Multiple Status Positions of University Students:
Snapshots from England and Romania

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The purpose of this paper is to initiate a discussion about students' experiences at university based on the findings of a research conducted on transitions from education to work in two countries. The research focused on final year university students from different social and disciplinary backgrounds in England and Romania to learn about their motivations for opting to go to university, the experiences and activities they engaged in while at university, and their future (career) plans. The analysis built on existing accounts that suggested that social structures and individual actions (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1991; Bourdieu & Waquant 1992; Beck 1992; Roberts 1993, 2003, 2009; Heinz 1999, 2002, 2009; Evans 2002, 2007) were important to understand transitional experience. It has been additionally argued that happenstance events (Hodkinson, Sparkes & Hodkinson 1996; Thomson *et al.* 2002; Holland & Thomson 2009) and significant others (Elias 1991; Brooks 2007; McAdams 2009) can also enable or constrain students' opportunities and experiences.

Methodological considerations

The research was conducted from a biographical perspective, using students' life stories as basis for social research in order to understand processes of transitions (Merrill and West 2009). This perspective, as Goodson and Sikes (2001) argue, has "the potential to make a far-reaching contribution to the problem of understanding the links between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues'". The main methodological approach was narrative inquiry as this approach allows researchers to present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness (Webster and Mertova 2007) and positioned the student voice at the heart of the study. Topical life history interviews (Ward 2003) were conducted with 42 male and female students, from a variety of disciplines, in the two countries. This method focuses on one key aspect of the participant's life (Ward 2003), in this case, students' education and work experience, rather than discussing all their life experiences. Using this method helped gain more focused data in relation to the main aim of the study. The method of analysis was informed by the work of Lieblich and colleagues (1998); student

experiences were compared and contrasted based on the themes and the emerging categories using narrative content and form analysis.

Multiple Status Positions

Several authors write about the non-sequential characteristic of education-work life-events and point to the fact that students increasingly opt to combine learning with work. Students combine 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 combine learning and working in the dual system, full-time students who have jobs, and employed individuals who invest 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. This research also focused primarily on Wolbers' second category, on full time students and their engagement in work, but 'work' was defined more broadly to include all types of work, and also various extra-curricular activities students were engaged in (in the following referred to as extra-curricular activities).

As seen in the graph - which presents the students and the various activities they were involved in - these students were 'busy' people (Holdsworth's 2010, p. 4) and they actually experienced simultaneously multiple work and learning positions while at university, and a more adequate term to describe their experience is MSP – multiple status positions.

Students' extra-curricular activities can be divided into two main categories: activities that gravitated around the department and activities that happened outside the departmental premises. The availability of opportunities within the department seemed country-dependent; students in England were more active outside of the department, while students in Romania engaged in activities both within and outside the department. In Romania students' narratives portrayed the good rapport that existed between (usually young) lecturers and students and consequently the various possibilities these students enjoyed to gain practical experience alongside more experienced staff. In England students' 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 tangential to their studies.

In general the participants of this 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, similarly to what Brooks and Everett (2008, p. 383) predicted, a strategy of 'fishing for' activities or engaging in MSP as defined in the present study, is becoming 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.

Implications of the research

This research is responding to calls for additional studies to address concurrently societal and individual transitions and help to understand how and why students make the choices they do during higher education and how these choices combined with the habitus of the institution and the social and economic situation present in the country shape their university experiences. By examining students' activities during university and their perceptions about these activities, the research contributes to the growing understanding of university students' experiences and school-to-work transitions which is important not only for academic purposes, but for the wider policy and practice community as well. Additionally, the analysis of these multiple status positions offers the opportunity to look in detail at how the pathways from education to work are organized in two different institutional contexts in Europe.
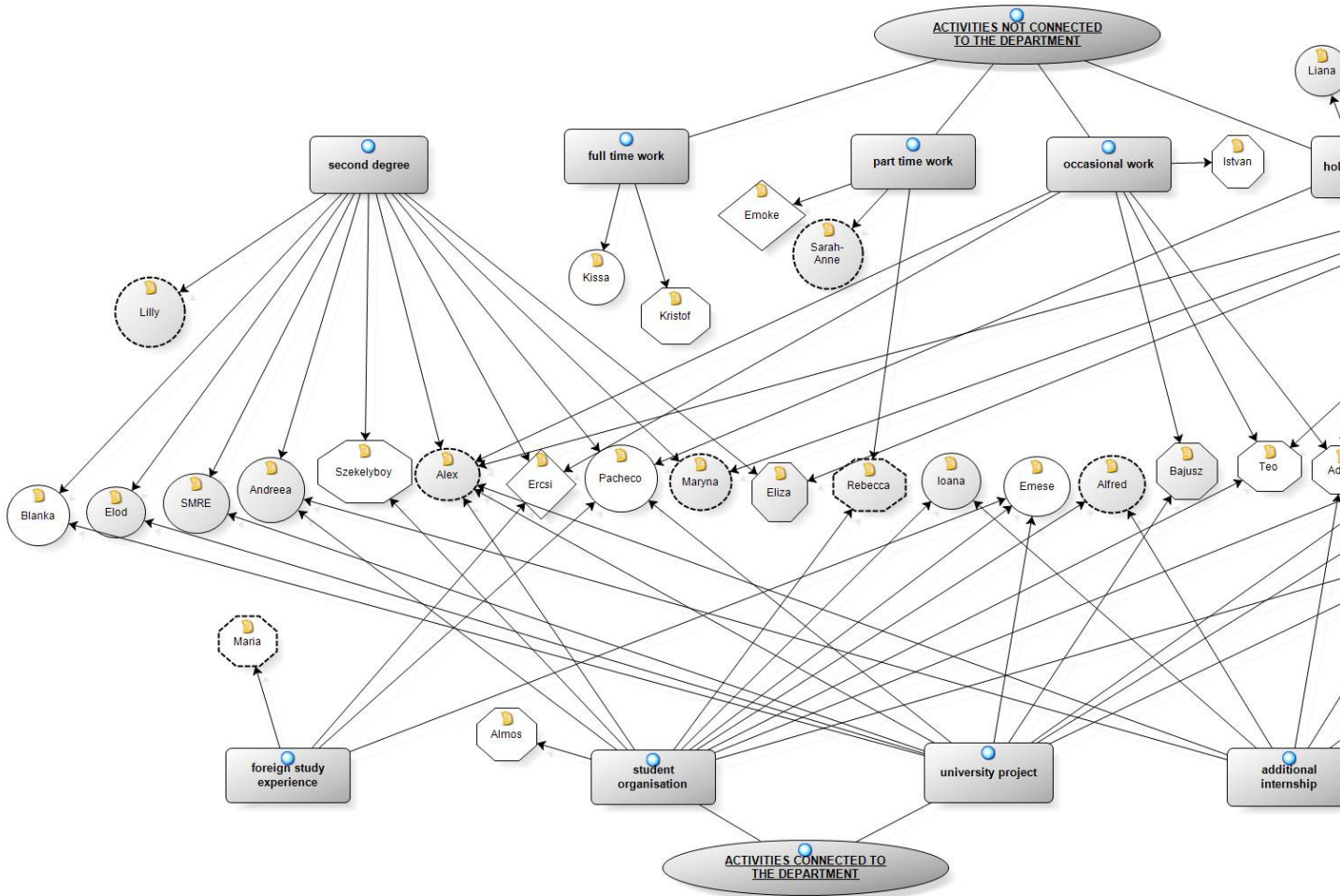
MULTIPLE STATUS POSITIONS[1]

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1 Guidance on how to read the figure:
The <u>shape</u> 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 <u>shading</u> of the object represents parents' experience with HE: white background = parents have no experience within HE; grey background = parents have HE experience.
The <u>dashed lines</u> in the objects represent British students.

ACTIVITIES NOT CONNECTED TO THE DEPARTMENT

second degree

full time work

part time work

occasional work

Liana

Istvan

hol

Emoke

Sarah-Anne

Kissa

Kristof

Lilly

Szekelyboy

Alex

Ercsi

Pacheco

Maryna

Eliza

Rebecca

Ioana

Emese

Alfred

Bajusz

Teo

Ad

Blanka

Elod

SMRE

Andreea

Maria

Almos

foreign study experience

student organisation

university project

additional internship

ACTIVITIES CONNECTED TO THE DEPARTMENT

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