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Europe's Education-to-Work Transition Regimes in the Twenty-First Century

Ken Roberts

School of Law and Social Justice, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK
Email: k.roberts@liverpool.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper reviews then builds upon previous comparative research into education-to-work transition regimes in Europe. It treats regimes as negotiated in education and labour markets, constantly subject to change. The paper adds America to intra-European comparisons and then identifies the main direction of change in 21st century Europe. This has been away from multi-tracking towards American-type single processions. The main change drivers are identified (young people and their families), the facilitators (higher education providers and employers), and losers (providers of vocational education and training). It is argued that 21st century global economic and technological trends favour American-type transition regimes. Limitations in the paper are acknowledged and the conclusions are summarised.

Keywords

Education, Employment, Labour Markets, Transition Regimes, Youth

1. Aims and Methods

This paper uses transition regime theory to map changes in education-to-work transitions across 21st century Europe. Previous attempts to compare transition regimes in different European countries can claim only limited success. The following passages aim for greater success by developing the transition regime concept, and widening the range of countries that are compared. The aim is to identify drivers and directions of changes in Europe during the 21st century.

Methods have to adapt to the absence of harmonised time series statistics that are required ideally to apply transition theory across all the countries that are considered. However, the questions that social science addresses cannot be governed by the availability of ideal data. The argument that follows uses data from official sources (national governments, OECD and Eurostat for example), but relies more

heavily on the reports of academic research, both comparative and within single countries. The paper's conclusions are that the main direction of change in transitions from education-to-work in Europe have been towards hitherto American-type transitions, while America itself has become more extremely American. The main change driver everywhere has been student demand rather than labour force requirements.

Before proceeding a note on terminology is required. First, some authors (for example Raffe, 2008) use "systems" for what here are described as "regimes". There is no issue of substance here. The terms are used with identical meanings. The current paper prefers "regimes" on account of the intentional allusion to regiments moving forward together. Second, the literature sometimes refers to "routes" and elsewhere to "pathways". Again, the meanings are identical. For purposes of the present paper broad routes such as through university are called "routes" while "pathways" refer to narrower tracks within such routes.

The paper rejects the view that seeking routes and pathways is outdated since transitions today have become disjointed with more cross-overs between routes and yo-yoing back and forth from education to work and then back into education (for example see Pais, 2003). The evidence from across Europe that is introduced below rejects this argument. Cross-overs are exceptional and yo-yoing is not a new normal but a sign of failure and disadvantage.

The paper proceeds by discussing the concept of transition regime and its previous uses, then applies the concept to 21st century Europe. The conclusions are about the main direction of change and the drivers, facilitators and losers.

2. Transition Regimes

The 1990s was a decade when international collaboration accelerated in all fields of research. This was especially true in Europe. Funding for collaborative research was available from successive European Commission frameworks, the European Science Foundation, an Anglo-German Foundation and national funding bodies. Individuals and institutions recognised that being at the "cutting edge" meant collaborating and disseminating internationally. This was facilitated by the adoption of English as the principal international language.

Transition regimes in youth research

Sociologists with interests in youth had been meeting annually since 1975 in the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Youth. The European Sociological Association was founded in 1994 and a Research Network on Youth and Generation followed quickly in 1995. A variety of ad hoc consortia launched comparative research projects. Some specialised networks were formed. One was the European Research Network on Transitions in Youth (TiY) which held its first meeting in Barcelona in 1993 and has met annually ever since. The European Group for Integrated Youth Research (EGRIS) was formed in 2001 (European Group for Integrated Youth Research, 2001). Both networks had a special interest in transitions from education-to-work and both adopted the transition

regime concept in their work. They did not disagree on the characteristics of a transition regime (or system), namely:

- Parallel pathways/routes, which vary in length, through education and training.
- Cohorts split at some point during education.
- Family class origins and prior educational attainments are usually good predictors of which routes and pathways are followed.
- Exits are into different classes of employment…
- Regimes are national or sub-national depending on who governs education and training.
- Local variations are in the proportions following different routes and pathways.

Most members of TiY were conducting quantitative studies of school-to-work transitions in their own countries. Some had embarked on longitudinal studies tracking their samples' progress from lower through upper secondary education and training then beyond. Each was studying a national transition regime. While the research remained "at home" they had no cause to question or explain what made the country's regime different. TiY participants learnt that in all the countries that were represented transitions were lengthening and becoming more complicated with the introduction of new provisions in education and training. When presenting their findings at TiY workshops all present found themselves hearing about institutions and qualifications with unfamiliar names and which, in many instances, had no close counterparts in their own countries. At that time there was sufficient harmonised data from an EU15 to seek a typology of regimes which would reduce 15 cases to a more manageable number of types and allow each country's researchers to place their own regimes into one of the types. Possible outcomes included the identification of "best practices" (what works) which might then be Europeanised (Raffe, 2008). The network was hoping for an equivalent to Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

The eventual outcome at TiY was an admission of failure (Raffe, 2014). Failure to produce a typology of their own led some youth research groups to resort to the Esping-Andersen types when comparing the experiences of university students in different countries (Antonucci, 2016) and during spells of unemployment (Hammer, 2003). When the TiY network was created all the countries that were represented were experiencing levels of youth unemployment well above what had been normal from the 1950s-1970s. However, welfare regime types do not map onto differences in education-to-work transitions such as the ages at which pupils are separated into different tracks, or the proportions entering higher education. These features simply refuse to cluster into a limited number of types. Raffe's advice was to reserve the transition regime concept for national case studies. TiY's initial project ran into a conceptual dead end. The network has lived on with successive changes of agendas and membership.

EGRIS was TiY's friendly rival with its own agenda. The group preferred

qualitative to quantitative methods and insisted that all aspects of young people's lives should be captured since education-to-work, family and household transitions, and uses of free time and discretionary spending were all inter-related. The group's sole project was qualitative investigations among groups from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and families in 10 European countries. The agenda was to discover how the prevailing transition regimes were imprinted on young people's biographies and possibly on their consciousness. The product was an interesting set of case studies (see Walther, 2012, 2015, 2017; Walther et al., 2005). However, the transition regime concept disintegrated during the research and EGRIS itself disintegrated on completion of its project.

Developing the concept and refocusing its uses

The analysis that follows is based on several developments, mainly additions, to the original transition regime concept, and a refocus on comparative inquiries. We need to jettison the static view with which quantitative research began. In practice regimes change constantly. Boundaries between routes and pathways and steps within each are negotiated in employment and education markets. Agency is exercised by firms, education and training providers and young people as well as governments. Some government initiatives may be rejected by the markets. Others may replace or merge into existing routes or find new space alongside routes that already exist (see Roberts, 2020, 2022). The value of any route is set by comparisons with adjacent routes, specifically in the family and educational backgrounds of those entering and their eventual employment destinations. As long as young people with the relevant presenting features continue to enter the route and eventually enter the expected types of employment, the route will be consolidated. If the character of its recruits and destinations of leavers change, the route will begin to disintegrate. All actors make choices, always within constraints, and some actors are more powerful than others. Causality tends to flow downwards, started by employers offering different classes of jobs to young people leaving different routes and pathways. These processes then work back to transitions from lower to upper secondary education, and before then from elementary to secondary schools.

Transatlantic divide

We can now see that the TiY's original choice of countries among which to seek different types of regimes was too limited. Extend the range to America and we see a continuum with the USA's "single procession" at one end and European countries' multi-track regimes bunched at the other, with Northern and North-West European countries closer to the American pole than the rest of Europe. This was noted independently but almost simultaneously by Gangl (2001) and Szydlik (2002). Transatlantic convergence is unlikely. The divide is rooted firmly in the different histories of education on the two continents. This is just one part of a wider transatlantic divide (Martinelli, 2007). The divide in education interfaces with the continents' welfare arrangements and approaches to labour market regulation.

Europe's oldest educational institutions that are still teaching have histories that began over 1000 years ago. These are universities which began as communities of scholarly monks. Their history as universities is said to have begun when they started taking students on a regular basis and have continued to do so ever since except for relatively short interruptions such as Europe's wars. On this criterion Bologna is the oldest university dating from the early 11th century, followed by Oxford towards the end of that century. The oldest secondary schools (present-day title) prepared students for university. These institutions prepared young males for religious vocations. During the Middle Ages other vocations were added: public service in the courts of Europe's sovereigns, princes and nobles, diplomacy and law. There were also schools, usually attached to churches, that provided an "elementary" education for pupils with more humble backgrounds and futures. All this preceded the formation of modern Europe's nation states (see Verdugo, 2014).

Governments stepped in and became leading actors in education when countries began to industrialise and urbanise. Elementary education was made universal and compulsory. Provisions for existing forms of "academic" secondary education (the original vocational functions had been lost) expanded in existing schools and in entirely new public institutions of the same type. Despite curricula having become non-vocational, these schools and the universities to which they could lead became the normal route into older and modern professions in health care, science, technology, finance and engineering. Over time routes from elementary into the existing secondary schools were created, but not for all children. Progression always depended on a test of suitability. Other types of secondary education were invented to prepare pupils for work in factories, mines, shipbuilding and other modern occupations. There were differences from country-to-country in the ages at which cohorts were split, the proportions admitted to academic secondary schools, and the character of the alternatives which depended on local employment opportunities. The names of institutions and the qualifications that pupils gained were sometimes inherited from history and otherwise invented in each country or adopted from elsewhere. Hence the mosaic of present-day Europe's multi-track regimes (see Roberts, 2023). Their resilience can be seen in how, in East-Central Europe, different countries' institutions, qualifications and admission procedures endured throughout twentieth century communism from which countries emerged to resume their national histories (Gulczynska et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2024).

America did things differently from the beginning of states' involvement, which was with elementary schools in the 1850s. There were existing elementary schools usually attached to churches. These were ignored. Public schools were secular and for all children. There were private European-type academic secondary schools and universities with 17th century origins. These were ignored when states began to create public high schools and colleges from the 1880s. High schools were for all children who had completed the elementary grades. Colleges admitted all high

school graduates (Duncan & Goddard, 2005; Goode & Teller, 1973). Hence the single procession with drop-outs at various stages which over time has moved upwards from following elementary school, to during then after high school, then during college (Hillman, 2024b). Today, around 60 percent of America's high school graduates enrol in college. Around a quarter of these are entering community colleges which offer two-year programmes after which a "junior degree" may be awarded. However, most entrants are aiming for a Bachelor degree which will involve transfer after two years to a degree awarding college. Only 14 percent of starter cohorts in community colleges have gained Bachelor degrees six years later. The 21st century trend has been away from two year colleges towards direct progression from high school to four year colleges (Hillman, 2024b). This has made America's single procession transition regime even more unlike Europe's regimes than formerly: the single procession remains intact for longer.

In 1960 Clark had noted how the manifest role of community colleges was to set students on the way towards bachelor's degrees while their actual latent function was to cool-out over-heated ambitions (Clark, 1960). In America, separation into distinct career routes occurs after high school. In 1960, Turner noted how education in America kept students in a "contest" for success for as long as possible. This contrasted with Britain (and we can now add other European countries) where those destined for success were selected earlier-on. Their progress upwards was then "sponsored" by providing education leading to qualifications from which they could step off the top of the "academic route" into corresponding occupational careers (Turner, 1960). Any divisions into pathways in American secondary education are within, not between schools of different types. Higher education institutions are ranked in an academic procession, placed according to entry standards. The procession is led by top graduate schools at top universities. They produce "the cream of the crop" for whom employers offering top jobs compete (Katchadouria, 1994). Other employers must target lower ranked institutions (Streib, 2023).

European education landscapes are different. Students divide into different tracks before starting upper secondary education, usually at age 14 or 16 but sometimes earlier. Countries are bunched in a mosaic of national varieties of multi-track systems (Roberts, 2023). However, it is argued below that during the 21st century there has been a continent-wide drift in Europe towards, while remaining at considerable distance from, the American single procession pole.

Routes and socio-demographic groups

With hindsight, we can see from previous experience that quantitative and qualitative inquiries, single country or comparative, which employ the transition regime concept need to focus initially on routes rather than selected socio-demographic groups (for examples see Bynner & Roberts, 1991; Evans & Heinz, 1994). This is preliminary to assessing how social divisions (by class, gender, ethnicity and others) play out within a country's transition regime.

3. Europe in the Twenty-First Century

The degree generation

No new Euro-wide routes have been created in the 21st century, but there have been many new pathways, most of them leading into or through higher education. The outcome has been a Euro-wide expansion of the academic route. This has made the term "degree generation" familiar across Europe and beyond because the expansion has been global. Degree generation is the title of at least one book (Ingham et al., 2023). The term has multiple meanings. One is to claim (correctly in most European countries) that an academic career leading towards then into higher education has become of the largest single education-to-work route.

There is no definitive statistic on the numbers following this route in different countries. New student registrations can include international students and exclude students from the home country who have gone to universities elsewhere. There is also a difference between the numbers registering and leaving with degrees. Non-completion rates vary between European countries. The UK rate is exceptionally low and (also exceptionally) declined from 15 percent of cohorts who entered in 2001-2002 to 9 percent in 2019-2020 (Hillman, 2024a).

Here we use the proportions of 25 - 34 years old with an ISCED Level 5 qualification or higher. ISCED stands for International Standard Classification of Education. The classification was proposed at an education conference in 1975 then endorsed by UNESCO in 1976. The classification has two columns—academic and vocational, and eight levels within each, creating 16 cells into which qualifications can be inserted. Level 3 represents matriculation to enter higher education. Level 6 is completion of a three-year degree (BA or BSc). Level 5 represents two years of a three-year degree course or a vocational qualification usually requiring two years full time study beyond Level 3. There may be European countries in which the majority of young people become university graduates. If so, they will from Belgium, Cyprus, France, Ireland. Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland. What else do these countries have in common? Nothing except that their nationally specific transition regimes produce cohorts with at least 50 percent possessing academic or vocational qualifications at ISCED 5 or above. There are huge inter-country differences within Europe. Italy and Romania have less than 30 percent of their 25 - 34 years old with an ISCED 5 or higher. The largest bunch of European countries are between 40 and 50 percent (Roberts et al., 2024).

Here we need to recognise that the placement of a qualification in an official scheme does not mean that all actors in education and labour markets will treat all qualifications within a level as equal. Universities may discriminate among Level 3 qualifications that they require for entry. Employers may discriminate between degrees awarded by different universities. This creates pathways within routes. Ultimately it is markets, not official classifiers, that confer value and create pathways while maintaining or weakening route boundaries.

Europe's academic secondary schools and universities used to be a "Royal

Highway" into top jobs. Expansion of the route has changed this. Students are more likely to regard a university degree as the minimum requirement for any decent and acceptable job. The meaning of these terms can vary from person-to-person, but at a minimum they will mean a permanent full-time job with prospects of career and salary progression to enable other youth life stage transitions to be completed, primarily new household and family formation. Universities are still a channel for upward mobility, but they are now equally likely to be seen as an insurance against social descent. As countries' middle classes expanded during the 20th century so did the numbers of young people at risk of descent (Bukodi et al., 2015).

It is not difficult to identify the main drivers of the expansion of higher education. These are young people and their families. The more modest the rewards that university graduates can expect, the less attractive the alternatives become as graduates compete for jobs formerly accessible from other routes (Mimina & Pavlenko, 2022). Employers have not been the main drivers. It is graduates who complain about shortages of jobs in which their expertise will be rewarded (Belfield et al., 2018; Bernadi, 2003; Cairns et al., 2014; Green & Henseke, 2021; Suleman & Figuieredo, 2020). Employers do not complain about a shortage of graduates although they may complain that the products of higher education cannot offer the specific hard and soft skills that the businesses need. Graduates complain about feeling over-qualified for the jobs that they are offered. They must ponder whether it will be better to wait or step down the labour market and accept a mismatch with their qualifications (Vobemer & Schuck, 2016). This applies to graduates in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths) as well as arts and social science graduates. Researchers have pronounced the death of human capital theory (Brown et al., 2020). The claim that the great global market knowledge economy would find uses for all the expertise that graduates can offer (Reich, 1991) has failed to deliver. Students may still act as true believers, but this may be because the alternatives at age 18/19 look even less attractive than the possibility, however small, of winning one of the "glittering prizes".

Young people and their families have been the main drivers, but other actors have been complicit in the expansion of the academic university route. Higher education institutions have willingly responded to increased demand. Older universities have expanded. Private universities have joined the marketplace. Other post-secondary institutions have upgraded to university status with degree awarding functions. Governments have provided increased funding, though during expansion more of the costs have been transferred onto students and their families. Nowadays the majority of Europe's full-time higher education students hold paid jobs during term times, usually part-time but sometimes full-time (Bozzetti et al., 2024). The student lifestyle is no longer a relaxed mix of lectures, tutorials, politics, sport and cultural activities. It is more often a hectic scramble to coordinate academic timetables and paid work schedules while maintaining contact with friends and families.

During expansion the number of degree awarding institutions has grown, and higher education has been stratified. Institutions and potential entrants know where they stand. Universities are stratified by their selectivity in recruitment, the prior attainments demanded of entrants, and by the careers to which their graduates progress. Students who enter lesser-known UK universities know that it will not be a version of Oxbridge. In the USA the great expansion to mass higher education happened in the 1960s and 70s (Habibi & Kamis, 2021). Students know the rank of their institutions and which employers will give their applications serious consideration (Streib, 2023). There is a global war for talent for the top graduates from top graduate schools (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). At the base of the academic procession it is more of a global (Dutch) auction in which the lowest graduate bidders win (Brown et al., 2011).

During expansion the social class gap in participation rates has narrowed in most countries, only to be replaced by class differences in the rank of the universities that they enter. The net effect everywhere is "effectively maintained inequality" (Andrew, 2017; Becker, 2003).

Finally, employers have been complicit in the expansion of academic routes because they have the greatest power among all actors in the relevant marketplaces. Young people aim for university because "graduate preferred" is attached to a widening range of job announcements. "Technical qualifications preferred" would turn the tide towards different routes and pathways. Within the academic route new pathways have joined older ones. The latter include from top families to top secondary schools, to top universities, and then to top jobs. This pathway enables top families to be reproduced from generation to generation (Reeves and Friedman, 2024).

Vocational education and training (VET)

The appeal of the academic route depends mainly but not only on the opportunities to which it leads. Every route is a comparator of and for others. The alternatives to the academic route include other routes through education and training. All are given the prefix "vocational", however inappropriate. Officially they are all VET. Every European country has its own mix of these pathways which vary in the levels of qualification and employment to which they lead, their vocational specificity, and types and levels of employer involvement.

The expansion of the academic route poses challenges everywhere for institutions and professions that deliver the various forms of VET. These were once attractive options on account of their links with well-paid careers in mining and manufacturing. As these business sectors have declined in numbers employed, their historical associations with VET have become a handicap rather than a magnet. VET providers may find themselves in a downward spiral: reduced applications especially from young people with decent attainments in prior education, leading to less employer support. Employers may remain on committees that set syllabuses and learning targets while ceasing to offer workplace training to college-based young people. This downward spiral has been noted in Central and

Eastern Europe's new market economies (see Kogan et al., 2011; Kogan & Unt, 2008; Noelke & Horn, 2014). In conditions of fiercer international and domestic competition, firms become unwilling to train beyond their own predicted employment and skill requirements. Their willingness to train is further eroded when skilled young employees leave and join other firms, maybe in another country (Evans et al., 2000). Sections of VET then become residual, training young people with no other options for no known occupational destinations (Pantea, 2020). This has happened to the third tier of secondary schools in Germany. In the 1950s the Hauptschule educated the majority of young Germans who exited at age 15/16 into apprenticeships. These schools now enrol just 15 percent of the age group who have become stigmatised as "not fit for the mainstream" (Solga, 2002).

VET was always a diversion away from the very top occupations but it was also a safety net which reduced risks of unemployment (Shavit & Muller, 2000). It is still a diversion, sometimes straight to the bottom because it has lost the safety net compensation (Saar & Martma, 2021). A VET response to the evident appeal of the academic route has been to create an upper tier of apprentice pathways that can lead to Level 4 or 5 vocational qualifications or just to Level 3 which qualifies for entry to university (for examples see Protech & Solga, 2016; Roberts & Szumlicz, 1995).

The oldest route

There is an alternative to both VET and the academic route which should not be overlooked. Young people may be required to remain in education or training until a specified age. once 14, 15 or 16, but now typically 18 though this can be difficult to enforce, and there is usually no prohibition on them holding part-time or even full-time jobs. This third route, stepping directly from education into employment without any useful academic or vocational qualifications, should not be overlooked.

In 2019 the UK Children's Commissioner calculated that a fifth of young people were leaving education with "nothing", meaning no qualifications that carried any weight in the labour market (Children's Commissioner, 2021). This fifth will include those who, despite the legal requirement since 2015, do not remain in full-time learning until age 18. In 2019, 15 percent of 16 and 17 years old self-reported in Labour Force Surveys that they were not in full-time education (Roberts, 2021). Some young people who continue to enrol in school or college do not achieve any "useful" qualifications. They "make their way" by job experience accumulation.

There are some regions of Europe in which VET simply will not sink roots. These regions are mostly in the Southern countries: Italy which was a founder member in 1957 of what became the EU, and Portugal, Spain and Greece which joined in the 1990s. The European Commission's preferred remedies for persistent high rates of youth unemployment, pioneered in the North, have been VET, preceded when necessary by remedial education. Millions € have thrown VET at unemployment in Southern Europe. Failure to haul down the rates has not been due entirely to weak economies in de-industrialised and rural areas. There is

simply no scope in the prevailing transition regimes for VET to be inserted. The measures simply reinforce young people's entrapment (Emmanouil et al., 2023). Southern countries are also exceptional in that higher education does not reduce risks of unemployment (Albert et al., 2023; Cairns et al., 2014; Morena & Mari-Klose, 2013; Suleman & Figueiredo, 2020). Relatively high youth unemployment rates are normal in countries with a mix of features that are most common in the South. These are high levels of seasonal employment in agriculture and tourism, family cultures which will support young people throughout extended life stage transitions into their late-20s and sometimes beyond, and acceptance of "waiting" by all parties including employers. These mixtures resist efforts to insert VET into the transition regimes. European Commission prescribed that VET becomes another "waiting room" before recycling young people back to unemployment. The only routes that work are the academic route and the oldest route which is to step directly from school into the labour market after lower secondary education, sometimes later and sometimes before.

4. The Wider Twenty-First Century Context

Occupations, careers and labour markets

Changes in Europe's economies, occupations, businesses and careers mesh easily with single procession transition regimes. In a limited number of occupations it has been and remains essential to enter with a higher education qualification in a specific discipline. Most of the relevant occupations are in health care, law, teaching, research and engineering. However, even in these occupations most job skills are acquired in employment, in workplaces, not in classrooms. Training may be completed quickly, within months or even weeks, or skill acquisition may be career long. In the latter cases careers will lead up "ladders" to higher levels of status, salary and authority. Skill acquisition may be front-loaded as in European apprenticeships. These have never been solely about skills. They have enabled those fully qualified in a craft to police entry and standards of workmanship, thereby becoming "partners" of employers and other crafts. The occupations thereby become vocations. This works well only in occupations and large firms, small businesses and self-employment which can be relied on to outlast a working life.

Apprenticeships were never adopted widely in the USA. They were among the parts of the old world, like monarchs and nobles, that the new world considered itself better-off without. Occupational training in America has been incremental in both offices and factories. Novices learn and practice specific job skills quickly, become productive for their employers, and can then move on to acquire more skills which make them even more productive and valuable to their firms. The threat to the European apprenticeship model is that in the post-industrial 21st century, ICT age, everything has become fragile: liquid according to Bauman (2006), risky according to Beck (1992).

Employment in manufacturing and extractive industries has declined across

Europe and North America. These are the sectors which created most apprenticeships. Their decline has been bad for VET. ICT has changed office, professional and management occupations. All have become less "solid". Fims do not seek recruits with fixed skill-sets. They want recruits who are "smart", quick to learn. The best indicators of "smartness", judged by employment and labour markets, are academic qualifications. Extra-curricular cultural, sport and political activities can enhance CVs if they offer evidence of "soft skills"—teamwork and leadership. This explains the appeal of the academic route to young people and why employers prefer university graduates, whatever their disciplines, to applicants with occupation-specific VET qualifications.

Major multi-national corporations may still present graduate applicants with the prospect of long progressive careers in the companies, but they do not expect most recruits to remain for long. Indeed, they find that recruits tend to move on voluntarily after a few years. They move to businesses into which their skills can be transferred and added to, and where they may be able to move up faster. Young graduates engage in experience accumulation. When they are unable to move-up they will jump. If they stay immobile for too long they may find themselves pushed out.

These are the changes that have pushed Europe's transition regimes towards the American single procession. There are jobs for young people who reach the top of their countries' education regimes, and also for those who drop out of school early, or in which students can work part-time. These jobs are in warehouses, retail, hospitality and delivering by foot, bicycle or motorised transport.

There are question marks against the sustainability of the new 21st century personal portfolio careers. At the start of "prime/mid working life" (30 - 50) many young adults have still not achieved the salaries or employment security required to finish their life stage transitions with new household and family formation. At the other end of "prime" working life staff may find that their experience and skills are of diminishing value. Earlier in the UK it was employees in manufacturing and extractive industries who faced tattered, undignified ends to their working lives (Harris, 1987; Westergard et al., 1989; Young & Schuller, 1991). This blight has now spread into management and professional careers. Staff aged 50 and above who have ceased "moving up" find themselves being eased out to make room for younger cheaper staff. Those eased out may have private pension funds, but these are unlikely to sustain standards of living for 30-plus years (Riach & Loretto, 2009). Displaced managers and professionals are unlikely to relish taking lower skill, lower salary jobs which would blight their identities. The mid-2020s scare is AI replacing management and professional judgement as well as more routine office jobs.

Europe in a global context

One way to judge how well a transition regime is performing is comparisons with other countries. For Europe the most appropriate comparators are other large, economically advanced countries. Here we use Australia, Japan and the

USA. The most suitable performance indicators for which the necessary data are available are employment and unemployment rates, and also GDP per capita. The data used below are from EUROSTAT, the OECD, and the World Bank.

Europe's employment rate (16 - 64 years old) was 75.4 percent in 2023. This put Europe ahead of the USA (72 percent), but behind Australia (77.6 percent) and Japan (77.9 percent). Europe's employment rate has been rising in the 21st century among men and women and in all age groups from 16 - 24 up to 55 - 64. Needless to say, there are inter-country differences in employment rates within Europe, from Italy on 66.3 percent to the Netherlands (83.5 percent). Europe's unemployment rates look less satisfactory: 6.0 percent overall in 2024 compared with 3.8 percent in the USA, 3.4 percent in Australia and 2.6 percent in Japan. Youth unemployment rates (16 - 24) are higher in all the countries, but do not change the rank order: 14.8 percent in Europe, 9.6 percent in Australia, 7.9 percent in the USA and 3,8 percent in Japan.

On GDP per capita in 2023 Europe was alongside Japan (both $34K) but well behind Australia (60K) and the USA ($64K). The EU's statisticians estimate that 21.9 percent of Europe's workforce is over-qualified for their occupations. An inference is that Europe's transition regimes feed into economies that are underperforming, failing to use the human capital that is at their disposal. The result is that younger European job-seekers are unemployed and those in employment are less productive than in comparator countries. Europe is certainly not a global disaster zone but could do better.

5. Limitations

One limitation of this paper is due to the absence of ideal data on youth transitions. These would be internationally harmonised longitudinal studies of young people's movements from lower secondary education until established in employment. Time series stretching backward for decades would be required.

A second limitation is that the analysis is confined to Western countries, albeit expanded to include East-Central Europe. Identifying transition regimes in Asia and the rest of the Global South will undoubtedly require adding to the Europe-America, multi-track versus single procession axis.

6. Conclusion

Faced with its limitations, the disparate evidence used above demonstrates the power of a transition regime lens in identifying:

- The main direction of change in Europe: towards American-type single processions.
- The main drivers of change: young people and their families.
- The accommodators and facilitators: universities that are willing to expand, and employers who take advantage of the increased supply to widen the levels of employment for which university degrees are required or preferred.
- The main losers: VET providers.

These conclusions vindicate the use of the transition regime concept. Routes and pathways are not being deconstructed by yo-yoing and other haphazard decisions and movements by employers and young people. The conclusions demonstrate the value which is added by attaching America to intra-European comparisons, and by treating regimes as constantly negotiable rather than rigid and static. Employers have the ultimate power to decide who enters groups of occupations. However, the preferences of young people can allow some education and training providers to expand their routes and pathways, while others are starved of entrants. Future developments need to be tracked and ideally, the rest of the world needs to be included to discover whether trends in Europe in the early 21st century continue, and spread globally, as we head towards the mid-century.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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