

Promoting Inclusive Systems for Migrants in Education

Edited by

Paul Downes, Jim Anderson, Alireza Behtoui
and Lore Van Praag

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Chapter 4

Promoting More Equitable Post-School Transitions

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of Migrant Youth in England

*Charlotte McPherson, Sait Bayrakdar,
Alice Weavers, Sharon Gewirtz, Meg Maguire,
Christopher Winch, and Andrea Laczik*

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In recent decades, the dominant focus of English policy-making relating to young people's post-school educational transitions has been the expansion of higher education and widening access to degree-level studies for non-traditional students – those less likely to have attended university in the past. The post-school transitions of young people not taking the university route (c.50% of 18–30-year-olds; Department for Education [DfE], 2019) have been relatively neglected. In part, this reflects the historically lower status accorded to vocational education and training (VET) in England, which tends to disproportionately attract low-income students often from areas of multiple disadvantage (Chankseliani, Relly, & Laczik, 2016, p. 282), is chronically underfunded (Orr, 2020) and is largely based on a narrow, skills-based conception of education that neglects its broader social purposes (Smith & Duckworth, 2020). In 2011, the government commissioned a review of 14–19 VET, which pointed to a proliferation of low-quality programmes that failed to offer clear progression routes, particularly for those studying for low-level qualifications (Wolf, 2011). A series of reforms seeking to improve the quality of technical qualifications for young people on vocational pathways was subsequently introduced (Department for Education [DfE], 2021), driven by the aim of making VET a more viable route to high-quality employment.

While inequalities in young people's experiences of transitioning from school to work have been examined by many UK researchers, there are marked absences in this literature. First, while there are numerous studies exploring class and gender inequalities, there is very little work on 'race' and ethnicity, despite the fact that Black and other racially and ethnically minoritized students appear to be overrepresented in low-quality programmes (Avis, Orr, & Warmington, 2017). Research looking at inequitable transitions in relation to other inequality axes, including migration status, is even scarcer. This is a notable gap given the diversification of the UK population in recent decades, with the latest available figures suggesting that in 2021, 14.5% of the population (or 9.6 million people) were born outside of the United Kingdom, 12%

(1.15 million) of whom were aged 16–25 (Rienzo & Vergas-Silva, 2022). Second, the few studies that have looked at the transitions of migrant young people have mainly focused on their destinations rather than their transition experiences (e.g. Heath, Rethon, & Kilpi, 2008) and the voices of migrant young people are, to a large extent, absent from this body of research. While mapping outcomes and destinations is an essential part of documenting inequitable transitions, this alone does not help policymakers create genuinely inclusive education systems. The latter requires a more holistic approach that takes young people's social and emotional needs and experiences into account and brings their own perspectives into the discussion.

In this chapter, drawing on a subset of qualitative data from a larger study of the post-school transitions of young people in England not intending to go to university, the 'Young Lives, Young Futures' study, we explore the experiences of a diverse group of young people with a migrant background and the challenges they face in their educational transitions. We document their decision-making processes, their capacity to exercise agency and make informed decisions, the support and resources they draw on and the role of broader contextual factors in shaping their experiences. In the final part of the chapter, we offer recommendations for what needs to change at the level of national policymaking to enable the creation of conditions that are more conducive to local actors being able to provide meaningful support for the post-school transitions of the young migrants in their care.

Sensitising Concepts

Our analysis is informed by sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954) drawn from two theoretical approaches used in the youth transitions literature: Hodgkinson and Sparkes's (1997) careership theory and Hodgson and Spours's (2013, 2015) learning ecologies approach.

Careership Theory

Careership theory centres on three core tenets. First, career decision-making processes are understood as operating in tandem with life-course events and turning points that may reinforce, complicate or disrupt these processes and require young people to continually renegotiate their original career 'decisions'. These events and turning points may be more complex and disruptive for those with fewer financial assets and less familiarity with post-16 provision. Second, Hodgkinson and Sparkes argue that, contrary to normative policy discourses, young people do not typically possess full knowledge of their local education landscape and all the potentially available options; their decisions are not 'technically rational' in the sense of being well-informed, planned, explicit or voluntary. Rather, they are more typically opportunistic and contingent, based on serendipitous contacts and experiences, and hence

they are ‘pragmatically rational’ (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 33). Third, rooted in the Bourdieusian concepts of *habitus* and *field* (Bourdieu, 1977), careership theory focuses on how young people are unequally positioned in terms of their resources and power to act, and how their transitions are enabled or constrained by what they themselves consider to be desirable and attainable – their ‘horizons for action’, which are culturally and structurally produced.

Careership theory has been used extensively to explore the disrupted and uncertain career trajectories of marginalised young people such as those with lower academic attainment (see, e.g. Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000; Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson, 1996). It has become less frequently used in recent years and has rarely been applied to young people with a migrant background. Yet, as other recent work has demonstrated (e.g. Lundahl, Lindblad, Lovén, Mårald, & Svedberg, 2017), careership theory is ideally suited to illuminating migrant experiences in education with its emphasis on the fact that young people can have limited knowledge about what is available, and the attention it pays to serendipity and the importance of significant turning points, one of which is likely to be migration to a new country.

Learning Ecologies

The learning ecologies approach complements careership theory through its focus on how young people’s horizons for action are constructed at multiple levels. Inspired by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) social–ecological systems theory, this approach conceptualises young people’s micro-level interactions with family, friends, teachers, their communities and the institutional contexts they encounter as nested within – and shaped by – their localities, wider socio-economic landscapes, and national and global macro-level contexts. The interactions across these various levels produce what Hodgson and Spours (2013) call ‘local learning ecologies’ – the physical, economic, social, cultural, educational and labour market spaces that young people traverse.

This approach highlights the importance of place in shaping young people’s transition experiences. Local learning ecologies ‘can be more or less affluent; more or less organised ...; [and] offer more or fewer opportunities... for participation in... employment or further study’ (Hodgson & Spours, 2015, p. 29). Hodgson and Spours (2013) represent local learning ecologies as located on a continuum ranging from ‘low opportunity progression equilibria’ to ‘high opportunity progression ecosystems’ (p. 29); the latter constituting nurturing, opportunity-rich environments that enable young people to develop more expansive horizons for action. However, in keeping with careership theory, which reminds us of the importance of paying attention to young people’s differential positioning in the environment in which career decisions and transitions take place, we want to depart somewhat from the linearity of Hodgson and Spours’ model in the way we apply it here.

Moving away from a linear ‘rich- vs poor-opportunity area’ understanding allows us to think of the same localities as offering different opportunities for those with different needs, social backgrounds, career aspirations and imaginations of the future beyond career. For example, an ethnically diverse locality may not be rich in education or employment progression opportunities or provide easy access to a range of good-quality VET offerings, but it may serve young people from a migrant background better in terms of inclusion and participation in their local communities.

Taken together, and in keeping with the theoretical framework of this collection as a whole, the combination of sensitising concepts summarised above, together with our empirical focus on young people’s own voices and perspectives, is closely aligned with several of Downes, Nairz-Wirth, and Rusinaité’s (2016) principles for inclusive school systems. In particular, we want to highlight their concern with the need for a ‘system-wide focus’, which considers the wider set of relations and influences that shape young people’s transitions; ‘equality and non-discrimination’, which calls for a prioritisation of ‘differentiated needs’; and ensuring the ‘representation and participation of marginalised groups’.

Young Lives, Young Futures

Young Lives, Young Futures is an ongoing project exploring the post-school transitions of young people in England who do not plan to take the university route. As part of this study, a thematic focus was initiated to explore, using in-depth semi-structured interviews, the transition experiences of a diverse group of 10 young migrant people (see Table 4.1). The interviews were conducted between October 2021 and February 2022, in person where possible, although some had to be conducted online to mitigate the impact of restrictions relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. All of the participants’ names have been anonymised.

The interviews were based on an *aide memoire* covering the young people’s migration and education biographies, school/college life, future plans and aspirations and any challenges they experienced in their education and post-school transitions. They were also asked about what could be done to improve the experiences of schooling and transitions to VET and/or employment for young people like themselves. While all the participants described struggling to varying degrees with English when they first arrived in England, at the time of interview, all were proficient in English and no adaptations had to be made to the interview questions or process.

All the interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. Based on the research questions and the conceptual framing of the study, specific themes identified prior to the fieldwork were used to interrogate the data. Among these were the impact of migration as a turning point in participants’ education trajectories on their horizons for action and the

Table 4.1 Participant characteristics (based on participants' own self-identifications/reporting)

Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Parents' occupation	Age at time of interview	Age at time of migration	Reason for migrating	Country of origin	Region
Alina	Female	Romanian	Father – construction Mother – cleaner	16	15	To join parents who were already living in England	Romania	London
Devora	Female	–	–	16	11	–	Bulgaria	London
Nyle	Male	African	Father – customer service	16	15	Sent by parents for his education	Angola	London
Ana	Female	White	Parent – warehouse job	17	11	Parents moved to England to find work	Romania	London
Camila	Female	Black/ White African	–	17	14	Came to join father who was already living in England	Portugal	London
Gasira	Female	–	–	17	16	Mother moved to England to join her new husband	Uganda	North West
Jared	Male	French	Father – college lecturer Mother – veterinary surgeon	17	16	Moved to England to join father when relationship with mother broke down	France	North East
Jinani	Female	Pakistani	Parent – receptionist	17	16	–	Pakistan	London
Kashvi	Female	Indian	Mother – housewife	17	16	Moved with mother and brother 'for my future'	India	London
Rafael	Male	Arab	Father – works in a restaurant (was an electrician in Spain)	19	8	Parents moved to England to find work	Spain	London

availability of formal and informal support and resources in career decision-making. A more inductive approach was also used to elicit additional themes from the data. These included participants' experiences of Covid-19 and online education, recognition of qualifications previously obtained, the role of friends in developing a sense of belonging and well-being, temporality of place, and migration as a continuous state. For example when analysing the transcript of our interview with Gasira, a 17-year-old who had recently moved to England from Uganda, we coded for the critical role migration played in her considering VET. This 'choice' marked a significant departure from her original plans to pursue university in Uganda. The transcript was also analysed inductively, which alerted us to some institutional barriers, including college staff finding it difficult to place her in a course due to their apparently limited understanding of her qualifications and capabilities. Data coding was initially undertaken independently by team members and subsequently collaboratively to enhance the interpretive rigour of the analysis (Gewirtz, 2001).

Young Migrant People's Experiences with Transitions

In this section, we detail our findings in three subsections. We begin with a brief discussion of migration as a turning point in young people's educational trajectories. This is followed by two subsections focused on opportunities, resources and challenges in young people's post-school transitions and migration in the context of a global pandemic.

Migration as a Turning Point in Young People's Educational Trajectories

Young people from migrant backgrounds frequently encounter a range of challenges in their educational experiences and their wider social worlds (see, e.g. Chee, 2018). Most of the young people we spoke with mentioned complex emotions related to adapting to living in a new country including feelings of homesickness, culture shock and loneliness. In the main, however, they were happy about living in England. While many had migrated because of their parents' decisions and wishes, they described being enthusiastic about the move and what they felt it would mean for their futures. Migration, which might be expected to be a disruptive turning point in their life courses and educational careers, was considered an opportunity that they felt excited about. Many of the participants' transitions to adulthood were bound up in distinctive geographical imaginaries and entailed 'a sense of agency' (Tse & Waters, 2013, p. 537). For example, one participant, Kashvi, a 17-year-old from India, described imagining her future in the United Kingdom from the age of seven and articulating this desire to her mother, who later agreed to the move. Such experiences suggest that, in some cases, migration can be a part

of a more extended project in which young people may be willing to accept some immediate educational losses or disruptions to access the longer-term gains they are working towards.

Opportunities, Resources and Challenges in Post-school Transitions

In some respects, our participants' migrant status enabled the articulation of more expansive horizons for action than we have found to be common among their non-migrant peers of similar socio-economic status. These more expansive narratives are enabled by a wider discourse of optimism about what migration is believed to make possible – for example the promise of better education and work opportunities and a more prosperous future. However, more expansive horizons for action were also reflected in some of the young people's imaginings of an adult future in a different (warmer!) country, with several mentioning that they might migrate again, in some cases back to their country of origin, on completion of their education. These young people were expressing a comfort with 'globality' (Robertson, 1992) that contrasts starkly with some of the more geographically constrained socio-spatial imaginings of their non-migrant peers, illustrating how horizons for action are differently shaped for differently positioned young people.

However, in other respects, migration could result in contracted horizons. For example, in Uganda, Gasira was set on a university path. She said she would have loved to go to university had she stayed there; but, in England, she has set her heart on pursuing an apprenticeship route because it will enable her to earn while she learns. We do not mean to imply here that university would have been an intrinsically better choice for Gasira, but only that the framing of her decision to do an apprenticeship appeared to be largely a function of financial constraints, rather than any intrinsic preference for a work-based route. This kind of reworking of aspirations as a consequence of the gritty realities of financial hardship post-migration was a feature of several of the narratives of the young people in our sample.

Navigating a New Education System

Our data also highlighted how young people's horizons for action can be constrained by a lack of knowledge of the VET system and available post-school routes. The majority of the participants had moved to England recently as teenagers and, because of their ages, were immediately confronted with the need to make decisions about their post-school destinations. They were all at a stage that Aaltonen (2013) describes as the 'first key transitional point' in young people's lives – the point at which they can leave compulsory schooling. This point of transition, and broader processes of transitioning

to adulthood, can be challenging for all young people, who may experience difficulties deciding what to do upon leaving school, choosing an educational institution or course, knowing who to ask for help, and dealing with parental pressures and expectations (see, e.g. Walther, Warth, Ule, & du Bois-Reymond, 2015). However, for young people from migrant backgrounds, the intersection of their life-course transitions with their migration trajectories (Punch, 2015) can compound these sorts of challenges and pose additional ones.

Many of our participants reported that they had not only struggled to adapt to their new schools but also struggled with navigating very different education systems. This was most evident when they were faced with having to negotiate their post-16 transitions while simultaneously trying to understand a VET system that can often be a confusing, crowded prospect, even for UK-born young people (Wolf, 2011). Those who moved to England earlier in their lives or found greater parallels between the education systems of their country of origin and England had an easier time navigating their post-16 transitions. However, several participants told us that they had no understanding of England's VET system, which made their post-16 transitions more difficult:

I don't know anything about the UK's college [system].

Kashvi, 17, London

Everything was new, it was kind of confusing... I didn't know, like I didn't have no one to help me... because in my country it's a different kind of study than here.

Jinani, 17, London

Camila, 17, had migrated to England from Portugal and found enrolling in a local vocational college very challenging because of the differences in the education systems of the two countries. She commented on how different her experience was to that of UK-born students:

It's not difficult for them as it is for me... It's much easier for them to understand. I'm still here for years, I do understand English, but not everything... I still have difficulty with some things... It's really difficult to come somewhere that's like really different from your country.

The Bourdieusian roots of careership theory are important here in helping to shine a light on how the disadvantaged positioning of these young people – in particular, their limited access to critical cultural knowledge of local/national education systems and their lack of English language proficiency – posed distinctive constraints on their ability to make informed decisions. Following Bourdieu (1977), careership theory highlights the importance of social networks for accessing knowledge of 'how things work'. Many young

people rely heavily on the advice of family members, and particularly their parents, when making decisions about their post-16 transitions (McPherson, Weavers, Gewirtz, & Maguire et al., 2022). Our conversations with some of our participants who reported finding England's VET system confusing and alien revealed a particularly strong reliance on the suggestions of family members, conveying a relatively low sense of their own agency playing a role in their decisions about where to study:

[My dad] found me this course. I don't really know anything about how the British education system works, at least not as well as the French system, so he showed me this and did a bit of research and found out that, yeah, it was probably the best option.

Jared, 17, North East

Actually, it's like my relatives, they told us.... This is the nearest college, so they told me to go to the college, and then I directly come here and I talked to the receptionist and then, yeah, he just explained me everything.

Kashvi, 17, London

Yet, in other cases, participants faced the challenge of their parents having a very limited understanding of the English education system, having never participated in it themselves. This meant that some of our participants were less able to access forms of support that others took for granted as they weighed their post-16 options. For instance, Ana's experiences trouble assumptions that all young people can turn to their parents for advice about their post-16 transitions:

And you don't know, you're only 16, and like your parents might not talk to you about this kind of stuff... Or they could not understand because they're from Romania... I was very stressed actually, because I didn't know what to do. And my parents were like, 'you do whatever you want'... Yeah, they don't understand. They were like, 'oh, so how many years do you still have to do?'

The young people's own lack of understanding of England's VET system meant that they tended to rely on the advice of college staff, which they typically accepted unquestioningly:

Well, in fact, when I first got here my dad wanted to put me in the Foundation Diploma... And I remember the first day... the one who handles this course, he told me to go to T Levels. And I was like, 'well, I want a Foundation Diploma, I've got no idea what a T Level is', and he said, 'but you've qualified for T Levels', and I'm like, 'okay, if I qualified for it, it must mean it's better.'

Jared, 17, North East

Because of these sorts of factors, while most participants were thoroughly enjoying their college courses and felt these were aligned with their interests and aspirations for the future, there was often a serendipitous feel to their decision to enrol in them, stemming from a reliance on the suggestions of others whether parents or college tutors. This sense of an unplanned post-16 transition resonates with Hodkinson and Sparkes's (1997) argument that young people are 'pragmatically' – rather than 'technically' – rational decision-makers. It could be argued that this is truer still for young people from migrant backgrounds whose migrant status can compound a lack of knowledge and agency at a moment in young people's lives, when – in the UK education system – decisions, and agency, are expected of young people for the first time.

Our data also speak to the salience of learning ecologies for shaping young people's educational trajectories and their horizons for action. The participants' interactions with their families and with local education institutions, and their reliance on both, as noted above, produced trajectories often more driven by serendipity than agency. This situation could expose them to both risks and opportunities in relation to their transitions. For example, while the support of college tutors was appreciated by the young people, there were a number of instances where taking tutors' advice resulted in their being placed in lower-level courses than they were qualified for. The problem of migrants' qualifications and expertise not being recognised by employers in host countries has been well documented (see, e.g. Guo, 2015). Many migrant families experience downward social mobility, with parents forced to take on low-skilled and low-paid jobs because their qualifications are not recognised (Guveli, Ganzeboom, Platt, & Nauck, 2016). Our findings suggest that for some migrant youth, their initial struggles with learning English can cause them to be similarly downgraded by educational institutions in terms of their level of study. While we have not yet had the opportunity to investigate tutors' motivations for placing young people from migrant backgrounds in lower-level courses than they were qualified for, it is possible that the use of student performance as a measure of institutional performance in England's VET system (Smith & Duckworth, 2020) is acting as a perverse incentive for colleges to prioritise ease of passing a qualification over students' educational needs and interests when enrolling them in classes. Kashvi, 17, had moved to London from India but her college had not asked to see the exam grades she had achieved in India, placing her onto a Level 1 course. Gasira, 17, described how she had ended up being placed on a Level 1 course in her college:

It didn't bother me but, the thing is, when coming to college they didn't know where to put me, because maybe they were afraid they're going to put me on a higher level and what if I fail, so it's like I had to go down to the lowest level, but it was quite okay with me.

Jinani, 17, who wanted to be a doctor, was studying a Level 1 Health and Social Care course at college even though he had been studying a pre-medical course at a significantly higher level in Pakistan. All three of these young people accepted being placed in a Level 1 course, but this phenomenon raises questions about how young people from migrant backgrounds are perceived and positioned within the English VET system. Not least, enrolling them on lower levels than they are capable of is likely to disadvantage them in terms of their wider life chances.

Language Barriers

Language proficiency has long been regarded as the primary vehicle for the integration of migrant children and young people and is fundamental to achieving a sense of belonging (Moskal, 2014). Most of the participants had arrived in England with very limited or no grasp of the English language:

When I first came in London it was so bad, I mean I speak only 20 per cent or something, that's it.

Alina, 16, London

At first it was really difficult because I didn't know no English at all, like I couldn't say nothing... I actually didn't understand nothing.

Camila, 17, London

Most participants had learned English at their schools in England, often receiving additional support in lessons, complemented for some young people with help from specialist English as an Additional Language (EAL) tutors. Others relied heavily on help from multilingual friends and/or taught themselves English at home using YouTube videos. It was a difficult, and, for some, ongoing process that entailed significant effort, but was considered a key priority if they were going to feel more confident in their new home. Learning English was also prioritised by our participants as a means of making friends, acclimatising to their new home and understanding their schoolwork. For most, initial difficulties in learning English had a profound impact on their schooling experiences. When combined with the timing of some of their arrivals, in Years 10 and 11, which in England is when students are studying for their GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education courses) and expected to be thinking about what to do after completing school, these experiences left many of the participants feeling anxious and stressed, with implications for their grades and confidence:

I didn't understand what [the teachers] were saying... Like, I had no idea: they could have said like good stuff was bad stuff, I didn't know.

Ana, 17, London

I was nervous because I was kind of like learning English, but I probably didn't like understand... I was nervous for everything... I did GCSEs and

I failed, I failed them... It's because I was learning English... I didn't understand nothing.

Nyle, 16, London

For these young people, the challenge of having to get to grips very quickly with a new language, school and education system was compounded by arriving in England during the most pressured stages of secondary education, unable to understand lessons or communicate with teachers or peers while expected to undertake examinations and make decisions about their post-16 trajectories.

Friendship as a Resource in Transitions

Migration can be an isolating, lonely experience for young people (Moskal, 2014) at a time of life that tends to be characterised by a greater emphasis on relationships with friends than family (Flynn, Felmlee, & Conger, 2017). Some of the young people had experienced high levels of mobility in their lives, changing schools several times as well as moving within and between countries, making it difficult for them to maintain friendships and establish lasting social connections:

I didn't grow up in one specific place, so it was a bit hard because I moved like every two months, so at some point when I was little, I got used to not making friends, because it's just not worth it.

Jared, 17, North East

Containment measures associated with Covid-19 also made it difficult for some of the young people to meet their classmates and make friends, leaving them feeling isolated at home with their families in a new country (see also Avis, Atkins, Esmond, & McGrath, 2021). Language barriers could also make it difficult for them to establish friendships in school and college.

At the same time, what also emerged very clearly in our conversations with the young people was the importance of friends in smoothing their transitions and helping them to feel settled and welcome in their new homes. Alina, 16, had moved to England from Romania and initially found her migration extremely difficult. A key turning point was making friends and feeling supported:

Oh, at the first time I was something like, 'oh my God, I'm going to cry and I'm not going to speak English very well', but then I find some friends and... I found out that they are such good friends and they tell me that it's not that difficult because we are all going in the same school and we can be together.

Friendships were typically forged with co-ethnic and migrant peers, with whom there were shared language systems and experiences to bond over. The areas where young people lived seemed to be a defining factor in the availability of opportunities to bond with co-ethnic and migrant peers. For example participants who had moved to a highly diverse borough in London commented on the value that this diversity brought to their transitions and adjustment to life in England. This was felt to be particularly valuable for helping them to learn English more easily and understand their coursework:

There was a lot of people who could speak different languages in my school... a lot of mixed cultures. I could also speak Arabic, so there was also Arab people there, I could speak with them... they usually helped me a lot because, instead of speaking with me in Spanish or Arabic, they would always speak to me in English, which helped me catch the language faster.

Rafael, 19, London

They give a knowledge about their tradition or their culture, everything, their language... I don't know how to speak English so, you know, they helped me to speak English a little bit... my English is not good like them, but they support me a lot.

Kashvi, 17, London

Beyond helping with learning English, the diversity in communities and classrooms was valued as a means of helping the young people to feel less out of place and as an opportunity for mutual learning – '[we] learn from them, and they learn from us as well' (Camila, 17, London). Here, our non-linear adaptation of Hodgson and Spours's work on local opportunity structures helps us to see how, while this London borough has high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and limited education and employment opportunities for young people, its diversity provided opportunities for our participants to adjust to their new country, often in ways that helped support their educational transitions; and in this sense, the local area could be seen as 'opportunity rich'.

Migration in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic

In addition to arriving in England in the final years of secondary education, many of our participants had migrated in the midst of the pandemic, which significantly compounded some of the more familiar challenges associated with migration and youth transitions. Containment measures associated with the pandemic in England – specifically, strict, nationwide lockdowns that involved the closure of schools and stay-at-home orders – made it even more difficult for some of the young people to get to grips with life in a new country,

including their new schools. Nyle, 16, had seemingly slipped through the net. Having moved to London at the height of lockdown, he was unable to access schoolwork or online lessons for seven months despite being enrolled at his school and spent his days at home teaching himself English on YouTube. It was only with the help of a bilingual classmate that he was eventually able to access login details to enable him to participate in online learning:

He's Portuguese as well and he was like talking to my teacher and then he was asking, like, can, because I was just waiting for my details... They didn't give me all my details to do like stuff online... and my friend had to ask my teacher, and then he sent me the details and then he told me what application I needed to download.

Nyle and other participants had to spend a significant portion of their schooling following lessons online. Online learning has been identified as challenging by UK-born young people in numerous studies, including our own wider study (McPherson et al., 2022), where it has been described as demotivating, difficult to engage with and beset with technical and access problems and distractions. For some of the young people, however, these challenges were made more acute by language barriers and not having existing relationships with classmates and teachers that may have given them greater confidence to ask for help:

I found really difficult to understand the lesson because we had lesson on computers, online, so it was actually difficult to understand what the teacher is saying.

Camila, 17, London

The participants' lack of confidence and their lack of connections with institutions and teachers also meant that decisions about what to do post-16 were typically made alone or, as has been discussed, were largely made with an absence of agency, steered by the suggestions of family and college admissions staff. In this sense, these experiences at school extended into their post-16 trajectories and experiences of VET. Most participants described receiving little, no or poor-quality careers advice and guidance in school, while isolated at home and/or getting to grips with English. Superficial relationships with schools, teachers and colleges, combined with their low levels of English, isolated them from support and compounded the pragmatic nature of their decision-making in relation to their post-16 education and employment.

The disruptive impact of the pandemic on young people's education and its profound impact on their mental health and well-being is well-documented (see, e.g. McKinlay, May, Dawes, Fancourt, & Burton, 2022). For some of the young people from migrant backgrounds in our study, these challenges were particularly acute. Gasira, 17, had moved to the North West of England

from Uganda at the height of lockdown in 2020. Unable to leave the new home she shared with her mother and stepfather, her excitement about this new chapter of her life faded into depression, loneliness and a desire to return to Uganda and be with her friends:

I came here when there was lockdown... I can't go anywhere. We used to do online learning and it was so hard, actually. And being in a new country, I don't know anyone, so I never had the time to make friends, so it was quite depressing honestly... At first I was excited, right until I came, and now they locked down everything I started feeling like I just want to go back.

The pandemic posed numerous challenges for all young people in terms of their mental health and well-being, but our findings suggest the mental health costs of the pandemic could fall particularly hard on migrant youth, who were simultaneously contending with challenges associated with their migration while their migration had coincided with a critical turning point in their post-16 educational trajectories.

Promoting More Equitable Post-school Transitions: From Experience to Policy

In this final part of the chapter, we summarise our findings and explore their policy implications. For all our participants, migration functioned as a significant turning point in their lives, which could be simultaneously rewarding and disruptive. All the young people we spoke with came with high expectations; they were excited about this major change in their lives. While they spoke of challenges, they appeared hopeful that the short-term losses caused by migration could be reversed as they progressed in education, the labour market and other domains of their lives. Indeed, other research suggests that, in some cases, such optimism is warranted, showing that some migration decisions pay off thanks to better educational and labour market opportunities in the receiving context, even though migration may also bring disruption immediately after the event (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2021). However, comparing young people's possible life chances in their countries of origin, had they stayed, with those that may be possible in receiving countries risks overlooking some of the ways in which migrant youth are systematically disadvantaged relative to their non-migrant peers as a consequence of their migrant status. Moreover, while these young people's parents' decisions to migrate might pay off for some (and we hope for all) in terms of their later life outcomes, our participants' narratives about their experiences of the 'here and now' conveyed a range of challenges that cannot easily be dismissed as costs worth paying. Some of these were similar to those experienced by young people without backgrounds

of migration, while others were more distinctively tied to their migration experience.

Our analysis, drawing on sensitising concepts from Hodkinson and Sparkes's (1997) careership theory and Hodgson and Spours's (2013, 2015) learning ecologies approach, has highlighted four sets of intersecting challenges for young migrants transitioning from school to work, each carrying important implications for policy. The first concerns the way young people's horizons for action can be constrained by a lack of knowledge of the VET system and available post-school routes. In many cases, young people from migrant backgrounds rely on parents or relatives who themselves have limited knowledge of the system or available career routes. Of course, this is the same for many of their non-migrant peers (McPherson et al., 2022), but for those with a migrant background, this is compounded by their encounters with college staff who may not recognise their qualifications or skills obtained in their countries of origin. While this lack of recognition might in part be explained by a limited understanding of non-UK qualifications on the part of college staff, it is also potentially a corollary of government accountability mechanisms leading to a prioritisation of institutional performance in league tables of qualification achievement rates over and above what might be in the interests of individual students (Smith & Duckworth, 2020). Moreover, because they have not yet accessed those forms of critical cultural capital required to navigate the English education system, young people who have recently migrated may be less able to question the decisions made on their behalf. This is a particular problem in the arena of VET, which constitutes a much more complex landscape of choice than the simpler, more streamlined, academic pathway through GCSEs and A Levels¹ into higher education (Lupton, Thomson, Velthuis, & Unwin, 2021). This lack of critical cultural capital can to some degree be compensated for by good-quality careers guidance. Yet, over the last decade, England (in contrast to Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales) has seen a decimation of career services for young people. As charted by Hughes, Warhurst, Benger, and Ifans (2021), annual government funding for careers support has been reduced from £203m in 2012 to £30m in 2022/3 and over the same period provision has been restructured along quasi-market lines, with responsibility for career support devolved to schools and colleges. These changes have resulted in fragmentation and inequalities of provision and in young people routinely being denied access to impartial advice from professionally trained careers advisors. Those attending the least affluent schools have been the most disadvantaged by these changes. Given this context, it is unsurprising that, as in our wider sample (McPherson et al., 2022), our participants' experiences of careers advice was patchy and uneven. For those whose wider family had little familiarity with the English education system and/or were unaware of the availability of careers guidance, the absence of routine access to high quality careers support in schools and

colleges represents a serious disadvantage, with the potential to contribute to longer-term labour market exclusions.

Second, while schools and colleges were identified by the young people as the place where they learned English, many expressed the need to complement this learning with their personal efforts through drawing on their friendships or by using resources from the internet. This is a pivotal policy area for those young people at different stages of developing English language proficiency. A lack of skills can disrupt learning (in many subjects) but may also contribute to a deficit view of the student, as language skills are so often taken as an indicator of learning or aptitude when students are being placed within VET programmes. Researchers have long critiqued England's official educational approach to young people with EAL, which has remained unchanged for over 30 years (Evans, Schneider, Arnot, & Fisher, 2020). Unlike in many other countries, the policy in England has been one of 'mainstreaming', where schools are encouraged to look for opportunities to teach English during mainstream subject lessons, avoiding separate provision where possible, and with very little official guidance and often a lack of training for teachers. While this approach ostensibly avoids the segregation of students with migrant backgrounds, it is problematic because it rests on a one-size-fits-all mentality, which is incompatible with the heterogeneity of the migrant youth population, who arrive in British schools with a wide range of linguistic capabilities and needs (Leung, Evans, & Liu, 2021). Leung et al. (2021) describe England's approach to EAL provision as 'laissez-faire' and the ramifications of this were clearly in evidence in our own study.

Third, friendships are critical for young people and our participants spoke of their friends as an essential resource and support network that helped them to overcome the isolation they often felt on first arriving in England, navigate an unfamiliar education system and enhance their sense of belonging to their school or college environment. Yet, the fact that communication between schools/colleges and young people from migrant backgrounds is so often facilitated by other young people suggests not only that there are clear gaps in support from schools and colleges for recently arrived young people, but also that not having friendship networks to rely on may disadvantage them in their post-school transitions. The availability of such friendships across different locations and its non-availability, especially in some rural areas, represents a significant form of spatial inequality that, we would suggest, has not yet received the attention it deserves in the youth transitions literature. As we discussed earlier, an ethnically diverse locality can be seen as a relatively opportunity-rich 'local learning ecology' for young people from migrant backgrounds.

Finally, the pandemic appears to have amplified the challenges mentioned above and contributed to reinforcing existing inequalities. Research, including from our wider project (McPherson et al., 2022), has highlighted the significant challenges posed by the pandemic for most

young people's transitions. The findings presented in this chapter suggest that it was particularly challenging for young people from migrant backgrounds who had to navigate online learning, settle into schools and communities, establish friendships, learn English and make decisions about their futures while contending with pandemic containment measures that made all of this even more difficult. At a time when young people need more support, many of our participants' testimonies suggest they were largely left to navigate these challenges on their own, drawing from their own resources and social networks. While there are heroic stories of schools and colleges going 'above and beyond' to develop creative approaches to supporting young people during the pandemic (see, e.g. EPBU, 2022), it is clear from work conducted by others that the conditions created by chronic underfunding, coupled with the narrow skills-based lens through which VET is understood by government, limit what it is possible for schools and colleges to provide in the way of meaningful social and emotional support for young people on VET pathways (Smith & Duckworth, 2020).

Taken together, our findings point to high-quality independent careers advice, specialist EAL provision, and social and emotional support for young migrants as the most significant priorities for policymakers to address. To deliver on these, interventions at the level of schools and colleges alone will not be sufficient. Rather, our analysis suggests that they require wider macro-level reforms to remediate the longstanding underfunding of post-16 education, the fragmentation and de-professionalisation of careers support emanating from over a decade of budgetary cuts and quasi-marketisation policies and England's *laissez-faire* approach to EAL provision. In addition, we suggest that there is an urgent need to review whether and how far performance-based accountability mechanisms in post-16 education are resulting in a systematic downgrading of young migrants' prior learning and hence their being systematically disadvantaged through being placed in lower-level courses than they are capable of studying. Without serious attention being paid to what needs to change at the national level, local actors committed to the construction of 'high opportunity progression ecosystems' for the migrant young people in their care are liable to remain frustrated in their efforts for reasons far beyond their control.

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Note

- 1 A Levels are qualifications for students aged 16 and above in England, which are recognised for entry to university, further study, training or work.

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