Home or Away? Pathways to Employment for the Highly Qualified in Armenia After the Velvet Revolution

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Abstract

In this article, we take a look at transitions to employment in Armenia for the highly qualified, focusing on students and graduates. Theoretically, we acknowledge the importance of insights from prior research, including the idea of the transition-to-work as a journey, with our research questions aimed at highlighting specific challenges facing Armenian youth following spatialized and sedentary transition pathways; moving abroad for work and entering the local labour market respectively. As evidence, we make use of interviews conducted with 51 young Armenians in the months that followed the Velvet Revolution of 2018. Discussion highlights factors that inhibit highly qualified youth from finding jobs at home, including perceptions of corruption in the workplace, difficulties associated with entering foreign labour markets and the salience of recent political events.

Keywords

Armenia, youth, employment, transition-to-work, mobility, migration

Introduction

Since the country won its independence in 1991, highly qualified young people in Armenia have faced many challenges in regard to employment. Low pay, a limited range of opportunities and perceptions of corruption in the labour market are just some of the reasons why they feel socially and economically excluded from work, and ultimately Armenian society (Mkrtichyan, Vermishyan, & Balasanyan, 2016;...

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Vartikyan & Ghahriyan, 2017). The country has also long been a starting point for outward migration, not only to Europe and the United States but also Russia, especially in regard to seeking work (Zenian, 2002). Taking into account these considerations, in this article, we ask questions about the main pathways to work for highly qualified young Armenians, focusing on the choice between accepting a limited range of opportunities at home and the uncertainty of entering foreign labour markets.

In explaining why finding work can be challenging in Armenia, the country has had to cope with a major earthquake, the transition from communism and neighbourhood conflicts with Turkey and Azerbaijan. These issues are significant in shaping life chances, with hardships endured by many citizens. Additionally, in regard to outward mobility, that neighbouring countries are not viable destinations for political reasons helps explain why those wishing to move abroad must look beyond the South Caucasus. These factors are important in regard to constricting opportunities, but our intention is to focus less on context and more on experiences at ground level, using original empirical evidence gathered during the summer and autumn months of 2018. This was a timely moment to conduct research with Armenian youth due to political developments. The Armenian Velvet Revolution led to a change in political leadership but it is not yet known if an improvement in the employment prospects of highly qualified youth and young adults has taken place.

**Transitions to Work in a Transition Society**

In April and May 2018, Armenian politics took a prominent position on the world stage, undergoing what came to be termed a Velvet Revolution. A series of large-scale street demonstrations were held, the focal point being Republic Square in the capital city of Yerevan. Thousands of people protested to demand the resignation of the Prime Minister of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan. Sargsyan had held power for the previous ten years as president, putting the country squarely under Russian influence and generating a high level of dependency on the former Soviet partner, a position not to everyone’s liking. The protests, led by member of parliament Nikol Pashinyan (head of the Civil Contract party), ultimately succeeded in their demands for change, albeit following prevarication by Sargsyan, with Pashinyan elected Prime Minister of Armenia on 8 May 2018.

While political events are important to note, irrespective of such changes highly qualified youth will be undergoing other, more personalized transitions, in seeking jobs and career advancement after the completion of full-time education; transformations that involve a shift within the life course as opposed to a change in government. And as individual decisions, we need to acknowledge personal preferences in regard to where to situate one’s career path, including the decision to stay in Armenia or move abroad. Our main focus in this article will, therefore, be upon the choice between two spatially different transition pathways: staying at home to work and moving abroad respectively, at the same time wishing to know if recent events have led to changes in decisions.

At a conceptual level, we are able to use some recognizable terminology from youth sociology to help us understand this process. Most prominent is the idea of ‘transition’ itself: movement from education-to-work imagined as a journey within
the youth phase of the life course. In the past, explanations of how this happens varied but usually involved consideration of personal and socio-demographic factors (including gender, ethnicity and social class) alongside prevailing social and economic conditions, with the tension between the two encapsulated by terms such as ‘structured individualization’ (Roberts, 1995), ‘bounded agency’ (Evans, 2002) and the ‘agency-structure dynamic’ (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002), with the transition period seen as elongated, unpredictable and highly differentiated in late modern societies due to post-industrialization, flexible specialization and generalized precariousness (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). More recently, authors have emphasized the non-linear character of transitions; for instance, a longitudinal study of young women in Australia stressed the importance of fluidity in transitions, including movement back and forth between education and work (Walsh, Keary, & Gleeson, 2019). Vogt (2018) has also taken into account the bearing of historical context; in this case, the transition experiences of male Norwegian manual workers, and the importance of peer networks is acknowledged, including active collaboration between friends to strengthen individual skills profiles (Cuzzocrea & Collins, 2015).

While diverse in theme and scope, what recent scholarship confirms is that transitions are indeed complex and unpredictable, and also that young people play an active role in managing the labour market entry process; a long-standing aspect of transitions irrespective of where they take place (see also Woodman & Wyn, 2015). Equally evident is the idea of transitions as embedded in specific social, spatial and temporal contexts (as indeed are the ideas we use as theorists to help us interpret transitions), to the point of transitions being constituted into specific ‘regimes’ (Walther, 2006). How we understand an individual’s transition will hence become related to their objective circumstances and collective youth cohort experience, including the ability to navigate a path through an education system and enter a labour market, in addition to subjective orientations (including agency), with how authors write about the transition framed by then current academic trends. This might explain why transitions theorists frequently rework transitions discourse, especially in terms of what constitutes success and failure (e.g. the idea that young people are taking longer to enter the labour market or are moving between work and study more frequently), when actually, very little might have changed on the ground compared to the past.

While this is a no doubt interesting debate, our contribution to conceptualizing youth employment transitions involves engaging with another, less prominent debate, concerned with geographical mobility; moving abroad or staying at home to work. A small but significant number of articles in the youth field have already underscored the need to ‘spatialize’ transitions, be this moving between urban and rural locales within a country, engaging in transnational mobility or imagining oneself as cosmopolitan (see, e.g., Cairns, 2008; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2014; Juvonen & Romakkaniemi, 2018; Robertson, Harris, & Baldassar, 2018; Thomson & Taylor, 2005). The basic premise of much this work re-works a familiar trope, namely the idea of the transition-to-work as a journey. However, rather than being an imaginative voyage, the journey can now be seen as quite a literal one, involving circulating within physical space. This is an exploration which we aim to continue in the rest of this article, the main contribution to the mobility in transitions debate being one of presenting evidence from Armenia, a locale in which we can observe both spatialized and sedentary transitions trajectories.
Employment in Armenia

A further contextual factor concerns the state of employment in Armenia. To provide some indication of the health of the national labour market, data from the World Bank estimates the current (November 2018) unemployment rate at just over 18 per cent for the overall population. This contrasts with an equivalent figure of 1.9 per cent at the time of Armenia’s declaration of independence in 1991; in other words, a marked contrast with the immediate post-Soviet period. While taking a statistics-based approach to employment in Armenia might yield a few interesting results, our main focus in this article is not upon labour market trends but rather employment pathways for the highly qualified since we wish to learn more about how people find jobs rather than how many are in work.2

In regard to what we already know, on reviewing studies on this issue from Armenian authors the impression is that the employment situation for youth is somewhat negative to say the least. For example, the ‘Youth in Armenia Study’ provides some insight into local employment issues (Mkrtichyan et al., 2016). Based on the German Shell Youth study in respect to approach, the report looks at the aspirations, values and lifestyles of 14 to 29-year-olds in Armenia, with additional emphasis on their relationship to the Soviet legacy and the future development of Armenian society. This includes coping with economic and political instability, and high unemployment rates. One of the findings of the study is that problems exist in sourcing the financial resources necessary for acquiring what the authors term a ‘good professional education’. The role of parents in securing labour market entry is also emphasized, as are difficulties in finding jobs corresponding to area of specialization: in fact, only 35.4 per cent of the sample of 1,200 respondents worked in their chosen profession (Mkrtichyan et al., 2016, p. 22). In total, 55 per cent of respondents over the age of 23 (i.e. those who have for the most part finished their studies) were not employed, with a significant gender/marital gap; 67.2 per cent of married males were in employment while 76.6 per cent of married women were not (Mkrtichyan et al., 2016, p. 39). This situation is attributed by Mkrtichyan, Vermishyan, and Balasanyan (2016) to factors such as patronage and nepotism in finding jobs. Other studies stress contextual issues: the collapse of Soviet Union, the consequences of the Karabakh conflict and the earthquake of 1988, in addition to the transition from an economic system grounded in state socialism to one based on neoliberalism, wherein the vested interests of oligarchs are thought to prevail (Vartikyan & Ghahriyan, 2017, p. 66). The outcome, according to these authors, is an exclusion of youth from Armenian society—culturally, socially and economically—due to their lack of access to material resources to the point of providing an impetus for outward migration.

On this subject, some additional mention should be made of the mobility imperative facing many highly qualified young people, not only in Armenia. The idea that ambitious people must move abroad to realize their occupational goals is self-evident, but certain professional pathways are hard to access and opportunities unevenly spread across and within countries. One must move towards work rather than find an employer close to home, quite possibly after having submitted to a highly competitive international entry procedure (Cairns, Cuzzocrea, Briggs, & Veloso, 2017). This explains why the idea of a ‘mobility imperative’ is recognized in the study of international migration, leading to a conceptualization of the professional career as essentially ‘peripatetic’ (Ackers, 2004); however, just because an imperative exists...
does not mean everyone will act on it. This explains why in this article we look at
experiences of engaging with mobility alongside those who prefer to stay at home.

**Approach**

An important aspect of this article is recognition of young people’s own perspectives
on transitions. This explains why in respect to methodology we have taken a qualita-
tive approach, conducting interviews with 51 Armenians. Most of this work was
undertaken in the capital city of Yerevan between July and September 2018 by
Marine Sargsyan, with interviewees found through visits to workplaces, training
institutions and NGOs, in addition to various university faculties. In regard to selec-
tion, this can be described as a purposeful sample, targeting young people in work or
those still studying but already thinking about their future career.

While it would have been preferable to have a representative group, there is no
reference point for building such a sample. Most interviewees were female (37 out
of 51), and the age range was between 19 and 34 years old, although most were
aged under 25. All were based in Armenia, aside from six members of the diaspora
in Europe and the US. The interviews were conducted in English, Armenian and
Russian according to the interviewees’ preferences, transcribed and where necessary
translated into English by Marine, with names changed where necessary to protect
the identities of interviewees.

**Working in Armenia**

In this section, we will look at entering the labour market in Armenia. An initial
appraisal of the transcripts shows that only 13 out of 51 interviewees have definite
plans to remain in Armenia, although this number will rise given the difficulty of
finding appropriate opportunities abroad and the likelihood that some people will
change their minds about moving.

There are many reasons why staying in Armenia is preferred, an outstanding jus-
tification being strong attachment to home. This can be an emotional connection to
Armenia itself, as well as ties to family, friends and local neighbourhoods, which may
be so strong that the interviewee will stay even if unable to find work in their specialist
field. One of our oldest cases, 34-year-old Artak, was in such a position, who informed
us that even if he had a job offer from abroad, he would say no. Staying did however
prompt a change of career pathway. A graduate in International Relations at Yerevan
State University, Artak became an entrepreneur rather than pursue a career in this field,
creating what he termed ‘his own job’ as he was not happy working for others. Such
a position emphasizes the importance of individual choices and preferences in transi-
tions-to-work, even with the prospect of a more limited range of job possibilities.

Having a business was also an attractive option for Ruzanna, a 29-year-old spe-
cialist in Italian language and literature. Her plan is to start a business in Armenia as
she recognizes the difficulty of finding work in her specialization:

> It’s not really hard to find a job in Armenia, the thing is what kind of job one wants to find. Certainly, well paid positions are very competitive, yet a qualified specialist will certainly sooner or later find a good job in Armenia.
Therefore, and contrary to the pessimism of the literature we cited early, there are young Armenians who remain positive, if pragmatic, about their prospects at home, the main limitation being the limited range of specialist opportunities. Others take a more balanced approach to entering the local job market, managing their expectations of career progression. For example, Haykaz is a 27-year-old PhD student at the Armenian State University of Economics. He has already entered the labour market, finding his first job in a bank during the initial year of his preceding Masters programme. His approach has been to work his way up inside the organization:

I applied for a vacancy, passed the exams, went through all the stages, and got the position. I work now at the same place, having achieved a lot in regard to my career in banking.

Interestingly, Haykaz has travelled abroad during his studies but not with a view to settling in another country. His approach has been to take advantage of the many mobility programmes open to Armenian students, including an exchange visit to Harvard University. Significantly, he sees himself using his knowledge and skills from abroad in Armenia rather than as a platform for subsequent outward movement. In this sense, Haykaz has been able to ‘use’ mobility to sustain progression within a domestic career trajectory.

**Finding a job in Armenia**

Further reflections on entering the local labour market are provided by Sona, a 22-year-old recent graduate of the American University of Armenia in English and Communications. She now works at the Armenian Volunteer Corps as a Programme Assistant, a job she has held for the past ten months. When asked how she found this position, she emphasized the significance of her own preparations:

I can’t give you a concrete answer to the question of whether it is easy or difficult to find a job in Armenia as the country is in the middle of an interesting transition. Finding a job depends on different circumstances. It was easy for me as I was well prepared for it and had experience of working at the admission’s office of my university.

This is an interesting perspective in the sense that Sona has used her own experience, and what might be termed an insider’s perspective, to find a job. While this is a useful approach, not everyone has had the opportunity to work in a university admissions office or equivalent setting. This is hence an exceptional means of making the transition-to-work that other people may not be able to follow, but a near equivalent path to employment is via internship. As is the case in much of Europe and the US, this intermediate form of working is popular in Armenia, providing an initial point of entry to the labour market. In the past, this was the case for Lilit, a 32-year-old dentist who undertook an internship during her final year of university:

It was very easy for me as I was offered the chance to stay after the internship and continue working as a full-time doctor. But what I have heard from others and friends is that it is very difficult to find a job in Armenia because the job market is small and we have many graduates.
As is the case in many other countries, an internship or work placement can be an entry mechanism to full-time employment but not for everyone, with the ‘best positions’ much sought after. The competitive nature of such paths to work thus reduces the potential value of these transition-to-work pathways; that is, internship can never become a general means of entering the labour market due to in-built exclusivity.

Looking at other factors that have helped interviewees find work in Armenia, the importance of personal relationships in the workplace was repeatedly emphasized; not so much in regard to gaining an advantage but rather to being treated as inferior due to the comparatively higher strength of competitors’ social connections or potential exploitation due to power differentials in the workplace. This scenario is illustrated by Maria, a 26-year-old project coordinator and PhD student at Yerevan State University of Economics. Despite her relatively young age, Maria has already had an eventful career, marked by success and difficulty:

Before starting my position at the university, I worked for a consulting company. During that period of my career, I had several opportunities. First, I applied for an assistant position at [name of corporation] but was offered an auditor job instead. I passed IQ, auditing, English, Russian and Armenian language tests. From 50 candidates for one position they selected me. At that time there were three more offers and I was thinking for four days about which one to pick. Eventually I decided to reject this offer from [name of corporation] as auditing takes more time and energy. My classmates who have worked for the company said they sometimes stay up to eleven o’clock at night. So I rejected that offer and accepted an offer from a consulting company which was later bought and is currently owned by [name of corporation]. I was overloaded with obligations and it was very difficult, yet I loved the job because I was learning a lot from it. I would even work during weekends, being of course paid for the extra work. However, I was given a hint from my team leader, with a subtext, that nobody has progressed based on knowledge or hard work alone, and there should be a personal/physical relationship if I wanted to succeed in the company.

This somewhat unpleasant realization became a reason for Maria to leave this job, illustrating that certain occupational pathways become dead-ends when not appropriately regulated due to abuses of power. But thanks to her excellent abilities, good grades and strong connections, Maria immediately found a position in academia within which she has been able to develop her career further. Here we have another illustration of resilience among the interviewees, in confronting an unpleasant and frankly unacceptable situation in the workplace; in Maria’s case, that this took place in a well-known international accountancy firm at its office in Yerevan also reminds us that globalized work environments are as vulnerable as national concerns.

Looking at other negative aspects of the Armenian labour market, there is a widespread belief among interviewees that corruption plays a major part in constricting opportunities, with particular emphasis on the role of bribery. Two of our interviews have directly witnessed such practices. Nune and Seda both work in the same cosmetics shop, and are recent graduates of Yerevan State University; Nune studied Psychology and Seda Romano-German Languages. They found their jobs through an agency and both think finding work in general in Armenia is not a problem. The issue according to Nune is what kind of job the person is looking for and in which industry:

The system is corrupt. You should have connections and pay a bribe of about 3,000 US dollars for a job in a school. Prices for higher education are even worse. We hope that
with this new government things will change. I even know several cases where people who got their positions through a bribe were fired after the revolution and its anti-corruption campaign.

Despite this bribery situation, Nune is optimistic that recent political events in Armenia, specifically the change of government in spring 2018, will make a difference, although Seda is more pragmatic:

I see no sense or point in paying 3,000 USD for a position in a school where the salary is about 140–150 USD and besides, I didn’t study and pay fees for six years to then pay for an appointment. People get positions through connections, and they may not have good qualifications, but connections and the bribe come first. At least that was the reality before the revolution.

They are now both satisfied with their salary at the cosmetics shop and see themselves staying in Armenia in the future. However, Seda, with her specialism in Linguistics, did once have a dream of studying at Cambridge but now she thinks it would be very expensive and that this ambition cannot be fulfilled.

**Progress within the Labour Market**

In looking at positive attributes that can influence success in finding a job in Armenia, an issue that features heavily in our interviewees’ accounts is the importance of their personal qualities, something that also applies to progression along a career trajectory, with much persistence in evidence. Thinking back on our ‘transitions’ theoretical context, and having already brought to light some contextual impediments, this reflection confirms the significance of agency and individualization, showing how ambition can help energize a transitions trajectory. This scenario is illustrated by Mariam, a 24-year-old Political Science graduate, who told us that it took her five months to find work in Armenia. Having graduated in May last year, she found a job in October as a junior research fellow, and then her appointment was extended with a new position within the same organization; in other words, her persistence and patience paid off.

While resilience can be a positive trait, we should also acknowledge that a lack of progress may lead to career stagnation even if much determination is evident; for example, the case of Gayane, a 28-year-old Medicine graduate. It took her a year to find a job after finishing her degree:

I found a job after a year through an agency. I had left my CV and a cover letter, and after a month I had a phone call for a position. I had an interview and got the job, where I worked for a year as a nurse.

More tellingly for Gayane, finding a job in her field with a reasonable wage was the more challenging issue:

I found my second job while visiting a dentist and they needed an assistant in the clinic. After a friendly conversation I got the new job, but the salary was the same as it was six years ago, something that I was not happy about, and that forced me to leave this job to find a new position with a higher income.
Judging how much time to invest in searching for a position and how long to ‘endure’ an unsatisfactory job for are therefore important considerations. Working conditions, including salary, obviously have a bearing upon career progression beyond the point of labour market entry. Poor wages are one obstacle, as is favouritism. This has been an issue for Narine, a 29-year-old International Relations graduate, who has previously studied in The Netherlands and the US. After graduation, she found a teaching post at an Armenian university, thanks to her good grades and the support of her PhD supervisor. However, the conditions under which she has to work are difficult:

The academic job market in Armenia is very challenging. It is really competitive, yet very badly paid. It is not respectful as in the EU or the US. I have experience teaching in Estonia and was offered exchange tutoring in Moscow, but the position went to another candidate from my home university in Armenia, which was unfair and affected by external influence; the connection thing. It was very disappointing because the other person didn’t have the qualifications or the knowledge and experience in the field. And the position was not well paid either.

Other challenges are faced by those from outside Yerevan. Greta and Zaruhi are medical students from the Noyemberyan and Gyumri regions respectively, both in their final year at university. They both pay annual fees of 800,000 Armenian Dram for their education and rent an apartment for 80,000 AMD a month, in addition to having to pay for food, transport and other expenses related to their studies. Greta explains:

We have to take care of ourselves, while it is very comfortable when after a class, tired and hungry, you come home and everything is prepared for your rest and you can enjoy your meal, for us it is very difficult. But we want to continue our education and would like to find a job in Yerevan, because in the regions, salaries are even lower despite there being high demands on doctors. Life is poor […] Salaries are too low and the main income comes from extra payments or not registered services that go directly to the doctor’s pocket. For example, an Otorhinolaryngology doctor in Gyumri has an official salary of 65,000 AMD [per month] and of course it is not possible to live on that salary. And that’s where the corruption and bribes start.

Doubts are also expressed about the quality of their training; both had internships in local hospitals but were not happy with their experiences, although they think that the theoretical dimension of medical education in Armenia is generally very good. There are also prospects for moving abroad, with many examples of Armenian medical students continuing their careers in Germany.

In evaluating these accounts in terms of the previously introduced ideas about youth transitions, we can argue that concepts such as ‘structured individualization’ come under considerable strain when one elects to stay in Armenia, arguably more so than in the European and Anglophone contexts from which many youth scholars draw their insights. Therefore, while Furlong and Cartmel (2007) were correct to assert that the process through which young people find jobs has become elongated, unpredictable and highly differentiated in a country like the United Kingdom, the forms and perhaps the intensity of the potential for transitions deceleration and derailment in Armenia is presented by certain interviewees as being of much
greater intensity, with these situations being persistent features of the local labour market rather than new developments. It is also worth remarking that people do not necessarily make decisions about work according to an economic maximization position: emotional attachments can outweigh what are ostensibly more logical choices. Additionally, a more mundane although almost certainly more important consideration relates to the quality of opportunities. As noted by Armenian authors (e.g., Mkrtichyan et al., 2016; Vartikyan & Ghahriyan, 2017), low pay and insecurity of tenure are endemic, meaning that even if people are able to enter the local labour market their position might offer a limited potential for personal development and professional advancement, reducing further the chance of settling into secure employment.

### Outward Trajectories

The remaining part of our discussion is concerned with outward work trajectories to countries and regions including Russia, the US and the EU, representing a continuance of the idea of mobility in transitions introduced in a previous article in this journal (Cairns, 2008). In regard to the popularity of movement abroad in Armenia, a report prepared by the European Training Foundation and Caucasus Research Resource Centre in Yerevan (2013), based on survey evidence from 2011 and 2012, provides some background information. While not a youth specific analysis, a number of important findings emerge. For instance, 36 per cent of people aged between 18 and 50 years of age in the survey sample were seriously considering leaving Armenia, with the likelihood of migration strongest among highly educated respondents. Motivations for wanting to leave included employment, specifically better quality of employment compared to what was on offer at home, with Russia the most popular destination [European Training Foundation/Caucasus Research Resource Centre (ETF/CRRC), 2013, pp. 4–5].

Moving abroad is however challenging in many different ways, economically and emotionally, and not everyone seeking work abroad finds the job they are looking for. Looking at the success stories among our interviewees, those who have left and are now established in a foreign labour market to a certain extent, we find Armine, a 27-year-old Brussels-based trainee at the European Parliament. Previously, she studied in Armenia and the UK, at Cambridge University. Rather than financial gratification, she ascribes her motivation to move abroad to an ambition she has held since she was 11 years old:

> It was my dream to study at Cambridge because of the name (I know that may sound funny) and because Cambridge was founded by the graduates of Oxford and is a more liberal university, which is closer to my personality. This dream was also supported by my parents. After my education in the UK, which was in Development Studies, I came back to Armenia hoping to put this knowledge and experience into practice, but couldn’t find a job for three months. After finding a job I faced challenges and had a very negative experience, as my supervisor was an ignorant and absolutely arrogant person. I was also paid less in comparison to other staff who were not Armenian citizens; they only had BA Degree Diplomas but had US citizenship of Armenian descent. They didn’t extend my contract but I was selected for a traineeship in Brussels at the European Parliament.
This is an interesting account in a number of ways, not least the fact that Armine’s experiences underline the importance of parental support while studying abroad and the difficulties of using ‘mobility capital’ on return to the sending society, an issue that is by no means exclusive to Armenian ‘migrants’ (see Hu & Cairns, 2017). But it is alarming to discover another example of a workplace in Armenia where inequalities are present, in this case related to differentials in citizenship, and this is something that certainly influenced Armine’s decision-making. On a more positive note, she is now content with her work in Brussels, although that this is a fixed-duration placement is a concern, with the prospect of having to find another position placing limits on her capacity to pursue a spatialized career. Mobile transition phases may in fact be just that; an elongation stage that offsets rather than augments the possibility of attaining a stable position within the labour market (see also Cairns et al., 2017).

**Aspiring to Work Abroad**

While the case of Armine provides a vivid example of what can be achieved during a stay abroad, most accounts we have from the Armenia-based interviewees discuss mobility more in terms of future aspirations than fully realized actions; looking at those who have attempted to find employment, as opposed to scholarships and work placements, we can see that successfully entering a foreign labour market is very difficult. Some of the problems encountered in moving to Russia are demonstrated by Hasmik, an Accountancy graduate who started her degree at Moscow Economic University. Hasmik first left and then returned to Armenia as she was not optimistic about her job prospects in Russia, attributing this to her Armenian heritage:

> It is very difficult to enter the job market in Russia with an Armenian surname and I was even told to change the ending of my name by the faculty. I had excellent grades and they said that this will help me to move forward and build a career in Russia.

Hasmik refused to change her name and instead finished her education in Armenia. After graduation it was unfortunately hard for her to find work in Yerevan, leading her to accept a job outside her specialization in a chemical plant, which then closed in 2015, emphasising the importance of labour market conditions to the transition-to-work. At this point she tried to find another job through agencies but without success. The only offers she received were to work as a cleaning lady or dishwasher. Now aged 31 and a single mother of one daughter, Hasmik is considering moving back to Russia despite her previous difficulties there. This example vividly illustrates the challenging nature of matching aspirations about moving abroad with the reality of situations that may be objectively no better or even worse than what has been left behind.

In other cases, a failure to settle abroad relates to different considerations. Another example of moving to Russia is provided by Sasun, who studied Finance and Credit at the Yerevan branch of the Moscow Entrepreneurship International Academy. After graduating, he tried to find a job back in Armenia:

> I applied for positions at [Armenian banks] and many other banks but being disappointed, I decided to try my luck in Russia. I moved to St. Petersburg where I started working in the
restaurant business. For two years I lived in St. Petersburg, but then my family insisted that I come back to Armenia, have a family and stay in the homeland.

This case illustrates the fact that moving to Russia does not necessarily present an opportunity to develop a career using one’s specialism; in this case, banking. And now back in Armenia, although he hasn’t married or started a family, Sasun is working as a sales manager at a brandy company, having made another change of career direction.

While moving abroad is one option, Sasun demonstrated another way of connecting with other countries: studying at branches of international institutions in Armenia. This situation is further illustrated by Karen and Anahit, who are both studying Business Administration at the American University of Armenia. Part of their motivation for doing so is the lower cost, although as Karen explains, there were other considerations:

We don’t have a state scholarship and education at our university is very expensive, but they have some discounts related to academic achievements. We are also given the opportunity to have internships during summer. So we are lucky when it comes to getting experience, because in comparison to other universities there are more opportunities for working in international companies thanks to our language skills and practical knowledge.

These factors make this choice more appealing. Therefore, although Karen wanted to study in the UK, he eventually decided on the American University in Armenia, but when he finishes, he plans to continue his education in the US at Harvard Business School, with his time spent studying in Yerevan providing an opportunity to generate essential skills including language fluency.

Anahit meanwhile wishes to study at Charles University in Prague because she loves the city and likes the fact that this university is reportedly the oldest in Eastern Europe. Moving to Europe, and to the EU in particular, is also perceived by her as less problematic compared to going to the US or Russia, and as Anahit explains, working for the European institutions also presents the possibility of avoiding some of the more negative aspects of Armenian society:

I had internships in local and international organizations in Armenia and my impression is that local institutions still have a Soviet approach, and people get positions through their connections, mostly. International organizations are more competitive, but well paid and entering there, you develop your skills as a professional. The other difference is that local state institutions sometimes demand that you stay at work till eight pm, and you never get paid extra, while international organizations pay for each extra hour. Working for an international organization you can also travel abroad for experience and knowledge exchange, while in local-national institutions connections decide who will be sent for a business trip.

All these considerations are significant and wanting to avoid such situations has a bearing on generating a desire to leave Armenia or work in an international environment for these interviewees.

Despite these remarks, it is notable that the interviewees who have already engaged in outward mobility for employment purposes tend to have endured negative experiences, with the ‘internationalization dream’ failing to come to fruition (see also Cairns et al., 2017). The harsh reality of foreign labour markets can in fact
come as something of a shock to those without prior experience of working abroad, whose prior travel experience was restricted to participating in relatively sedate holidays or student exchanges. Nevertheless, the belief that things are brighter outside Armenia remains an important driver of outward mobility, particularly where there appears to be little or no chance of pursuing a chosen career path at home. This is certainly the case for Alvard and Hayarpi, two third year students at Yerevan State Conservatory, specializing in opera. They both see themselves working abroad in the future as they believe there are no opportunities for opera singers in Armenia. Alvard wishes to study in Edinburgh, having previously sung in Moscow, Vienna and at the Mariinsky theatre in St. Petersburg. Both also acknowledge the importance of London as a centre for the arts in Europe, and they believe that their work would be appreciated there. But in order to be able to move abroad they must participate in entry competitions. That is how they will be noticed. As Hayarpi states: ‘It is all a matter of luck.’

Post-revolutionary Transitions?

While we have some interesting reflections on moving abroad, and a few insights into living and working in other countries, there are no clear indications that decisions about leaving among those contemplating an exit are being reversed after the Velvet Revolution. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, political change does not necessarily lead to societal change, at least not in the short-term, and this seems to apply to mobility choices. Among our interviewees based in Armenia, it should therefore come as no surprise to learn that we have no support for the idea that people are changing their career plans in the immediate aftermath of the Velvet Revolution. Positive views of recent developments were however found among those already living abroad. For example, David is a 27-year-old Project Director at a consultancy company in Berlin. He moved to Germany having previously worked in Russia after finishing his studies at the Russian–Armenian Slavonic University in Yerevan, and had the following to say:

The positive side of this revolution is that now people realize their real power and if Nikol Pashinyan, the current Prime Minister does not fulfil his promises, then he will have the same destiny as the overthrown government. The diaspora is very enthusiastic, but at the same time sceptical about these changes, as we all understand that it will take time to see the results of the events in terms of political, economic and social change in the country.

Nevertheless, David thinks these changes are radical, especially considering that during 27 years of independence there have been many political challenges, even if it will take time to see the real outcome of the Velvet Revolution. Therefore, he can’t say whether it will be positive or negative in long run, but that Armenians abroad are very enthusiastic and have great hopes raises the prospect of members of the diaspora engaging in return migration. As such, we need to refrain from making conclusions about the impact of the revolution on transitions to the labour market, although the issue obviously warrants future exploration.

These mobile trajectories are, however, in some respects disheartening in regard to the lack of unambiguous success stories; there is certainly no overwhelming sense that moving abroad presents a risk free means of resolving all the contradictions that
arise in attempts to find a professional position that is, at the very least, adequate in terms of future prospects. Such a realization challenges our preconceptions about the value of mobility to transitions to employment. Mobile pathways are neither easy to access nor comfortable to follow. Nevertheless, moving abroad may come to feel as if it is a more or less mandatory requirement, for example, in the cases of Alvard and Hayarpi, which suggests that outward trajectories will continue to attract the interest of many ambitious young Armenians.

**Concluding Remarks**

In this article, we have examined some key pathways to work for highly qualified young Armenians. At the outset, we have to accept the limitations of our empirical material; that we are exploring rather than defining these routes. Our analysis is, therefore, illustrative rather than decisive. What we are able to offer is a fresh perspective on transitions-to-work in a society undergoing political change, acknowledging influences associated with regional location, including reported difficulties in the local labour market, and difficulties in using spatial trajectories to secure employment. Reaching some tentative conclusions, we can however state that the interviewees generally face a difficult choice when entering the labour market. And while the impact of the recent Velvet Revolution has yet to be felt, there are signs that change is anticipated, particularly in regard to the inequalities in the workplace that we have been able to highlight. It is however among members of the diaspora where we find most hope in regard to an improvement in circumstances.

Our evidence also enables us to affirm that it is sometimes necessary to take pragmatic decisions about work so as to be able to enter or remain within the labour market; for instance, accepting a job outside a specialism or slowly working one’s way up inside an organization. This pragmatism extends to dealing with difficult situations in the workplace, with a significant degree of resilience demonstrated by several of the interviewees. Reflecting on what these observations mean for our appreciation of transitions-to-work per se, we can add a certain amount of grit to ongoing debates in youth sociology about how young people find jobs and progress within labour markets at home and abroad, and inform the mobility in transitions debate.

Additionally, while there are shared experiences in regard to the challenge of entering the labour market with other global regions, some of the situations we have uncovered in Armenia do not generally form part of the conversation in the Anglophone and European worlds; for instance, young people in those countries do not generally expect to have to bribe their way into a first job or cope with chronically low wage levels when skilled and highly qualified. And in the era of the #MeToo movement, the personal abuse of junior employees by their more powerful superiors within outwardly respectable organizations is frankly disgusting and should be made a policy priority at national and international levels. These may be outlying experiences, but the feeling that access to certain professions in Armenia is effectively blocked by corrupt practices or outright lechery comes across very clearly in different accounts. This negativity also contributes to a strong mobility imperative, despite the fact that we have relatively few success stories in regard to labour market integration among those who have left, creating a potentially self-replicating cycle.
of disadvantage. For this reason, mobility is an answer but not necessarily the correct one in regard to the challenge of finding appropriate work among the highly qualified in Armenia.

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**Notes**

1. The Velvet Revolution in Armenia, named so due to its largely peaceful nature.
2. For details on employment trends in Armenia, including youth unemployment, see https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=AM&name_desc=false
3. The overall scale of outward migration from Armenia is also useful to note, with the number of Armenian migrants according to a World Bank survey stated as 870,200 in number or 28.3 per cent of the total population, with the top destination countries being Russia, the US, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Israel, Germany, France, Spain and Greece (World Bank, 2011).

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