

**PLANNED AND HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITIONS OF
STUDENTS FROM EDUCATION TO WORK IN
ENGLAND AND ROMANIA**

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ABSTRACT

The fact that students engage in more than just their studies while at university has been acknowledged in previous education research, but it has not been included in the theoretical debates on education-to-work-transitions. In this thesis I argue that the lack of debates between educational researchers and youth transitions researchers and the narrow focus of existing studies on certain educational aspects cannot do justice to the complex experiences and perceptions of young people today, who, I believe, experience multiple status positions while at university.

In this thesis I try to address this gap by focusing on the process of student transitions from education to work from a comparative and biographical perspective. I conducted 42 topical life history interviews with final year students in England and Romania about their reasons for opting to study at university, the processes of deciding what and where to study, the impressions and attitudes towards their studies, the activities they were engaged in, and their future (career) plans just before graduation.

I conducted this exercise with an explicit aim to answer my main research question: *What are the characteristics of student pathways through HE?* To answer this question I relied on the main concepts from youth transitions and education-to-work transitions research – structure and agency – but I included in the analysis considerations about significant others and happenstance events, as well as perspectives about time and space.

Overall, from a theoretical perspective, my research responded to calls for more holistic perspectives on youth and education-to-work transitions, while from a methodological perspective, I offered a *thick description* of narrative research conducted from multi-lingual and multi-ethnic perspectives on the lived experiences of students in two country and institutional contexts.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

DAS = double academic status

EU = European Union

HE = higher education

HU = Hungarian students

LM = labour market

MSP = multiple status positions

RO = Romania or Romanian students depending on context

UK = United Kingdom or students studying in the United Kingdom, depending on context

NOTATIONS USED

I used the following notations in the quotations:

“..” = represents the opening and closing of a quote unless the text is long in which case it is presented in a block and indented.

‘...’ = convey terms used in the literature and by lay people

[..] = the text within these brackets has been inserted by the author to explain the meaning or it refers to names and places deleted in the process of anonymising the data.

{..} = the text within these brackets has been inserted by the author to present the original Hungarian or Romanian words or phrases next to the translated texts.

... = between sentences indicates pauses.

.... = between sentences indicates that the quotation has been shortened.

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

...our work is an expression of who we are and who we are becoming
(Lichtman 2006, p. 206)

I start my thesis with the above quote because it portrays in an ingeniously simple way my motivations for pursuing doctoral level work, the pages I have written and what my intentions are with this work in the future. This thesis is an expression of who I am, what I think about the worlds I live in and what I feel social research should address in the field of higher education. I started this journey because I had a topic I was passionate about and I felt it deserved the significant amount of time I was willing to dedicate to it, namely researching the relationship between higher education and the world of work. I studied this relationship through looking at the transitions from education to work of university students in two contexts: an English university and a Romanian university.

I opted for doing cross-national research because I wanted to conduct a study in my home country on the issues I felt were important, but because I embarked on the doctoral journey in England, and I wanted to learn the English way of life, I thought combining these two aims would be beneficial both from a personal and a professional point of view. There are many similarities in the experiences of students in the two countries: typically, going to university comes after graduating from compulsory education, going to university is regarded as beneficial for the life-course and future career prospects. With all the similarities, there are also differences in the experiences of students, as going to university does not mean the same thing in the two countries, it does not have the same consequences and students decide about where and what to study based on different criteria.

I decided to write the thesis in the first person because as I mentioned in the first paragraph, this thesis reflects my personal past, present and future as much as it represents the experiences of those students I interviewed. The detection that multiple status positions (MSP) are becoming 'the norm' in higher education came from my own experiences as a student involved in several activities in parallel. As I continued learning and researching the topic it became clear to me that this is a much wider public issue and that it deserves researchers' and policy makers' attention.

RESEARCH ON EDUCATION-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS

I situate my theoretical thinking within the youth transitions and education-to-work transitions literature, but I also point out the aspects that I feel are not addressed within these debates: namely the multiple status positions that characterise students' experiences at university today or the narrow focus on structure and agency as it shapes youngsters' experiences. The fact that students or pupils engage in more than just their studies while in school or at university has been acknowledged in previous education research, but it has not been included in the theoretical debates on transitions. I argue that the lack of debates within educational research and youth transitions research resulted in overlooking this phenomenon which has been characteristic of student experiences for a while and will continue to be so in the future. In this thesis I try to address this gap by focusing on students' higher education experiences within the context of their life course, by asking them about the reasons for opting to study at university, the processes of making a decision about what and where to study, the impressions and attitudes towards university and their studies, the activities they engaged in, the perspectives on their studies and their future plans just before graduation. When reading the answers to these questions I pay attention to both the silent and the explicit narratives, I read for agency, structure, communion, and happenstance in students' stories within place and time considerations. I conduct this exercise with an explicit aim to answer my main research question: *what are the characteristics of student pathways through HE?* To achieve my aim I rely on the main concepts from youth transitions and education-to-work transitions research, namely structure and agency, but I consider it important to include in the equation considerations about significant others and happenstance events in students' lives. I felt that young people do not exist on their own, but they are part of various figurations in their societies and it is important to research their perceptions about these connections and the attributed role of other people in students' lives. In addition to structure and agency, individual and society, students' lives are also shaped by turning points and serendipitous moments so it is important to include a planned-happenstance dimension when researching their experiences and perceptions. Apart

from these, I also felt relevant to include perspectives on time and space when considering students' experiences as I agree with Dewey (cited in Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 2) that students' reference points have a past experiential base and they also lead to an experiential future as their "experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences."

To sum up, my research responds to calls for more holistic perspectives on youth transitions and education-to-work transitions research. Looking at education-to-work transitions via HE holistically I identified a phenomenon (multiple status positions) that was missing from the literature on transitions and student experiences, and by incorporating both traditional and new concepts to grasp this phenomenon I set out to describe, understand and explain students' perceived transitions from education to work in two country contexts.

RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

My aim with writing this thesis was to describe, understand and interpret the characteristics of university students' pathways and transitions to work in England and in Romania. I wanted to get an insight into the reasons why students choose to go to university, their experiences as students and/or as 'workers', the 'turning points' of their (student) life, and their perceptions and opinions about their future (career) plans. The main research question of the study was:

→ What are the characteristics of student pathways through HE and into work?

In addition to the main research question several specific research questions were formulated:

Q1. What are the circumstances and motives that lead youngsters to choose to attend HE?

Q2. How do students understand and describe their HE experience?

Q3. What role do extracurricular activities and/or work experience have in students' HE experience and perceptions about transitions to work?

Q4. How does the current economic climate influence students' strategies and perceptions about their future (career) and how do they see their life after graduation?

In order to answer the research questions, the study was undertaken from an interpretive perspective. I investigated the narratives of students living and studying in two specific contexts: an English university and a Romanian university.

In the United Kingdom expansion in higher education started after World War II, "the overall participation rate had increased eleven-fold: from around 3 per cent in 1950 to around 33 per cent" in 1997 and "expansion had been particularly rapid since the 1988 Education Reform Act" (Chitty 2009, p. 203). The chosen English university is one of the 133 higher education institutions in England (Bologna Report – UK 2012, p. 2). The election of New Labour in 1997 marked a key and decisive shift in British politics (Bell & Stevenson 2006, p.7). While working within the parameters of the neo-liberal agenda, the Government defined education as playing a key role in sustaining the state both from a social and an economic point of view. The chosen English University is situated in the East Midlands and it is one of the top-20 leading universities in Britain. The university places great emphasis on the synergy between teaching and research, it has an "inclusive and accessible culture" and considers student support to be highly important. The University won in recent years THE Award for Outstanding Student Support. Research shows that East Midlands is a popular destination for studies, but not necessarily to remain there as a graduate (Pennington 2005, p. 21). The regions' economy compares well with the UK as a whole, according to Pollard and colleagues (2005, p. 5) unemployment rate is low and three-quarters of the working-age population is in employment.

The Romanian higher education system has evolved rapidly since the fall of communism with the number of universities increasing from 56 in 1990 to 107 in 2010, and the overall number of students in the country exploding from 164,507 in 1990 to 999,523 in 2010 (Andrei *et al.* 2010; Drăgoescu 2013). The chosen Romanian university is one of the 56 state HE institutions including universities, academies, polytechnic universities and institutes that operate in Romania along with the 35 accredited private institutions and 21 provisionally approved HE institutions (Bologna Report – Romania

2012, p. 2). According to Mocanu (2008, p. 305), public universities in Romania seem to be more valued than private universities. Situated in the north-western part of Transylvania, the city where the chosen Romanian University is represents the most popular city for university studies after the country capital, attracting annually around 70,000 students (Statistical Yearbook – Romania 2007, p. 23). The university is part of a small group of so-called 'Level 1' universities in Romania, which can be considered models for other institutions across the country (EUA 2001, p. 22). The university is one of the six public universities in the city. There are around 40,000 students studying in 21 departments. The university is multicultural and multilingual; 117 courses are in Hungarian language, 20 in German, 43 in English and 9 in French apart from the 327 courses on offer in Romanian.

Over the past decades higher education has become available to wide sectors of the Romanian population. After the collapse of communism aspirations of upward social mobility through children's access to higher education became a 'leitmotiv' in the strategies of parents. While access to higher education was a privilege for the generation of parents, for their children it became a widely shared and normal expectation. It is almost like parent's unfulfilled life plans, their hopes and expectations were delegated to their children whose main responsibility became to fulfil these expectations. Andrei and colleagues (Andrei *et al.* 2010; Drăgoescu 2013) identified four main problems within HE in Romania: finding alternative sources of funding, linking university curricula to labour market needs, increasing the number of teaching staff and improving the relationship between universities and the corporate world. To these I would add the lack of focus on student support services, counselling and guidance before, during and after university and based on Csata and colleagues (2006, p. 25), the asynchrony between HE and the labour market.

In my research I studied student experiences with reference to three analytic levels: the macro level of national public policy; the institutional level of university policies and practices; and the individual level, the students' transitional journeys through higher education. I compared the ways students reported and contextualised, in the present moment, past behaviours and future plans within the two country and institutional contexts.

For the purpose of the individual analytic framework I conducted the research from a biographical perspective, using students' life stories as a basis for social research in order to understand processes of transitions (similarly to Heinz 1999; Hubbard 2000; Rustin & Chamberlayne 2002; Merrill & West 2009).

In order to capture students' individual voices and stories I conducted 42 (27 in Romania and 15 in England) semi-structured topical life-history interviews around a key decision-making moment in these students' lives: before graduation from a BA or an MA programme in 2011 and 2012. I wanted to gain insight into experiences, motivations and plans of different students and one sampling variable was subject studied. Other variables considered were level of study (BA or MA), and demographic characteristics like ethnicity (Romanian, Hungarian and English and non-English), and gender (female and male). I was attentive of age as well because I wanted to include both 'traditional' and 'mature' students. Particularly in Romania students' engagement in extra activities apart from their studies were important, as I wanted to include both students who focused solely on their studies and multiple status students who were engaged in different activities apart from their studies. I decided to combine two types of narrative analysis in order to present a holistic picture of the student experiences in the two higher education contexts. Firstly, I carried out content analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber 1998), focusing on the events and experiences recounted in the narrative, and I complemented it with structure or form analysis (Cortazzi 1993; Riessman 2008), looking at how the stories are put together.

The structure and the content of the thesis represents one potential way my research could be written up. My aim was to do justice as much as possible to the stories and experiences I collected and although I cannot capture every aspect students shared with me – due to space restrictions and the volume of data collected – I feel that by summarising the findings both thematically and narratively the thesis displays the core themes of students' experiences.

THESIS ROADMAP

I used a bidirectional perspective in constructing this thesis; on the one hand I tried to understand and interpret students' experiences and perspectives with the aid of theoretical concepts, and, on the other hand, I used actual narratives of students' lives to demystify the conceptual discourses. In what follows, I present a brief outline of the theoretical discourses dealing with youth and educational transitions in the first part of chapter two. In the second part of the chapter I focus on the concepts that underpinned my research and analysis: agency, structure, happenstance, significant others and additionally considerations on time and space.

In the third chapter I focus on the methodological and analytical aspects of the research. I start by defining my philosophical and methodological position, then continue to detail the methods applied for data collection, the selection of the research 'material' and the techniques of data analysis. Reflection on quality, ethical considerations and the limitations of the study conclude the chapter.

Chapters four to six present the results of the empirical analysis and are broadly organised in the same format: within the thematic analysis, they present the results of the form and context reading of the interviews for agency, structure, communion, happenstance, place and time. The first one, chapter four, focuses on students' transitions from compulsory education to higher education by looking at the themes of their motivation for opting to study at university level and their HE choices (field of study and location). The next chapter, chapter five, presents students' experiences at university: their attitudes and perceptions about their studies and the activities they are involved in. The last results chapter, chapter six, details students' future perspectives and plans. At the end of each sub-chapter (starting with the second one: subject choice) I illustrate and discuss how I built the typology of student transitions that emerged from the analysis up to that point.

The final chapter of the thesis briefly summarises my findings, details the transitions pathways typology, presents the policy implications of my results and offers suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

CONCEPTUALISING EDUCATION-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Choosing a theory is not a neutral process, but rather a subjective and social one in which the subjectivity of the researcher – in interaction with cultural and intellectual structures, power, language, experience and unconscious processes – has an important role.

(Merrill and West 2009, p. 58)

As the above quote suggests the theoretical considerations that underpin social research are not neutral, they are strongly connected to the researcher's worldview and topic choice, what he/she regards as important and interesting to research and how that research is going to be explained and used. My theoretical framework was not the result of a few months of reading and writing, but it was developed before and throughout the research and data analysis. What I read informed my research and analysis and vice-versa, as I progressed with the research and the analysis what I chose to read changed. From this perspective the fact that this chapter precedes the other chapters is a matter of convention and it does not reflect the iterative process of which this chapter is the product.

Evans and Robinson-Pant (2008, p. 135) argue that transition happens when "an event or series of events results in changed roles, relationships and expectations". They distinguish two types of studies of transitions in education: those that focus on people as they change statuses between education and employment, and studies that concentrate on societal and system-level socio-political changes. The combination of societal and individual transitions in research studies is rarely attempted due to its challenging nature; most of the studies tend to focus primarily either on the individuals or the societies (Evans & Robinson-Pant 2008, p. 137). In this thesis I made an attempt to combine individual and societal factors by looking at school-to-work transitions of higher education students in two country contexts. My aim was to describe, understand and interpret the transitional experiences of students from education to work by looking into the reasons why they go to university, what it is like being a student, the tensions of multiple status positions (student life and various other

activities students are engaged in) and how the experience contributes to their planned future career plans. By looking at these stories I was able to map out the transitional journeys and the influential factors through the journeys and how these intersect and are related to individual, institutional and societal characteristics. The goal of this literature review is to depict a framework for the study and to situate it within the broader context of related research. In order to accomplish this, the chapter is organized into three sections. I start by presenting a brief history of youth transitions research and its shared past with the structure and agency debate. Then I focus on higher education research and how student experience and education-to-work transitions has been conceptualised in this field. In the third part I bridge these two and argue for a more holistic understanding of transitions by researching it as a process and also by including in the analysis alongside agency and structure, concepts like: significant others / communion, serendipity / happenstance as well as situating the events in time and place. I conclude this chapter by summarising the theoretical framework that underpins my study.

TRANSITIONS RESEARCH THROUGH THE AGES – STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

Theoretical debates about the primacy of structure or agency over social action have been central in social sciences. Robert van Krieken (2002) locates the origin of the structure-agency dichotomy within the work of Talcott Parsons who was interested in finding an answer to the question of what holds the social together. In the UK youth research has its roots in the developments of the 1960s when youth was starting to be regarded as an important consumer group with distinctive tastes and spending patterns (Abrams 1961 cited in Bynner, Chisholm & Furlong 1997, p. 3). In this research phase the theoretical thinking was in line with functionalism, as these studies highlighted the ways in which young people's experiences were closely related to class positions (for example Ashton & Field 1976) and they were often portrayed as passive agents in the processes that affected their life. Ashton and Field (1976) argued that there were three main youth transition types from school-to-work. Young people either followed extended careers which involved participating in higher education, or short

term careers in which young people left school to enter the world of work and the jobs they entered provided additional training. The third type of transitions was the careerless occupations, which provided no or little training and few opportunities for development. The predominant metaphor in this phase was filling society's 'niches', which referred to the "clear-cut routes" which young people took "from their class of origin to their class of destination" and how "their scope to influence outcomes was seen as limited" (Bynner, Chisholm & Furlong 1997, p. 4). Due to the supposed linearity and smoothness of school-to-work transitions this period was named as the perceived 'golden age' of youth transitions (Heinz 2003; Vickerstaff 2003; Goodwin & O'Connor 2007).

In the 1970s, though still under the influence of functionalism, when post-compulsory education became more common and the number of unemployed increased, *bridges*, *routes* and *pathways to work* were mentioned. In the 1980s labour market outcomes were largely regarded as being outside the control of individual actors, depending on opportunity structures, so consequently the metaphor of *trajectory* came to the fore as developed by Roberts and his colleagues in the ESRC 16-19 initiative (Roberts 1993; Evans & Furlong 1997). Along with class positions gender, ethnicity, race, educational attainment and labour market conditions were also seen to have an impact on youth transitions and labour market outcomes. During the 1980s "it became increasingly clear that simple unitary models of the transition to adulthood could no longer be defended" (Jones & Wallace 1992, p. 10) as researchers started to realize that young people were not conforming, passive beings. As Rudd (1997) summarized, in the 1980s researchers pointed out the complexities in the socialization process as young people started to resist socializing influences and to an extent tried to accommodate them in a way that conformed to their own lifestyles and ambitions. Paul Willis's (1977) study of 'lads' is seen as a classic example. Commencing from then, researchers by the late 1980s and early 1990s tried to "build ideas of agency into general theoretical perspectives, particularly within 'individualist' explanations of youth positions in society as opposed to 'structuralist' formulations" (Rudd 1997, pp. 262-263).

Researchers, particularly in West Germany, stimulated by the work of Ulrich Beck emphasized less the significance of class and social structure on youth transitions and

more the individual actions of young people in shaping their own biographies. Zinnecker (1990, p. 25) argued that there is a 'moratorium period' which young people experience between adolescence and adulthood and during this phase they simultaneously experience institutionalised education, leisure culture and flexible underemployment. Transitions to paid employment happen later, but access to adult behaviours occurs earlier in life and this leads to a 'duality of movement' affecting the pre-adult life phase as it concomitantly begins both earlier and later, both speeds up and slows down. Zinnecker (1990, pp. 27-28) argues that young people acquire semi-autonomy from their families earlier, and consequently they are required to be self-responsible earlier and shape their own biographies.

Continental youth researchers used these concepts of prolonged youth phase to conceptualise the experiences of young people in the 1990s (see Chisholm *et al.* 1990; Beck 1992), while in the UK, as Chisholm (1990, pp. 41-42) mentions, extended dependence on parents was not considered prevalent, and rather "expectations have been that young people are economically and socially responsible for themselves once they have left full-time education". "The most common way to characterise the school to work transition in British studies has been in terms of the reproduction of social classes" states Jones and Wallace (1992, p. 25). After the 1990s UK researchers also started seeing patterns of prolonged transitions as young people became dependent on their families for longer, they remained in full-time education for longer, and they made transitions to the labour market later in life (Furlong & Cartmel 1997).

These thoughts were echoes of concepts used to describe societal changes that characterised what was later called "late modernity", "high modernity" (Giddens 1990, 1991), "second modernity" (Beck 1992) or "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2000). In these societies life experiences of young people have changed significantly due to the "re-structuring of labour markets, of an increased demand for educated workers, of flexible employment practices and of social policies which have extended the period in which young people remain dependent on their families" (Furlong & Cartmel 2007, p. 1). In Ulrich Beck's (1992) view the western world went through a historical transformation as industrial society was replaced by a new society characterised by new sets of opportunities and risks and he feels that this modernization lead to

individualization. This modernisation process also leads to more risk and uncertainty. This risk society is predominantly different from what he calls 'class-society' in that while in the latter the concept was that "everyone wants and ought to have a share of the pie", this is transposed in risk society to "everyone should be spared from poisoning" and while the "driving force in a class society can be summarized in the phrase: *I am hungry!* the movement set in motion by risk society, on the other hand, is expressed in the statement: *I am afraid!*" (Beck 1992, p. 49, original emphasis). Furthermore, Beck (1992, p. 135) states that people are forced to put themselves at the centre of their plans and reflexively construct their own biographies as collective patterns are disappearing and gender, class and ethnicity from determinants of the life course become differential resources. Giddens (1991, p. 28) agrees that people have to accept the central part played by risk in their lives and they need to adopt a "calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence." As Evans, Behrens and Kaluza (2000) argue these perspectives of the risk society do not deny the existence of social inequalities, rather they state that these inequalities operate at the level of the individual and not at the level of the group or social class.

As a result of reflexive and post-structuralist perspectives that emphasized the need of individuals to navigate and negotiate their way through uncertainty and risk the dominant metaphors describing youth research after the 1990s revolved around the concept of *navigation*. The papers in Chisholm and colleagues (see Chisholm 1990; Zinnecker 1990) suggested that young people were becoming liberated from class and gender restraints and they could build their futures in 'open spaces'.

While the individualization thesis (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992) emphasized the autonomy of choice and the importance of the individual agency in post-traditional society, several authors (Jones & Wallace 1992; Roberts 1993, 2003b, 2009a; Furlong & Cartmel 1997, 2007; Heinz 1999, 2002, 2009a; Bynner 2001, 2005) pointed out the persistence of structural constraints or 'opportunity structures' in young people's lives. Heinz (2009a, p. 397) argued that "the structural continuities of social inequality and

the different opportunities for putting agency into practice are neglected”, while Roberts (2009a) stated that

Choice is not irrelevant, but it fails to explain enough. It cannot account for the contexts, including the labour market contexts, in which young people make their choices, and it cannot identify the different limits within which different groups of young people choose. (Roberts 2009a, p. 362)

He stressed that young people navigate within “constraints (structures) that are neither of their own making nor within their control” and so it is structured individualization which young people experience (Roberts 1993, 2003b). Bates and Riseborough (1993, p. 1) also note that “a classless society is not in the making”, but rather the career prospects of young people depend greatly on their social class origin along with school achievements, place of residence, ethnicity and gender as the findings of the 16-19 initiative point out (Roberts 1993, p. 232). Similarly, Evans and Furlong (1997, p. 33) emphasized that the increasing fragmentation of opportunities and experiences of young adults created new situations which no longer can be explained by developmental / functionalist and structuralist perspectives and highlighted the need for research that takes into account both individual and societal characteristics, giving rise to ‘middle ground theories’.

The middle ground theories emphasize the dual influence of structure and agency, that although transitions are embedded in opportunity structures, social networks and institutions, through individual agency they also construct distinguishing pathways and meaningful connections between past experiences and future plans, a construction that is strongly shaped by present living conditions. By referring to the findings of an Anglo-German study Evans and Heinz (1994, p. 398) link transition actions (strategic, step-by-step, wait-and-see and taking chances) to specific pathways to employment (progressive, upward drift, stagnant and repaired trajectories) and come up with two models of individualisation: self-directed choice between occupational destinations, or what they call ‘active individualisation’; and delayed or uncertain choice with unclear destinations which they name ‘passive individualisation’. In both cases of individualisation the authors emphasize, similarly to others (see Heinz 1999, p. 2; Bynner & Roberts 2001; Furlong & Cartmel 2007, p. 141), that the various forms of agency are activated by the different opportunity contexts and that ultimately these

individualisation cases are structurally embedded in social class, gender and regional job opportunities. In a different study, Rudd and Evans (1998, p. 61) also argued along the lines of 'structured individualisation' that the young people in their study seemed to believe that if they worked hard they were able to achieve suitable qualifications, but at the same time they were conscious of the influence of factors external to their choice, like luck or the state of the labour market in their chosen location or the preferences of employers. In this context Furlong and Carmel (2007, p. 138) claimed that "life in late modernity revolves around an epistemological fallacy", because, "although the collective foundations of social life become more obscure, they continue to provide powerful frameworks which constrain young people's experiences and life chances". The authors see these processes similarly to Norbert Elias (1978) that "individuals are tied together by chains of mutual dependence to form changeable social figurations. Thus individuals are inseparable from their social contexts and as social figurations change, similar changes are manifest in the constituent parts" (Furlong & Cartmel 2007, p. 144). Cieslik and Pollock (2002, p.3) summarise these societal changes as: "in the place of these collective guides and traditional institutions are much more individualised identities and biographies where individuals have a greater scope beyond traditional markers of class, race and gender to create complex subjectivities and lifestyles." On a similar note, Steven Roberts argues for the use of middle ground positions to explain young people's transitional experiences, based on an analogy borrowed from Furlong and Cartmel (1997) and Williamson (2006):

...whereas once young people could be viewed as being on trains being hurled across a set track to some final destination, they are now making their journey to adulthood in a car, navigating their own way. However, political rhetoric espousing equality of opportunity in a meritocratic society obscures the fact that 'cars' of varying quality and reliability are unevenly distributed, that there is variable access to different standards of 'road', and that while many are supplied with 'maps', a differential ability to read them exists" (Roberts 2010, p. 146).

In the new millennium transitions are described as 'arrested' (Côté 2000), 'non-linear' 'de-standardised' (EGRIS 2001); 'cyclical'; 'reversible' and 'yo-yo'-like (du Bois-Reymond 1998, 2009). Heinz (2009a, p. 398) points out that in their study youngsters' capacities of reflection were embedded and influenced by their past experiences, transitions context and competence of self-observation. Although in the past 30 years

the rational choice model became dominant, Heinz (2009a) highlights that decisions in real life do not follow the ideal-type of this theory and people do not have a clear picture of all future scenarios from which they can choose the one that maximizes gains and minimizes utility. Instead people make options based on 'intuitive rationality' which is based on past experiences and reasonable assumptions about likely outcomes. Heinz (2002, 2009a) suggests the concept of 'self-socialization' while Evans (2002, 2007) proposes 'bounded agency' and argues that having this concept in mind the focus rests on individuals as actors, without losing the perspective of structuration. This is important as she believes that while some structural constraints are more difficult to move, others could be "reduced through social and educational policies" (Evans 2007, p. 93). Similarly, Furlong (2009, p. 346) also highlights the classed nature of youth experiences. He feels that due to the changes in youth transitions class-based stratification routes became obscured, but this does not mean they disappeared. In his view this blurring of divisions only reflects the need to develop new practices and new ways of seeing the complex patterns between structure and agency, possibly starting by bringing the long-standing separation of 'transition' and 'cultural' perspectives of youth research closer together (Furlong, Woodman & Wyn 2011, p. 357).

While the trends of functionalism, structuralism and then later individualism dominated in the Western parts of Europe, in the Eastern bloc strong social institutions dominated the predictable routes from school to employment, leaving no room for individual action and preference, but at the same time offering security and protection from cradle to grave (Nagel & Wallace 1997, p. 52). The changes in 1989 lead to a slow but radical change in social structures. Education and labour markets became open almost overnight and young people started experiencing the risks of unemployment as well as the pleasures and the need for making choices. Roberts (2003a) argues that although the changes that happened in Eastern Europe were sudden and were not similar to anything previously seen, the experiences of youngsters in post-communist countries can be adequately explained by western concepts and paradigms. He further states that "post-communist youth's new condition is not structureless or chaotic.... rather, the structures are simply different than those encountered under communism and in the West" (Roberts 2003a, p. 489; Roberts 2009b, p. 94).

To sum up, by looking at youth research historically, it is apparent that the perceptions of researchers and the ways they tried to capture young people's transitions changed over the years shifting from social towards the individual and recently moving towards the middle-ground. At present one of the dominant ways is to understand transitions at both the social and personal level, which requires a formulation that transcends the structure and agency dichotomy and searches for the solution in the 'middle-ground' theories that take into account simultaneously structural factors and individual preferences when researching youth. The theoretical framework for my research is situated within these 'middle-ground' theories of youth transitions, but I focus on youth in higher education contexts, so the next section of this chapter focuses on theories and concepts within this field.

TRANSITIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION SETTINGS

The aspects that characterize late modernity as referred to by Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) are also reflected in young people's experiences within educational settings and in their transitions to the labour market. One of the most significant trends impacting on the experiences of young people in recent years has been the increased participation in post-compulsory education (Furlong & Cartmel 1997, 2007; Nagel & Wallace 1997; Wyn & Dwyer 2000). From being a "minority pursuit for the privileged higher education became more and more a standardised part of the transitions process" (Nagel & Wallace 1997, p. 47), and at the same time this led to a differentiation within the higher education system (between institutions, or courses or qualifications). Furlong and colleagues (2012, p. 1) argue that in most advanced countries young people are now expected to continue studying until the age of 18 and those who gain better marks and those who aim for middle and high ranking positions will aim to go to higher education. Similarly, young people are expected to tackle educational challenges individually and navigate through a complex set of routes into the labour market (Furlong & Cartmel 2007). These challenges are in fact policy responses of governments on the one hand to the global competition of the knowledge societies where a highly skilled workforce is seen to increase the national human resource base

and lead to economic prosperity, and on the other hand responses to the collapse of the youth labour market in the 1980s and the restructuring of employment opportunities in such a way that there was a higher emphasis on training and job flexibility (Brown 2001; Furlong & Cartmel 2007).

Due to the increased costs of education for the masses, governments argued that individuals need to assume some part of the financial burden as they also enjoy the benefits of education. By positioning education as a private good there was an assumption that people will “seek to make rational choices about the services they require” in order to invest in their own futures (Wyn & Woodman 2006, p. 505). The marketization of education led to an illusion of choice and this hid the unchanged traditional sources of inequality (e.g. based on social class, gender and race). As Furlong and Carmel argue

On the surface, educational opportunities have increased for all social groups; participation has increased at all levels and many young people from working class families now enjoy access to higher education. At the same time beneath the surface there is evidence suggesting a maintenance of differentiated educational experiences and, despite differences in the ways in which education is delivered, similar forms of inequalities exist across the industrialised world (Shavit & Blossfeld 1993). In terms of patterns of differentiation, continuity rather than change best describes educational outcomes over the last two decades. (Furlong & Carmel 2007, pp. 32-33)

On a similar note, other authors (Nagel & Wallace 1997, p. 47) claim that although engaging in higher education studies is also uncertain and risky, as you can never be sure of the outcomes, “the attainment of a higher education degree is still correlated with better labour market positions and higher incomes”. While, as we have seen, some authors state that the investment in higher education has good returns in the labour market, others (like Dwyer *et al.* 2005) state, that “the relationship between education and employment is complex and can be extended and unpredictable”. More recently, Brown and colleagues (2011) even more pessimistically claim that

The opportunity bargain has not extended individual freedom but has led to an *opportunity trap* that forces people to spend more time, effort, and money on activities that may have little intrinsic purpose in an attempt to fulfil one’s opportunities. (Brown, Lauder & Ashton 2011, p. 12)

From this perspective, investing in higher education becomes a defensive action, education is a necessary investment to have any chance of fighting for a decent standard of living, but it will result in “handsome rewards” only for a few. Brown and colleagues (2011, p. 5) argue that the belief that “education equals earnings” is unsustainable in a global economy because states fail to live up to their promise in the ‘opportunity bargain’. The authors state that the competitions for jobs shifted from within national borders to a ‘global auction’ open to everyone and the original opportunity bargain turned into an ‘opportunity trap’ because as more and more people spend time and money to gain qualifications, the value of the credentials in the job market is reduced and no one is able to secure any advantage - “If everyone stands on a tiptoe, nobody gets a better view. But if you don’t stand on a tiptoe, there is no chance of seeing” (Brown, Lauder & Ashton 2011, p. 135).

Within the context of education to work transitions there is a vast literature on what happens to people after they graduate and enter working life. Length of time needed to secure a first job, returns to education after several years in employment, employability skills, graduate labour market characteristics, are all widely researched, especially in Western countries (see Shavit & Müller 1998; OECD 2000; Müller & Gangl 2003) but recently papers that include Eastern European countries (see Blossfeld *et al.* 2008; Kogan, Gebel & Noelke 2008; Roberts 2009b; Blossfeld *et al.* 2011; Kogan, Noelke & Gebel 2011; Robert & Saar 2012) are also appearing. These studies look at the outcomes of transitions in a sequential manner: education, then graduation, and then work. But several authors write about the non-sequential characteristic of education-work life-events, and as du Bois-Raymond (1998, p. 67) specifies, “what used to be arranged in series – learning and then work – is currently becoming a double field and a double life for adolescents and young adults: learning and work, work and learning alternately.” She also points out that this starts at an early age, for several people during school years because they want to supplement their pocket money. Wolbers (2003) and more recently Robert and Saar (2012) used the concept of ‘double status positions’ when talking about students who are engaged concomitantly in work and learning. Although theoretically not embedded in the youth transitions or school-to-work transitions literature (except Hodkinson, Sparkes & Hodkinson 1996; Ball *et al.*

2002), empirical findings point out the complexity of these double status positions that students experience.

Studies on combining education and work recently gained predominance within higher education and secondary education research. Mortimer and Kirkpatrick Johnson (1999) and Hodgson and Spours (2001) pointed out pupils' term-time employment, its aspects and possible effects on academic engagement and the vast literature on the topic in the UK and USA contexts. The focus within higher education research tends to be on who works (Barron & Anastasiadou 2009); reasons for working (Wolbers 2003; Barron & Anastasiadou 2009; Richardson, Evans & Gbadamosi 2009; Purcell & Elias 2010); amount of time dedicated to working (Brennan, Blasko, Little & Woodley 2002; Canny 2002; McInnis & Hartley 2002; Brooks 2006; Moreau & Leathwood 2006; Purcell & Elias 2010); type of work done (Brennan *et al.* 2002; Purcell & Elias 2010; Robert & Saar 2012); concerns about academic performance and drop-out (Curtis & Shani 2002; Curtis & Williams 2002; Metcalf 2003; Manthei & Gilmore 2005; Humphrey 2006; Wang *et al.* 2010); type of skills students gain from employment and the effects these might have on their academic life and future work (Brennan *et al.* 2002; Little 2002; Callender 2008; Greenbank, Hepworth & Mercer 2009; Robert & Saar 2012). As Robert and Saar (2012, p. 742) point out "relatively little attention has been paid to the impact of social and institutional contexts on variations in student employment levels" (except Wolbers 2003).

Wolbers tried to determine whether being in a double status position facilitates (is a step for young people towards stable employment) or hinders (are a kind of trap that place young people in a persistent precarious working condition) the transition to a stable labour market position for young people. He concludes that although double status positions are not a promise to secure, high-skilled jobs, they do act as a bridge between full-time initial education and stable employment for young people, especially regarded in the context of human capital investment that pays off later on (Wolbers 2003, p. 153).

In a recent study Roulin and Bangerter (2013) pointed out a different type of 'double status positions' within higher education, namely students who engage in extra-

curricular activities alongside their university studies. Engagement in extra-curricular activities is recently explained by the increased competition in the labour market (Brown & Hesketh 2004; Brown, Lauder & Ashton 2011) as students get involved in extra activities as a tactic to distinguish themselves from their peers (Roulin & Bangerter 2013). Consequently extra-curricular activities become part of the *economy of experience* (Roulin & Bangerter 2013, p. 25). But Roulin and Bangerter (2013, pp. 34-35) in their study of Swiss university students found that interest/passion, well-being, continuation of something started earlier in life, meeting other people, helping people, acquiring practical experience and the fact that it will look good on their résumé were all part of students' motives for engaging in extra-curricular activities.

While Müller and Gangl (2003, p.1) defined transition from school to work as “the period between the end of individuals' primary involvement in education or training and their stable settlement in a work position”, others have argued that in the transition period participation in education and training and participation in the labour market are not mutually exclusive – as Couppié and Mansuy (2003, p. 73) write “a specific feature of the transition period is the existence of borderline situations between trainee, pupil, or student status and worker status.” I agree with this perception and argue that in order to grasp education-to-work transitions researchers need to “understand the individual options and decisions *within* the educational system and *before* actually entering the labour market” (Müller & Gangl 2003, p. 10, original emphasis). Consequently, I believe that bridging youth transitions research and higher education research is essential when trying to grasp education-to-work transitions holistically. I situate my thinking in the ‘middle ground’ theories and argue that in order to fully understand and grasp transitions holistically we need to include structure and agency, but also other concepts that help untangle the complexities of student experiences within HE today. The next section focuses on the concepts I found useful in my research. Some of these are rooted in my readings (time and place considerations, turning points), while others emerged from the interview analysis (significant others, happenstance events).

CONCEPTS USED TO GRASP STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND EDUCATION-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS

Analytical and empirical explanations about students' experiences and transitions from education-to-work are mainly located within the structure-agency continuum, with some researchers representing 'middle ground' positions situated between the two poles. I also situate my thinking within this latter group and in the following I explain my understanding and use of the different concepts applied in my research and analysis. My intention is to clarify my working definitions of the concepts and present how I consider these could be useful in mapping the complex processes of transitions from education to work.

Over the years different authors looked at various aspects and definitions of **agency** (Emirbayer & Mische 1998; White & Wyn 1998; Hitlin & Elder 2007a, 2007b; Hitlin & Long 2009). In Hitlin and Long's (2009, p. 138) view 'agency' refers to a person's ability to make changes in their environment and they distinguish three types: individual, structural and cultural agency. They feel that there are two separate dimensions for understanding human agency: a person's objective opportunities to exert control over their life – 'structural agency', or 'bounded agency' in Evans's (2002, 2007) terms – and their subjective belief about their ability to exert control, which they call 'individual agency'. The third type, 'cultural agency', refers to the cultural beliefs of the person about the relationship between structural and individual agency.

Hitlin and Elder (2007a, pp. 59-60) define agency as a "multifaceted phenomenon that includes feelings of efficacy as well as a sense of forward-looking optimism. It is heightened by individual capacities for planfulness as well as social support". In short, for them (Hitlin & Elder 2007a, pp. 56-57) agency is "a human capacity to influence one's own life within socially structured opportunities" and I also use this definition in my analysis. I looked at students' decision-making, at how they reflect on their past and future decisions and whether they feel they were / are in control to influence what happened / will happen in their lives.

Agency is also socially situated, as 'structural agency' or 'bounded agency'. Evans (2002, 2007) defines 'bounded agency' as a "socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by environments and emphasizing internalized frames of reference as well as external actions" (Evans 2007, p. 93). Additionally, she feels that people have "a past and an imagined future which guide and shape actions in the present, together with subjective perceptions of the structures they have to negotiate, the social landscapes that affect how they act" (Evans 2007, p. 92). Agency is context-dependent, a person might have more agency at home than in a workplace (Hitlin & Long 2009, p. 140), and it also depends on their social class as Stephens, Markus and Townsend (2007) found working-class individuals made choices that expressed similarity to others, while middle-class individuals made choices that highlighted their independence and difference from others. Mirowsky and Ross (2007, p. 1375) found a positive association between education and a person's sense of control, meaning that those who achieve higher levels of education feel that they exercise more control in their lives. Consequently, apart from the subjective perception of agency, it is important to look at the 'structural factors' / 'structural contexts' / 'opportunity structures' / 'social landscapes' / 'horizons for action' within which students' lives are embedded.

Structural factors believed to shape individuals' opportunities are: socio-economic status, age, gender, ethnicity, and additionally, the contexts in which students' experiences are embedded, which are in turn represented by the characteristics of the national and institutional higher education systems and the local and national practices in the labour market. I collected information about ethnicity, age and gender primarily in the on-line questionnaire. I 'measured' socio-economic status with two variables: on the one hand I asked my respondents to place themselves within a scale of 1 to 10 based on their perceived economic situation; on the other hand I asked students whether their parents attended higher education. Information about the characteristics of the higher education system and the labour markets in both countries were compiled using document and policy analysis and were incorporated in the main analysis. Apart from these, while analysing the narratives I paid attention to both

explicit and implicit references of students to structural factors in helping or hindering the course of their lives.

Several authors conducted studies sensitive to both structure and agency when researching aspects of youth transitions like Evans and Furlong (1997), Chisholm (1999), Heinz (1999), Evans (2002, 2007), Brannen and Nilsen (2002, 2005, 2007), Hollands (2003), MacDonald and Marsh (2005), Cieslik and Simpson (2006). While Furlong and Cartmel (1997, 2007) and MacDonald and Marsh (2005) emphasize the importance of structural aspects (like social class, gender or labour market opportunities) on transitions, du Bois-Reymond (1998, 2004), Evans (2002, 2007), Arnett (2004, 2006), Anderson and colleagues (2005) and Cieslik and Simpson (2006), highlight the workings of individual agency and reflexivity in face of labour market opportunities and transitions. In addition to these two aspects recently researchers make note of other aspects that affect and shape transitional experiences. Heinz (2009b) and Brooks (2007) argue that significant others play a major role in young people's transitions and decision-making, Thompson and colleagues (2002) talk about 'critical moments', Yair (2009) mentions turning points, and Archer (2007) highlights the importance of temporal sequencing of elements of structure and agency.

Heinz (2009b, p. 12) argues for expanding the life course perspective on transitions with including information about the ways in which **young peoples' lives are linked**, about the relationships between them and their parents, peers, partners and about the effects these relationships have on the course and result of transitions. Norbert Elias has previously noted the interconnected nature of lives. According to him researchers can grasp and understand individual behaviour and actions in the context of the "figurations they form with each other" (Elias 1978, p. 72). In his viewpoint it is not possible to regard a single element without its surrounding, to be more precise, one human being without the society in which he or she lives and is embedded, "society consists entirely of individuals, oneself among them" (Elias 1978, p. 13). For Elias

The individual always exists, on the most fundamental level, in relation to others, and this relation has a particular structure specific to his society. He takes on his individual stamp from the history of these relationships, these

dependences, and so, in a broader context, from the history of the whole human network within which he grows up and lives. This history and this human network are present in him and are represented by him. (Elias 1991, p. 27).

He was advocating for the interrelationships among human beings; “everyone is interdependent...One's sense of personal identity is closely connected with the 'we' and 'they' relationships of one's group, and with one's position within those units of which one speaks as ‘we’ and ‘they’ ” (Elias 1978, p. 128).

McAdams (2009, p. 412) conceptualises agency and communion in life stories. He sees an ‘agentic life story’ as one in which “the characters strive for power, achievement, independence, mastery, and so on.” While in a “life story dominated by communal themes, characters strive for friendship, love, intimacy, community.” Within education research the influence of parents and peer groups on young people’s decision-making has been noted by Brooks (2007) and Holland and colleagues (2007). Brooks (2007, pp. 703-705) argues that the nature of young people’s friendships at university varies according to context as within non-academic contexts friendships tend to be based on mutual trust and closeness and they were connected to social learning, while within academic contexts the relationships were more characterised by competition and increased levels of individualisation. On the other hand, Holland and colleagues (2007, p. 113) argue that bridging and bonding social capital are interconnected and interdependent, and furthermore, are influenced by place and the community, or using Elias’ concept, with the figurations they form.

Recently Marissa Mayer, Yahoo CEO declared in the Vogue Magazine

I didn’t set out to be at the top of technology companies... I'm just geeky and shy and I like to code. ... It's not like I had a grand plan where I weighed all the pros and cons of what I wanted to do – it just sort of happened (Weisberg 2013).

This ‘it just sort of happened’ feeling that Marissa Mayer talked about has gained prominence recently in youth research. Apart from structure, agency and the role of significant others, **chance or unforeseen events** and how people react to these gained momentum mainly through the work of Thomson, Holland, Henderson and their

colleagues from the longitudinal project of *Inventing Adulthoods* (see Thomson *et al.* 2002; Thomson *et al.* 2004; Henderson *et al.* 2007; Holland & Thomson 2009).

'Unintended consequences', the role of 'luck', or 'being in the right place at the right time' were mentioned in previous empirical research on youth (Bates 1993, p. 30; Rudd & Evans 1998, p. 61), but have not been conceptualised in theoretical debates. Within career decision-making studies the concept of happenstance or its various forms (fortune, serendipity, fate) have been widely researched. Shanahan and Porfeli (2007, p. 99) argue that "while objective measures of chance events are likely 'undoable science', subjective measures deserve attention in studies of educational and occupational careers and the family cycle". Studies of career decision-making confirm that both researchers and the people they study regard chance as playing a substantial role in educational and occupational careers. 'Chance event' refers to "a highly unlikely or seemingly random occurrence" in Shanahan and Porfeli's (2007, p. 100) view and they identify four defining features of it: they are highly unlikely, have causal effects, are unintended, and they warrant explanation. They recognise that chance events are difficult to define and study as the phrase 'chance events' is not necessarily present in everyday speech, nor its approximate synonyms like 'luck', 'misfortune', 'serendipity' (p.110). They also argue that "self-perceived chance events are almost completely unexplored territory in life course studies, and they may well be a 'tool' with which many people come to understand their lives" (Shanahan & Porfeli 2007, p. 117). In my research I use the concept of 'chance events' as Rojewski (1999, p. 269) defined them: "chance generally denotes unplanned, accidental, or otherwise situational, unpredictable, or unintentional events or encounters that have an impact on career development and behaviour." He continues to state that "while the term 'chance' implies lack of control, individuals usually have at least some control over chance encounters and events, as well as over how to interpret and react to those situations."

Connected to plans and happenstance events is the concept of turning points which as Yair (2009, p. 353) points out denote "a story with a timeline, one that connects a past to a seemingly disconnected future with a surprising middle movement that reshuffled the actors, their motivations and their actions". Furthermore he states that "the opportunities for positive turning points are organizationally produced and socially

distributed” (Yair 2009, p. 365). Particularly researchers who adopted a biographical perspective in their studies highlighted the value of analysing young people’s experiences and perspectives for ‘**critical moments**’, ‘turning points’, or ‘fateful moments’. Usually having as starting point Giddens’ (1991) work on the relationship between self and society and particularly his theoretical concept of ‘fateful moments’ researchers came up with different conceptualisations.

Janet Holland, Rachel Thomson, and their colleagues (Henderson *et al.* 2007; Holland & Thomson 2009; Thomson *et al.* 2002; Thomson *et al.* 2004) use the concepts of critical moments and turning points to analyse biographical accounts and their relationships with social structures (see also Sennett 1998 on ‘defining moments’ and ‘crucial turning points’, and Shanahan & Porfeli 2007 on ‘chance events’). They define critical moments as events that have important consequences on the lives and identities of young people (Thomson *et al.* 2002, p. 339) and they use a choice-fate continuum to capture the presence or absence of agency in young people’s experiences. Furthermore, they feel that the responses of young people to critical moments in their lives are also revealing and they distinguish between fatalistic response in line with absence of agency, and ‘fateful moments’ characterised by the presence of agency, in line with Giddens (1991, p. 112) who defines ‘fateful moments’ as “those when individuals are called on to take decisions that are particularly consequential for their ambitions, or more generally for their future lives.” While recognising the role of luck, chance and opportunity, namely that fateful moments can occur both due to the initiative of the individual and as a consequence of events beyond the individual’s control, for Giddens the crucial aspects of ‘fateful moments’ remain in the control and the exercise of agency by individuals. Taking a different stance, Henderson and colleagues (2007, p. 22) also believe that critical moments are important, as they play a central part in young people’s narratives of self and in the ordering and reordering of these narratives in their reflexive projects, but they also feel that young people are not simply authors of their own destinies, but they are located in time, space and social structure. Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996) also emphasize the presence of both structure and agency in young people’s decision-making. Similarly to Thomson and colleagues, Hodkinson and colleagues also look at critical moments, or turning points as they call them, in young

people's lives, within educational contexts and career decision-making. They (Hodkinson, Sparkes & Hodkinson 1996, p. 142) state that "at a turning point.... a person goes through a transformation of identity.... turning points are when the young people make significant, pragmatically rational, career decisions." They identify three types of turning points: structural, forced and self-initiated. Structural turning points are largely determined by societal structures and they occur at predictable times in the life course, like the ages when people leave compulsory education or they retire. When people need to reconsider their lives due to external factors beyond their control, they experience forced turning points. The examples of redundancy, physical injury, bereavement are mentioned by the authors. In contrast to these are the self-initiated turning points, like the decision to retire early, to get married, to set up a home alone, in these cases the persons decide to change their lives. Hodkinson and colleagues mention that these turning points are not mutually exclusive and their categorisation can also depend on scale and distance, nevertheless for the purpose of my study the concept of turning points and the three different forms were deemed useful. My working definition of the concept of turning points/critical moments in students' lives denotes those moments (either structurally, externally or internally induced) when students need to make decisions that will alter their lives.

Giddens (1979, p. 54) argued that "social activity is always constituted in three intersecting moments of difference: **temporally**, pragmatically (invoking structure which is present only in its instantiation) and **spatially**". He sees all social activity situated within these three senses. Roberts (2009b, p. 92) stated that "place is one of the 21st century's great dividers". Archer (2007) felt that it is possible and desirable to unpick the elements of agency and structure analytically "to give empirical accounts of how structural and agential phenomena interlink *over time* rather than merely stating their theoretical interdependence." She felt that it is "agential reflexivity which actively mediates between our structurally shaped circumstances and what we deliberately make of them" (Archer 2007, p. 16). Taking this perspective into consideration Brannen and Nilsen (2002) researched how young people thought about their present and their future and found that "the ways in which people conceptualize and experience time

are important influences on whether they have a notion of planning for the future” (Brannen & Nilsen 2002, p. 517). These perspectives are also in line with the contextual perspective on youth research which White and Wyn (1998) advocated for. They feel that this approach “provides insight into how different groups of young people are situated in their local and possibly global contexts, both in terms of contemporary life and historically.” (White & Wyn 1998, p. 325).

Dewey argued that “experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences” and that it is important to regard educational experiences from a standpoint that incorporates a time perspective as “there is always a history, experiences always change and people are always heading somewhere” (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 2). Similarly to them, I also feel that in order to capture students’ experiences it is important to regard them as embedded in personal and societal pasts, presents and futures.

Overall, in my research I felt important to aim for the contextual approach, which I sensed, would provide a more holistic picture on the experiences and transitions of students. In order to achieve this, I read students’ narratives for agency – the narrator presents himself or herself as someone whose actions, choices and preferences determined / will determine his or her situation – and for structure – the narrator presents his or her life as being controlled by gender, age, ethnicity, social class, regional, institutional or country characteristics – but I also found that significant others or communion – the narrator attributes much influence to other people and his or her positions and relationship within the figurations they form – and happenstance events – the narrator feels luck or chance determined his or her life course – were all important and useful concepts. Additionally, students’ narratives were embedded in perspectives on time – reflecting on the past, present and future – and place – reflecting on different locations and the attached meanings. Taken together, the concepts of structure, agency, communion, happenstance, and perspectives of time and place offered me the possibility to understand and describe how students subjectively frame their experiences and transitions from education to work; whether they explain their

decisions and experiences as consequences of personal choice and individuality or whether collective consciousness (like class, ethnicity, gender, age) pervade their narratives or they feel that everything is outside of their control and depends on random, unplanned and unforeseen events.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Transitions research is dominated by the study of school-to-work careers as MacDonald and Marsh (2005, p. 34) pointed out and, in this sense, my research is not different. Over the years several critical thoughts were formulated with regard to different aspects of youth transitions and education-to-work transitions literature. In this last section I present my own viewpoints while also relying on some of these critiques and I conclude by presenting my theoretical framework which argues for a broader definition of how education-to-work transitions are conceptualised theoretically and also empirically.

First, what is my main concept: social generation, transitions or emerging adulthood? Researchers presenting the experiences of today's youth often contrast their experiences with the 'golden age' transitions that characterised the experiences of young people in previous decades. Goodwin and O'Connor (2005, 2007) are critical of this standpoint and drawing on data from the 1960s, and additional data from re-interviews with the same respondents in 2003–2005 argue that, despite considerable social change over forty years, there were important continuities and resemblances in young people's experiences of transitions. Transitions were less clear-cut in the 1960s than it is often assumed and young people experienced risks as well as complex and uncertain transitions, similarly to young people today (Vickerstaff 2003; Goodwin & O'Connor 2005, 2007). Consequently, Goodwin and O'Connor (2007, p. 570) highlight that "continuity best describes trends in youth transitions not just over the last two decades but also over the past fifty years". On a different note, Furlong and colleagues see the notion of 'transition' as unfit to describe the complexities of late modernity and propose the concepts of 'social generation' instead (Furlong, Woodman & Wyn 2011, p. 361) while Brooks (2007, 2009), Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) and Stokes and Wyn

(2007) argue for broadening the concept of *transitions*. Skelton (2002, p. 113) considers using the concept of a “process” rather than a stage to be passed through, because this provides room to recognize that there are as many different transitional processes as there are different groups of young people and that they are all valid processes, events and experiences. The author further argues that just because we become adults does not mean the complexities are over, and if some young people do not cope well with the complexities it does not mean they have failed to become adults. They may have a different way through adulthood and it might be much harder, but it is still part of the active process of growing up and growing older. Similarly, I do not regard ‘transitions’ as a phase of life, but rather as a multitude of experiences, choices and perceptions – a process. Engaging in university studies is part of the longer process of transitioning from education to the labour market. This transition may still be linear for some, but as in late modernity there is an increasing need for lifelong learning, people are more likely to move between education and work statuses throughout their life either in a zigzag or simultaneously, while also maintaining other positions in society (mother/father, wife/husband, child, friend, neighbour, colleague, etc.). Having said this, I do not ignore, but rather point out students’ experiences of transitions in different aspects of their life (e.g. housing transitions) whenever these become apparent in students’ stories. I do not think of education-to-work transitions as linear, progressive movements towards adulthood, but rather concur with researchers who regard them as unpredictable and circular. In this sense Wyn and Wodman’s (2006) ‘social generations’ based on Mannheim (1952) is an interesting concept and I agree with their idea to locate those who we research within their social, political and economic milieu, and regarding them as a ‘social generation’ (Wyn & Woodman 2007, p. 375). Thinking along these lines, those who attend university at a specific time experience the same institutional structure, the same rules and benefits apply to them within a specific place, but regardless of age, gender and social class, so essentially what differs is their individual backgrounds. From this perspective the idea of ‘social generations’ seems a useful concept to use in cross-cultural comparative analysis on students’ higher education experiences. As Wyn and Woodman (2006, pp. 499-500) argue, apart from looking at the social and institutional factors that constitute a

generation, it is also important “to understand the role that young people themselves play in constituting distinctive features of their generation”. However I also agree with Roberts (2007, p. 265) that “the transitions and generation perspectives are not mutually exclusive: they can be used complementarily.” My research is about a process – the process of transitioning from education to the labour market – and from this starting point takes into consideration the full range of experiences of a social generation of students (leisure, family, relationships, etc.) as they mention them in their life stories in two countries. This processual approach is what Mills (2000) argued for in *The sociological imagination*. Rooted in this reason too, the concept of ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett 2004, 2006) would not have been useful in my research. Although I agree with Arnett (2004, 2006) that ‘youth’ is too general a concept and probably his ‘emerging adulthood’ is more suited to describe people as they make the transition from youth to adulthood. However, in my research, I was interested primarily in the topic of higher education and how during this period of their life students engage in and manage transitions within/between education and work, and not the general transition of people aged 18-25 from adolescence to adulthood; and second, the students I interviewed could not all be regarded as emerging adults, some of them were mature students who returned to higher education after several years in the labour market. So ultimately I decided to use the concept of ‘education-to-work transitions’ because I felt this captures best what I set out to research: the process of educational and work transitions and the interplay between the two in full-time university students’ lives in two country contexts.

Second, how to capture theoretically education-to-work transitions: does structure or agency explain students’ transitions or there is a need for more holistic approaches that include both structure and agency and other aspects as well? As others have argued before me (Heinz 1999, 2009a; Doherty 2001; Evans 2002, 2007), I also believe that the interconnectedness of structure and agency provides a framework in which we can consider the dual impact of agency and structure upon student experience. Authors like Robert van Krieken (2002) and Woodman (2009) are critical of the prominence of ‘middle ground’ theories and suggest alternative forms of social and youth research. Van Krieken (2002, p. 257) argues that instead of thinking about dichotomies

sociologists should work towards a “complementary form of sociological thought”. He proposes to start from the work of Norbert Elias and his concept of ‘figurations’ instead of trying to build bridges and links between structure and agency, methods that instead of abolishing the oppositional dichotomy, they only reinforce it (van Krieken 2002, p. 256). From the same starting point Woodman (2009, p. 253) claims that the study of youth transitions is “stuck in a constant reinvention of a middle-ground position between structure and agency, often against mythical enemies of its own construction”. Since the 1990s several researchers or groups of researchers (Chisholm 1999, p. 308; Heinz 1999; EGRIS 2001, p. 112; López Blasco, McNeish & Walther 2003; MacDonald & Marsh 2005; Furlong 2009; MacDonald 2011; Goodwin & O’Connor 2013) have argued for a “reconceptualization of the social life course that dispenses with linearity and unidimensionality” and allows for more holistic approaches to conceptualising transitional experiences of young people. Chisholm (1999, p. 308) felt that “the emergent features of youth transitions can be better appreciated, theoretically and empirically, if they are related more systematically and explicitly to the changing features of the social life course as a whole”. Heinz (1999, p. 13) described modern life planning in risk societies as the construction of a “patchwork in time” and Chisholm (1999, p. 308) further developing the idea stated that “successful patchworkers in time need access to ‘networks in space’ and the knowledge to navigate them autonomously”. Goodwin and O’Connor (2013, para 2.2) argued for exploring the *how it is* experiences of young people by aiming for “‘reality congruent’ knowledge” and considering the “‘wholes’ (as opposed to parts of society)”. In complete agreement with these researchers I also felt that in order to capture the complexities of student transitions I had to include the ‘how it is’ in my research and not just questions of ‘who’ and ‘what’ and ‘why’. I aimed to go beyond the dichotomy of structure and agency and focus on grasping students’ experiences from a holistic perspective, by including in the analysis concomitantly structure and agency, but also happenstance and significant others as well as considerations on time and place (concepts which I presented earlier in this chapter).

Third, who to research: the NEET or the high flyers or the missing middle? Regarding the population studied, several researchers (see Cieslik & Simpson 2006; MacDonald

2011; Roberts 2011, 2013; Goodwin & O'Connor 2013) have pointed out that it has become an 'orthodoxy' in transition studies to focus on the extreme cases. On the one hand, Cieslik and Simpson (2006, p. 226) consider that the emphasis on NEET, on 'youth problems' has created "many studies of young people buffeted by social forces over which they seem to have little control" (see Bates 1993; MacDonald 1993, 2011; MacDonald & Marsh 2005). On the other side, the work of du Bois-Raymond (1998, 2004) and colleagues (Diepstraten 2006), Brooks and Everett (2008), Roker (1993) focused on the 'success stories' and experiences of more privileged young people. Kenneth Roberts (2013, para 3.3) positions the disappearance of 'middling youth' from sociological transitions research around the end of the 1980s. Some researchers (MacDonald & Marsh 2005; Furlong, Woodman & Wyn 2011; MacDonald 2011) argue for bringing the two aspects of youth perspectives together (youth cultural studies and youth transition studies) in order to provide more "encompassing and influential studies of youth" (MacDonald 2011, p. 429). Furlong and colleagues (2011, p. 357) argue that "to ignore or sideline youth culture results in a one-dimensional picture of young lives in which the active way that young people negotiate constraint and opportunity is portrayed as marginal to the process of social reproduction." France (2007) and MacDonald (2011) on the other hand feel that youth researchers should turn their focus towards the "'ordinary kids', the 'missing middle', the *mainstream* that has been *marginalized* in transitions and youth culture research." I wanted to break with the traditions of researching the disadvantaged or the 'high flyers' and instead I aimed to focus on students inclusively, not just those who are disadvantaged or marginal, or those who are high-achievers, but both these categories and the middle-ground as well. Finally, what is the main topic of interest: the experiences of university students? Within higher education research student experience is one of the main themes, as Tight (2012) pointed out in his analysis on specialist academic journals within the field of higher education during the years 2000 and 2010. He found that student experience together with course design dominated the publications, making up 55% of articles under review (Tight 2012, p. 727). There is also an apparent increasing interest in students' experiences while at university, but nevertheless very few studies have undertaken a comprehensive and systematic study of the issue: particularly what

activities students are engaged in, why they get involved in these activities in the first place, or whether they believe these will give them an advantage over other students in their academic life or later over other job seekers in the labour market. Albeit some studies (Roulin & Bangerter 2013) mention that there are several students who engage in two or more activities at the same time, like multiple extra-curricular activities or they also work while being engaged in extra-curricular activities, these studies do not develop the issue further. While there are still students who do not engage in any other activity apart from their studies, there are also increasingly youngsters for whom education-to-work transitions can be characterized by multiple education and work statuses over long periods of time. My aim is to focus on students' experiences at university, including those who do not engage in activities and those who are active on multiple fronts.

To sum up the theoretical framework, with my research I explore education-to-work transitions defined as a process that can be grasped theoretically and empirically from a holistic perspective at the intersections of agency, structure, happenstance events and significant others situated in time and place. I use a quote from Evans (2002, p. 265) because it adequately depicts my thoughts and framework for researching student experiences of school-to-work transitions in the two countries:

Young people are social actors in a social landscape. How they perceive the horizons depends on where they stand in the landscape and where their journey takes them. Where they go depends on the pathways they perceive, choose, stumble across or clear for themselves, the terrain and the elements they encounter. Their progress depends on how well they are equipped, the help they can call on when they need it, whether they go alone or together and who their fellow travellers are.

She talks about youth as displaying agency in their decisions and life course experiences, but at the same time their actions are embedded in their personal, regional and national structures which provide different opportunity structures and horizons for action. Their progress is also dependent on how happenstance and significant others intersect and change their lives, the timing and the location of various encounters and events. In order to grasp these multiple perspectives a contextual and holistic approach is needed which takes into consideration the inner experience of individuals and its connections with changing events and phases throughout the life

course (White & Wyn 1998, pp. 323-325; Giele 2002, pp. 15-16; Bryman 2012, p. 695). This is also in line with calls by several researchers (Jones & Wallace 1992; Heinz 1999; Rustin & Chamberlayne 2002; MacDonald & Marsh 2005; Furlong 2009) for more biographical and life course approaches to youth and transition studies.

Overall, I designed this research to focus on people (students), places (a university in Romania and a university in England) and processes (going to university, choosing an institution and a subject, experiencing student life and multiple statuses, perceptions and plans about future) in order to understand and describe the lived experiences of university students and their transitions from education to work. Details about my choice of research perspectives and methods as well as the concrete steps of my study and analysis are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The chapter starts by defining my philosophical and methodological position, then continues by presenting the methods applied for data collection, the selection of the research 'material' and the techniques of data analysis. Reflection on quality, ethical considerations and the limitations of the study conclude the chapter.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL POSITION

The aim of the study was to describe, understand and interpret the characteristics of university students' pathways and transitions to work in England and in Romania. The research wanted to gain an insight into the reasons why students choose to go to university, their experiences as students and/or as 'workers', the 'turning points' of their (student) life, and their perceptions and opinions about their future (career) plans. The main research question of the study was:

→ What are the characteristics of student pathways through HE and into work?

In addition to the main research question several specific research questions were formulated:

Q1. What are the circumstances and motives that lead youngsters to choose to attend HE?

Q2. How do students understand and describe their HE experience?

Q3. What role do extracurricular activities and/or work experience have in students' HE experience and perceptions about transitions to work?

Q4. How does the current economic climate influence students' strategies and perceptions about their future (career) and how do they see their life after graduation?

As I argued in the previous chapter, I subscribe to the view that there is a need for researching transitions from education to work holistically by looking at the person as a whole and researching their experiences in the context of their life stories. Consequently my research is located within the interpretive paradigm, which is concerned with how individuals perceive and make sense of the world – be it through language, shared feelings, or personal perceptions derived from experiences. In order

to grasp the meanings of peoples' behaviour, the researcher attempts to see things from that person's point of view (Bryman 2012, p. 30). Interpretivists highlight the importance of the perspective of the research subjects and the meaning that they attribute to the phenomenon under study. In line with interpretive epistemological positions I believe that knowledge can be acquired from the process of engaging with the respondents, we can know the world through the eyes and experiences of people we are researching, through understanding their subjective interpretations of it. In terms of ontological assumptions, I believe that reality is not inert and objective, but it is constructed and shaped by the people who are its constituent parts. Researchers intend to reconstruct the world as it exists in the minds of those who are the subjects of the analysis. My research questions and my epistemological and ontological positioning lead to a research design that favoured a qualitative approach. My working definition of what qualitative research encompasses is based on Creswell's (2013, p. 44) statement:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive / theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.

The following part presents the perspectives and approaches used throughout the research process.

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

The research was conducted taking into consideration two perspectives: biographical perspective combined with comparative perspective. In the following I present the rationale for opting for these perspectives and the research methods that underpinned them.

1. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

I investigated the narratives of students living and studying in two specific contexts: an English university and a Romanian university. Accordingly, the research adopted a

cross-national comparative perspective with the purpose to seek explanations for similarities and differences and to gain a greater awareness and a deeper understanding of social reality within the different university and national contexts (Brown 2001, p. 54; Bryman 2012, p. 72). As Heinz argues:

Comparative case studies that look at transition systems in detail by applying quantitative and/or qualitative methods emphasize the interaction of structure and agency and illuminate the interrelationship between socio-economic conditions and institutional arrangements in which transition processes are embedded. (Heinz 1999, p. 2)

Similarly, Crossley (2000) and Kubow and Fossum (2007, p. 18) state that “the multidisciplinary nature and context sensitivity characteristic of comparative education make it especially applicable to studying educational phenomena and their sociocultural, historical, and political conditions.”

Within cross-national studies, the field of comparative higher educational research is largely dominated by multi-national quantitative comparisons (Shavit & Müller 1998; Müller & Gangl 2003; Lindberg 2007; Pohl & Walther 2007; Teichler 2009) using the European Union Labour Force Survey or the CHEERS survey or other statistical databases. Brannen and Nilsen (2011) and Gómez and Kuronen (2011) argue there is a need for more qualitative in-depth comparisons that enable the researcher to analyse the phenomena from the inside, within their socio-cultural contexts and in people’s everyday lives. For Mason (2006, p. 16) the strength of qualitative comparison lies in its holistic understanding of the distinctive dynamics, mechanics, and particularity of each case. Conducting comparative analysis is a way of finding the absences, the peculiarities in one case as their characteristics become more recognisable when in contrast with another setting. Similarly, Brannen and Nilsen (2011, p. 604) state that by contextualising people’s experiences, cross-national comparisons add depth and richness to the data which helps in understanding and explaining the differences and similarities in cases. These aspects are largely overlooked in cross-national surveys as they focus only on the macro levels of public policy and miss the nuances of individual experience, the meanings that people attribute to their experiences, and consequently how agency is shaped by the different layers of contexts.

Mabett and Bolderson (1999 cited in Kennett 2001, pp. 6-7) identified three broad types of comparative social research. First, there are studies that focus on macro-economic indicators and test hypotheses using multivariate quantitative analysis; second, at the other end of the spectrum are the micro-level studies which utilize more in-depth qualitative data. Between the two poles are the mid-or meso-level studies as exemplified by the work of Esping-Andersen (1990) who concentrates on both within and between characteristics of different regimes. I opted for the latter type and I regarded the two countries as *contexts* of the study and not as *objects* or *units of analysis* (see Kohn 1987 cited in Brannen & Nilsen 2011). My aim was to understand which characteristics of the particular societies and institutions affect patterns of behaviour within them, similarly to Przeworski (1987 cited in Kennett 2001, p. 41).

In my research I compared the ways students reported and contextualised, in the present moment, past behaviours and future plans. With this type of analysis I aimed to combine the “holistic study of cases *within* contexts with analysis of key variables *across* contexts” (Ragin 1991 cited in Evans 2002, p. 253).

2. BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

For the purpose of the individual analytic framework I conducted the research from a biographical perspective, using students’ life stories as a basis for social research in order to understand processes of transitions (Heinz 1999; Hubbard 2000; Roberts 2002; Rustin & Chamberlayne 2002; Merrill & West 2009). This perspective “is indicated where the arena of interest is either the effects of change across time, historical events as these events have impinged upon the individual, or his or her movement along their life course” (Miller 2000, p. 74). Rustin and Chamberlayne (2002, p. 2, original emphasis) see the value of biographical studies in the fact that “these studies can illuminate the experiences and problems of *transitions* from one social milieu to another, transitions that are increasingly both expected and demanded of citizens”. Furlong and Carmel (2007, p. 7) see this method in youth research “as another way of talking about rationality, or more accurately, rationalization” and they feel it “helps to understand agency and the ways in which individuals negotiate uncertainty and

attempt to manage their lives". Bertaux and Thomson (1997 cited in Thomson *et al.* 2002, p. 336) see the strength of this method in its ability to capture "the complexity of individual lives and the relative impact of events within them".

The methodological approach in line with the biographical perspective was narrative inquiry, as this approach allowed me to capture and present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness. As several authors mention (see Freeman 2004; Cortazzi 2005; Webster & Mertova 2007; Goodson & Gill 2011) this approach focuses on participants' experience and the meanings given by them to the experience. It is not about telling it "as it was", but as Freeman (2004, p. 74) argues, imagination is involved because meanings are articulated "that could not possibly emerge except only in retrospect, through narration". Similarly, McAdams (2009, pp. 389-390) states that "life story is not simply an objective account of 'what really happened' in the past... life stories tell us how a person sees his or her life in the overall and over time and what the overall meaning and purpose of that life might be" or as Denzin (2001, p. 60, original emphasis) states: "narratives are reflections *on*, not *of*, the world as it is known." The researcher is primarily concerned with these interpretations of participants, not the 'real' world. As Riessman (1993, pp. 1-2) argues the purpose of this approach is "to see how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives"; and because this approach "gives prominence to human agency and imagination, it is well suited to studies of subjectivity and identity" (Riessman 1993, p. 5). Singer (2001) highlights quoting Pillemer (1992) "individuals do not simply possess life stories, but they use them for interpersonal persuasion, psychological regulation of self-concept and mood, and motivational guidance in life pursuits. Consequently the analysis of individuals' life stories uncovers not only the themes of a given life, but also the dynamic properties of that story in a given personality." Furthermore, MacIntyre (1984) quoted by Goodson and Gill (2011, p. 6) argues that "in the telling of their lives, individuals place actions in the context of intentions with reference to their role in the history of the setting or settings in which they belong. In this way, in the narrative construct, human actions are united with their intention, values and purposes".

The explanation that Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2008) give for using narrative research in the introduction of their edited book *Doing Narrative Research* offers a good summary of my own motivations for choosing this approach:

...by doing [narrative research] we are able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change. (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou 2008, pp. 1-2)

As Miller (2000, p. 74) and Gilbert (2008, pp. 429-430) argue, there are several research topics that lend themselves to narrative inquiry and “these are often experiences or events shared by a number of individuals that tell us something about the nature of society as well as being significant to those involved”. Riessmann (1993) used this approach to examine interrupted lives (biographical accounts of chronic illnesses, divorce and infertility). Other studies that adopted narrative or biographical approaches for investigating specific periods or transitions in the life cycle include: Heinz (1999), Hubbard (2000), Thomson and colleagues (2002, 2004), Hollands (2003), López Blasco and colleagues (2003), Brannen and Nilsen (2005), MacDonald and Marsh (2005), Walther (2006), Walther and colleagues (2006), Devadason (2006, 2008), Henderson and colleagues (2007), Bradley and Devadason (2008), O’Connor (2012), and Aaltonen (2013) present different aspects of youth transitions or school-to-work transitions; Berger (1995) focuses on Jewish survivors; Lieblich (1993) on the transition of immigration; Smith (2012) on school teachers’ perceptions of factors affecting their career decisions; Mulhall (2013) on career experiences of Community Employment participants.

Touching upon educational topics with narrative methods is scarce, studies are focused mainly on: teacher education, looking at the ways in which teachers' narratives shape and inform their practices (Cortazzi 1993; Dimmock & O'Donoghue 1997; Clandinin & Connelly 2000; Goodson & Sikes 2001; Phillion & He 2004; Webster & Mertova 2007); on the experiences of university academics (Ward 2003; Floyd 2009); on the experiences of immigrant students in school contexts (Phillion 2008); on the experiences of graduate students and their supervisors of anthropological fieldwork (Coffey & Atkinson 1996); on students’ HE choices (Holmegaard, Ulriksen & Madsen 2012; Rodd, Reiss & Mujtaba 2013). As mentioned by Crossley (2008, p. 364), “while narrative approaches to

research have a strong foundation in fields such as counselling or psychotherapy, their potential within the field of comparative and international education remains to be fully realised.” Research using biographical perspectives specifically on students’ experiences in higher education is scarce, and those that exist focus on adult learners (Doherty 2001) or international students’ learning experiences (Trahar 2009).

Similarly to Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 19) I believe that “educational experience should be studied narratively” and I feel that prompting for narratives in life history interviews with students can add important layers to understanding their experiences, their motivations, feelings and plans and facilitates the exploration of the interplay between structure and agency as embedded in students’ narratives. Through these narratives we can also gain a glimpse of how student experience as a phase of life is politically and socially constructed and we can describe their practices while preserving their voices. In the following sub-chapter I focus on the four categories of sampling as identified by Burgess (1984, p. 76): research locations, time, events and people.

SAMPLING: RESEARCH LOCATIONS, TIMING, EVENTS AND PARTICIPANTS

In line with the cross-national comparative perspective I conducted the field research in two countries in two institutions adopting the same approach and research methods in approximately the same time frames. The main aim of the study was to describe and understand the experiences of students and their embeddedness in the different institutional and national contexts.

As my main locations, I selected two countries (Romania and England) and within the countries two universities (called Romanian University and English University in the thesis) where I knew the language, was familiar with the socio-cultural and educational practices, as I had first had experience in both of them. I considered my prior experience in the two settings an asset and decided to use it in the research. Analysing processes and practices in Romania helped me to see what was specific in the English setting and vice-versa.

McArt and Brown (1990 cited in Irvine *et al.* 2008, p. 39) suggest three recruitment and sampling strategies when undertaking cross-cultural research: equivalency of sample, time equivalency and culturally sensitive access to sample groups. When designing the fieldwork I was attentive of all these three aspects. The data collection periods were roughly equivalent, not identical as I could not be in two places at the same time:

Pilot phase – 2010:

- I conducted individual interviews in August in Romania and in December in England.

Main research first phase – 2011:

- I posted the questionnaire on-line on 2nd May in Romania and 2nd June in England.
- I conducted individual interviews in May & July in Romania and in July & August in England.

Main research second phase – 2012:

- I posted the questionnaire on-line 20th March in Romania and 13th March in England.
- I conducted individual interviews March & April in Romania and in March & April & May in England.

I included a second phase of field research because after the first phase I interviewed only 5 students from the UK and I felt that there was a need for more data (see Table 1 on the next page). The lower response rate in the UK compared to Romania can be explained by two main factors. One the one hand, students in the UK are used to surveys and researchers asking for their opinion, while it is less common in the Romanian context. The second aspect is due to timing: May-July are busy periods for final year students and they are less willing to give up their time for free. I built on the experiences from the first phase and I approached students two months earlier in the second phase. As in the first phase, I conducted interviews in both countries using the same recruitment methods and after completion I felt that the information I gathered was sufficient as the stories of students became repetitive and I did not find out new information about their experiences. I considered the time difference during analysis, but the narratives of students interviewed in phase 1 and 2 did not differ significantly.

Equivalency of sample and sensitivity to sample diversity were dealt with at the same time in my research. I advertised my research at selected departments, based on type of subjects identified by Purcell and Elias (2008, p. 12):

- specialist vocational subjects: Law, education, medicine, architecture, engineering, technologies
- occupationally-oriented routes: Mathematics, Biology, Business, Arts, Social, Mathematics, Comp sciences, Media, Psychology
- discipline-based academic subjects: Geography, Physics, Languages, History, Chemistry

I wanted to gain insight into the experiences, motivation and plans of different students and one sampling variable I used was the subject studied. Other variables considered were level of study (BA or MA), and demographic characteristics like ethnicity (Romanian / Hungarian / English / non-English), and gender (female / male). I was attentive of age as well because I wanted to include both 'traditional' and 'mature' students. Students' engagement in extra activities apart from their studies was important, as I wanted to include students who focused solely on their studies and multiple status students who were engaged in different activities apart from their studies. All these considerations led to the sampling matrix visible in Appendix 1, which also presents the boundaries of what my interviewees are 'cases of'.

Although I was attentive of the proportion of students in my sample in terms of gender, ethnicity, age and experiences, I did not make a major effort to gain a sample that would be statistically representative for the student populations in the two countries or within the two institutions, but I rather aimed for 'problem representativeness' (see Strauss & Corbin 1998). My sample was meant to be representative with regard to the themes studied: the transition from school to work as experienced by university students engaged in different activities in the two institutional and country contexts at a particular point in time: just before graduation. Burgess (1984, p. 62, original emphasis) argues that sometimes it is important to consider "not only *what* activities occur but *when* they occur". In my study the events I was interested in (transitions from education to work) were strongly connected to their timing and I wanted to speak to students and hear about their experiences and perceptions before they graduated, before they left the university.

In total, 256 students took part in the study, 182 in Romania and 72 in the UK. Out of these, a total of 47 BA, MA and PhD students were interviewed, 30 in Romania and 17 in the UK. The five students interviewed during the pilot were excluded from the main analysis, consequently, I conducted the analysis and wrote the thesis based on the experiences of 42 students (27 in Romania and 15 in England).

TABLE 1. TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY BASED ON YEAR APPROACHED AND LANGUAGE / COUNTRY OF STUDY

	RO			HU			UK			total RO	total UK	Total
	2010	2011	2012	2010	2011	2012	2010	2011	2012			
questionnaire	-	45	25	-	76	36	-	44	30	182	74	256
interview	1	8	4	2	9	6	2	5	10	30	17	47

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF STUDENTS INTERVIEWED AND USED FOR THE DATA ANALYSIS BASED ON GENDER AND ETHNICITY.

Romania				UK			
female		male		female		male	
HU	RO	HU	RO	UK	non-UK	UK	non-UK
7	10	8	2	3	6	2	4
17		10		9		6	
27				15			

The following sub-chapters present the methods I used to gather and analyse the research material.

RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCESSES

The purpose of the study was to gain a detailed understanding of student experiences and the context in which their experiences and their decision-making occurred. In this sub-chapter I guide the reader through the processes of data collection for the pilot (semi-structured interviews via opportunity sampling) and the main field research (topical life-history interviews via research-based recruitment). I explain my choice of research methods and provide rationale for the mode in which they were applied in this study. An overview of the research timetable is provided in Appendix 2.

1. PILOT RESEARCH

Taking advantage of having first-hand experience at both universities selected for research, for the pilot I used my personal networks to meet participants (Atkinson & Flint 2001). This way, I selected the participants by opportunity sampling (Wragg 2005, p. 146) or opportunistic sampling as others (Merrill & West 2009, p. 107) call it. I asked my acquaintances and friends to name final year BA, second year MA and second or higher year PhD students in the two countries.

Overall I conducted five semi-structured interviews for the pilot stage: two interviews with final year BA students, one interview with a second year MA student and two interviews with third year PhD students. Several observations emerged from the pilot stage regarding aspects of the research process:

- participants: opting for a PhD is a significantly different experience than studying for a BA or MA, so consequently I decided to refine my study population and exclude the experiences of doctoral students.
- access to participants: originally I was planning to use snowballing technique to interview participants, but during the pilot stage I decided that using an on-line questionnaire would be a more suitable approach. The benefits of the technique are presented in detail later.
- narrative approach: without asking specifically for stories, in their answers, students told me tales about their decisions and actions, so consequently I decided to pay more attention to how I asked my interview questions and started reading about the narrative approach.
- interview guide: the topics identified and included in the interview guide proved to be adequate and sufficient so no further action was needed.

Based on the experience from the pilot research I modified my recruitment strategies for the main field research in both countries.

2. MAIN FIELD RESEARCH

For the main field research (both phase 1 and phase 2) I decided to recruit participants using research-based recruitment (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2011, p. 91): with the help of gatekeepers students received an advert of my study asking them to sign up for an interview by filling in a short on-line questionnaire. I explain my rationale in the following lines.

As I decided to research final year students at particular departments, I needed to find the best way to approach them specifically and at a particular moment in time in both countries (towards the end of their studies, just before graduation). The timing and the fact that I could not be in two places at the same time made me opt for online resources (sending e-mails and designing a questionnaire) when approaching students. I had to decide whether to send direct e-mails to students or to ask a member of the administrative or academic staff to forward my e-mail. First I approached gatekeepers (heads of career services, officials at the student services departments, lecturers and departmental managers and tutors at both universities) to seek their help in disseminating information about my research to appropriate networks (final year BA and MA students). As Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011, p. 93) and Liamputtong (2008, p. 8) mention in terms of participant recruitment, the advantages of seeking assistance from gatekeepers are multiple. Not only are they able to provide information about the local settings and practices, but by asking their help they also become advocates for the research within the local community. Lecturers, tutors, departmental managers are in regular contact with students, their names are familiar to them and they potentially have a significant influence on whether students participate in the study or not. I considered it much easier to mobilize students to participate in my study if someone they knew and trusted endorsed it (copies of the e-mails sent to gatekeepers are in Appendix 3 & 4 and copies of the texts forwarded by the gatekeepers to students are in Appendix 5 & 6).

My insider knowledge helped me to decide which approach to take in each country. In England students usually receive information from administrative staff or via an online university platform, while in Romania students and lecturers are part of and

communicate via Yahoo! Groups, and the administrative staff enter rarely in contact with students. In Romania I sent e-mails to academic staff, while in England to administrative staff asking them to forward my call for participants to final year students in their department. I also asked members of the student unions to distribute my call to fellow students. Only one English department refused to forward my e-mail to their students. Due to my selected approach I also experienced, similarly to Burgess (1984, p 49), that during the study there were “multiple points of entry that required a continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation”.

A third method used was research-based recruitment, which is generally used in studies that employ multiple research methods in a single study. Usually participants for qualitative research are selected from those already involved in the study but were recruited for another part of the study through another recruitment method. This was the case in my research as well. Students recruited via gatekeepers and advertisements filled in the on-line questionnaire and were asked at the end if they would be willing to talk to me in a face-to-face interview, and those who signed up were approached via e-mail or telephone and asked for a time and place convenient for them to meet. One of the advantages of using this method was that I was able to use the information gathered through the survey and did not need to ask those questions again in the interview. The survey was designed to gather information about the population, but the main purpose was to introduce students to the topic of my research and to invite them to sign up to share their experiences in face-to-face interviews (copies of the surveys are in Appendix 7 & 8).

The questionnaires were designed in three languages and were adapted to the two country contexts. The link to the questionnaire was distributed to final year students at the chosen departments via gatekeepers at both institutions. The questionnaire comprised a series of questions relating to the students' age, ethnicity, gender, subjective social status, parents' and siblings' higher education experience, prior qualifications, motivation for choice of university, future plans, views on their university experience and engagement in extra-curricular activities. The questionnaire data provided information about aspects of a cross-section of student experiences in a non-representative sample at the two universities and acted as an indicative context for

the subsequent qualitative data. Consequently the questionnaires served a dual purpose in my research as they:

- acted as a sign-up form for interviews,
- provided contextual information which helped triangulate the interview data.

It has been highlighted in the literature (Polkinghorne 1995; Hollway & Jefferson 2000; Goodson 2001; Chase 2005) that narrative inquiry can help the researcher to understand the complexities of social situations, so student experiences as well. Therefore, in order to answer the question, ‘What are the characteristics of student pathways through HE?’ a narrative inquiry approach was used, as broadly defined by Chase (2005, p. 651):

Contemporary narrative inquiry can be characterized as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods – all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the ones who live them.

More specifically I conducted topical life history interviews (Ward 2003, p. 30-31) in line with several other studies that investigated experiences in education (Dimmock & O'Donoghue 1997; Doherty 2001; Ward 2003;). This approach focuses on one key aspect of the participants' life (Ward 2003, p. 30), in this case students' education- and work-experience, rather than discussing all their life experiences. This helped gain more focused data in relation to the main aim of the study. Life history was seen as a suitable approach for this study as “life history presents the experiences and definitions held by one person, one group or one organization as this person, group or organization interprets those experiences” (Ward 2003, p. 29). Therefore, hearing and analysing stories from students allowed me to understand and describe the complexities of their experiences.

In order to capture students' individual voices and stories I conducted semi-structured topical life-history interviews around a key decision-making moment in these students' lives: before graduation from a BA or an MA programme in 2011 and 2012. I developed the interview guide themes in stages, and continued to develop the guide throughout the data collection process. Initially, a draft schedule was drawn up and used for the

pilot research in both countries. I based the themes for the pilot interviews on the theoretical framework developed through the literature review, and it was designed to capture the different life-stages of the participants' educational and work history. After the pilot stage the interviews were transcribed and analysed (for the interview guide see Appendix 9). During the analysis of these interviews I realised that often students were producing narrative responses to particular questions and these were richer and more what I was interested in. This is when I decided, after reading more about life history and narrative inquiry that this would be the approach that I would use in my research. During the main fieldwork I used the interview guide only to give direction to the interview but without having a fixed order of questions. This allowed for more flexibility than a structured interview and enabled me to dedicate more or less time to certain themes depending on the participants' experiences. This flexibility in the interviewing process is seen as an essential element of life history research (Dimmock & O'Donoghue 1997; Goodson & Sikes 2001; Lichtman 2006; Seidman 2006). I directed the participants to particular time frames rather than giving them the freedom to talk about their whole life.

The qualitative data collection process was carried out in three stages. First, I sent an introductory email to the participants' email address inviting them to share their experiences in an individual interview (see Appendix 10 & 11). As advised by Merrill and West (2009, p. 109), who state that it is important to "involve participants from the start and to be honest and explain clearly and comprehensively what the research is about and what is being expected", I attached a participant information sheet (see Appendix 12) to each email. This gave more detail about the study and included information on ethical considerations about data handling, anonymity and the right to withdraw at any point from the research. This also allowed me to outline for participants what involvement in the research means and what both the participants and the researcher could expect from taking part in the interview process. It also allowed the participants to reflect on their student experiences before the interview. In case of students where initial contact was by telephone, I offered them a brief summary of my research through the telephone conversation and repeated the information

before the interview. I also handed them the participant information sheet and asked them to read through it prior to the interview.

Second, a face-to-face interview was set up either via email or via telephone. We agreed to meet at a mutually convenient time and in a comfortable environment for the students, either in my office or in a quiet cafeteria at the university or nearby. This meeting typically lasted between 40 and 120 minutes (or in some cases longer). Prior to the interview, each participant read and signed a consent form (see Appendix 13), which had been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee where I was a student. This form set out the participant's prerogatives and requested permission for the interview to be recorded and for quotes to be used in future publications. In order to preserve the anonymity of my interviewees I asked them to choose a pseudonym before the interview and consequently I used this pseudonym when referring to the student in all my documents including the research diary, which contained my field observations, reflections and experiences of the process. All participants chose a pseudonym, allowed the interview to be recorded and all gave permission for quotes to be used. Each interview was recorded on a digital voice recorder and was subsequently transcribed and analysed by me. After the interview any outstanding issues and queries were handled through electronic communication.

Third, I sent each participant a copy of the interview transcript and a case summary (see Appendix 14) electronically and asked them to make comments, additions and clarifications and they were also invited to add any further thoughts they had had since the interview. This respondent validation (Cohen *et al.* 2007, p. 200) ensured that each participant agreed with my interpretation of their story. The interviews were transcribed in their narrative form; students' speech was not forced into written or grammatical correctness. In-text pauses are indicated by the use of three dots and where material is abbreviated, or omitted in the process of editing or quotation, four dots are used. Interpolations are indicated by the use of brackets. Some punctuation was used in order to break up the text, but this was done in a consistent way with the rhythms and patterns of speech. Students were given the right to correct transcripts as they wished (Merrill & West 2009).

Different interview techniques are suggested in the literature to elicit good quality data when undertaking life history interviews (Hollway & Jefferson 2000; Goodson & Sikes 2001; Lichtman 2006; Seidman 2006). Incorporating some of these techniques into the life history interviews undertaken in this study, I worked on two key aspects of the interviewing process: the way the interview was conducted and the conditions under which the interview took place.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000, p. 31) argue that “the researcher’s responsibility is to be a good listener” and Seidman (2006, p. 63) suggests three levels in which interviewers need to listen. The first level is to listen to what is actually being said; the second is to listen to the language being used to describe their experiences and work out when some points need more explanation; and the third is to listen carefully to ascertain the progress of the interview to ensure all topic areas are covered. Seidman (2006) continues to suggest that interviewers need to limit their own interaction and tolerate silence. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) argue that using open-ended questions, and getting the respondent to tell stories of their experiences are important when doing life history interviews. Chase (2005) similarly highlights this as a key method in interview studies, and stresses the need to follow up themes using the respondent’s ordering and phrasing. Incorporating the above tactics, I was casual and frank with my interviewees and my initial role was one of ‘learning’ rather than ‘researching’. I made a conscious effort to ask one question at a time, used open-ended questions, and tried not to interrupt the respondent. I took notes when key themes were raised that needed expansion and I followed up these issues at suitable points in the interview using the respondent’s terminology and taking care not to interrupt a narration. I also tried to ensure that the conditions under which each interview took place favoured the interviewee. Each participant was offered a range of possible times and dates for their interview.

I also tried to conduct the interviews following Kvale’s (1996 cited in Bryman 2008, p. 455) criteria of a successful interviewer: knowledgeable, structuring, clear, gentle, sensitive, open, steering, critical, remembering, interpreting, and Bryman adds balanced and ethically sensitive. I went to the interview with prior knowledge of the national and institutional contexts in which the student was living and studying and I

also had prior information about the interviewee as they filled in an online questionnaire (see more in sub-chapter about questionnaire) and responded to my invitation to be interviewed. Prior to the interview in England I sent the participants a detailed information sheet about the research, their rights and my expectations from the interview. In Romania I spoke about my research, my expectations and their rights before the interview and prior to them signing the consent form. Everyone was aware of the purpose of the interview and their rights prior to switching on the recorder. I reminded interviewees of their rights when I sent them the transcript as well. During the interview I tried to ask clear, simple and short questions and I listened attentively to what they said, I tolerated pauses, gave them time to think and let them finish their thoughts before asking another question. The order of the questions was determined by the phase and flow of information in the interview. I tried to link my questions to what has been previously mentioned, I asked clarifying questions and tried to find out the meaning between what the interviewees said without imposing my interpretations on them. I was careful not to talk too much, but in several cases, due to the nature of the conversation, I felt it was appropriate and necessary to share my own experiences relating to the topic, as other researchers also noted (see Smith 2012, p. 490). This corresponded to what Creswell (2013, p. 55) calls 'reciprocity' in conducting qualitative research – giving back to participants for their time and efforts in the project. Measor and Sikes (1992) cited in Goodson and Gill (2011) argue that reciprocity is necessary for "building bridges in research relationships" similarly to what Zweig (1948 cited in Burgess 1984, p. 103) also mentioned as being "a friend and a confidant who shows interest, understanding and sympathy in the life of the person with whom a conversation occurs." I agree with them and my research experience suggests the same, but nevertheless I always tried to be brief, and sensitive when sharing information about myself. At the end of the interview I asked whether they had anything further to add or I invited them to ask me questions, which they sometimes did. I tried to conduct the interviews closer to a natural discussion, this is why I let the participants choose the place and time of the interview; usually it was a cafeteria they frequently went to.

Although some studies may pay participants, a basic principle in qualitative research is not to pay interviewees for the interview as this may influence the information that is

provided. Instead it is common practice to take small presents for the interviewees to be given after the interview is completed (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2011, p. 123). I did not give small presents, but in the invitation to the interview I specifically invited them for a drink while we talked and in most cases (except when the interviewees insisted not to) I paid for the drinks or any meals consumed during or immediately after the interview. Since this was the first time when we met, I felt that we should not rush straight into asking questions, so we spent a few minutes before turning on the tape recorder talking about casual topics (weather, town, university) or about ourselves. These introductory discussions helped the interviewees to feel more comfortable revealing information about themselves, and to establish rapport between us. After the digital recorder was turned off, with most of the interviewees we continued talking about ourselves. This was the time when I revealed information about myself, my studies, my life in the UK and we talked about common or different experiences. Overall, I spent about two-three hours with each participant.

Gilbert (2008, p. 431) argues that “...it is worth considering whether two interviews with the same individual might produce richer and more insightful data than a single interview....”. In my case it was not possible to repeat the interview with students as in most cases they did not stay in the same town or even the same country. And also due to being near graduation they had several things in their mind: final exams, preparing the dissertation, looking for a job, working, moving, etc... When sending back the transcripts I asked them some clarifying questions via e-mail, but I met the students only once in person when I conducted the interview.

To augment my knowledge and gain contextual information about the higher education fields that students I interviewed belong to, I conducted policy and document analysis as well as expert interviews with university officials about student services and students’ usage of those services. I conducted two expert interviews, one at each university with representatives from the student services department. In order to determine the values, assumptions and ideologies underpinning the policy process (see Gordon *et al.* 1977, p. 28 cited in Olssen *et al.* 2004, p. 72) I collected and analysed

policy and legal documents in the two countries as well as international reports on higher education (Eurybase, the national Bologna Stocktaking reports, Trends Reports). Regarding the methodological approach for the documentary analysis, it is important to stress that this research was *on* education policy not *for* education policy (Ozga 2000, p. 40) and also it was a comparative study where the nation is regarded as the object of the research (Bynner & Chisholm 1998, p. 134).

This process involved a two level analysis: national level and institutional level and the findings form the basis of the contextual narrative analysis. The purpose of the national level analysis was twofold: on the one hand it was a descriptive exercise with the purpose to provide an understanding for the researcher of the historic developments in higher education, what policies characterized the pre- and post-Bologna periods in the two countries, how did the countries end up with the policies they currently have, what are those policies; and on the other hand it was a topic-specific analysis which tried to map out the “official” meeting point between higher education and work and where the system places students in this dimension. The primary documents included (see Appendix 17) in the analysis were found on the ‘main’ governmental websites; for the UK this was the *Historical documents in higher education* (<http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/higher-education/historical-documents>) section on the *Department for Business, Innovation and Skills* website, while for Romania it was the *Legislation* section (<http://www.edu.ro/index.php/articles/c485/>) of the *Higher Education* section on the *Ministry of National Education* website and the *Educational Policies* section (<http://www.edu.ro/index.php/articles/c401/>) of the same ministerial website. At the same time academic works relating to commentaries on the higher education systems and international organizations’ reports and other publications were consulted.

The aim of the institutional level analysis was to map out the specific institutional policies, how students are regarded by the institution, what services are available for students prior, during and after their years spent enrolled in a course, how does the system support higher education transitions and education-to-work transitions, and how does the institution define and treat double status students (Wolbers 2003). As Atkinson and Coffey (2004) argue, documents should be viewed as having a distinct reality in their own right. Texts do not simply represent reality, they were written with

an intended meaning to an intended audience by specific people. Consequently, I believe that these institutional documents should be read and analysed with a view of the contexts in which they were created and their implied readership. In this view “documents are significant for what they were supposed to accomplish and who they are written for” (Bryman 2008, p. 527). The documents included in the analysis were the policy and strategic documents available on the university websites as well as the ‘official’ university presentations (mission statements, newsletters, etc.). Semi-structured interviews with university officials helped me to confront the rhetoric and the reality in terms of the institutions’ approaches to students’ experiences and also to gain more insight on institutional mechanisms.

Given that policy is largely a public discourse, the focus of the analysis is on the public actions taken by educational policy agents, more precisely, on public legal and policy documents that address student experiences and their transitions to working life in the English and Romanian educational system. The reports and proposals analysed are taken here as windows that allow one to look onto the field of higher educational policy. From the reports the ‘official’ strategies and stances employed are ‘read’ and interpreted. Through this analysis, it is suggested that it is possible to map out the structure of intended relations among higher education and the world of work and to understand the position that students are meant to occupy in this dimension. The policy and document analysis as well as the expert interviews helped me to understand the contexts in which students’ lives are embedded and I used this information when analysing student narratives and writing up the findings.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

I started the data analysis process immediately after collecting the pilot interviews. I developed a coding framework based on the interview guide and the pilot interviews, which is visible in Appendix 15. While I was coding the pilot interviews I realised that the answers students gave me had the structure of stories and I started reading about narrative inquiry and narrative analysis. I recoded the interviews to see how they conform with the narrative structure proposed by Labov (1972) and found that by

using his narrative analysis lenses I can add important and interesting layers to the analysis and consequently decided to analyse the interviews from the main field research for both narrative content and structure.

I imported all the interviews in NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis computer software package and did the coding and analysis in this programme. Following Richards' (2005, pp. 87-88) suggestions of coding for three different aspects (descriptive, topic and analytical), first I created a case for each interviewee using their pseudonym and subsequently I created descriptive codes (age, gender, country, ethnicity, subject studied, subjective social status) for each case. For compiling these descriptive codes I used both the interview data and information from the online questionnaires. These codes, stored as attributes, formed the casebook and were highly useful in later stages of the analysis when I asked for 'queries' and I created 'models' combining descriptive codes with topic codes and later analytical codes (see Appendix 18).

As Creswell (2013) mentions, narrative stories can be analysed in a variety of ways. An analysis can be made about what was said (thematically), the nature of the telling of the story (structural) or who the story is directed toward (dialogic/performance). In the process of moving from field texts to research texts as defined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) I combined two types of narrative analysis in order to present a holistic picture of the student experiences in the two higher education contexts: content analysis, focusing on the events and experiences recounted in the narrative, and structure or form analysis, looking at how the stories are put together.

I started the process with content or thematic analysis. This exercise was similar to what Lieblich and colleagues (1998, p. 12) call the categorical-content approach and they define it as dissecting the original story and "sections or single words belonging to a defined category are collected from the entire story...". This corresponds to the traditional content analysis or thematic analysis.

First I read all the interviews and coded them for themes using the master codes (individual background, opting for HE, HE experience, extra-curricular experience, work experience, future plans and perceptions about HE and the labour market) and any additional themes that emerged from the data. Based on this coding exercise I

wrote the summaries for each interview and used it for data validation. I considered it important to familiarize myself with the interview, to “try to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts” as it was also highlighted as an important first step by Agar (1980) cited in Creswell (2013, p. 183). This first step also corresponded to what Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 133) present as an interim text between field texts and research texts. I recorded my thoughts and impressions about each interview transcript and coding in a separate memo. After the validation was completed, I continued the content analysis with reading through each theme separately and coding further for subthemes and categories that emerged (see the Appendix 16 for the final codebook). I noted down my impressions and thoughts related to the main themes and subthemes into separate memos. I continued reading and rereading the texts to label and refine categories and create topic groups. This is when the topic codes, as defined by Richards (2005) were converted to analytical codes that portray meanings in context, and express new ideas. After I finished coding, recoding and arranging the topics within each theme I read the texts in each topic group and provided a descriptive analysis of the content. At this stage I marked as an ‘annotation’ whenever the students’ responses seemed to have the structure of stories. I used the ‘queries’ and ‘models’ facility in NVivo to organize and link the different codes, themes and case attributes to interpret the data. These interpretations together with the descriptions formed the basis of the subsequent chapters in the thesis.

Focusing on themes and topic groups meant that I extracted parts of the life stories out of the whole and I disregarded contextual factors, but since context and presenting experiences holistically has always been my goal, I felt important to continue analysing the texts from a structure / form perspective too. As Lieblich and colleagues mention, “Synthesis between form analysis and content analysis can prove very fruitful” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber 1998, p. 163).

Labov (1972, 1982; Labov & Waletzky 1967) in his structural approach argues that narratives have formal properties – each with a specific function – forming recurrent patterns that can be identified and used to interpret the story. A “fully formed” narrative includes six common elements: an abstract (summary of the substance of the narrative), orientation (time, place, situation, participants), complicating action

(sequence of events), evaluation (significance and meaning of the action, attitude of the narrator), resolution (what finally happened), and coda (returns the perspective to the present). With these structures, a teller constructs a story and interprets the significance of events in clauses and embedded evaluation. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) argue that we are continuously involved in telling and retelling of our experiences and lives and in doing so we organise them according to events, influences and decisions and so we “make sense of them” and additionally

How social actors retell their life experiences as stories can provide insight into the characters, events, and happenings central to those experiences. How the chronicle is told and how it is structured can also provide information about the perspectives of the individual in relation to the wider social grouping or cultural setting to which that individual belongs. (Coffey & Atkinson 1996, p. 68)

I used Labov's (1972, 1972, 1982) framework as presented by Cortazzi (1993), Coffey and Atkinson (1996) and Riessman (2008) to see how narratives are organized in my interviews. This approach is useful because it provides an analytic perspective both on how the narrative is structured and on the functions of different elements within the story (Coffey & Atkinson 1996; Elliott 2005).

Apart from paying attention to the content and form of the narrative, I also read the interviews for context. My definition of contexts is: a set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular event, situation. As Zilber and colleagues (2008, p. 1065) mention, “when narrating their lives, narrators embed their stories within specific contexts. This contextualization is as indicative as the choices of content and form that take place in the process of narration...” Embedded contextual information helped me to understand the narration better and to be able to place the experiences more accurately when I was comparing and contrasting the narratives at various levels. Reading for context is strongly connected to how students positioned themselves and others in the stories and whether they referred to random events and external circumstances in their lives. Similarly to Devadason (2006) I read the narratives accounts and noted whether the interviewees only mentioned themselves as the main characters making choices and initiating changes, or they referred to other influences such as significant others (e.g. parents, siblings, teachers, friends) or social context as affecting their life events (e.g. class, region, ethnicity).

Reading these narratives through the voices of agency, structure, communion (significant others) and serendipity (happenstance) as presented by Lieblich, Zilber and Tuval-Mashiach (2008, p. 628) proved to be an effective way “to expose the richness of life stories and the narration of human action within them” and to “‘hear the music of society’ behind the solo voice of the biography” (Brannen & Nilsen 2011, p. 610). Similarly to these authors, I chose to treat agency, structure, serendipity and communion as “components of human experience and its construction in narratives” (Lieblich, Zilber & Tuval-Mashiach 2008, p. 618). I also included concepts from Giele and Elder (1998, p. 9) location in time and place and Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space: temporal dimensions (past, present and future), personal-social dimensions (personal and social) and within place.

To sum up, taking into account these perspectives of reading narrative interviews I came up with an analysis that I felt allowed me to grasp both the ‘silent narratives’ (Brannen & Nilsen 2005) as well as the explicit stories students told me, and consequently it permitted me to re-present student narratives holistically embedded in their contexts. The findings of this analysis form the basis of the subsequent chapters.

DATA RE-PRESENTATION

Apart from presenting the verbal analysis of the interviews I also chose to include visual representations of the findings. The figures I have included in each section of the findings chapters represent summaries of the thematic and context narrative analysis.

For example, Figure 1 on p. 92 re-presents those students who spoke about their motivation to go to university in terms of a ‘natural next step’. Within this topic group three different clusters can be identified based on narrative thematic analysis: those who regarded it a clear and natural step (I), those who felt they had to go to university to gain the degree or to have that experience (II) and those who had clear career plans (III) which meant that they had to engage in higher education to reach that goal. Each of these clusters is represented as well as the students who formed these clusters.

The bottom part of the figure represents the findings from the contextual analysis. When talking about their motives students referred to themselves, other people, places and times which were important in relation to their explanation for regarding going to university as a next step. In this figure, students referred to their past – like school or family experience – or their future – like the career they are planning to pursue.

The figures also display students' socio-demographic information. The continuous lines are students from Romania, while the dashed lines are students from the UK. The shading of the object represents students' parents' HE experiences: white background are parents with no HE experience, while grey background are parents with HE experience. The shape of the object represents students' subjective social position on a scale from 1 to 10: 3rd and 4th positions are represented by an octagon, 5th position is represented by a diamond, and 6th, 7th and 8th positions are represented by a circle. There is additional information available based on the students' pseudonyms using Appendix 18. Overall, taken together all this visual information is meant to re-present the findings, to support and augment my textual analysis.

Apart from the figures, tables 3-8 (see pages 126, 140, 161, 192, 216 and 230) are also a form of re-presentation of my data. I use these to summarise and illustrate my process of building subchapter by subchapter my typology of students' transitions pathways from education to work.

QUALITY CRITERIA / INTERPRETATION AND EVALUATION

All research methods are determined by the aims and context of the research, but as Bush (2005, p. 59) points out they should also have regard to quality criteria, which he identifies as validity, reliability and triangulation. The traditional criteria of quality are: internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity. Various authors (see Lincoln & Guba 1985; Polkinghorne 1995; Guba & Lincoln 2005; Webster & Mertova 2007; Creswell 2013) argue that these criteria are not adequate for evaluating qualitative research and they propose alternative concepts such as *trustworthiness*. As noted by Bryman (2008) this notion is linked to scientific concepts of reliability, validity

and generalisability, but it is more in line with the differing ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying the interpretive paradigm. Similarly, Riessmann (1993) points out that in narrative studies it is more important to “render transparent the process by which the interpretation of the narrative and stories has been reached”. In this way the researcher can argue that there is a high degree of trustworthiness in the analysis and any conclusions drawn from it. She also stresses that “...the past is a selective reconstruction. Individuals exclude experiences that undermine the current identities they wish to claim” (Riessman 1993, p. 64). Similarly, I believe that addressing the quality criteria is essential in qualitative research and in my study this is achieved by providing enough information about the research, analysis and writing processes so that the reader can assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings. In the following I present how the notion of trustworthiness was upheld in my study through: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 296) define the credibility criterion as a twofold task: first, to carry out the research in a way so to enhance the probability that the findings will be found credible, and second, to show the credibility of the findings by showing them to the narrator. I carried out the research according to the University Research Ethics Code of Practice where I was registered as student and of the BERA, BSA and ISA codes of ethics where I am a member. From the techniques suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 301) to accomplish credibility I performed peer debriefing and member checking. At two crucial stages of the research process, before starting field research and at the beginning of the coding stage I sent the questionnaires, interview topics and coding framework to other (UK and Romanian) researchers for comments and reflections. Their feedback made possible not only to test my research instruments, but also to correct grammatical and linguistic errors and make sure that the questions I was asking were understandable and appropriate for my goals.

To enhance the credibility of this study, all interview data were tape recorded, transcribed in the original language and subjected to respondent validation where each

participant was provided with the transcription and a summary in order to check that they agreed with my interpretation of their narrative. To further enhance the credibility of the study, the semi-structured interview data were triangulated with a number of other sources including my field observations, insider knowledge and the answers provided in the online questionnaires; the analysis of key strategic documents produced by the University and the expert interviews. This supplementary data helped in the analysis of the interview data, especially in relation to the interplay between institutional characteristics and individual dispositions.

Transferability

The aim of this study was to describe, understand and interpret the student experiences and their perceptions in the two countries. Bryman (2008) and Silverman (2006) argue that interpretative research findings can help others in similar positions elsewhere to understand their own situations by transferring, applying and comparing findings to their own settings. Lincoln and Guba (1983, p. 298) see the transferability criteria being met with providing sufficient descriptive data to orient the readers. Chase (2005, p. 667) mentions that “any narrative is significant because it embodies – and gives us insight into – what is possible and intelligible within a specific social context”. In order for others to compare and use my findings I provided *thick description* (Geertz 1973) of the social contexts, the participants, the data collected, the translations and the analysis performed in the thesis. The use of these techniques aims to aid in the transferability of the research findings.

Dependability

The reliability criteria of quantitative studies can be substituted by dependability in case of qualitative studies in the view of Lincoln and Guba (1985), who define it as taking into account both research design factors and outside factors. In order to enhance the dependability of the research the reader is guided through a detailed account of the research process: developing the research questions, obtaining data, transcription, the coding process, translations and data analysis. The aim is to provide

a transparent account of the research process, which is further complemented by the quotations and the research evidences included in the Appendices as well as the reflective notes that accompany the different research steps.

I used a good quality digital recorder to record the interviews, I transcribed the data verbatim, indicating pauses and overlaps as well as essential gestures and sounds. I kept a research journal in which I recorded my notes during the interview as well as my impressions and observations after the interview. After I finished coding the data I asked another researcher to code several interviews using my codebook in order to see if there is a mismatch between what codes we assign to different passages in the text. In this intercoder agreement process we achieved a high percentage of agreed upon codes and themes for the segments. I analysed the data in the original language and translated the interviews using standard translation techniques at the time of analysis.

Confirmability

As Lichtman (2006, p. 12) argues, “the researcher plays a pivotal role in the qualitative research process” and my position is especially important in this thesis, as I had personal and professional connections to the topic and my research settings. My perceived advantages included ease of access, a thorough understanding of the culture and working practices of the institution being studied and fluency in three languages to conduct the research in the selected settings. I disclosed information about my characteristics and personal and professional background that represented the lenses through which I conducted the research and the analysis. I kept a research diary and reflected critically on each aspect of the research process, translations and data interpretations. The transparency of how I conducted the research, the translation and the analysis helps the reader to appraise the work in an informed way and detect potential subjective and value-laden assumptions.

Reflexivity

Thinking reflexively was present during every stage of the research process. At the planning stage I was already aware that my topic choice was based on my past experiences and unanswered questions I had, so I decided early on that I will keep a research journal where I can record my thoughts, my ideas, the challenges I faced and the solutions I thought of, basically every aspect of the PhD project. This was an online journal that I could access from any device and any country. In addition to this, I also kept a field research journal, where I recorded my questions during the interviews, the contexts in which the interviews took place (in my office or in a cafeteria, whether we were interrupted or not, how long we talked before and after the interview, what topics we touched upon), and my impressions about the respondents (whether he or she was at ease or was nervous or was searching for words or seemed inconsistent or embarrassed during the interview). While transcribing the interviews and during the analysis phase I recorded my thoughts about the interviews, the transcripts, themes, topics, codes, models, translations and contexts in separate memos in NVivo. All these online and offline tools helped me keep a record of my actions, but also about my reflections and impressions and how these changed throughout the process. This reflective process is seen as essential in narrative research and I would agree with this. Keeping a record and being constantly aware of what I was doing, why and what my reactions were on that process was important to uphold the quality criteria in my research, but it was also beneficial for my personal and professional development. This process was a research about the research I was doing on students some of who had similar experiences and background to me. I learned a great deal about myself, not just who I was and who I am as a person and as a researcher, but also about the contexts of my past and present life, contexts which shifted from being implicit in my life to being explicit and articulate in this research. Throughout the thesis my aim was to reveal the ways in which my personal background, social location, and biographical history have influenced the focus and design of my research and analysis and with this I hoped to show the “links between the lives of the investigators and the shape of their craft” that Giele (2002, p. 16) feels is at the heart of a life-span perspective.

Lieblich and colleagues (1998) present alternative criteria to evaluate narrative studies because they found the traditional measures difficult and sometimes impossible to maintain and they feel it ultimately contradicts the very nature of the narrative approach – that respondents' experiences can be understood and analysed in different ways depending on the background and aims of the researcher. The fact that different readers can subtract alternative conclusions from the same narrative account is not due to inadequate scholarship, but is rather “a manifestation of the wealth of such material and the range of sensibilities of different readers” (Lieblich *et al.* 1998, p. 171). They feel that looking at the width, coherence, insightfulness and parsimony is a better measure of narrative research and analysis. In the following I reflect on my research and how I met these criteria.

Width

Width refers to the comprehensiveness of evidence (Lieblich *et al.* 1998, p. 173), the quality of the interviews and other materials collected as well as the proposed interpretations of analysis. During data collection I made every effort to gather rich and insightful data from my participants. Throughout the research process I prioritised the well-being of my participants – they were consulted regarding the location, timing and language of the interview. Conducting the interviews in the preferred language of my respondents, usually their mother tongue, helped them better express themselves and provide rich accounts of their experiences. I transcribed and analysed the interview data in the original language, and later I translated the interview parts using standard translation procedures in a manner to assure equivalence in meaning. I provided numerous quotations to support my interpretations of the narrative data, along with alternative readings both on the transcription and the narrative analysis.

Coherence

The way different parts of the interpretation create a complete and meaningful picture represent the coherence criteria in narrative research (Lieblich *et al.* 1998, p. 173). Throughout the analysis I paid attention to show the connections between different

parts of data interpretations as well as how these are connected to previous research and the literature.

Insightfulness

Originality in my research is represented by the use of three different languages and a combination of content, form and context analysis to gain knowledge about experiences and perceptions of students. I was in constant transition between languages and cultures throughout the data collection and the analysis and I included the reflections on this position in my analysis.

Parsimony

Parsimony refers to the ability to provide an analysis based on a small number of concepts, and elegance or aesthetic appeal (Lieblich *et al.* 1998, p. 173). My analysis included concepts and contexts from three languages and two university settings from multiple backgrounds of students. Combining and presenting them in a simple form was challenging if not impossible, but I tried to use visual techniques and rich explanations with the hope that all this information helps the reader to better understand how data that originated in another language was produced, interpreted, translated and reported and also to appraise the work in a more informed way.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND DATA MANAGEMENT

There has been a growing awareness in recent years regarding the moral issues surrounding educational research (Burgess 1989; Cohen *et al.* 2007). The underlying principles of educational research were broadly defined as honesty and avoidance of plagiarism or respect for the dignity and privacy of the participants and pursuit of truth (see Busher 2005, p. 73). These issues include minimising potential physiological/ psychological/ emotional harm to participants, ensuring that informed consent is gained from the participants before embarking on the research and ensuring

anonymity of the participants throughout the process. In case of life history research these issues are potentially even more important as the information participants share is very personal. Another important aspect is that the participants' life histories were lived before the interview and remembering certain aspects may bring out painful memories and also their lives are still being lived after the interview so the researchers should be aware of the potential impact of the interview can have on the respondent.

I faced ethical issues throughout the research process. Prior to conducting the study I familiarised myself with the ethical guidelines at the university (2011) and also the standards for ethical conduct of the ISA (2001), BSA (2002) and BERA (2011), and I adhered and followed these guidelines in my research in both countries. I thought through my research and completed the ethical approval document at my department, which was subsequently approved before I started my data collection.

At the beginning of the study I made sure to present details about my research to people I approached, either gatekeepers or students and I also attached an information form providing more details about the research process and what it means to participate in the research. I was always specific about why I was approaching people and what I expected them to do. I did not encounter misunderstandings in this phase.

I reminded participants of their rights prior to the interview when I also explained and asked them to sign the consent form. All participants signed the form and gave me permission to use the data under the pseudonym, which they chose for themselves.

To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the data, all information collected was kept strictly confidential. In order to protect the anonymity of each participant, pseudonyms were used to ensure that they cannot be identified. In addition, I changed the names of people and places in the quoted texts to assure anonymity and protect the identities of the participants. The university in Romania is mentioned as The Romanian University, occasionally when it is compared to other universities in the narratives it is disclosed that it is an old university. The same applies to the university in England. In the thesis and in the interviews it is mentioned as The English University and occasionally I refer to it as a 1994 university when comparisons are drawn with other institutions. The names of the cities have been omitted from the interviews and the

analysis, I talk about an English city situated in the East Midlands and a Romanian city situated in the north-western part of Transylvania.

All electronic data were held securely in password-protected files on a non-shared computer and all paper documentation was held in locked cabinets in a locked office.

I made sure the participants were fully aware of their rights and the purposes of the research and they were given the option to comment or amend the data before I began the analysis. The documents used in the research process are visible in the Appendix.

REFLECTIONS ON MY BIOGRAPHY AND THE ROLE LANGUAGES PLAYED IN THE RESEARCH¹

Several authors (Clandinin & Connelly 2000; Merrill & West 2009; Goodwin 2012) remark that researchers often have a biographic connection with the topics they choose to study and particularly biographical research “carries more of a sense of search... a searching again” (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 124). Much like my own experience as a student, I wanted to investigate student lives and experiences; I was asking my research subjects the same questions I have often asked myself, and I was seeking answers from them at the same time as I was looking for answers for my own actions. For this reason, through my position as researcher and my past experiences, the topic of higher education pathways and transitions to work became strongly connected with language knowledge/usage and I found myself thinking, researching and analysing, as well as translating words and meaning within/between languages and cultures. Language and communication are central in research and analytical processes belonging to the interpretive paradigm. Knowledge is created through the communication interplay between researcher and respondents; researchers construct an understanding of the social world through the words of the respondents and the attached concepts, meanings and descriptions. As Hennink (2008, p. 23) writes, language represents “data that helps the researcher decode behaviours, processes and cultural meanings attached to different social worlds.” However, several authors (Twinn 1997, 1998; Temple 2002, 2005, 2006a; Temple & Edwards 2002; Baumgartner

¹ Parts of this chapter were published in a journal article in *Narrative Works*, see Plugor 2013.

2012) noted that language-related discussions in qualitative research are rare, and when present they mainly focus on acts of translation as separate from methodological phases of research. Methodological papers written from the perspective of researcher-translators or bi/multi-lingual researchers are very uncommon (Baumgartner 2012). My research aims did not include language-related aspects initially, but as I engaged in the research process and I faced challenges due to the particular university settings I opted for, language-related complications surfaced and it became clear this will be an overarching area of my research. As Temple (2006a, para. 6) argues, “language is used to create and re-create social worlds and identities and no one person is positioned neutrally in these processes”. For this reason, I consider it important to share a few lines about my own background and how it is connected to the research topic and my methodological choices.

I am one of the 6.5% of Hungarians living in Romania. Coming from a minority ethnic background meant, among other things, that thinking and speaking in multiple languages became part of my everyday life from an early age. Hungarian is my mother language; it is the language I use with family and friends, at school, and in many situations in my hometown. Although in certain parts of the country, like my home region, you can manage without speaking the national language, in other parts, and usually for official business, you need to speak Romanian. I speak Romanian fluently, but I would not consider myself to be bilingual as this language does not represent a significant part of my identity. For me, learning Romanian was similar to learning English. It was a foreign language, even though I sometimes used it in daily conversations in the city, or while playing with other children around the block whilst growing up.

In terms of education, Hungarian minority students have the possibility to study in their mother language, if they wish, throughout compulsory education as well as during the different stages of higher education. In school we also learn Romanian as a second mother language from an early age. Regarding higher education choices, Hungarian students have two main options if they wish to stay in the country: they

either study a course in Romanian language, in which case they have a variety of institutions to choose from; or if they wish to study in Hungarian they can pick from a handful of institutions, depending on the desired subject. In many cases the necessity to study in Hungarian language (because of limited Romanian language ability) determines the subject and institution choices.

I attended compulsory education in my mother language and decided to continue my studies at university both in Hungarian and in Romanian. School and social networks influenced my institution choice, whilst subject choice was determined by preferences and opportunity structures (whether the course is available and whether I am granted a state-funded place). Studying further at higher education level was never a question; I experienced a natural progression from high school to university. I gained admittance to study several courses and after discussion with my parents I decided to enrol for two full time courses at two separate departments (Sociology in my mother language – Hungarian, and International Relations and European Studies in Romanian language). I did not realise at first what this meant for me, becoming a double status student (Wolbers 2003), but I started a lifestyle bursting with activities, tasks and challenges. I experienced a student life in constant transition between subjects, places, people and languages, a life I thoroughly enjoyed. Gaining sociological perspective through my studies, I often thought about my life and the choices I made; I wondered how I ended up living the fulfilling life I was living and what would have happened if I had taken a different route. These questions inspired the research project that ultimately ended up forming the basis of my doctoral work.

My familiarity with the languages and the university contexts positioned me as an ‘insider’ in the research, but I was equally an ‘outsider’ as I had not had contact with the Romanian higher education system for four years prior to starting my research, and I had been living and studying in England for only two years at the moment of commencing my fieldwork. Due to this particular background, and due to the nature and timing of my project, I was constantly transitioning between familiar and unfamiliar aspects of cultures and languages during the project.

I realised that decisions regarding language usage in my research would be significant when I started preparing for my field research. Deciding which language to use to contact people was a sensitive decision. Particularly in Romania, the use of a certain language speaks for itself and since I relied on other people to achieve my aims, I had to make sure that I did not alienate anyone with my approach. Using English as the language of my research in Romania would have meant positioning myself as an 'outsider' from the beginning, which I did not want as I was interested in finding out intimate details about students' lives, and consequently I needed to be regarded as someone they could trust and confide in. Similarly, although using only the national language in Romania would have reduced my translation problems, it would have meant distancing myself from the Hungarian community, consequently hindering my goals. For a broader discussion about Hungarians in Romania, the historical and political roots of the situation, and the relationship between the two languages, see Benő and Szilágyi (2005).

On the other hand, using English or Romanian would have meant that students' language abilities might have affected their participation in the research. Additionally, it has been suggested in the literature that research participants provide their 'best' accounts in their first language (Twinn 1998; Baumgartner 2012) and to researchers who share their social and cultural characteristics (Adamson & Donovan 2002 cited in Liangputtong 2008). Overall, speaking all three languages, it seemed beneficial to use my ability to conduct the field research in the language most natural to my target population in the university contexts selected. For this reason, the decision was to contact people in the language they used at university. In England, everyone was working and studying in English, all the communication was done in English. In Romania, Hungarian departments were approached in Hungarian, and students who were studying in Romanian were approached in Romanian language.

I applied the above logic to my research instruments (the questionnaire and the interview) as well. It seemed the best option to consistently employ the language my target group was using at university. This meant that I had to prepare the online questionnaire in three different languages adapted to the specific contexts. Using equivalent questions and categories was challenging and, in some cases, not possible.

Some questions had to be phrased slightly differently in the two countries due to different structural and cultural practices relating to higher education. For example, the question about student finances: in England everyone needs to pay tuition fees and there are support mechanisms in place to help students pay for their studies (student loan, maintenance loan, vacation work, support from parents, etc.), whereas in Romania there are state-funded and tuition fee places and usually parents support their children through university, even if they leave the family home. Phrasing the question the same way in both countries would not have resulted in meaningful responses, so I asked one question in England (see question 11 of the questionnaire distributed at the English university, visible in Appendix 7) and two questions in Romania (see questions 11 and 12 of the questionnaire distributed at the Romanian university in Appendix 8). This was my solution to gaining conceptual equivalence and the colleagues I consulted both in Romania and England shared my views.

In Romania 28 out of 29 interviews were conducted in the mother language of the respondents. The final interview was conducted in English, as this was the preference of the student. In England all 16 interviews were conducted in English, although I had two Romanian students who I could have interviewed in their mother language, but they chose to speak in English. In total I conducted 9 interviews with students not in their mother language. I always offered the possibility to conduct the interviews in the respondents' mother language (when possible) and ultimately it was their choice to share their experiences in English and I respected that. It is possible that they would have been more forthcoming in their mother language, but I was satisfied with the amount and depth of information the students shared with me during the interviews. Overall, I feel my decision to conduct the interviews in the languages used by students at university, usually their mother language, was a good decision which led to rich interview data.

Filep (2009) writes about his experience of "mixing of languages" during interviews (switching from one language to another within one line of thought in order to explain issues), as a natural fact. He does not see it "as a problem, but rather as a method that supports the communication process" (p. 64). This phenomenon similarly applied to my interviews. Students explained situations as they experienced them, within the

contexts and in the language in which they happened. Liana, the girl who was studying in English at a Romanian university and who decided to conduct the interview in English, switched languages during the interview. As she was talking about her student experiences in Romania, about the university and her department, she switched from English to Romanian and back. It was not a problem for me because I understood both the language and the meaning.

Gómez and Kuronen (2011) and Temple and Edwards (2002) point out that the same words can potentially mean different things in different cultural contexts and that “the words we choose matter”. As seen in the quote below, Liana used a Romanian word when she was talking about her future plans and she talked about the fact that she needs to pass her exams and gain her degree before she can leave on her gap year. In this situation the word ‘licența’ refers to the university leaving exam. In the Romanian higher education system students need to both pass an exam based on the curricula they studied and write a dissertation, which they later defend orally in order to gain their BA degree. If you try to translate the word ‘licența’ into English, most dictionaries would equate it with ‘university degree’, whereas the term in the Romanian context refers to the exam that is part of the process of gaining a degree and not the degree itself.

Liana: I'm starting... I think I have till, you know, **licența** and my BA degree, so maybe it will be August or September. I will start with Ireland and the United Kingdom and then maybe Amsterdam then maybe some Nordic countries, and then something like Ukraine... I will see.

My interviewee knew that I would equally understand why she used a Romanian word and what that word meant, so she did not need to explain it. The mixing of languages aided the communicative process as we were both aware of the meaning; if she had chosen to explain in English it would have been a lengthy and unnatural conversation.

Temple and Edwards (2002) argue that language is not a neutral medium as it defines difference and commonality, excludes or includes others. In the example above, in using a Romanian word Liana has also signalled that I was an ‘insider’ in the story she

was telling, that I knew about the processes and the experiences students in her situation were part of.

My position as a researcher was constantly changing between 'insider' and 'outsider' depending on which topic we were discussing during the interview. I was assumed to have knowledge about student life in that particular Romanian city: to know people (lecturers, politicians, student union representatives), names of places (student meeting places, university buildings, squares, pubs, malls), and details about processes (university application processes, accommodation options, graduation) – I was assumed to know and indeed I knew the 'student languages' they were speaking. Students use different words to describe streets and places in the city depending on where they are from, their mother language, and which student community they belong to. Spaces and places in the city are marked by history, ethnicity and languages. Students either grow up in or are socialised into this culture upon arrival where the names of streets and places have two names: an official name (usually Romanian) and a name used and spread by the Hungarian community (usually a Hungarian name). I have written about the bipolar characteristics of space knowledge and of space usage in this city among Hungarian and Romanian students elsewhere (see Plugor 2008).

On the other hand, because I studied further and because I had left the country, especially when students were talking about their future plans, I was regarded as an 'outsider', as someone who opted for a different route, compared to their plans to not continue studying for a PhD and not migrate. Similarly, having studied a different subject a few years earlier than them and being at a different stage in my life all contributed to increase the distance between my experiences and theirs, between being an 'insider' and 'outsider'.

In England, even though I did not have first-hand experience of being a BA and MA student in the country, and therefore technically did not share similar experiences to my respondents, the fact that I was part of the university meant that I was assumed to know about places, names and processes in much the same way as an 'insider'.

I was aware of these shifts in my position during the interviews, and I reflected on them in my research diary and included them in the data analysis. Some of these shifts

were due to my language knowledge (Liana), others connected with my ethnic background (Doriana), while some students compared their own experiences and future plans to my own educational and career history (Erika), similarly in other studies involving similar techniques (see Smith 2012). Apart from the insider-outsider position of the researcher with regards to the participants, the narrative investigator has an insider-outsider position within the academic community too. Cortazzi and Jin (2009, p. 33) talk about a need for 'double vision' when conducting comparative narrative educational research; a need for an insider view who can explain perceptions and meanings, and that of an outsider view, a scholar who can use the academic conventions to interpret the research and translate them for others from different communities to read them.

My intention, in a similar vein to what Twinn (1998), Irvine, Roberts and Bradbury-Jones (2008) and Baumgartner (2012) advocate, was to keep working on the original texts until after I completed the analysis, so I decided to transcribe the interviews in the original language and postponed the translation for a later stage, contrary to the general practice (see Temple 2002, 2006b; Larkin, Dierckx de Casterlé & Schotsmans 2007; Sharma-Brymer & Fox 2008). I was able to do this because I am fluent in all three languages used in the research project and I had experience in dealing with research texts and had conducted analysis in all three languages in the past.

I transcribed the interviews in their narrative form; I did not force students' speech into written or grammatical correctness. Subsequently these texts were sent to students for validation, along with 2–3 page English summaries of the interviews. I wrote the summaries in English, as this is the language of my thesis. Even though all previous communication (e-mails, the questionnaire, the interview, follow-up e-mails) was in the language the respondent was studying, I decided to send the summaries in English so that students could get acquainted with, and were able to validate my interpretations of their stories, in the language I was going to use them in my thesis. Students in Romania also had the option of reading the summaries in their mother language if they wished. I received a few comments on transcription and on the

summaries, but overall everyone agreed with my interpretations and everyone coped with the English summaries.

In line with my previous reasons I decided to read the interviews in the original language, but I did all the coding in the NVivo programme in English. Although I experienced limitations in the programme due to the three languages (e.g. I could not perform meaningful word searches), I did not have problems with developing thematic and categorical codes in English.

Baumgartner's (2012, p. 12) choice was to code and analyse the transcripts in the original language as she felt this was the best way to "understand the overall 'atmosphere' of the interview and to build up a coherent high level understanding of the scope and contexts of the key experiences under investigation". Although I agree with her perspective, I feel that for my personal analysis, using the original languages would have been counter-productive. I was writing my research diary in English and thinking about my research in English, so it seemed natural to write all the memos and notes in English. It was not something I consciously chose; rather, it was something that felt natural to me, the same way it seemed natural to conduct the interviews and the communication with my participants in their mother language or in the language they were studying. I did not feel that doing the coding in English distanced me from the transcripts and I did not feel this jeopardised the analysis or that the literal and free translations I was doing were rushed or incorrect. I spent a considerable amount of time developing and organising the codes and where I felt necessary I kept the original texts in the description. For example, in the case of *in vivo* codes I first created the codes in the original language and later translated them to English.

I started translating the interviews as I was writing up the findings of the analysis. The translations were entirely done by me in the NVivo programme and I kept the English versions next to the original texts both in the programme and in the written accounts I produced (the PhD thesis and journal articles) until the interpretations were finalised. My general aim during translating the Romanian and Hungarian interview texts into English was to maintain equivalence in meaning whilst doing literal translations as much as possible. In some cases a "free translation" (Birbili 2000) was more adequate

as I had to change or add words to receive meaningful English sentences. I kept the hesitations and interruptions in flow and I did not tidy up grammar as long as the translated text was understandable for English audiences. Similarly to Spivak (1992, 1993 cited in Temple & Edwards 2002), Venuti (1995, 1998, 2000 cited in Temple & Edwards 2002), Temple (2005) and Riessman (2008), I believe that the original texts are part of the data production process and I also feel that they represent the contexts the respondents belong to, so I often opted to keep words or phrases from the original language in the English translations and provided additional notes when necessary.

Temple, Edwards and Alexander (2006) argue that researchers are often “expected to produce easy-to-read English texts in which the process of production is not apparent”, but I did not try to convert my texts into BBC English (Temple 2005). Venuti (1998 cited in Temple, Edwards & Alexander 2006) calls this process of presenting interview transcripts as if everyone speaks perfect English “domestication”, while Spivak (1993 cited in Temple, Edwards & Alexander 2006) refers to it as “*translate*se”. Both these authors argue, and I also subscribe to their views, for re-introducing language and cultural contexts and “sending the reader abroad”.

Researchers have suggested techniques that they argue address translation dilemmas; for example, back translation and using professional translators (see Esposito 2001; Pham and Harris 2001 cited in Temple 2006b) to check whether a translation is ‘correct’. I did not choose either of these. After I finished the translations I asked a colleague, who had a similar background to mine (Hungarian mother language, grew up in Romania and was fluent in Romanian, has been living and studying in England and was fluent in English), to read both the original texts and my translations and identify possible discrepancies. We had discussions about parts of translated texts that I was unsure of, but overall I always considered (similarly to Temple 2002; Temple & Edwards 2002) that there can be no single correct translation of a text in the same way as the experiences of respondents can be interpreted in different ways. I designed the research, conducted the interviews, did the data analysis and translated the interviews from the perspective I disclosed at the beginning of this sub-chapter, and this is how I represented my participants. The findings of my research therefore need to be read taking this into account.

To sum up, when I embarked on this research journey, I never imagined that language would play such an important role, or that I would be transitioning between three languages and cultures throughout the process. I read several texts about conducting social research, especially from comparative perspectives, but these rarely reflected on language-related dilemmas in the different phases of the research and were not written by researchers who shared both language and cultural background with the population investigated. I made language-related decisions based on my familiarity with the contexts and settings of my research and I opted for what seemed most natural to my participants. In retrospect, I still feel that the decision to approach students in the language they used at university was appropriate and resulted in rich narrative data and multi-layered analysis which captured the holistic picture of what it means to be a student in that particular social context and time. Because it was usually their mother language, students felt comfortable talking to me, they were able to express themselves, and even when it was not their mother language, like in the case of Liana, our shared language and cultural knowledge aided the interview process. Transcribing and analysing the interviews in the original language also proved fruitful, as I was able to grasp several layers of meaning in students' stories, richness which I hope to have conveyed by presenting words and phrases from the original language in the English translations.

My task as researcher and translator was not simply to conduct research and then literal translations but rather to apply a double vision and to transition between languages and contexts and to grasp as well as to discuss differences and similarities in concepts and experiences and how these are coupled to meaning-making by students. I was able to fulfil this role due to my multi-lingual and ethnic background; a position which although special, I am sure it is not unique. It would be useful to hear the voices of other multi-ethnic and multi-lingual researchers and see the transitions and translations they make between cultures and languages while conducting research on different topics.

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Furlong and Cartmel (2007, p. 7) argue that biographical approaches are an “effective way of learning about young people’s interpretations of their experiences and of discovering the ways in which they attempt to plan their lives and put together the pieces of jigsaw”. They have also cautioned researchers that from a theoretical perspective this method might underplay the significance of structure and it might be inclined to take young people’s interpretations at face value. Even though I do not subscribe to their criticism and to their guidance that youth life events should be regarded within the framework of structural constraints, I was particularly attentive of the contexts and rationalizations of my interviewees. One of my aims with this research was to see the interplay between structure and agency in student experiences and their rationalizations of their past, present and future, so I did not take students’ narratives at face value. I questioned what they said and I was always attempting to include in my analysis both the ‘lived stories’ and the ‘told stories’. Ultimately, my interpretations represent neither of them, but a ‘reconstructed story’ which takes into account both what they shared with me and how I constructed their stories based on my own experiences and the literature I read.

Focusing on specific topics within the life-history interviews could be considered as a way of predetermining the importance of these topics in the respondents’ life, but as Bornat and colleagues (2000, p. 247) argued, one of the characteristics of these types of interviews is that people often bring their own agendas and interests to the interview. Consequently, even though the topics for the discussion were predetermined, the interviewees reinterpreted and shaped them according to their experiences and perceptions, which corresponded to the purpose of the interviews and the study.

Regarding comparability of cases at national and institutional levels, as I disclosed earlier, my aim with opting for Romania and England was not to select two countries with comparable welfare and educational systems, nor two universities which are comparable regarding their processes or ranking. There were similarities and differences between the countries as well as between the institutions. I have pointed out the relevant characteristics in the analysis. Ultimately, the strength and the purpose

of my comparisons are at individual biographical level. I was interested to capture the multitude of experiences of students in both country and institutional contexts and to see the similarities and differences within these contexts. The fact that I opted to conduct research in two countries resulted in methodological challenges in terms of gaining access, timing, conducting interviews as well as conducting the data analysis. As I previously mentioned, I tried to conduct the research in both countries similarly (but not the same way) in terms of time and approach. I opted not to conduct the research exactly the same way in both places because I felt that by forcing one or the other approach would have resulted in less responses or less rich data. Additionally to my original research design I had to include a second phase of interviewing in 2012 because I felt that I did not gather enough data in 2011. Methodologically my approach was the same, I just opted for a different timing to reach students at a less busy period in their lives. Overall, I was satisfied with the sample and the type and volume of information I gathered. I could have been more focused on achieving a representative sample, or could have interviewed more students within each sampling characteristic, but this was a small-scale project and my time and resources were limited. My aim was to map out the multitude of experiences and I achieved that. More detailed within-each-sampling-case research could have been also useful, but that is a different project.

My respondent population was reasonably diverse in terms of subjects, higher education experiences, gender, social background. It is likely that the method I used to recruit respondents – e-mails through gatekeepers and my emphasis on self-selection – had an impact on who I interviewed and what type of stories they shared with me. It is possible that students who experienced more difficulties during higher education were underrepresented.

Creswell (2013, p. 76) argues that given the procedures and the characteristics of narrative research, this is a challenging approach to use. The researcher collects extensive information about the participants, and needs to have a clear understanding of the context of the individual life. I made every effort to gather as much information as possible from the students about their experiences during university. They were asked to complete an on-line questionnaire, they participated in a face-to-face interview and they were sent the transcripts and case summaries to review and

comment. I am also part of the communities I researched: I had experiences of my own in both contexts. I regarded these experiences as an asset and I built on these consciously during the research and the analysis, but I also made efforts to complement my knowledge and understanding through conducting the document and policy analysis, through the expert interviews, through reading literature and through participating in discussions about my research with people who were familiar with my contexts either as an academic or as someone with first-hand experience. I made every effort to collect and portray students' experiences, but ultimately the narrative interpretations in the thesis are my own and they bear the characteristics of my own worldview and experiences. I can never be a different person, although I can aim to understand their experience and their life, the readings of what they share with me will bear the marks of my own lenses.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter provided an overview and justification of the approaches and methods used in my research. Similarly to Rustin and Chamberlayne (2002) I believe that it is important to research the complexity of experiences of individuals, and of the particular cultures in which their lives are embedded. In my research I chose to describe, understand and interpret the experiences and perceptions of students in two university contexts by adopting an interpretive paradigm, biographical and comparative approaches, and narrative methodology to meet these aims. In the previous pages I presented details about the main method I chose – topical life history interviews – and the secondary methods that served the purpose to help the primary method and augment my understanding of the overall topic – online questionnaire, policy and document analysis. I also discussed about the research locations and contexts, the participants involved in my research, how I selected them, when we met and how we kept in touch after the interviews. I revealed my transcription and translation techniques as well as details about the narrative analysis methods I applied and how I re-presented the data. My personal characteristics and background as well as the role languages played in my study represented important information to

disclose, as it had an impact on every aspect of my research and analysis. And finally I concluded the chapter with presenting my reflections on the quality criteria for the research, ethical considerations linked to the study and limitations of the chosen methodology.

The following chapters present the analysis of the narrative data collected and link the findings of the research to existing literature on student motivations, choices, experiences, plans and more generally to transitions from education to work.

CHAPTER 4 – PATHWAYS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

The first research question of this study asked: *What were the circumstances and motives that led youngsters to choose to attend HE?* In asking this question I wanted to find out what students thought about HE, why they decided to embark on this journey, how they made that decision and what were the factors that impacted on their HE choices. Apart from considering the individual circumstances, I was also interested to understand and describe how higher education decision-making was exercised in the two country systems, whether it was a similar or a different process and why.

Within education research information about the decision-making processes of pupils is gathered either retrospectively, varying times after their university application, by asking students or graduates about past events and choices (see Brooks & Everett 2008; Greenbank 2009; Lexmond & Bradley 2010) or prospectively, varying times before application, by asking pupils about their plans and viewpoints related to higher education studies (see du Bois-Reymond 1998, 2004; Reay, David & Ball 2005; Bates *et al.* 2009). Few longitudinal studies exist that try to offer a more holistic picture of the decision-making process (see Hodgkinson *et al.* 1996; Hodgkinson & Sparkes 1997 for students in VET; Purcell *et al.* 2008 for students in higher education).

In this chapter I look at the retrospective framing of decision-making of students regarding motivation for studying at university, choosing a subject / course and opting for a location. The three main themes (motivation, subject choice, location choice) appear in three sub-chapters. These sub-chapters are divided into groups based on the emerging topics from the narratives, and these are further clustered based on the influential factors students mentioned (see Appendix 19 for an overview of the analysis and chapter structure). Each theme is summarised at the end and each chapter has a concluding remarks section which highlights the main points. At the end of this chapter, I reflect on what applying to university meant to students who lived in different country contexts and came from different backgrounds, how that related to the journey they had embarked on and how it was storied into their lives. Beginning with the subject choice sub-chapter I start to discuss and build the transitions typology which will be fully presented in the final chapter (7) of the thesis.

MOTIVATION FOR OPTING TO STUDY AT UNIVERSITY

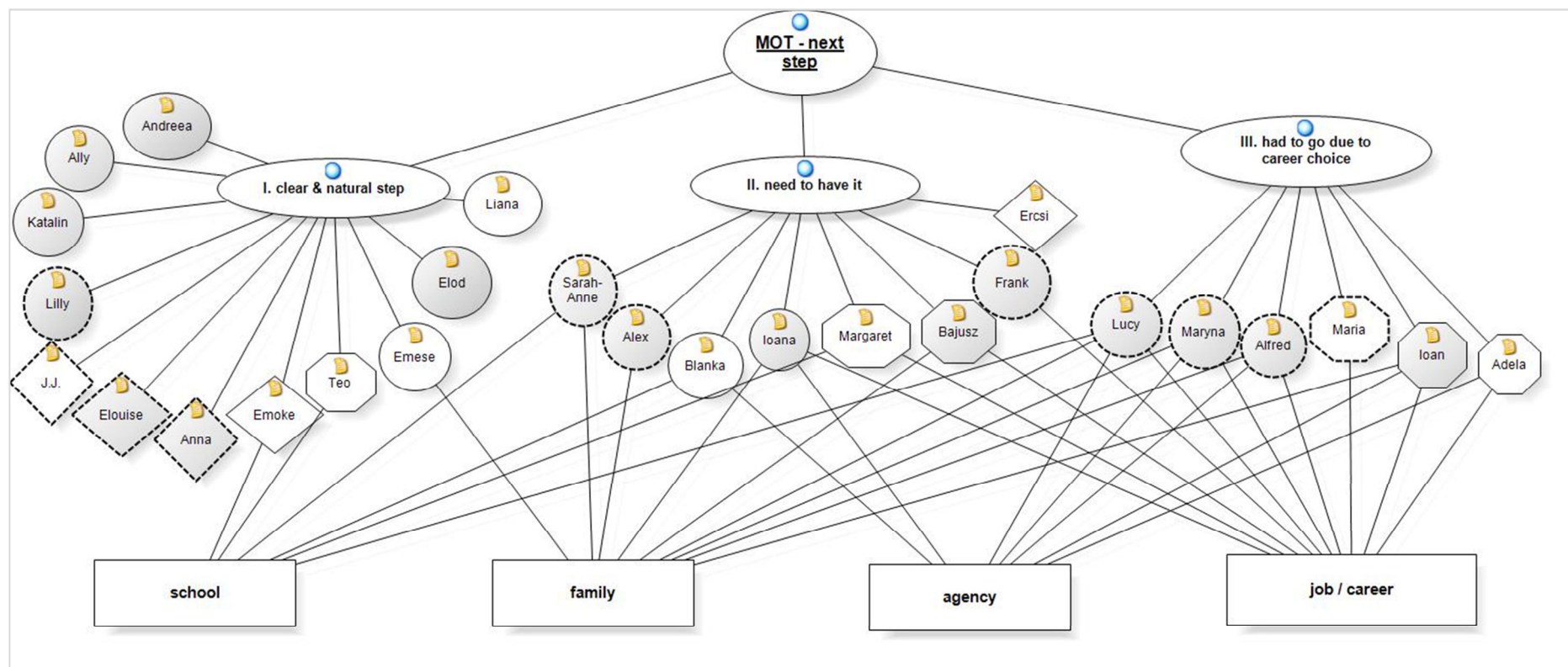
While reading the narratives of students about their motivations for opting to study at university three main groups of reasons can be distinguished; the first two are similar to du Bois-Reymond's (1998) categories of 'normal' and 'choice' biographies. The first group of students positioned HE on a predicted life course, they stated that they "knew the university was the next step" and they cited varying reasons that underlined their feelings: high school influences, family influence, the need to go to university, vague or specific career plans that required a degree. For the second group of students going to university was not the norm, they made a conscious choice of opting for HE because they wanted to reach higher than their parents, or to have a better future, for the degree, or because it was a stage of life and they wanted to have that experience. A third group of students, not mentioned in previous research on educational choices, consisted of students who did not feel that university was a natural next step or they did not want to engage in higher education studies, but they ended up applying and attending a university due to a happenstance event.

In the following I present the characteristics of these three groups and the influential factors students mentioned. There are overlaps and some students could be placed in different clusters as well, but in general the motives and the worldview of students were akin within each cluster.

1. "I KNEW THE UNIVERSITY WAS THE NEXT STEP"

Students who felt that university was the natural next step after finishing school had in common that going to university was seen as an anticipated, predictable, linear next step. They did not think about going or not going, opting for higher education was rather a non-decision in their life, as Bajusz mentioned: "it wasn't really a decision". Contextual factors such as family, school and peer group played an important role in shaping their decisions as well as forming career goals at an early age. They often stated that going to university 'seemed like a natural step', it was a 'natural progression', 'the sort of thing that I was going to do'.

FIGURE 1. OPTING FOR UNIVERSITY WAS THE NEXT STEP²



² Guidance on how to read the figure:

The top part of the figure presents the clusters within the respective topic group; in the bottom part the influential contextual information is shown; and in the middle part of the figure the students' pseudonyms appear:

The shape of the object represents students' subjective social positions on a scale from 1 to 10: 3&4 = octagon; 5 = diamond; 6 & 7 & 8 = circle.

The shading of the object represents parents' experience with HE: white background = parents have no experience within HE; grey background = parents have HE experience.

The dashed lines in the objects represent British students while the continuous lines represent students from Romania.

From this perspective they resembled du Bois-Reymond's (1998) 'normal biography' students who experienced linear, anticipated, predictable transitions, which were often gender and class-specific. Figure 1 presents the students, the three clusters in which they can be grouped based on thematic analysis, and the influential factors (school, family, agency, job/career) that can be inferred from the contextual analysis. Students placed in this topic group were grouped in three clusters based on the aspects they mentioned for going to university: (I) university as clear and natural step, (II) university as something necessary to have, and (III) needing to go due to career choice. In the following I present in detail each of these clusters and the influential factors that students mentioned as having an impact on their decisions.

I. In case of students who felt that university was the clear and natural next step the absence of decisions regarding going or not going to university was present in the way they narrated their stories. I asked every student about their reasons for deciding to go to university, but these students essentially did not answer my question or they answered it in one or two brief sentences and continued to speak about how they chose a subject or institution or other aspects where they felt they did make a decision. They used adjectives like 'clear' and 'natural' to highlight the fact that going to university was always present in their lives, that it was a non-decision, probably a latent expectation from either their family or school:

Ally: For me it was obvious (clear) {a fost clar} that I will come to university. It was never a question of going or not going, I just had to decide where to go.

Emőke: In high school it was certainly clear that I will go to university. The question was what (subject) to opt for.

No particular reasons were mentioned for opting to go to university and no explicit influence could be detected, except in case of Emese who knew she would be following her older brother to university as she "always wanted to be where he was". This is visible in Figure 1 as well as only Emőke, Teo and Emese are connected with lines to the bottom half of the graph. Implicitly, family— in case of Ally, Katalin, Elouise and Anna who all had parents with higher education experience – and high school – particularly in case of Emőke and Teo who situated the narrative within high school

context – probably influenced students’ feelings towards university. Their narratives were either atemporal or situated in the past within the school context.

II. Those who stated that ‘they needed to go to university’ were similar to the previous cluster in that going to university was a non-decision in their lives, but their narratives of this non-decision were more elaborate and the hidden pressures became more explicit (and it is visible in Figure 1 too as students are connected to the bottom half of the graph by one or two or three lines). Family played a significant role in the way these students explained this phase of their life as the quotes from Sarah-Anne and Bajusz illustrate:

Sarah-Anne: To be honest, there wasn't any other option... from quite an early age, because I had gone to a private school anyway my parents have sort of taken the view that I was going to go to university.... So to me it was always engrained that it was the sort of thing that I was going to do.

Bajusz: Hmmm... I wouldn't say it was a choice (laughing). Because I come from a family where my father graduated university and... it was not a question. They didn't force me, not at all. But... as many who go to university decide, I also became entangled in this societal pull factor that university is necessary...

These students regarded going to university as the ‘normal route’ to take, but they also displayed a tendency to take into consideration instrumental reasons which echoed the policies and the messages portrayed in the media about returns on HE, as Ioana stated: “...it's important to have a degree...”. Apart from Blanka and Margaret these were all students who had parents with HE experience and family played a major role in the way their educational choices were made. This is similar to what Allatt (1996) called the “taken for granted assumptions” of middle-class families or the ‘tacit’, internalised influences of middle-class parents which Devadason (2006, p. 160) mentioned. Reay (1998, p. 526) also highlighted that students from middle-class families “engage with higher education choice in a context of certainty”, in contrast students from working class background experience uncertain family habituses. Uncertain habituses were not present in my study, but students who did not have parents with HE experience emphasised the school environment and how it was the norm for someone with good grades or from good schools to go to university, as Margaret explained:

Margaret: I graduated from high school and it was somehow the natural next step. I didn't particularly want to go to university, but it was the most... those who went to good schools and those who got good grades went to university.... It was somehow normal to think about going to university and especially a good university. It was normal, it was natural. I didn't even think about not going or taking a gap year. No.

International students – particularly Frank and J.J. – echoing Bamber's (2014) findings, regarded the postgraduate qualification as a necessity for early and mid-career gains that otherwise might not have been achievable with just an undergraduate degree from their home institution. Additionally the length of the English postgraduate course was appealing to them (1 year compared to 2-3 years in their home countries). These students all reported fierce competition for good graduate jobs in their home countries and the master's degree was perceived as one way to facilitate access to the most sought-after jobs or workplaces. Frank made explicit reference to his family 'sending' him to study in the UK, while J.J. said that she needed to persuade her family. In both cases strong ties with family and dependence upon family could be observed.

The narratives in this cluster illustrated the latent pressures students felt of 'needing' to conform to the implicit or explicit expectations of their families or school environments to do 'the right thing'. Ioana and Blanka spoke in first person singular, which could be interpreted as a sense of control over their lives, but the contextual analysis revealed stronger family influence. For all these students family was strongly present in their narratives and the voice of agency was silenced as the stories suggested a feeling of compulsion, a power that forced them to take this route. Similarly to the previous cluster, the narratives were situated within school or family contexts regarding place and within the past regarding the time perspective, but some students included hints to the future and/or a potential job for which they needed HE qualification.

III. Similarly to the previous two clusters, these students also talked about going to university as something that was a natural step, but their narratives were more elaborated and they all included references to their future career plans (as seen on Figure 1 all the students are connected to the job/career influential factor). Students had strong ideas about who they wanted to become and knew that in order to achieve their

goals they needed to go to university. Adela, Maria and Maryna knew from an early age that they wanted to become lawyers and they knew they needed to go to university to achieve that. Other students did not have such strong ideas, but they stated that they knew they would be doing something that needed a degree:

Alfred: I wasn't entirely sure what I wanted to do, but pretty much every career choice that I could think of required university so it was just something I had to do. I would have preferred probably not to go to university if that had been an option.

Lucy: I always wanted to do something that I knew I'd have to go to university to do.

Parental involvement and school influence were mentioned in connection to decision-making, but these students, contrary to the previous two clusters, had a heightened sense of agency (only Maria was not connected to 'agency' on the graph), they decided what they wanted and engaged in university studies with a plan to achieve these aims. Phrases in first person active were predominant:

Adela: I wanted law.

Alfred: ...it was just something I had to do.

Lucy: I always wanted...

Maryna: I never questioned myself...

The time perspectives of these students was also different than in the previous two clusters. While the latter mainly recalled the decisions situated in the past and connected to places (like high school or home city) or embedded in the family context, these students recalled these past decisions with a view on the future. They mentioned the specific or vague career plans they had as young children and they firmly connected the decision of going to university to the labour market options they would have after graduation. Four of the students were from the English university which could reflect the fact that in the English system students are encouraged from a young age to think about careers.

To sum up, in this first topic group not going to university was not a thought that crossed students' minds. They recalled the option of going to university as a non-decision, they were all conscious that university was going to be the next step. For them higher education was a continuation of their high school studies. This was in line with their experiences within the family and/or this was what their school environment

and peer group reinforced. The degrees of agency which students attributed to themselves varied between these groups, those who cited career plans seemed most in control of this step in their lives and they explained it in terms of future plans, while the other students positioned the decision mainly within family or school contexts in their past. Compared to the next two topic groups, there were more students in this group who had parents with higher education degrees, and students from the English university were also overrepresented particularly in the first and the third clusters. There were no Hungarian students in the third cluster, and all international students were in the first cluster. No gender differences could be detected in students' narratives.

2. "I OPTED TO GO TO UNIVERSITY BECAUSE..."

The second topic group of students displayed characteristics similar to the 'choice biographies' identified by du Bois-Reymond (1998, p. 65). She regarded the 'choice biographies' as marked by the "tension between option / freedom and legitimation / coercion". I will argue that this group should mainly consist of those students who described the multiple, sometimes divergent, motives and factors that influenced their decisions, but ultimately highlighted that it was a choice, usually their choice to study further. Those students who highlighted influential factors like significant others or chance events should be grouped separately (see next topic group). These students did not refer to university as a straightforward step, like the students presented in the previous part, but rather mentioned that they reflected on their options and made a decision to apply to HE, consequently displaying higher levels of agency than the previous group. Nevertheless, the narratives were permeated by references to parents and friends, so ultimately the fact that they took this step was mediated by family or peer group influence. On a similar note, what these students had in common was that they all regarded their participation in HE beneficial for their futures and a necessary step for gaining better labour market positions. The national dispositions regarding the structure of the labour market and the perceptions of students and their relatives about what was needed to secure good jobs was also apparent.

FIGURE 2. OPTING FOR UNIVERSITY WAS A CHOICE

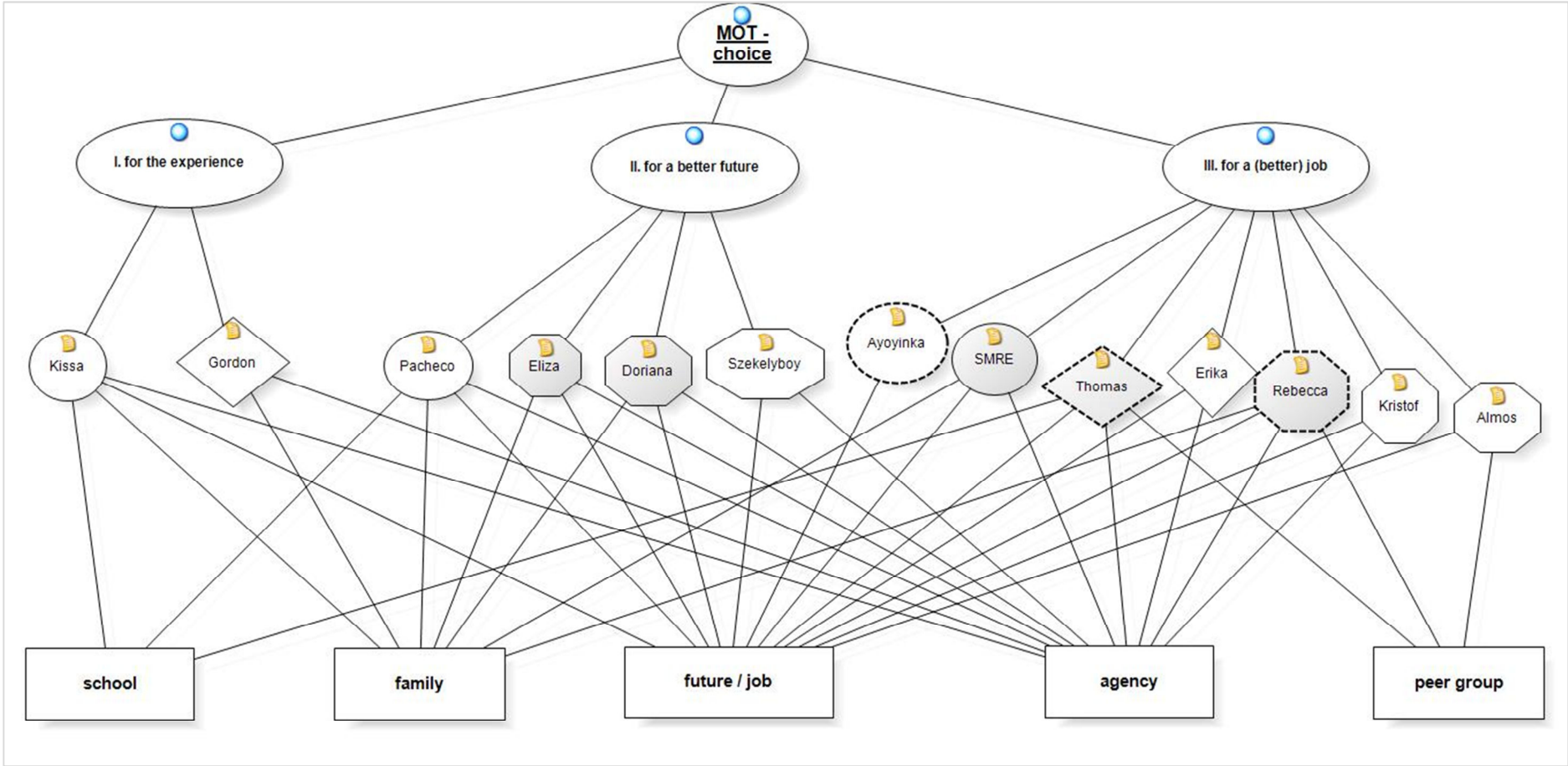


Figure 2 presents the students, the three clusters and the influential factors (school, family, future/job, agency, peer group) they mentioned during the interviews. Compared to the previous topic group a new influential factor was apparent: students' references to their peer groups. Students placed in this topic group mentioned three main motives for opting to go to university: (I) university as a stage of life, (II) hope for a better future and (III) hope for a better job upon graduation. In the following I present in detail each of these clusters and the influential factors that students mentioned as having an impact on their decisions.

I. In the first cluster university was regarded as a beneficial stage of life and students mentioned that for them it was important to gain this life experience. Both Gordon and Kissa were ethnic Romanians from families where their parents did not attend higher education and they both came from smaller towns approximately one hour away from where they opted to pursue their studies. They framed their narratives around a view of university as a stage of life experienced by many, but underneath this frame parental guidance and peer-group influence were visible.

Gordon: Erm...on the one hand, because it's the fashion {asta e moda}, and on the other hand because I felt the need to do something else, to see what's new. It's a stage of life. Like school is, not necessarily a phase when you learn, but it's a stage in your development, you see life from multiple angles. And this is why my mother insisted that I don't stay in [hometown]. And it was a good idea.

Gordon referred to going to university as "the fashion" while Kissa stressed that it was not a real choice as everyone at school was doing it. Nevertheless, she explained that going to university was what she wanted as she felt the need to "do something more; and to do something more university was needed."

Both students regarded HE as a beneficial phase of life which they were keen to experience. Their motivations were embedded in the national culture of what student experience meant: new experiences and personal development. Their decision was mediated by family and structural constraints and compared to the other two clusters in this topic group, these students seemed less preoccupied by their futures and about the graduate labour market.

II. Hope for a better future was present in most of the narratives within this topic group of 'choice biography', but it was explicitly stressed within this cluster by Pacheco, Doriana, Eliza and Székelyboy. These students differed from the previous cluster in that their motives were more articulated and their rationale for opting to study at university was explicit. Family played an important role in their decision to study further, but mainly as a deterring example. This feeling was the strongest in Doriana's and Eliza's case who both decided to pursue significantly different routes than their parents. Doriana was escaping from her home town and from the lives her parents lived, who although graduated from university were working in jobs not connected to their studies and for which they were overqualified, in her opinion.

Doriana: ...in this situation I cannot afford to go to university just for the sake of doing it... to do one because my mother and my father also did, and so I should as well. No. They did different courses than what I am doing and now they are overqualified... So it's a descending jump. And it's all because of the city. If I went to [name of the city] and did my university studies there and then I went back to [hometown] and so what? Work as a shop attendant? No. I don't even want to hear about that.

She was careful not to trace any of the steps her parents did, so she opted for a different subject, in a different city and university and she was not planning to go back to her home town. She regarded university as a necessary step to secure a better future, but she also felt that success is highly place-dependent – not in her hometown as the labour market perspectives must be better elsewhere. Similarly, Eliza's narrative was also about reaching higher than her parents.

For Székelyboy and Pacheco, their family background was not related to the higher education route. Their horizons of action were altered by the practices they experienced at high school which pushed them in a different direction, towards university. Pacheco's brothers' experiences helped him see what happens if he goes down the route which his family background suggested and so he decided to 'listen' to the school's message and opted for going to university.

Pacheco: From my family, the important factor was that my brothers are much older. One is 15 years older and the other one 16 years older, and they didn't go to university and it was really difficult for them to make it {értvényesülni}...and they always motivated me to go and do it...

Place perceptions within this cluster were divergent, family home appeared as a place they wanted to escape from, while school, was the place where they gained strength and support to opt for the HE route. They connected their past and future and although they did not have specific future career plans, they stated that they regarded HE as a necessary milestone in the route for a better future. Although references to the labour market were implicit, these students spoke about better futures in abstract terms without mentioning jobs; from this perspective they differed from the next cluster who emphasized potential job prospects.

III. While students in the first two clusters either did not mention significant others in their decision-making or if they did, they were portrayed as negative examples, students in this third cluster referred to their parents or other significant others as push factors in their decision-making process (the 'peer group' influential factor in Figure 2 appeared only in these student narratives). They also spoke about going to university mainly for the degree which would give them positional advantage when searching for jobs. Rebecca's mother had higher education experience, and both her parents wanted her to go to university and apart from the family background she also mentioned friends and colleagues as guiding her towards the HE route. She did not apply straight after finishing school as she did not gain the expected grades to go to university and decided to work instead. After working for two years she started feeling that in order to have a more secure future she needed to get a degree, so she decided to apply. For SMRE parental experience of HE was one of the factors mentioned, along with feeling that "nowadays it's the minimum that someone goes to university" and that this experience was needed to secure a better future and not work in manual jobs. Thomas also came from a family where parents had higher education experience, but he mentioned his friends as push-factors. He also highlighted that the degree would be beneficial for him in the job search, which was a view shared by Ayoyinka too.

Erika and Kristóf, came from families with no higher education experience, and they received no parental guidance in the process as Erika mentioned:

Erika: Well my father and mother didn't go to university.... my father said that if I don't go to university then I can go hoe weeds (laughing). So they were supportive, they said I can go, they will pay as long as they can, and all... they didn't impede me, but they never explained that if I don't go then... it's my future. It's up to me how it happens.

Students often highlighted that their parents supported their decision to go to university but did not participate in the decision-making process. Students' main rationale for going to university was to gain a degree, which was seen as a necessary first step towards a better job, and ultimately to a better life:

Kristóf: I always wanted to go to university. When I was applying I thought that this will help me find a job easier and contribute to my personal development...

These students were similar in their attitudes and motives to the working-class students mentioned by Reay and colleagues (Reay, David & Ball 2005; Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2009). In their research students were aware of the importance of their actions; agency rather than structure determined their choices and paths in 'making their dreams come true' (Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2009, p. 1110). Erika and Kristóf displayed similarities with Devadason's (2006) working class ethnic minority students in terms of their degree of individualism and strong emphasis on themselves and the power they felt to shape their life. Álmos, although also Hungarian, he was exactly the opposite. He felt no control over his life and was engaging in events as they occurred. He could have been included in the next topic group of going to university due to a happenstance event, but his motivation was clear, he wanted to improve his life chances and this was the main reason for wanting to go to university.

Overall, similarly to the previous cluster, these students also made the connection between past desires and future plans, but they were more specific, they talked about the benefits of having a degree or the work prospects of HE graduates. Those who were from families with HE experience mentioned the support and guidance they received, while other students highlighted that their parents were supportive but could not offer guidance and they felt that their futures were in their own hands.

To sum up, the students I placed in this second topic group regarded HE as a beneficial step for themselves, going to university was not a non-decision for them, like it was for the first topic group. They recalled several motives for opting to go to HE, some related

to their family or school dispositions, others were more personal motives connected to imagined futures and occupations. Especially the second and third clusters had expectations from the university regarding their future entry into the labour market. Significant others played an important role in these students' decision-making as they influenced them with specific advice, or they acted as positive or negative role models, but ultimately their pure presence acted as catalyst for students and so they reconstructed the process from an agential perspective, as having control over their lives. Apart from Ayoyinka there were no international students in this topic group, and the other two students from the English university were both in the third cluster. Romanian students were also less represented (with the exception of the first cluster which consisted only of Romanian students), while there were several Hungarian students in both the second and the third clusters. Students did not reflect explicitly on gender or ethnic themes. Social class was mentioned by students in the second cluster as they stated that they wanted to reach higher than their parents or siblings who they defined as working class (although Eliza and Doriana had parents with HE degrees).

3. WENT TO UNIVERSITY DUE TO A HAPPENSTANCE EVENT

There were two students who did not aim to go to university or gave up on the idea of going to university, but then experienced a happenstance event that placed them on the fast-track route towards HE.

Johey wanted to join the army after graduating from A-levels, but due to a medical problem he was not accepted. He tried to get a job, but he was told he should go and study at university because he would be 'bored' on the job. His family background was in line with the HE route; parents and siblings went to university, but the family situation was turbulent at the time he was finishing his studies. His compulsory education experience was also negative, which put him off studying. Due to these two aspects he did not consider higher education as an option. Receiving encouragement from someone impartial helped him gain confidence in himself and regard going to university as within his horizons for action. He applied in the clearing period. In

retrospect, he felt that, if asked, he would repeat the advice he was given, as he felt that HE provided an environment to develop and decide about career plans:

Johey: ...it's exactly what I'd say to anybody that I meet that's thinking of going to university... 'just do it, don't get a job now, there's no point. All you need to do is spend three years actually discovering the kind of person that you want to be and what you want to spend your life doing and then go on and do it'.

In István's case, his family was completely unsupportive of HE. Due to some distant relatives' influence and the support received in high school he had aspirations to go to university right after graduation, but he did not get admitted. After trying the following two years and being unsuccessful both times the pressure from his family became high to get a job and contribute to daily livings financially so he got a job and gave up his HE plans. After more than a decade of working in different jobs in different countries and never feeling any sense of belonging, due to a chance event he was advised to go and study at university, which he decided to do. He did not apply for the same subject as before and he did not need to sit in an exam in order to gain admittance as the admission process changed since he last applied. In hindsight he felt that university and gaining a degree was important in order to improve his and his family's financial situation and future and this is why it was worth doing it.

István: I want to change my life, and mainly my life as this is the only one I can, but also because my parents are under 70, they are 64 and 65 and I'm fighting so hard and I'm swallowing the bitter pill {nyelem le ezt az egész keserű pirulát}.... to end up in a position to be able to buy a house, so that my parents wouldn't need to live in a rented house... there is a psychological aspect as well, that I need to achieve something {el kell érni valamit az életben}, not just because of me, but for the community.

The role of significant others is apparent in both of these narratives. The two males lived in different countries, in different circumstances and were of different ages, but what was common in their stories was that in spite of the structural setbacks and the forced turning points when they received advice from someone impartial to their circumstances, they took their advice and decided to go to university. The combination of happenstance and a significant other changed their horizons for action and their life course and gave them confidence to act in ways that seemed unimaginable and unachievable before. The narratives were lengthy presentations of their past circumstances and events; future perspective entered the discussion when the focus

returned to the present. Family and school appeared in their narratives, but none seemed to have had the force to guide them towards the HE route, like it was the case for students in the first two topic groups. The turning point, which was identified by them as a fateful moment, happened when they met and received advice from someone impartial to their situation, an outsider. Only these significant others had the power to enable these students to make a life-changing decision.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

To sum up this subchapter on motivation, the influential factors apparent in students' narratives (visible in Figure 1 and 2) about opting to go to university were: family, school, career and job considerations, agency and their own sense of control over their life events and to a lesser extent their peer group. Students tended to have a more relaxed experience of the structural turning point of their life and they negotiated the decision-making process with more ease when both family and school reinforced each other and both encouraged them to study further. When only one of them was present students tended to struggle with the decision not knowing which route to take. Students who lacked both family and school influence experienced a happenstance event, a turning point in their life, which 'pushed' them towards HE. These narratives revealed the importance of supporting mechanisms and also highlighted the situations when students were particularly vulnerable and due to their circumstances their horizons for action might not have included going to higher education as an option.

Ethnicity and gender were not explicitly recounted in connection with the decision-making process. Socio-economic status appeared in the narratives as a supportive mechanism mostly in case of students in higher socio-economic position, but it was also present for students in lower socio-economic situations where family environment acted as a deterrent and possibly an individual push factor for students to take control of their lives and reach higher than their parents (like Eliza, Doriana, Erika).

Country differences were apparent especially with regard to how students reconstructed their own involvement in the decision-making process. English students,

even though they admitted being influenced by parental background, they also tended to highlight their own involvement more in shaping their lives, while students in Romania tended to exhibit more a 'going with the flow' reconstruction of how they ended up going to university. Those who were career-focused or who wanted to reach higher displayed more agency and control over the events and life-decisions.

Labour market considerations were particularly present among students who regarded going to university as a choice, or those who felt that going to university was the next step because of a chosen career. Although these students varied with regard to career decision-making and clear focus on their future, they all felt that the degree was a necessary step in the current labour market.

SUBJECT AND COURSE CHOICE

Bates and colleagues (2009, p. 70) stressed the fact that subject choice is the key factor in choosing institution and in the choice process it came after deciding whether to apply to higher education or not. In contrast, White claimed (2007, p. 17) that institution and course choice could not always be separated, as there were certain courses available at certain institutions. In my study, students' narrative accounts revealed a multitude of factors that had an impact on their decision-making regarding the two main choices about university: what to study and where, and in most cases these represented a single decision in students' lives. In the following I first elaborate on the topics mentioned within the theme of subject/course choice and then I focus on how students decided about where to study. Similarly to their motivation for going to university, students' reconstructions of the process of subject / course choice varied from "I always knew what I wanted" to lengthy accounts of decisions, events and ultimately choices which they made. In the following I present first the aspects mentioned by students who experienced subject choice as a natural next step, and then I focus on students who experienced it as a more complicated choice process.

1. "I ALWAYS KNEW WHAT I WANTED" TO STUDY

Several students felt that choosing a subject was implicit for them; it was a natural option as they had always been interested in that field or subject. The decision was usually placed temporally in their childhood, mainly within the family context (as was the case with Alex and Maryna). Other students situated the decision around graduation from high school and they emphasised that the interest in the subject they opted for has been there all along, but they did describe a decision-making process which was permeated by references to family context (Sarah-Anne, Bajusz, Lilly) or to the school environment (Ercsi and Kristóf). Figure 3 presents the students who reconstructed their university subject choice as something that has always been present in their lives and the influential factors they mentioned in the narratives.

For Maryna, Lilly, Alex and Bajusz their subject choice was connected to either their parents' occupation or the parents' hobbies, while for Sarah-Anne and Adela it was the advice they received from parents regarding choice of subject. Maryna said that deciding what to study at university was easy for her as she knew she wanted to become a lawyer because her parents were in the profession and she used to help them since she was a little girl. Alex did not continue the family 'tradition' (father and grandfather were both engineers), instead he internalised their side-passion for history and decided to study that at university. Both students stated that it was an easy decision for them and they never considered other options:

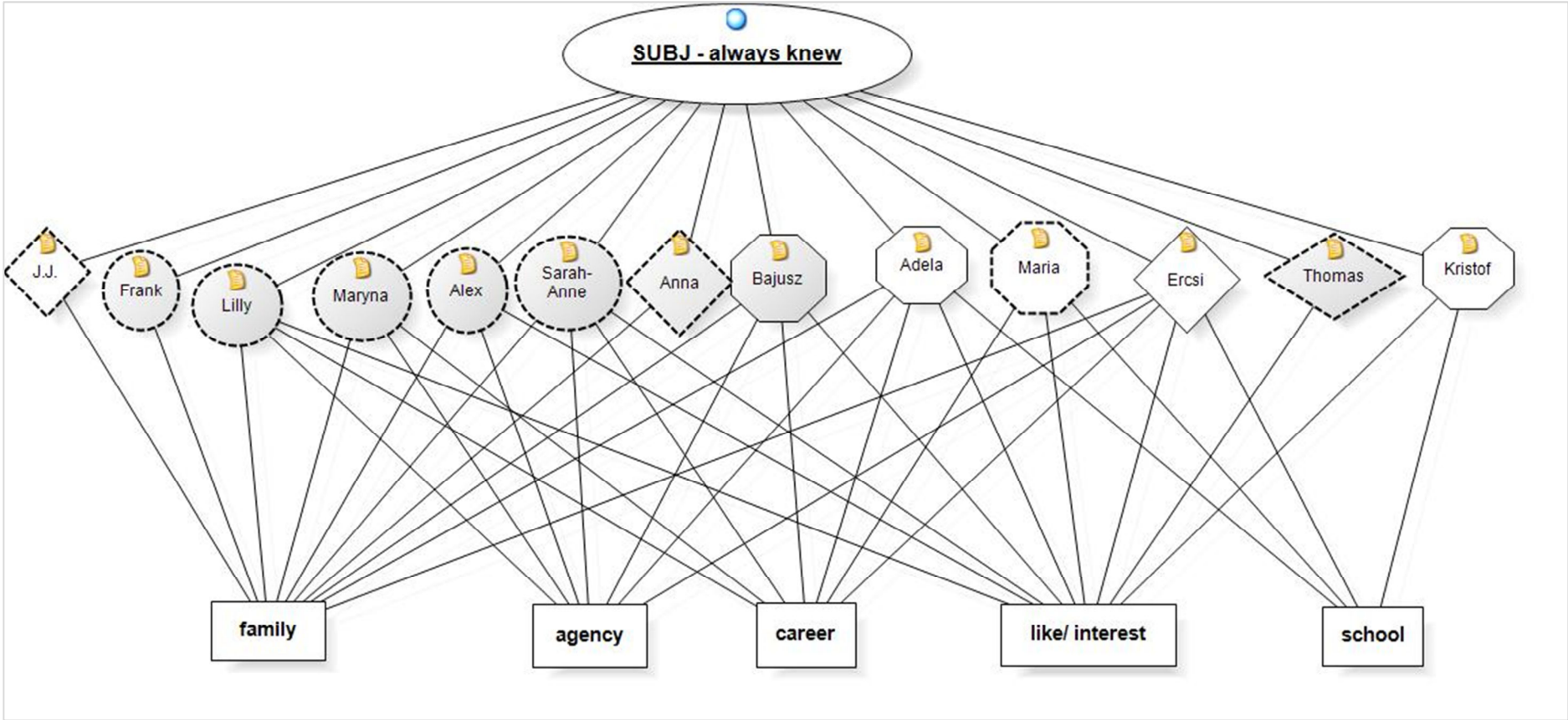
Alex: No, I never really thought about doing anything other than history, yeah... never did.

Maryna: I've never questioned myself over what I want to do. It was really easy for me.

In contrast, for Lilly, deciding what to study at university was not an easy decision. She was the only one in her family who was not interested in the sciences:

Lilly: I come from a family of engineers, everyone in my family, on both sides, everyone is an engineer. And I was the first person who didn't want to do a real science so it was a lot of talk about that. But then obviously there was my choice.

FIGURE 3. SUBJECT AND COURSE CHOICE AT UNIVERSITY – ALWAYS KNEW INTERESTED IN THE SUBJECT



Lilly was a good example of complex factors involved in decision-making. Everyone in her family was an engineer and they expected her to become one too. Her experiences at high school pointed out that she was not good at and not interested in the sciences, instead her interests were located within humanities and social sciences. From the possible subjects she chose something that she liked, but she also considered instrumental reasons as she disregarded philosophy and history because “people don’t really make a lot on money out of it” and her decision was also influenced (indirectly?) by her father’s occupation as a politician.

Bajusz also framed his narrative as a difficult decision, not knowing what to opt for right until the last moment, just before the admissions, but then the narrative goes back in time to his childhood and how he has always been involved in archaeological work with his father. Eventually he explained his subject choice as settling for archaeology, because this has always been a work he enjoyed and so he decided to learn the theoretical aspects at university. He also spoke about how he has been involved in acting throughout his childhood and that he did not pursue this at university because he was too lazy to prepare for the exams, so apart from being influenced by the family environment, he highlighted his individual choices throughout the process. Sarah-Anne was similarly influenced by her father, but not by his profession or hobbies, rather by his past experiences and advice:

Sarah-Anne: My dad went to university and he just went just for the sake of it and you know, the degree that he did, it was just for the sake of doing a degree, so he sort of made it clear that it was important to do something that I’d really enjoy, cause otherwise I’d be stuck for 3 years and I probably wouldn’t do as well

In contrast to the students mentioned previously, Sarah-Anne did not explain her interest in geography as something connected to her parents, only in the sense that they encouraged her to opt for something she enjoyed, so not to repeat her father’s mistake. She stated that she has “always been interested in...[geography] from a young age”. Apart from interest and parental advice, she also mentioned thinking about career options and feeling that she had “always known that I wanted to work in like an environmental type of field, albeit I didn’t know exactly what specifically”.

Similarly to Alex and Maryna, Adela also never questioned herself and her interests and she persuaded her aunt and her mother that this was the only course she was interested in pursuing, despite the fact that she did not gain a state funded place and so she was faced with the fact that she had to pay for her studies in order to read law. Her uncle and her boyfriend were supportive of her decision, so that might have helped her to follow her interest.

Kristóf and Ercsi spoke about their school experience as a decisive factor in choosing what to study at university. They talked about graduating from an economics class from high school, so from there it was an obvious choice to study economics at university. The same was the case with Thomas, who stated that he opted for something he liked.

Overall, interest in the subject was the major factor that influenced students' decisions about what to study at university within this cluster. Their interest and their horizons for action seemed constrained by their family environment as they were either following the footsteps of their parents' careers or hobbies, or they were advised by them what choices to make. These students recognised the influence of their families, but they also distanced themselves and highlighted that ultimately the decision of what to study was theirs. They also reflected on possible career options while thinking about subject choice, so not only were their narratives situated in the past, but also in the future. Parents' HE experiences seemed to have had a clear influence on how students recounted the decision of what to study – as visible in Figure 3, almost all students were connected to the family influential factor. Those who had parents with HE experience made reference to them, they played some role in the decisions of their children, influencing them either with their occupations or hobbies or past experiences. While those student who did not have parents with HE experience mentioned teachers and the school environment as having played a decisive factor in their decision of what to study. Although all students mentioned interest in the subject as a primary reason, students who situated the decision within family context made references to future career plans in connection to subject choice so temporally their narratives were situated both in the past and in the future, while students who spoke about the school environment explained their decision only based on past interests.

2. OPTED FOR THIS SUBJECT/COURSE BECAUSE...

Students, who presented the story of their subject choice as a result of an individual choice, highlighted that they evaluated their options, and then they made a conscious decision. Most of them emphasised their interest in the subject, but some also mentioned a process of eliminating several options. Ally told a lengthy and detailed story pointing out several factors that she considered prior to applying:

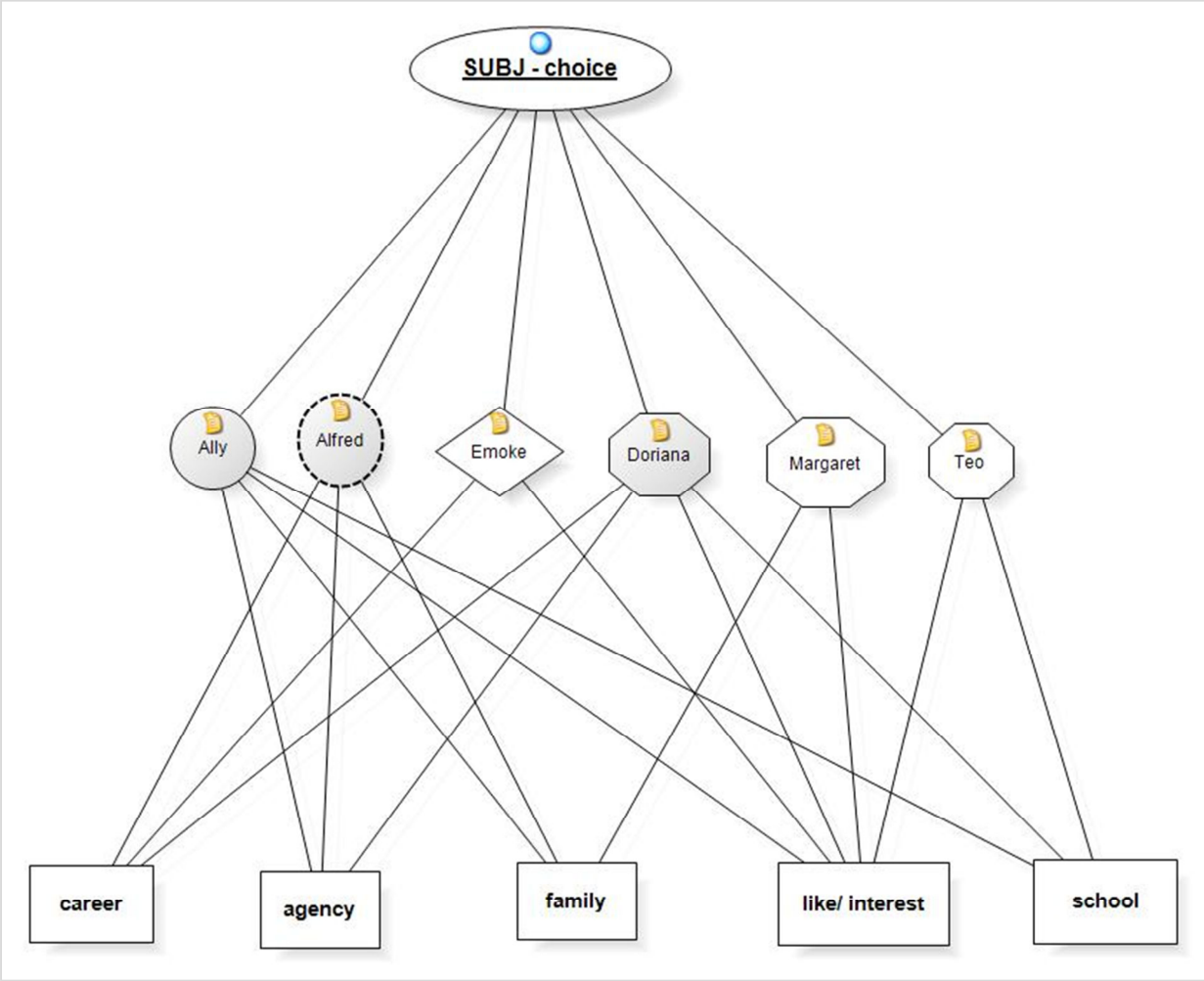
Ally: I know that in 12th grade we have all the options in front of us and I chose sociology through elimination... at one point I was inclining towards economics... but ultimately I wanted to apply for something I liked.... Other options were pharmacology or architecture, but I realised that I didn't have enough time to prepare, and I eventually opted for sociology thinking that I studied it in the 11th grade, I liked it very much, I even went to the Olympics in the 12th grade. It was OK and interesting and I said I'd come here. I didn't really know what applicability it will have in the labour market.

She liked economics, but she knew that it was a very popular subject and lectures were attended by hundreds of students. She also liked other subjects, but she would have needed to pass an exam in order to apply and she did not have enough time. She ended up choosing sociology because she did not need to spend extra time preparing for an exam, it was something less popular so she would not have been surrounded by too many colleagues, and also she had some prior experience and knowledge as she studied it in high school. Labour market perspectives and career choice were not in her mind, and she excused herself for not thinking about it with a quote from her father:

Ally: And my father gave me a very good advice: "Go, study what you like and you'll see later what you can do {cum te descurci}, because the markets change, times change... get a degree and you'll adapt later. So I chose sociology.

Ultimately, her decision to opt for sociology was influenced by multiple factors: family environment, as her father's advice encouraged her to choose something she was interested in without the pressure of opting for a specific career; the school provided her an opportunity to gain insight into the subject, so she was familiar with what the field encompassed; the structure of higher education admissions in Romania, as she might have opted for something different had she not needed to pass an entrance exam in architecture or pharmacology. Implicitly her social position also influenced her as she did not mention financial considerations or hardship.

FIGURE 4. SUBJECT AND COURSE CHOICE AT UNIVERSITY – CONSCIOUS CHOICE



Parental advice was also present in Alfred's case, but in a very different way. He told the story of how his father was a highly educated engineer and how he wanted him to study something "proper". So for him it was clear that he could not opt for something like history, as it would not have been an option that his parents supported. Consequently, his horizons of action were shaped by his family, yet he resisted his parents' insistence to study engineering as he could see himself in management or investment-banking, so the choice was his own within the limits of family expectations. Doriana combined her high school interests with a rational decision-making about career options and decided that sociology was the best option for her. The remainder of students within this group (Margaret, Teo, Emőke) presented their choices more briefly and factually as exemplified by Emőke's quote:

Emőke: This is what I liked. As a career I liked it {Mint szakma nekem bejött}. Basically it was this, economics and international relations, this two. So it was entirely this angle {ez a beállítás volt}.

They all highlighted that the subject they opted for was something they liked and were interested in. They did not mention multiple factors when considering their options and they did not mention considering multiple subjects. In this respect they were similar to the first topic group of students, but they differed from them because subject choice was not as implicit. These students were similar to what Ball and colleagues (2002) call contingent choosers, as they seemed to be considering one option and building a rationalisation around that.

Overall, interest in the subject was the major factor that influenced students' decisions about what to study at university within this cluster. Family and school, as well as structural factors, like the provision of education and the process of admissions to HE influenced their options and constrained their horizons of action. Nevertheless, for these students the subject choice process remained dominated by their own decisions and interests, so ultimately they reconstructed it from an individual perspective, highlighting their own control. Turning points and happenstance events did not deter them from their chosen path, rather they found a way of bypassing the changes and in this respect they were different from the next group of students, who recounted significant others as decisive figures in their choice making process.

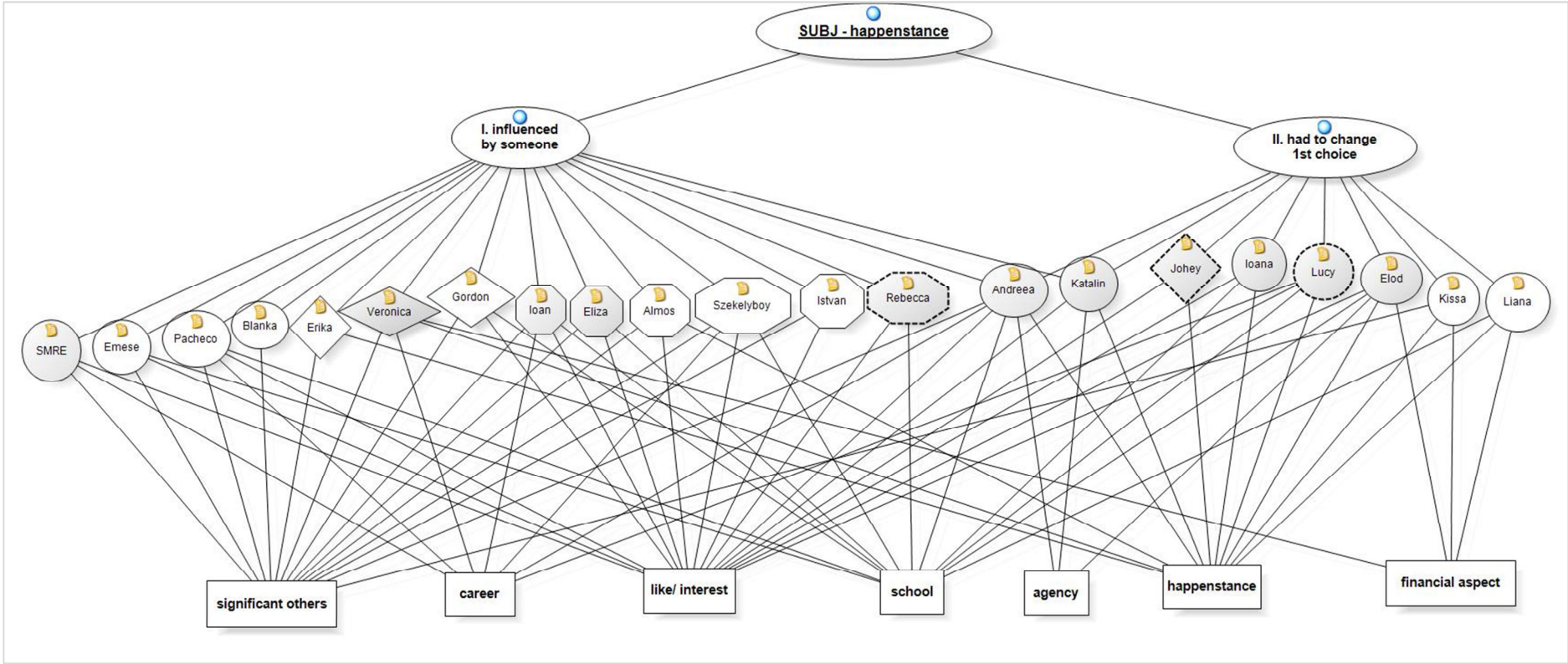
3. TURNING POINTS IN CHOOSING A SUBJECT

Similarly to the previous topic, turning points and happenstance events came up as even more significant and infiltrated in the process of choosing a subject. Students speaking about turning points prior to or during the university application process is a topic, which is usually, not present in reports or academic papers dealing with subject choice. Students' narratives within this topic group displayed hesitations, periods of indecision of what they wanted to do, what they were interested in, what they were good at. In contrast to students who stated that they had always known what subject they wanted to choose and often that subject was their favourite at school, these students described the realisation that they were not interested in the subject they were studying and they embarked on a search for something different, or they had multiple interests and did not know which one to pursue. Figure 5 presents the students and the two main clusters that I identified: (I) in the first one significant others had an impact on students' choices as they seemed to have entered their lives at the right time and guided them towards (seemingly) the best option for them; (II) while in the second cluster students spoke about a forced turning point which they experienced. New influential factors like 'happenstance', 'significant others' and 'financial considerations' appeared in these student narratives, as visible in the figure too. In the following I present in detail each of these clusters and the influential factors that students mentioned as having an impact on their decisions.

I. Students within this cluster referred to different people who had a significant influence on their subject choices. School influenced students' dispositions primarily through teachers. These narratives were situated temporally and spatially in the school contexts with teachers as significant others. Pacheco and Rebecca both mentioned a favourite teacher who paid particular attention to them, who pushed them and consequently they developed a special interest in the subject.

Rebecca: I always find when I get along with a teacher well, especially when I was in GSCE and A-level, I had the same teacher for humanities and sociology and I feel that he really made the effort to tell me 'you know, you could be good at this, but you need to try' and I kind of really appreciated his approach...

FIGURE 5. SUBJECT AND COURSE CHOICE AT UNIVERSITY – HAPPENSTANCE



Rebecca presented her subject choice as due to a teacher she had and the encouragement she received. Had she received the same encouragement from other teachers she might have opted for a different subject.

Family background played an important role in students' decisions regarding subject choice, but the most explicit influence was stated by Ioan and Eliza. Ioan explained that he approached decision-making from a practical angle by asking himself: what he wanted to become?, what he wanted to work in? and how he could get there?, but also taking care not to limit his options too much and allowing room for change if he did not end up liking the subject.

Ioan: I heard about environmental sciences and it seemed interesting and I was at a hiking club and I like nature so I said I would become an engineer and if I cannot find a job then I do something different... I can easily become a mechanical engineer or an electronic engineer if it doesn't work out... so I applied and I like it very much.

Only when prompted about his parents' opinion on his subject choice, he mentioned that they insisted he should opt for engineering track within the environmental sciences faculty. Similarly, Eliza mentioned that she was influenced by her cousin, who advised her to study economics.

Friends also appeared influential in students' narratives about subject choice. István and Gordon opted for sociology as they had friends who were studying social sciences and as they found out more about the field, they became more interested.

Emese stated that she was not sure why she opted for geography. She mentioned that she graduated from an economics class and she knew that she did not want to study that further, but it was difficult to decide what to study, as she did not feel a special calling for any particular field and eventually she was influenced by an older friend who was studying geography at her chosen university and she followed her path. Álmos's life story after leaving school had several references to random events and influential friends. After graduating from a further education college he decided to study law as he was not happy with being a nurse. His friend was planning to apply for a course in the university city 4 hours away from his home and following him, Álmos also decided to apply there instead of his hometown. When they went to inquire about the application process they entered in a conversation with the porter

and he asked him what he was interested in, what he wanted to do? Álmos replied “jokingly that it would be great to study something about politics”, to what the porter said that there is such an option as political sciences at the university. Álmos then decided that he would apply to study politics and not law. First he did not gain admittance to a state founded place, but in the second round of the application process he secured one. He concluded his story about subject and institution choice with a reference to geography and distance emphasizing that it was a ‘big’ step for him:

Álmos: I came here [name of the university city], from a small village to a big town... which was a really big thing for me.

Similarly to the others, Erika changed her preference after receiving a call and encouragement from a friend to apply to study economics, and not languages as she intended originally. These students, although they changed their minds at the last moment, they did not feel any regret of letting themselves be persuaded to change their options and as Erika mentioned laughingly: it was a coincidence that lead her to read economics, but she ended up really liking it.

Random people or non-specified people also had an impact on students’ life course. Blanka mentioned how she was persuaded not to apply to sociology as “she was capable of more”, so she opted for European studies as that was more fashionable and it seemed like a good decision at that time. SMRE was influenced by what he saw within the family of his girlfriend at the time. They were economists and their perceptions on the field influenced his views of what was the better option for him in terms of his future. Instrumental attitudes towards course choice were also present as these students pointed out that they chose specific subjects because it could potentially give them more opportunities in the labour market. SMRE opted for economics because he felt that his first choice (history) would not give him an advantage in the labour market and Blanka let herself be persuaded by others to opt for European studies, as she believed there would be more job opportunities after graduation than with other degrees. Veronica regretted not pursuing her initial plan of applying to study medicine, as she let herself be influenced by an acquaintance who worked in the field and who told her stories from her career which made Veronica think that medicine might not be the appropriate career for her. She also made a reference to her

financial situation and how there was no guarantee that she could have kept her state funded place throughout the years even if she gained admittance in the first instance.

Even if students in this topic group stated that they had always known which field or subjects they were interested in, their interest did not translate smoothly into a university course choice. For Pacheco it took him two years after leaving school to actually apply for the subject he was interested in. When asked if he could narrate how he opted to study the subject he did at university he immediately stated that “this is interesting, it was a long process”. He stated that from childhood he has always been interested in geography and in school with his friend they used to quiz each other in various geography topics. But then as they were approaching the end of their school studies the “societal pressure” was pushing them towards more “fashionable subjects {menő szakok}” and they all gave in and opted to study applied linguistics. This was the first turning point in his story, a certain extent forced turning point as he also gave in, similarly to his friends. The next turning point in his story happened when they all went to hand in their applications at university. As agreed, they went to the languages department and they had to stand in line to submit the applications. He described how the building was ‘rigid’ and the queue too long and these prompted him to leave and submit his application at the geography department. He explained that as he went inside he knew that this was the place where he wanted to study and he did not consider applying to languages anymore. Later, connected to his double academic status he clarified that actually he applied for a tourism course, again giving into “societal pressure”, and not geography, which he has always been interested in. He ended up fulfilling his long-term interest and applying for a geography course after completing two years of Tourism BA and 1 year abroad in an Erasmus program. It is possible that this year abroad changed him, it is also possible that he decided to apply for opportunistic reasons (the courses he took abroad would have been recognised in a geography course, while they were not recognised in the tourism course). Overall it was a long and bumpy process for him to actually apply for what he was interested in. Although the other students’ narratives in this cluster were similar to Pacheco’s in that their subject choices were all situated within their childhood and school environments, they had significant others playing important roles in their life course, and they all

presented a chronological happening of events starting from childhood and ending up at university studying something related to these childhood interests, in Pacheco's case he did not go from high school straight into a course which was connected to his interests. His road was lengthier, full of turning points and happenstance events.

Andreea was set to apply to the economics department following on from her school studies, but she told the story of realizing in the last weeks that she was not really interested in studying economics and she embarked on a search for something different. Two people influenced her during the selection process. One was her sister's former classmate who told her about studying communication and PR, and the other was a friend who told her about security studies. She decided that her main aim was to gain admittance to the communication course, as researching more about the field it seemed a good option for her. She experienced a forced turning point when she found out that she gained admittance only to the fee paying place at the communication course. She decided to take advantage of a structural opportunity within the Romanian higher education system and particularly at her chosen university: she could opt to study two courses full time at the same time and have a state funded place at one and pay a discounted fee at the other. As her chosen course accepted her to a fee paying place, in order to receive a reduced package she decided to read security studies as well. Her self-initiated turning point of changing her plans from studying economics to something different eventually lead her to become a double academic status student.

Students within this cluster experienced turning points, either forced, or self-initiated but their narratives were permeated by references to what they were interested in and a search for who they wanted to become and what they wanted to do. Significant others played major parts in their life events along with structural constraints and opportunities that shaped their life course. Temporally these narratives were situated around the application period with brief references to the past and hints to distant and blurry future careers.

II. The second cluster of students experienced forced turning points during the application period and the stories portrayed how subject choices can easily change

during the application process due to not meeting the admission requirements and consequently not being accepted, or being accepted on the course but on a fee paying place. In Kissa's case the back-up plan turned into reality after she found out that her first choice accepted her on a tuition fee place. Since she did not want to pay the fees she opted for sociology where she was accepted to a state-funded place. Similarly Előd and Liana opted to study a different subject because that is where they did not need to pay the tuition fees. The ease with which Kissa and the others opted in the last moment for a different subject illustrates the characteristics of the Romanian HE system. Students could submit as many applications as they wished as long as they were willing to pay the application fee for each. The courses applied for did not need to be within the same department or within the same broad field of study, in contrast to the English system. Kissa's first choice was communication and PR and her second choice was sociology, within the same university; Előd opted for medicine and as his second choice political sciences, in a different town at a different university; Liana opted for communication and PR and as her second choice political sciences in English within the same department; and Ioana's first choice was landscape architecture and her second choice, in a different city at a different university was business studies. These are just two of the choices that students mentioned, but they might have ended up submitting even 5 or 6 applications to different places.

The situation was different in the UK as students went through an online application process where they needed to submit the same cover letter to all their chosen subjects at the same time. After application they received offers from the chosen courses, which might have been conditional upon satisfactory A-level grades, at which stage they needed to select the first option and one insurance option. Lucy was not accepted to her first option so she had to go through clearing at which point she decided to change her subject choice slightly, mainly determined by what was available for her:

Lucy: ...actually I was going to do history with sociology and I was going to go to [name of a city in Scotland], but I didn't quite get the grades in my history A-level, so I went through clearing so the option was to do sociology, cause sociology was always over history, it was something that I always wanted to do more... so yeah, I just had to look up on the clearing list to be honest and [name of university attended] came up and it was a good university for sociology.

Lucy's story painted a different picture than Ioana's case in Romania. Her subject choice was strongly connected to place, to the university where she was planning to study (the same was for Előd). Happenstance, structural constraints and opportunities within the HE sector, as well as discussions within her family affected Ioana's journey of subject and course selection at university. Her father influenced her decisions as he was completely against studying communication at university because "you can communicate at home too". The opportunity structures and constraints that affected her journey were part of the HE system in Romania. Graduating from a humanities class she would not have been qualified to apply for most science-related subjects and she could only apply to the business department as she passed a school-leaving exam in economics, which, although not planned in advance, became an opportunity for her. She ended the discussion with emphasizing that she opted for something she liked, as this was not entirely her choice, first experiencing a turning point by not being accepted to her first choice, and second negotiating a new subject with her father. Mentioning two times that she submitted her application on the last day highlighted the last-minuteness of the decision, but it also represented an opportunity as she found out the rejection prior to the application deadline at the other university.

Johey opted for cultural studies due to a combination of what was available and achievable with his grades. Katalin decided to opt for political science as she failed to pass a language test which was a requirement to apply to the international relations European studies course. She has regretted her decision ever since and considered that she did not have enough self-confidence and knowledge about her abilities, and this is why she settled for something different.

Overall, what was present in these student narratives is equally important as to what was missing. Situated within the Romanian context, students did not refer to career guidance or information they received from official sources about what to study and where. The main sources of information they mentioned were friends, relatives, acquaintances who often had information limited to a particular field or subject and were not able to provide a more general overview of different options. These students reflected back on their thinking in terms of subjects they studied in school, they did not mention particular careers or more specific branches within their chosen fields. From

this perspective although they came from different socio-economic backgrounds and their parents might have had higher education experience, all students were similar to the working class parents in the study of Reay and colleagues (2005) who made restricted choices based on limited information available to them.

Turning points did not appear as important factors in the literature about university subject/course choice, even though, as presented above it was an experience which several students shared, regardless of their position geographically, culturally, socially, economically. The experience of not being accepted to your chosen course was not country specific, but the events and circumstances leading up to the turning point could be explained by national structural characteristics. The lack of career guidance in schools in Romania leaved students exposed to making their own decisions regarding what they wanted to study and where. They relied on scarce and hot sources of information, which did not provide them with the full array of possible choices. Both the career guidance and the structure of the admission system in England forced students to be more focused in their choices early on, while in Romania students tended to have wide interests and made decisions only after they found out the results of the application process. Being part of a minority group in Romania gave students more options in HE compared to the majority population. But this was true only if the Hungarian students were able and willing to opt to study in Romanian language, which did not apply to most of the students. Ethnic Romanian students usually opted for different courses at the same institution (Kissa, Liana), and not the same course at the same department taught in different language, as did the Hungarian students (Pacheco, Emese).

To sum up, most of the students within this topic group mentioned multiple subjects that they were interested in and presented the details of the elimination process they went through to end up with their chosen subjects. Temporally the decision-making was usually framed in the proximity of the application deadline or within the last year of school and apart from family and school, significant others appeared as factors in the choice process while reflections on possible careers appeared sporadically. The opportunity structures defined by the HE admission system and career guidance

during compulsory education shaped students' experiences of subject choice and highlighted the sharp differences between and within the two country contexts.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Overall, most of the students opted for a subject and course having short-term horizons for action, like immediate interest in the content, being a student on a certain study programme and they rarely mentioned the horizon of what will follow after graduation (Holmegaard, Ulriksen & Madsen 2012). They mainly thought about what they were interested in based on previous experience either within the family or through school studies or work experience, but only a few students' narratives presented future career considerations and these also remained vague. In this sense these students were similar to the physics students that Holmegaard and colleagues mentioned in their study (Holmegaard, Ulriksen & Madsen 2012, p. 11). Their conclusions that "the choice becomes embedded in social relations" (Holmegaard, Ulriksen & Madsen 2012, p. 11) became apparent in my study as well, because the level and the quality of the information these students had access to, particularly in Romania, determined their choices and because sometimes the advice came at the last minute, students tended to change their mind and opt for something different. In England students mentioned attending career events and receiving career guidance while studying for their GCSEs or A-levels, along with consulting their parents and significant others. So both hot and cold types of information sources were utilised in the choice process, while in Romania students mentioned mainly hot sources, as they made choices based on what parents, friends, acquaintances, relatives or teachers had told them. Career services and other formal information sources were non-existent and particularly in rural contexts students' choices were based on very limited sources of information.

In reflecting on the factors that influenced their choice of study, interest in the subject was present in almost all narratives. The sources of interest were either rooted within the family or the school, but several students particularly in the last topic group mentioned changing their mind at the last moment and suddenly becoming interested

in something different due to influences by significant others. Consequently, the choice based on interest was balanced by other factors as well, like labour market considerations, career possibilities after graduation and financial considerations and students ultimately opted for a subject through an elimination process. This process was based on instrumental reasons for some as they did not have the grades to apply for other subjects (like Rebecca and Johey), or they felt that they would be in a disadvantaged position in the labour market after graduation if they opted for certain subjects (like SMRE, Dorian, Lilly), while others just picked their favourite subject from school (Kristóf, Margaret, Sarah-Anne). In other cases, like for Blanka, Adela and Ioana, the elimination process was to certain extent mediated by their parents, who had other plans in mind and students needed to negotiate and persuade them of what they wanted.

Rodd and colleagues (Rodd, Reiss & Mujtaba 2013, p. 159) have shown that a young person's subject choice (they talked specifically about studying physics) "seems to be linked with their identification with a key adult who represents the potential field of study". Centrality of a teacher or parents or other adults was apparent in my study as well within students' narratives of subject choice. Rebecca stated that she had a teacher who pushed her and this is why she liked sociology more and she did better in Sociology A-levels than any other subject. Pacheco also talked about his geography teacher and how he enjoyed learning the subject. Bajusz could imagine only archaeology as his career because he has been involved in it throughout his childhood with his father, same for Maryna and Alex. On a separate note, Gordon mentioned his maths teacher and how his dislike of the teacher translated into a dislike of the subject and it affected his university subject choices.

Most of the studies that focused on students' subject choice process aimed to understand how students' various backgrounds in general, and their social class in particular, affected their choices and access to higher education (see Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe 1995; Reay, David, & Ball 2005; Purcell *et al.* 2008, p. 59-67). These authors suggested that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds seemed to be opting for courses because they enjoyed studying them in school or were advised by teachers, while students from lower socio-economic groups chose more instrumental, career-

oriented reasons. This did not seem to be supported by my research. Most of the students were drawn to their subject due to a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons; there were just a few students who stated that only one factor influenced their choices. Chance and happenstance events were a major characteristic of the HE choice process in both countries as students initiated turning points or they experienced forced turning points due to not being accepted to the chosen course and they needed to reconsider their options. Financial aspects determined choices particularly in the Romanian context where students' main aim was to secure a state funded place in their chosen subject. If they failed to secure one, they usually changed the subject choice for a course where they did not need to pay tuition fees.

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It was interesting to note that du Bois-Reymond's (1998) choice and normal biography, as well as the happenstance biography which I identified was present in both topic groups of motivation and subject choice. Based on this I grouped the students to see if there was a pattern emerging along these three types.

Normal transitions were students who mentioned that going to university and selecting a subject was a natural step for them. Most of these students were from the English university, and apart from Sarah-Anne they were all born outside the UK. Only Bajusz and Ercsi represented the Hungarian students and Adela the Romanian students. Regarding parents' HE experience, social status, gender there was a broad spectrum. Several students felt that going to university was a natural step, but said that their subject choice was influenced by happenstance, so they could be termed normal transition students with happenstance subject choice. Only Lucy represented the English students in this group, while there were both Romanian and Hungarian students present. All of these students classified themselves in the upper part of the social scale, but not all students' parents had HE experience. There were five students who stated that going to university was a natural next step for them, but in terms of subject choice they made a conscious decision: Teo, Margaret, Alfred, Ally and Emőke. This group was heterogeneous in terms of gender, social class, parent's HE experience, ethnicity and country (although only Alfred was studying in England).

TABLE 3. TRANSITION PATHWAYS – MOTIVATION & SUBJECT

Alias	Motivation	Subject choice	Transitions behaviour
NORMAL TRANSITION PATHWAY			
Adela	NORMAL	NORMAL	normal transition
Bajusz			
Elouise			
Alex			
Anna			
Ercsi			
Lilly			
Maria			
Maryna			
Sarah-Anne			
Frank			
J.J.			
Alfred	NORMAL	CHOICE	normal transition - choice subject
Margaret			
Teo			
Ally			
Emőke			
Blanka	NORMAL	HAPPENSTANCE	normal transition - happenstance subject
Katalin			
Előd			
Ioana			
Lucy			
Andreea			
Emese			
Ioan			
Liana			
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY			
Ayoyinka	CHOICE	CHOICE	choice transition
Doriana			
Kristóf	CHOICE	NORMAL	choice transition - obvious subject
Thomas			
Pacheco	CHOICE	HAPPENSTANCE	choice transition - happenstance subject
Rebecca			
Eliza			
Kissa			
Álmos			
Gordon			
Veronica			
Erika			
SMRE			
Székelyboy			
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY			
Johey	HAPPENSTANCE	HAPPENSTANCE	happenstance transition
István			

Second, from those students who appeared to have gone to university based on a conscious choice only two selected the subject as a conscious choice as well: Ayoyinka and Doriana and they both emphasized their desire for a better future and their selection of subject and reason for going to university both confirmed this. Those students who mentioned that going to university was a natural next step, but then they made a conscious choice what to study were Teo, Alfred, Ally, Emőke and Margaret – they all emphasized interest in the field and the subject. Only Thomas and Kristóf said that they made a conscious choice when going to university, but selecting a subject was a natural step for them as it was based on their school experiences and interests. Several students who stated that they made a choice when deciding to go to university have said that their subject choice was influenced by happenstance. Only Rebecca was from the UK, while the others were from the Romanian university. There were both Romanian and Hungarian, male and female students, but the majority defined themselves as being in the middle or bottom positions of the social ladder. So, as a conclusion it seems that what du Bois-Reymond (1998) found in case of Dutch youngsters is applicable in case of higher education students as well but additionally a country divide was apparent. Most of the students who came from well-off families and/or who were studying in England displayed normal biographies based on their motivation and subject choice (even if subject choice was determined by chance events), while students who were studying in Romania and who were from less well-off families seemed to display choice biographies combined with happenstance subject choice.

And third, the two students who ended up going to university due to happenstance, said that their subject choice was due to chance too, so they could be classified as displaying a happenstance biography.

In the following I focus on students' decision-making about where to study. First I present the topic groups and clusters and at the end of the subchapter I summarise and I look at whether these three pathways were present when location choice was included in the analysis.

LOCATION CHOICE

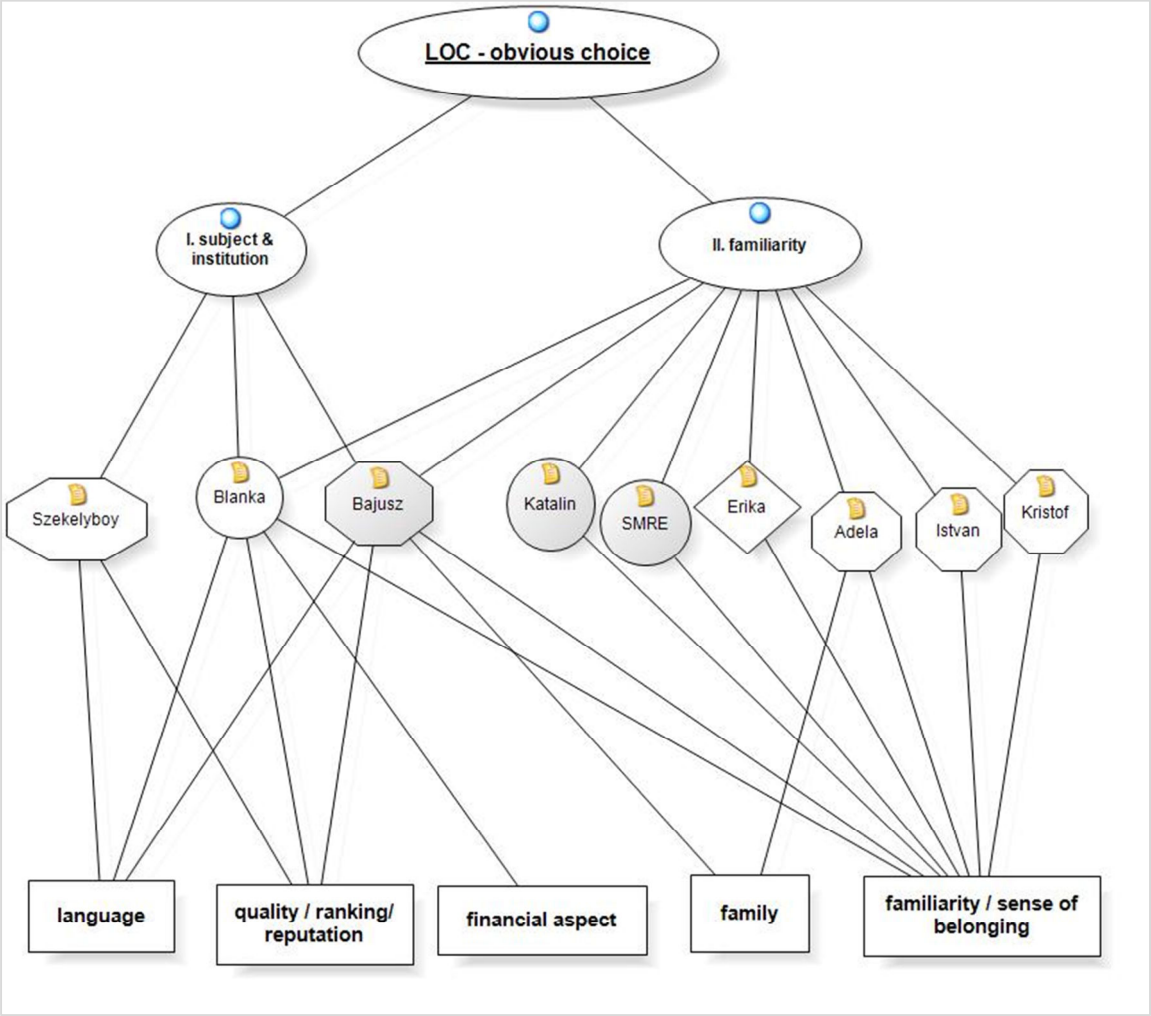
Factors connected to subject and location choice were deeply intertwined in some students' narratives, but other students made a clear distinction between reasons for opting for a specific course and reasons for choosing a particular city or university. Similarly to motivation for going to university and subject choice, three main topic groups emerged: students who talked about location choice as something given, a natural step, students who emphasized and explained the reasons behind choosing a particular institution and / or city, and students who opted for a location due to happenstance events. In the following I present each topic group.

1. IT WAS THE OBVIOUS CHOICE

Similarly to the previous two themes, narrative topic and form analysis revealed that some students talked about choosing a location for their studies as a non-decision, as an obvious choice for them. Their reasons for feeling this way varied and Figure 6 presents the two main clusters that were identified within this topic group: (I) students who felt that location was determined by their choice of subject and language of study, (II) and students who considered only one location because of familiarity with the place. In the following I present in detail each of these clusters and the influential factors that students mentioned as having an impact on their decisions. Compared to the previous two topic groups, new influential factors became apparent: 'language', 'quality / ranking / reputation', 'familiarity / sense of belonging'.

I. The first cluster was made up of Hungarian students. Bajusz, Székelyboy and Blanka seemed to have opted for particular subjects at particular institutions and in specific cities. All three factors played an equally important role for them. They all emphasized that their course choice and institution choice were determined by their desire to study in their mother language at a 'good' university and from this point of view the choice was obvious: there was only one place in the country. Apart from this aspect, Bajusz mentioned his desire to study in that particular city as he had significant others there.

FIGURE 6. LOCATION AN OBVIOUS CHOICE



Bajusz's narrative was illustrative of the effect of this structural factor in case of Hungarian students in Romania: the language the course was taught in at university.

Bajusz: One, because archaeology it's only here the closest. There is in other places as well, but that's different. It's not the same level. And the other ones are all in Romanian. This is the only university which is accredited, it's in Hungarian and it's close to my home and the other aspect is that I have three siblings and they all went here and my father teaches here.

Blanka had a similar rationale to Bajusz but she has not mentioned the city as a factor, although her previous experience in the city might have played a role. She did her compulsory education there, similarly to several students from the next cluster. From this perspective Blanka and Bajusz could be classified in both clusters as they had prior knowledge about the city and that familiarity also influenced their decisions, but the main factors they talked about were subject- and language-related so this is why I included them mainly in this cluster.

All three students highlighted the importance of studying at a 'good' university, so the prestige of the institution was an important factor for them, nevertheless they differed from the next topic group of students because this aspect was not the decisive factor (language was).

Temporally these students situated the decision-making around the application process, and they recounted it as an obvious choice because they were already studying in the city (Blanka) or because they had connections to the city (Bajusz), but mainly because this was the only institution where they were able to study their chosen course particularly if they considered the reputation of the institution as a factor.

II. Familiarity with the city was mainly present in case of students who were originally from the city or those who had studied at school in the city (like Kristóf, Erika, SMRE, István and Katalin). They stated that it was an obvious choice for them, they did not need to travel or move away to study. Slightly different, Adela became familiar with the city due to her relatives as they were going frequently to the city and she always

enjoyed being there. She stated that she “became familiar with the city since childhood”.

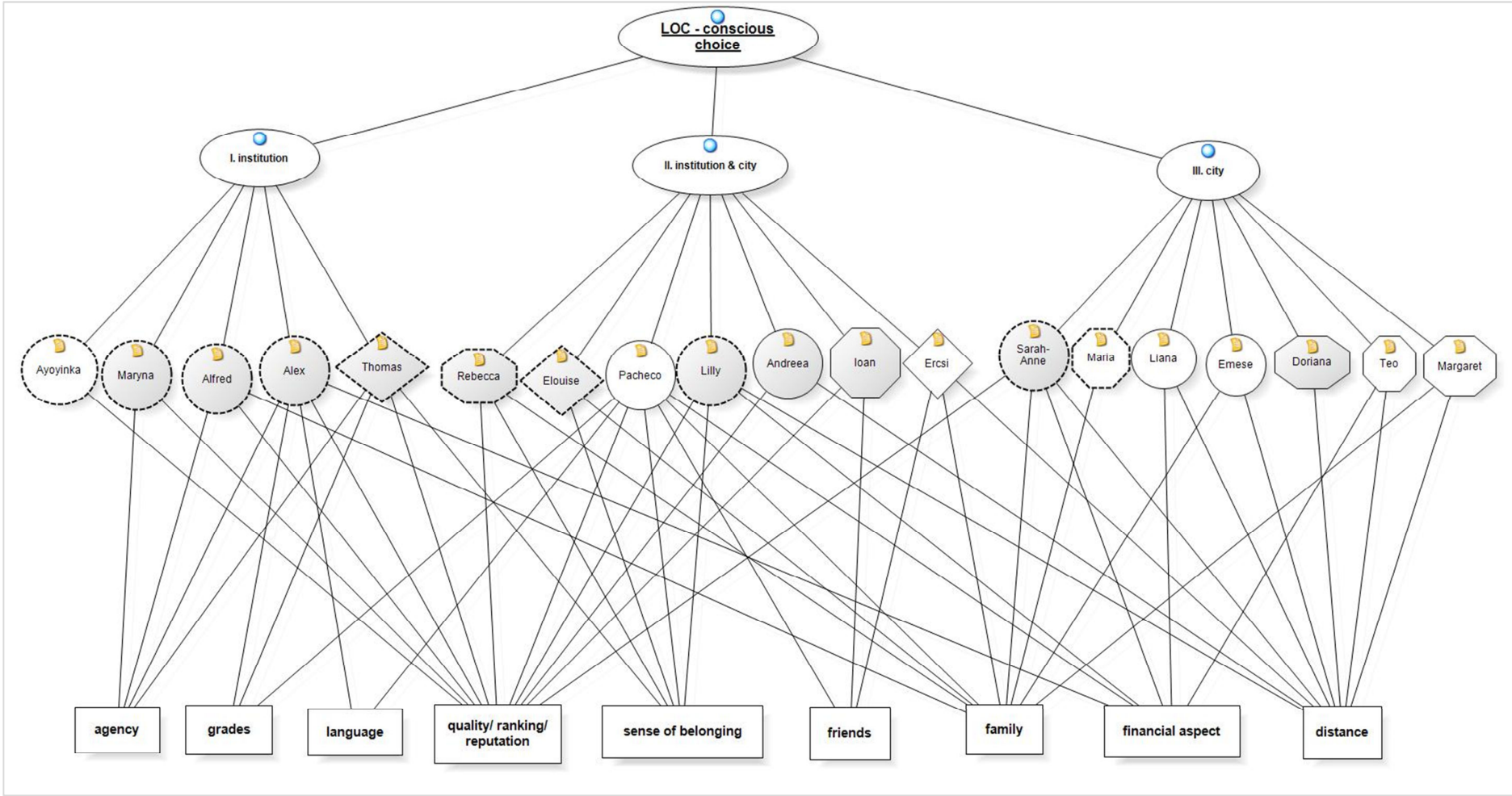
These narratives were less elaborate as almost entirely they referred only to familiarity with the city as the decisive factor. For these students where to study was a non-decision because they were already living in a city where they could attend a good university, so they did not think of looking for alternatives. Spatially the narratives were constructed around school (Kristóf, Erika, Katalin) or family and relatives (Adela, SMRE, István) and they all highlighted their familiarity with the city.

Overall, students’ narratives in this topic group were about the non-decision related to where to study at university. These students did not need to think about where they want to study, for them the choice was obvious. In the first cluster students’ options were limited due to their language knowledge and desire to study in their mother language, so ethnicity was a the main structural factor that determined their choices. For the second cluster of students, their familiarity with the city meant that they have not considered any other options. Staying and studying further in that city was the obvious choice. Apart from Adela, all the students were ethnic Hungarians in this topic group. It is possible that language considerations were also important for the second cluster of students, as they went on to study in their mother language, but they made no reference to this aspect during the interview.

2. OPTED FOR THIS UNIVERSITY / CITY BECAUSE...

Students who emphasized location as a choice had in common that the place where they saw themselves spending their university years was one of the most important factors in their choice process. Figure 7 presents the three main clusters that I identified within this topic group. These students mentioned three main motives for opting for a specific institution / city: (I) the institution, (II) institution and city and (III) city. In the following I present in detail each of these clusters and the influential factors that students mentioned as having an impact on their decisions. From all the topic groups, this had the most influential factors mentioned.

FIGURE 7. LOCATION AS A CONSCIOUS CHOICE



I. Institution choice appeared predominantly as a single factor in the English context. Alex, Alfred and Maryna explained where they ended up studying predominantly by referring to the institution, not the city or the subject they opted for. The thoughts of these students can be summarised with a quote from Alex:

Alex: I sort of landed [name of the university] because it was the best university I could find that I thought I might be accepted into based on my grades.

They highlighted the reputation and the ranking of the university as well as the quality of education, particularly with reference to their home countries, as all three were international students. Similarly, Thomas also mentioned thinking about reputation and ranking, but he did not regard this as the most important aspect influencing his choice and he stated that a more subjective factor was predominant in his case:

Thomas: I choose [name of the university where he studied] because it was the most friendly. At the time I don't think the department was particularly high-ranked, I think it got a little better now...

This sense of belonging which Thomas referred to was connected to what Holmegaard and colleagues (Holmegaard, Ulriksen & Madsen 2012) mentioned as the horizon of being a student in a particular place. Temporally these students situated the narrative in the past, around the application process, and apart from Thomas they did not seem to be thinking about their futures. They appeared to be making the decision on their own based on information about the institution from league tables and other websites. Their parents had higher education experience and they seemed to be present in the decision-making process, but they were not the main influential factors and their opinions were not voiced by these students, instead they highlighted the individual control they had over the decision.

II. In contrast to the previous cluster, where students emphasized only the institution, in this second cluster students mentioned factors connected to the location also. Although factors connected to the institution were still important, students opted for a particular institution based on how they felt about the place or the city. They talked about a sense of belonging or the importance of distance from home, as well as locations which their friends chose. Andreea emphasized the distance from her

hometown along with the reputation of the institution while Ioan mentioned that his friends also opted for this city so it was easier for him to fit in and get to know the place. Lilly and Pacheco offered detailed descriptions of their choices, and location took centre place in the narrative. Lilly talked about the location of the university campus within the city, and the location of the city with regard to the airports in London as an important factor. For Pacheco the feeling he got when walking through the campus was a decisive factor. Both these students mentioned a sense of belonging and just 'feeling' that this was what they wanted:

Pacheco: I had a compelling feeling that this is what I want {Volt egy olyan késztetés érzés, hogy ezt akarom}.

Lilly: I had a feeling. There was no reason. I got into [name of a Russell Group University] which in the year when I applied was 3rd, it was right after Oxford and Cambridge so technically I should have gone there, but [name of the city where she studied] has the campus on the street, there's near the city, you have to take the bus to go to the halls, so you know, you feel like you're in a community, rather than an isolated campus and it won starting from 2006 it won the National Student Survey every year, because people were genuinely happy here... It's not too far away from London, because for [name of a city in the North-West of England] I would have to change flights and no... it's just... I had a feeling.

Rebecca on the other hand combined her desire to stay close to her family and the comfort of a familiar place with being accepted to study at a good university. For her the reputation and the ranking of the university also played a role, but closeness to parents and siblings was more important.

In this cluster institutional factors appeared alongside city and other locational aspects (appeal of the campus, location of the campus within the city) as guiding students' choices. These students presented multiple factors in lengthy detailed narratives about why they opted for that place and how they reached this conclusion. Temporally their narratives were situated in the past, but with an eye on the future, as they emphasized thinking about longer term plans when choosing the place (like the location of the airports in case of Lilly). Spatially the narratives were centred around the university, the department or the city and they all emphasized the personal importance attached. Although these students appeared to be making the decisions alone, there was less emphasis on agency and more emphasis on significant others / communion in their narratives as it was important for them to be close to their families or friends.

III. In this last cluster, students highlighted the distance from their hometowns, usually in the context of financial reasons as well. Previous studies mentioned that the location of the HEI influenced students' decision-making particularly in case of older and female students who were more likely to opt for a university that was closer to their home, while younger students tended to study away from home (Purcell *et al.* 2008; Bates *et al.* 2009). In my study distance was also an important factor among female students, but they were all young.

Sarah-Anne: I chose universities that were nearer to home, because I didn't feel comfortable and I didn't feel ready moving away in my first year. So I wanted to live at home and commute if possible. Partly because I didn't feel ready, but partly because of the financial implications as well.

Liana: No, just [name of university attended] because it's close to home and the distance was really important for me.

For some students (Sarah-Anne, Liana and Teo) distance from their home town was connected to financial reasons, but for others (Emese, Margaret) it was convenience in terms of travel time. In contrast to other students who wanted to stay closer to their families and home towns, Doriana wanted to move far away from home and was hoping that her chosen city would provide her with more opportunities than her hometown or the nearby cities would have.

Overall, students who articulated their institution choice mentioned very often the ranking and reputation of the university. In the UK grades and ranking were seldom mentioned together while in Romania narratives about grades were non-existent and university ranking was also limited to mentioning that it was a 'good', state-funded university, with 'history' (meaning it is old, compared to the new, usually private and less established universities) and it was not based on a ranking or objective factors like in the UK. Apart from formal sources of information students also used informal sources, like friends or acquaintances had studied or were studying at that university.

3. HAPPENSTANCE

The third topic group of students also talked about the city, but they situated the decision regarding location as something outside of their control. These narratives

were very brief and mentioned one or two influential factors only. Based on narrative analysis I distinguished two different clusters: (I) students who were influenced by a significant other, and (II) students who stated that they had no or just limited options regarding location choice. Figure 8 (on the next page) represents these clusters and the influential factors students mentioned. In the following I present these two clusters.

I. In case of Ally and Gordon it was relatives who suggested studying in that city, while for Veronica it was her brother who influenced her decision.

Ally: It was the obvious choice [name of the city where she studied] because my mother's cousin was anti-[name of the capital], so I ended up coming to [name of the city where she studied].

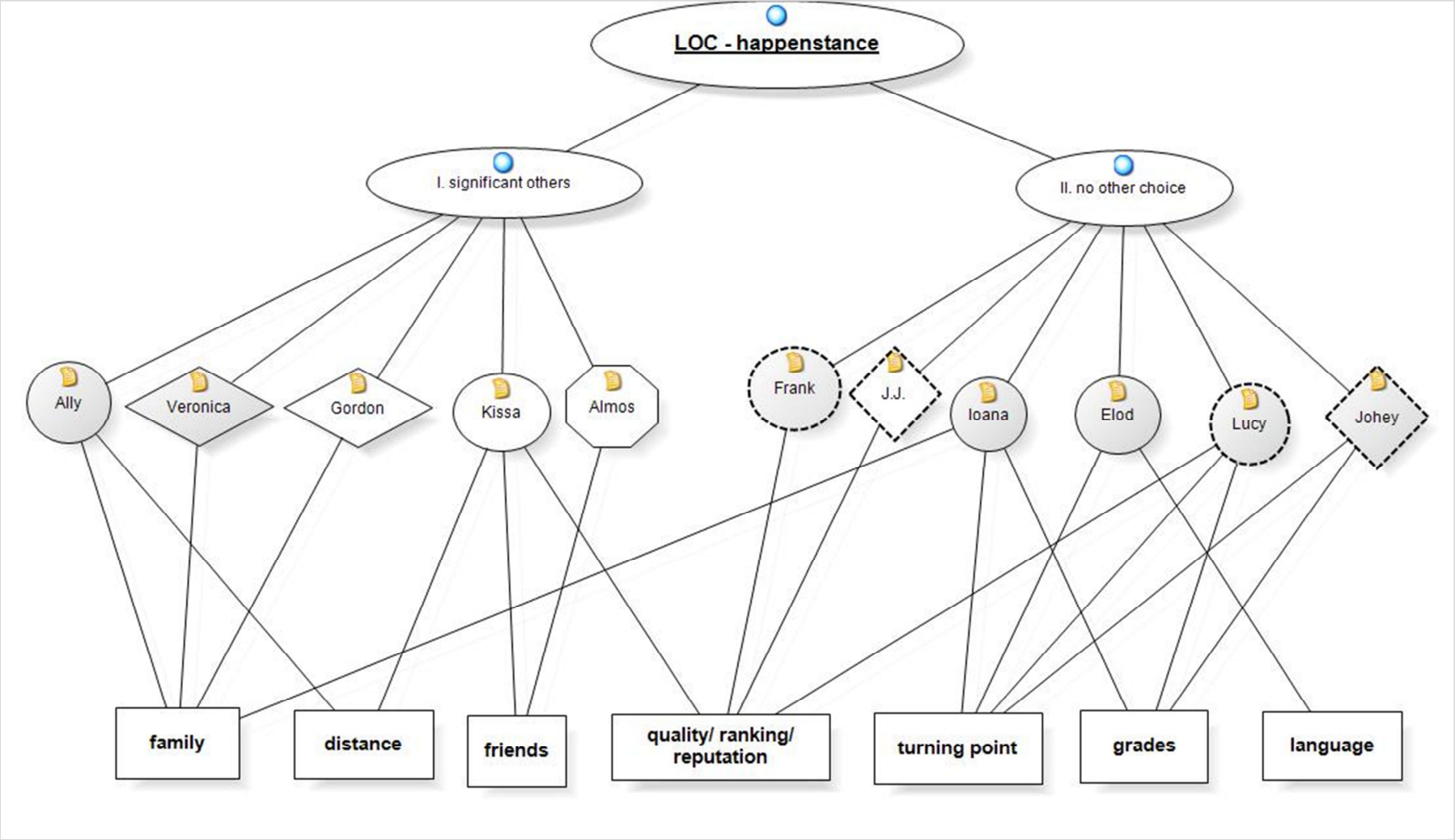
Álmos and Kissa, were influenced by their friends regarding location choice. These students were more likely to opt to move further away from home and they mentioned deciding about which city to go earlier than about anything else and often this decision was a non-decision, because their friends were going there as well. Their narratives highlighted the elements of a journey done together with their friends:

Kissa: You know, when I opted for a university, one of my reasons was that I wanted to go where my friends went. All my friends and colleagues were here and everyone was here. And this was one of the things... that everyone was here, because if I would have chosen [name of a different city] I would have woken up completely alone, so I came here.

These narratives about location were very brief, students stated the location choice and who influenced them to opt for that and nothing else. All students were from Romania and apart from Álmos, they were ethnic Romanians.

II. In the second cluster, J.J and Frank were international students and they stated that they did not have control over where they would end up studying as an agency made that selection for them based on their grades and subject interests. Johey and Lucy, students at the English university, both went through the clearing process and consequently their options were limited to which subjects were available and where. They both tried to maximise the benefits by opting for 'good' universities within the limited structural opportunities of subjects and university offering places in August.

FIGURE 8. HAPPENSTANCE LOCATION CHOICE



Ioana in Romania had a similar experience of not being accepted at her first choice, so she had to reconsider and ended up opting for a subject which she felt could be a “good match {am simțit că numai aici mi s-ar potrivi}”. The institution and subject choice were connected as she explained that this was the only department in the country where she could study business. She also made reference to the city, but it did not seem to have played as major role in her decision as the institution and subject. For Előd it was a similar process. He did not gain admittance to study medicine and he had to reconsider his plans. He opted for politics because he felt he was interested in it and he wanted to study in his mother tongue. He only had one place where he could apply to study in his mother language. He also mentioned that his friends were going to the same city, which was not surprising as many ethnic Hungarian students chose to study in their mother language and this city and that institution was their first choice if they wanted to study at a ‘good’, ‘old’ (meaning better reputation) university.

Overall, the narratives in this topic group made frequent references to significant others and the desire to share the journey with their peers, particularly in Romania. In England, Sarah-Anne and Rebecca had a different emotional journey in mind, they wanted to remain close to their families. These narratives were spatially situated around the university town and students talked about moving away from home with their friends and they made references to their future lives.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Choice of institution may be driven, in some cases, by subject choice as certain courses, like medicine, engineering, graphic design were available at specific institutions. In Romania subject and institution choice, if linked, was mainly connected to the language the course was taught in at university. Although these language-considerations were mainly characteristic of the Hungarian student population, foreign students who opted to study in England also displayed similar reasons. Elouise, from the United States of America or Alex from Eastern Europe, both opted to study in England as this was the language they were able to study in.

According to Purcell and colleagues (2008) parental experience of HE and education context has a significant effect on the reasons why students choose their institutions. Students coming from families with HE experience and/or who studied in selective and fee-paying schools were more likely to cite prestige-related factors when deciding about HE institution (Purcell *et al.* 2008, pp. 47-48). This was present in my study as students at the English University (both British and foreign nationals) tended to cite reputation and ranking more than Romanian students. This probably reflected the highly stratified nature of the English higher education system and even those students who came from abroad tended to be aware and adapted to this system when applying. In Romania the quality division between institutions was also present, but it was between the private and public universities, not so much among public universities as it was in England, and it did not seem to be the main choice-factor.

*

Overall, regarding the pathways of students from school to university three main transition types could be identified: those who felt they made a natural step towards something (normal biography), those who reflected on the options available and made a choice (choice biography), and those who recounted happenstance in explaining where they ended up (happenstance biography). At the end of the subject choice subchapter I presented these three pathways based on students' motivation and subject choice, and now I will also include the location choice into the analysis.

Only Bajusz and Adela felt that all three aspects of their pathways to HE were a **normal** and natural next step and they did not need to make any major decisions regarding what and where to study. The majority of the students who were grouped in both motivation and subject choice in the normal transition spoke about location choice as a conscious decision which they made. From Romania only Ercsi could be included in this type, while the other students were from the English university, both home and international students. Most came from families with HE experience and they situated themselves in the top half of the social scale. Normal biographies with happenstance subject or location were also present, Katalin and Blanka – both Hungarian students – mentioned that going to university and choosing a place where to study was a normal

step for them, but they both experienced a chance event in their subject choice. For Frank and J.J. their motivation and subject choice were obvious while location was outside of their control. In case of Kristóf, he made a conscious choice to go to university, but subject and location choice were a natural next step for him as he opted to study the same subject in the same city as he did in high school. Overall, those students who mentioned two out of three aspects (motivation or subject or location) as a natural next step were included in the normal biography type (a total of 15 students).

TABLE 4. TRANSITION PATHWAYS – MOTIVATION & SUBJECT & LOCATION

Alias	Motivation	Subject choice	Institution choice	Transition pathways
NORMAL TRANSITION PATHWAY				
Adela	NORMAL	NORMAL	NORMAL	normal transition
Bajusz				
Elouise	NORMAL	NORMAL	CHOICE	normal transition - choice location
Alex				
Anna				
Ercsi				
Lilly				
Maria				
Maryna				
Sarah- Anne				
Kristóf	NORMAL	NORMAL	NORMAL	normal transition - choice motivation
Blanka	NORMAL	HAPPENSTANCE	NORMAL	normal transition - happenstance subject
Katalin				
Frank	NORMAL	NORMAL	HAPPENSTANCE	normal transition - happenstance location
J.J.				
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY				
Ayoyinka	CHOICE	CHOICE	CHOICE	choice transition
Doriana				
Alfred	NORMAL	CHOICE	CHOICE	choice transition - normal motivation
Margaret				
Teo				
Thomas	CHOICE	NORMAL	CHOICE	choice transition - obvious subject
Pacheco	CHOICE	HAPPENSTANCE	CHOICE	choice transition - happenstance subject
Rebecca				
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY				
Johey	HAPPENSTANCE	HAPPENSTANCE	HAPPENSTANCE	happenstance transition
Előd	NORMAL	HAPPENSTANCE	HAPPENSTANCE	happenstance transition - normal motivation
Ioana				
Lucy				

Alias	Motivation	Subject choice	Institution choice	Transition pathways
Eliza	CHOICE	HAPPENSTANCE	HAPPENSTANCE	happenstance transition - choice motivation
Kissa				
Álmos				
Gordon				
Veronica				
István	HAPPENSTANCE	HAPPENSTANCE	NORMAL	happenstance transition - obvious location
INCONSISTENT TRANSITION PATHWAY				
Ally	NORMAL	CHOICE	HAPPENSTANCE	inconsistent transition
Emőke				
Andreea	NORMAL	HAPPENSTANCE	CHOICE	inconsistent transition
Emese				
Ioan				
Liana				
Erika	CHOICE	HAPPENSTANCE	NORMAL	inconsistent transition
SMRE				
Székely-boy				

From those students who stated that they made a **conscious choice** to study at university and they selected their subject based on careful selection, only two students spoke about making a choice related to location too (Doriana and Ayoyinka). Alfred, Margaret and Teo were included in this type because they all opted for subject and location based on careful consideration of their options, while going to university seemed like a natural next step for them. For Thomas the subject was a natural option, while going to university and choosing a location were based on careful considerations. Pacheco and Rebecca both stated that they made a conscious choice when deciding to go to university as they wanted a better future for themselves, and they both selected a location based on their preference and weighting it against other options. Their subject choice was due to happenstance event as they were both influenced in their decision-making.

Most of the students who were placed in the choice biography based on their motivation, stated that they opted for a subject and location due to happenstance (Eliza, Gordon, Kissa, Álmos, Veronica) so these students formed the **happenstance pathway** along with Előd, Ioana and Lucy who stated that going to university was a natural step for them, but subject and location choice were influenced by turning

points and chance events. Only Johey stated for all three aspects that happenstance influenced his decision.

A fourth type of pathway could be distinguished after including in the analysis students' considerations about location. I named this fourth type the **inconsistent transition pathway**, because these students stated that one aspect was a clear step for them, the second was a choice they made and the third aspect was based on chance events. Ally and Emőke opted for university studies due to a natural next step, they chose their subjects based on careful consideration of what they liked, while their location choice was influenced by significant others. Andreea, Emese, Ioan and Liana also made a natural next step towards university, but they chose a subject due to happenstance, and they opted for a location based on their preference for the institution and/or the city. Erika, SMRE and Székelyboy highlighted that they wanted to go to university, location was an obvious choice for them, while choosing a subject was influenced by the opinions of significant others. No students from the English university were included in this last type, while Hungarian and Romanian students were both present, with both genders being represented. There were no apparent differences in terms of parental HE experience, nor social status, although Székelyboy was the only one who situated himself in the bottom half of the social scale.

In the following I summarise this first chapter on pathways into HE.

CONCLUDING REMARKS – PATHWAYS TO HE

This chapter aimed to answer the first research question of my study: *What were the circumstances and motives that led youngsters to choose to attend HE?* The answer was formulated in three parts, the first presented the motivational factors for opting to go to university, the second part presented the aspects that influenced students during their subject choice, while the third detailed the influences connected to location choice. This chapter had as its starting point the work of du Bois-Reymond (1998) who talked about 'normal' and 'choice' biographies in the context of Dutch young people and their experiences of transitions to adulthood. These two categories were apparent in the

analysis of my interview data – set in the context of higher education students' experiences – as well, and furthermore, they were obvious in all three themes of motivation, subject and location choice. In addition to these two categories, a third – 'happenstance' biography – could be distinguished which was characterised by the lack of sense of control in students' narratives as they mainly referred to turning points they experienced as consequences of either interventions by significant others or chance happenings.

Throughout the chapter several influential factors appeared, some confirmed what has already been written in the literature that agency and structural factors (like family school ethnicity, region of origin, HE system and country characteristics) were still important in the transition process, but other aspects also emerged from my study, like the presence and influence of happenstance events and significant others, as well as the considerations for time and place that add important dimensions to the analysis. In the following I briefly summarise the prevalence of all these factors with regard to students' transitions from school to university.

Foskett and Hesketh (1997, p. 308) stressed the fact that students whether consciously or otherwise made decisions within the 'frames of reference defined by their parents'. As White (2007, p. 21) mentioned, parents and family members were widely reported by young people as being influential on their educational decision-making. According to Brooks (2004) fathers were more involved than mothers in relation to HE decision-making. This finding was also supported by Payne's research (2003, p. 30) who stated that parental influence could take several forms. The narrative accounts revealed that students enjoyed different levels of parental support throughout their decision-making process. Parents' involvement in the HE choices of their children varied from tacit to explicit influences, from telling them where and what to study to not being supportive of them studying at university level and insisting instead that they should be getting a job. Students who mentioned the most parental involvement were from families where parents had higher education experience, like Alex, Bajusz, Alfred, Lucy, Frank, Ally, Sarah-Anne. These students highlighted that it was expected of them to act in a certain way, although some stressed that ultimately it was their decision to opt for the higher education route, like Bajusz and Sarah-Anne. These family contexts were similar to the

ones Allatt (1993) described in her study, where both families and children stressed the responsibility and individualism in children's decision-making. Some parents were similar to Devadason's (2006) middle-class tacit influencers and induced in their children a sense of responsibility and agency with regard to their school achievement and future career plans. Other parents were more outspoken regarding their opinion on the HE choices of their children and consequently the decision-making process was more like a negotiation. Those students needed to convince their parents about their subject choice (Adela, Alex, Alfred, Blanka or Ioan) or the institution and city choice (Margaret, Pacheco or Ercsi) as parents were reluctant to see their child travel and live far away from home.

In case of students coming from families where parents did not attend higher education siblings and friends were directly or indirectly involved in the decision-making process and parents were usually supportive, but not advocating their viewpoints, like we saw in case of Erika. Devadason (2006, p. 161) found that ethnic minority students from working-class backgrounds were the most independent, 'self-made', and this was apparent among some of the students I interviewed, but only with regard to certain aspects in their pathways from school to university. Both Kristóf and Erika highlighted that they did not receive advice or guidance about their studies, but Erika relied on her friend in relation to subject choice and Kristóf relied on support from his school and university guidance.

Apart from parents, siblings, friends and relatives were also often mentioned in as influential regarding students' HE choices. Students, especially in Romania, and particularly when talking about city and institution choice, mentioned that "this is where my friends went" as a reason. This was in line with Payne's (2003) report that young people were more likely to continue studying if their classmates were also staying on. Although the school environment was widely mentioned when talking about their motivation for studying further, career professionals seemed to be influential for only a minority of students and mainly in England. In Romania the lack of career guidance left students relying on informal advice from parents, friends and others.

Devadason (2006, p. 163) found that ethnic minority students emphasized their ethnic habitus and how that has shaped their experiences, but they distanced themselves from their families and emphasized their independence and control over events in their life. I did not find these in my interviews. In Romania Hungarian students rarely referred to their ethnicity as an impeding context, when it was present it was mainly manifested in their lack of knowledge or desire to learn the majority language. But these students did not emphasize their independence from family or other social constraints, they did not appear to display more agency than their fellow colleagues. The explanation for this could be the country context, the fact that the Romanian society does not place such a great emphasis on individualisation as it was present in Devadason's (2006) Swedish or British societies. In Britain my non-British interviewees had moved to the country to pursue their higher education studies, so did not develop a strong minority identity during this time period. Some students, like Eliza and Doriana who wanted to reach higher than her parents could be classed as the contingent choosers Ball and colleagues (Ball, Reay & David 2002, p. 352) mention, but their ethnicity did not influence them directly.

One of the aspects in which location and country characteristics played a strong role in students' progression to higher education and university choices was the career guidance received at school. Although formally present within schools, Romanian students talked about their experiences of lack of support and guidance. Within the national context, in Romania the regional differences mattered as students who lived and studied in university cities had better chances of gaining information than students who lived further away, in smaller towns and especially in villages. Mocanu (2008) highlighted the gap between rural and urban areas with respect to education and it was an aspect which students also mentioned. Kristóf talked about attending high school in the university town and receiving guidance and attending presentations about university options in his last year, while this type of information was non-existent for other students like Pacheco, Ercsi and Álmos.

There was a clear distinction in the two countries regarding timing of HE choice, too. In England students handed in their application with their expected A-level grades via an on-line system (UCAS) where the deadline was in January for courses starting the

following September (for Oxford and Cambridge earlier), while in Romania students applied directly at the departments in person in July after they already received their school leaving exam grades. The education system-level differences contributed to the different patterns students experienced regarding timing. As Lucy explained, in the UK students were encouraged to think about HE in year 9 or at least when they chose their GCSE subjects and A-level subjects. Students in Romania usually decided in their final year of high school (year 13 in the English education system), but they could decide later too, like we saw in case of Pacheco, Veronica and Kissa who changed their minds at the moment of handing in their applications at the departments. Foskett and Hesketh (1997) conducted a study among pupils in year 11 and their findings suggested that almost half of the students (42%) started thinking about their post compulsory schooling choices before the last year of schooling and the rest just started to think about it. They also reported finding no significant class differences in relation to the timing of students' decisions. Interestingly many small-scale studies came up with a different finding, namely they stressed the classed nature of the choice process (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe 1995; Hemsley-Brown 1999; Ball et al. 2000; Lehmann 2004). In my study class did not seem to play a major role in the choice process, national and system-level differences were more pronounced.

One common aspect of students' narratives, non-related to country, institutional features, family background, gender, ethnicity or age, was the presence of significant others, turning points and chance events in their lives. Regarding students' HE choices these were predominantly connected to selecting a subject. It was interesting to note students' decision-making when they experienced a forced turning point in their life. Some took the decision in their hands from the beginning, like Thomas and Előd, while others waited to find out the results and then chose from the remaining options. Another interesting aspect was that students in Romania tended to keep the chosen institution and opt to change the course, instead of opting for a different institution and keeping the same course, as students in England did. Not all turning points were forced, some happened because students themselves initiated them, as was the case for Pacheco who opted to change his course before applying. His dislike and impulse self-

initiated turning point was rooted in his initial interest in geography and frustration with giving into the pressure from others to opt for a more 'fashionable' course.

Feelings and sense of belonging also played an important role in students' choice process. For Pacheco it was important how the building, the campus felt when he went to visit, for Előd and Kissa who opted for that particular city because their friends also went there, and Ioana felt that her subject choice is the only place where she could see herself studying. In England feelings connected to the campus and the department came up more often, both among British students and international students. Thomas changed his mind during the application process and he opted for this particular institution because staff were more friendly, disregarding reputation and ranking, but do taking his chances into consideration. Lilly and Elouise both opted for the city and institution because of aspects they felt were important to them, which were not connected to reputation or ranking or their studies. Sarah-Anne and Rebecca opted for close and familiar places because they did not want to live far away from their families. These affective responses were similar to what Gewirtz and colleagues (1995, p. 31) found in their study of parental decisions regarding their child's school. They found this was a process deeply affected by class positions as parents from privileged/skilled backgrounds tended to be more articulate regarding the reasons why they opted for a particular school and they tended to take into consideration aspects like: the 'feel' of the school, its ethos and atmosphere, the state and nature of the buildings, the location, the head teachers' speech, and they matched these against their child. They also found that the semi-skilled parents tended to seek reassurance from other people who they identified as more 'informed' with regard to school choice; and this pattern was visible in my research as well. Both Álmos and Ercsi highlighted that they did not have access to other reliable information about universities, they could not rely on their family background for help, as they did not have HE experience and the schools they attended were not well-equipped. They felt that the decisions they took were based on limited horizons for action, and they felt they would have made other choices if they had been more informed. Similarly to Gewirtz and colleagues (1995) findings, these students appeared to be looking at HE from the outside, they did not feel insiders, they

did not feel confident in their choices and in hindsight they felt they could have made better choices, had they possessed more knowledge.

Overall, based on the transitions typology those students who regarded going to university as the next step did not need to make an active decision about attending university, it was the natural progression for them, it was something “ingrained” as Sarah-Anne explained. Furthermore, throughout their school years, these students enjoyed high levels of institutional and/or family support to the degree that they were ‘expected’ to study further. From this perspective their progression to university was supported by structural forces which presented themselves as enabling rather than constraining their biographies. In contrast, students who were included in the choice transitions pathway needed to actively make a decision to embark on the HE route or choose a subject and a location. Their choices were made in contrast to alternative routes, usually illustrated by the experiences of people around them, which encouraged them to assume greater control over their lives. As Doriana’s life story illustrated, the experience of her parents played a significant role in shaping her life course and encouraged her not to retrace any of their steps in the hope of a better future. Or in case of Pacheco, the fact that his brothers did not attend university gave him perspective of what could happen to him if he chooses that route and that gave him incentives and increased his agency to ‘listen’ to the messages received at school and opt for HE. Students included in the happenstance transition pathway were different to the previous types, as they highlighted forced or self-initiated turning points due to being influenced by significant others as the main reasons for explaining where they ended up. They recounted a lack of control over what has happened to them and even those who made a conscious choice to go to university in order to increase their future prospects, they seemed to have drifted into specific subjects and locations due to chance events. The fourth type of students did not present a clear pattern based on their transitions into HE.

In the next chapter I focus on the perceptions and experiences of students while they were at university.

CHAPTER 5 - HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

After considering how students decided what course and university to choose, this chapter presents students' narratives about their university life encompassing a variety of topics that emphasise the diverse nature of the experience. In trying to answer my second research question – *How do students understand and describe their HE experience?* – I present first students' thoughts regarding the theoretical and practical knowledge they received at university and then I turn my attention to students' engagement in extra-curricular activities and/or work and I argue that students today experience and juggle between multiple status positions (MSP) while at university. At the end of each sub-chapter I revise the transitions typology. I conclude the chapter by answering the third research question: *What role do extracurricular activities and/or work experience have in students' HE experience and perceptions about transitions to work?* Within the narratives on each of these themes I read for topics mentioned as well as for the structure of the narratives and the contextual factors students mentioned.

OPINION ABOUT THEIR STUDIES

One of the aspects I wanted to capture in this study was students' views on their studies and how these were connected to their engagement in extra activities and future plans, as well as their past experiences and motivations. In this subchapter I present students' views on their studies. The issues which students mentioned were grouped in two topics as they spoke separately about the theoretical and the practical aspects of their learning experience. Within the topic groups students' responses can be classified broadly in two main clusters: (I) those who were on the whole satisfied with their studies, and (II) those who were on the whole dissatisfied with their studies. In the following I will present each topic based on these two criteria. It is important to mention that during the interviews students spoke about various aspects of their studies (like exams, final thesis, social events, colleagues, lecturers), but due to space restrictions, and the main focus of the thesis being on transition experiences of students, I am not going to touch these aspects in detail.

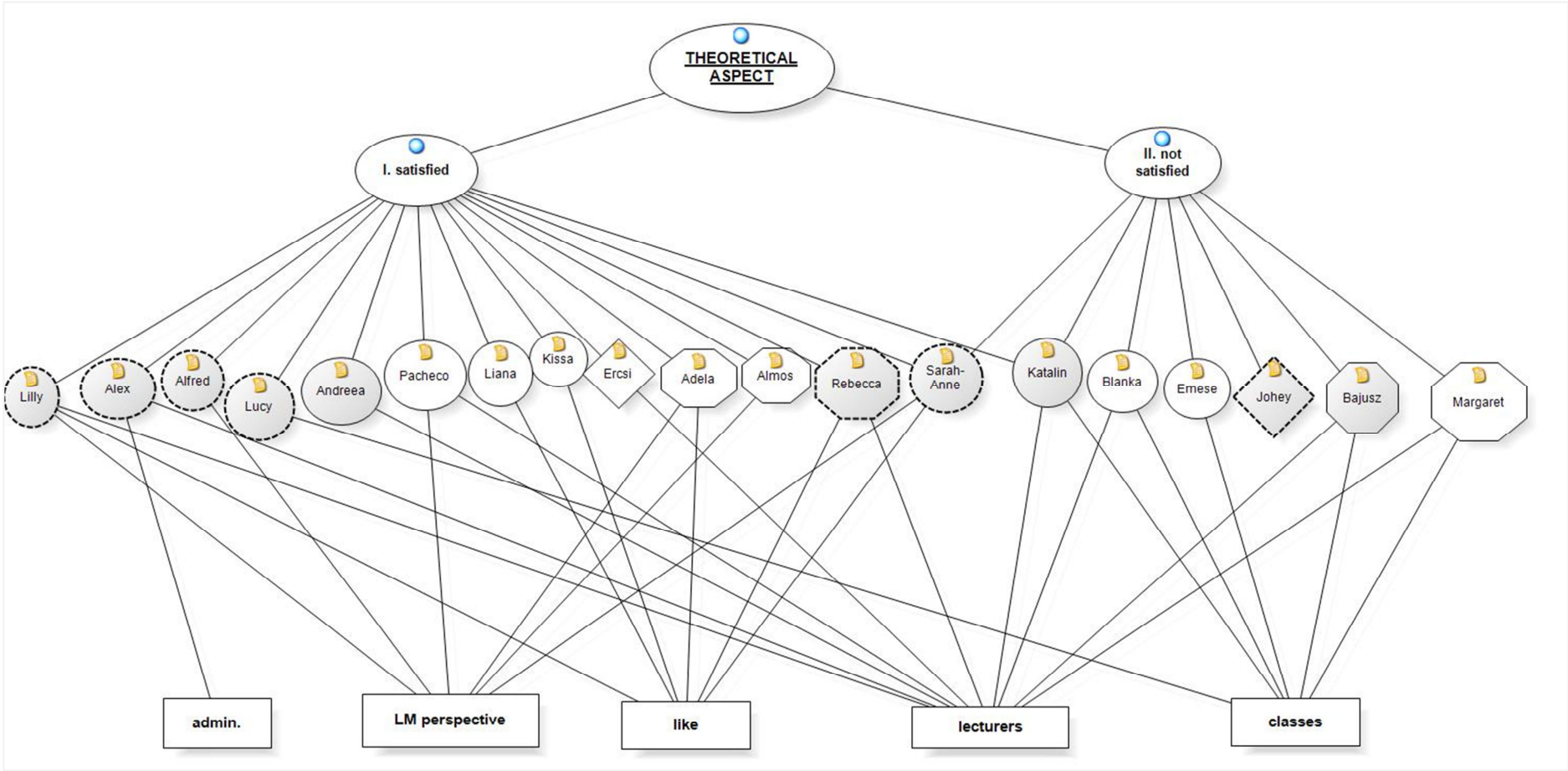
1. THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF THEIR STUDIES

As Brennan and Osborne (2008, p. 188) found “many students find a match between their aspirations and circumstances and the cultures and the requirements of the institutions they attend. But some do not.” In this sub-chapter I set out to examine students’ satisfaction with their learning experience regarding the theoretical aspects of the course. As Figure 9 presents, students within this topic group mentioned either their positive or negative attitudes towards the theoretical aspects of their studies.

I. In general, students were happy with the theoretical contents of the course. They mainly stressed that they have enjoyed learning the subject (Adela, Kissa, Liana, Lilly), they felt satisfied with the level of teaching and the knowledge they received (Alex, Ercsi, Pacheco, Andreea). The connections between students’ rationale for opting for a particular subject and their views about their studies became apparent in their narratives. Those students who were deeply interested in their chosen subject highlighted the pleasures of being able to learn and they felt satisfied with their studies, as Lilly (and also Pacheco) said “...for the first time in my life, going to university, I liked everything that I did...”. Apart from this aspect, Alex was pleasantly surprised with how organised the administrative and academic staff were on his course, he enjoyed the combination of contact hours and individual work he needed to do as well as the curricular freedom, in the sense that he could opt for courses he was interested in. Although he mentioned that he did not spend as many hours studying as he should have he was happy with his results and he found both the teaching and the support highly satisfactory.

Unsurprisingly, lecturers were prominent characters in students’ narratives about their studies. Within this cluster, students mainly highlighted the positive aspects regarding their lecturers: that they were knowledgeable, friendly, approachable; that they enjoyed their classes. However, Katalin made a distinction between the younger and older lecturers as she felt that the younger lecturers made the classes more enjoyable, and they were more engaging, interactive and interesting.

FIGURE 9. SATISFACTION WITH THE THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF THEIR STUDIES



Katalin: The young lecturers were really cool. Every year, I think, except third year, we had each semester classes with younger lecturers and those were very different. It was interactive and really everyone was talking... after a while we got so used to it that we didn't realise we were part of the class as well. It was great. {Vagány volt.}

While Lilly acknowledged the efforts of her lecturers and she was overall positive about her studies, she criticised the knowledge of her colleagues in her first year.

Some of the students reflected on how they would be able to use the knowledge gained in the labour market. Pacheco, Adela and Álmos were hopeful that they would be able to use the knowledge gained, while Alfred stated that he believed what he has learned at university was generally not enough in the labour market. While for Alfred this did not represent a problem, or a disappointment, this was a thought which would be echoed by several students within the next cluster.

Overall, students within this cluster mentioned that they have not felt they had to work hard to achieve good grades and they were satisfied on the whole with how their studies progressed. They spoke about having a good support system, establishing good rapport with lecturers and colleagues. Consequently students regarded their course more holistically, it was equally important for them to enjoy the course and the company of the lecturers, as well as the formal knowledge they received. No country, gender or social status differences could be distinguished.

II. In the second cluster students emphasised the negative aspects of their course and cited their dissatisfaction with the theoretical knowledge they received. Students, particularly those who were studying discipline-based academic subjects, like geography or history (Blanka, Bajusz, Emese) expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of possibilities to specialize, which they saw as mainly due to the lack of teaching staff within their specialisations. Blanka explained, but it was a similar case for Bajusz and Emese too:

Blanka: This is the problem with the education at the history department that it's very history-centered, they are really strongly pushing it, Middle Ages, modern history are OK, but... I think there is a shortage of professors and we have three professors to teach contemporary subjects and there is no one specialized in international relations or diplomacy.

While Blanka does not offer explanations why this shortage is present, Bajusz saw this as a characteristic of his department, and more particularly of the Hungarian study line within the department. Emese compared her studies with a two-week experience abroad where she felt the teaching was more structured and there were more options for students to specialise than in her course. She stated that she did not actually know what she missed out on, but she had a feeling that she could have gotten more out of her course. Similarly, Johey felt that he was not able to develop a particular interest in an area within his studies, he “never found that one topic or that one subject that I was particularly interested in that sparked anything for me”.

Margaret and Doriană, both of them sociology students at the Romanian university, spoke about being interested in their field and having interesting classes, but they felt disappointed because of the subjects’ perceived status in Romania. Doriană was disappointed by the general perception of people about her field and Margaret highlighted her discontent with the way her course was regarded within the department. Being a relatively new course there was a shortage of lecturers and she felt that they could have been more organised and well-prepared. She was afraid that with the knowledge received at university she was not prepared for the world of work and was planning to do a masters course probably at a different department.

Margaret: I am not really satisfied with the courses [modules in England] we are doing, the amount of devotion lecturers give to these, how few we are.... I am afraid how much sociology, how much anthropology we know after three years at this university. I do not consider myself an anthropologist after three years. I did not deepen {aprofundat} my knowledge. Three years are too little and too laidback... It seems to me there wasn’t anything special to it {nu a fost mare brânză}. It was very interesting like leisure activity and not like something after which you know something. We had to learn a lot on our own.

Her experiences were embedded within the university and departmental context, as it was with all the students mentioned in this cluster. The impact of re-structuring of degrees and courses and the transition to the Bologna System of HE structure was felt by students as well.

Other students connected the theoretical and the practical aspects of their course and generally highlighted the lack of applied knowledge they received. This will be presented in detail in the next sub-chapter, but for now Sarah-Anne’s experience is

important to mention. She stated that she liked what she was studying, but she struggled to see the practical relevance of her studies until the third year of her degree. She mentioned an eureka moment, a turning point when something “clicked” and she changed her lifestyle completely, she became more focused on her studies and was able to enjoy student life and her studies more.

Sarah-Anne: ...it wasn't until the third year that I actually, something clicked for me and it kind of clicked because I could realize the importance of doing it and putting all the work into, actually get something.... I think it was just me in general just, like the whole-roundedness, something clicked and that was it.

She did not offer any explanation for the experience, not even when prompted, but temporally this turning point came after the fieldwork at the end of her second year and this was an event as a result of which she felt that she became more mature. This was an important social experience, but it mattered on a personal level too. She was expected to be more responsible and organised and to apply the knowledge she learned during her course in a foreign environment. I dealt with Sarah-Anne's experience of her course separately not because I felt that she had a unique experience. In many ways other students also experienced a similar turning point when they felt that what they were doing was worthwhile and interesting. This might have happened early in their studies or even later, after they graduated. For other students this happened only in the second course they were doing, as I will present later, but the important aspect is that all students highlighted that they needed to be both interested in what they were doing and to see the usefulness of their studies (not necessarily the labour market value). When either of the two were not present students tended to show dissatisfaction with their study experience.

2. PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF THEIR STUDIES

Figure 10 presents students' satisfaction with their learning experience regarding the practical aspects of the course. Students were again divided in two clusters based on their opinion about the practical aspects of their studies: whether they were satisfied or not satisfied with their practical experiences on the course. In the following I present in detail each of the two clusters and the influential factors students mentioned.

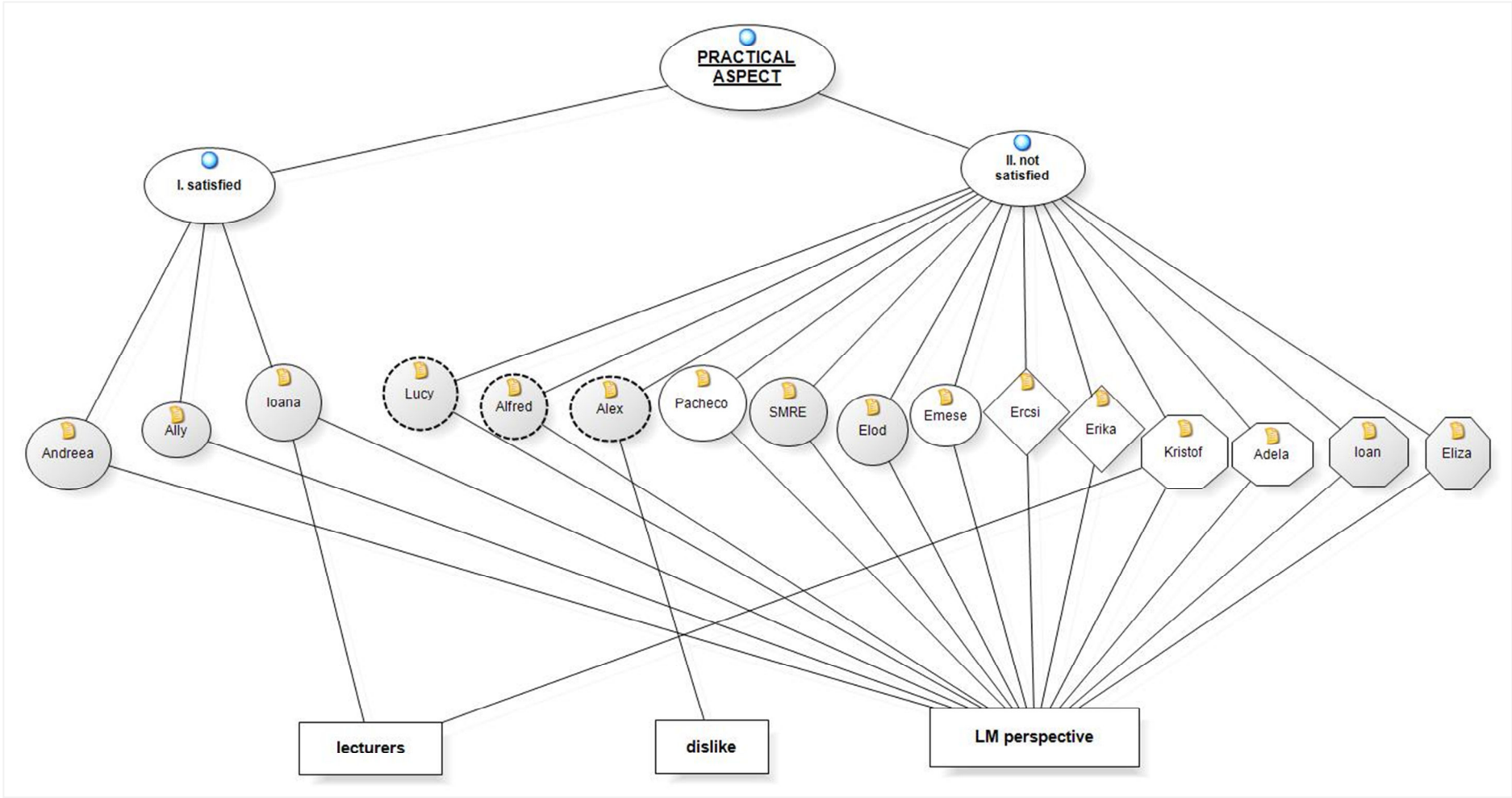
Compared to the previous topic group, where the 'lecturers' seemed to be the most influential factor, here the dominance of the 'labour market perspective' factor was visible (see Figure 10).

I. Compared to the theoretical aspects of their studies, students on the whole felt less satisfied with the practical side. Those who mentioned their satisfaction with the practical aspects highlighted the events organised by their department and the opportunities that existed for them to become involved in activities that focused on the applicability of their discipline. Ioana emphasized that although her field is very much theory-based the lecturers always made an effort to point out the practical, everyday aspects of the theories they were presenting. Ally mentioned the various projects and noted that they had various opportunities to become involved in research and to see how aspects touched upon during courses were applied in the field.

Ally: They [the Sociology department] have several projects, field research in which they apply the knowledge learned... I learned how to design a questionnaire, how the interview guide is done, how you can work with these data. We had multiple chances during seminars to apply these and we did a project in teams with older students and professors and we saw a different model... we saw them, the Professors... I learned a lot of things which you cannot see in books...

Andreea also mentioned how in her first year they were given the task to put together a social campaign and how much she learned from doing this. Practically all students highlighted the opportunities and the amount of experience they gained by participating in activities organised within the department. Spatially all the activities were situated within the department, while temporally these varied from being in the first year to being spread across the undergraduate programme. Similarly to students' satisfaction with the theoretical aspects of the course, they highlighted the role their lecturers played: either as the sources of knowledge (Ioana) or as mediators (Ally, Andreea) of assigning students to various projects.

FIGURE 10. SATISFACTION WITH THE PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF THEIR STUDIES



II. Students who highlighted their dissatisfaction with the practical aspects of their studies mentioned the gulf between the theories taught at university and work practice. They did not see the applicability of what they were learning in the labour market. This was most prominent in the narratives of students who were working, like Kristóf or Eliza, who highlighted that they quickly forgot the theoretical aspects which they were thought, they remembered scarce practical aspects being thought and they did not see the applicability of their course to their working life:

Eliza: There are some good lecturers who you feel want to teach you and they are there to help you, but from time to time they are incredibly inflexible. And practical information I don't remember receiving any. The only things that I recall {megmaradt}, one or two things, are the projects we had to do.

But other students, who did not have any practical experience, also highlighted the perceived abyss, as they had difficulties in making the intellectual connection between the course components and their chosen vocation.

Blanka: ...if I go to an employer, me with my international relations knowledge to what I am capable of, really, I couldn't say. Like very abstract terms and in general I would say something, but practically I don't know. This has not been unravelled, in me or my classmates {Nem tisztázódott ez le bennem, a csoporttársaimban sem}. We cannot see the end of it, like it's Ok, I enjoy it now, it sounds good, it's fashionable, it's new, but what then? What can I do with it? I don't know. I cannot see.

Adela and Ioan also reflected on this aspect and they saw it as concomitantly a structural problem and a feature connected to students' levels of interest and engagement. Ioan explained the system level problems with the underfunding of universities, where access to equipment in laboratories was scarce and there were just a few short fieldwork trips organised. Even in this system, he felt that if a student showed interest, studied and took the opportunities to engage in extra activities, then they could gain more practical experiences, which was rewarding both for their studies and for their future careers. Eliza shared the view of Ioan and Adela, but she felt that it was the university's role to teach students to be more engaging and to show them how to build their skills purposefully to be able to enhance their chances of securing work after graduation. In contrast, Adela highlighted that knowledge learnt at university needed to be continuously updated during working life, especially in a "dynamic field of legal studies where things change all the time and new things appear".

Connected to the above, but approached from a different angle, Ally, Ioana and Teo also talked about how besides studying they felt the need, both intellectually and professionally, to be involved in other activities as well. Ally summed it up:

Ally: I know that when in the second semester of the first year, after all the happiness and the lets' discover the university, how things work has passed, I got to a point when I realised that it doesn't stretch me enough (solicită suficient) intellectually what we are doing in the courses [modules in England]. It's OK I go to courses [modules in England], to seminars, I read all the texts, but I want something more.... I felt the need to do something extra, and even from year 1 I considered that if at our faculty you don't do something extra, either research projects or volunteer work or other things, it's not enough. I considered that if you want to apply your knowledge, to create relationships that could be useful for you in the future, you need to do something on top of studying.

In general, students in Romania expected to learn at university skills that would be useful for them after graduation. Some of these skills were expected to be learned while doing the internships or the practical aspects of their courses. The perceived lack of usable skills was disappointing for several students in Romania. Students were unhappy with the curricular messages which were not perceived to be really useful knowledge but they were equally dissatisfied with the pedagogical styles of lecturers and highlighted the one-way transmission of a pre-ordained curriculum.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Overall, students' perceptions about their studies was very different in the two countries. Students in Romania felt that the university curriculum was too focused on theory and they did not see the practical side of what they were learning. Even when there were extra opportunities offered to students many did not engage in them as it has never been explained to them that this is what they should be doing. At some departments certain (usually younger) lecturers were able to make an impact on students, but usually students needed to show some engagement or initiative in the first place. It was the privilege of a few to take part in activities that enhanced their skills and they were able to learn how to sell what they knew and it was usually through a happenstance event that students engaged in these. Some students tried to

focus on the positive aspects of their modules and highlighted the things they learned, either about the chosen field or social skills or life skills.

In England students were generally more satisfied with their studies, and with the level of support they received both from within the department and from the university. Their perception about university and their studies differed from their Romanian colleagues in that they regarded their studies more as the place where they learn about theoretical aspects of the subject and they recognised the fact that they needed to engage in other activities (usually outside of the department) to learn about how they could apply what they were learning. In contrast, in Romania students' expectations were to learn both the theory and practice in the lecture theatre. Some students recognised the need for more agency from their part, but they still had higher expectations from their lecturers and courses and explained the reason for their dissatisfaction in structural level characteristics of the HE system, or aspects of the institutional or departmental environment.

*

Including students' perceptions about their studies in the transitions pathway typology presents an interesting picture that revealed the link between past subject choice and study perceptions. Table 5 presents the students and their perceptions about their studies. Not all students spoke about their opinions about their studies, I marked with + and – only those who stated explicitly during the interviews what they thought. I highlighted with black those students who had an overall negative opinion about their study experiences (either theoretical or practical) and I speak about the transition types based on these. The main difference between students regarding their views on their studies seemed to be connected to how they chose their subject.

Students who described the subject choice as a natural next step, meaning that they had always known what they wanted to study, highlighted that they were excited to learn that subject at university and they were overall positive about their studies and did not regret their choices. Alex and Kristóf, although both mentioned negative perspectives along the positives, they both highlighted that they liked their studies and imagined their futures within that field.

TABLE 5. TRANSITION PATHWAYS – PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THEIR STUDIES

Alias	Mot.	Subject	Location	Theory	Practice
NORMAL TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied					
Adela	NORM	NORM	NORM	+	-
Bajusz				-	+
Elouise	NORM	NORM	CHOICE	+	
Anna				+	
Ercsi					
Lilly				+ / -	
Maria					
Maryna					
Sarah-Anne				+	
Frank	NORM	NORM	HAPP		
J.J.					
NORMAL TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied					
Alex	NORM	NORM	CHOICE	+ / -	+ / -
Kristóf	CHOICE	NORM	NORM		-
Blanka	NORM	HAPP	NORM	-	-
Katalin				+ / -	-
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY - satisfied					
Ayoyinka	CHOICE	CHOICE	CHOICE		
Alfred	NORM	CHOICE	CHOICE	+	
Teo				+	
Thomas	CHOICE	NORM	CHOICE	+	
Rebecca	CHOICE	HAPP	CHOICE	+	
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied					
Doriana	CHOICE	CHOICE	CHOICE	-	
Margaret	NORM	CHOICE	CHOICE	-	
Pacheco	CHOICE	HAPP	CHOICE	+	-
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied					
Ioana	NORM	HAPP	HAPP	+	+
Kissa	CHOICE	HAPP	HAPP	+	
Álmos				+	
Gordon					
István	HAPP	HAPP	NORM	+	
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied					
Johey	HAPP	HAPP	HAPP	-	-
Előd	NORM	HAPP	HAPP	+	-
Lucy				+	-
Eliza	CHOICE	HAPP	HAPP	-	-
Veronica				-	
INCONSISTENT TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied					
Ally	NORM	CHOICE	HAPP	+	+
Emőke					
Székelyboy	CHOICE	HAPP	NORM		

Alias	Mot.	Subject	Location	Theory	Practice
INCONSISTENT TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied					
Emese	NORM	HAPP	CHOICE	-	-
Andreea				+ / -	+
Ioan				+	-
Liana				+	-
Erika	CHOICE	HAPP	NORM		-
SMRE					-

Students who made a choice when selecting what to study were also mainly on the positive note when speaking about their studies, only Doriana and Margaret, both Romanians studying sociology, stated that they were dissatisfied with the theoretical aspects of their studies.

Happenstance subject choice seemed to be most connected to negative views on studies. These students opted to study their subject either because they were influenced by someone or because they did not have any other choice during the admission process. This group was made up of mainly students from the Romanian context, both Hungarians and Romanians, and both genders. They spoke about their regret for studying their subject as they did not like it and stated that they would opt for something different given the chance to go back in time and choose again. Johey and Lucy represented the English students, and they were similar in their views to their Romanian colleagues, but they mentioned regretting their subject choices in the context of their labour market possibilities. They both felt limited in their possibilities and if they had the chance to go back in time they would opt for something different.

Students' perceptions about their studies and the ways they coped with their dissatisfaction will be the topic of the next chapter where I present the multiple status positions that students were engaged in while at university.

MULTIPLE STATUS POSITIONS DURING UNIVERSITY STUDIES

Several authors wrote about the non-sequential characteristic of education-work life-events and highlighted the fact that students increasingly opted to combine learning with work. One of the reasons why I wanted to do this research was to see how

students conceptualised extra-curricular / work experiences and for this reason I asked from all students (if they did not start talking about these activities themselves during the interview) what activities they were engaged in apart from their studies. I deliberately left the question broad as I wanted to see what kind of activities they mentioned, whether these were connected to their studies or the department or rather to their hobbies outside of their studies.

As mentioned in the literature review chapter, students combining studies and work has been termed by Wolbers (2003) and more recently by Robert and Saar (2012) as 'double status positions'. Wolbers (2003) distinguished three types of double statuses when talking about youngsters combining learning and working: young people who combined learning and working in the dual system, full-time students who had jobs, and employed individuals who invested in training to advance their working career. Robert and Saar (2012, p. 747) focused on Wolbers' second category and distinguished further two forms of this activity: study related and non-study related work. My research also concentrated primarily on Wolbers' second category, on full time students and their engagement in work, but I defined 'work' more broadly and along with paid work I also included the various extra-curricular activities students were engaged in and in general I used the term extra-curricular activities for all work and non-work related activities students were involved in. I found that there were students who engaged in more than one or two activities during their university course and therefore multiple status positions (MSP) was a more appropriate term to describe their status and experiences. Appendix 21 presents all the positions students were involved in while doing their studies and, as visible, all the students I interviewed participated in some form of activity alongside their studies (compulsory internship programmes were excluded from the graph as that was not necessarily a choice students made). Out of 42 students, 12 were engaged in one extra activity, 9 were engaged in 2 extra activities, 8 were engaged in 3 extra activities, 3 were engaged in 4 extra activities, 1 was engaged in 5 extra activities and 1 was engaged in 6 extra activities, so it is fair to conclude that these students were 'busy' people as Holdsworth's (2010, p. 4) characterised her students. In the graph it is also visible that I divided these extra-curricular activities in 2 main groups: I. activities connected to the department – which

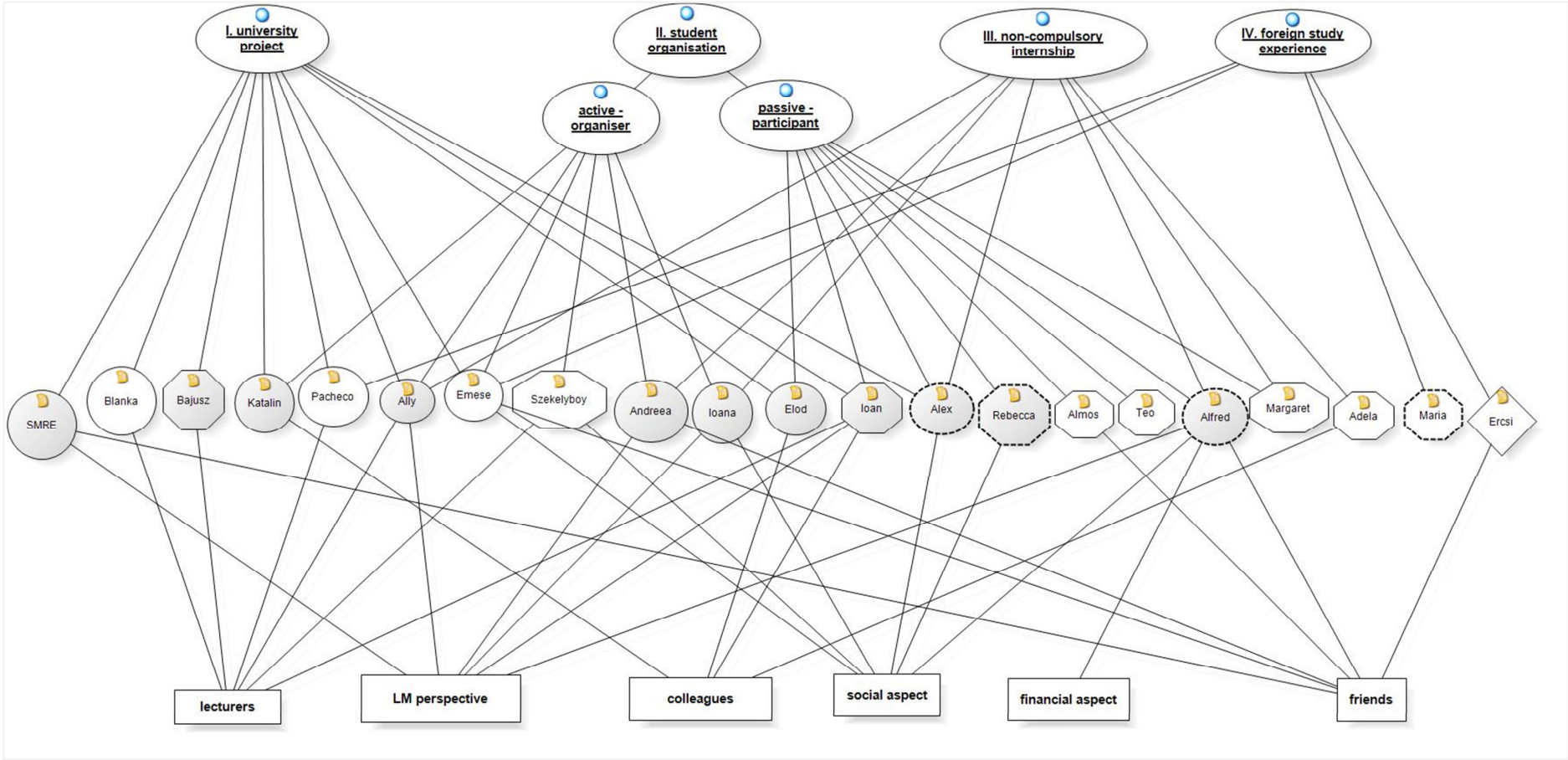
included: university projects and participating in the student organisation, and additionally doing an additional internship and going on a foreign study experience were also loosely connected to their university department – II. activities not connected to the department – engaging in full time work, part time work, occasional work, holiday work or unpaid work, doing a second degree at another department. The two main categories could correspond broadly to Brennan and colleagues' (Brennan *et al.* 2002) organised work external to the programme, organised within and outside the university, but unlike the authors, I did not consider departmental involvement in students' learning.

1. ACTIVITIES CONNECTED TO THE DEPARTMENT

Students within this group were divided in four main clusters as Figure 11 also displays: (I) those who participated in projects, (II) those who were active within the departmental student society, (III) those who went on non-compulsory internships and (IV) those who went abroad for foreign study experience. In the following I present in detail each of these clusters and the influential factors that students mentioned.

I. University projects encompassed a variety of different activities (research projects, special colleges, paper competitions) which were grouped together because they were all closely centred around the department where students were registered. Lecturers played a significant role in students' accounts for getting involved in these activities. They were the source of information, they advertised ideas or sometimes specific positions to students to get involved in activities they coordinated. These practices were present in all subject fields, but their intensity and number varied from one department to the other. The Sociology Department in Romania seemed the most engaging, possibly due to the nature of the subject as well. There was a shared view among sociology students that apart from their coursework they needed to engage in other activities as well. This perception was welcomed by some and hated by others, as Margaret (who did not participate) stated:

FIGURE 11. MSP – ACTIVITIES CONNECTED TO THE DEPARTMENT



Margaret: I have a colleague, she liked urban studies and she did so much work on her own, and was also helped by [name of the lecturer] and if she didn't do that, she wouldn't have been where she is now. And it's unfair. If you don't struggle you don't... I'm not saying that it's necessarily a bad thing, but...

Sociology students reported various projects that were advertised to them and in which they could participate. Ally and Blanka took up these opportunities and they explained this decision with being interested and also feeling the need to engage more in extra-curricular activities. This situation was particularly interesting in Blanka's case, because for her the sociology course was her second university degree and she was not an active student in her first one. When prompted, she talked about the various opportunities within sociology and the role of the lecturers who were both supportive and informed about these opportunities. These students, particularly Ally, emphasized among the benefits of their engagement their increased social network which they saw as beneficial for their future careers.

Student competitions were another form of gaining practical knowledge about the subject they were studying and as Ioan explained this had multiple benefits:

Ioan: I was interested and you know that saying... two rabbits at the same time {doi iepuri dintr-o lovitură}... but I liked it... and they organised a student exhibition and a professor comes and has a look at what you are presenting and you appear like a good student, engaging and you grow in their eyes. And if you need information, guidance they help you with the greatest pleasure because they know you as a studious boy.... and I learned a lot, also about personality and skills and a bit of knowledge and I think all of these are good for me.

He got involved in this activity through one of his professors but knowing that this type of engagement could be potentially beneficial for his career also played a role. He was involved in the student organisation and there he had an opportunity to talk to older students as well who shared their views and provided him with advice about what and when to do during his student years. As a result, he felt that the experiences he had not only were beneficial for his subject-specific knowledge, but he also made valuable social connections, learned useful skills and was acknowledged by fellow colleagues and lecturers as a result. He was planning to build on these post-graduation. SMRE mentioned the benefits he saw in his colleagues who were involved in these activities:

SMRE: ...those who are part of these groups, these colleges, they have opportunities to go to companies and do 2 days of work shadowing, and other things... they are really... they get to the labour market and they have a really big theoretical and practical knowledge.

Although participating in the above mentioned activities required certain initiative from the students, this was usually minimal as the opportunity was presented to them, and they just needed to opt in. On the other hand, participation in special colleges (Bajusz, Pacheco, Emese, Blanka) needed more initiative and there was a competitive entrance. These Colleges provided opportunities for students to enhance their subject specific knowledge with guidance from their lecturers. Students became members of the college through a selection process and they received a scholarship in order to pursue research on their own initiative or join groups made up of older colleagues or academic staff and pursue research on the project.

Overall students who were active in departmental projects usually got involved in them due to their lecturers and these were opportunities that provided them with subject-specific knowledge applied in practical projects alongside lecturers or older students. There was a difference in the perception of students with regards to these activities. Some of these students (Ioan, Ally, SMRE) mentioned the benefits that these activities had on their life: they learned more about their subject, they worked in groups and were able to see how others who were more experienced approached the tasks, they became more confident in their abilities and subject-specific knowledge, they won prizes, they developed social and professional network and they enjoyed the prestige and advantages of these positions among their colleagues, their lecturers and within the department. Other students (Katalin, Pacheco, Előd, Bajusz, Blanka), even though they had the same experience, they did not explain them in detail as being beneficial, their recounts were more about whether they liked them or disliked them. These types of activities were characteristic of the Romanian context, only Alex in England mentioned being involved in departmental projects: outreach visits to schools.

II. Another activity, which to a certain extent was linked to departmental life, was students' involvement in the departmental student union in Romania, or in the subject specific society in the English system. Apart from leisure time activities, these societies

organised workshops, talks and student conferences related to the specific subject. Some students participated actively in these (Ioana, Andreea, Székelyboy, Katalin, Ally, Emese), they campaigned to be elected and became responsible for the organisation of specific activities in the union/society. Other students (Álmos, Rebecca, Előd, Alex, Ioan, Margaret, Teo) were more passive participants, they attended the events organised and sometimes helped out when needed, but did not take on any specific roles and responsibilities. Emese talked about how she got involved through a friend, how much she enjoyed her experience of becoming the president of her departmental student union, and how her life changed after her role ended:

Emese: I knew someone who was a year older and she mentioned that there is this departmental student club and that it's really nice and... and I was always interested in new things and I went to the first meeting and I like the people, they were nice and... from the second year I became the president and it was such an honour that they asked me and I was really happy and then people were coming and we tried to organise many things and the lecturers were supportive. This was a great experience, I think.

Székelyboy was also involved and he emphasized the immediate benefits that came with his role in the student union, but he also hoped that this experience would provide beneficial when looking for jobs after graduation.

Székelyboy: And in Theology one of the tutors is responsible for the student union and there were always concessions... you don't need to send the paper, it's OK later as well, when you have time... so it had lots of advantages.

Ioana also talked about how her experience within the student organisation changed her. She used to be very introverted and people in the organisation motivated her to make an effort and get involved in the activities they were organising. Slowly she became more involved and she started enjoying herself. She stated that it was due to the activities she has done as part of the organisation that she was selected to speak at the graduation ceremony. Teo mentioned a similar experience of experiencing a turning point when she realised that she had to be more involved because time was passing and she was not doing anything for her development. She stated that she realised at the beginning of her second year that it was her who needed to be more active and engaging, she “cannot sit around and wait as it will not happen {nu trebuie să aștept să-mi pice ceva din cer, că nu se va întâmpla}”.

Overall, in contrast to the previous cluster, these students mentioned becoming involved in extra activities due to friends or experiencing a turning point and the desire to be more sociable and engaging. All these students mentioned the benefits that these activities had on their life, they became more sociable, more outspoken, they felt more useful, they developed several transferable skills, they enjoyed the advantages the positions they had within the department. Being involved in activities within the department seemed to be the characteristic of the Romanian HE system, English students – only Rebecca, Alfred and Alex – mentioned participating in the activities of the departmental student society.

III. At the Romanian university internships were somewhat part of the curricula, it was compulsory for students to participate in short internships at the end of their first year and sometimes at the end of their second year as well. In England there was no such practice at university level, it was up to individual departments how they handled the practical experiences of their students. In Romania compulsory internship experiences were generally on the negative side, students emphasised that they were not useful, that they learned a limited amount of new information and as Adela concluded in the quote below, the experience only satisfied the compulsory tasks: the final essay and the pass certificate.

Adela: In year 1... my place was at the Local Council at the Civil Status Service {Serviciul de Stare Civilă} where we were looking at registers, at how they were filled in which I can say did not help me much personally to stay there and look at registers for two weeks and then comes an Act and you register it and you give it back. It was pretty simple. It was enough to get the certificate and pass the internship, but as practical experience it was nil.

The narrative highlighted that students participated in these internships with expectations to learn the practical side of their chosen field and they expected to gain more information than what they were reading in the books and they felt disappointed if this did not happen

Ally: We didn't get to observe them how they work. We didn't get any feedback about the questionnaire and the report we wrote... practically I didn't gain much, I didn't feel that I got very much {nu m-am ales cu multe, n-am simțit că m-am ales cu foarte multe}.

Doriana: The internship doesn't help you at all. You don't learn anything.

These students mentioned being given routine tasks, not necessarily appropriate to the degrees they were doing, or not being involved in the work-life of the organisation as they were asked to work from home and pick up the certificate on the last day.

Those students who regarded both the positive and negative aspects highlighted that they had an opportunity to gain a glimpse into the organisational life, but not much practical experience. Maryna mentioned that it was useful "not probably for legal experience, as a knowledge, but more like a social... just to know how it's working." Similarly Margaret said that she "ended up with some information, not necessarily about the institution, but about the social aspect".

Apart from this, several students mentioned that the practical experience was useful for them because it contributed to clarifying their career plans. Alex realised that he did not enjoy the practical aspects of the course as much as the theoretical parts and he decided to "stick to history". Székelyboy found what he was interested in while doing his compulsory internship in a school. In England, some departments organised field trips, like the one the Geography department organised for Thomas and Sarah-Anne to a foreign country after their second year, but it was not the same type of compulsory programme that was present in the Romanian system.

Although many agree that the internship experience organised at the end of their first year was not very useful, those students who opted for an additional, non-compulsory internship at the end of their second year (Andreea, Ally, Adela, Ioana, Margaret) mentioned that they were more focused, they knew what they wanted, where they had to apply, how to behave and how to treat employers and consequently they got more out of that experience than their first one.

Ally: The internship after my second year was more rewarding because I decided in my head that I will focus on urban studies and it was really a company that interested me and I was passionate and we did the fieldwork and they actually showed us how they are going to implement it.... And we kept in touch.... Practically that experience was very-very beneficial for me.

Students highlighted that they knew more about their field and what they wanted to focus on, and also that the company where they went interested them more and they

were more engaging as a consequence. On the other hand, they also highlighted that during the internship they had an opportunity to participate in organisational tasks, they were asked to contribute with ideas and to implement them. Consequently, they felt that the experience was more beneficial for them.

In England, participating in internship programmes was mainly up to individual students, but as Alex mentioned there were several opportunities advertised on departmental lists, so if students wanted to engage they had opportunities to choose from and apply. Alfred talked about his motivation for doing an additional internship, which was mainly to secure a job at the end of it:

Alfred: So the summer internship is basically a 10 week job interview and all other internships are work experience.... I was pretty much expecting to get a job offer after I finish my internship and based on what feedback I was getting during the internship and I was very surprised that I didn't.

His experience pointed out that even when students were doing all what they were supposed to and more, it was still not a guarantee for a graduate job. He also spoke about his approach to internships as a trial for various careers: "I want to basically find out the lifestyle I could have and an internship is a good way to do that..."

This perception was echoed by Andreea and Ally as they both emphasized that they were more focused when applying for their second internship, that they knew what they were interested in and the reason why they wanted to do the internship was to gain more experience in the chosen field. These students spoke about the internships with a view on their futures and prospective jobs.

Overall, students' views about the compulsory internship were in general negative as they had high expectations but not very clear ideas about what they wanted and how they could achieve that? The additional internships proved to be more useful as students felt more mature and more focused on a particular area within their field, and they were able to better articulate their ideas. Country differences were apparent with regards to students' engagement in internships, as they were part of the curricula only in the Romanian university. However, the fact that there were compulsory did not seem to have positive effects on students, as they highlighted that the second non-compulsory internship – where they made an active choice to get involved – was

overall more beneficial for them. One could argue that the experience on the first internship shaped these students' views about their studies and future internships. It is possible and more research needs to be done to determine how internships shape student's perceptions about their studies and also career plans. What was apparent in my research was that not all students engaged in a second internship, but those who did, had specific interests and possible career ideas in mind and they used the internship to gain more knowledge.

IV. Foreign study experience was an event shared by five students I interviewed: Maria in England, Ercsi, Emese, Blanka and Pacheco in Romania. Maria and Pacheco participated in the ERASMUS Programme where students go to a foreign country to study from six months up to one year, while Blanka, Ercsi and Emese took part in a programme funded by the Government of Hungary (Részképzés) to help Hungarian ethnic minority students to gain an insight into HE programmes in Hungary. These programmes lasted from two weeks up to one year. Both programmes were competitive and based on grades as well as other criteria. These programmes were entirely voluntary and students had to take an initiative and find out information about them, apply and make the necessary arrangements. Students found out about these possibilities either from friends or from lecturers which defined their main motivation as well. All students highlighted the benefits of participating in the programme, for Pacheco and Maria the benefits ranged from learning a foreign language, to meeting people from other countries, to being away from the family and managing on their own. For Blanka, Ercsi and Emese it was a similar experience, except learning a new language and due to the fact that they went for a short period of time they did not have to sit exams as part of the programme. All five students mentioned that they had changed as a result of the participation in the programme. Maria felt a boost in confidence and she started to become more engaged as a result; Pacheco stated that it was a difficult experience for him from many perspectives, but he did not regret taking part; Blanka, Ercsi and Emese highlighted more the social aspects of the programme but also valued the insight which they got into a foreign study programme although as a result they realised the limitations of their own course.

2. ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE OF THE DEPARTMENT

The activities that were not connected to the department were mainly the various jobs that students were engaged in either during term time or in the holidays, for money or unpaid, occasionally or periodically. Apart from the jobs, students who opted to study for a second degree were included in a separate category, largely because studying for two degrees at the same time has become very popular in Romania and I wanted to see what students said about how they ended up studying two degrees and what they thought about this status.

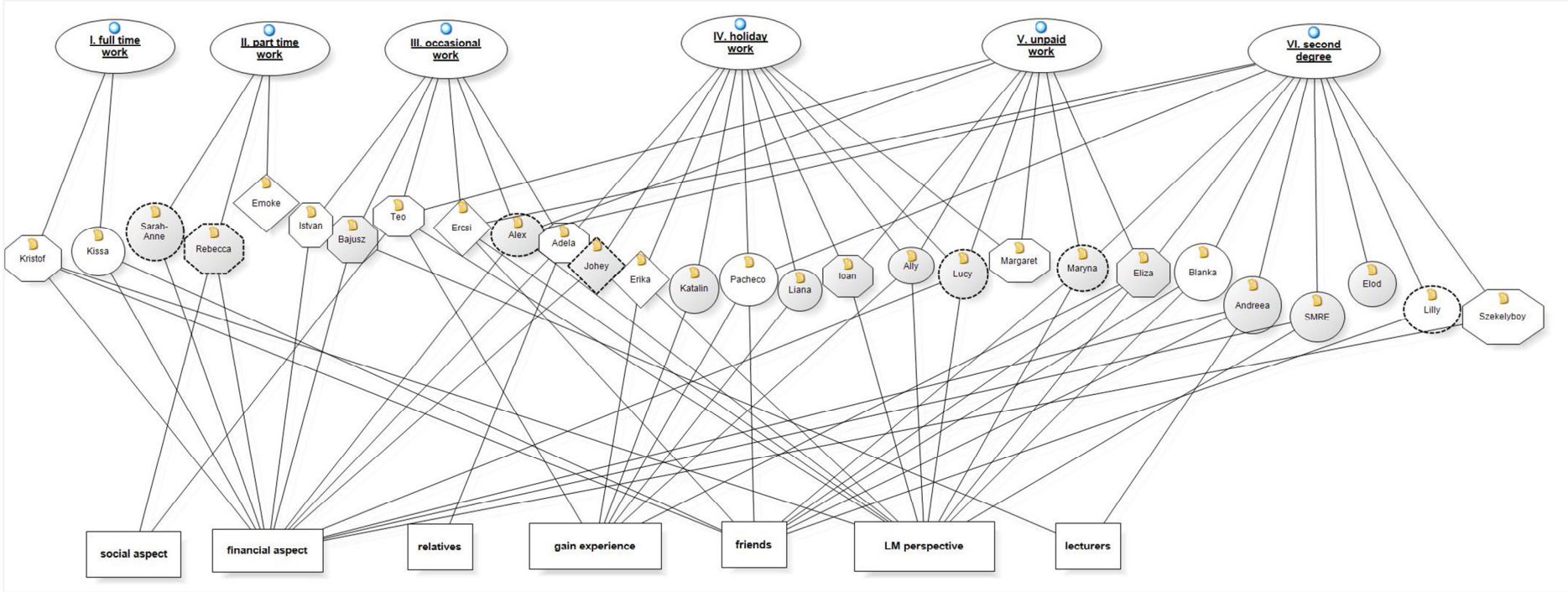
Students' involvement in activities that were not linked to their department varied and usually needed more initiative from them to locate the opportunities and to become involved. In the following I present the six clusters, visible in Figure 12 as well: full time work, part time work, holiday work, occasional work, unpaid or voluntary work and DAS – double academic status students.

I. Kristóf and Kissa had full time jobs for a certain time while being full time undergraduate students. Kristóf found the job in his home village and he was commuting to university and attending classes only in the afternoon. He felt that it was very tiring, but the practical experiences he learned on the job he could not have gained at university and the effort was worthwhile.

Kristóf: You need to evaluate, because you always miss something. Either this one or the other one. But overall it's worth it, because at the university you get the theory, and this is practice and you can compare them and I say that it's worth the fatigue.

After giving up his job, he and his colleagues started their own business and he has been working in this while finishing his Masters. Although he does not have experience of looking for work after graduating from his undergraduate studies, he thought that having work experience while studying was a necessity as employers were asking for more than just the degree. Kissa similarly emphasized the transferable skills she gained and how working impacted her learning. She started to work because her friend was also working and she was offered an opportunity.

FIGURE 12. MSP – ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE OF THE DEPARTMENT



She explained that she did not want to go home after the end of the first year as she wanted to do something more useful with her time and working was a good excuse for staying in the university city and gaining some financial independence from her parents. What started out as a full time holiday job continued throughout the first semester of her second year too, when essentially she was a full time student and a full time employee. Reflecting back on the experience she felt that work had organised her study time much better than she would have been able to on her own and although she was forced to miss classes due to her work schedule she felt that her learning habits overall improved in that period.

Both these students mentioned the time constraints of being in two full time positions at the same time, but they also highlighted the positive aspects for their lives and skills as well and stated that overall it was worth it. Monetary aspects as well as friends' influence in Kissa's case were the driving factors for them engaging in full time paid work. Both students were from the Romanian university and came from families without HE experience. They engaged in full time work because 'the opportunity presented itself', but they had to apply, get the job and then keep it. Financial incentives and feeling of independence from parents were highlighted as the main motives. Although it was described as challenging, these students highlighted the benefits for their studies as well, for Kristóf it was subject-related, while for Kissa it was more about time management skills.

II. Rebecca who was working part time as a waitress during her studies echoes Kissa's thoughts about the benefits of working and the effect it had on a her time management:

Rebecca: I think you've got a lot more responsibility when you've got a part time or full time job, so I think that you think more carefully about what you are doing with your time. Saying that, there are a lot of people that don't have a job that probably do more uni work than me, so it's not for everyone, but definitely everyone I know with a job is doing kind of alright so... that's good.

But she also mentioned the pressures of working and studying at the same time:

Rebecca: It's sometimes harder with the work side because they want me to do more hours and I can't because of uni, but I've always put uni first so that has always been my major priority so there's been no problems.

Overall she felt that she found work easier especially around essay deadlines, as she sometimes “gets really bad mind block” but she “resisted the urge to take on more hours” so that she can keep focusing on her studies. Rebecca’s experience highlighted some of the challenges of multiple status students: the difficulty is not necessarily in doing the job, it is in the management of several, sometimes conflicting activities time wise and regarding personal preferences.

Sarah-Anne experienced similar challenges due to her part time work as every semester her timetable changed and consequently she needed to change her work hours as well. She found that managing her coursework and her job were not challenging, instead at work managers were sometimes inflexible and needing to change her work patters to fit it around her studies was the stressful and difficult part. This aspect of managing employers was highlighted in the Australian context as well in the study of McInnis and Hartley (2002).

Both Rebecca and Sarah-Anne were from the English university and it was interesting to note that compared to students from Romania who mentioned informing their lectures about their work or other commitments and negotiating absences from their course commitments, these students in England emphasised that they did not tell anyone and they never missed any classes due to work. They did not feel that managing the academic side of their duties was particularly difficult (except exam periods) while in Romania due to the increased course load that students had compared to their English colleagues, they experienced more problems in attending lectures and asked for assistance. This practice could also be due to the different perceptions on the value of work and of HE within the societies. It seems that as long as students felt in control and managed their commitments the benefits outweighed the negative aspects and the focus could still remain on their studies.

III. Occasional and flexible work was highly praised by students as they were able to focus on their studies and work when it suited them, as Alex and Adela mentioned:

Alex: I think it's kind of the best possible job because it's so diverse and there's no work requirement constraint...

Adela: I was attracted by the work schedule because I used to work Friday, Saturday and Sunday and from Monday to Friday I was free and I was getting just over the minimum wage with that much free time. I liked it.

Alex was working as a student ambassador at the university and he stressed that it was a great opportunity because it was paid, it was not something that required too much time and effort and he could pick the jobs he was interested in doing and employers “don't put any kind of pressure on you”. He worked as a student ambassador since the second semester of his second year and all through his third year.

Emőke, Teo and Bajusz were working in jobs that were related to their studies, Teo was working for a market research company, Emőke was writing grant proposals and Bajusz was digitalising data. He mentioned that he got that job through one of his lecturers and he felt that this was the ideal type of work for students as it was not fixed, it paid on quantity and there were no time pressures. He also stressed the problem of absence of these type of student jobs in the city, which was why, in his view, many students became exploited as they needed to sign up and work full time if they needed to earn money. Bajusz worked throughout his undergraduate studies. In the first year he was typing up a book for someone, then he distributed fliers for a while and while doing his Masters he found this digitizing job. SMRE echoed Bajusz's thoughts and felt there were not enough flexible jobs in the city for students.

Ercsi also wanted to work, but she was impeded by her parents as they wanted her around during the holidays, so she was not able to take up holiday jobs. During term time she was mainly busy with being in double academic status which did not give her much time to work. She did two occasional paid jobs, one was field interviewer in a research project and the other one was getting people to sign up for private pensions. She enjoyed working on both and gaining experience and felt regret that she did not have a chance to work more.

Overall, students valued occasional employment opportunities as it was paid employment but they were in control of when and how much time they dedicated to work. In the Romanian context students highlighted the lack of these types of employment opportunities and considered that these contributed to students engaging in full time employment which was seen as potentially detrimental for their studies.

IV. Working during holidays was a way for students to spend their vacation in a productive way and it did not interfere with their studies. There were several students who had jobs during the holiday periods. Adela was working as a waitress since she was 14 at her uncle's restaurant, Erika worked for one summer as a waitress, Ioan worked as a waiter and security guard, Ally and Margaret worked at festivals, Bajusz and Johey worked on construction sites, Lucy worked at a children's club while Katalin as a babysitter. It was popular among students in Romania to apply for a work and travel visa to the United States of America and work there during the summer. Pacheco and Liana had this experience and Teo was preparing to go that year. Students within this cluster talked about the various benefits of working, not just the monetary. Johey was working to raise money for his studies, and Lucy was also partly funding her studies from her holiday work, but as Ally and Erika mentioned, they wanted to spend their free time productively. It was a sense of satisfaction that they used their time wisely and they also got some money for it. Apart from these two aspects, those students who embarked on work experience abroad talked about the sense of adventure and excitement along with the responsibility that they were alone and they had to take care of themselves.

Liana: ...last summer I was in the United States with Work and Travel, I worked as a housekeeper but it was really really interesting and a unique experience... Because I wanted something different. And it was something different. And it enlarges you know, your knowledge about everything and it changed me a lot.

As Liana's quote presented, this experience was regarded as life-changing, almost as a rite of passage, and these students felt that they grew up as a result. This feeling of becoming a grown-up as a result of work experience or practical experience also appeared in Sarah-Anne's narrative previously.

V. In contrast, students engaged in unpaid work emphasized the skills they learned and how they developed through the activities they engaged in, not the monetary or labour market value of their experience. Teo started volunteering in her second year because she experienced a turning point. She felt like she was wasting her time during summer and she decided that she needed to be more proactive. She also talked about a

deep sense of doing something useful, which she got through being engaged in volunteering activities. She was also conscious about the longer term benefits she could acquire and which could help her when searching for jobs.

Teo: I don't know, I feel useful and even though it's volunteer work and you don't get anything in return from a material point of view, from a spiritual point of view... and you develop yourself and you develop certain knowledge that you cannot develop at school... and this develops me from a social and mental perspective and I think every person knows how they want to develop. Volunteering develops me in ways I want to be. {Voluntariatul mă dezvoltă cum simt eu că vreau să fiu}.

Alex and Lucy were engaged in volunteer work throughout their studies. Lucy was mainly following her interests and experimenting with potential career plans, but she also echoed Teo's thoughts that it would be beneficial for her in the long term. Alex internalised the university's employability policy and was trying to enhance his CV to better his chances of finding a job after graduating.

Alex: I volunteered, because they were pretty... the introduction lectures were... you're going to do this course, academic issues, we're solve them together, you're going to be learning this stuff, but you also need to do something outside of the curricular field, because you need to get that extra... you need to get those extra experiences and tie them with your degree experiences in order to be a more, stronger candidate for possible jobs upon graduation. And that sort of set me up that, quick, I need to volunteer for anything.

Both Alex and Lucy not only volunteered but they were engaged in an extra-curricular programme at the university designed for volunteers to help them translate and explain their experience to potential employers.

Maryna and Eliza both started out volunteering for student organisations, Maryna at university level and Eliza at local level but after a while they became responsible for certain projects for which they received financial benefits. They both emphasized the joy but also the responsibility that came with such jobs and the multitude of transferable skills they learned.

Maryna: It's definitely time management. Because I definitely know that I can spend this time for social involvement but studies are studies, I just can't forget about them.... Yeah, so basically time management and willing to study. So you have to separate these two issues.

Students engaged in the above activities outside of the department were working mainly for financial reasons; most of them mentioned earning money either as the primary reason for working or as one of the motives. Labour market perspectives and the general experience of learning and developing themselves appeared in narratives about occasional work holiday work or unpaid activities. Significant others appeared as prominent characters in the stories – Bajusz got the job through one of the lecturers, Kissa followed her friend to the workplace, Pacheco embarked on the holiday work similarly as his friends, Maryna and Eliza got involved in unpaid activities due to their friendship circles. There were several students who appeared to be taking the initiative and finding these opportunities for themselves (like Lucy, Teo, Kristóf, Katalin), or they mentioned happenstance as a contributing factor (Rebecca).

To sum up, both Rebecca and Sarah-Anne started their narratives about working as something that has been part of their life from an early age; in Romania Adela and István had a similar narrative.

Sarah-Anne: I'd always worked anyway, I always had part time jobs. I worked at [workplace] for probably the best part of 7 years, I worked there right from doing my GCSEs up until I left uni as like a part time job, so I'd always...

Rebecca: Yeah, I started work quite young.... I've been kind of working nonstop since I was 16 with maybe a few months off every summer and stuff like that.

Other students situated their decision to work within the university years. Alex started to volunteer and later to engage in paid work after hearing from lecturers and student services how important that was for his future. The same conclusion was reached by several students, as Teo, Margaret, Ally, Ioan, Erika all mentioned the benefits of their engagement outside university as beneficial for their later job search and careers. Ally and Lucy referred to using these various experiences to clarify their career plans. The financial aspect appeared as an absolute necessity only for Kristóf, István and Bajusz, but the other students' main reasons for working were not necessarily financial. Gaining some work experience or meeting people or becoming familiar with the world of work were seldom mentioned.

Friends and lecturers played important roles in students' engagement in extra-curricular activities as they introduced them to these possibilities or they were

companions along this road, so students made the decision to engage in these activities easier. Others, like Ally and Lucy pursued their individual goals and engaged in activities to clarify their future career plans.

Lucy: I think like working in the kids club has given me like, for the career that I want to get into, has given me quite a lot of experience so I could have maybe gone back and worked in the supermarket but I sort of thought for myself that maybe it would be best to do something where I'm gaining more skills at the same time. Cause it's always good to get like more work experience in the field you want to get into.

It was interesting to see that while most of the students tried to accommodate work experience that fitted within their university studies and interests, Eliza's was exactly the opposite, she was trying to find a course that corresponded to her work interests.

VI. Although I did not advertise specifically that I was looking for students who were studying for two degrees, in Romania from the 29 interviews I did 8 were students who had experience studying two courses in parallel, while in England one student was doing a joint degree, another student was a full time student at the English university and a part time Masters student in her home country, while another student did one year of her undergraduate degree in parallel at an English university and at a university in her home country (these students were from Eastern-European countries studying in England). Appendix 20 details the types of courses my interviewees were enrolled in, their first course and the second option, while Figure 13 below presents students' motivations for opting for a second degree and the timing of the choice. In the following I present students' stories of how and when they opted for the double academic status (DAS) and what were their experiences of it based on the year they engaged in DAS.

There were two students who opted to enrol in two courses at the same time in Romania (Székelyboy and Andreea) in their first year and their motivations were financial. **Andreea** ended up in DAS as a result of the admission process, because she did not secure a state funded place at her first choice course, Communication & PR, and she did in Security Studies. She knew that if she opted for both the university would give her a tuition fee discount, so she decided to give it a try. She found both

courses useful and was able to use the knowledge gained in one course at the other, but her preference remained the Communication & PR and she was planning to continue studying for a Masters in that area. Juggling between the two courses and marrying the two timetables for her did not seem a difficult task. She was aware that the university requirement of lecture and seminar attendance was lower for students who were enrolled in two courses and she negotiated her course attendance with her lecturers.

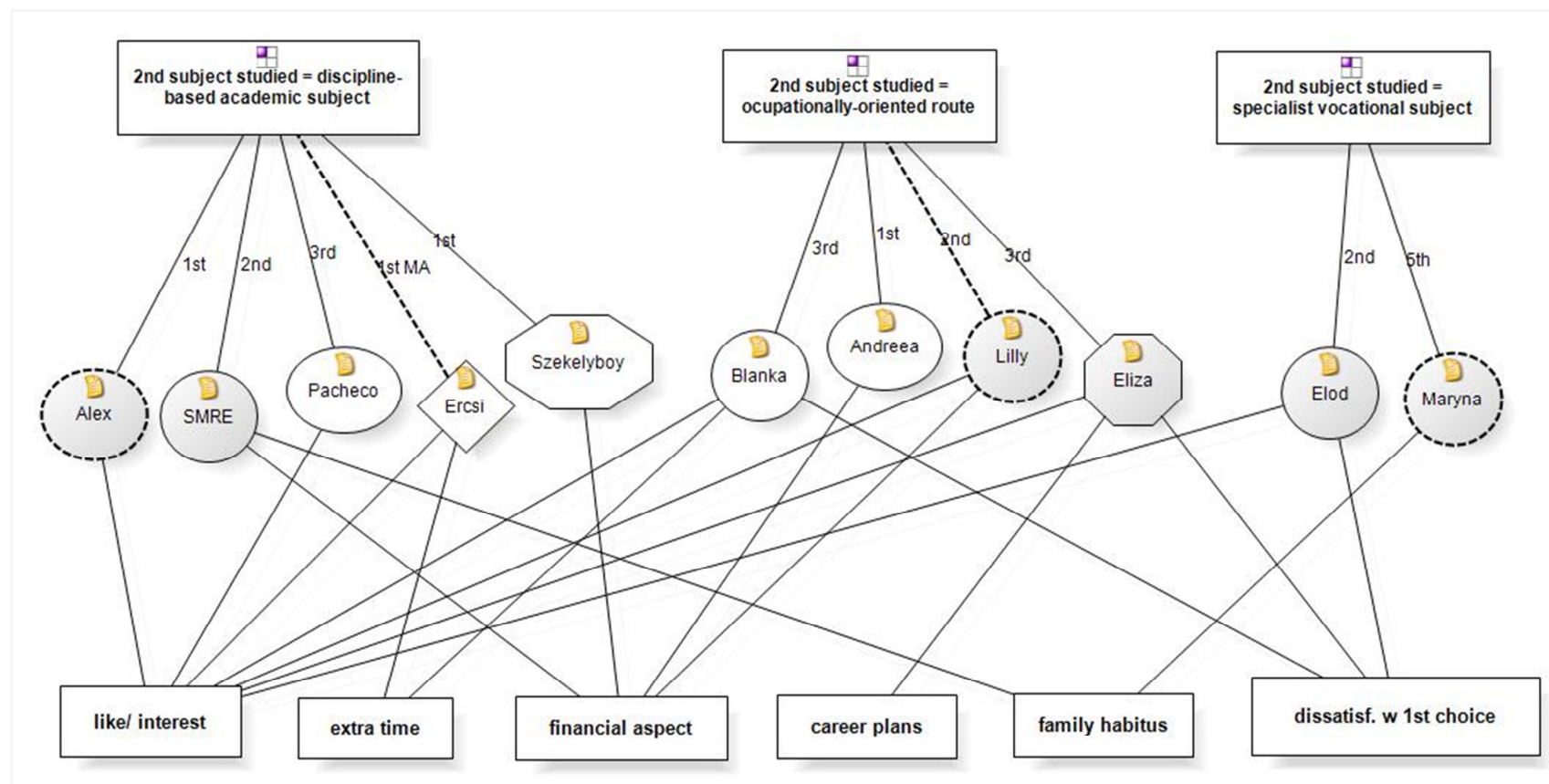
Andreea: ...I talked to the lecturers and I said that I will not have maximum attendance, but they were OK, they were understanding and also because in the [name of university] rules it states that if you are attending two courses than you are not required to have maximum attendance at lectures... so it was OK.

The busiest and most difficult periods were the exams for her, because during the three weeks she had to study and pass more than 10 modules. The third incentive that the university system 'gave' to students enrolled in two courses was that they did not need to attend similar modules in the two courses, nor pass exams in those. Students had the option to have their final grades from one department equated at the other department. **Székelyboy** also opted for the two courses in his first year at university, and his main reason was also financial although it happened before the admission process started, not as a result of it. He thought he would not gain admittance to his first choice course (Psychology) and he accepted the scholarship offered by the Theology department: if a student was enrolled at their department and in parallel was a student on a different course, then the department would pay for that student's tuition fees. So in essence the student would benefit from attending two courses without paying tuition fees.

Székelyboy: ...the department has a certain amount, from abroad and places... and they have an amount which they give to those who are at two universities. Here at my department the majority are at two universities...

In addition, not only that there were special arrangements for these students at university level, the Theology department was supportive and understanding of students enrolled in two courses when designing the course timetable and with essay deadlines or exams. For Székelyboy attending courses and passing exams did not seem to be problematic, but he mentioned that he struggled with the different epistemological positions of the two fields:

FIGURE 13. DAS POSITIONS BASED ON MOTIVATION FOR OPTING FOR THE SECOND COURSE³



³ Ercsi and Lilly appear with dashed connector lines as they were not in double status positions at the time of the interview. Ercsi completed her Masters course and ended her double status position which lasted for two years the year before I interviewed her. Lilly was in a double status position when she started her undergraduate course in England four years ago, as she continued her undergraduate degree started in her home country for one year while being a full time student in England.

Székelyboy: Regarding classes, I was able to go to both, the lecturers were understanding, but I have contradiction in myself... in one place they are saying one thing and at the other they are saying a different thing... they don't overlap, they are contradictory... they are saying that psychology and theology are similar fields, but I think they are not so close. But I can handle it. It's easy for me.

Both Andreea and Székelyboy talked about how they found the double aspects of their experiences interesting, how they were able to use or not use the knowledge gained in one course to help them in the other. They both liked above all the practical experiences which they had and felt they learned the most from those. Apart from doing two courses at the same time they were also engaged in other activities at the student union which they found beneficial both for their studies and their futures.

In England **Alex** enrolled in a double degree course in his first year, studying Ancient History and Archaeology. In contrast to the Romanian practice, his was a joint degree within his department and the administrative aspects were handled at departmental level, he did not need to manage conflicting timetables and exams. His motivation was also different than for Andreea and Székelyboy, he stated that he always had a passion for history but when he saw that there was the possibility of doing a double degree he decided to “try something a little bit more practical, archaeology”. He did not feel that his time at university was stressful and difficult, even though apart from studying he was constantly engaged in other activities as well to enhance his skills. He stated that he regretted his choice of Archaeology as he did not like it and he concluded that he was “going to stick to history”, like he initially planned.

Előd and SMRE started their second courses after the first year. **Előd** was disappointed by the lack of practical experiences in his Politics course and he decided to study law as it was an area he was interested in and he could see how he would be able combine the two fields together. He chose to study law at a New University partly because he wanted to learn Romanian, but also because he wanted to be surrounded by people similar to him, with Hungarian mother language and studying in Romanian.

He enjoyed his experiences in the New University more as it was an environment similar to the Waldorf school in which he grew up. He had a deep sense of community feeling, the social aspects of his studies were equally important as the knowledge that he gained by studying. He described the New University as “colourful” compared to

the “grey” Old University. He mentioned the several benefits of doing the two courses and he projected his future as continuing with both and focusing on aspects that “have a bit of both in them”.

For **SMRE** his first course was economics, while his second was theology. He liked what he was learning at his economics course and felt that lecturers were well-prepared and the theoretical aspects of the field were covered and also practical examples mentioned. He also praised the extra-curricular activities organised by the department as he saw these as good skills-enhancing opportunities, but felt that these were not for everyone and consequently thought that there should be more practical focus in the curricula and not just in the extra activities. He explained opting for theology with his family background and the presence of an opportunity (the scholarship). His parents worked for the department so he has always been surrounded with theology-related topics, and additionally the scholarship which the department offered seemed a good option. He said that it was not difficult to combine his studies and that he enjoyed the different world-views the subjects offered, similarly to Előd.

In England **Lilly** opted for a double status by happenstance. She missed the deadline to apply to study in England and decided (influenced by her friends and father) to enrol for one year in her home country instead of having a gap year. Although she enjoyed her time at the university in her home country she followed her plans to apply and study in England. Because she finished her first year in good standing she enrolled in her second year too in Romania but since the exams periods overlapped and the Romanian University did not accept her English grades, she was not able to sustain her double status and after the second year (first year on the English course) she froze her studies in Romania. Although this happened years ago she still defined herself in the first minutes of the interview as someone in double academic status “I’m actually doing two universities”, which showed the importance this position had for her and emotionally she was still connected to the place and people.

Eliza, Pacheco and Blanka all opted for the second degree while in the final year of the first one and Ercsi after graduating from her first degree and while doing a Masters.

All four opted for the second degree due to interest, but while for Pacheco this was the only reason, both Blanka and Eliza opted for the second degree because they were disappointed by their first choice and felt that it was not connected to their chosen career paths. **Blanka** felt that she would not be able to cope in the world of work with an International Relations European Studies degree so she decided to opt for something which was more practical and also interested her for a long time, sociology. She felt that there was a disproportionate focus on history topics that lecturers were familiar with and the course structure lacked modules about international relations and European studies. She also felt that she was not able to see the connection between what she was studying and how she could use it in the world of work as there were hardly any practical experiences organised. The sociology course on the other hand was more practice-oriented, she enjoyed studying it more, felt the lecturers were more approachable and they focused on presenting the practical aspects of the subject too, consequently she could see the practical use of what she was doing, she was more engaged in extra-curricular activities as well and she was planning to continue to focus on this field in the future. She engaged in double academic status as she felt that she had the extra time to devote to something she was interested in and as she found where her interests lied she became more engaged in extra-curricular activities too.

Similarly, **Eliza** also started her second degree because she was disappointed by her first choice, not feeling Economics was “her world” although she did appreciate the mentality and the worldview she got from her course. She did not feel that combining the two courses was very difficult due to the nature of the field and the courses – her second option was Sociology – she did however complain about the rigidity of some lecturers and how she was penalised when she was not able to prepare for a course.

Eliza: It's not difficult at all if one is only focusing on the university. There are 7-7 modules at the 2 universities, that's 28 hours with 1 lecture and 1 seminar, that's not the world for 5 days. I was lucky this semester, because only 2 of my classes collide and the lecturers are also understanding, you can talk to them that I come only bi-weekly because I need to go to the other one too. So if the student is serious about doing it, then it's manageable.

Pacheco decided to opt for Geography as his second course, apart from studying Tourism. His rationale was different, he was finally pursuing his interests and during

the interview he kept emphasizing that it was not the same as studying for two different courses. He was able to have several of his modules equated, so his workload was not as high as for students studying at different departments and the support received from his lecturers was also higher because they already knew him and 'he belonged' to that department:

Pacheco: They overlooked if I didn't go to classes, they overlooked if I didn't submit my assignments in time, they overlooked if I didn't take my exams when the others did and I could negotiate a different date. They were absolutely flexible in this respect.

For him the difficulty was that he needed to write his undergraduate and his postgraduate dissertation at the same time and he had to juggle the deadlines his lecturers gave him. But he saw the two as complementary and he was planning to engage in PhD studies and in an academic career. From this perspective he was similar to the girls, Eliza and Blanka, as he used his second degree for future career reasons.

Ercsi opted for the double status position after graduating from her Economics degree and was starting her MA course because she knew she would have spare time and thought she could spend it better (*{ne töltsem potyára itt az időt Kolozsváron}*) by opting for a second degree. Her second option was Geography as it was an area she was interested in. She mentioned that although lecturers understood her situation, they did comment that it was not beneficial for her to "ride two horses at the same time (*{két lovat egyszerre megnyergelni}*)..." and she mentioned that it was a very busy period and her grades were not so good but she managed to pass all her exams. Although there were university policies in place for double academic status students, much depended on the department and especially on individual lecturers how they treated students in these situations. In Ercsi's case the departments she was attending were less keen on having double status students.

Maryna opted to come to England when she was a final year student in law in her home country. She transferred part time there and took up full time studies in England also in law. She felt it was not difficult to do the two courses as in her home country part time students were not required to have contact hours and as long as she could pass her exams she was fine.

Maryna: They have sort of lectures for one month for part time students but at the same time the School of Law knows that I'm in different country so they are OK for me not attending but at the same time I have to be back for my exams and for my credits anyway. But they are sort of OK if I can still pass it and do whatever you want... so no one teacher will pay too much attention for part time students there.

There is no estimate how many students at the Romanian university were engaged in double academic status, but in the online questionnaire which students at the Romanian university completed (not representative of all the students enrolled at the university) 21.3% of the students responded that they were either enrolled in two courses at that time or they were already in the possession of a university degree and were studying for a second one. It was visible how the whole HE/university field in Romania was constructed and operated in a way to enable students to study for two degrees at the same time. Although the benefits for the university were not known specifically, it is possible that since a student is registered at two departments, the university counts them two times when reporting about the overall number of students registered at the university. In addition the student needed to pay a certain amount for the possibility to do two degrees at the same time, which although is a reduced rate, if there was no such opportunity then students would graduate only from one degree, so it would not be financially beneficial for the university. Students regard the possibility for DAS as a normal part of the HE system in Romania and were open about their positions. They told their lecturers and used the DAS to negotiate their levels of engagement with the course. Lecturers seemed supportive as they gave them absences or accepted delayed papers, although some might have been opinionated, like in Ercsi's case or inflexible, like in Eliza's case.

Overall, students who engaged in double academic status in their first year, opted for the position either because of the financial advantages or because they were not prepared to opt for just one subject, one career option at that moment in time. Those students who opted for the second degree later, in their second or third years made a conscious choice of doing something different or something extra mainly because they realised that their first option was not entirely fulfilling. Students talked about the challenges of combining the two degrees both from a time perspective and in terms of the curricula, but generally highlighted that they were able to fulfil both commitments.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

With this sub-chapter my intention was to highlight the multiple positions that students experienced while being at university. Opting for a double academic status was a characteristic of Eastern European students, and was predominant in the Romanian context. Those students who opted for DAS in their first year were not able to decide which subject to choose and also decided to take advantage of the financial benefits of the opportunity. Those students who opted for a second degree later in their studies re-evaluated their interests and considered their future plans and decided to opt for a second course which fitted more in what they wanted to study and possibly work after graduation. Making decision about DAS seemed to be within the control of the students, no significant others were mentioned and no other constraints mentioned on their choices. Students decided to act based on the horizons for action they saw in front of them and the opportunities they encountered within the national, institutional and departmental education system. In contrast, for engaging in extra-curricular activities alongside their studies students were either influenced by the opportunities presented to them by their lecturers or by friends and other colleagues. Departmental projects seemed to be characteristic within the Romanian HE system, where students engaged in projects alongside their lecturers or older colleagues. Participating in the departmental student society was mainly through friendship circles and there was no senior input, unless requested. Overall, students highlighted the benefits of both types of activities and they saw them as beneficial for their skills, development and future career plans. They also highlighted the social contacts they were able to make through their engagement in these activities. Compulsory internship experiences were classified as disappointing by most of the participants, while those students who participated in additional internships highlighted their value. It might be that due to the previous experience students' expectations were lower, or they were more prepared and interested as they made more conscious choices with regard to the second option. Foreign study experiences were similarly praised for their social and also experiential value. Activities that were outside of the department included paid or unpaid activities of various lengths and time commitments. There were a few students engaged in

regular paid or unpaid activities, but all highlighted the benefits of their involvement even though it was sometimes difficult to manage deadlines and clashes in commitments. In general occasional and holiday work was praised by students as a great opportunity to gain experience and money while not interfering with their studies and social lives.

Overall, echoing the findings of Brooks (2006) and Broadbridge (2006), my students felt that their engagement in extra activities was beneficial for them both for their present and future lives and even those who did not participate actively in these opportunities highlighted the beneficial changes they saw in their colleagues who engaged in extra activities. Significant others played an important role in students' engagement, particularly in the Romanian context and within the department, but several students highlighted their own initiatives and agency in finding the opportunities they wanted.

Concerns raised in the literature with students' engagement in various work and extra-curricular activities highlighted the amount of time dedicated to working versus studying (Canny 2002; McInnis & Hartley 2002; Callender 2008) and the decrease in academic performance and risks of drop-out (Curtis & Shani 2002; Curtis & Williams 2002; Metcalf 2003; Manthei & Gilmore 2005; Humphrey 2006) of those who were working. In contrast to the problems voiced in these studies, the students I interviewed emphasized the beneficial aspects and they highlighted that they always prioritised their studies over other activities and they were determined to graduate. A decrease in their study commitments and lower levels of academic achievement were recognised as being the result of their MSP, but students valued the benefits of multiple experiences more than these side effects and they did not mention isolation, as did students in Moreau and Leathwood's (2006) study, but rather emphasised the positive social aspects of particularly the activities within the department.

To sum up, students' actions were situated within individual and institutionally shaped horizons of action, but significant others were important in suggesting them additional possibilities and all students highlighted that as a result of their participation in these activities their worldview widened, they felt more mature and independent. Differences in students' approach and 'use' of their MSP were apparent

within the two country contexts. In Romania students informed their lecturers about their MSP and used them to negotiate their levels of engagement with the course, while in England this idea was rejected by the students and they highlighted that the MSP never interfered with their study commitments.

*

Including students' engagement in extra activities in the transition pathways typology presents an interesting picture, particularly viewed together with their views on their studies. It was visible how students who said the same reasons for going to university took different routes through HE for various reasons.

First, those who were part of the normal transition pathway and those who stated that they were satisfied with their studies were engaged in 1-2 mainly short-term activities. Adela and Ercsi were the only ones who engaged in 3 activities, from which the departmental ones were closely related to their career plans, while those outside of the department were for financial reasons. The English students (both home and international) were not very active as they focused mainly on their studies.

Those students who stated that they were not satisfied with their studies spoke about their extra-curricular activities as something that complemented their studies. Alex spoke about enhancing his employability skills, but also experimenting with what he liked and disliked through engaging in various activities. Blanka opted for a second degree with the explicit aim to learn something different than her previous degree and she started engaging in other activities, mainly connected to the department, in her second degree. Katalin was aiming to finish her degree and then start another one at a different department. These students used their extra-curricular activities to complement their studies, to gain knowledge and skills that they could not gain through their studies.

Apart from Alfred, Teo, Pacheco and Margaret, students who were part of the choice transition pathway were not extensively involved in extra activities. All these students stated a heightened interest mainly in their studies.

TABLE 6. TRANSITION PATHWAYS – HE EXPERIENCE

Alias	Mot.	Subject	Location	Theory	Practice	MSP
NORMAL TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied & focused on studies						
Adela	NORM	NORM	NORM	+	-	internship holiday work occasional work
Bajusz				-	+	university project occasional work
Elouise	NORM	NORM	CHOICE	+		unpaid work
Anna				+		-
Ercsi						DAS foreign study occasional work
Lilly				+ / -		DAS
Maria						foreign study
Maryna						DAS unpaid work
Sarah-Anne				+		PT work
Frank	NORM	NORM	HAPP			-
J.J.						-
NORMAL TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on extra activities						
Alex	NORM	NORM	CHOICE	+ / -	+ / -	DAS internship student union occasional work university project unpaid work
Kristóf	CHOICE	NORM	NORM		-	FT work
Blanka	NORM	HAPP	NORM	-	-	DAS foreign study university project unpaid work
Katalin				+ / -	-	university project student union holiday work
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied & focused on studies						
Ayoyinka	CHOICE	CHOICE	CHOICE			-
Thomas	CHOICE	NORM	CHOICE	+		-
Rebecca	CHOICE	HAPP	CHOICE	+		student union PT work
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied & focused on extra						
Alfred	NORM	CHOICE	CHOICE	+		internship student union
Teo				+		student union occasional work unpaid work

Alias	Mot.	Subject	Location	Theory	Practice	MSP
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on studies						
Doriana	CHOICE	CHOICE	CHOICE	-		-
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on extra						
Pacheco	CHOICE	HAPP	CHOICE	+	-	DAS foreign study university project holiday work
Margaret	NORM	CHOICE	CHOICE	-		internship holiday work unpaid work
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied & focused on studies						
Kissa	CHOICE	HAPP	HAPP	+		FT work
Álmos				+		-
Gordon						-
István	HAPP	HAPP	NORM	+		occasional work
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied & focused on extra						
Ioana	NORM	HAPP	HAPP	+	+	student union internship
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on studies						
Johey	HAPP	HAPP	HAPP	-	-	holiday work
Veronica	CHOICE	HAPP	HAPP	-		-
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on extra						
Előd	NORM	HAPP	HAPP	+	-	DAS student union university project
Lucy				+	-	holiday work unpaid work
Eliza	CHOICE	HAPP	HAPP	-	-	DAS unpaid work
INCONSISTENT TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied & focused on studies & extra						
Ally	NORM	CHOICE	HAPP	+	+	holiday work internship student union university project unpaid work
Emőke						occasional work
Székelyboy	CHOICE	HAPP	NORM			DAS student union
INCONSISTENT TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on studies						
Emese	NORM	HAPP	CHOICE	-	-	foreign study university project student union
Erika	CHOICE	HAPP	NORM		-	holiday work
SMRE	CHOICE	HAPP	NORM		-	DAS university project

Alias	Mot.	Subject	Location	Theory	Practice	MSP
INCONSISTENT TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on extra						
Andreea	NORM	HAPP	CHOICE	+ / -	+	DAS internship student union
Ioan	NORM	HAPP	CHOICE	+	-	university project holiday work unpaid work training
Liana	NORM	HAPP	CHOICE	+	-	holiday work

The English students were mainly focused on their studies, only Rebecca was working and her motivations were social and financial. Alfred and Teo were more purposeful with their activities (although Pacheco's DAS could also be included here). Alfred was going on internships partly for the money, but also to enhance his chances for a good graduate job, and Teo was involved in paid and unpaid activities because she felt that she needed to be more active. Both these students spoke about their engagement in extra activities to gain experience and also to experiment with various careers.

Students who spoke about their dissatisfaction with their studies also used the extracurricular activities to supplement their knowledge. Pacheco was similar to Alfred and Teo in that he opted for DAS in order to learn something he was more interested in and he saw this choice as connected to his future career plans.

Students who were part of the happenstance pathway could again be split into two, as there were some (like Johey, Kissa, Almos, Gordon, István, Veronica) who focused mainly on their studies, while the others (Előd, Lucy, Ioana and Eliza) focused on extra activities. Their choice of activities was important as all these students were trying to identify what future careers interested them. Előd and Eliza decided to engage in a second degree because they were not satisfied with their first choice and felt they could not imagine their future within those. Lucy was experimenting with various unpaid work to see the one that interested her and Ioana wanted to become more engaging and to push herself to interact more as she thought that would benefit her long-term.

Those students who I placed in the inconsistent transition seemed overall the most active from all the types. Only Emese, Erika and SMRE highlighted their interests in their studies, but even they engaged in various activities, albeit due to interest and not

connected to future career plans, as was the case with others in this group. Ally engaged in the most activities, she used these to experiment with various areas that interested her. Székelyboy and Emőke while focused mainly on their studies, they were also engaged purposefully in other activities as well and they stated that they found what interested them in the long term through engaging in these activities. Andreea, Ioan and Liana spoke about their dissatisfaction with their studies and they tried to use their engagement in extra activities to enhance their knowledge and, particularly Ioan and Andreea, to experiment with various careers.

Overall, a different pattern seems to be emerging across the four transitions pathways identified, which seems to suggest that the initially identified four types do not hold up during university studies. Nevertheless, I will first include students' future plans in the analysis and then I might consider restructuring the typology.

CONCLUDING REMARKS – HE EXPERIENCES

In this chapter my intention was to answer two research questions: *How do students understand and describe their HE experience?*, and *What role do extracurricular activities and/or work experience have in students' HE experience and perceptions about transitions to work?*. In order to answer the first I explored students' perceptions about the theoretical and practical aspects of their course. Moving from school to university meant simultaneously academic, personal, social, and lifestyle transitions for students and some of them embarked on this journey anticipating with excitement the new experiences, while others were fearful of how their life might turn out and experienced it as a "shock". One of the main findings was the importance of reliable prior information about university life and how students could have prepared for it and once at university the importance of social bonds, to establish a sense of belonging and knowing where to turn if they had questions. The information and support system in England tended to have a 'one-size fits all' approach, but it did not become a problem because of the variety of sources students had access to and they could identify the best way for them to gain the information they needed and to use the knowledge gained to their advantage. In contrast, in Romania the lack of formal sources of information

meant that students often relied on hot knowledge from friends, siblings and acquaintances.

In general, students regarded the theoretical aspects of their studies in a positive light while the practical aspects were defined as unsatisfactory. Those students who were deeply interested in their chosen subject highlighted the pleasures of being able to learn, to establish good rapport with colleagues and lecturers. Other students, who were more extrinsically motivated expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of possibilities to specialize, particularly in Romania, which they saw as mainly due to the lack of teaching staff (mainly in the Hungarian line within the department) and the lack of applied, practical knowledge they received in the modules. In England students were generally more satisfied with their studies, and with the level of support they received both from within the department and from the university. Their perception about university and their studies differed from their Romanian colleagues, in that they regarded their studies more as the place where they learned about theoretical aspects of the subject and they recognised the fact that they needed to engage in other activities (usually outside the department) to learn about how they could apply what they studied. In contrast, in Romania students' expectations were to learn both the theory and practice in the lecture theatre. Some students recognised the need for more agency and engagement on their part, but they still had higher expectations of their lecturers and courses. One of the strategies students in Romania adopted to deal with their dissatisfaction with their studies was to opt to study a second degree while still finishing the first one and this way engaging in double academic statuses (Pacheco, Blanka, Eliza, and Előd). Some students opted to finish first their studies and they were contemplating at the time of the interview to apply for a second degree, like Katalin. This general tendency to search for knowledge and value formal education above practical experience outside the university was characteristic of the Romanian context and it was in stark contrast to the policies in England where gaining employability skills outside of the curriculum was more appreciated.

Power and colleagues (2003, p. 99) mentioned the 'troubled' and 'broken' progression that several of their participants experienced from school to successfully gaining a degree. In my study there were several students who had false starts or ended up

opting for something different. Gordon decided to drop out of his first choice and study sociology instead, Alfred decided not to complete his studies in Germany and came to England instead, and those students who became dissatisfied with their studies (Blanka, Előd, Veronica, Eliza) they could have all dropped out and continued only with their second choice, but they acted differently partly due to the structural opportunities present.

Double academic statuses were part of the second research question that I wanted to answer in this chapter. Overall my intention was to complement the existing literature on double status positions – combining work and studies – and to point out that students actually experienced simultaneously multiple work and learning positions while at university, so a more adequate term to describe their experiences was MSP – multiple status positions. I separated students' activities into two main groups based on place considerations: activities connected to the department and activities outside of the department.

The availability of opportunities within the department seemed country-dependent. In Romania students' narratives displayed the good rapport that existed between lecturers (usually young lecturers) and students and consequently the various possibilities these students enjoyed to gain practical experience alongside more experienced staff. In England students' practical activities were mainly outside of the departmental premises, staff seemed approachable and helpful, but the students mentioned a different rapport between them and the lecturers. These students did not have opportunities to get involved in projects alongside their lecturers or professors and their extra-curricular experiences were generally less related to their studies. Students in England were more active outside of the department, while students in Romania engaged in activities both within and outside the department. Financial reasons were mentioned primarily for engaging in full time and part time work, while the benefits for their skills, their social life and their confidence were recognised by all students. They all mentioned the problems that resulted from conflicting schedules and the time management that was necessary to engage and complete all the activities, but they also highlighted their enjoyment in being active and they saw more the beneficial aspects than the problems they encountered. Lecturers played important roles in

students' engagement in departmental projects, while friends and colleagues introduced them to other paid and unpaid opportunities. Some students were more active as they internalised the employability policy and realised that they needed to be more proactive in order to increase their knowledge and skills and become more employable (like Alex in England and to a certain extent Ally and Teo in Romania). It was part of the higher education system that students in England became familiarised with the employability policies as they started their studies and Alex mentioned that he could see adverts everywhere about what and how to increase his skills base while at university: "basically everywhere, it's pretty well advertised. It's hard to miss them. You have to try really hard to miss them." In contrast in Romania students mentioned both the lack of opportunities and the lack of information and guidance so they needed to be more proactive to engage in extra activities. As presented earlier, students engaged in work and other activities either because of financial constraints, or because of friendship networks and they learned some of the benefits of their engagement while on the job/activity from colleagues. Eliza felt that it would be the duty of the university to spoon-feed students that they should pay more attention to their extra-curricular activities.

There were several students who were 'fishing for' activities to engage in, as Brooks and Everett (2008, p. 383) defined in their study, or the trendsetters of du Bois-Reymond's (2004) study. Alex and Sarah-Anne (normal transition), Alfred and Teo (choice transition), Lucy (happenstance transition) and Andreea, Ioan, Székelyboy and Ally (inconsistent transition) could be classified in this group as they were deliberately seeking different activities to engage in within or outside of the department, connected or not connected to their studies, either paid or unpaid. They mentioned realising that these experiences were beneficial for their present and future careers and they also enjoyed the experience as they experimented with various different fields and job types. The social networks that they developed as a result were also mentioned as one of the beneficial aspects. A different type of students, similarly 'fishing for activities' also emerged, but these were rather 'fishing' for one different activity and not various activities. These were the students who reported being dissatisfied with their studies

and wanted to change and learn something different (Blanka, Liana, Előd, Pacheco and Eliza).

In general students in my study tended to become involved in MSP and although the activities they engaged in were not purely for employability reasons, as they tended to highlight happenstance, significant others and intrinsic reasons for their involvement, once they gained some experience they tended to see the value of their activities both for their present lives and their futures. So overall I would agree with Brooks and Everett's (2008, p. 383) prediction, that this strategy of 'fishing for' activities or engaging in MSP as I defined it, would become the contemporary student experience and mode of learning. This is also connected to the idea that the race for qualifications becomes an *opportunity trap* (Brown, Lauder & Ashton 2011, p. 12) that forces students to engage in different extra activities to boost their credentials and earn an edge in the labour market. The saturation of experiences was expressed by Alfred when he talked about the fact that he did all he was supposed to do (study and do internships) and he still was not offered a job at the end – so his solution was to boost his credentials by doing a Masters. Romanian students had a similar strategy (although not explicitly recognised or stated by all) that the BA was not enough and that they needed an MA to distinguish themselves in the labour market. Additionally, in contrast to what Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) identified two decades ago as the key to success – the amount of effort students put into their academic studies and their involvement in the life of the university – students in my study highlighted the practical aspects of their studies as the most important. Students who engaged in activities that provided them with opportunities to apply the knowledge received in the 'real' world highlighted their sense of fulfilment, satisfaction and were overall happier with their studies and university experience. This was particularly important in the English context which places "students at the heart of the system" (BIS 2011).

In the next chapter I focus on students' perceptions about their future (career) plans just before graduation from BA or MA.

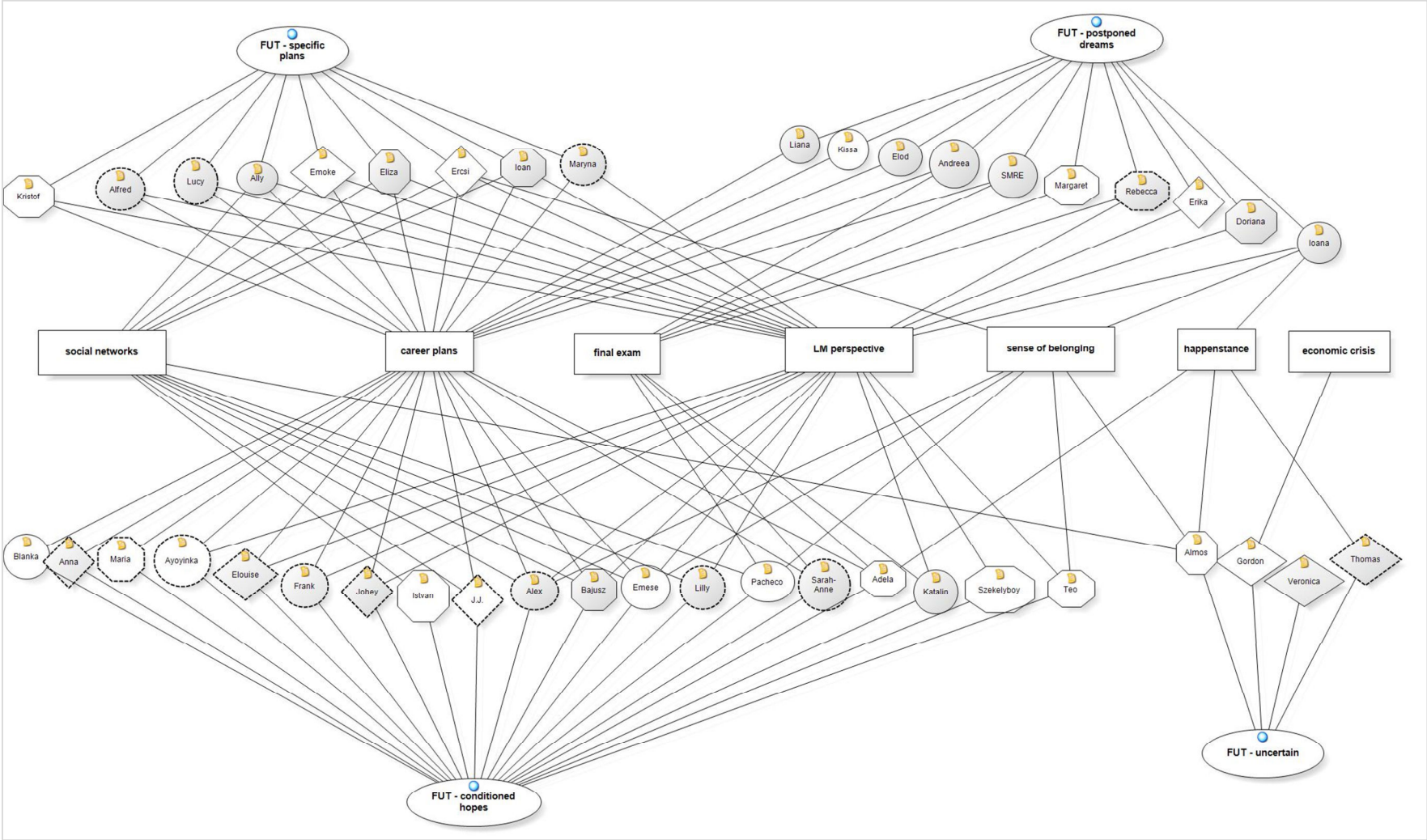
CHAPTER 6 - FUTURE (CAREER) PLANS

In previous chapters I presented aspects about students' lives in the two countries, why they wanted to engage in university life, how they made that decision, with what parameters can their university experience be described and now this chapter focuses on students' perceptions about their future (career) plans. I consider what completing university studies meant to students who lived in different country contexts, how that related to their perceptions about the labour market and what futures and careers did they foresee themselves having. Within the narratives on each of these themes I read for topics mentioned as well as for the structure of the narratives and the contextual factors (particularly references to the economic climate) students mentioned. Having in mind these questions contributed to answering the final research question of this study: *How does the current economic climate influence students' strategies and perceptions about their (future) career and how do they see their life after graduation?*

Nilsen (1999, pp. 178-179) made a distinction between dreams, hopes and plans with regard to young people's future plans. She defined dreams as belonging to a timeless and spaceless territory where no commitments were needed from the young persons. Hopes were on the other hand seen as having time and space boundaries and plans were the most concrete from all as the young people had clear boundaries in terms of time and space and were expressed as having control over the course of the events.

Figure 14 presents students' future plans and the main influential factors they mentioned in the narratives. I placed students in four different topic groups based on how they narrated their futures: those who mentioned specific plans, those who spoke about conditioned hopes, those who deliberately postponed the decision-making and finally those students who had uncertain ideas or did not want to make plans. These four topic groups follow Nilsen's dreams, hopes and plans broadly, but she did not speak about uncertain futures. Figure 14 is slightly different than the previous graphs, as the influential factors are displayed in the middle part of the graph, the four different topic groups are visible in the four corners and between the topic groups and the influential factors are the students. The shapes and shading are identical to the previous graphs.

FIGURE 14. FUTURE (CAREER) PLANS



1. SPECIFIC PLANS

Several students mentioned having specific plans, they stated that they knew what and where they were going to do after graduation and they also narrated the decision-making process which contained references to agency and individual control over how they managed their lives and utilised previous contacts and various education, cultural and economic resources to reach future plans.

Alfred, Ally and Lucy all applied and secured a place on a Masters programme. Lucy and Alfred had been accepted to study for a Masters at a different university and hoped they would secure a job after that. Ally was also planning to attend a Masters programme at a different institution and a different country. She opted to study further in Germany and hoped that after the Masters programme she would have reasons to return to her home country and work there. Kristóf was planning to dedicate his time to build the business he started with his colleagues in the past year. Maryna was planning to work at the university for at least a year, writing her applications for internship so she could secure a legal training course for next year and realise her dreams of becoming a lawyer.

Emőke, Ercsi, Ioan and Eliza have not secured their future position at the time of the interview, but they knew what they wanted to do and where. Emőke was planning to augment her studies but not via formal education. She had plans to attend short training courses that would have allowed her to specialise her previous studies and knowledge on a different area. Similarly, Eliza also felt that what interested her was outside the formal curricula at university, so she wanted to apply to participate in courses organised by private providers to augment her skills. Ioan was also planning to continue his studies at Masters level, find work while studying and also set up a business with his colleagues. Ercsi already had a Masters degree so she was planning to find employment and maybe do another Masters via distance learning.

Overall, these students had clear ideas about the direction they wanted their life and career to be going and they were also aware of the steps they needed to take. They

consulted a variety of sources of information (both hot and cold) using their social networks, they were aware of some alternative options as well, but at the time of the interview they had opted to pursue the career and future plans they were interested in and which they felt would give them the most benefits in the long term. They saw their futures as something within their control. The use of the active voice was frequent in these narratives. Temporally the narratives were situated both within the short-term future (1-2 years) and longer term futures (3-5 years) whereas spatially students seemed mobile, they thought about various possibilities: Alex considered staying in the UK or moving back to his home country, in a particular city; Alfred was planning to stay in the UK and work after he graduated from the Masters in London; Ally planned to study abroad for the Masters but was undecided about what would happen after that and she contemplated both going back to her home country or staying abroad; Eliza wanted to attend training sessions abroad but return to work in her home country; Ioan planned to stay in his home country, but also to study abroad for a short period of time.

2. CONDITIONED HOPES

Hopes were seen as having time and space boundaries (Nilsen 1999, p. 179), and this corresponded to the conditional plans that my students mentioned. They placed their future plans within a time frame, albeit for some this was still timeless as it was outside of their control, but for others the plans could materialise upon successful graduation from their current course.

Students within this cluster had either self-imposed or externally imposed conditional factors that affected their ability to plan. Alex was not completely certain about where he would be in a few months' time, but he had already sent applications to several institutions for Masters programmes and was waiting for their responses. He had clear plans in terms of what he wanted to do after he graduated. He realised during his fieldwork that he was not interested in the practical aspects of his course and he decided to study modern history at Masters level. Then after the Masters he was thinking of doing a PhD and stay in academia either in the UK or in his home country.

Pacheco, Blanka, Katalin and Lilly wanted to continue their studies but they needed to wait until the application cycle opened so they did not know where they would be after graduation, apart from continuing their studies. Blanka at the time of the interview saw two possible routes she could follow: doing a PhD abroad as she wanted to study in Hungarian language, or finding a job and doing a Masters in Sociology at the same department. Katalin was planning to enrol for a second degree after she graduated from her politics course. She felt that learning languages as a second degree would be a good idea and it was compatible with the politics degree as well. She also felt that she would need to do a Masters and gain some work experience. Johey also decided to embark on the academic route, so he applied to several places to do a PhD and he was waiting to see where he would get a scholarship. He stated that he did not know what would happen in the distant future as he needed to get into the PhD programme first and then he would see whether he liked the academic route or not. Similarly Lilly saw the PhD as the next best option for her due to her interests and lack of work experience. She was unsure whether she wanted to stay in academia or look for a job after the PhD. Bajusz was keen on doing a PhD but felt that "it is not entirely up to" him what happens as usually there were not many places advertised and the competition was high. The history and archaeology and in general the cultural field in Romania, he stated, was in a precarious situation. Jobs were being frozen because of underfunding and there were no possibilities especially for young graduates to get into permanent jobs, they can hope only for temporary contracts. So he saw the structural factors of releasing PhD positions and new positions in the labour market as a conditional element for him to achieve his goals of working as an archaeologist.

Adela was inclined towards entering the labour market after graduating, but her plans were not so well-sketched and she stressed that the job prospects were dependent on different factors that were to a certain extent outside of her control. She had ideas about what kind of jobs she was interested in, but the whole narrative was permeated with references to 'if's and 'luck' and 'chance' so she appeared less convinced of her value and whether she would be able to achieve what she wanted. Her main conditional factor seemed to be the final exam and gaining a degree after the course. Pacheco felt the same way about his final exam as he needed the degree to apply for a

PhD course. On the other hand, Sarah-Anne had plans to change jobs after finishing the course.

Teo was only in her second year, but knew that she wanted to study further after she graduated from her undergraduate programme, and had a different kind of conditional factor than her colleagues. She was going to the USA for a summer work programme and she planned to decide about her future after her return. She felt that if she liked the independence from her parents, she might consider to study abroad after graduation, if not, she could stay in her home city and work while doing a Masters. Similarly, Székelyboy was also in his second year and he knew he would be studying further but he felt that he will decide which career interested him most during his last year, but was planning to return to his hometown and possibly work as a teacher.

J.J., Elouise and Frank spoke about their plans for when they go home. Frank wanted to search for a better position and J.J. was planning to speak to her parents about the type of job and where she wanted it. These students' feeling was that post-study work opportunities for international students in the UK were limited and hence they did not plan to stay, similarly to the students reported in Bamber's (2014) study.

Temporally these students' narratives were situated around the graduation, many using the leaving exam as a condition to what will happen to them in the future or the Masters / PhD as a period to decide about their future. Regarding post-graduation plans, they did not see far ahead in the future, just the immediate months after graduation and when they needed to apply for a Masters/PhD or a job. These students often mentioned 'luck' or 'chance' or they stated they did not believe that they were smart enough or knowledgeable enough or well-connected enough to obtain certain positions, either Masters / PhD studies or work. They had a step-by-step approach towards their futures and careers stating that if they managed to graduate or get into the desired programme then they would see what to do next.

3. POSTPONED DREAMS

The postponed decisions cluster of students corresponded to Nilsen's dreams category as students deliberately stated that they did not decide anything regarding their future career plans, they made no commitments. The thoughts they had about possible career routes were positioned in a spaceless and timeless realm with no certainty that they would materialise in anything more than dreams.

Some of the students in this cluster displayed the step-by-step approach mentioned previously, but they differed from the previous group because they did not want to make decisions until the critical event happened in their life. They had some ideas, but felt that they would make a decision regarding their future at a later moment in time, as Andreea mentioned:

Andreea: I want to work as a PR consultant, maybe a bit of publicity I would really like. I'd like to work within this field, but I don't know... I'll see after I graduate {o să văd acumă când termin}.... But until I see my final exams passed {licențele date}, at least one of them, I cannot concentrate very hard on the Masters.

Erika also aimed to do a Masters at the same department where she was studying, but in Romanian language because she wanted to learn the terminology in both Hungarian and Romanian. She was unsure what she would do after the Masters and stated that "it is not always good to make plans ahead. Your life might not turn out like that {...sokszor nem jó tervezni előre. Nem mindig úgy alakul az életed se}". Doriană also wanted to study further but was pessimistic in terms of her chances of finding graduate employment as she saw many graduates working in low paying jobs and she did not want to become a waitress. She stated that she would continue studying as long as necessary but she wanted to work in her field.

Liana was planning to take a gap year and travel around Europe so she would decide about which Masters to study and where after she returned. Rebecca was planning to work in something that she had experience in until she decided what she wanted to do because she stated that she did not know at that moment in time: "I think that I need a couple of years to probably search for something that is going to be a career." She stated that she needed to finish her university work, to graduate and then she could sit down and decide about her future.

Előd aimed to finish his law course after he got the degree from politics, but he also contemplated doing a Masters in politics while finishing his law studies. He was uncertain about what he was going to do and stated that doing a Masters was “a plan which I will either do or I will not {Ez egy olyan meghatározott terv amit vagy megvalósítok vagy nem}”. Similarly, SMRE and Kissa were also planning to apply for a Masters but were not sure where and what to opt for.

Ioana saw multiple opportunities in front of her and she was uncertain which route to follow. At the time of the interview, she had decided to do a Masters in human resource management, but she stated that if she was offered a different opportunity she would take it. Similarly to Brannen and Nilsen’s research participants (2002) she saw this period of her life as the time to experiment, to try out new avenues as she was still flexible and without commitments. Similarly to Álmos, she also felt that having a sense of belonging was important and this was why she was unsure whether she wanted to do the Masters in the university city or in her hometown.

Margaret said that she had a fear of the future and she tended to leave everything for the last moment. She was also planning to do a Masters and initially she was aiming to go abroad, but she did not apply and now she was thinking about continuing her studies in the university city, but was unsure whether she would stay with the same subject or opt for something different. She felt she needed to concentrate first on obtaining her degree and she could focus on the Masters after that. In Romania most of the students opted to continue their studies in the same institution as where they did the BA and frequently within the same department. This did not necessarily reflect their interests or future plans, rather it seemed the easiest option. Blanka, who was finishing her Masters, summed up nicely the tendency of these students to continue their studies at the same place, even if they were not satisfied with the programme:

Blanka: I graduated from my BA and then came the Masters and I enrolled to the same department because, a normal person... if they didn’t like the BA then they wouldn’t go to the MA... but I went because if I’m here in [name of the city] because of the sociology course then I of course continue doing the Masters because that’s an extra paper, an extra qualification... so this was my thinking... because it’s not very difficult, it’s not much effort knowledge-wise and time-wise to finish the Masters, it looks good that I completed 2 cycles of the same...

Kristóf also mentioned his disillusionment of the level of the BA programme, but nevertheless he decided to continue studying in the same department, firstly because he thought that having a MA degree would be an advantage in the labour market, secondly because he hoped that the MA would be more practical.

Romanian students in this cluster stated that they wanted to do a Masters, but they were not sure why. To a certain extent it seemed a natural step to take and it allowed them two extra years to decide what jobs they wanted to apply for. The English students opted to work while deciding what career to pursue, instead of continuing their studies. These strategies were deeply rooted in the overall national opinion, the perception of education and Masters education as well as the perception about the value of the undergraduate degree in the country. While in England the general view within HE circles and outside was that the undergraduate degree represented the entrance to graduate jobs, in Romania the perception was that the undergraduate degree was not enough and students needed to do a Masters as well. This perception was to certain extent a result of the changes in the HE system – when Romania adopted the Bologna cycles it changed the 4 year undergraduate programme and 1 year Masters to 3 years undergraduate and 2 years Masters.

Overall, students within this cluster displayed a tendency to postpone the decision-making regarding their future plans either until after graduation or after finishing some other project they had planned. These students had vague ideas about what careers they wanted to pursue and they were hoping that by postponing the decision-making they could “figure out” what they wanted to do. Both Rebecca and Andreea mentioned the stresses of the last few months of their programme and they stated they had to concentrate on their studies and everything else could come only after that stage was completed. Students cited other emotional aspects as well: feeling uncertain, not being able to decide, feeling confused, disappointed. They did not mention any significant others nor thinking about contacting student or career services to ask for guidance or help. They lived in the present and their main strategy was to deal with the immediate future. They had vague ideas about long term plans, which they felt were bound to change.

4. UNCERTAIN FUTURES

Students within this cluster stated that they had some ideas about what they wanted to do after graduation, but nothing was decided and they were not sure when they would make the decision. Thomas felt that he could not rule out any options, he could stay in academia, but he might be aiming to leave after he finished his PhD. At that moment in time he was uncertain and he felt that “it depends on where you find yourself”.

When prompted, Álmos mentioned that he would like to do a Masters and that he was thinking of doing it within the same department, but he heard from a friend that there were other Masters programmes within a different department and he could consider those as well. Additionally he also wanted to start working as he needed to earn money. He was not sure what he was going to do and stated that “I’m a village person, and we say, that it will work out somehow {Én falusi ember vagyok, nálunk azt mondják, hogy sose volt, hogy ne legyen}” which is a Hungarian saying referring to the belief that things will sort themselves out. Gordon stated that he did not think it was a good idea to plan ahead as people get disappointed when some things do not work out. He felt that things happen suddenly and with the economic crisis it became hard to find work especially for a sociologist. He was thinking of moving back home or travelling abroad for work or he might get help from his father. He was undecided and felt he was not entirely in control of what would happen.

Overall, these students were uncertain about their future plans, they had vague ideas and they had a sense that anything could happen. They often use the term “I don’t know” or “I am unsure” in the narratives. Similarly to the previous cluster, they tended to live in the present and they thought about the immediate future, but they felt their futures were not within their control, that they depended on happenstance events. Significant others were not mentioned in the narratives and students did not seem to be sharing their plans with others. Spatially they seemed to be thinking about where their immediate futures would happen as particularly Álmos compared the university city to his hometown and he stated he would opt for his hometown, even though the possibilities were more scarce than in the university town, just because he felt he belonged there.

CONCLUDING REMARKS – FUTURE PLANS

The transition from elite to mass system in higher education was a universal process that had effects at local, national and international levels. It changed the conceptions of what higher education was and what going to university meant for students. University life became accessible to a wide variety of students from different backgrounds and as more students graduated from university the value of the diploma in the graduate labour market decreased. As Doherty (2001) argued these changes in higher education happened concomitantly to changes in society and the lives of the research participants needed to be understood in relation to them. In Romania the introduction of the Bologna System affected not only the higher education system, but also the labour market, the perception of people and societal processes in general. Anecdotal evidence suggested that students and parents felt that the 3 years BA was not enough and they needed to study for a Masters as well in order to 'know something' and be competitive in the labour market.

Social theorists have argued that people now live in societies that are characterized by 'reflexive' modernity (Beck 1992), 'late-modernity' (Giddens 1991). Whereas they might not agree on the terms to describe the society, it is still true that the structural changes that characterize the societies have implications for the way in which individuals negotiate their life courses. Côté (2000, p. 4) stated that "the life course has been destructuring, and people have increasingly had to adapt by individualizing their lives – taking things into their own hands rather than relying on traditional institutions to provide structure for them". There was scarce evidence for this within my study, particularly in the Romanian context. Most of the students did not feel in control of their lives and did not know how they could become more in control. They saw structural constraints as hindering them in achieving their plans, but only a handful of students reflected on their choices and possibilities and utilised their resources to find suitable alternatives. In general, when they were planning, students foresaw their immediate futures and had no or vague concepts about their distant futures. This was similar to the young Australians Woodman (2004) wrote about, who he saw as

‘balancing temporalities’ – they struggled to find a balance between being and becoming, of managing choice and keeping options open.

Opting to study further became popular, especially in the current economic climate. Many students postponed their entry into the labour market by applying to pursue a postgraduate degree. In England this option was less popular due to the financial implications, but also because of the socio-cultural and historic educational practices and the institutional and national rhetoric which favoured students securing jobs shortly after graduation instead of prolonging their studies. In Romania almost the opposite was true, large numbers of students decided to study further for a Masters degree and they could afford to wait until they graduated and then made decisions regarding their future. The Bologna Stocktaking Report for Romania (2012, p. 3) reported that 50-75% of first cycle students continued to study in a second cycle programme after graduation from the first cycle (within two years), while the Bologna Stocktaking Report for the UK (2012, p. 3) reported 0-10% among the same group. The Romanian higher education system was designed in a step-by-step way, students completed one cycle and then they applied for the next one. This was in contrast to the UK system where students needed to send their applications and usually received the results before finishing one cycle in the system. In England this forced students to make decisions earlier about post-graduation plans than in Romania. Some students were successful in negotiating this process and making decisions, while for others it was a more difficult and stressful process. This either lead to postponed decisions or to last minute choices when students were forced to choose from what was available instead of what they ideally wanted. In Romania the transition to the labour market was more prolonged. Students regarded the BA studies as the phase of life when they experimented with what interested them and made decisions about what they would like to focus on in terms of career which they could then further narrow down while doing the MA. Students started thinking and applying for specific MA programs after they graduated and started searching for jobs and sending in applications while completing their Masters.

Freeman (2004, p. 64) wrote that there was a feeling of incompleteness, that people often did not realise what was happening until the moment had passed, “until it can be

located within some broader constellation of events, read for its significance in some larger whole.” This feeling seemed to be present in my students’ narratives too – they did not know how to evaluate their experiences because they were still living them. Pacheco and Alfred summarised this feeling: at the time of the interview they felt satisfied with their studies, but if they would not be able to find a job then their feelings would change.

In contrast to what Anderson and colleagues (2005) found, there were just a few students in my study who felt in control of their lives and they had clear plans of what to do and when. Those who felt uncertain about their plans or felt the need to postpone or condition the decision exhibited lack of resources. They did not mention using their social networks to find out about possibilities.

The importance of certified qualifications, in contrast to du Bois Reymond’s (2004) and similar to Brooks and Everett’s (2008) findings, was prominent among the students I interviewed. Even those who felt disillusioned by their studies, they opted for another course instead of finding learning opportunities elsewhere. Only Eliza was vocal about how learning at university was inadequate and that she would not opt for postgraduate studies, but instead she wanted to do some other non-formal course, albeit she did decide to opt for a second university course while completing her first.

Most of the students in Romania were aiming to continue their studies at Masters level and the same trend was visible in England as well. These students were aiming for positional advantage in the labour market (Tomlinson 2008) or what Brown and Hesketh (2004) termed as ‘wealth of talent’ in that they needed to enhance their qualifications and skills base. In the Romanian context there was a strong feeling that the BA was not enough in terms of knowledge received, but even the value of the qualification was not enough in the labour market, so students needed to stay on and gain a Masters too. Similarly to the findings of Brooks and Everett (2008, p. 384) the reputation and status of HEIs represented an important factor in students’ future choices, if they opted to leave their university. Those students who mentioned opting for a different institution for their Masters studies talked about having better opportunities in the new choice (Alfred, Kissa, Alex). Most of the students were

planning to continue their studies in the same city and at the same university, but maybe change the department (Margaret).

Brannen and Nilsen (2002) and Nilsen (1999) talked about set courses of action for certain people who had a deeper sense of belonging to traditions and this seemed to be present in my study as well. Erika and Emese were both thinking about their careers in conditioned or postponed terms, but they were also mentioning typically gendered routes. They both had serious relationships and their future plans were connected to their partners'. Emese was planning to move back home because her boyfriend was there and she was planning to find work and possibly engage in distance learning from home. Erika was staying in the university city as her boyfriend was also there and she stated that the decisions which she was going to take were joint decisions. From this point of view they had set courses of action and were taking decisions within the boundaries of those. Rebecca was a similar case as she wanted to stay around her family and boyfriend and even though recognised that she might need to move to find better job opportunities she was determined to stay in her hometown.

Another constraining factor for students was ethnicity and strongly connected to this was language knowledge in Romania. Hungarian ethnic students stated that they were looking for opportunities that were in their mother language. Blanka and Bajusz were both thinking of opting for PhD studies in Hungarian, while Előd and Ercsi were 'forcing' themselves to learn Romanian language through their studies.

Overall, students did not reflect specifically about the economic climate unless prompted and in general they were aiming to continue their studies. Lucy was the only student who mentioned that she would reconsider her course choice in view of the increase in student fees, but she did not mention the economic crisis or the lack of jobs or high unemployment rates. Students were in general optimistic about their post-graduation possibilities, even though they differed with regard to how much control they perceived they had over what happened in their lives. The most pessimistic group were those with uncertain or no plans as they felt they were not in control of what might happen to them and they were fearful of their job prospects.

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Including students' future plans in the transition pathways analysis to a certain extent provides a more rounded picture of where they came from, what their experiences were and where they were heading.

Three of the normal transition students stated that they had specific future plans (Maryna, Ercsi and Kristóf), and these were connected to their career ideas and they all stated that they had the same career ideas when applying to university as well. They knew what they wanted from the beginning and they used their time at the university to achieve that. They mainly focused on their studies, the activities they engaged in were either for monetary or social purposes, although Maryna highlighted the skills she was developing as well. They had specific plans about what and where they would be doing after graduation and also on the long term. The other students in the normal transitions group also had ideas about their future, but they were conditioned by other events (graduation, travel back to home country, acceptance by university) or structural factors (labour market conditions, availability of internship places, availability of jobs). These students felt less in control of their future, particularly Bajusz, Adela, Maria. Although they were very similar in their university journeys to Ercsi, Maryna and Kristóf, because they all applied to university having some career-related ideas and they used their time at university to learn more about their field, they felt that their futures were not in their hands solely. Adela and Maria mentioned the difficulties of gaining good jobs in the legal system, while Bajusz spoke about the fact that there were no PhD positions and no jobs advertised in his field. Elouise, Anna, Frank and J.J. had similar experiences as they had clear ideas why they wanted to study in the UK and they also had plans what they would do after they returned to their countries. For them gaining a postgraduate degree from a UK university was seen as a stepping stone in their home labour markets and so their main focus throughout their studies was to gain a good qualification. They did not need to engage in other activities. Alex, Lilly, Sarah-Anne, Blanka and Katalin all spoke about how they realised through their studies and extra activities which areas they were interested in and they started making the necessary steps towards achieving their goals. Alex and Lilly applied for postgraduate studies and were waiting for replies, while Blanka and Katalin had to wait until after graduation for the application periods to begin.

TABLE 7. TRANSITION PATHWAYS – FUTURE PLANS

Alias	Mot.	Subject	Location	Theory	Practice	MSP	Future
NORMAL TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied & focused on studies							
Adela	NORM	NORM	NORM	+	-	internship holiday work occasional work	hopes
Bajusz				-	+	university project occasional work	hopes
Elouise	NORM	NORM	CHOICE	+		unpaid work	hopes
Anna				+		-	hopes
Ercsi						DAS foreign study occasional work	plans
Lilly				+ / -		DAS	hopes
Maria						foreign study	hopes
Maryna						DAS unpaid work	plans
Sarah-Anne				+		PT work	hopes
Frank	NORM	NORM	HAPP			-	hopes
J.J.						-	hopes
NORMAL TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on extra activities							
Alex	NORM	NORM	CHOICE	+ / -	+ / -	DAS internship student union occasional work university project unpaid work	hopes
Kristóf	CHOICE	NORM	NORM		-	FT work	plans
Blanka	NORM	HAPP	NORM	-	-	DAS foreign study university project unpaid work	hopes
Katalin				+ / -	-	university project student union holiday work	hopes
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied & focused on studies							
Ayoyinka	CHOICE	CHOICE	CHOICE			-	hopes
Thomas	CHOICE	NORM	CHOICE	+		-	uncertain
Rebecca	CHOICE	HAPP	CHOICE	+		student union PT work	dreams
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied & focused on extra							
Alfred	NORM	CHOICE	CHOICE	+		internship student union	plans
Teo				+		student union occasional work unpaid work	hopes

Alias	Mot.	Subject	Location	Theory	Practice	MSP	Future
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on studies							
Doriana	CHOICE	CHOICE	CHOICE	-		-	dreams
CHOICE TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on extra							
Pacheco	CHOICE	HAPP	CHOICE	+	-	DAS foreign study university project holiday work	hopes
Margaret	NORM	CHOICE	CHOICE	-		internship holiday work unpaid work	dreams
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied & focused on studies							
Kissa	CHOICE	HAPP	HAPP	+		FT work	dreams
Álmos				+		-	uncertain
Gordon						-	uncertain
István	HAPP	HAPP	NORM	+		occasional work	hopes
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied & focused on extra							
Ioana	NORM	HAPP	HAPP	+	+	student union internship	dreams
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on studies							
Johey	HAPP	HAPP	HAPP	-	-	holiday work	hopes
Veronica	CHOICE	HAPP	HAPP	-		-	uncertain
HAPPENSTANCE TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on extra							
Előd	NORM	HAPP	HAPP	+	-	DAS student union university project	dreams
Lucy				+	-	holiday work unpaid work	plans
Eliza	CHOICE	HAPP	HAPP	-	-	DAS unpaid work	plans
INCONSISTENT TRANSITION PATHWAY – satisfied & focused on studies & extra							
Ally	NORM	CHOICE	HAPP	+	+	holiday work internship student union university project unpaid work	plans
Emőke						occasional work	plans
Székelyboy	CHOICE	HAPP	NORM			DAS student union	hopes
INCONSISTENT TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on studies							
Emese	NORM	HAPP	CHOICE	-	-	foreign study university project student union	hopes
Erika	CHOICE	HAPP	NORM		-	holiday work	dreams
SMRE	CHOICE	HAPP	NORM		-	DAS university project	dreams

Alias	Mot.	Subject	Location	Theory	Practice	MSP	Future
INCONSISTENT TRANSITION PATHWAY – not satisfied & focused on extra							
Andreea	NORM	HAPP	CHOICE	+ / -	+	DAS internship student union	dreams
Ioan	NORM	HAPP	CHOICE	+	-	university project holiday work unpaid work training	plans
Liana	NORM	HAPP	CHOICE	+	-	holiday work	dreams

From students who were part of the choice transition group only Alfred had specific plans. He applied for a Masters and was planning to pursue his career choice in investment banking. Ayoyinka was similar to the international students mentioned previously (J.J, Anna, Elouise and Frank) as his main goal was focusing on his studies, gaining a degree with which he could apply for higher positions in his home country. Teo and Pacheco both had some ideas about what they wanted to do, but Pacheco had to wait until he was able to submit his application for a PhD and Teo was only in her second year and she felt that she still had time to decide and much depended on how she would feel after spending three months in the USA. Doriana and Margaret were quite uncertain about their futures, they both had some ideas, but they also stated that these might change as they had not made up their minds yet. Thomas similarly felt that he did not know what was going to happen as he was just finishing his Masters and was going to do a PhD which seemed like a long time for him and he did not want to commit to an academic career at that stage.

In the happenstance transitions group Lucy and Eliza had similar experiences as they stated that they had specific plans about what they wanted to do after graduation. Both were similar in the sense that they found their interests while being active in extra-curricular activities, but while Lucy was able to combine her studies with career interests, Eliza felt that she did not make a good choice when opting for economics as it 'was not her world' and she decided to opt to study something else. Johey even though originally did not want to go to university he eventually realised what he was interested in and applied to do a Masters and at the time of the interview he was waiting to hear back from several universities about his PhD application. Elód, Ioana and Kissa had all vague ideas about what they would like to do in the future and they

all stressed that they might change their minds if something else came up. Álmos, Gordon and Veronica were the least decided about their futures and they all mentioned the role of chance and the fact that they could not control what would happen to them.

In the inconsistent group, Ally, Emőke and Ioan were similar to Eliza, Lucy and Alfred as they had clear career ideas and they based these on the extracurricular experiences which they had. Similarly to Eliza, Emőke decided to change her studies and she was planning to go on training courses to retrain herself. Ioan and Ally both found what they were interested in through a combination of activities within and outside of their departments and they knew what they needed to do to achieve their goals. They both opted for postgraduate studies where they could specialise. Székelyboy and Emese were less certain about their plans, but they had ideas and hopes of what they might like to do and where. Particularly the location was important for them. Andreea, Erika, Liana and SMRE all postponed their plans until graduation. They knew that they would be doing postgraduate studies but were not certain when, where and what exactly.

This concludes the last chapter that focused on data analysis. The final part of the thesis offers a brief summary of the main findings, presents the transitions typology, highlights some policy implications of my research, and suggests further research avenues.

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis set out to explore the education to work transitions of students in Romania and the UK. I was interested to find out the lived experiences of these students and how the storied expressions of self, social contexts and decision-making about HE and careers was expressed by these students. This chapter summarises the findings of the study and presents my conclusions with regard to the research questions asked. I argued that the process of opting for higher education and studying for a degree cannot be studied separately from the students' personal background and past experiences as well as their future aspirations and plans. Apart from the personal aspects, each individual life was embedded in local and national contexts, which also had an impact on their life trajectories. In order to find out about students' transitions from education to work I explored their narratives of self, their constructions of the choices and experiences they had in HE and their future (career) aspirations. I considered how individual stories related to higher education fitted into their lives and how these were embedded in larger local and national contexts.

This final chapter starts by providing a summary of my overall aims and the methodology used to meet these aims. The second part focuses on summarising the findings of my study and presenting the answers to each of the research questions:

- Q1. What are the circumstances and motives that lead youngsters to choose to attend HE?
- Q2. How do students understand and describe their HE experience?
- Q3. What role do extracurricular activities and/or work experience have in students' HE experience and perceptions about transitions to work?
- Q4. How does the current economic climate influence students' strategies and perceptions about their future (career) and how do they see their life after graduation?

and finally to the main research question that my study sought to explore:

- What are the characteristics of student pathways through HE and into work?

This last part presents the typology of transition pathways that I identified based on my data. A brief discussion about the policy implications of my study and some recommendations for future research conclude this chapter and the thesis.

RESEARCH ON TRANSITIONS FROM EDUCATION TO WORK

Goodson and Walker (1991, p. 1) argued that people played a central role in the educational process and in educational systems. To improve HE systems and the experiences of students at university we need to know about students' perspectives. There is a vast amount of data about students' aggregate perspectives, they are seldom placed into different categories depending on the questionnaire questions asked. But what often is missing from these reports is students' own voices, how they see themselves in their situation, what their experiences are like, what they believe and how they think. We need to know more about what it means to be a student for them and how this status is connected to their past and future. This is an important area of higher education, which has received little attention from researchers. The thesis aimed to fill this gap and through analysing students' narratives it set out to study their experiences, beliefs and plans in order to point out different aspects that can help policy makers to design adequate responses to the needs of this growing population.

The research explored the stories and narratives of forty-two students in two countries at two institutions and examined how they recounted their motivations for going to university, the choice processes, their experiences at university and how they talked about their future aspirations. The results of this study confirmed that students shaped their future aspirations through their lived experiences, both remembered and current. Their experiences and the contexts in which they were located, and whether they were negative or positive, were pivotal to how students regarded their plans. Structural constraints, such as social, economic, ethnic and geographical constraints, mediated their lived experiences by hindering choices and diminishing resources. The findings revealed that students exercised agency by resisting structural constraints and creating opportunities, beyond the (institutional) resources available, but significant others, happenstance events also played an important role in shaping their experiences and additionally, the narratives were situated within time and space considerations. By taking all these factors together the thesis presented a holistic analysis of students' education to work transitions within two institutional and country contexts and added important layers of understanding to existent academic and policy debates.

The first research question of the study – *What are the circumstances and motives that lead youngsters to choose to attend HE?* – was explored in **Chapter 4 – Pathways into Higher Education**. I presented students' retrospective framing of decision-making regarding why and how they opted to study at university, how they chose courses and locations.

I used du Bois-Reymond's (1998) categories of 'normal' and 'choice' biographies to illustrate students' motivations for going to university. The first group of students positioned HE on a predicted life course, they stated that they "knew the university was the next step", while for the second group of students going to university was not the norm, they made a conscious choice of opting for HE. I also presented how these broad categories could be further refined into clusters when the influential factors they mentioned were regarded in conjunction with the topics they narrated. The combination of different levels of structural constraints, feelings of control, as well as students' ideas about potential career plans and future-oriented thoughts shaped the positions of the clusters.

Apart from these two main topic groups I identified a third one, that did not fit in previously mentioned categories of students, as they ended up going to university due to a happenstance event, not because it was a natural step and neither because they opted to go. Although only two students were part of this group I argued that researchers should pay attention to happenstance events and the role these played in altering the life course of students. Within the two cases these unplanned events led students to go to university, and this represented a category which has not been identified and explained, to the best of my knowledge, in the literature previously.

Turning points appeared even more predominant within students' decision-making regarding what to study and where. While previously mentioned categories, such as interest in the subject or opting for a field that was connected to career plans appeared in the narratives of the students I interviewed, several new influential factors emerged and led to different choice categories. The guidance of significant others, like family, friends, teachers, but also acquaintances and random people seemed widely influential in what and where students opted to study. Most of the students ended up studying a subject due to an event outside of their control. They were either influenced by

significant others, or they experienced a forced turning point when they were faced with not being accepted to their chosen place or being accepted to a fee paying place in the Romanian context. This represents an aspect neglected both in academic and policy literature to date, and especially in the Romanian context it has lasting impact on students' life course and future plans. System and institutional level characteristics of the university choice process, as well as the lack of career guidance in schools led to students relying on hot sources of information and making decisions within short time frames with limited information. This became evident with regard to students' narratives about institution choice which appeared predominantly as a single factor in the English context, while in Romania or for foreign students studying in England, it appeared in combination with subject and city choice. Language considerations appeared in connection to subject and institution choice as certain subjects could be studied at specific institutions in Hungarian. Considering all these aspects together, Hungarian students' choices were limited to one or two institutions if they wished to study in their mother language in Romania. What seemed a structural constraint from one aspect became an opportunity if regarded from a different perspective, as Hungarian students who were willing to study in Romanian had the option to submit their application to both the Hungarian and Romanian line within the same institution to study the same subject, which increased their chances of being accepted to a state funded place in their chosen city. Sense of belonging, whether with regard to subject choice or institution or city, seemed to be an important characteristic of the choice process. As Holmegaard and colleagues (Holmegaard, Ulriksen & Madsen 2012) mentioned the horizon of being a student in a particular place determined students' choices, and they ended up not opting for the more rational choice because it did not 'feel' the right option. Country differences were apparent as students in England tended to highlight their own involvement in the decision-making process, while students in Romania exhibited a 'going with the flow' reconstruction of how they opted to go to university and how they made choices relating to subject and institution. Overall, students' circumstances and motives that shaped their pathways from school to university were influenced by the complex interplay of structure, agency, significant others and happenstance events situated within specific place and time boundaries.

Chapter 5 – Higher Education experiences explored the second – *How do students understand and describe their HE experience?* – and third – *What role do extracurricular activities and/or work experience have in students' HE experience and perceptions about transitions to work?* – research questions of the study. In that chapter I presented students' perceptions about the theoretical and practical aspects of their studies and their engagement in extra activities apart from their studies.

Satisfaction with their studies was deeply connected to students' interest in what they were studying and whether they were able to see its usefulness, either in the immediate future or in the longer term. The source of dissatisfaction was mainly the perceived gulf between the theories taught at university and the world of work. All students complained about the lack of practical experiences gained through their courses, but while it was generally accepted in England that students needed to gain the practical experiences elsewhere, the Romanian students expected to learn all from their modules. Their critiques targeted the curricula, in some cases the lecturers, but mainly the educational system as a whole and the lack of possibilities for students to 'translate' what they learned into usable knowledge.

Most of the students interviewed were engaged in extra-curricular activities, some in several and this is why I called them multiple status students. These students reflected on how they had changed personally since starting university and also how work experience changed them. Kissa and Rebecca mentioned being more organised, Maryna also mentioned that she had to be good at time management in order to cope with all her responsibilities. Both Rebecca and Maryna mentioned that they had clear priorities from the start, university and learning came first, then after that extra activities and leisure. Others also mentioned how the double status did not mean disadvantage for the studies, but that it was difficult to manage the work pressures (changing timetables and pressure to work more hours during peak times). Eliza talked about the fact that many students did not realize how important it was to engage in extra activities and she felt it should be the university's role to teach students to be more engaging. Involvement in the departmental student union or engagement in departmental projects was frequent, but volunteering outside the university was also often mentioned. Students learned about these opportunities through social networks.

Friends and lecturers introduced them to new possibilities which they could build on. Several students mentioned the role of teachers/lecturers and the benefits of being “pushed” from behind. They tended to perform better and took advantage of the opportunities they learned from their teachers. Eliza, Emese, Maryna spoke about (older) friends and they got involved in activities at the student union which they enjoyed thoroughly. They all highlighted the benefits of what they were doing. These were the students who ‘were familiar with the employability agenda and consciously or unconsciously were taking part in activities that enhanced their skills. Through these activities they learned the meaning of their actions and they made up their own employability narrative to become the ‘Players’ Brown and Hesketh (2004) described.

Apart from gaining theoretical and ideally practical knowledge about a specific field, students wanted and expected social interaction with peers, but also with academic staff. Students frequently narrated stories about what they did with their peers, or among the best memories were either social activities or when they got noticed by a lecturer. Receiving support was equally important, students experienced a turning point that launched their career when they got noticed by lecturers and they got involved in extra activities. Being told that ‘I expect more from you’ could be enough for students to motivate themselves to do better.

Today with the massification of higher education universities are not meant to be places which guide individual students through education and into the world of work. Students are taught in masses and they are not individuals anymore, they are the group of first year, second year or third year students. The groups receive code names and students learn to understand these and know what they need to do, which class to attend and where. But in the student narratives it was striking how much students valued when they got recognised as being an individual with potential and as a result they tended to perform much better. These narratives seemed to suggest that attention and support were the most important parts of students’ university experience and seemed to help them decide about career plans and feel more prepared for the world of work. Students who received this attention and support, sometimes guidance from academic staff tended to become the ‘Players’, their horizons of action became much wider and they had options ahead of them and knew what they needed to do in order

to get there. Whereas students who drifted through HE without clarifying their interests and plans tended to feel that the degree itself will be enough or the knowledge they gained through studying will help them find a job. Blanka and Johey both had this experience of completing their first degrees without having clarified what their interests were within that area, without engaging in extra activities and without knowing what they wanted to do afterwards. Their narratives of trying to find a job afterwards were full with references to the difficulties they encountered and the realisation that their degree was not enough for them to secure a job. They both decided to further enhance their knowledge and skills by doing postgraduate degrees. Retrospectively both students felt that the subject choices they made could have been more informed and they should have thought more about job prospects beforehand. While Blanka's narrative was more about being misinformed and misguided by others, Johey stated that he should have been more proactive in shaping his learning.

The last research question – *How does the current economic climate influence students' strategies and perceptions about their (future) career and how do they see their life after graduation?* – was explored in **Chapter 6 – Future (career) plans**. In this chapter I looked at students' prospective framing of their decision-making. Students were split based on how they narrated their post-graduation plans, whether they mentioned specific plans, or they had some conditions which needed to materialise before they could plan further, or they deliberately postponed their decision-making for a while, or lastly, whether they spoke about uncertainty or they were reluctant to plan as they felt it was outside of their control.

One common theme which was mentioned in all the narratives of final year students was studying further at Masters level. In the Romanian context opting for a Masters was presented as a non-decision, it was obvious that students would study further, they just needed to decide where and what to study. Within the English context studying further was not a non-decision, it rather appeared as a necessary step in order to gain access to desired careers. While students who stated they had specific plans talked about the Masters as a stepping stone towards a desired future career, they

highlighted the choices they made and how they were planning to achieve them, students who had less clear plans talked about the Masters as an 'excuse', as gaining more time to "figure out" who they wanted to become and how to get there. This strategy was particularly apparent in the Romanian context where the opportunity structures allowed students to gain admission to state funded places based on their undergraduate grades and the results of the entrance exam. Students who had plans or hopes used the resources they had to plan their futures and they felt confident that they would be able to achieve their goals. In contrast, those students who postponed their decision making and spoke about dreams they had which they would either accomplish or not and those who felt uncertain seemed doubtful about their possibilities to achieve their goals and they felt that their futures were to certain extent outside of their control.

The importance of certified qualifications was prominent among the Romanian students I interviewed. Even those who felt disillusioned by their studies opted for another course instead of finding learning opportunities elsewhere. All students in Romania were aiming to continue their studies and felt similarly to what Brown and Hesketh (2004) termed as 'wealth of talent' that they needed to enhance their qualifications and skills base. In the Romanian context there was a strong feeling that the BA was not enough in terms of knowledge received, nor the value of the qualification was enough in the labour market, so students needed to stay on and gain a postgraduate degree.

Similarly to the findings of previous comparative research (see Evans 2002; Evans and Heinz 1994), which concluded that transitions to work in England tended to be 'accelerated' compared to the 'extended' transitions in Germany, the same pattern persisted in case of transitions in England and Romania. In England students tended to have 'accelerated' transitions, whereas in Romania students tended to 'extend' their transitions from education to work by doing a BA and then an MA. In England, due to the policy contexts both at national and institutional level students aimed to secure work as soon as possible. The context of the economic crises pointed out that students in England might have also considered extending their transitions to work with an MA, but they were also gaining significant work experience in parallel. These national

differences in transitions perspectives were also present in students' timing of their job search. Students in Romania tended to adopt a step-by-step strategy more often than their colleagues in England, who tried to secure jobs in the last few months of their studies. These differences were due to the labour market characteristics as well. In England companies hired in advance, whereas no such practice was present in Romania. Students in Romania did not start thinking in essence about the world of work until they graduated. As Andreea mentioned, they first needed to be done with the stresses of the thesis and then they would figure it all out. It was the same with applying for a Masters programme. Students might have had ideas to opt for a Masters, but they would actually decide after they completely finished the undergraduate degree. In England students started thinking about work and further studies much sooner. In some cases even in their 2nd year, as Alfred pointed out summer internships were for recruitment and some students started their third year already knowing they would be starting in a particular job once they graduated. Applications for Masters programmes were also due before students graduated.

TRANSITION PATHWAYS FROM EDUCATION TO WORK

In order to answer my main research question I looked at students' transitions holistically across the three main themes and I identified four potential types of transitions from education to work. This is not a finite product as these students' lives evolve and change with each activity they engage in, with each influence they experience and with each choice they make. This is just a snapshot summary of the students' journeys and an attempt to group them together for analytical and comparative purposes. Table 8 presents the characteristics and in the following I provide a summary for each type.

TABLE 8. TRANSITION PATHWAYS

Alias	Mot.	Subject	Location	Theory	Practice	MSP	Future
PERSISTERS							
Adela	NORM	NORM	NORM	+	-	internship holiday work occasional work	hopes
Bajusz				-	+	university project occasional work	hopes
Ercsi			CHOICE			DAS foreign study occasional work	plans
Anna				+		-	hopes
Elouise				+		unpaid work	hopes
Lilly				+ / -		DAS	hopes
Maria						foreign study	hopes
Maryna						DAS unpaid work	plans
Frank				HAPP			-
Kristóf	CHOICE		NORM		-	FT work	plans
Ayoyinka		CHOICE	CHOICE			-	hopes
EXPERIMENTERS							
Sarah-Anne	NORM	NORM	CHOICE	+		PT work training	hopes
Alex				+ / -	+ / -	DAS internship occasional work university project unpaid work	hopes
Alfred				+		internship student union	plans
Teo		+			occasional work unpaid work	hopes	
Ally		CHOICE	HAPP	+	+	holiday work internship student union university project unpaid work	plans
Lucy				+	-	holiday work unpaid work	plans
Andreea		HAPP	CHOICE	+	+	DAS internship student union	dreams
Ioan				+	-	university project holiday work unpaid work training	plans
Székelyboy			CHOICE	NORM			DAS student union
SWITCHERS							
J.J.	NORM	NORM	HAPP			-	hopes
Emőke		CHOICE				occasional work	plans

Alias	Mot.	Subject	Location	Theory	Practice	MSP	Future
Blanka	NORM	HAPP	NORM	-	-	DAS foreign study university project unpaid work	hopes
Liana			CHOICE	+	-	holiday work	dreams
Előd			HAPP	+	-	DAS university project	dreams
Pacheco	CHOICE		CHOICE	+	-	DAS foreign study university project holiday work	hopes
Eliza			HAPP	-	-	DAS unpaid work	plans
István	HAPP		NORM	+		occasional work	hopes
Johey			HAPP	-	-	holiday work	hopes
WANDERERS							
Margaret	NORM	CHOICE	CHOICE	-		internship holiday work unpaid work	dreams
Katalin		HAPP	NORM	+ / -	-	university project student union holiday work	hopes
Emese			CHOICE	-	-	foreign study university project student union	hopes
Ioana			HAPP	+	+	student union internship	dreams
Doriana	CHOICE	CHOICE	CHOICE	-		-	dreams
Thomas		NORM		+		-	uncertain
Rebecca		HAPP		+		PT work	dreams
Kissa		HAPP	+		FT work	dreams	
Álmos			+		-	uncertain	
Gordon					-	uncertain	
Veronica			-		-	uncertain	
Erika		NORM			-	holiday work	dreams
SMRE					-	DAS university project	dreams

1. PERSISTERS

Going to university was part of a natural move from school to university for these students. Only Kristóf and Ayoyinka mentioned that they made a conscious choice to go to university and their motivation was to obtain a good job afterwards. For most of the Persisters this natural step was due to their career choices as they knew that in order to become a lawyer or teacher or economist they had to go to university. For others it was obvious due to the family environment in which they grew up, as it was

assumed that they would be going to university. Subject choice was also something obvious for these students as they stated they have always been interested in these. None of them experienced a turning point with regards to subject choice. Location was also either an obvious choice for them as they were familiar with that particular city, or those who made a conscious choice did it because it enhanced their sense of safety or belonging as it was similar to something they previously experienced. Happenstance occurred only in case of Frank because he left this choice for other people to decide: an agency chose for him.

These students were satisfied with the theoretical knowledge but not satisfied with the practical knowledge received. Because most were international students, they anyway came for the theoretical experience, so that was enough for them. Romanian students voiced their disappointment with the practical aspects in particular as they felt they should have received more from the university, should have gained more knowledge that was applicable in the labour market.

These students were least active in engaging in extra activities, partly because of their international status and goals to go back home. They focused mainly on their studies, those who engaged in second studying did so within their field, to gain more knowledge in the same area. In England only Maryna and Maria engaged in extra activities and they did so for social purposes and to enhance their employability skills. Students in Romania mainly engaged in occasional work to earn some money. They did not regard these activities as connected to or helpful for their futures (apart from Adela and her non-compulsory internship). They enjoyed them, they considered that it was time better spent than not doing it but they did it for the money.

Regarding their future plans, the Persisters were split between having specific plans and conditioning their future to some event. Those who were in the latter category also had specific plans in mind, but they either needed to gain admittance or to finish a job or find a placement in order to succeed.

Some of the Persisters were doing/finishing their Masters studies so they were more focused on what they wanted from their studies and they also knew what they wanted to be doing after they finished. But leaving them aside, the other students who were in

their final year of their undergraduate studies were placed in this type because they connected their initial career ideas with their present studies and with their future plans. Interesting to note is that they kept the initial idea because their horizons of action were limited to that. They realised that just the studies would not be enough for them, but they did not necessarily see any options outside of academia. So overall, these students seemed to be transitioning from education to work within the parameters of structural factors that shaped their experiences and decisions. Agency, happenstance and the influence of significant others was minimal and it occurred only within the limits of these perceived horizons for action.

2. EXPERIMENTERS

Going to university was part of a natural move from school to university for them, only Székelyboy mentioned that he made a conscious choice in opting to go to university. For some this natural step was due to their career choices as they knew that in order to become a teacher or economist or engineer they had to go to university (Lucy, Alfred, Ioan). For others it was obvious due to the family environment in which they grew up, it was assumed that they would be going to university (Sarah-Anne, Alex), and for a third group it was just a natural step and they did not explain it any further (Ally, Andreea, Teo). Deciding where to spend the next 3-4 years of their lives was narrated as a conscious choice for most of the Experimenters. Quality of education and ranking of the institution were important aspects for them. Picking a subject was not a straightforward process, only two students mentioned that they had always known what they wanted to study, while the others either considered various options and then opted for one which they were most interested in, or they ended up studying that particular subject due to a turning point. What was common in these narratives was that they all highlighted that they opted for something they were interested in.

None of them mentioned not being satisfied with the theoretical aspects of their course and some were happy with both the theory and the practical aspects. Others voiced their dissatisfaction with the practical aspects, they either did not enjoy them or they found them lacking and not enough. These students realised that their studies would

not be enough and that they needed to augment their knowledgebase from somewhere else. Consequently, these student were the most active in extra-curricular activities. They engaged in activities related to their studies and outside of those. Activities within the department equally included university projects, non-compulsory internships and student organisations. Activities outside of the department included: part time work, occasional work, unpaid work, holiday work and also doing a second degree. Only Alfred did not opt for any activities outside the department, the others did. Full time work and foreign study experiences were not recounted by these students. Gaining money and the usefulness for future job search were mentioned as the most important reasons for engaging in extra activities. Romanian students highlighted the role their lecturers played in them accessing extra activities. Three of them were involved in second or joint degrees at university, the two Romanian students mentioned the financial reason for their choice: they got either a scholarship or a discount, while the student in England evoked his interest in doing both.

Most of the Experimenters were satisfied with how their student life evolved, they were satisfied with the education they received and the activities they engaged in. These students used their time at university to refine their career goals and they participated in extra-curricular activities with the explicit purpose to see whether that particular career or job was for them. They managed to clarify their goals and they had specific or vague plans for after graduation.

Regarding their future plans, most of the Experimenters talked about specific future plans they had. Teo, Székelyboy and Sarah-Anne had one extra year, they were not in their final years, so they had more time to think about what they wanted to do, but they already mentioned some plans. Andreea was the only one who felt the pressure of being in the final year and not knowing what she wanted to do in the future, but she explained that she had too many things going on in her life and she could not dedicate time to decide about what she wanted to do. She knew that in her immediate future she would be doing a Masters degree, but she did not make longer plans.

English students seemed more knowledgeable about their choices and career opportunities which was due to higher emphasis on career education in schools and at

university. Romanian students mentioned their parents, friends, teachers and other acquaintances helping them through the choice process. Romanian students had more opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities within their departments and lecturers facilitated their engagement in these through providing information and support. English students mentioned less personal sources of information, like flyers, e-mails, and finding the information and the opportunity on their own (Alfred the internship and Lucy the group). Their parents' influence was limited to providing advice for them when they were deciding about going to university and choosing a subject, but after that the students seemed to be making their own decisions and finding their own ways.

In terms of ethnicity all groups were represented: but the UK foreign students were from Europe and there was only one Hungarian student, so this aspect might benefit from more research on why ethnic minority students and international students from outside Europe were less likely to become Experimenters. This could be connected to language knowledge as some specifically chose a particular course and university to study in their mother language and they engaged in extra-curricular opportunities available in their mother language.

Overall, these students referred most often to agency in their transitions from education to work. Structural constraints and chance events were present in their lives, but these students understood that they needed to adapt to the changes and find ways to work around the constraints and plan their future. Their horizons for action changed constantly either due to outside influences, or due to students exercising agency and changing their life course.

3. SWITCHERS

These students explained going to university as a natural next step, mainly due to school influence. Apart from Előd they did not have parents with HE experience, so it was understandable that school influenced their choices more than the previous two types. Johey and István ended up going to university due to a happenstance event,

while Kissa, Pacheco and Eliza made a conscious choice to go to university mainly due to reasons connected to their perceptions about the labour market as they wanted to have a better future. Subject was due to happenstance as they were either influenced by external people in their choices or they experienced a turning point in their subject choice, as they did not get in the first option and they had to reconsider their options. In terms of location, quality and ranking seemed important for some, but others were more concerned about familiarity and distance from home.

These students were the least satisfied with their studies, particularly with the theoretical but also with the practical aspects. Due to the fact that they were not satisfied with their studies four students opted for a second degree in their second or third years of study. They felt the need to do something different and they found the solution in doing another degree, instead of opting for other extra-curricular activities. These were all students from Romania and this also portrayed the general perception about higher education in the country. Overall these students engaged in few activities, either within the department or outside of it. They were not satisfied with their studies, but they were uncertain about what to do about it, other than engage in more and different studies. For most of them opting to study another course was a good solution as they seemed more contented with the theoretical and practical knowledge received and they were engaging more in extra-curricular activities as well. For some, making the change meant that they got a new focus for the future, Eliza and Emőke knew what they wanted to do and how to do it, they had specific plans. Liana, Blanka, Előd and Margaret postponed their decision mainly to see what their options would be after graduation, but they would all like to study further, so they did have some plans. Pacheco, Johey and Kissa conditioned their future plans to gaining admittance, but they also wanted to study further.

Structural factors like country, gender, ethnic or class differences were not present. The common thread was that all these students encountered happenstance and they initiated a turning point in their HE routes, either in the beginning or during their studies, or they were planning to in the immediate future, hence the name of Switchers. These students did not reflect on their career choices or occupational plans in their narratives. They were mainly living and acting in the present, correcting past mistakes.

4. WANDERERS

Within this type, there were only four students who felt that going to university was a natural next step for them. Most of them talked about it as a choice for a better future or a better job. The English students mentioned knowing from the start what they wanted to study, and it was mainly related to their school experiences and interests. Students in Romania either opted for a subject because they were influenced by someone or they experienced a turning point. Location was an obvious choice for some as they were familiar with the city, already studying and living there. Others mentioned that they made a conscious choice as this was their preference, due to distance or feel of campus. Happenstance also appeared in the narratives about location as students were influenced by friends and family to choose a certain place. Overall the majority of students displayed a lack of control and choice over where to study as they either went with the most familiar option or they let other people decide for them. Emese and Thomas were the exception, but Emese also went somewhere where she had friends.

These students felt satisfied with the theoretical knowledge they received, but showed dissatisfaction with the practical. Overall they were the least vocal about their studies. They engaged in few extra activities, university projects and student union seemed the most preferred by them. They did not volunteer, nor work occasionally. If they engaged in work it was paid work part time or in holidays. They focused mainly on student life, not on studies or future career plans. They engaged in extra activities because of their friends or because they wanted to meet more people, have a broader social life. If given the option, they would opt for change as they were not satisfied, but they were not sure with what or what better options could they have had. Gordon would probably not want to go to university, Katalin would opt for a different subject, others would study more or engage in extra activities more.

In terms of future plans, they either postponed the decision after graduation or they stated that they were uncertain and had no plans. They even mentioned thinking that it was not good to have plans as they did not materialise and then they remained with the disappointment. In general these students did not talk much about career plans,

apart from the initial ideas they had that going to university was beneficial for their futures and they would probably get better jobs as a result. They initially believed the media and policy messages about the returns to higher education, but as they progressed through their studies the realities of the labour market became clearer, but they felt powerless and unsure about their options.

Overall, these students seemed to be making happenstance transitions from education to work through chance events and the guidance of significant others without having clear goals themselves. Agency was minimal and it occurred only within the limits of these outside influences, partly mediated by structural factors as well.

CONCLUDING REMARKS, POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This thesis aimed to contribute to our understanding of youth transitions by exploring students' planned and happenstance transitions from education to the world of work in England and Romania. The thesis built on existing accounts that suggested that social structures and individual actions were important to understand transitional experiences. I additionally argued that happenstance events and significant others could also enable or constrain students' opportunities and experiences. Côté (2000, p. 204) wrote that when we ask the question "Is the glass half empty or half full?" it was appropriate to ask "For whom?". He argued that class, gender, race and age continued to structure people's lives and experiences. While I agreed with this, and in my research I also asked the question "for whom" was the glass half empty, in addition, I considered it important to ask "when", "how", and "who else was present". People retold life events from their past based on their present position, but also having an eye on their future, so considering the temporal dimension was important because it allowed me and the readers to situate the transitional events in the life course of the individual and aided the understanding of the events and their meanings better. Taking into consideration the whole life course of students also shed light to happenstance events and turning points which they encountered and which stirred their life course. So knowing how decisions were made also helped to determine what

factors were taken into consideration when making decisions, and this highlighted the fact that life events were rarely made alone. As Elias (1978) wrote individuals do not exist alone in society, they are connected to other people forming figurations. Similarly students did not make decisions on their own, family members, teachers, friends, acquaintances, lecturers and even unknown people had an impact, consciously or unconsciously, on the decisions they made and consequently how their student lives unfolded. By considering all these aspects (structure, agency, significant others, happenstance, time and place) together and essentially looking at the education to work transitions of students as a holistic process I argued that we could develop a better understanding of what was happening in their lives and why, which has implications for both academic literature and the policy world. Similarly to te Riele (2004) I also argued for a re-conceptualisation of educational transitions in such a way that policy reflects more closely individual experiences in contemporary society.

Research on transitions from education to work mainly focused on the interplay between structure and agency and this thesis argued that in order to address the complex experiences of students – particularly their multiple status positions – there was a need to include other factors in the analysis, like the role significant others, happenstance events, time and place considerations played in students' lives. Aiming to grasp the experiences and perceptions of students holistically added different layers of understanding to this increasingly more and more popular stage of life and led to the development of the transitions pathways typology which revealed a reciprocal relationship between students' pathways into HE, their experiences within HE and their perceptions about their future plans in the labour market.

Cross-national comparative studies, particularly from a biographical perspective taking into consideration students' past life events, experiences and perceptions was uncommon within the field of education studies. My study bridged this gap and argued that the approach and methods used complement previous quantitative and qualitative studies and add new layers of understanding to researching student experiences and transitions from education to work. Using a comparative perspective enlarged the differences and similarities within and between contexts, and using biographical and narrative methods to reach a holistic understanding of students'

perceptions, experiences and plans (in conjunction with quantitative data) lead to a more detailed analysis which could form the basis of better targeted policy recommendations that address the complex experiences of student.

On a different note, methodological papers written from the perspective of researcher-translators or bi/multi-lingual researchers were very uncommon. Given that space boundaries particularly within the European Union are becoming blurred and different cultures and languages mix, more research topics will focus on various topics conducted in bi/multi-lingual populations so the situation of Hungarians in Romania might find resonance in other parts of the globe. I argued that it would be useful to hear the voices of other multi-ethnic and multi-lingual researchers and see the transitions and translations they made between cultures and languages while conducting research. Consequently I encouraged researchers to use their knowledge and skills both when selecting the topics and throughout the research and analysis because their insights and data-reading adds extra layers of understanding to issues studied previously by others. My intention with presenting a *thick description* of the various aspects of my research was to present one possible way of tackling this task.

To sum up, the findings of my research reinforced the importance of both agency and structural factors with regard to how and where students opted to go to university, but more significantly they highlighted the prevalence of significant others and happenstance events that altered students' plans and life course while at university and consequently influenced their future careers as well. My study did not aim to specifically target turning points and influential people within the life course, but a more in-depth analysis on both these topics would provide more fruitful information both for academia and policy audiences. I also did not have space to reflect more on the prevalence of students' 'sense of belonging' in the various phases of the transition process. It was apparent when students were selecting a subject and location, but also with regard to what activities they chose to be part of and which they disregarded or they gave up as it 'didn't feel right', and similarly with respect to where they could see themselves working and living in the future. Although this was to certain extent part of the considerations about place, future research should explore students' attachment and detachment to places and communities as this might become a separate

consideration when analysing transition processes. Similarly, since the study focused on those who were at university in two institutional contexts in two countries, there was no data about students at different universities and in different countries, or who did not end up applying or studying at university or those who dropped out for some reason. Conducting comparative analysis on the life stories of those who did not apply or did not complete their studies would clarify whether the prevalence of significant others and happenstance events, as well as engagement in multiple status positions was a characteristic of the student generation or it is a more widely spread phenomena.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. SAMPLING MATRIX

	Romania				England			
	female		male		female		male	
	HU	RO	HU	RO	UK	non-UK	UK	non-UK
parallel course	<u>Eliza</u> : Sociology & Economics		<u>Székelyboy</u> : Theology & Psychology			<u>Maryna</u> : Law		<u>Alex</u> : History & Archaeology
	<u>Blanka</u> : Sociology & History	<u>Andreea</u> : Security Studies & Communication	<u>SMRE</u> : Economics & Theology <u>Pacheco</u> : Tourism & Geography					
	<u>Ercsi</u> : Geography & Economics		<u>Előd</u> : Law & Politics					
single course		<u>Ally</u> : Sociology <u>Teo</u> : Sociology <u>Ioana</u> : Business studies	<u>Kristóf</u> : Economics <u>Bajusz</u> : Archaeology	<u>Ioan</u> : Environmental Sciences	<u>Rebecca</u> : Sociology <u>Sarah-Anne</u> : Geography			<u>Alfred</u> : Economics
	<u>Emese</u> : Geography <u>Emőke</u> : Economics <u>Katalin</u> : Politics	<u>Kissa</u> : Sociology <u>Adela</u> : Law	<u>István</u> : Sociology		<u>Lucy</u> : Sociology	<u>Elouise</u> : Archaeology		
	<u>Erika</u> : Economics	<u>Doriana</u> : Sociology <u>Liana</u> : Politics <u>Margaret</u> : Sociology <u>Veronica</u> : Communication	<u>Álmos</u> : Politics	<u>Gordon</u> : Sociology		<u>Maria</u> : Law <u>Lilly</u> : Politics <u>J.L.</u> : Economics <u>Anna</u> : Geography	<u>Johey</u> : Cultural studies & Sociology <u>Thomas</u> : Geography	<u>Ayoyinka</u> : Security studies <u>Frank</u> : Computer science

Engaged in many activities
Engaged in some activities
Not engaged in extra activities

APPENDIX 2. THESIS RESEARCH PROCESS

		1. Document and policy analysis	2. Pilot	3. Expert interviews	4. Interviews with students	5. Transcribe, code & validate interviews	6. Analysis & writing
2010	J						
	F						
	M						
	A						
	M						
	J						
	J						
	A						
	S						
	O						
	N						
	D						
2011	J						
	F						
	M						
	A						
	M						
	J						
	J						
	A						
	S						
	O						
	N						
	D						
2012	J						
	F						
	M						
	A						
	M						
	J						
	J						
	A						
	S						
	O						
	N						
	D						
2013	J						
	F						
	M						
	A						
	M						
	J						
	J						
	A						
	S						
	O						
	N						
	D						

APPENDIX 3. EXAMPLE OF E-MAIL SENT TO GATEKEEPERS AT THE ENGLISH UNIVERSITY

Subject: Research on student experiences at University of ...

Dear (name),

My name is Réka Plugor, I am a PhD student at Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester. My PhD research is about student experiences and transitions from education to work in Romania and in the United Kingdom. Currently I am conducting my field research in the UK and for this reason I am writing to you.

Can I please ask you to forward this e-mail to the final year (BA and MA) students at your department and encourage them to share their views and experiences by filling out the questionnaire?

The questionnaire can be accessed at this link: <http://bit.ly/gXrQUr>

The data will be treated confidentially and responses presented anonymously.

Kind regards,

Réka Plugor

APPENDIX 4. EXAMPLE OF E-MAIL SENT TO GATEKEEPERS AT THE ROMANIAN UNIVERSITY

HUNGARIAN:

Tisztelt (név),

Az angliai Leicesteri Egyetem doktori hallgatója vagyok és disszertációm témája a romániai illetve angliai diákok egyetemi tapasztalatainak és a munkaerő-piacra való átmenetüknek elemzése.

Jelenleg kutatásomhoz a ... Egyetemen tanuló diákokat keresek és, amennyiben lehetséges, az lenne a kérésem, hogy továbbítsa az alábbi üzenetet a végzős politológia szakos diákok listájára.

Segítségét előre is köszönöm.

Tisztelettel,
Plugor Réka

ROMANIAN:

Bună ziua,

Mă numesc Réka și sunt doctorandă la Universitatea din Leicester în Anglia. Tema mea de doctorat este un studiu comparativ despre experiența și percepția studenților privind învățământul superior și tranziția lor pe piața muncii în România și Anglia. Pot să vă rog să trimiteți mesajul de mai jos la toți studenții din anul 3 licență linia română?

Vă mulțumesc pentru ajutor și vă doresc o zi plăcută.

Réka Plugor

APPENDIX 5. EXAMPLE OF THE TEXT FORWARDED TO STUDENTS AT THE ENGLISH UNIVERSITY

Dear Student,

You are invited to take part in a study about student experiences and transitions from education to work. The aim of my research is to understand and describe the experiences of students at University of ... at different stages of their higher education studies, for this reason I am interested to hear about your motivation for studying, your experiences as a student, the activities you are engaged in while in higher education and your future plans.

If you would like to take part in the study or read more information about my research, please click on the following link: <http://bit.ly/gXrQUr>

If you have already participated in the study, please do not sign up again.

All data will be treated confidentially and responses presented anonymously.

Thank you very much for your help.

Kind regards,

Réka Plugor

APPENDIX 6. EXAMPLE OF THE TEXT FORWARDED TO STUDENTS AT THE ROMANIAN UNIVERSITY

HUNGARIAN:

Kedves Diákok,

A Leicesteri Egyetem doktori hallgatója vagyok és disszertációm témája a romániai illetve angliai diákok egyetemi tapasztalatainak és a munkaerő-piacra való átmenetüknek elemzése. Jelenleg kutatásomhoz a ... egyetemen tanuló diákokat keresek. A kérdőív 23 kérdésből áll és körülbelül 7 percet vesz igénybe a kitöltése. A válaszadás önkéntes és bizalmas, minden adat névtelenül és biztonságos helyen lesz tárolva.

A kérdőívet ezen a linken találjátok: <http://bit.ly/m72C1C>

Köszönettel,
Plugor Réka

ROMANIAN:

Salut,

Mă numesc Réka și sunt doctorandă la Universitatea din Leicester în Anglia. Tema mea de doctorat este un studiu comparativ despre experiența și percepția studenților privind învățământul superior și tranziția lor pe piața muncii în România și Anglia. Momentan colectez informații de la studenții din România și te rog, dacă ai timp, să completezi unul dintre chestionarele de mai jos. Chestionarul are 23 de întrebări și completarea durează cca. 7 minute.

Chestionarul în limba română: <http://bit.ly/j2CImM>

Chestionarul în limba maghiară: <http://bit.ly/m72C1C>

Chestionarul în limba engleză: <http://bit.ly/jjB4zT>

Sunt bucuroasă să răspund la orice întrebare în legătură cu cercetarea.

Îți mulțumesc pentru ajutor și îți doresc o zi plăcută.
Réka Plugor

APPENDIX 7. SURVEY ADVERTISED IN THE ENGLISH UNIVERSITY

Student experiences – questionnaire

I am a PhD student at University of Leicester and the survey is part of the research I am doing for the thesis. The aim of my research is to understand and describe the transition from education to work through the experiences of students at different stages of their higher education studies. For this reason I am interested to hear about your motivation for studying, your experiences as a student, the activities you are engaged in while in higher education and your future plans.

The questionnaire takes less than 10 minutes to complete and I can assure you that your individual responses will remain absolutely confidential. All data collected will be held anonymously and securely.

I am also seeking final year full time campus based undergraduate and postgraduate students who would be willing to spend 45-60 minutes of their time until the end of July talking to me about their experiences as a student, the activities they are engaged in and their future plans. If you have time to talk to me, please leave your contact details at the end of the questionnaire or write me on [e-mail address].

Thank you in advance for taking the time to complete this questionnaire and please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or you would like to find out more about my research.

1. Your gender. Please select one
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Prefer not to say
2. Year of birth: _____
3. Your ethnicity: _____
4. Where would you place yourself on the following scale compared to your fellow colleagues? Please select one
5. Did any of the following attend university or college? Please select all that apply
 - a. Parents
 - b. Siblings
 - c. Partner
 - d. Other
6. Where did you live before starting your studies at [name of University]? Please select one
 - a. In [name of country where the university is situated]
 - b. In the [name of region], but not in [name of county]
 - c. In the UK, but not in [name of region]
 - d. Other:

7. What was your highest qualification at entry? Please write your qualification

8. Which Department do you belong to? Please select one from the drop-down list

9. How are you studying...? Please select one

- a. Undergraduate level
- b. Masters level
- c. Doctoral level

10. In which year did you begin your current study program? Please select year from the drop-down list.

11. How are you funding your studies? Please select all that apply

- a. Financial support grants
- b. Financial support maintenance loan
- c. Financial support tuition loan
- d. Contribution from family/partner
- e. Hardship or access funds
- f. Personal savings
- g. Earnings from work during term
- h. Earnings from vacation work
- i. Earnings from occasional work
- j. Other forms of borrowing
- k. Grant/bursary from your university/college
- l. Organisational/employer grant
- m. Other: _____

12. On a scale from 1 to 4 how important were the following reasons for choosing to study at [name of University]? Please select one in every row

	1 = Not at all important	2	3	4 = Very important	NA
1. it felt like a natural step					
2. could not think of anything else to do					
3. I was interested to study the subject					
4. it is part of my longer term career plans					
5. I think it will enable me to get a good job					
6. reputation of the University					
7. the student support and development services available at the University (e.g. AccessAbility Centre, Learning Development, Career Development)					
8. the social life of a student in [city]					
9. I was encouraged by family / friends					
10. I was encouraged by employer					
11. I was encouraged by teachers					
12. the location of the University (close to home)					

13. How many hours do you spend a week on the following activities? Please select one in every row

	None or less than 1 hour per week	1-10 hours per week	11-20 hours per week	21-30 hours per week	more than 30 hours per week
1. Activities related to your studies (attending courses, seminars; reading; writing; group study; etc.)					
2. Employment, internship (paid!)					
3. Voluntary work, internship (unpaid!)					
4. Entertainment (sports; movies; parties; traveling; etc.)					
5. Enhancing your learning skills (by attending workshops, seminars, etc.)					
6. Enhancing your employability skills (by attending workshops, seminars, employer presentations, etc.)					

14. In case you are working, what is your main reason for doing so?

- For financial reasons
- Skills-related reasons / to gain experience for future career
- To socialize, to get to know people
- It is a degree requirement
- Other:

15. On a scale from 1 to 4 how satisfied are you with the following aspects of your student life? Please select one in every row

	1 = Not at all satisfied	2	3	4 = Very satisfied	NA
1. subject-specific knowledge gained					
2. opportunities to develop employability skills					
3. free-time					
4. level of student support received at departmental level					
5. level of student support received at university level					

16. Have you heard of the Student Support and Development Service at the [name of University]? Please select one

- Yes, and I have used its services
- Yes, but I have not used its services
- Yes, but I do not know what services it offers
- No, but I would be interested to find out more
- No, and I am not interested

17. In case you used the services provided by the Student Support and Development Service could you please specify which services you used and how useful they were for you? Please write the name of the service and your comment.

18. What (other) services would you like to see organised by the Student Support and Development Service? Please write your answer

19. What are your plans after graduation?
- a. Continue studying
 - b. Continue studying but also work
 - c. Take a gap year
 - d. Work
 - e. Other

20. How do you feel, are you optimistic or pessimistic regarding your ability to fulfil your future plans?
- a. Optimistic without a doubt
 - b. Rather optimistic
 - c. Rather pessimistic
 - d. Pessimistic without a doubt

Thank you for taking the time to complete the questionnaire! I would be interested to hear more about your experiences as a student. Would you be willing to talk to me?

- a. Yes
- b. No

In case you are willing to talk to me could you please give me your e-mail address?

In case you are willing to talk to me could you please give me your mobile number?

If you have questions or comments related to the topic, the questionnaire or my research please feel free to write them here:

APPENDIX 8. SURVEY ADVERTISED IN THE ROMANIAN UNIVERSITY (ENGLISH LANGUAGE EXAMPLE)

Student experiences – questionnaire

Are you a student at [name of University in Romania]?

I would be interested to hear about your motivation for studying, your experiences as a student and the activities you are engaged in while studying. The questionnaire has 23 questions and takes less than 7 minutes to complete. I am also seeking students who would be willing to spend 45-60 minutes of their time talking to me about their experiences as a student, the activities they are engaged in and their future plans. If you would be willing to talk to me, please leave your contact details at the end of the questionnaire or write to me on [e-mail address] or call me on [Romanian mobile number].

I can assure you that your individual responses will remain absolutely confidential. All data collected will be held anonymously and securely. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or you would like to find out more about my research.

Thank you in advance for taking the time and completing the questionnaire!

1. Your gender
 - a. Male
 - b. Female

2. Year of birth _____

3. Your ethnicity
 - a. Hungarian
 - b. Romanian
 - c. Other

4. Where would you place yourself on the following scale compared to your fellow colleagues? Please select one

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Very poor											Very rich

5. Did any of the following ... attend university or college? Please select all that apply
 - a. Parents
 - b. Siblings
 - c. Partner
 - d. Other
6. In which town / village did you live before starting your studies at [name of university]? Please write the name of the settlement: _____

7. What was your highest qualification at entry? Please write the name of your qualification: _____
8. Which Department do you belong to? Please write the name of your department: _____
9. How are you studying... ? Please select one
- Undergraduate level
 - Masters level
 - Doctoral level
10. In which year did you begin your current study program? _____
11. Are you paying fees for you studies?
- Yes
 - No
12. How are you funding your studies? Please select all that apply
- Contribution from family/partner
 - I am paying for my studies and living (from earnings from work)
 - Scholarship from the university
 - Bank loan / borrowing
 - Other: _____
13. Have you studied previously or are you a student at another faculty?
- No
 - I have studied at a different faculty / university previously
 - I am currently studying at a different faculty / university

14. How important were the following reasons for choosing to study at [name of University]? Please select one in every row

	1 = Not at all important	2	3	4 = Very important	NA
1. It felt like a natural step					
2. Could not think of anything else to do					
3. I was interested to study the subject					
4. It is part of my longer term career plans					
5. I think it will enable me to get a good job					
6. Reputation of the University					
7. The student support and development services available at the University (e.g. Career Office)					
8. The social life of a student					
9. I was encouraged by family					
10. I was encouraged by friends					
11. I was encouraged by teachers					
12. The location of the University					

15. How many hours do you spend a week on the following activities? Please select one in every row

	None or less than 1 hour per week	1-10 hours per week	11-20 hours per week	21-30 hours per week	more than 30 hours per week
1. Activities related to your studies (attending courses, seminars; reading; writing; group study; etc.)					
2. Employment, internship (paid!)					
3. Voluntary work, internship (unpaid!)					
4. Entertainment (sports; movies; parties; traveling; etc.)					
5. Enhancing your learning skills (by attending workshops, seminars, etc.)					
6. Enhancing your employability skills (by attending workshops, seminars, employer presentations, etc.)					

16. In case you are working, what is your main reason for doing so? Please select all that apply

- For financial reasons
- Skills-related reasons / to gain experience for future career
- To socialize, to get to know people
- It is a degree requirement
- Other: _____

17. How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your student life? Please select one in every row

	1 = Not at all satisfied	2	3	4 = Very satisfied	NA
1. Subject-specific knowledge received					
2. Opportunities to develop employability skills					
3. Free-time					
4. Level of student support received at departmental level					
5. Level of student support received at university level					

18. Have you heard of the Career Centre at the [name of University]?

- Yes, and I used its services
- Yes, but I do not know what services it offers
- No, but I would be interested to find out more
- No, and I am not interested

19. What (other) services would you like to see organized by the Career Centre?

20. Have you heard of the Alumni Association at the [name of University]?
- Yes, and I am a member of the Mentor programme
 - Yes, but I do not know what programmes it organizes
 - No, but I would be interested to find out more
 - No, and I am not interested
21. What (other) programmes would you like to see organized by the Alumni Association?
-
22. What are your plans after graduation?
- Continue studying
 - Continue studying but also work
 - Work
 - Other: _____
23. How do you feel, are you optimistic or pessimistic regarding your ability to fulfil your future plans?
- Optimistic without a doubt
 - Rather optimistic
 - Rather pessimistic
 - Pessimistic without a doubt

Thank you for taking the time to complete the questionnaire! I would be interested to hear more about your experiences as a student. Would you be willing to talk to me?

- Yes
- No

In case you are willing to talk to me could you please give me your e-mail address?

In case you are willing to talk to me could you please give me your mobile number?

If you have questions or comments related to the topic, the questionnaire or my research please feel free to write them here:

APPENDIX 9. INTERVIEW GUIDE THEMES

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. The purpose of this interview is to find out your motivations, actions and experiences as a university student. Do you mind if I tape-record the interview? The data collected from the interview is for the purpose of the research, it is voluntary, anonymous and it will be kept in strict confidence.

Topic / Question...	Rationale for asking...	Research question...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can you tell me about yourself? General + school background? 	⇒ <i>introduction, but also what he/she mentions</i>	What circumstances and motives lead to youngsters becoming students?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why did you want to study in a higher education institution? Did someone/something influence your decision? 	⇒ <i>motivation for being a student + factors that influenced their decision!</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did you choose where/what to study? 	⇒ <i>decision-making</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did your family/friends feel about you going to HEI? Did your parents attend university? 	⇒ <i>family & peer influence!</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why do you think youngsters should study at university? Do you think HE is important? Why (not)? 	⇒ <i>HE role and importance!</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can you describe what it means/meant to you being a student? 	⇒ <i>student experience!</i>	How do students understand and describe their experience?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is your most memorable moment? Have you any regrets if you look back at your student life? Would you change something if you could? 	⇒ <i>what do they think they should have done? student experience!</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you feel now (before graduation)? 	⇒ <i>experience at a turning point!</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Were you engaged in extra-curricular activities while studying? Which one(s)? Why? How about volunteer work? Can you describe the experience? 	⇒ <i>engagement in extra activities? student (work) experience!</i>	Extra-curricular and work experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did you work during your studies? What? Where? Why? How did you find the job? 	⇒ <i>work experience!</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are your future plans? Where do you think you'll be working in 2 months/1 year/5 years? 	⇒ <i>future (career) plans!</i>	How does being a student influence future career?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you see your experience of being a student contributing to your future career? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you have any other comments regarding the topic? 		

APPENDIX 10. EXAMPLE OF THE E-MAILS I WROTE TO STUDENTS AT THE ENGLISH UNIVERSITY INVITING THEM TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW

Hello,

My name is Réka, I am a second year PhD student at Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester and if I am not mistaken you completed my on-line questionnaire in which you mentioned that you would be willing to tell me more about your student experiences. I will be conducting interviews starting from next week and I was wondering when and where would be a suitable time/place for you to meet and talk?

The interview should last about 45 minutes - 1 hour and your identity will be anonymous. Please see the attached document for additional information about my research.

Many thanks,
Réka

APPENDIX 11. EXAMPLE OF THE E-MAILS I WROTE TO STUDENTS AT THE ROMANIAN UNIVERSITY INVITING THEM TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW

HUNGARIAN:

Szia,

Réka vagyok, az Angliában tanuló lány, akinek a kérdőívét kitöltötted. Köszönöm, hogy időt szántál rá, válaszaid nagy mértékben segítik a kutatásom. Ha nem tévedek a kérdőívben jelezted, hogy lenne időd és kedved részt venni egy személyes beszélgetésen is. Ezzel kapcsolatosan írok most, érdeklődni szeretnék, hogy neked mikor és hol felelne meg egy max. 1 órás beszélgetés?

Várom mielőbbi válaszod, addig is kellemes napot kívánok.

Üdv,
Réka

ROMANIAN:

Salut,

Mă numesc Réka, și te contactez în legătură cu chestionarul pe care ai completat recent. În primul rând, aș dori să-ți mulțumesc pentru timpul acordat completării acestui chestionar, mai ales pentru posibilitatea să facem un interviu. Cu acest scop îți scriu acum, și vreau să te întreb când/unde putem să ne întâlnim pentru interviu? O să dureze maxim 1 oră, deci putem merge și la o cafea undeva dacă îți convine.

Îți doresc o seară plăcută și aștept răspunsul tău.

Réka

APPENDIX 12. PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET

Full title of PhD research project:

Planned and happenstance transitions in the UK and Romania

Name, position and contact address of Researcher:

Réka Plugor, PhD student
Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester
7-9 Salisbury Road, LE1 7QR Leicester, United Kingdom
rp234@le.ac.uk

You are invited to take part in the above research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is to describe the relationship between higher education and work in Romania and the United Kingdom through understanding the experiences of students at different stages of their higher education studies. This will be done by undertaking topical life history interviews with several male and female students, from a variety of disciplines, in the two countries. This research is undertaken as part of a PhD study based at the University of Leicester's Centre for Labour Market Studies under the supervision of Dr John Goodwin. It is proposed to submit the final thesis in September 2013.

What will happen if you take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form and you will be invited to take part in a one-to-one interview. You might be contacted again to take part in a further interview as the study develops.

If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving reason.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The main benefit for you will be an opportunity to reflect in detail on your experiences and the proposed use of the life history approach has been identified as a method which has considerable potential for personal and professional development. Whilst there will be a time commitment required from you, it is felt that the benefits of involvement will outweigh the costs.

A more thorough understanding of the students' experiences and their work trajectory (past, present and future) is important for policy-makers, managers and researchers in the higher education field. Such research, for example, could help tailor specific training, development and support for them while studying.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

In agreeing to take part in this study there will be a time commitment to consider and due to the nature of this type of research it is impossible to determine what that might be at the outset but the interview is likely to last between 45 minutes and 1 hour. You are, of course, able to withdraw from the study at any time.

Will the information you say be kept confidential?

All information collected will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations). In order to protect the anonymity of each participant, pseudonyms will be used to ensure participants cannot be identified. All electronic data will be held securely in password protected files on a non-shared computer and all paper documentation will be held in locked cabinets in a locked office.

Data generated by the study must be retained in accordance with the University's policy on Academic Integrity and therefore will be kept securely in paper or electronic form for a period of five years after the completion of the research project.

What will happen to the results of the research?

All interview data will be transcribed and subjected to respondent validation where each participant will be provided with the transcription and account of the findings in order to check that the participant agrees with the researcher's interpretation of their life history. This data will then be used in a PhD submission and may also be published in appropriate academic journals and/or books as well as for conference presentations. All participants will be able to have access to a copy of the published research on request.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet, please feel free to let me know if you require any further clarification.

APPENDIX 13. CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

Full title of Research Project:

Planned and happenstance transitions in the UK and Romania

Name, position and contact address of Researcher:

Réka Plugor, PhD student

Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester

7-9 Salisbury Road, LE1 7QR Leicester, United Kingdom

rp234@le.ac.uk

Please circle your answer:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	Yes	No
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.	Yes	No
3. I agree to take part in the above study.	Yes	No
4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.	Yes	No
5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications.	Yes	No

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher

Signature

Réka Plugor

APPENDIX 14. EXAMPLE OF A SUMMARY SENT TO STUDENTS

Rebecca
Summary
length: 00:34:17:12

female / 23
UK / Soc BA 3
date: 2012.04.17.

Individual background

23 years old, Rebecca is from the local county. Her parents are separated and she has 3 younger sisters. She talks about her parents and their educational history...

...they both wanted me to come to university. My dad is a little bit older and he wasn't... he is the most intelligent person I know, but because of his age he wasn't given, there wasn't as much... there weren't as many chances for people then so he never got anywhere. He dropped out of law school because he wasn't good enough, but he's the cleverest person I know. So I think he wanted to kind of see me do it and I think it really mattered to him. My mum as well has been studying on and off all her life so... yeah, she's doing a PhD here, she has been at [name of university] when I was younger so I think I always knew that she would like it if I went to uni especially here. Not only because she wants me around to look after my sisters or whatever, but also because I think she holds education highly.

She did her compulsory education locally, then attended college, but "didn't do as well as expected" in her A-levels and she explains her actions:

...decided to take two years out before I came to uni and worked full time in those 2 years and applied and I've got an unconditional offer here which I was very surprised at cause I didn't quite have the grades... so that's just kind of happened.

She feels that teachers have played an important role in her life:

Yeah, definitely. Quite a few of them were teachers actually. I always find when I get along with a teacher well, especially when I was in GSCE and A-level, I had the same teacher for humanities and sociology and I feel that he really made the effort to tell me 'you know you could be good at this, but you need to try' and I kind of really appreciated his approach with that. I think that's what it is, I think it is an encouragement thing with me. There's a guy in the department that I think, he said, you know, 'I expect to be doing really good references for you' so that encourages me further. I like to please people with what I do, so... yeah, I'd say teachers had a really big influence. I think that's what I need, I need a bit of push and sometimes it's not there so I tended not to do as well when it wasn't.

Work experience

She started working from the age of 16. Earning money, gaining independence from her family and meeting new people were her main reasons for working:

Yeah, I started work quite young, I was 16 and I worked in kind of restaurants and when I was 18 I started working on-and-off in bars and when I was 16 I also worked in a clothing shop as well as well as in a restaurant. So I've been kind of working nonstop since I was sixteen with maybe a few months off every summer and stuff like that. When I left A-levels I was in a bar job that decided that I'd look for something that was a bit with better hours like to have just a few years out of education. So I went to an employment agency, [name of agency] in [name of city] and they found me a job with [name of bank] so I started full time there and I really enjoyed it and I really miss it....

I really just wanted a bit of my own money and I think I became quite independent quite young. I moved out when I was 17 so for me, it was, I wanted something that was mine and just mine and I thought that getting experience would help me eventually anyway. So it gave me a bit more experience, gave me money and I've met people through which was nice as well, so it seemed everything was a good idea.

Opting for HE

Her decision to go to university was influenced by family, friends and her experiences at work:

I find that all of my friends are at university as well from where I live. It was very like, everyone has gone to university, so I kind of felt like it's a step for me, I didn't even think about not doing it really....

I think it was because what kind of pushed me towards the edge with my decision I was a bit like, one: my stepdad used to say to me, 'oh you've got a good job, you can go far in it' but whereas my mum and dad were very like 'I want you to go to university'. But I think what pushed me over the edge was that people were starting to be made redundant and I knew that I was probably, having only been there 2 years, I was probably gonna be one of the first to go anyway so I thought it better my chances in getting a long time life career if I went to university and did something that was ??? to me.

And my team leader had been to university and so had another younger guy in the department and they were always like 'you know, you need to go, it's something you need to do'. That's what I heard from my friends at home as well... so that kind of yeah pushed me and I thought... yeah, you know even though they didn't want to lose me in the bank because I used to... I did work very-very hard, I worked very hard in employment all the time... yeah, I think that the people there were like 'yeah, if I could do it again, I would' so I said I've got to do this.

Choosing university based on a combination of grades, university ranking and personal preferences:

I've got 3 younger sisters and they are all quite younger than me, the oldest is 17 and the youngest is 13 and I kind of wanted to stay around them and I wanted to stay around my dad cause he's 65 now so... just really I wanted to stay around my family and I know the place and that makes me feel quite comfortable. Yeah it was really easy, so I think for me it was probably just an easy option.

Yeah, I applied to the full 5, but because my A-levels weren't as good as expected, the only 2 I got into were [name of a new university] and here and obviously I kind of wanted to go... out of the two it's obviously the only redbrick university of the two and my mum studies here, she's doing a PhD so she was very... she tried not to sway my decision, but she did, she ended up doing so. Yeah, yeah, so it was the obvious choice for me really.

Opting for sociology was also based on personal preferences and rational choice, she liked studying the subject and got the highest A-level grade in it:

I really enjoyed it at A-level, even in GCSE level I loved humanities so it has always been something I've really enjoyed and always been good at which I think it has reinforced me doing it and it was my best A-level grade so I thought that even if my A-levels are not quite up to scratch it shows that I'm dedicated to the subject at least. And I just like how it kind of it includes like kind of a bit of everything in it as well, it makes sense of a lot of things.

HE experience

She explains her transition to university life:

The first year of uni I actually found that it was a little bit strange balancing my family and friends from home with uni, because all my other uni friends have moved away so their family and stuff weren't around them and that was the case for everyone in my block apart from me. So everyone was kind of 'where is she' cause I was trying to see my family as much as I did before... it's just not possible. Now I'm at a stage where my friends have kind of merged so they have all met each other so it's fine, so yeah.

After working for 2 years, she wanted to enjoy university life:

I wanted to throw myself at the deep end of uni really like having just worked for two years I said I'll just try a bit of everything and see how it went.

Her best memory is from the first few weeks:

...probably first year, fresher's time, that kind of... first couple of months it's really exciting meeting everyone, it was such a change for me as well because I've been in an office for about 2 years so yeah, probably then. Before all the real work started as well.

She enjoyed studying sociology and is happy with her experiences here:

Yeah, I really enjoyed the course. I think it's a lot of work, but I think I would think that any of the subjects are, because I'm not very good with deadlines, but I really liked the department and the staff, the teaching staff are really helpful so I really liked it, yeah.

She started working in the second semester of her first year and that changed her world-view and schedule:

Well, the beginning of second year I think it hit me quite a lot like that it all mattered now and that it wasn't actually that long two years so the first year had gone so fast that I thought well, these two years are going to go fast so I've got to pull some really good work out so I can get a good grade in my degree. And I started working at a bar like sort of March of my first year so it became a bit difficult at the beginning of second year as well because there was more work to kind of balance that, but I did it just for extra money really.

She talks about her experiences of being in a double status position and how she decided early on that her studies were a priority:

I say I'm bad with deadlines but I never miss them. So it has never been a problem. It's sometimes harder with the work side because they want me to do more hours and I can't because of uni, but I've always put uni first so that has always been my major priority so there's been no problems.

I feel like there's sometimes when deadlines are coming up that I would rather be at work than actually doing my essays cause sometimes I just get really bad mind block, but I've always resisted the urge to take on more hours. I think, well I know... I have friends that have full time, not full time, part time jobs, but they work sort of 25 hours a week and do uni and I could never do that so I've always said to the boss 'look I can do sort of 13 to 15 hours a week, no more'. And as long as I keep it at that it's, I find it's actually good having a job because it makes me plan my time better... cause if I know I'm going to be at work then I can't say that oh, I'll just do it later, because I can't do it later. So sometimes it helps I think.

She talks about the benefits of being in a double status position:

I think you've got a lot more responsibility when you've got a part time or full time job, so I think that you think more carefully about what you are doing with your time. Saying that, there are a lot of people that don't have a job that probably do more uni work than me, so it's not for everyone, but definitely everyone I know with a job is doing kind of alright so... that's good.

She also got involved in the sociology society and talks about her experiences:

...we took it over cause the people that did it last year left it and didn't bother getting any new committee in or anything like that so we took it over and I responded to an e-mail that went out from two girls that decided to be joined presidents and were looking for other core members for other positions so I responded and said that I would like to do treasurer kind of just because I've always been involved in money slightly so and I thought it would probably look good in my CV and we've tried to plan really big socials, we've tried to listen to people do questionnaires on what they want out of this society but it feels like even if we do everything they ask there are quite negative about it. I think people would rather go to sports societies than they would to subject societies and it's always hard planning events cause you have to plan them around deadlines and stuff. So yeah, hasn't gone as well as we thought... we had a good turnout for the first one and then after that it all dropped.

Apart from work and clubs at university she also got involved in another experience which she feels is also part of university life:

Last year I climbed Kilimanjaro with a group of people from uni. It was the beginning of my second year I saw a sign up and I wanted to do something that scared me a little bit so I had to organize a fundraising like 2500 pounds round doing my work and working as well and it was amazing, but that was really hard... definitely the hardest thing. It was amazing, like it was so good, but I just can't explain how much I cried. It was like... we had this altitude sickness tablets and I kept getting hallucinations and I was sick all the way up and when I got to the top it was like -14 and I couldn't, like my ear and my ipod it frozen so it was a bit emotional. I needed music to get me through. But yeah, it was amazing and I loved that I managed to do it while I was at uni cause I'll always remember it.... Yeah, and I think that's what uni is about as well. So many people try to do these things around uni, like life skills, life experiences... I think it's a big thing about coming to university.

If given the chance to go back and change something in her past, she would opt to focus more on her studies as she feels that her past actions determined her life course:

That's really difficult... I had... my GCSEs I didn't try hard enough and I didn't really care too much, so they weren't as good as I could have done and I feel like that has been a little bit of a story for me all through education, apart from uni. Which is why I am glad that I took 2 years off to sort myself out and so I would probably try harder in my GCSEs and A-levels, especially now. One of the things that I forgot to mention about the PGCE is that I know that they look at your GCSEs and I don't have a C in science so I think, I don't want... I wish I could have changed that so that my... something I did when I was 16 didn't affect me for the rest of my life... but it will do.

She describes the university:

I would say supportive because I assumed that I wouldn't get much help at uni and I actually have and there's been a lot of support both in terms of the emotional aspects as well. Definitely got in crying to lectures so I do understand this. I kind of say active, but that might be just my experience here, like I did... I haven't done anything in the second and third year, but I did cheerleading in the first year, I had really active social life with people at work, people in classes, people that I lived with. It has always been busy as well as

I've always had a gym card so I used all the facilities. I don't know what other... a third word, I definitely think that... it's so hard to... it's a good uni, how can I say that, you know what I mean...

R: What do you mean by 'good uni'?

Oh, it's really hard... like it looks good. If you studied at [name of university] it's one of the ones that I guess is desirable, that's maybe a good word, like I had teacher... cause I was from [name of city], you know, if you wanted to go to uni for sociology than definitely stay in [name of city] cause [name of university] is good for sociology and it is a good uni. And when people say a 'good uni' it's like, it's a desirable one to have a degree from.... and it looks good.

Future plans

Regarding her future plans, she wants to focus on finishing her degree and she is planning to work at the same place until then. This will give her some space to think about what she wants to do next.

I don't know. I think basically I've just got to be in a situation that it's not as stressful at uni so that my head can deal with the decision... I just think that there's so much more to do before the end of term that I can't think straight. I don't want to take a whole year out to kind of think 'oh what I'm going to do', but I think it's probably the best thing to do for me at the minute.

She used to think she wants to become a teacher, but due to her GCSE and A-level grades she doesn't think she will get into the programme so she is keeping her options open.

I find it really difficult with sociology. I used to want to be a teacher so I was planning on doing a PGCE after my degree, but I feel like I need a bit of a break again so I think it's probably going to be more like I'm going to take a year trying maybe do something that I have experience in, like bank work, I figure out where I want to be because it's... I still don't know. One of the things that I forgot to mention about the PGCE is that I know that they look at your GCSEs and I don't have a C in science so I think, I don't want... I wish I could have changed that so that my... something I did when I was 16 didn't affect me for the rest of my life... but it will do.

Cause I really like working with children, I worked in schools and stuff before, doing health and social care. I really like working with children so I wanted to go into primary, but I know that the chances of being a young women and getting a primary PGCE with sociology are quite slim and there's a lot of competition so I think I just thought that it's going to be really stressful and I might not enjoy all that stress....

She plans to stay local although job prospects are not too good and she might be forced to leave, but she is optimistic about her future:

Yeah, I really want to stay in [name of city] but I'm looking... I've seen a lot of graduate jobs that... and none really that are in [name of city] so I'm hoping I don't have to move, I have my family here, my boyfriend lives here and really don't want to move, but I'm kind of facing the fact that I might have to one day. [name of city] it's just so small.

I think my chances of getting a job are high, but I think my chances of getting a job for life are low. I think that I need a couple of years to probably search for something that is going to be a career. But I know I can get a job.

APPENDIX 15. INITIAL CODING FRAMEWORK

research question	master code	code	sub-code	label	source (etic/emic)
1. What circumstances and motives lead youngsters to become students?	1. BACKGROUND			individual background	et
		BACKGR-SELF		individual background/self	et
			BACKGR-S/CH	childhood memories	em
			BACKGR-S/LANG	language knowledge	em
		BACKGR-OTH		individual background/others	et
			BACKGR-OTH/PARENT	parents' role	et
			BACKGR-OTH/PARTNER	partners' influence	em
			BACKGR-OTH/FRIEND	friends' influence	em
	2. PRIOR EXP			prior experience	et
		P-EXP-SHOOL		high school experience	et
		P-EXP-WORK		work experience	em
	3. MOTIVATION			motivation for entering HE	et
		MOT-INT		personal/internal motivation	em
			MOT-INT/PERS.DEV	personal/intellectual development	em
			MOT-INT/EMP	employment reasons	em
		MOT-PEOP		peoples' influence	et
			MOT-PEOP/PAR	parents' influence	et
			MOT-PEOP/FRI	friends' influence	et
			MOT-PEOP/ALL	everyone goes to uni	em
		MOT-OTHER		other motivational factors	em
			MOT-OTH/EASY	easy to get in	em
			MOT-OTH/FASH	it's fashionable	em
			MOT-OTH/NAT	natural step	em
			MOT-OTH/ALWAYS	always wanted to study	em
			MOT-OTH/RIGHT	right thing to do	em

research question	master code	code	sub-code	label	source (etic/emic)
2. How do students make choices related to HE?	4. CHOOSING INST			choosing the institution	et
		INST-HABITUS		factors related to institutional environment	em
			INST-HAB/LOC	location of the uni	em
			INST-HAB/PRES	prestige of uni	em
			INST-HAB/QUAL	quality of edu at uni	em
			INST-HAB/ATMOSPHERE	atmosphere at department	em
			INST-HAB/LANG	language of study	em
		INST-INF		factors related to people's influence	em
			INST-INF/FRI	friends' influence	em
			INST-INF/PARENTS	parents' influence	em
			INST-INF/RELATIVES	relatives' influence	em
2. How do students make choices related to HE?	5. CHOOSING SUBJ			choice of subject	et
		SUBJ-INT		personal reasons	em
			SUBJ-INT/LIKE	liked the subject (studied in school)	em
			SUBJ-INT/EXP	prior experience working in area	em
			SUBJ-INT/EXCL	"prin eliminare", "profil care mi s-ar potrivi"	em
		SUBJ-PEOP		people's influence	em
			SUBJ-PEOP/PAR	parent's influence	em
			SUBJ-PEOP/FRI	friends' influence	em
			SUBJ-PEOP/REL	relatives' influence	em
			SUBJ-PEOP/TEACH	teachers' influence	em
			6. CHOOSING MA		
		MA-REAL		doing a Masters degree at the moment	em
			MA-REAL/INT	personal motivation for doing MA	em
			MA-REAL/OUTSIDE	outside influence to do MA	em
		MA-PLAN		choosing to study for Masters degree in the future	em

research question	master code	code	sub-code	label	source (etic/emic)
	7. CHOOSING MULT. STAT.			choosing multiple statuses	et
3. How do students understand and describe their HE experience and activities while in HE?	8. HE EXP			higher educational experience	et
		HE EXP-STUDY		higher educational study experience	
			EXP-STUDY/DEP	departmental atmosphere	em
			EXP-STUDY/LEC	lecturers' role	em
			EXP-STUDY/COLL	colleagues	em
			EXP-STUDY/CURR	curricula	em
			EXP-STUDY/LANG	language of study	em
			EXP-STUDY/FACIL	facilities (library, careers office)	em
			EXP-STUDY/ACTIV	extra activities part of classes	em
			EXP-STUDY/INTERN	compulsory internship organized by uni	et
			EXP-STUDY/GRAD	feelings about graduating	et
		HE EXP-DOUBLE		double statuses	et
			DOUBL/COURSE	2 courses at uni	et
			DOUBL/AT UNI	extra activities at uni	et
			DOUBL/OUTSIDE	extra activities outside uni	et
		HE EXP-WORK		work experience	et
4. What are students' future plans?	9. FUTURE PLANS				et
		FUT-STUDY		future study	em
		FUT-WORK		future work	em
		FUT-FAMILY		future family	em

APPENDIX 16. FINAL CODING GUIDE

research question	master code	code	sub-code	label	
1. What circumstances and motives lead youngsters to choose to attend HE?	1. MOTIVATION			motivation for entering HE	
		MOT-NEXT		next step	
		MOT-NEXT/CLEAR		clear & natural step	
		MOT-NEXT/NEED		need to have it	
		MOT-NEXT/CAREER		due to career	
		MOT-CHOICE		was a choice	
		MOT-CHOICE/EXP		for the experience	
		MOT-CHOICE/FUTURE		for a better future	
		MOT-CHOICE/JOB		for a (better) job	
		MOT-HAPPENSTANCE		happenstance event	
	2. CHOOSING SUBJECT			choosing the subject	
		SUBJ-ALWAYS		always knew what to study	
		SUBJ-ALW/PARENTS		parental influence	
		SUBJ-ALW/TEACHERS		teachers' influence	
		SUBJ-CHOICE		opted for a subject because...	
		SUBJ-CHOICE/INDIV		individual preference	
		SUBJ-CHOICE/INFL		influenced	
		SUBJ-TURNINGP		opted for a subject due to a turning point	
	SUBJ-TUR/NOTFIRST		not accepted into first choice		
	SUBJ-TUR/CHANGED		changed before applying		
	3. CHOOSING INSTITUTION			choice of institution	
			INST	due to institution	
			INST-SUBJ	due to subject choice	
			INST-CITY	due to city	
	4. CHOOSING CITY			city choice	
			CITY-INFLUENCED	influenced by someone	
			CITY-DISTANCE	based on distance from home	
			CITY-FAMILIAR	based on familiarity	
2. How do students understand and describe their HE experience?	5. HE EXPERIENCE			higher educational experience	
		HE EXP-INITIAL		initial impressions	
		EXP-INITIAL/POSITIVE		positive aspects	
		EXP-INITIAL/NEGATIVE		negative aspects	
		HE-EXP-STUDY		perceptions about studies	
		EXP-STUDY/THEORY		theoretical knowledge	
3. What role do extracurricular activities have in students' HE experience?		EXP-STUDY/PRACTICAL		practical knowledge	
		6. MSP			multiple status positions
		MSP-SECOND		double academic status	
		MSP-WORK		extra activities	
		MSP-WORK/ATDEP		connected to the department	
		MSP-WORK/OUTSIDE		outside of the department	
		MSP-INTERSHIP		internship experience	
MSP-INTERN/COMP		compulsory internship			
MSP-INTERN/ADD		additional internship			

research question	master code	code	sub-code	label
4. What are students' post-graduation plans?	7. FUTURE PLANS			future (career plans)
		FUTURE-SPECIFIC		specific plans
		FUTURE-CONDITIONAL		conditional plans
		FUTURE-POSTPONED		postponed plans
		FUTURE-UNCERTAIN		uncertain plans

Influential factors - codes:

- | | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| ▪ agency/control | ▪ labour market perception | ▪ school environment / practices |
| ▪ career consideration | ▪ language | ▪ sense of belonging |
| ▪ communion | ▪ like | ▪ social class |
| ▪ distance | ▪ opt for change | ▪ time |
| ▪ ethnicity | ▪ people | ▪ turning point |
| ▪ family environment / practices | ▪ places | ▪ university degree |
| ▪ financial aspect | ▪ prestige/reputation/ranking | ▪ university environment / practices |
| ▪ gender | ▪ quality | ▪ value |
| ▪ grades | ▪ region | |
| ▪ happenstance | ▪ regret | |
| | ▪ satisfaction | |

APPENDIX 17. LIST OF PRIMARY NATIONAL DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THE ANALYSIS

- ROMANIA -

Constitution of Romania 1991, revised in 2003

Law 84/1995, Education Law

H.G. 445/1997, Scholarships and material support for students

Ministry of National Education (MNE). 2001. Strategy for developing higher education in the period 2002-2010

Law 288/2004, Organization of university studies

H.G. 88/10.02.2005, Organization of undergraduate studies

H.G. 769/2005, Scholarships and material support for students from rural areas

Ministry of National Education (MNE). 3235/2005, Organization of undergraduate studies

Ministry of National Education (MNE). 2008. Report on the status of national education system, Bucharest.

Law 1/2011, Law of National Education

- UNITED KINGDOM -

Department for Education and Skills (DfES). 2003a. The future of higher education. London: HMSO

Department for Education and Skills (DfES). 2003b. Widening participation in higher education.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES). 2007. World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England. London: HMSO.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES). 2008. Higher Education at Work- High Skills: High Value.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). 2011. Higher Education: students at the heart of the system. White Paper. London: BIS.

APPENDIX 18. LIST OF STUDENTS INTERVIEWED & INCLUDED IN THE ANALYSIS – MAIN SELF-DESCRIBED CHARACTERISTICS

Nr.	Pseudonym	Country	Age at the time of the interview	Gender	Ethnicity	Social status	HE experience in family	Educational status (& degrees held at the time of the interview)	Categories of subject studied
1	Adela	RO	23	F	Romanian	4	-	Law BA - 4th year	specialist vocational subjects
2	Alex	EN	22	M	Romanian	7	parents	Ancient History and Archaeology BA - 3rd year	discipline-based academic subjects
3	Alfred	EN	24	M	Mixed White-Chinese	8	parents	Economics BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes
4	Ally	RO	22	F	Romanian	7	parents	Sociology BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes
5	Álmos	RO	25	M	Hungarian	4	grandmother	Politics BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes
6	Andreea	RO	23	F	Romanian	8	parents/siblings	Communication and PR BA - 3rd year & Security studies BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes
7	Anna	EN	23	F	Asian-Pakistani	5	parents/siblings	Geography MSc (BSc degree)	discipline-based academic subjects
8	Ayoyinka	EN	37	M	African	6	-	International Security MA (BA degree)	occupationally-oriented routes
9	Bajusz	RO	23	M	Hungarian	4	parents/siblings	Archaeology MA - 1st year (Archaeology BA degree)	discipline-based academic subjects
10	Blanka	RO	24	F	Hungarian	7	siblings	Sociology BA - 3rd year & International Relations MA - 2nd year (International Relations and European Studies BA degree)	occupationally-oriented routes

Nr.	Pseudonym	Country	Age at the time of the interview	Gender	Ethnicity	Social status	HE experience in family	Educational status (& degrees held at the time of the interview)	Categories of subject studied
11	Doriana	RO	21	F	Romanian	3	parents/siblings	Sociology BA - 2nd year	occupationally-oriented routes
12	Eliza	RO	22	F	Hungarian	4	parents	Economics - Bank and Finance BA - 3rd year & Sociology BA - 1st year	occupationally-oriented routes
13	Előd	RO	23	M	Hungarian	8	parents/siblings	Politics BA - 3rd year & Law BA - 1st year	occupationally-oriented routes
14	Elouise	EN	23	F	from SUA	5	parents/siblings	Archaeology MA (Anthropology BA)	discipline-based academic subjects
15	Emese	RO	22	F	Hungarian	7	siblings	Geography BA - 3rd year	discipline-based academic subjects
16	Emőke	RO	24	F	Hungarian	5	-	Economics - Management MA - 2nd year	occupationally-oriented routes
17	Ercsi	RO	24	F	Hungarian	5	-	Geography BA - 3rd year (& Economics BA & MA degree)	discipline-based academic subjects
18	Erika	RO	22	F	Hungarian	5	siblings	Economics -Economic geography BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes
19	Frank	EN	25	M	Chinese	7	parents	Maths and Comp science MSc (Computer science BSc)	occupationally-oriented routes
20	Gordon	RO	25	M	Romanian	5	-	Sociology BA - 4th year	occupationally-oriented routes
21	Ioan	RO	24	M	Romanian	3	parents/siblings	Environmental Science BSc - 4th year	specialist vocational subjects
22	Ioana	RO	22	F	Romanian	6	parents/siblings	Business BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes
23	István	RO	34	M	Hungarian	3	-	Sociology BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes

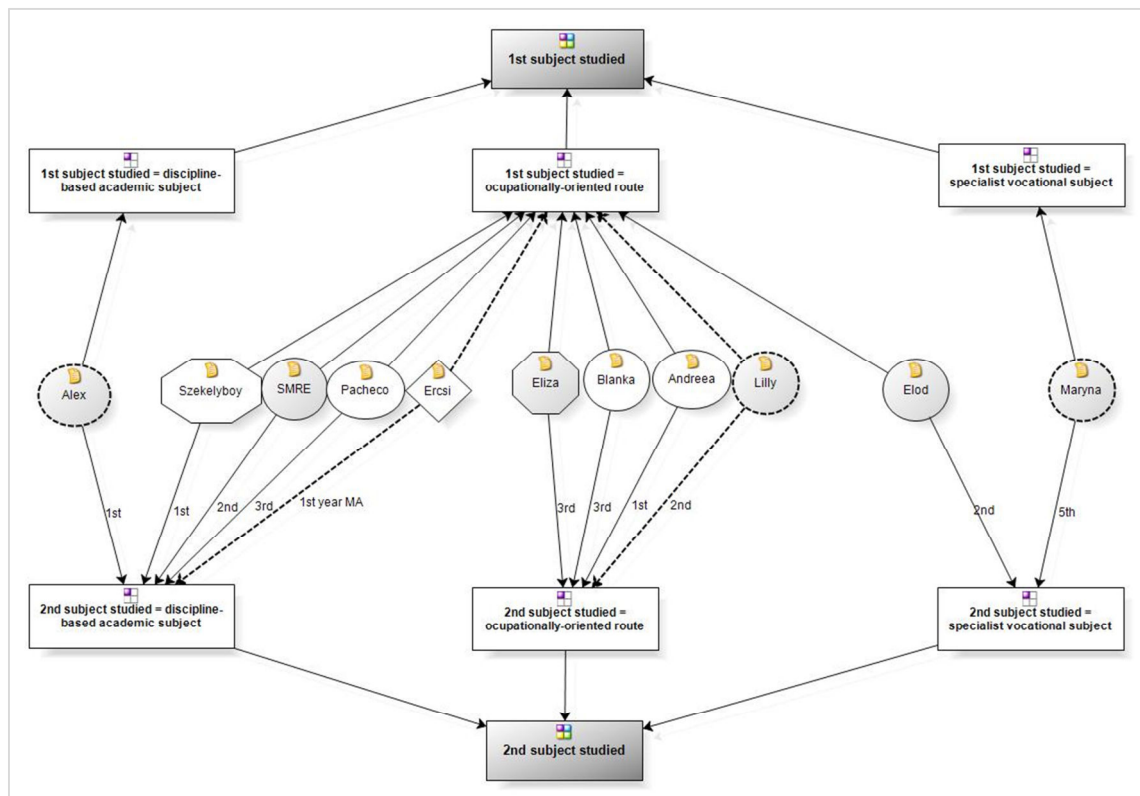
Nr.	Pseudonym	Country	Age at the time of the interview	Gender	Ethnicity	Social status	HE experience in family	Educational status (& degrees held at the time of the interview)	Categories of subject studied
24	J.J.	EN	27	F	Thai	5	-	Economics MA	occupationally-oriented routes
25	Johey	EN	22	M	British	5	parents/siblings	Social Research MSc (Cultural Studies BA)	occupationally-oriented routes
26	Katalin	RO	22	F	Hungarian	7	parents	Politics BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes
27	Kissa	RO	22	F	Romanian	7	siblings	Sociology BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes
28	Kristóf	RO	24	M	Hungarian	3	-	Economics - Management MA - 2nd year (Economics BA)	occupationally-oriented routes
29	Liana	RO	22	F	Romanian	7	siblings	Politics BA in English - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes
30	Lilly	EN	23	F	Romanian	7	parents	International Relations MA (Politics BA)	occupationally-oriented routes
31	Lucy	EN	21	F	British	7	parents	Sociology BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes
32	Margaret	RO	23	F	Romanian	3	siblings	Sociology BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes
33	Maria	EN	23	F	Romanian	3	-	Law BA - 2nd year	specialist vocational subjects
34	Maryna	EN	24	F	from Ukraine	7	parents	Law BA - 3rd year & Law MA in Ukraine (& Law BA degree in Ukraine)	specialist vocational subjects
35	Pacheco	RO	25	M	Hungarian	7	-	Tourism MA - 2nd year & Geography BA - 3rd year (& Tourism BA degree)	occupationally-oriented routes

Nr.	Pseudonym	Country	Age at the time of the interview	Gender	Ethnicity	Social status	HE experience in family	Educational status (& degrees held at the time of the interview)	Categories of subject studied
36	Rebecca	EN	23	F	British	4	parents	Sociology BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes
37	Sarah-Anne	EN	25	F	British	7	parents/siblings	Sustainable Management of Natural Resources MSc part time (Geography BA)	occupationally-oriented routes
38	SMRE	RO	23	M	Hungarian	7	parents/siblings	Economics - Marketing BA - 3rd year & Theology BA - 2nd year	occupationally-oriented routes
39	Székelyboy	RO	21	M	Hungarian	3	-	Psychology BA - 2nd year & Theology BA - 2nd year	occupationally-oriented routes
40	Teo	RO	22	F	Romanian	4	-	Sociology BA - 2nd year	occupationally-oriented routes
41	Thomas	EN	24	M	British	5	parents	Geography MRes (Geography BA)	discipline-based academic subjects
42	Veronica	RO	22	F	Romanian	5	parents/siblings	Communication & PR BA - 3rd year	occupationally-oriented routes

APPENDIX 19. ANALYSIS AND CHAPTER STRUCTURE

Chapters	Themes	Topic Groups	Clusters
Pathways into HE	Motivation	1. always knew	I. clear step
			II. need to have it
			III. career choice
		2. conscious choice	I. experience
			II. better future
			III. better job
		3. happenstance	
	Subject choice	1. always knew	
		2. conscious choice	
		3. happenstance	I. influenced by someone
	Location choice	1. obvious choice	II. had to change the first choice
			I. subject & institution
		2. conscious choice	II. familiarity with the city
			I. institution
			II. institution & city
			III. city
HE experience	Studies	1. theoretical aspects of their studies	I. significant others
			II. no other choice
		2. practical aspects of their studies	I. satisfied
			II. not satisfied
	MSP	1. activities connected to the department	I. satisfied
			II. not satisfied
			I. university project
			II. student organisation
		2. activities outside of the department	III. non-compulsory internship
			IV. foreign study experience
			I. FT job
			II. PT job
Future			III. occasional / flexible work
			IV. holiday work
			V. unpaid work
			VI. DAS
		1. specific plans	
		2. conditional plans	
		3. postponed decision	
		4. uncertain plans	

APPENDIX 20. DOUBLE ACADEMIC STATUSES⁴



⁴ Guidance on how to read the figure:

The top part of the figure shows students' first choice subject/course; the bottom part the second choice subject/course; and in the middle part of the figure the students appear:

The shape of the object represents students' subjective social positions on a scale from 1 to 10: 3&4 = octagon; 5 = diamond; 6 & 7 & 8 = circle.

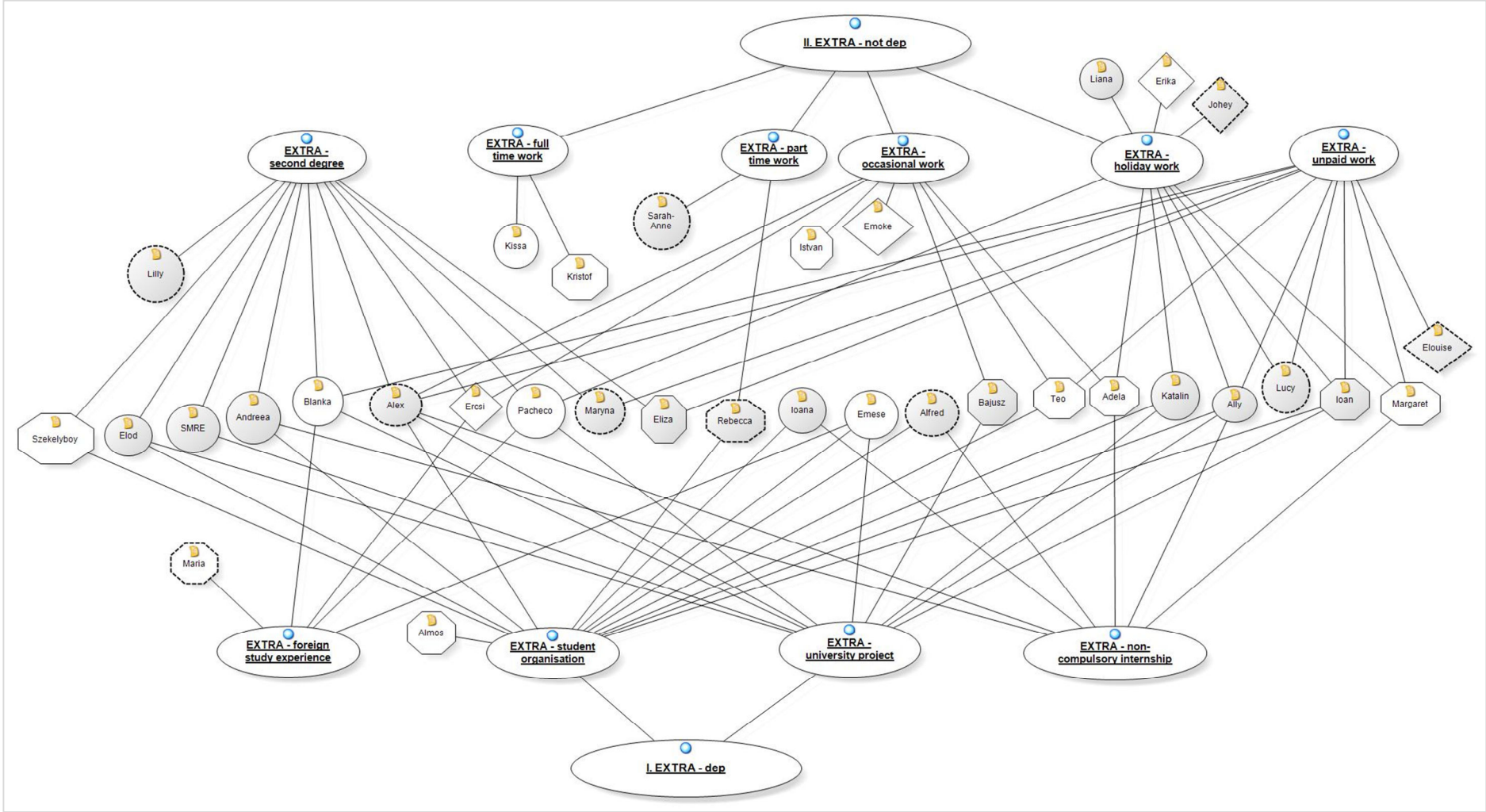
The shading of the object represents parents' experience with HE: white background = parents have no experience within HE; grey background = parents have HE experience.

The dashed lines in the objects represent British students.

Ercsi and Lilly appear with dashed connector lines as they were not in double status positions at the time of the interview. Ercsi completed her Masters course and ended her double status position which lasted for two years the year before I interviewed her. Lilly was in a double status position when she started her undergraduate course in England four years ago, as she continued her undergraduate degree started in her home country for one year while being a full time student in England.

The second arrows are labelled with the academic year the students opted for the second course.

APPENDIX 21. MULTIPLE STATUS POSITIONS



APPENDIX 22. TYPOLOGY OF TRANSITION PATHWAYS FROM EDUCATION TO WORK

Pathway	RO		UK	Description...		
				Pathways into HE	HE experience	Future plans
Persisters	Adela		Anna	Had (clear) career ideas	They built consciously on initial plans to strengthen their position for chosen career	Had specific or conditional plans
	Bajusz		Ayoyinka	when applying to		
	Ercsi		Elouise	university		
	Kristóf		Frank			
			Lilly			
			Maria			
			Maryna			
Experimenters	Ally		Alex	Had vague career ideas	Used vague ideas as starting point to experiment different career options during their studies	Had specific or conditional plans
	Andreea		Alfred	when applying to		
	Ioan		Lucy	university		
	Székelyboy		Sarah-Anne			
	Teo					
Switchers	Blanka	Liana	J.J.	Had some career ideas	During their studies they realised that they needed to ‘correct’ the choice they made, so they switched career paths	Had hopes for the future
	Eliza	Pacheco	Johey	when applying to		
	Előd			university		
	Emőke					
	István					
Wanderers	Álmos	Ioana	Rebecca	No clear career ideas about why and what they wanted to be doing when applying to university	They drifted through HE without clarifying career ideas or future plans	Had dreams for the future, but no plans
	Doriana	Katalin	Thomas			
	Emese	Kissa				
	Erika	Margaret				
	Gordon	SMRE				
	Veronica					

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