Sustainable Futures: Exploring Social Ecosystems for Skills

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green skills
Building capacity for a sustainable future

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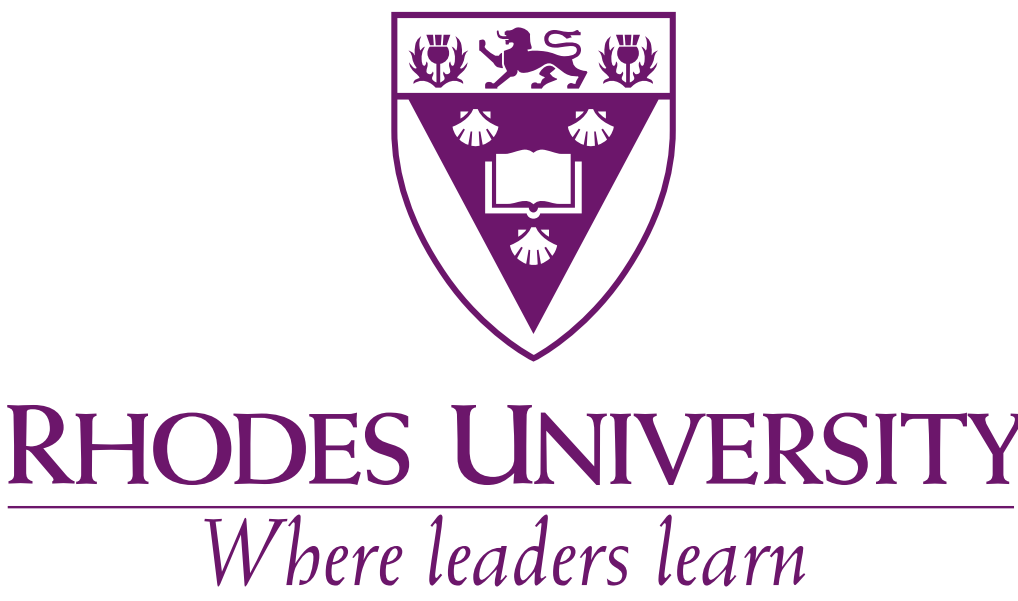
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

As climate change intensifies, it continues to present unprecedented challenges to work and livelihoods, particularly in Africa. South Africa exemplifies this, with nearly every sector, from agriculture to energy feeling the adverse effects of climate change. This growing concern has many contemplating the future of work and seeking innovative ways to cultivate knowledge and skills that are currently not yet included in the skills system.

Recognising this urgent need for **green skills for just transitions**, and building on a number of years of research published in the book 'Green Skills Research in South Africa: Cases, Methods' (Rosenberg, Ramsarup & Lotz-Sisitka, 2021), has led a team of researchers in the green skills for just

transitions research programme to investigate the potential of a social ecosystem skills model. Our interest is to examine its potential to advance place-based, contextual and more responsive skills development, and thus also inform skills system development.

The social ecosystem model for skills model (originally put forward by Hodgsen and Spours, 2019) is interesting because **it links learning, living and work**, and also seeks to connect local networks (horizontalities) and vertical structures and organisations (facilitating verticalities) involved in skills development through place-based networked links and partnerships around common concerns and/or local economy development (see figure below).

RESEARCH PROGRAMME

Case studies investigating local / place based social ecosystems for skills are being developed in sectors and contexts where sustainability challenges are high, such as agriculture and fisheries, maritime, oil and gas. Methods being used to explore place-based social ecosystems for skills include historical sociologies, curricular reviews, contextual profiling, change laboratories, in-depth interviews and focus groups, social network mapping and policy

analysis. The challenge is to map out all players involved in skills development in response to sustainability challenges in a place-based sectoral context, and to then understand how they all contribute to skills development in and across formal education and training institution boundaries.
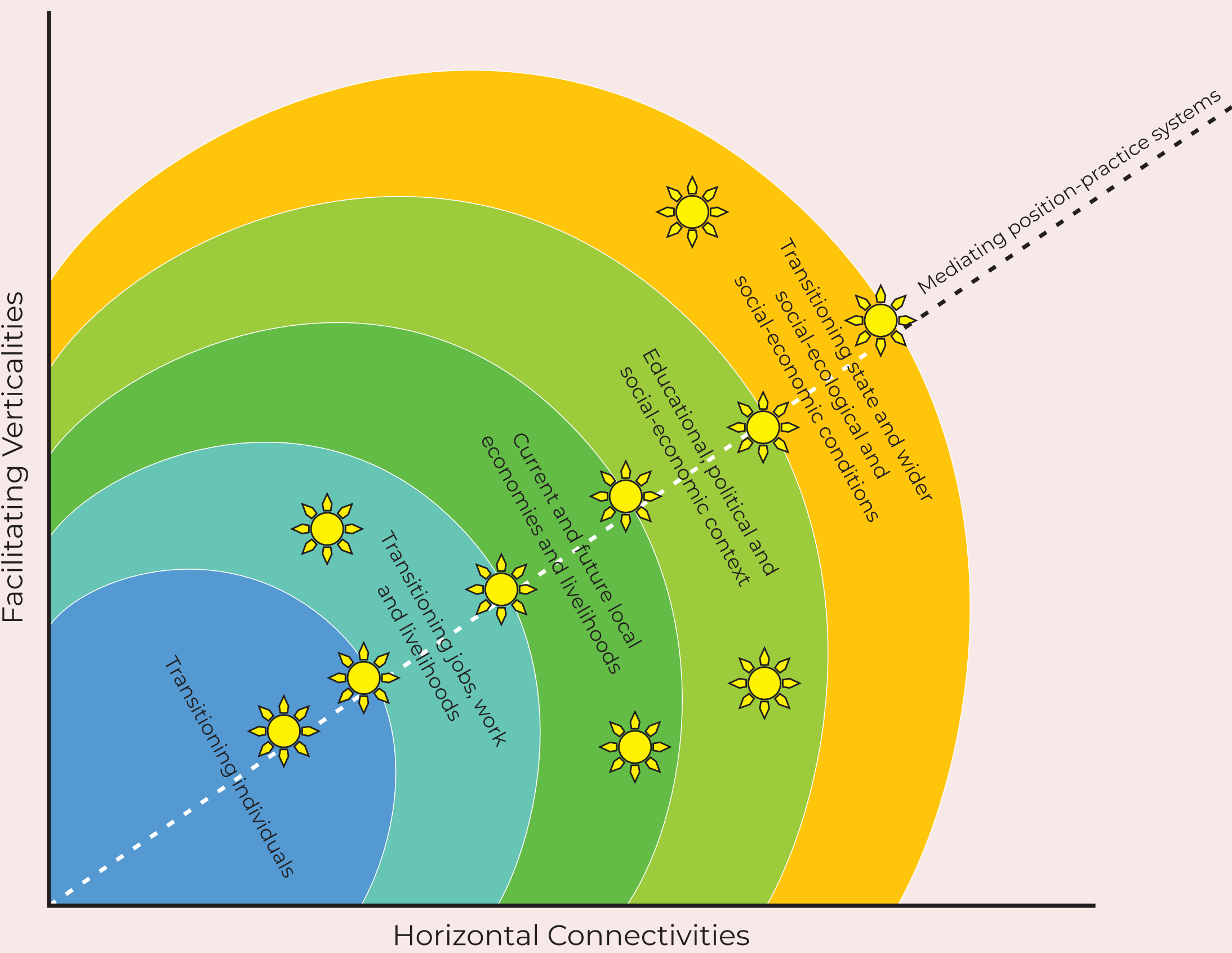
WHAT DID THIS PROGRAMME ACHIEVE?

Through multidisciplinary collaboration, researchers spanning countries, including South Africa, Uganda, and the UK, have contributed to articulating the contours of what a social ecosystem for skills looks like in an African context, with key findings articulated in the VET 4.0 Africa project (a partnership between Rhodes University, Nottingham University, Gulu University and Wits University). This project sheds light on how individuals navigate their learning and work transitions within VET systems, both formal and informal, and highlights the important role played by 'informal' training providers in the social ecosystem for skills context in Africa. The findings also show how skills trajectories are often skewed by donor driven interests and a general lack of responsiveness in the VET system to emerging challenges such as climate change. A VET Africa 4.0 Collective book: "Transitioning Vocational Education and Training in Africa; A social Skills Ecosystem Perspective" was published in 2023.
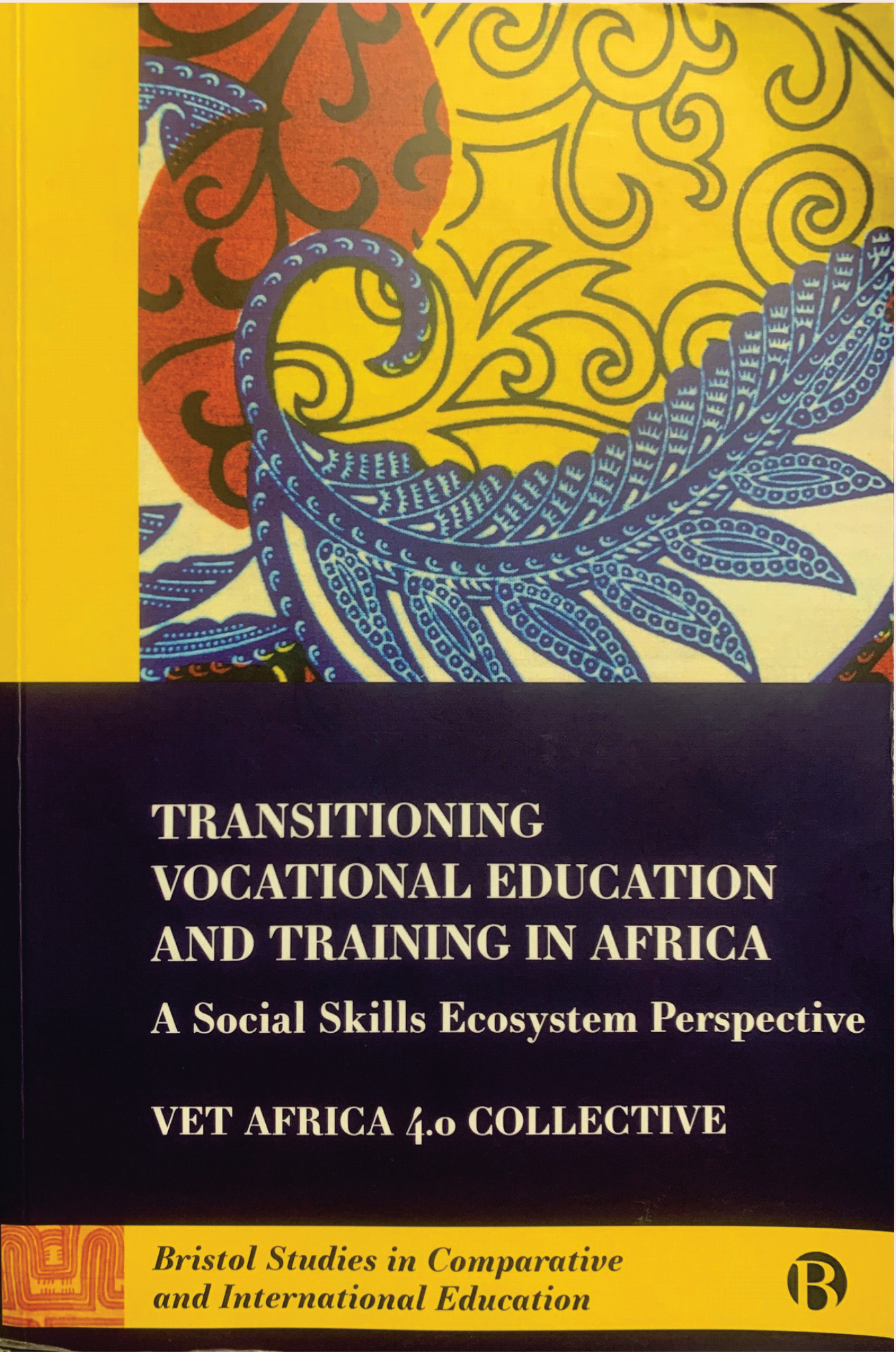
The approach has also been considered in education and training settings of the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) (Lotz-Sisitka, 2020).

Current PhD research is investigating the social ecosystem for skills of agricultural extension officers trying to respond to climate change challenges. It shows that a reframing of the agricultural extension occupation for planning and developing skills to respond to climate change challenges is needed. This research offers a workstream mapping approach as a potential mediating unit of intervention for skills planning and development for agricultural extension to facilitate Just Transitions for smallholder farming (Muhangi in press). Other ongoing PhD studies are investigating the laminated nature of social ecosystems for skills in aquaculture sector (Sithole), and school food gardens as sites of just transitioning in the food system (Chappel). Research by Ramsarup, Lotz-Sisitka and McGrath (2022) is showing a need to deepen analytical tools for social skills for ecosystem approaches (see figure below).

This work contributes to ongoing insights into methods and approaches that can advance skills development for the just transition in food, water, agriculture and energy sectors.

Download the book 'Transitioning Vocational Education and Training in Africa. A Social Skills Ecosystem Perspective' (Open Source)

A laminated view of a social ecosystem for skills approach to understanding skills development in place, and around critical sustainability concerns (Ramsarup et al., 2022).

Further insight into the Green Skills research programme can be found here:

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