees' accounts is the importance of their personal qualities, including persistence and patience in regard to waiting for appropriate opportunities. This is demonstrated by *Mariam*, a 24-year-old Political Science graduate and former Erasmus Mundus exchange student. She told us that it is difficult to find a job in Armenia. It took her about five months, although having graduated in May 2018, she was not looking for a job during summer. She found a job in October as a junior research fellow, and then her appointment was extended with a new position within the organization.

While persistence and patience may be virtues, a lack of progress can lead to career stagnation, and there are other difficulties encountered after finding work. *Gayane* is a 28-year-old Medicine graduate, who is now married with two children. It took her a year to find a job after finishing her degree:

I found a job after a year through an agency. I had left my CV and a cover letter, and after a month I had a phone call for a position. I had an interview and got the job, where I worked for a year, as a nurse. I then had maternity leave after which finding a job was not a problem either.

More tellingly, while *Gayane* thought that finding a job in her field was not difficult, being paid a reasonable wage was an issue:

I found my second job while visiting a dentist and they needed an assistant in the clinic. After a friendly conversation I got the new job, but the salary was the same as it was six years ago, something that I was not happy about and something that forced me to leave this job to find a new position with a higher income.

The issue of remuneration in Armenia was also raised by *Narine*, a 29-year-old International Relations graduate, who has previously studied in The Netherlands and the US. After graduation, she found a teaching post at an Armenian university, thanks to her good grades and the support of her previous PhD supervisor. However, the conditions under which she has to work are difficult:

The academic job market in Armenia is very challenging. It is really competitive, yet very badly paid. It is not respectful as in the EU or the US. I have experience teaching in Estonia and was offered exchange tutoring in Moscow, but the position went to another candidate from my home university in Armenia, which was unfair and affected by external influence; the connection thing. It was very disappointing because the other

person didn't have the qualifications or the knowledge and experience in the field. And besides, the position was not well paid either.

Additional challenges are faced by those who live outside the metropolitan centres of Armenia. For example, *Greta* and *Zaruhi* are medical students from the Noyemberyan and Gyumri regions respectively, both in their final year at university. Being from an outlying region is very difficult as they need to pay rent, with most students in Yerevan living at home with their parents. They both pay annual fees of 800,000 Armenian Dram for their education and rent an apartment for 80,000 AMD a month, in addition to paying for food, transport and other expenses related to their studies. *Greta* explains:

We have to take care of ourselves, while it is very comfortable when after a class, tired and hungry, you come home and everything is prepared for your rest and you can enjoy your meal, for us it is very difficult. But we want to continue our education and would like to find a job in Yerevan, because in the regions, salaries are even lower despite there being high demands on doctors. Life is poor [...]. Salaries are too low and the main income comes from extra-payments or not-registered services that go directly to the doctor's pocket. For example, an Otorhinolaryngology doctor in Gyumri has an official salary of 65,000 AMD [per month] and of course it is not possible to live on that salary. And that's where the corruption and bribes start.

Doubts are also expressed by about the quality of their training; both had internships in local hospitals but were not happy with their experiences. However they think that the theoretical dimension of medical education in Armenia is generally very good. There are also prospects for moving abroad, with many examples of Armenian medical students continuing their careers in Germany. This situation explains why *Greta* and *Zaruhi* have a strong wish to

go abroad to further their education and career, with their preferred destination the EU, despite their strong attachments to Armenia.

Outward trajectories

These preceding remarks take us to the next part of our discussion, which is concerned with education and work trajectories involving outward mobility to a range of different countries and regions, including the EU, Russia and the US. A report prepared by the European Training Foundation and Caucasus Research Resource Centre in Yerevan (2013), based on survey evidence from 2011 and 2012, provides some information on this issue. While not a youth specific analysis, some important findings emerge regarding outward mobility trends, including the popularity of the idea of moving abroad. 36 per cent of people aged between 18 and 50 years of age in Armenia in this survey sample were seriously considering leaving the country to live and work, with the likelihood of migration strongest among highly educated respondents. The main motivations for leaving included employment, or a better quality of employment compared to what was on offer in the domestic labour market, with Russia the most popular destination (ETF/CRRC 2013, 4-5). The overall scale of outward migration from Armenia is also useful to note, with the number of Armenian migrants according to a 2010 World Bank survey stated as 870,200 in number or 28.3 per cent of the total population, with the top destination countries being Russia, the US, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Israel, Germany, France, Spain and Greece (World Bank, 2011).

Looking at what we might regard as the success stories involving outward mobility among our interviewees, meaning those who have left and have been able to establish themselves in a foreign labour market to a certain extent, we find *Armine*, a 27-year-old Brussels-based traineeship at the European Parliament. Previously, she has studied in Armenia

and the UK, at Cambridge University in 2015. She ascribes her motivation to study and work abroad to an ambition she has held since she was 11 years old:

It was my dream to study at Cambridge, because of the name (I know that may sound funny) and because Cambridge was founded by the graduates of Oxford and is a more liberal university, which is closer to my personality. This dream was also supported by my parents. After my education in the UK, which was in development studies, I came back to Armenia hoping to put this knowledge and experience in practice, but couldn't find a job for three months. After finding a job I faced challenges and had a very negative experience, as my supervisor was an ignorant and absolutely arrogant person. I was also paid less in comparison to other staff who were not Armenian citizens; with only BA Degree Diplomas but with US citizenship of Armenian descent. They didn't extend my contract but I was selected for a traineeship in Brussels at the European Parliament.

This is an interesting account in a number of ways, not least the fact that *Armine's* experiences underline the difficulties of using what might be termed 'mobility capital' on return to the sending society, an issue that is by no means exclusive to Armenia (see Author xxxx). It is also alarming to discover another example of a dysfunctional workplace wherein a degree of inequality seemed to be present, attributed in this case by our interviewee to differentials in citizenship. On a more positive note, *Armine* is more content with her work in Brussels, although that this is a fixed-duration placement is an obvious concern given the prospect of having to return to Armenia upon its completion.

Actually finding work abroad can be challenging. For example, *Haykushik* lived in Los Angeles but came back to Armenia due to the fact that she could not find a job in the US. Some of the limitations of another outward mobility scenario, that of moving to Russia, are

demonstrated by *Hasmik*, a graduate of Yerevan State Economic University in Accountancy, who had started her degree at Moscow Economic University. *Hasmik* left and returned to Armenia as she was not optimistic about her job prospects in Russia and was of the opinion that this was due to her Armenian heritage:

It is very difficult to enter the job market in Russia with an Armenian surname and I was even told to change the ending of my name by the faculty. I had excellent grades and they said that this will help me to move forward and build a career in Russia.

Hasmik refused to do this and instead decided to finish her education in Armenia. After graduation it was unfortunately very difficult for her to find work and she started a job that was not in her area of specialization; in the Nairit chemical plant that closed in 2015. She tried to find another job through agencies but had no success. The only offers she received were to work either as a cleaning lady or dishwasher. Now aged 31 and a single mother of one daughter, *Hasmik* is considering moving back to Russia despite her previous difficulties.

Another example of moving to Russia is provided by *Sasun*, who studied Finance and Credit at the Yerevan branch of the Moscow Entrepreneurship International Academy. After graduating he tried to find a job in Armenia but without success. He therefore decided to move to Russia:

I applied for positions at Inecobank, Ardshinvestbank and many other banks but being disappointed, I decided to try my luck in Russia. I moved to St. Petersburg where I started working in the restaurant business. For two years I lived in St. Petersburg, but then my family insisted that I come back to Armenia, have a family and stay in the homeland.

This case illustrates the fact that moving to Russia does not necessarily present an opportunity to use one's specialism; in this case, banking. Now back in Armenia, although he

didn't marry or start a family, *Sasun* is working as a sales manager at the Noyan-Tapan Brandy Company. From his personal experience, he thinks that connections and having well-placed family members are more important than qualification and background when it comes to finding a job in the Armenia.

While moving abroad is one option, as *Sasun* demonstrated, another way of connecting with other countries is to study at branches of international institutions in Armenia. This situation is further illustrated by *Karen* and *Anahit*, who are both studying Business Administration at the American University of Armenia. Part of their motivation for doing so is the lower cost, although as *Keren* explains, there were other considerations:

We don't have a state scholarship and education at our university is very expensive, but they have some discounts related to academic achievements. We are also given the opportunity to have internships during summer. So we are lucky when it comes to getting experience, because in comparison to other universities there are more opportunities for working in international companies thanks to our language skills and practical knowledge.

These factors make this choice more appealing. Therefore, although *Karen* wanted to study in the UK, he eventually decided on the American University. But now he plans to continue his education in the US, at Harvard Business School, should that be possible. Still being relatively young, *Anahit* wishes to study at Charles University in Prague, because she loves the city and this university is oldest in Eastern Europe.

Moving to Europe, and to the EU in particular, seems to be perceived as less problematic compared to the US or Russia, and as *Anahit* explains, working for European institutions also presents the possibility of avoiding some of the more negative aspects of Armenian society:

I had internships in local and international organizations in Armenia and my impression is that local institutions still have a Soviet approach, and people get positions through their connections, mostly. International organizations are more competitive, but well paid and entering there, you develop your skills as a professional. The other difference is that local state institutions sometimes demand that you stay at work till eight pm, and you never get paid extra, while international organizations pay for each extra hour. Working for an international organization you can also travel abroad for experience and knowledge exchange, while in local-national institutions connections decide who will be sent for a business trip.

All these considerations are significant, and potentially have a bearing upon generating a desire to leave Armenia or work in an international environment. But despite these remarks, it is notable that interviewees who have engaged in outward mobility tend to have endured negative experiences. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that we have numerous interviewees who are open to the idea of moving abroad or who are actively engaged in planning a departure.

In explain why this is, two of our youngest interviewees provide some clues. *Elen* and *Albert* are 18 and 20 respectively. *Elen* is a first year International Relations student at Yerevan State University, while *Albert* is a third year Marketing student at the French University in Armenia. They both have experience of short term study visits in the EU. *Elen* spent two weeks attending a language class in Barcelona and *Albert* two weeks in London, also visiting Oxford University and travelling around England. *Elen* has also visited Singapore, Doha and Bali with her parents as she adores travelling. And it is this love of travelling which has led them to consider moving abroad. *Elen* wishes to move to the US while *Albert* prefers the UK, although neither has definitive plans.

Optimism seems to prevail among those who are seeking an exit but have only experienced travel as a leisure activity or via student exchange platforms. These experiences do not seem to prepare people for the difficult aspects of living in a country, including being able to enter foreign labour markets. In a previous work, this situation has been discussed in terms of plans for outward mobility being motivated by a ‘mobility dream’ (Author xxxx) rather than realistic expectations. One reason is the lack of recognition given to the reality of mobility in publicity materials issued by foreign universities and international agencies; the hidden costs, pitfalls and challenges. But we should also mention the fact that for certain careers, a move abroad is essential due to a complete lack of opportunities at home.

This was certainly the case for *Alvard* and *Hayarpi*, two third year students at Yerevan State Conservatory, specializing in opera. They certainly see themselves studying and working abroad as they believe that there are no prospects for opera singers in Armenia. *Alvard* wishes to study in Edinburgh and has previously sang in Moscow, Vienna and at the Mariinsky theatre in St. Petersburg. Both also acknowledge the importance of London as a centre for the arts in Europe, and believe that their work would be appreciated there. But in order to be able to move abroad they participate in competitions as that is how they will be noticed and invited. As *Hayarpi* states: ‘It is all a matter of luck.’

Conclusion

In reaching some conclusions about our material, we can see that young people in post-independence Armenia face a difficult choice. Should they elect to stay at home, they face uncertainty in a country that is itself undergoing a period of transition, something that many of our interviewees hope will see an end to the corruption that limits their access to many professions. The attractions of moving abroad are also evident, less so the mundane, and often

quite depressing, reality of entering a foreign labour market. In fact, we did not find any examples of unqualified success in regard to outward employment trajectories.

More specifically, it is interesting to note that starting a business was one of the ways in which people engaged with the Armenian job market (see Roberts et al. 1998), and that short-term student exchanges were also popular. Moving abroad does not necessarily mean ‘migration.’ Circulatory modes are also present, particularly in regard to moving to the Europe and the US.

Reflecting on what these observations mean for our appreciation of transitions to the labour market, involving mobility or staying at home, we can add a certain amount of levity to this debate. Many of the situations we have uncovered do not generally form part of debates in the Anglophone and European worlds. For example, young people in those countries do not generally expect to have to bribe their way into a profession.

Notes

1. See

https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=AM&name_desc=false

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Appendix

Table 1. Interviewees, socio-demographic characteristics and mobility intentions

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Location	Stay/Leave
Gurgen	27	Male	Self-employed	Armenia	Leave
Artak	34	Male	Entrepreneur	Armenia	Stay
Ani	28	Female	Translator	Armenia	Leave
Ruzanna	29	Female	Linguist	Armenia	Leave
Manvel	18	Male	Management student	Armenia	Leave
Sona	28	Female	International Development	US	Leave
Albina	35	Female	Unemployed	France	Leave
Levon	28	Male	Agriculture student	Czech Rep	Leave
Armine	27	Female	International Relations	Belgium	Leave
Izolda	24	Female	Economics student	Armenia	Leave
Karine	25	Female	Economist	Armenia	Stay
David	27	Male	Project Director	Germany	Leave
Haykaz	27	Male	Banking	Armenia	Leave
Mane	19	Female	Marketing student	Armenia	Leave
Arthur	21	Male	Cook	Armenia	Leave

Marine	28	Female	Lawyer	Armenia	Leave
Sonna	22	Female	Volunteer Corps	Armenia	Leave
Hanin	32	Female	Teacher	Armenia	Leave
Emma	21	Female	Volunteer Corps	Armenia	Leave
Anush	31	Female	Psychologist	Armenia	Leave
Lusine	25	Female	Gymnast	Armenia	Leave
Mariam	24	Female	Researcher	Armenia	Leave
Tatevik	29	Female	Political Science	Armenia	Leave
Nune	22	Female	Mathematics	Armenia	Leave
Azniv	22	Female	Economics	Armenia	Leave
Anna	28	Female	Maternity leave	Armenia	Leave
Kristina	24	Female	Sales Person	Armenia	Leave
Mushegh	20	Male	Marketing	Armenia	Stay
Melina	21	Female	Student	Armenia	Stay
Ruben	20	Male	Student	Armenia	Leave
Diana	28	Female	Teacher (Private Tutor)	Armenia	Stay
Armine	32	Female	Dentist	Armenia	Stay
Elen	18	Female	International Rel. student	Armenia	Leave
Albert	20	Male	Marketing student	Armenia	Leave

Maria	26	Female	PhD student (Economics)	Armenia	Leave
Anahit	32	Female	Medical student	Armenia	Leave
Hasmik	31	Female	Accountant	Armenia	Leave
Gayane	28	Female	Nurse	Armenia	Stay
Narine	29	Female	Academic	Armenia	Stay
Sasun	31	Male	Sales Manager	Armenia	Stay
Nune	23	Female	Shop Assistant	Armenia	Stay
Sede	26	Female	Shop Assistant	Armenia	Stay
Arusyak	25	Female	Banker	Armenia	Stay
Karen	19	Male	Student (Business)	Armenia	Leave
Anahit	20	Female	Student (Business)	Armenia	Leave
Greta	22	Female	Student (Medicine)	Armenia	Leave
Zaruhi	23	Female	Student (Medicine)	Armenia	Leave
Alvard	23	Female	Student (Music)	Armenia	Leave
Hayarpi	22	Female	Student (Music)	Armenia	Leave
Vahan	24	Male	Shipping	Armenia	Stay
Hratch	23	Male	Student (Banking)	Spain	Leave
