

ABSTRACT

The two main aims of the CATEWE project were to develop a more comprehensive conceptual framework of school to work transitions in different national contexts, and apply this framework to the empirical analysis of transition processes across European countries. The project drew on two complementary data sources for these analyses: the European Community Labour Force Survey, and integrated databases based on national school leavers' surveys in France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Scotland and Sweden.

Transition processes and outcomes were found to vary significantly across European countries. Three broad types of national system were identified: countries with extensive vocational training systems at upper secondary level, linked to occupational labour markets (such as Germany and the Netherlands); countries with more general educational systems with weaker institutionalised linkages to the labour market (such as Ireland); and Southern European countries with less vocational specialisation and lower overall attainment than the other groups. Each of these groups had distinctive patterns of labour market integration among young people. In 'vocational' systems, young people tend to make a smoother transition into the labour market while those in Southern European countries find it more difficult to achieve a stable employment position.

Across European countries, educational level is highly predictive of transition outcomes; those with lower levels of education have higher unemployment risks and greater chances of entering low-skilled, lower status and/or temporary jobs. Those who have taken part in vocational education/training (especially apprenticeships) tend to have a smoother transition to their first job and achieve more stable employment. Other dimensions of education are also significant with examination grades having a greater effect in more general education systems. Transition outcomes are found to vary by gender, social class background and national origin. There is no evidence that such differences have become less important in shaping the transition process over time.

Given the diversity in education, training and labour market systems across Europe, the same policy interventions are unlikely to be equally effective in different contexts. However, early educational failure has serious negative consequences for young people across all systems. There is a need, therefore, for policy intervention to reduce such failure and/or to provide alternative routes to skill acquisition for young people. There is also a need to monitor differences among groups of young people in terms of gender, social class and ethnicity and pursue policies to address these inequalities.

The project highlighted a number of areas which should be prioritised in future research: the role of field of education/training in transitions, employer recruitment strategies in relation to young people; young people's own views of the transition process; the role of policy interventions (especially youth programmes); and regional/local differences in educational and transition outcomes. It is recommended that a European-wide survey should be initiated, covering young people from around the age of fifteen and following them over a ten-year period. In the absence of such a survey, we recommend that the Commission should encourage agreement on a 'best practice' template to facilitate the partial harmonisation of existing transition surveys, and use of, and access to, the transitions module of the Labour Force Survey should be enhanced.