

## Facilitating Meaningful School-to-Work Transitions for Students of the Institute of Technical Education (ITE)

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### KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Academic/vocational education hierarchical divide needs to be narrowed to enhance ITE certifications and vocational identities for career progression.
- The enhanced curricular discontinuities as well as curricular tensions around meeting the needs of the market and the higher educational aspirations of youths need to be addressed to facilitate smoother transitions and change in aspirations.
- Understanding how learner identity can develop in the course of one's learning career can lead to better engagement and guidance of youths.

### BACKGROUND

Singapore's education system has witnessed much changes over the years, including the introduction of multiple pathways to better cater to varying needs of students as well as the enhancement of vocational education and

routes. However, how these changes translate into educational experiences and school-to-work transitions for ITE students and alumni have been little researched. Thus this study, through a longer contextualisation of school-to-work transitions, examines the narratives of ITE youths, looking at their trajectories, navigation of education and work, learning careers, transitional decision-making and sense of success. It seeks to understand the interaction between individual dispositions and structured opportunities to uncover how transitions could be better supported particularly in face of an uncertain future economy.

### FOCUS OF STUDY

The study examines the life trajectories and school-to-work transitions as well as the subjective experiences of ITE students and alumni. It surfaces the enablers and challenges at various transitions and also investigates the relationship between individual dispositions, institutional habitus and opportunity structures.

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*This brief was based on OER 11/18 TSS: Pathways to Meaningful Careers: Understanding the Successes and Challenges of ITE students School-to-work Transitions.*

## KEY FINDINGS

The main findings are presented in brief below.

- ITE is increasingly seen by some ITE students as a stepping stone in their educational journey and not the final destination. There is a need to manage curricular tensions to meet preparation needs for higher education vs preparation for work.
- The transformation of ITE over the years have provided a positive institutional habitus for its students that generates compensatory effects in relation to the social/cultural capital. However, there are tensions within ITE institutional habitus. In spite of the curriculum offer and expressive order of caring culture, its relative subordinate educational status external to other institutions meant the stigma associated with vocational education and ITE students remains.
- Opportunity structures like financial aid and work-study options help much to facilitate post-ITE transitions. However, much of interviewees' challenges cited relating to structural issues beyond ITE, such as learning gaps between ITE and polytechnic for educational progression as well as the inadequacy of ITE certifications for career prospects still need addressing.
- Interviewees' learning careers suggest that youths' learning identity is not static and they may exhibit, discover and/or develop learning dispositions at different phases of life. Their learning agency could be activated by non-academic activities in or beyond school which could lead to positive academic and/or non-academic outcomes.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

- Policy – There needs to be a more concerted effort to reduce the knowledge/ skills hierarchy and polarisation in our society. The move to widen educational pathways should be complemented by greater recognition of vocational work to avoid reifying credentialism. Students of different bands

and school types could be more systematically exposed to both 'head' and 'hand' learning, and the importance of both learnings need to be impressed upon them.

- Policy, ITE and polytechnic educators – Given the discontinuities in curricular teaching/learning approaches between ITE and polytechnic that many interviewees were challenged by, ITE lecturers may need to balance “the culture of care” ecology with training students for more independent learning required in higher education. Also, the Polytechnic foundation programme could enhance facilitation of teaching/learning continuities. A review of the curricular continuities from lower levels of education upwards could have implications on the implementation of the Full Subject-Based Banding.
- Educational and career guidance – Educational pathways should allow space and time for the nurturing of learning dispositions that could benefit them for life. Adults working with youths should recognise a wider range of learning and help them develop these dispositions as well as connect non-academic learning to academic learning.

## PARTICIPANTS

A total of 3 cohorts of former and current students of ITE, who had graduated 1993 onwards, were involved in the study.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative study employs a life-course approach and an adapted form of the biographical narrative interview method (BNIM) to investigate participants' life trajectories and school-to-work transitions, situating them within the broader socio-historical context in connection to structural and institutional developments. Almost 200-hour worth of interviews were conducted with 62 interviewees mostly across two interview sessions in this study.

## How to cite this publication

Teng, S. S. (2024). *Facilitating Meaningful School-to-Work Transitions for ITE Students* (NIE Research Brief Series No. 24-012). Singapore: National Institute of Education.

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