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To cite this article: Lisbeth Lundahl & Carina Carlhed Ydhag (2020) Transitions and career learning: youth and governance perspectives, Education Inquiry, 11:4, 297-301, DOI: [10.1080/20004508.2020.1840491](https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2020.1840491)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2020.1840491>



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Published online: 30 Nov 2020.



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## Transitions and career learning: youth and governance perspectives

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### Introduction

This special issue focuses on young people's career choices and career learning, as well as societal governing and interventions targeting youth. The articles emanate from the cross-disciplinary, international conference *Transitions, career learning and career management skills – Multi-disciplinary and critical perspectives*, which was held at Stockholm University in October 2017. An important aim of the conference was to bring together and stimulate exchange between researchers from the commonly separated research fields of youth transitions, career learning and counselling, as well as vocational education and training (VET), respectively.

Young people's career choices and school-to-work transitions became prioritised matters in national and international policy agendas in the 2000s (Bengtsson, 2016; European Commission, 2010, 2018; Musset & Kureková, 2018; Watts & Sultana, 2004), *inter alia* resulting in strategies to support young people's acquisition of so-called career management skills, CMS (Hooley, Watts, Sultana, & Neary, 2013; Sultana, 2012). There are several reasons for this increased policy engagement. Good access to qualified and flexible manpower is regarded as a crucial factor behind competitiveness and economic growth, nationally and globally. The growing discrepancy between young people's preferences, for example, their decreasing interest in VET and related vocations, and labour force demand, has become a political problem. The difficult situation that many young people and young adults face – long periods characterised by, for instance, temporary and unsafe jobs, unemployment, participation in various youth schemes and poverty (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013; Plenty et al., 2018) – leaving long-lasting 'scars' such as the increased risk of social exclusion and economic hardship (Kieselbach, 2003; Scarpetta, Sonnet, & Manfredi, 2010), constitute a set of social motives for governing young people's transitions and choices.

The five contributions to the special issue are from three of the Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland and Sweden. Thus, there is reason to briefly mention some previous transitions and career research in the Nordic context.

Andreas Walther (2006) speaks of the Nordic countries as a universalistic transition regime. Important characteristics are the comprehensive school system and an extensive public safety system including young people's right to receive financial support when studying regardless of their family's socio-economic conditions. The employment regime is characterised by a large public sector and a high level of female employment enabled by good access to publicly funded childcare. Institutionalised counselling at all

levels, orientated towards stimulating young people's motivation to develop, as well as youth activation policies with a similar orientation, are other distinctive features, according to Walther. Even though he has some reservations, for example, pointing to the introduction of more restrictive activation policies, Walther paints a rather idyllic picture of the Nordic transition regime.

Subsequent research certainly identifies common traits of the youth transitions in the Nordic countries, which, however, are only partly in line with Walther's analysis. A cohort study by Albaek et al. (2015) shows that young people's trajectories through education at upper secondary level are quite similar in the four countries studied: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. A large majority of students continue to upper secondary education after completing their compulsory school education, with a noticeable increase over time in the proportion attending a study-orientated track and a corresponding reduction in the number of students following a vocational track. This pattern also applies to those students who have not completed upper secondary education by the age of 21. Even Jørgensen, Järvinen, and Lundahl (2019) in their analysis of youth transitions and transition policies in Denmark, Finland and Sweden find obvious similarities between the countries, for instance, that measures to make young people participate in education or work have become more imperative and punitive. There is also a common tendency to prioritise direct, linear transitions between compulsory school and upper secondary education, and further to work life. The researchers conclude that the concept of a universal transition regime risks obscuring the fact that the transition policies of the Nordic countries have taken on neoliberal characteristics emphasising individual responsibility and weakening the societal support for young people's school-to-work transitions. Furthermore, based on the fact that they identify considerable differences between Danish, Finnish and Swedish transition policies, Jørgensen et al. (2019) problematise the idea of a common Nordic youth transition regime. To take some examples: Finland and Sweden have a policy focus on young people Not in Employment, Education or Training ('NEET'), while Danish policies are orientated towards the activation of young people in VET and apprenticeships. In Denmark, the school-to-work transition is an integrated part of VET, which is not the case in the other two countries with a stronger school-based VET. However, certain groups such as migrant youth have problems accessing Danish apprenticeship training. Also, see Bäckman, Jakobsen, Lorentzen, Österbacka, and Dahl (2015) who more specifically analyse the various ways of organising VET in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, and the outcome in terms of completion and dropout rates, as well as the comparison between Norwegian and Swedish policies aimed at reducing the proportion of young people who have not completed upper secondary education (Helgøy, Homme, Lundahl, & Rönnerberg, 2019). Lundahl, Lovén, Holm, Lindblad, and Rolfsman (2020) compare the systems of career education and career guidance at compulsory level in the Nordic countries, in which Sweden stands out, lacking a clearly defined field of knowledge or school subject in these matters.

### Contributions of the special issue

There is an important line of distinction between transition policies that adopt an individualising or structural approach to disadvantaged youth (Pohl & Walther, 2007). The contribution of Kristiina Brunila, based on an invited keynote at the 2017

conference, highlights the visible tendency to diagnose the precarious situation for many young people discussed above primarily in terms of ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at-risk’ youth and what they lack, for example, skills, motivation and flexibility, thus obscuring the limited opportunities that are largely responsible for producing the problematic contexts that young people face. Focusing on the alleged psycho-emotional vulnerability of youth, the design of the societal support for young people’s transitions tends to overlook what young people from various backgrounds themselves describe as their interests and needs.

Young people who turn their backs on vocational education and training (VET) and a resulting shortage of skilled workers have become a growing problem in Sweden and Denmark, although to a lesser degree in Finland. In Denmark, only one-fifth of year 9 students (15-year olds) opted for a VET programme in 2015. A lack of apprenticeship positions, the low status of VET and scant knowledge of VET and related occupations are some of the main reasons behind the weakened interest. In his article, Bo Klindt Poulsen analyses a major career learning initiative intended to generate knowledge and interest in vocational education among compulsory school students by offering them the opportunity of visiting post-compulsory school and places of work and reflect on these activities. The short-term outcomes were promising: the students reported that their attitudes to VET and respect for vocational work had changed for the better although the study does not allow for conclusions to be drawn regarding, for example, the students’ concrete career choices and further trajectories.

The articles by Ewa Rolfsman and by Janne Varjo, Mira Kalalahti and Markku Jahnukainen, respectively, depart from a youth perspective, focusing on the thinking of young Swedish and Finnish compulsory school students about their career choices and future paths. Based on answers to a questionnaire, Rolfsman *inter alia* analyses the factors that young people regard as important when they choose a career path after completing compulsory school. Interests and own ability, wellbeing and engaging educational contents, as well as further plans after upper secondary school, are regarded as being the most important factors by the majority of informants, regardless of gender and country of origin. A large majority are aiming for a study-orientated programme at upper secondary level and the majority of the students also wish to continue into higher education. However, a striking finding is that almost half of the students would prefer to work after year 9, if work is available. Building on an interview study, Varjo, Kalalahti and Jahnukainen relate the students’ envisioned educational trajectories to immigrant origins and social class. They distinguish between elective (clearly goal-orientated) and standardised (less goal-orientated) routes that may either start from vocational or study-orientated education at upper secondary level (both provide eligibility for tertiary education in the Finnish system). An interesting finding is that the trajectory from vocational education to a university of applied sciences was commonly chosen by students of non-Finnish origin. The researchers interpret this as a logical decision based on the students’ own aspirations, their opportunities in terms of study achievements in compulsory school and their families’ aspirations. On the other hand, only students of Finnish and predominantly of working-class origin chose a direct transition from vocational upper secondary school to work.

Finally, Catarina Lundqvist's article on time horizons in young people's career narratives foregrounds the inseparable temporal and spatial aspects of life courses and transitions. The article builds on interviews with young adults in their twenties, living in a rural town. The issue of place, *inter alia* in terms of staying or leaving, becomes highly tangible in such a socio-geographic context, and in all likelihood much more so than in urban areas with a rich smorgasbord of educational and occupational options. Hence, it is possible for Lundqvist to identify place-based temporalities in the young people's narratives – combinations of individual, more long-term orientations and short-term perspectives affected by the often uncertain labour market conditions.

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