CHAPTER 4

‘Figuring it out’. Continuity or discontinuity of work in young rural-urban migrants’ education to work transition in Kathmandu, Nepal

Abstract

Although youth research has highlighted the importance of a holistic understanding of the changing nature of youth education to work transitions, few studies have examined these transitions from a process perspective. In this study on continuity and discontinuity of work, the process perspective proved to be useful to analyse the education to work transition of rural-urban migrants in Kathmandu, Nepal. Qualitative longitudinal data, consisting of two consecutive in-depth interviews, with twenty-one participants, reveal how they shift choices, negotiate positions, embrace changes and decisions. A reemphasis on the understanding of rural-urban migrant youth education to work transition as part of a process is suggested calling for a holistic understanding of rural-urban migrant youth education to work transition among scholars and policymakers in Nepal and also in other contexts.

Introduction

In the last few decades, a number of studies have been carried out to examine the education to work transitions of young people. The concept of education to work raises several questionable issues. First, some scholars assume that the transition from education to work used to be a linear process which turned into a non-linear process (see MacDonald et al., 2001; Wyn & Woodman, 2006). Other researchers have debated that it has never been short, smooth and linear, but rather non-linear, longer and zigzag (see MacDonald et al., 2001; Wyn & Woodman, 2006). For example, Vickerstaff (2005) collected reflexive accounts of past transitional experiences, which show that the patterns of transition for the youth cohort studied during the 1960s and 1970s period were ‘safe and cushioned’ for some while for others they were ‘unpleasant and fragmented’.

Secondly, the concept assumes that the transition mainly consists of two stages i.e. full-time education to full-time work. The notion of the education to work transition suggests that the starting point of transition is finishing full-time education (Sanderson, 2019), but in many cases, young people had to make the transition into work before they could finish their education. For example, a study conducted by MacDonald et al. (2001) in Teesside, Northeast England, shows that socially excluded young people often face difficulties to make the education to work transition. These young people had to leave school and enter into the labour market due to financial constraints. Therefore their trajectories do not fit the notion of education to work transition from full-time education to full-time work This demonstrates that the
concept of education to work transition excludes those who do not follow this two stage transition process.

And finally, the approach universalises the experiences of young people from the Global North to the lived experiences of young people from Global South. The notion of the education to work transition falsely assumes that young people, also in the developing countries, could easily transition into a full time permanent job after entering into the labour market (Peng, 2019; Yeboah, 2020). For many young people in developing countries, there are no fixed stages and there is no fixed time of arrival in adulthood; social inequalities, poverty, racial discrimination, and socio-cultural factors often determine the transition stages, each influencing the other (Chen, 2018). Thus, this notion of education to work transition fails to capture the trajectories of young people in developing countries who migrate to the cities for education and work. Peng (2019) and Yeboah (2020) show that young rural-urban migrants in the city does not solve the problems of these young people, as they face difficulties finding a decent job in the urban areas. The transition experiences of young people with a rural-urban migrant background are often filled with episodes of unemployment, short-term employment, combining education with part-time work and back to education (Basnet et al., 2020).

This paper aims to add to the emerging body of literature about rural-urban migrants’ education to work transitions by exploring how Nepalese young rural-urban migrants working at call centres in Kathmandu reflect on their career decisions, focusing on their choices to continue or discontinue work. Drawing on longitudinal qualitative research data obtained from 21 rural-urban migrants working at call centres in Kathmandu, this paper explores: What factors influence the continuity or discontinuity of work among young rural-urban migrants in Nepal?

**Rural-urban migrant youth education to work transition as a process**

In the recent decade, scholars (Chea & Huijsmans, 2018; Crivello, 2011; Punch, 2015) have explored the intersection of rural-urban migration and youth education to work transitions in geographically and culturally diverse contexts. Their studies have investigated rural-urban migrants’ education to work transitions in terms of migration to the cities (Crivello, 2011), job-hunting tactics (Chea & Huijsmans, 2018) and managing the job and city environment (Yeboah, 2020). The findings cater to broader debates and understanding of youth education to work transition research, that indicates that rural to urban migration within young people’s trajectories provide undisturbed pathways (Peng, 2019). As Wood (2017, p. 11) points out:
Such approaches fail to recognise gradual and continual change and the non-linear, round-about and discontinuous way decisions are made, and actions are taken.

The traditional approach to understanding rural-urban migrant youth education to work transition and hence to adulthood has underpinned the education to work transition as a one-time event. More holistically attuned understanding of rural-urban youth education to work transition takes into account the changes that inform social, political and economic changes in individual lives for a longer period of time. Locating rural-urban migrant young people’s lives within a longer period of time reduces the risk of just focusing on young people’s education to work transition as a success or a failure. It accentuates the shift in choices, changes, negotiations and decisions taken throughout the journey. As a result, it develops an understanding of education to work transition as a process. This transition process encompasses a process of ‘becoming’ that shapes the rural young people’s decisions in their education to work transitions (Crivello, 2011). In spite of these insights, little research exists in understanding rural-urban migrant youth education to work transition as a process.

Recent rural-urban migrant youth studies highlight the changes in decisions, negotiation of their positions and work-life experiences after securing a job (Peng, 2019; Sanderson, 2019; Yeboah, 2020). Young migrants often have to modify their career aspirations or divert themselves from their plans to adapt themselves to the situation at hand. For example, many rural young people have to manage both their personal and familial expenses which often influences their educational and work decisions and opportunities (Rönnlund et al., 2017). Rural-urban youth live highly complex lives and manage multiple domains such as education and family responsibilities (work at home and or in the field or family business) and employment as waged workers. Thus, this makes trajectories fluid and yet entangled with the socio-cultural factors that shape and constrain their choices (Brøgger, 2019). A social network, for example, is integral to young people’s education to work transition experiences. The absence of a social network forces young people to engage themselves in informal work (Yeboah, 2020). For Peng (2019, p. 3), this means the education to work transition of young migrants is a ‘constantly evolving process where various events, decisions and experiences at different times’ shape the narratives of young people even after getting employment.

As such, personal and familial responsibilities, the absence or presence of a social network in the city, may restrict or facilitate young rural-urban migrants’ transitions from education to work and influence their career expectations and career outcomes, resulting in more or less smooth education to work trajectories. This paper attempts to provide insights into the education to work transitions by studying the continuity and discontinuity in the work of rural-urban migrant youth from a process perspective.
The Nepalese context of young rural-urban migrants’ education to work transitions

In the context of Nepal, young people are socially and culturally obliged to provide financial support to their families (Chen, 2018), which may make them seek employment opportunities through migration. Previous research on young people’s employment in Nepal has demonstrated how employment trajectories of youth are dependent on educational attainment, appropriate social connections (Dhungel, 2019), and demography (Snellinger, 2018). It formally takes ten years (excluding preschool) to complete the secondary level of education, two additional years for higher secondary education and three to four years of full-time study to complete a bachelor’s degree in a specific field. Young people and their families can apply for personal loans and grants, however, state educational loans are unavailable.

It is necessary to take into consideration Nepal’s ten-year conflict since 1996 which has exacerbated the situation in rural areas. In rural areas, many education structures, in particular, were purposefully damaged to force young people to participate in the civil conflict on the side of the Maoists (Valentin, 2012). For young people in rural settings, lack of proper learning institutions created constraints for educational success and transition to decent work. Many of them were forced to discontinue their education due to a lack of financial resources and lack of proper education institutions in their respective regions (Kölbel, 2013). The lack of resources motivated them to migrate from rural areas to the cities. These movements are often combined with aspirations for higher education and work opportunities, to fulfil their financial responsibilities towards their families (Chen, 2018), and cover personal expenses during their studies (Kölbel, 2013). Kathmandu, the capital city, became the prime destination for students. The expansion of higher education institutions in Kathmandu provided an avenue for young people from different socio-economic backgrounds to forge social mobility. Although practices of international migration of young people have been studied to understand youth transitions in Nepal (Brøgger, 2019; Valentine, 2019), internal migration for education and work has received relatively little scholarly attention.

Like in many other developing countries, rural-urban migrants in Nepal often face a lack of social connections when navigating their livelihood in the cities (Kölbel, 2013). They face risks and financial distress such as excess of work and educational dropout, which further exacerbate social inequalities (Brøgger, 2019). Due to their limited financial resources, young people with a rural background are forced to combine study and work (Kölbel, 2013). To afford the high living costs of the city they have to work fulltime in parallel to their studies (Brøgger, 2019). The jobs they aspire are in a bank
or in government institutions, but they struggle to land in those jobs not only because of the particular skills required but also because of the lack of social connections. In line with this, a study by Kölbel (2013) with young public university students (with a rural background) demonstrated caste-based and gender-based discrimination in Kathmandu affecting the trajectories of the young students. These situations led young people to either engage in precarious work or migrate abroad for better economic opportunities.

According to an International Labour Survey Report (2014), more than 70 per cent of the total economically active population work in the informal employment sectors and 92.2 per cent of young people in Nepal are engaged in informal employment. The changing patterns of employment structures are providing room for informal employment to expand. Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries, including call centres, are part of such informal employment sectors where employees work without contracts (Shrestha & Sharma, 2013). In Kathmandu, these outsourcing services were transferred from India, where IT-BPO services started to contribute significantly to the Indian economy (Pradhan 2016). Unlike in countries such as India and the Philippines, these service sectors run on a small to medium scale in Kathmandu. Even so, they created a demand for employees with a fair knowledge of spoken English and computer skills.

For the small-scale business settings such as call centres, the rural-urban migrant students are suitable employees because of their secondary education and the need to combine work with education. The new job opportunities are especially attractive to young people navigating their education to work transition. As these industries have not been integrated into the workforce evaluation, they are almost non-existent in Nepalese statistics (Pradhan, 2016) and very little research has been conducted on young people working at call centres in Nepal. Still, the service sector seems to give an important socio-economic contribution to the lives of young rural-urban migrant students as one does not need a social network to work at a call centre in Kathmandu. Exploring the experiences of these rural-urban migrants working at call centres provides meaningful insights into the life trajectories of rural-urban migrant youth.

**Methodology**

The study adopted a qualitative longitudinal research approach as the most appropriate design to document and understand the change and continuity in the lives and trajectories of young people over a longer period of time (Crivello et al., 2013). Kathmandu city was selected as a suitable location to study this phenomenon, as large
numbers of call centres are found in Kathmandu (Shrestha & Sharma, 2013), which may be attributed to the centralised facilities and resources in Kathmandu. The expanding rural-urban migrant young population, who are working at different small to medium size service sectors such as call centres in the context of Nepal, have not yet been subject to studies. Call centres can be described as service centres with sufficient telecom, internet facilities and an extensive collection of databases, which provide voice-based or web-based information and support to the customers based in the country or abroad through trained personnel (Patel, 2010). They are widely dispersed in Kathmandu with great variance in terms of employees, work schedules and services. A shared feature is the substantial number of rural-urban young migrants among their employees. These young migrants match the requirements of a fair educational back-ground, a fair level of spoken English and availability to work different shifts. Work experience is not required.

**Longitudinal study**

The data collection was done between April 2018 and February 2019 with 24 research participants in Kathmandu, Nepal. The research subjects were rural youth who had migrated to Kathmandu either for studies or work and found a job in Kathmandu at a call centre. The study used snowball sampling to conduct life (hi)story interviews with these research participants between 16 and 25 years old. The employers of the call centres were approached with a research request with their employees who had following characteristics: rural-urban migrants and who were in the age group of 16 and 25 years old. Most of the research participants were higher secondary school graduates; few were undergraduate students and some just completed their secondary education. They had studied in either public or private schools.

Drawing on the data collected over 12 months with a six months gap between two in-depth interview phases with the same participants, the focus was on examining continuity and discontinuity of their work at the call centre and how their choices, decisions and positions shifted in six months. The first phase of the interviews was conducted between April and October 2018 with 24 participants, 12 females and 12 males; the second phase of the interviews was conducted between November 2018 and February 2019 with the same participants reduced in number to 21: 11 females and 10 males. The participants’ number reduced in the second phase as three participants could not be contacted after trying several times. They had either switched off their phones or did not reply to messages. At the time of the first phase of the interview, the research participants were working in Kathmandu at different call
centres in the capacity of caller agents, a human resource person, a quality controller, and search engine optimisation agents.

After six months, the second phase of the interviews took place. The second research interview began with a reflection on the interview reports shared with the participants based on the first interview. To understand how their lives had evolved in six months, semi-structured questions were posed: ‘So, since we had our last meeting and until today what has happened in your life?’ After the semi-structured questions, the researcher made the interview process resemble a conversation i.e. participating equally during the interview to build trust, get clear and elaborated answers from the research participants. When detailed information was obtained, questions such as ‘Will you look for another job in the near future?’, ‘Are you thinking of combining education and work in the future?’ were asked informally to validate the data and further delve into participants’ stories of change and continuity or anything they wished to share. Data were documented as reflection notes (for each interview) and audio recordings. To maintain the authenticity of the data the participants were given the choice to choose the language of communication during the interview (Nepali and/or English). All the interviews were recorded after taking written consent from the participant. Each interview lasted between two to three hours in the first phase, whereas in the second phase it lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. The interview varied in length due to the time availability of the participants.

Using the longitudinal data, first, we analysed the transition patterns and key events influencing the patterns among the rural-urban migrant youth education to work transition (Basnet et al., 2020). To protect the research participants’ identities pseudonyms (chosen by themselves) were given to participants. The analysis of the narratives/stories was based on the thematic analysis guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Boeije’s (2002) Constant Comparative Method (CCM). The first step in the CCM was comparative analysis of themes within a single interview, followed by a comparison between interviews within the same group. Then the analysis follows a comparison between groups with different perspectives about the same subject of the study. The codes were analysed inductively, and a set of sub-themes and themes were developed aiming to identify factors influencing continuity or discontinuity of work among young people.

In this paper, we analyse the continuity or discontinuity of work in the education to work transitions among the research participants. The 12 months longitudinal data with a gap of six months between the data collection phases provided an opportunity to explore and develop a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing the
Findings

During the first phase of the interview, all participants worked at call centres in various positions and for various reasons in Kathmandu. The narratives of the research participants show that key life events such as migrating to Kathmandu and the mandatory waiting periods influenced their education to work patterns (Basnet et al., 2020). In the second phase of the in-depth interviews, 11 out of 21 participants were found to continue working at the call centres, whereas ten were found to have discontinued working and were enrolled in higher education. Out of the 11 participants who continued working; seven were combining the work with their study and four were working full-time at a call centre. These four had either dropped out of school or had no further interest in pursuing higher education. Of the 10 participants who discontinued working one travelled abroad for a Bachelor’s degree, one travelled abroad as a labourer, two were in the process of going abroad for work and six were enrolled in a Bachelor’s degree in Kathmandu. The participant who travelled abroad for a Bachelor’s degree and the six who enrolled in a Bachelor’s degree in Kathmandu depended on their parents to support their studies. Seven of the 21 participants of the second research phase had been in Kathmandu for less than a year, six between 2 and 3 years, and seven migrated with their families when they were children.

Continuity of work in the transition process

After six months, at the time of the second interview, 11 participants were still working at the call centre. What factors had contributed to the continuity of their positions at the call centre? Our thematic analysis showed that for these 11 young adults financial constraints, responsibilities towards their families and places of origin, were an important reason for staying at the call centre. For some of these young people, the work at the call centre provided an opportunity to finance a future educational career.

Financial constraints

Joye, a 25-years old Bachelor’s student was found to be continuing his work at one of the call centres in Kathmandu. Joye’s life changed when he travelled to Kathmandu with his aunt and her husband at the age of seven. The move was motivated by his desire for better education. But his journey from Nuwakot to Kathmandu came at a price. He was treated badly by his uncle and aunt in Kathmandu who made him work at their home and do the household chores. It became so difficult for Joye that he
decided to leave the house and live on his own “It became so unbearable, it was enough [...] I was not being treated as human [...]”

He started working in a call centre to cover his school fees and other expenses. When he was interviewed for the second time, after six months, he continued in this job at the same company.

J: I was, and I still am working as a manager covering the night shift in the company. But, I did reach a point where I felt like I had to look for another job [...] it was because I did not see any growth for myself in this company.

INT: So, have you left the job? Are you working somewhere else?

J: Oh no no... some time ago I was thinking about leaving this job for another call centre...but for the time being, I will continue working here [...] because first of all, I want to complete my Bachelor’s. I also have my responsibilities [...] I have to take care of my parents and help my younger sister complete her education...then obviously, when I am done with my education, I could go for something else [...] but I don’t know where or what... it is not concrete yet [...] But until that happens, I will continue like this [working in the call centre and combining this with his higher study].

For Joye, work and studies are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually beneficial. They depend on each other. His financial constraints make it impossible for him to exclusively dedicate his time to his education. His pursuit of education is structurally entrenched in his ability to pay for that pursuit. For him, work is the precondition for studying and his future work opportunities depend on how well he can combine work and education in his life. In his precarious financial situation where he does not have a safety net and no support from family, any form of temporary unemployment may endanger his studies. Moreover, since his income also goes towards supporting his parents and his sister, the opportunity to save becomes challenging, leaving him even more vulnerable to unexpected setbacks and making it difficult for him to plan for his future.

‘[...] every month I send money to my parents and specifically for my sister’s education... I do not want her to go through the same experiences as I did [...]’

Therefore, for Joye, work is the means to his education which means that despite realising that he might not have great career opportunities at the current company, he cannot risk losing his job since he does not have the option to be unemployed. However, that does not mean that Joye does not have future-oriented aspirations. He stressed his desire for career progression which, to him, was just a matter of time:

‘ [...] Right now I am only focusing on completing my Bachelor’s and then I will see [...] I have been thinking about getting involved in a business [here he was referring
to opening up a business like a call centre where he was working]. But then, I also want to do something back home [in his village in Nuwakot] [...] my parents have land but since they are too old to work on it, I am also thinking of starting an agricultural business [...]’

Like Joye, all the young participants who continued working in a call centre had responsibilities towards their place of origin and towards their family, among them seven were combining work with education, which allowed them to take on a sort of transitional responsibility by working and providing for their needs, economically contributing to the family. On the other hand, they held high hopes for their future, as Ray, a 24 years old Master’s student stated:

‘My family is financially sound, but my parents could not afford my higher education in science. [...] so, I told my parents that I will work and study both... also because I have vitiligo, the expenses just add up [...] I do not want to be a burden to my parents and I can arrange myself... I can figure it out [...]’

The participants who were combining work and education tried to reconcile their desire for progress with transitional and immediate pressures brought on by a lack of financial resources and responsibility towards their families. Joye was from a farming family that was financially strapped. By pursuing his education, and working to support that pursuit, he was breaking the cycle of educational deprivation in his family. Similar to Joye and Ray, other research participants who were also from rural regions in Nepal, struggled to make a smooth transition to adulthood amidst a lack of resources and few work opportunities, which disrupted a linear education to work transition. These participants also showed to have accommodated themselves to the limited resources they had, knowing that they had to work hard every day both for their studies and at work. Rhythm, a 25-year-old management student, described:

‘I take my classes in the morning and go to work [...] and I do this every day... I take complete rest on the weekends [...] I am so competitive; I work even extra for additional money [...] I have also won employee of the month [...]’

The quote illustrates the struggle of young people that characterises everyday life during the education to work transition. What is common in these narratives is that the move to continue working was explained by a combination of individual and economic factors, although the participants emphasised the importance of lack of network and safety nets differently in their individual accounts. Although, call centre work was not something that these young people aspire to, by working at the call centres most were able to combine studies alongside work. This indicates continuing work to be valuable both allowing the young people to fulfil their transitional responsibilities towards their families and cover personal expenses for their studies.
The narratives suggest working at the call centres was seen as a means to buy time for their personal navigation ‘to figure out’ (Ray’s words) how to move forward towards what they considered to be a better future. In other words, securing employment for them was not equated with achieving what they wanted. It was to financially sustain themselves when they are still on their way to achieve their educational goals that would lead to pathways and links to jobs they aspire to have.

**Discontinuity of work in the transition process**

Out of the twenty-one interviewed, 10 research participants in this study were found to be either back to full-time education in Nepal or have travelled abroad for studies and/work. They had discontinued working during the interval between the two interviews. What factors contributed to the discontinuity of work? The thematic study showed that for the participants who decided to discontinue working, the job at the call centre was mainly to gain some experience of work and become independent of their parents financially. However, as soon as the school results were out, most participants felt that they should complete their higher education to get the sort of job they desired. Other participants decided to discontinue the call centre work due to the demanding schedules.

**Future-oriented aspirations**

During the first round of interview, Eliza mentioned that she left her home in Birendranagar when she was seventeen to live with her *tataa* (elder sister in Newari language) in Kathmandu and pursue her higher-secondary education. As a newly arrived young, rural-urban migrant, Eliza had little support when it came to navigating her way around the city. She had little or no information regarding enrolment processes at colleges. Eliza wanted to enrol into a college that had a sciences faculty and pursue a career in nursing as her mother had wanted Eliza to become a nurse.

‘My daddy is sick and doctors have not been able to diagnose the problem yet [...] we go to the hospital often to see the doctor [...] my mother used to admire the nurses in the hospital and told me that I should also study to become a nurse [...] she told me I will get a job quickly, and I would get respect and money as well [...]’

But Eliza soon realised that she had already missed the entrance exams for that academic year. As she did not want to disappoint her mother, she joined a diploma course to train as a medical lab technician, which she felt could appease her mother. However, Eliza struggled with her studies. Two years after joining the course, she sat for her final examinations, but she failed two of her subjects. Eliza was too scared to
tell her parents that she had failed and that she could not pursue her higher education until she cleared her exams.

While she was waiting to re-take her exams, she decided to work at a call centre. Upon meeting her for the second round of interview after the six months interval, she had left her job at this centre.

INT: Are you still working at the same call centre?

E: No... I have already left that job.

INT: When?

E: Oh, it's been a while now. I left it two or three months ago.

INT: Then, are you working in a laboratory?

E: No, not at all. At this point, I am thinking of doing my Bachelor's. [...] I think if I have a Bachelor's degree, then I will be able to find a job easily [a job in medical laboratories at the hospitals] [...] after that, I think I will work [...] If I do not study, then I will not be able to find a good job [...].

E: [...] I actually took up the job at the call centre as a way to cover for the fact that I had failed my exams [...] now I have the results [she has passed her exams] and I do not need to work in that job [at the call centre] [...]. It is not what I want to do in life [...].

For Eliza, the work she was doing at the call centre was not integral to what she wanted to be in the future. She aspired to become a lab technician. At the same time, she had a strong attachment with her family and wanted to fulfil her parents’ aspirations too. These factors influenced her decision to discontinue working at the call centre and go back to full-time education. Another participant, Sarah, who migrated to Kathmandu to work along with studies, and had worked in a call centre for more than six months, also left the job. She wanted to apply for higher studies abroad. Doing work relevant to their studies and future-oriented work was what both of them envisaged for themselves as part of their education to work trajectory.

This shows that the participants took up the job at a call centre not as a possible job prospect but rather as a platform to ‘figure things out’, borrowing the words of participant Ray. This process of transitioning shows that the pathways of education to work are not to be reduced to a one-time decision. They are filled with choices, negotiations as shown in the case of Eliza above, and decisions that young people are required to make in every step of their education to work transition.

*Demanding schedules*
The other reason found to be influencing the discontinuity of work among the participants were the demanding daily schedules. The research participants spoke of exhaustion and how their daily schedules were taking a toll on their lives and their health.

For example, Rose, who was twenty-two at the time of the second interview shared what her daily routine looked like; while she enjoyed working and saw it as a learning experience that offered her financial independence, she talked about how combining work and education was becoming too stressful for her. The conversation with Rose is cited at length because it summarises a common experience for the participants in the study:

So my classes for Bachelor’s were from 6 am to 10 am. I thought I could work as well, so I applied for some jobs. My last job was in a finance company […] after college I used to get to the company around 11:30 am and then after grabbing the details of the job, I would just walk all day, as a door to door salesperson. It was too much and on top of that they did not give me time off to prepare for my examination, so I left that job. This job [at the call centre] I thought it was good because I do not have to walk all day and our sir [boss] was also flexible about the work hours […] First I was working as an agent but later they moved me to the human resources section. But what happened was that […] in my 2nd year of the university class hours changed. The classes ran from 9:30 am to 1:30 pm. Again they [employers] were flexible with the timing and asked me to come to the office after the class and work until 8:30 pm. But slowly this became stressful. I would wake up at 6:00 am and I was out until 9 pm, sometimes even later in the night. […] I did not even get a tempo [a local transport in Kathmandu] to go home. I had to get a taxi but taxis are also expensive in Kathmandu […] My aunts were also not happy that I was coming so late in the night from work […] it became a big issue […] also, I was getting sick often because the food in the office was not good at all and I had no time to make my food […] time nai chaunna k [There was literally no time] […] so I had to leave […]

As Rose’s comment during the second round of interview shows, focusing on studies should be her priority if she was to achieve the life she aspired to have. During the first interview, Rose was happy to have the job which she could combine it with her study. Data from the study indicated that like Rose, other participants who were combining work and study were facing similar difficulties. They complained that they had too little time to lead a ‘normal’ life. While Rose’s employers were quite flexible in allowing her to adjust her work hours to fit her college timetable, the long hours were taking a toll on her. Moreover, Rose’s relationship with her family was also turning strenuous as they did not approve of her coming home late at night. Even though Rose felt that she had a lot to gain from continuing work, she had to prioritise her education and her wellbeing. Therefore, she stopped working altogether and focused on her studies. Working at night is difficult for everyone, but research has shown that
especially young women face difficulties in working late nights as this breaks the societal persistent traditional norms and safety precautions (Parikh, 2018; Patel, 2010).

Another participant, Nora, a seventeen-years-old, also mentioned during her first interview that her parents were against her working at night:

‘After the training, I was offered a night shift job. I thought I could work at night and study during the weekends [...] I informed my parents about the job... They said ‘No’. They told me ‘we understand that you will be working at the call centre in the night shift... but, our neighbours and relatives in the village would not think the same [...]’

Nora contemplated changing the job not only because her parents were not happy about it, but also because work late at night would bring shame to her family. As the money for training was already spent, Nora opted for a morning shift job at the call centre. This meant that Nora had to finish her morning shift job and go straight to college to attend her classes. During the second interview, Nora had left the job and started the IELTS [International English Language Testing System] course for studies abroad.

‘I informed sir [her boss] that it is becoming very difficult for me...I cannot work from 5 a.m. until 11 a.m. and the college starts at 11 a.m. until 6 p.m. [...] I had to leave.’

The narratives of Rose and Nora show how they struggled to combine studying and working. As dropping out of their studies was out of the question for them, they dropped out of the job. Thus, the factors causing the participants to discontinue work at a call centre were found to relate to their aspirations for the future and to the demanding schedules of the work at those centres. In their experience, the work did not help them to reach their aspirations and/or working long hours at irregular times asked too much of them. Different from the participants who continued to work in a call centre, they were not bound by financial constraints and could, in most cases, opt-out of the work while continuing their education. Thus, the subjective experiences of confined and condensed time among young student workers show their constant attempt to navigate their pathways.

Discussion

This study explored the factors influencing the continuity or discontinuity of work among young, rural-urban migrants working at call centres in Kathmandu, Nepal. The
analysis of the factors shows the complex situation and experience of rural-urban migrants in their education to work transition and the understanding and meaning of this process for the participants. Financial constraints were identified as the main factor influencing the decision to continue working. Whereas, future-oriented aspirations and demanding schedules demonstrated to be the main factors influencing the decision to discontinue work among the young rural-urban migrants. The decisions based on these factors were not that straightforward though. The analysis of the factors reveals the complex situation and experiences of rural-urban migrants in their education to work transition and the understanding and meaning of this process for the participants. The findings also show that the education to work trajectories could be linear and smooth for some and non-linear for others depending on the access to resources as it has been widely debated by youth scholars (MacDonald et al., 2001; Vickerstaff, 2005). Furthermore, the experiences of the participants in this study show it is an ongoing process covering time to ‘figure things out’, in the words of one of the participants, balancing education and work to fulfil personal responsibilities, prioritising between education and work, and negotiating with demanding schedules. This reflects that young people’s transitions from education to work are not one-time decisions, not a two-stage process from full-time education to full-time work, rather longer-term processes involving several moments of choices and decisions (Wood, 2017).

Regarding the first factor, scholars, particularly from Nepal, have emphasised financial constraints and family responsibilities influencing the patterns of early school to work transition (Chen, 2018; Valentin, 2012). The findings from this research show that financial constraints can impact young people’s trajectories for a longer period and can affect their decisions for change and continuity within the trajectories. Among the participants who continued work, this scenario was pertinent because they could not follow their aspirations right away. Even though the job at the call centre lacked growth opportunities, those participants saw the potential of the job to accommodate both their personal needs and their family responsibilities. Findings from other studies confirm that young people with a rural-urban background tend to struggle to find a job that is in line with their education and often end up taking informal jobs (Yeboah, 2020). Thus, negotiating between aspirations and responsibilities seems to be an unending predicament for them constantly influencing their decisions and choices.

The second factor observed in the participants was the desire for higher education for the future or a future-oriented aspiration influencing the transition process. This desire was expressed strongly by the participants, even while they had different understandings of the future-oriented aspirations, as well as how successful they could be if they choose higher education over work. The tendency to prefer higher education
above continuing to work does not necessarily mean that they lacked motivation or interests in work. They made this choice because they thought it would help them in the long run without taking into account that many young people with educational qualifications still struggle to find a job (Basnet et al., 2021; Kölbel, 2013). In this sense, rural-urban youth live a highly complex lives and manage multiple domains that often include education and family responsibilities. One could wonder whether the decision to prioritise higher education over work experience would help them in the future to earn a living. This would need further research.

The third factor found to be influencing the transition process among the research participants were the demanding schedules which turned problematic for some research participants. When the participants described how they were managing the long working hours both at schools and at work, they showed that they were constantly trying to navigate their ways. Viewing the job as a way to enhance their skills or as a temporary pause in their educational trajectories, they were making relentless efforts to negotiate the conditions. Unfortunately, the pressure was huge and it proved to be difficult to find a balance in their lives. For female participants, working at a call centre, which includes night work, often implied difficulties not only in terms of commuting but also related to the social stigma attached with women working at night (Patel, 2010; Singh & Pandey, 2005). If there was no financial need to continue working, the long and irregular working hours made the participants decide to quit. Those who possessed a safety net such as parents and relatives in Kathmandu could benefit from some economical support. However, participants without such a network faced even more challenges in their education to work transition and had to negotiate with available options on their own.

Although the number of participants in this study was limited and the narratives were not compared with the experiences of youth in general, the subjective experiences provided valuable insights into the education to work transition of young rural-urban migrants. Through qualitative longitudinal research allowing for analysis from a process perspective, it was possible to highlight the diverse experiences that young people face negotiating choices, embracing changes and uncertainty (Peng, 2019; Sanderson, 2019; Valentine, 2019). Wrapping up, the education to work transitions for young rural-urban migrants are complex processes involving both linear and non-linear trajectories and it is a process rather than just transitioning from full-time education to full-time work. Policies and programmes supporting youth in these circumstances to get a decent job, should build on their aspirations, resources and capacities in their changing environments, and support them in the complex negotiation process between their aspirations and their immediate or continuous needs.
Conclusion

In conclusion, our findings show that rural-urban youth education to work transition is a process. The continuity and discontinuity of work trajectories show the diversity of the transition after the entry into the labour market. Results also show the individual experiences, in this case of rural-urban migrants, are fluid, diverse and ongoing. It seems that there is no end to the education to work transition, but this would need longitudinal research stretching over a longer period of time.