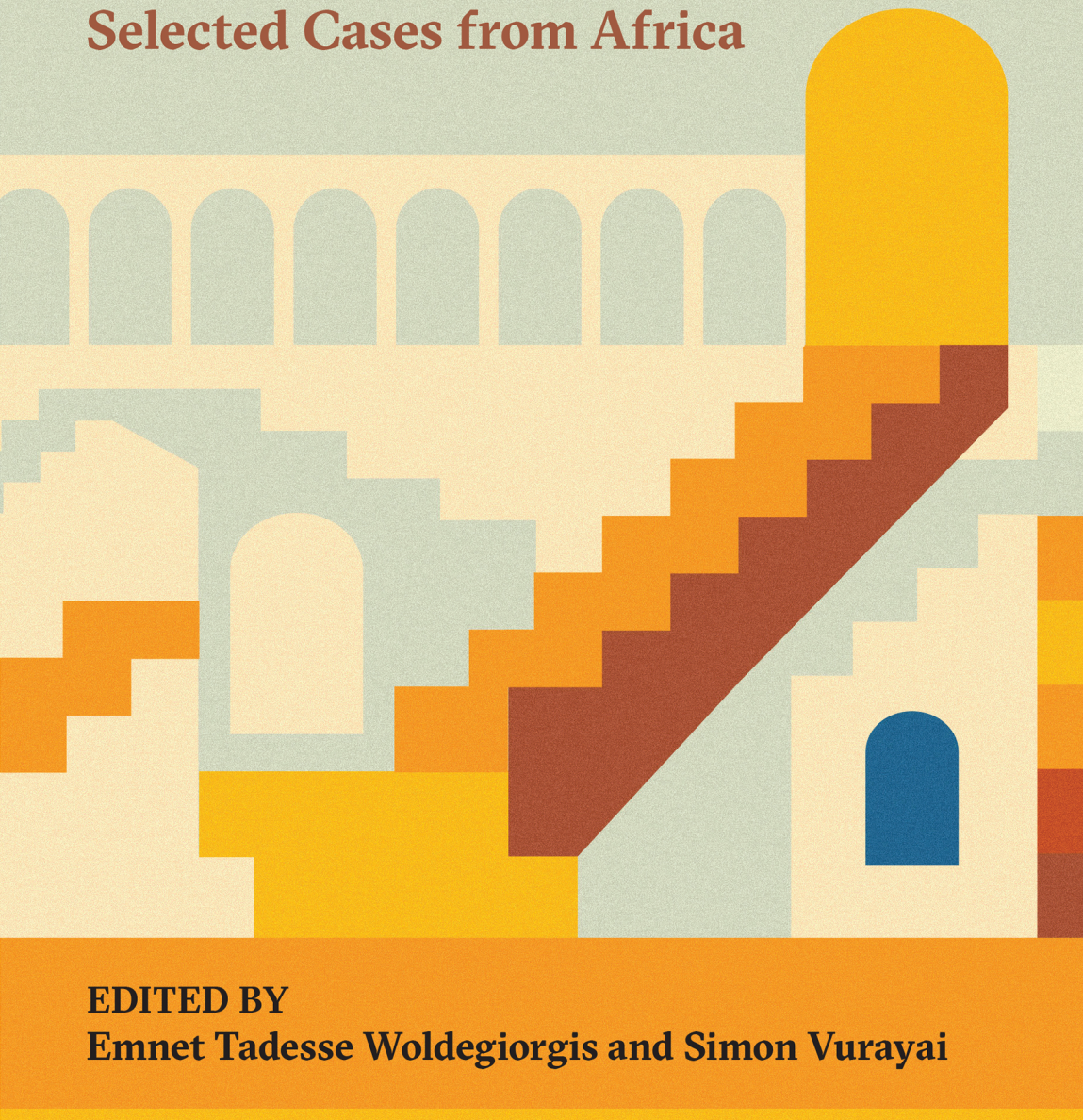
NEGOTIATING CHANGE IN THE PROCESS OF TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Selected Cases from Africa



EDITED BY
Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis and Simon Vurayai

Negotiating Change in the Process of Transition from School to Higher Education

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Negotiating Change in the Process of Transition from School to Higher Education: Selected Cases from Africa

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Transition as a Contested Social Process

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Introduction

The transition from secondary school to higher education in Africa is not merely a pedagogical passage but a complex and contested social process, fraught with structural, epistemic, and emotional disruptions. At the heart of this volume is the recognition that the challenge of educational transition is both symptomatic of and contributory to broader systemic inequities that persist in postcolonial African societies. Although the transition from secondary schooling to higher education has long attracted scholarly attention, often framed in terms of access, retention, and success (Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 2000), the African context is layered with distinctive historical, structural, and epistemic complexities that render it a deeply contested terrain. Rather than a neutral or technocratic passage from one institutional space to another, transition is inseparable from broader socioeconomic and structural violence, including the enduring hegemony of Eurocentric epistemologies (Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). It embodies contestations over who gains entry, under what conditions, and through which epistemic frameworks knowledge is legitimised or delegitimised.

Questions of belonging are deeply entangled with these struggles, as students from marginalised rural, working-class, and linguistic communities often encounter alienating pedagogical cultures that reproduce exclusion even within moments of apparent inclusion (Jack, 2019; Reay et al., 2009). Transition in Africa, therefore, cannot be reduced to an administrative category but must be theorised as a site where the politics of recognition, redistribution, and representation converge. This edited volume, *Negotiating Change in the Process of Transition from School to Higher Education in Africa*, emerges from a landmark conference convened under the auspices of the Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies (AMCHES) at the University of Johannesburg. It assembles critical voices

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that interrogate the multifaceted nature of transition within African educational systems and responds to the core questions that animate the chapters: What precisely are the challenges linked to transitioning from secondary to higher education? How does the experience of first-year students reflect on their academic achievement? How do students navigate change and develop resilience to cope with complex higher education environments? What would schools' role be in preparing students for the transition to higher education? How do student and teacher associations contribute towards alleviating the challenges of low participation, high attrition, and low retention rates? These and many other issues shape the discussions of the book.

This edited volume enters this fraught terrain both critically and creatively, advancing the proposition that transition in African higher education is simultaneously a locus of constraint and of possibility. The contributions assembled here insist that transition is not reducible to a developmental sequence of stages. However, they must be grasped as a contested field in which structural inequalities, institutional logics, and student aspirations converge. By drawing on empirical cases across various African countries, the volume foregrounds how students negotiate the interlocking challenges of access, belonging, and epistemic legitimacy while simultaneously cultivating strategies of resilience, improvisation, and resistance. These case studies reveal transition as a complex and uneven process in which aspirations frequently collide with institutional cultures and policy frameworks, producing what could be termed a dialectic of hope and disillusionment. The paradox, as several chapters illustrate, is that even as universities function as sites of exclusion, they also remain the very spaces where new forms of agency, solidarity, and epistemic innovation are nurtured.

We begin from the premise that the journey into higher education is not simply an individual rite of passage but a deeply structural event implicating histories of marginalisation, the fragility of public education systems, and the neoliberal commodification of learning. Despite decades of policy interventions, the transitional fault lines remain stark, particularly for students from rural, low-income, or otherwise structurally disadvantaged backgrounds. Questions of belonging are deeply entangled with these struggles, as students from marginalised rural, working-class, and linguistic communities often encounter alienating pedagogical cultures that reproduce exclusion even within moments of apparent inclusion (Jack, 2019; Reay et al., 2009). Transition in Africa, therefore, cannot be reduced to an administrative category but must be theorised as a site where the politics of recognition, redistribution, and representation converge.

Theoretical Orientations

A philosophical critique of inherited educational architectures animates the research problems addressed in this volume. They reflect an ontological unease with systems that promise universal access yet reproduce epistemic violence and systemic exclusion. Students enter universities not only as learners but also as carriers of histories, languages, and identities that are often unrecognised or devalued by dominant institutional cultures. Hence, the chapters draw on frameworks

such as Tinto's Model of Student Integration, Nancy Fraser's (2008) social justice theory, Bourdieu's (1986) notions of habitus and capital, Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth, decolonial pedagogy, and Critical Disability Studies to excavate the structural undercurrents shaping educational transitions in Africa.

Emerging typologies of student transition (Gale & Parker, 2014) emphasise three broad orientations: 'transition as induction', 'transition as development', and 'transition as becoming'. The dominant institutional model often foregrounds transition as a brief period of adjustment (induction), measured against benchmarks of academic performance and retention. However, Gale and Parker (2014) advocate for a more expansive notion of 'becoming', which views transition as a prolonged and dynamic identity project that extends beyond institutional entry and implicates learners' broader trajectories of growth and transformation. This orientation is particularly salient in the African context, where transition is rarely a linear or universal experience. Furthermore, scholars such as Ecclestone et al. (2009) have emphasised the intersectional nature of student transitions, arguing that competing discourses of vulnerability, capability, and performativity shape them. Students are not passive recipients of change but are active agents negotiating structures, relationships, and identities. Yet, institutional responses often emphasise individual deficits rather than structural reforms, framing transitional difficulties as personal failures rather than systemic inadequacies.

Building on this literature, the volume foregrounds the affective, epistemic, and ontological dimensions of transition. Transition is not understood merely as a technical movement from one institutional setting to another, but as a fundamental transformation in a learner's being, knowing, and becoming. It is a temporal and relational journey wherein students renegotiate their sense of self, knowledge frameworks, and social belonging within new institutional contexts. As such, transition is marked by philosophical tensions between continuity and rupture, autonomy and dependence, and belonging and alienation. The chapters collectively challenge normative, Eurocentric, and deficit-oriented constructions of African student identities, advocating for an approach that acknowledges transition as both a socio-political condition and a lived experience.

In this volume, transition is not treated as a discrete, technical stage demarcated by institutional boundaries between school and university. Rather, drawing on Ecclestone et al. (2009), it is conceptualised as a 'socially negotiated passage', a formulation that foregrounds the relational, processual, and contested nature of the educational journey. The term 'socially negotiated' implies that students do not traverse the path to higher education in isolation; their trajectories are embedded within, and mediated by, a complex web of social expectations, cultural scripts, institutional arrangements, and interpersonal encounters.

Relationality refers to the ways in which students' experiences of transition are co-constructed through interactions with peers, educators, family members, and institutional agents. It highlights how social belonging, mentorship, and exclusion influence academic and emotional adaptation. Students often need to recalibrate their identities in response to new norms, unfamiliar epistemologies, and hierarchies of value within the university space. Temporality also signals that transition is not a single, time-bound event but an ongoing and non-linear

process. It unfolds unevenly across students' lives, with its effects often lingering well beyond the first year of study. For many, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, transition involves revisiting earlier ruptures, deferrals, and moments of educational dislocation, while simultaneously imagining uncertain futures. Uneven power dynamics point to the structural asymmetries that condition who gets to 'succeed', on what terms, and through which cultural and institutional gatekeeping mechanisms. Transition is not experienced equally; it is profoundly shaped by race, class, language, geography, gender, and ability. Within this framework, transition becomes a terrain of struggle over epistemic recognition, linguistic legitimacy, and institutional inclusion.

The transition from school to university is widely recognised as a significant leap to independence and personal and academic autonomy for most students. Yet this leap is neither neutral nor evenly experienced; it is a philosophical and structural passage marked by ontological ruptures and an existential reorientation. For many African students, especially those from historically marginalised and under-resourced communities, this transition signifies not just a change in institutional location but an entry into a new epistemic terrain governed by unfamiliar logics, norms, and linguistic codes. It involves a renegotiation of the self, a reconstitution of identity under the gaze of institutional expectations, and a navigation of social and symbolic capital that is often unequally distributed. This fragile process is further complicated by the asymmetrical distribution of resources, institutional alienation, and the implicit demand for epistemic assimilation. The early stages of university enrolment thus become a crucible for both transformation and disillusionment.

Empirically, the urgency of this problem is reflected in persistent patterns of low participation, high attrition, and low retention rates across many African higher education systems. For instance, studies conducted by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in South Africa have found that 50% of Black students who access university studies drop out, with the majority of dropouts occurring in the first year of study (Thompson et al., 2021). The CHE report (Council on Higher Education, 2013) argued that students performed poorly at university because schools did not adequately prepare them for university life. Nevertheless, the challenges of poor student performance extend beyond academic preparedness; they also include socioeconomic and psychosocial factors. Financial constraints, family and work-related commitments, poor academic preparation, complex campus social-life terrains, ill-informed choice of disciplines, the pressure of being a first-generation student, and inadequate academic support are widely reported as significant factors in student dropout (Young et al., 2020). Students thus navigate interlocking challenges in the transition from school to university: coping with knowledge gaps (academic preparedness), economic burdens (financial constraints), socio-cultural issues (managing independence and personal autonomy), and psycho-behavioural issues (mental health concerns).

Student retention has consequently become a critical issue in most African countries. Apart from academic challenges, transitioning from the controlled environment of school and the family home to accepting personal responsibility for the academic, financial, and social aspects of life is challenging. Higher

education institutions increasingly recognise the need to develop strategic partnerships with schools to better understand the complexities of students transitioning to higher education. Research from various national and international contexts reveals that a student's transition to higher education is a complex process with a direct impact on their success (Hultberg et al., 2008; Krause & Coates, 2008; Kyndt et al., 2017; Murtagh, 2012). A smooth transition can set the foundation for academic success. Yet, many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, find this transition difficult, with varying capacities and resilience in navigating change and coping with campus dynamics. The complexities of transition, therefore, necessitate serious scholarly examination, not merely to diagnose the problem but to offer empirically grounded and theoretically robust insights capable of informing transformative interventions.

This edited volume enters this fraught terrain both critically and creatively, advancing the proposition that transition in African higher education is simultaneously a locus of constraint and of possibility. The contributions assembled here insist that transition is not reducible to a developmental sequence of stages; it must be grasped as a contested field in which structural inequalities, institutional logics, and student aspirations converge. By drawing on empirical cases across diverse African contexts, spanning Southern Africa and extending to broader comparative African realities, the volume foregrounds how students negotiate interlocking challenges of access, belonging, and epistemic legitimacy while simultaneously cultivating strategies of resilience, improvisation, and resistance. These case studies reveal transition as a complex and uneven process in which aspirations frequently collide with institutional cultures and policy frameworks, producing what could be termed a dialectic of hope and disillusionment. The paradox, as several chapters illustrate, is that even as universities function as sites of exclusion, they also remain spaces where new forms of agency, solidarity, and epistemic innovation are nurtured.

The volume further situates these struggles within broader global debates on higher education, decolonisation, and social justice, thereby dislodging the assumption that African experiences of transition are peripheral or derivative. Instead, it treats African transitions as privileged vantage points from which to rethink the categories, such as access, success, and belonging, through which higher education is commonly theorised. By reframing transition as a generative threshold, the chapters collectively open theoretical and political space for imagining new epistemologies and forms of belonging that resist neoliberal reductionism and colonial legacies. Transition, then, is approached not only as an obstacle to be managed but also as a fertile terrain for the production of alternative imaginaries of knowledge, subjectivity, and emancipation.

Major Thematic Areas of the Volume

While each chapter offers a distinct analytic lens, the volume coheres around several interrelated thematic areas that collectively reframe transition as a multidimensional struggle over justice, recognition, and the meaning of higher education itself.

Transitions as Sites of Struggle

The notion of transition as 'struggle' emerges as a central problematic in this volume. Against celebratory narratives that cast entry into university as an unambiguous achievement and an assured pathway to upward mobility, the chapters foreground the tensions, contradictions, and ambivalences that structure students' journeys. Transition is neither linear nor neutral; it is a deeply contested site where competing imperatives collide: neoliberal logics of efficiency against social justice commitments; inherited colonial structures against decolonial aspirations; institutional regimes of governance against the lived realities of students. To speak of transition as struggle is to recognise that the passage into higher education entails more than academic adjustment: it involves negotiating historically sedimented forms of exclusion, epistemic violence, and political contestation. The chapters dislodge the functionalist assumption that transition is a technical matter of progression from one level to the next, revealing instead an arena in which belonging, recognition, and epistemic legitimacy are fought over, resisted, and reimagined.

Transition as Belonging

Belonging is frequently invoked in relation to student retention, persistence, and academic success, yet in African contexts, it cannot be understood as simple integration into pre-existing academic cultures. It is bound to histories of colonial exclusion, racialisation, and epistemic disqualification that continue to shape students' experiences. For many students, particularly those from rural, working-class, and historically disadvantaged backgrounds, entry into university is accompanied not by affirmation but by estrangement. As Mbembe (2016) argues, African universities remain haunted by the 'colonial library', replicating epistemic architectures misaligned with the lived identities and knowledges of African students. The resulting dissonance produces experiences of non-belonging across multiple registers: linguistic barriers, cultural alienation, and pedagogical irrelevance. In this sense, belonging is not merely affective; it is, as Yuval-Davis (2011) reminds us, a political project mediated by recognition, legitimacy, and access to power. The chapters conceptualise belonging as both contested and constructed, illustrating that it is not passively bestowed by institutions but actively struggled for by students, while simultaneously insisting that genuine belonging cannot rest solely on student resilience and must be grounded in institutional transformation.

Transition as Dignity

Closely linked to belonging is the question of dignity, treated here not as an abstract moral ideal but as a lived condition structuring students' encounters with higher education. Nussbaum (2011) frames dignity in terms of the capabilities necessary for human flourishing. When students are denied material, epistemic, or affective resources required to realise these capabilities, dignity is not merely eroded but systematically violated. Within African contexts, where educational

transitions remain shadowed by colonial legacies and neoliberal austerities, the denial of dignity often manifests as precarious survival rather than substantive flourishing. Dignity thus becomes a litmus test for whether higher education serves as a pathway to empowerment or a mechanism of reproducing inequality under the guise of access. This volume, therefore, calls for a paradigm shift: universities must treat students not as burdens to be managed or risks to be contained, but as valued participants in an intellectual community whose flourishing requires both material support and epistemic recognition.

Transition as Epistemic Emancipation

Perhaps the most radical reconfiguration advanced in this volume is the framing of transition as epistemic emancipation. Rather than assimilation into dominant epistemologies, transition is conceived as a generative capacity through which students participate in reshaping knowledge itself. This is particularly urgent in African universities where colonial epistemic architectures continue to dictate legitimacy and silence alternative ways of knowing (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Quijano, 1992). To transition in such contexts is to confront epistemic hierarchies that disqualify African languages, indigenous knowledge systems, and rural worldviews. Transition thus cannot be restricted to technocratic questions of access; it must be theorised as an epistemological project. Epistemic emancipation requires reimagining curricula, pedagogies, and institutional practices so that African epistemologies are affirmed not as peripheral supplements but as foundational frameworks. This does not entail rejecting global knowledge but situating it within dialogical encounters that affirm epistemic plurality. Reconceptualised in this way, transition becomes an emancipatory horizon: a threshold where new ways of knowing, belonging, and imagining the university are forged.

Organisation of the Volume and Chapter Contributions

This volume is composed of 16 chapters, including this introduction and a concluding chapter. The chapters represent diverse yet interconnected investigations into the dynamics of transition from school to higher education across various African contexts. They have been organised to begin with more theoretical and philosophical analyses before turning to grounded empirical case studies. What follows is a brief outline of each chapter's main arguments and contributions.

Chapter 2 titled 'Theorising Transitions as Sites of Struggle: A Theoretical Inquiry into the School-to-University Trajectory' is by Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis. This chapter provides a theoretical examination of transition, drawing on global and African scholarship and substantiating its analysis with extensive empirical references. It problematises deficit-based approaches and conceptualises transition as a dynamic, multidimensional process marked by epistemic, structural, cultural, social, and psychological challenges. It explores typologies of transition, induction, development, and becoming, and draws on Bourdieu's theory of habitus, capital, and field to theorise how learners navigate differentiated institutional landscapes.

Chapter 3 titled 'Theorising Structural Barriers in the Transition from Secondary Schools to Higher Education for Students with Disabilities in South Africa: A Critical Disability Studies Perspective' is by Sibonokuhle Ndlovu. Using a conceptual, desktop literature review underpinned by critical disability studies, this chapter explores how culture shock and lack of acceptance, communication barriers, stigma, and inaccessible infrastructure confront students with disabilities in South Africa. It argues that these transitional challenges will persist unless both schooling and higher education are transformed into porous, interlinked systems.

Chapter 4 titled 'Liminality for the Natives of Nowhere: Black African Students' Experience Transitioning from High School to Higher Education' is by Marcina Singh. Drawing on Turner's theory of liminality and Kumalo's (2018) 'natives of nowhere', the chapter examines how Black African students in South Africa experience the effects of poor basic education, exclusionary institutional cultures, and linguistic and economic differences. It frames transition as a liminal space and makes a strong conceptual contribution to debates on decolonising South African universities.

Chapter 5 titled 'Bridging the Gap: Exploring Transitional Challenges from Secondary Schools to Higher Education in Ethiopia' is by Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis. This conceptual chapter advances translanguaging as an inclusive pedagogical practice enabling deeper learning and epistemic access for linguistically marginalised students. It reviews the evolution of translanguaging, its potential to disrupt monolingual ideologies, and the challenges of implementation, including resource constraints, English hegemony, and assessment misalignment.

Chapter 6 titled 'From School to University: A Bourdieusian Analysis of First-year B.Ed. Students Negotiating Academic Literacies in South African Higher Education' is by Halima Namakula. Using Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital, this chapter analyses how structural inequalities and dispositions intersect in shaping academic literacies during transition. It highlights how cultural capital, familiarity with genres, critical reading, and academic writing unequally position students for success, particularly in under-resourced schools.

Chapter 7 titled 'Negotiating the Transition from High School to Higher Education in South Africa under the COVID-19 Pandemic' is by Alois S. Baleni. This chapter examines COVID-19 as a disruptive moment in transition, exposing and deepening socioeconomic and cultural inequalities. It draws on Nancy Fraser's social justice theory and Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality, using interview data to show how technological change intersects with pre-existing disparities and to call for more equitable approaches.

Chapter 8 titled 'The Significance of Diversity in Transition: Diversity Dimensions in Admission, Administration, and Reporting of Higher Education Institutions in Ghana and South Africa' is by Philina Wittke and Berit Stoppa. Through documentary analysis of strategic plans, reports, and policy documents, this chapter investigates how diversity is articulated and operationalised in selected universities. While policies frequently reference diversity, the chapter highlights limited evaluation and monitoring, producing a disconnect between institutional commitments and actual student support during the first year.