Youth transition to the labour market during employment mobility. Employment and inequality of young people in Europe

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ABSTRACT: Transition from study to work is considered as the end of youth. How do young people prepare to enter the labour market? What are the strategies young people utilise to become employed if it occurs in another country, as in the case of employment mobility? To answer these questions, the proposed article focuses on how young people move and enter the employment in other destination countries. Alongside with the literature on youth and transition we also observe that young people equally experience challenges of matching their skills in the destination countries. They relate to inequalities on the job market depending on their skills, their qualifications, the type of jobs, their working experiences, etc. The discussions in this paper thus first touch upon the topic of inequality with regard to the process of recruitment and becoming employed. Second, they draw attention to the inferior positioning that young people are prepared to put themselves into when entering the labour market for the first time and emphasise the fact that young people often experience discrimination and unequal treatment when they complete education and apply for jobs, on the grounds of being young and inexperienced. As a result, such a positioning often puts young people in a vulnerable situation, which they accept and endure as long as they are promised work. Furthermore, by focusing on how young people enter the labour market in the receiving country, the paper also explores strategies that young people apply for being employed, becoming integrated in the labour market, overcoming inequalities in employment and finding ways to cope with these challenges in the labour market, as well as their own social lives in the destination country.

Introduction

Transition from study to work is considered as the end of youth.[1] With young people it is common that mobility[2] coincides with the transition to another life stage; they live in times of uncertainty and lack a guaranteed secured path in shaping their futures. A large number of people choose mobility after the completion of education, especially when they face difficulty transitioning to

employment in their country of origin. Mobility becomes incorporated into the people's life trajectories, including young people. In that way, mobility becomes a common practice to them, a social norm for cohorts of young people at risk and in insecure situations looking for employment in the countries of origin. By choosing the same patterns of transition through mobility, young people develop the same biography that incorporates the process of moving to another country. Such a similar biography allows young people to have a sense of shared lives with similar experiences, as, for instance, living in times of precariousness and insecurity. As a result, the idea of mobility is also shared among people, and when someone becomes mobile and moves to another country, others consider mobility for themselves, too (Elder 1998).

This contribution offers an exploration of transition to work during mobility from a relational perspective – i.e. by focussing on the interrelatedness of individual characteristics of young people and their agency on the one hand, and structural hindrances as well as opportunities (and the particularities) of the labour market situation in a given country on the other hand. Such a perspective is particularly important when transition to work is marked by another life event, i.e. mobility to another country.

This contribution is based on one case study analysis of 15 interviews with young employees who come to Luxembourg (14) and Luxembourg nationals leaving to work in other countries (1). During the preparation of the analysis for contribution regarding the inequality and status among working young people, it became apparent that young people particularly refer to hierarchy and unequal status when discussing their work. Regarding the hierarchy at work, it is often the case that they take a lower, more inferior position at work, both in the country of origin and the destination country (post-mobility).

Previous research

Transition to work is one of the most unsettling topics in youth research. Researchers emphasise the complexity of transition; transitions take various trajectories and directions, with multiple stops on the way (Settersten, Furstenberg, Rumbaut 2005; Walther 2006). Thus, researchers of youth studies rather speak of the complexity and multiple possibilities of transitions to adulthood, as the "usual tendency of defining transitions in terms of certain predetermined linear pathways fails to do justice to the actual experience and choices of young people" (Looker, Dwyer 1998, 7). The transition may also occur at different stages of individuals' lives; to some it is clearly marked by some (institutionalised) events, such as graduation, beginning employment, leaving the parent's home, etc. In that way, it becomes more suitable to speak of destandardised transitions of youth from school to work (Heinz 2009).

Furthermore, the "success" of transition to work depends on various individual characteristics: education, work experience, socioeconomic situation, and gender (Kelly, McGuinness, O'Connell 2012; Kogan, Unt 2006), as well as structural particularities (labour demands, national policies, political regimes, etc.) (Barry 2010; Bynner 2005), class and social positioning in the society (Lehmann 2004), structuring influences of global information (Kelly 1999) and impact of welfare regimes on transition (Schels 2013). For instance, researchers like Kogan and Unt (2006) emphasise the fact that "the impact of individual resources, e.g. education, on the occupational outcome depends on the specific institutional settings, i.e. the institutional arrangements of educational systems, the system of labour market and the linkages between the two" (Kogan, Unt 2006 in Hannan et al. 1997).

It is particularly during the transition period that young people are urged to develop their own "reflexive biographical projects" (Giddens 1991) and bear the responsibility for their choice. Young individuals must make everyday choices regarding "education, profession, job, place of residence, spouse, number of children" (Beck 1992, 135). In the constant attempts to make decisions, individuals "have no choice but to choose, how to be and how to act" (Giddens 1991, 75). As a result, "individuals need to engage more reflexively with their social environment in order to make sense of the increased range of alternatives they now face" (Beck et al. 1994, 380). Under such conditions, young people must be reflexive to be able to navigate through complex situations in a rapidly changing environment. Thus, the future plans and life arrangements among young people are particularly complex as they involve the need to continuously choose and make choices – a process which in itself poses risk, contingency and uncertainty (Wyn, Dwyer 1999). As a result, "individuals form dispositions based on a reflexive understanding of their position in the social structure" (Lehmann 2004, 379).

Regarding the latter, researchers point out the development of distinctive patterns of behaviour, or agentic actions (Evans 2007) by young people. Evans particularly underlines the role of individual action that "introduces conceptions of individualization which suggest that progress through the school to work phase is based on complex interactions of individual agency and structural influences" (Evans 2002, 247). Other scholars also highlight the role of agency as a capacity, a tool which young people "activate" throughout the transition to adulthood, as "young people manage their life-courses in different ways depending on their proactive and agentic attitude" (Di Blasi et al. 2016). Wyn and Dwyer (1999) point out young people's chances of establishing a livelihood in the terms they value and will depend on. Agency implies that they will construct positive links and experiences where none may be apparent. In other words, where structured pathways do not exist, or are rapidly being eroded, individual agency is increasingly important in establishing patterns for themselves, which give positive meaning to their lives (Wyn, Dwyer 1999, 14).

The focus on agency is thus particularly important and requires more investigation, as "although a considerable proportion of these young people show resourcefulness and a capacity to be flexible in the face of unexpected structural and social 'blocks', their insights are mostly confined to their own personal experience" (Wyn, Dwyer 1999, 14).

Thus, departing from transitions from youth to adulthood and/or study to work, and by putting emphasis on individual agency in manoeuvring through new situations during the period of transition, this paper aims to explore two aspects: first, it explores how and what individual aspects of young people apply during the transition to work in case of mobility to another country; second, following from the first, it looks at what social structures are imposed upon them during the transition to work in case of mobility. To do so, we depart in our research by asking the following guiding questions. We narrow down our focus of exploration and ask ourselves: Which individual aspects do young people rely upon when entering the job market? How do they activate their capital/instruments/individual strategies for transiting to work? To answer these questions, the proposed article focuses on how people, being young, move and enter the workforce in other destination countries.

Methodology

The analysis is based on 15 semi-structured interviews with young people (22–29 years old) of various skills and with various years of working experience. The overall sample is balanced. For the interview selection we considered general mobility dimensions, specifically: age, gender, point in time of the interview, citizenship, temporary frame of mobility, direction and language. These aspects were integrated into sampling throughout the process of data collection. We also considered the timing of the transition into the labour market and differentiated between highly skilled, skilled and unskilled persons (the two first categories are sometimes referred to as "higher skills" and "lower skills"). Interviewed young people are between 22 and 29; most of them have their first jobs even though they completed their studies some years ago, as they were unable to make a direct transition to work. They all came to Luxembourg either to look for a job or with a working contract in hand; all interviewed participants were employed during the interviews. Interviewed participants come from various geographical regions of Europe: from countries neighbouring Luxembourg and having close cultural and language links, or from countries from which people traditionally emigrate to Luxembourg, as well as from "new" immigration countries with no previous historical or cultural connections between the receiving and destination countries. Three interviews were conducted with young people from Luxembourg with the aim

of contrasting the results of the incoming mobility. Lastly, throughout the data collection process we saw a differentiation between people with mobility experience and working experience; as a result, aspects such as first-time mobility or first-time employment were deemed important for a balanced sample within the employment case. Many interviewed young people needed to make internship loops, mostly unpaid, to acquire working experience. Some other interviewed young people worked before employment mobility in their country of origin. Some of them lived with their parent(s) while others lived independently with their partners. However, they seek a change in their lives, a turning point to mark their transition to the new stage, which has already started for them. In that way, mobility becomes a turning point, a rite of passage, and an initiation into adulthood.

We analysed the gathered data using the MAXQDA software program. The data were categorised using codes. To do so, we focussed on smaller parts of the interview, i.e. a sequence within one narrative horizon "that seeks to reconstruct layering the social meanings from the process of the action" (Flick 2009, 353), and moved gradually towards another interview sequence. The codes were developed in the first step, and the coding tree was continuously revised throughout the data analysis of further interviews. Personal and geographical names (cities, locations, etc.) have been pseudonymised to guarantee the anonymity of the interview participants.

Results

Following the literature on youth and transition, we began our analysis by looking at how young entrants become employed in the destination country during mobility. We structure our analysis along two pillars: first we discuss young peoples' positions at the labour market; second, we proceed to discussing the social positioning of young job entrants in the receiving country. Parallel with the discussions of the two structural dimensions that young people face during mobility, this contribution explores strategies that young people apply to become employed and integrated in the labour market, as well as how they overcome inequalities in employment. Thus, the analysis focuses on how young people equally experience challenges of matching their skills in the destination countries, how they relate to inequalities in the job market depending on their skills, qualifications, type of jobs previously held, the extent of their working experiences, etc.

To illustrate the interrelatedness of young people's agency, as well as structural opportunities/hindrances of the labour market situation in the destination country, we have selected several cases from the data corpus. The cases were selected following common logic and typical patterns, by examining

young people's individual experiences during their mobilities. Therefore, each of the selected cases illustrates and adds to the complexity of youth employment across youth mobility. The selected cases include semi-structured interviews with two young men (Thomas and Leonardo from Belgium and Italy, respectively) and two young women (Ewa and Christina from Poland and Romania, respectively). They have varying amounts of professional experience and different "strategies" for entering the labour market in Luxembourg. These four interviews are complemented by one interview with a young Luxembourgian man called Nicolas, who left Luxembourg and moved to Germany to find a job. Along with that of other young incoming mobile people, the narration of the Luxembourgian young man emphasises similar challenges and hardships during the transition entering the labour market. Interviews, when put all together, display a heterogeneous picture of the transition to employment as experienced by young people across various geographical areas of Europe.

Discrimination in the labour market: Young and new when entering the labour market in the country of origin and the country of destination

When young adults make a transition from education to work, they face discrimination by certain companies. Entrance into the job market is difficult, as employers often give preference to those with previous work experience. Fresh graduates from various institutions have knowledge and ambitions and are eager to start working. Moreover, they soon realise that there is a "wall" blocking them from entering the job market. Some young people who find themselves in such situations look to overcome the discrimination against young employees by leaving their home countries. As a result, mobility becomes a bridge for overcoming this obstacle.

A young ambitious person from Italy who was working in Luxembourg looked for a real job that would match his qualifications. He explains this situation as follows:

"Y: The funny thing is that in Italy for in order to be hired, you have to be young and with experience. So you see, that is why I wanted to leave. Because I wanted a fairer work environment, where you are rewarded, if you work well. And you can have career incentives, and salary incentives, so that is why I like it because it is a bit blocked." (Leonardo, Italian)

Discrimination of young people occurs not only when entering the labour market, but also post-hire. Young people then feel unequal in relation to other workers, particularly when promotions that recognise their professionalism and expertise are at stake. Young people emphasise that they are undervalued, and that lack of recognition is a normal thing that youth should merely accept.

One of the interviewed young people recalls a time when his professionalism was not appropriately recognised, and describes the general difficulties associated with social mobility for young people in his country of origin (Italy). As a result, such a constellation of factors contributed to his decision to become mobile and look for a better working place in another country, i.e. in Luxembourg. This is how he explains it:

"Y: It is, it is kind of rewarding. Yeah. But, yeah, still the work market is not good. I mean it is very demanding and not so rewarding. By salary wise and career wise as well. Because you have some blocks in Italy due to age, so if you are [25–29] years old, you simply cannot be like market manager in sales. Because you are [25–29], what do you expect, but you know, I can speak like four languages or something, ah, NO, you are just too young for that." (Leonardo, Italian)

Through mobility, after coming to Luxembourg, he feels that his talents are recognised; he is valued in a multicultural country and has a place of work where he feels needed and where his skills and competences (such as mastering several languages) are valued.

Some interviewees detailed unequal treatment of young people making a transition to the job market. Being young and new to the workforce proves a double challenge. Such a situation makes it difficult to become an adult, and as a result, young people are forced into making steps back, making "yo-yo transitions" (Walther 2006). For example, one of the interview participants explains the challenges he faced when stepping into the professional world and how he had to go back to live with his parents after graduating from a university and failing to find a job.

"I: Well you came after you finished your studies, you came to Luxembourg and you were looking for a job here.

Y: Yes, I was looking but that was difficult here, also because I went back to live with my parents, and now I have been living alone for so long. So after seven years of living alone, going back to your parents' place is not like the best thing for you to happen if you like living a little bit more free." (Nicolas, Luxembourgian)

I: Because this year was a transition year, that is why you were a little bit...

Y: Absolutely, I would absolutely call it transition year, 2013 for me was coming back from university, looking for a job, couldn't find one, being back with my parents. So when the opportunity came to go to [town A in Germany] I was like OK, I will be living by myself again, getting my first job in a really nice town, there was nothing that could have kept me at that moment. I had no girlfriend." (Nicolas, Luxembourgian)

For young people like him, this decision was particularly difficult because he had been independent and responsible for his own life. The opportunity to become autonomous is closely connected to work, which he eventually found abroad.

Due to these factors, young people feel unequal when entering the job market and looking for acceptance. Companies profit from that and exploit young employees. Throughout the interviews, young people explained how, in their first working experience, they were underpaid or not paid at all, were

forced to perform excessive tasks and did not feel that their skills were recognised. Throughout the interviews we have seen how some young people must "de-skill" their qualifications to get a job, make a number of smaller steps, make several loops of internships or complete traineeships before getting a working contract; others need to work for free at organisations to gain experience and, simultaneously perform menial jobs to pay for their housing, food, etc. One of the interviewed participants explains that it was difficult to get a job when she came to Luxembourg, so she was forced to do a number of jobs before she was able to secure work with a salary and contract. In the passage below she emphasises which skills are considered important in the destination country and how certain jobs are useful for boosting young people's careers.

"I: Which skill is important, lack of it is considered a difficulty for getting another job?

Y: So, I really enjoyed the internship because the multicultural environment, it was basics of administration, but it really helped me and maybe not after finding my job here in Luxembourg, because when they see Polish Embassy 'Ah so, you worked in Poland, so you have no experience in Luxembourg.'" (Ewa, Polish)

Another person explains how she was unequally treated in the country of origin; she, too, was forced to exert great effort while looking for job opportunities.

"Y: I tried, I told you, I went for free, to volunteer, I did one year of 'volunteer' with a possibility afterwards; maybe next month, maybe next month and they said okay, for my experience, because I was also working I needed money, I volunteered first, but in my free time, after four-five o'clock when I finished the volunteering, I was a [seller], at a [grocery store], and during the weekend I had full, full work as a [seller] because I needed money to survive." (Christina, Romanian)

Throughout the analysis process, we see how young people react to a country's composition and structure; through their professional experiences young people see how macrostructures and the country's labour market "impose" rules and criteria for jobs. In Luxembourg, where three languages are official, a lack of language competency becomes a structural hindrance within the labour market (there is also a social aspect of it, which will be described below).

"Y: So we came here, at the beginning was, I would say, very hard to find anything because Luxembourgish market is very closed and you know, you have to speak four languages fluently, you have to speak French, German, Luxembourgish, blablablablablah, and English is nothing, really! So, it was really hard: I was doing some baby-sitting, my boyfriend did different jobs, really different." (Ewa, Polish)

In other countries, such a "prescribing" structure is taken for granted particularly in those where minimal languages are spoken; young people, even before coming to the country, can evaluate their low chances of getting a job and discriminate themselves within the labour market.

"Y: Yeah actually in three months because I had to start working. I started there, I told them from the beginning, I don't speak French very well, this is one of the reasons

why I thought that I will not find anything and because I don't speak French. So my life was in English, was not the best one, so, NOW it's not the best, but, I improved a lot, but I don't study, I didn't study since I started work, because I don't have time to study English." (Christina, Romanian)

In a multicultural and multilingual country such as Luxembourg, people who come to Luxembourg to live and to work are generally fascinated by the language competences of the country's nationals. In some cases, though, superior language proficiency in a multicultural context creates invisible competition and a hierarchy of competences. In a context where language proficiency matters for the job, young people, like this interviewed young man from Italy, feel their competences to be superior to those of nationals (reputable for speaking many languages). By speaking three foreign languages proficiently as well as his mother tongue, this young man seeks to earn his position in the new destination country. He does not want to accept multilingualism as a given in the new country and emphasises that this was achieved through hard work, training and constant practice; this is in contrast to Luxembourg nationals, who are thought to speak several languages by default.

"Y: Some of them struggle with French for example. Yeah. I mean they can understand it, but they can't speak it, I have a colleague who sits next to me, he's a Luxembourger from the German side, he speaks German, like normal, like everyday use; but I've never heard him speak French. Any he told me 'yeah, I can understand it but, yeah I can't speak it proficiently, I can speak it of course but not proficiently enough.' And he can speak English. Proficiently. (I: He prefers English?) Yes, over French... And in one of my, of the founders of the company prefers English as well against French, for example, because he's from the German side again, of Luxembourg. And he has a terrible accent. It's almost impossible to understand him when he speaks English." (Leonardo, Italian)

Moreover, young people with rare skills and high qualifications, namely those that some countries are particularly short of do overcome the employment barriers for young people entering the labour market. Transition as a short and direct pathway to work is usually described by people who make a direct transition from study and graduation in the (home) country to working in another one. Their narrations are also time compressed and the transitions are thought of as short. The process itself is thus not overly intricate, with only a few uncomplicated steps along the way.

"I: Maybe you could tell me how is that you are here at this place?

Y: A very good question (...) so I studied [law], then I did an extra master in [international law]. And I was contacted by a couple of firms in Luxembourg that were interested in my profile, so I got a couple of interviews, found out that Luxembourg was doing a lot of law, structuring from multinationals, and I accepted one of the offers they were proposing me." (Thomas, Belgian)

Moreover, most of the interviewed young people perceive the process towards their (employment) mobility as a complex path; to them this process includes a formatting learning stage (study, exchange or EU programmes,

learning language(s) abroad). It can also include a leisure stage, i.e. travelling. From our data it can be seen that young people often assign high value to travelling to some of the most remote and distant countries before starting professional work. Young people who travel before beginning work emphasise their need to experience adventure, challenges and carefree youth.

Inhomogeneous society and unequal status

In the interviews, young people described how they experience a different position and status in the destination country when compared with others, particularly with Luxembourg nationals. Luxembourgers, who currently make up 53% of the country's total population, represent the majority and have roles within the country's society. Asking someone whether they know any Luxembourgers is a playful way of pointing out that foreigners and Luxembourg nationals do not often mix in the society. Young people, too, experience this separation in their private and work lives.

Some young people who know and work with Luxembourg nationals explain that they experience different relations with them. They are nice and good to work with and they are all treated the same way; they are all colleagues and share the same status. Moreover, when the working hours finish, the differences become more visible as interaction stops and everyone goes his/her own way; some claim that Luxembourgers prefer to socialise with people from their own Luxembourgian circle.

"Y: Yeah, like half of the company is made up of Luxembourgish. So, I have many Luxembourgish colleagues. I mean they are ok. But just they hang out with other Luxembourgers, like on Saturday night, Friday night they do not ask you to hang out with them. They simply don't.

I: Do you think it is because of the language?

Y: Maybe it is a kind of defence, because there are so many foreigners in this country, that they think, ok it is my country, they do not speak my language, I have to speak either French or German or English, so let us stick to the people that I have known for years or that share my culture in a way. I think their mind-set is a bit like this. But they are open anyway, I mean, they are really ok." Later in the interview: *"Y: In a way it's like a country which is, which can be broken down in bubbles. So, there is the Luxembourgish bubble, where Luxembourgish live and prosper, thrive, have their own thing, there's the foreigner's bubble when foreigners live, escape from their countries to land in Luxembourg and thrive at least for a while. Do their thing and maybe move again to other shores."* (Leonardo, Italian)

While this person wishes to be accepted in the circle and socialise with its members on equal terms, he accepts the unequal interaction in a comprehensive, albeit irreconcilable way. This dynamics is also due to the current situation in

which Luxembourgers find themselves: the proportion of Luxembourg nationals in the country's population is rapidly decreasing, and very soon native citizens will become a minority in their own country. Most new arrivals discover this fact quickly. They themselves do not look for ways of breaking into the social lives of Luxembourg nationals; instead, they devise an alternative way that would not interfere, i.e. communicating with non-nationals.

Conclusion

This analysis of how young people enter the labour market, and of the strategies they use to become employed during their mobility has demonstrated that young people employed in another country experience a different and often inferior position within the receiving country. In the narratives of young people, the topic of inequality and conflict was central when discussing professional spheres. First, it affected the process of recruitment and becoming employed. In that way, two major aspects became prominent: hierarchy and unequal status. By and large young people perceive that they experience unequal treatment at work due to their age and (lack of) working experience. This is particularly challenging for young people during the transition period to the labour market, which draws a yo-yo trajectory with several steps backwards (such as a necessary return to education that results in the person being even further away from employment).

Second, inferior positioning and particularly unequal treatment have become more pronounced in the professional sphere. The analysis has demonstrated that young people experience discrimination and unequal treatment when they complete education and apply for jobs, on the grounds of being young and inexperienced. Such a situation thus inclines young people to develop various paths to employment that range from obtaining additional education, traineeship, to de-skilling and de-qualification to secure employment. Others, while looking for ways to get employed, are pushed to make steps back, return to education, to live with parents, etc. We have nevertheless seen an exception to this rule: young people with rare skills and high qualifications, namely those that some countries are particularly short of, who overcome the employment barriers entering the labour market. Though this analysis we have thus been able to see how young people use their linguistic, cultural and social capital in new situations to overcome hindrances in the destination country.

Third, we further learned that young mobile people in the context of employment are in a vulnerable position. They often face age penalties regarding payment, access to positions, respect, acknowledgement and protection. As a result, young people follow a path to employment in which they enter the foreign labour market from the bottom. They accept precarious and insecure jobs with low qualifications when they perceive higher risks in

planning their future at the job market. Thus, they would rather gradually ascend the career development ladder step by step.

Last, during mobility young people also meet ethnicity- or origin-specific forms of disadvantages in the labour market (and beyond) the destination countries, such as prejudice-based forms of unequal treatment. However, the analysis also showed that young people manage to find ways to cope with these challenges in the labour market, as well as their own social lives, in the destination country.

Notes

1   While I acknowledge the fact that the concept of "youth" is very broad, its openness and fluidity may lead to overgeneralisation, depending on the various categories that are considered in defining the term. Moreover, I aim to keep the category open and only fix it by age (between 18 and 29 years old). With the use of the term "youth" I emphasise it as a phase, a status passage during the life course, particularly during the transition from education to employment.

2   This paper is part of a European project; the term "mobility" is used in a general sense as there is no official EU definition. The meanings of the terms "mobility" and "migration" often overlap, which goes beyond the scope of this contribution. In this paper, "mobility" is used generally to emphasise the (physical) cross-border movement of people.

Acknowledgments

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