Mapping Vulnerability Through a Capabilities Approach
A Biographical Study of First Generation Students
in Portuguese Higher Education

A dissertation submitted to the
Faculty of Educational Sciences
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
In Education
At Bielefeld University

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July 2015

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Funding for this project has been provided by the European Commission within the framework of the FP7 Marie Curie ITN "Education as Welfare—Enhancing Opportunities for Socially Vulnerable Youth in Europe" programme (http://www.eduwel-eu.org).

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I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and in the content of my work, I have used no other sources than those explicitly indicated and where due acknowledgement has been made.

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____

Ana Sofia Ribeiro

Bielefeld, 10.07.2015

Aknowledgments

One of the purposes of a PhD is to become an independent scholar. However, reaching that status depends not only on one's work alone but also on the support of many others. Therefore, here I state my gratitude and send an enormous thank you to:

The EDUWEL network for providing me with unique financial and scientific support to develop this project, enhancing my capabilities and introducing me to great people. To my supervisor, Prof. Holger Ziegler, who was always encouraging towards my development, pointed me creative directions and gave me the necessary freedom to act upon them. To Prof. Hans Uwe Otto, my second supervisor, for supporting me in doing this PhD and allowing me to study at the Bielefeld Center for Education and Capability Research, where I could profit from a stimulating and international research environment. To my mentor supervisor, Prof. Melanie Walker, for her critical support in designing this project and making it feasible, and for always being present and aware. To my colleagues and senior researchers in EDUWEL, Aurora Lopez, Agnese Peruzzi, Burcu Guner, Davina Gateley Saïd, Lukas Ertl, Elaine Unterhalter, Enrica Chiappero, Sara Bonfanti, Alberta Spreafico, Mattias Strandh, Björn Halleröd, Janine Leschke, Mario Biggeri, Annica Brännlund, Guntars Catlaks, Krystian Szadkowski, Margherita Bussi, Maria Jepsen, Jean-Michel Bonvin, Stephan Dahmen, Virva Leppänen, Vincenzo Mauro and Susanne Gottuck, a big thank you for sharing this journey, particularly to my "Eastern sister" in Poznan, Petya Ilieva-Trichkova, who always believed I could do this. To my colleagues and friends in Bielefeld, thank you so much for taking me in your wonderful group: Joshua Amunga, Brana Bosnjak, Erika Bozzato, Antje Brock, Zöe Clark, Anika Duveneck, Franziska Eisenhuth, Grace Shiao En Chng, Johanna Maria Gold, Pinar Burcu Güner, Rada Jancic, Natalia Karmaeva, Ksenia Kuzmina, Anetta Potsi, Daniel Rebbe, Bettina Ritter, Jana-Elisa Ruth, Lakshmi Venkataraman, Sittipan Yodyotying. Finally, I would like to thank the International Office at the Bielefeld University for providing me financial support through an Aid of Final Degree grant.

Parts of this thesis were presented and discussed in several conferences and articles, and the final work benefited a lot from comments and suggestions from wider research community. To the reviewers, a sincere thank you.

In the process of presenting this work, some friends have helped designing posters and making it all look clear and pretty. To designer Rita Carvalho and Marta Correia, my gratitude.

English is not my mother tongue and so I requested help proofreading this thesis. To my friend Brant Monaghan, a big thank you.

Since 2014 I have been working in Portugal at the Institute for Social Sciences in the University of Lisbon, under the coordination of Prof. Maria Manuel Vieira and Prof. Ana Nunes de Almeida. This thesis benefited much from my experience at the institute, an interdisciplinary work environment where constant learning opportunities are provided. For that, my appreciation.

To my friends, too many to mention, the old and the new, who are near and far, my gratitude for their encouragement and patience with my shortcomings and long goings.

To my mother, who always told me I should finish what I started, and that I should finish this PhD.

To my partner, Miguel, my gratitude for sharing his life with me, coping with the pains of being a social scientist and making me smile all the way.

Finally, my gratitude goes to the students that have accepted to share their stories with me, providing me with insight and inspiration, in the hope that maybe I could change something. Maybe we can.

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Abstract

The economic crisis that hit Portugal in 2010, and the consequent International Monetary Fund intervention have called for austerity measures that affect the country's welfare state in general and required severe cuts in higher education funding, which are shifting higher education costs from public to private. While such cuts affect all students, low-income households students suffer the most, for their family's precarious employment situation. Among these, first generation students raise greater concern, due to their double disadvantaged position. Despite being a new majority in Portugal (in 2010, 54% of participants in Portuguese higher education have parents with lower secondary education at most), first generation students remain an underrepresented population in most higher education systems. Taking into consideration the policy changes and overall socio-economic context, this research analyses the biographical narratives of 25 first generation students from one Portuguese campus and illuminates how their specific cultural environment, limited economic resources and unstable welfare policies shape their university experience.

The research is theoretically informed by the parity of participation conception of justice of Fraser (2007), which requires dismantling all institutionalised obstacles that prevent people from becoming full partners of society, be it economic structures that require redistribution, hierarchies of cultural value which require recognition of other contributions or social exclusion from networks that are in power to make claims and decisions. The concept is coupled with the vulnerable subject vision of Fineman (2008) that observes vulnerability as a universal human condition that can be reduced or expanded through institutional action (overcoming identity based interventions), and the capabilities approach of Sen (1997). A capability is an opportunity constructed both by external conversion factors, and internal drive dispositions, such as preferences, choices and aspirations. By considering freedom and opportunities as indicators of human development, the capabilities approach is used for outlining what should be the desired capabilities first generation students should have for thriving in the university, and for evaluating the specific conversion factors, whether of personal, social environmental nature which prevent the subject from living the life it has reason to value.

A mixed methods approach was adopted during field work, combining both biographical interviews as defined by Schutze (2007a) and problem centred interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) a method that combines both features of deductive and inductive reasoning, suited for researching specific topics. The interview guide was based on a literature review done around first generation students and on the operationalisation of the capability approach by selecting 4 core capabilities necessary for their flourishing in the university: the capability for autonomy (choice and motivation), capability for voice (participation on academic activities), capability for resilience (self-confidence and identity) and the capability to aspire (self-projection and expected outcomes of HE). Given the particular qualification structure of the Portuguese population (45% of the population has up to 4 years of education and only 12% completed a higher education degree), I have operationalised first generation students as students whose parents have at most lower secondary education and who are at least in their second registration at the university.

Findings interrogate the constitution of first generation students as a vulnerable group in widening participation schemes, rather pointing to the institutional role in fostering resilience and vulnerability of these students, namely though the provision of needs scholarships. Regarding familiar influence, parentalisation was observed in the majority of cases, whether for material reasons or emotional ones, with both positive and negative impacts on academic performance. Nevertheless, individual agency is revealed through ~~a~~ critical cultural and cognitive views elaborated by these students, and enabled by social support networks, and in some cases, by supportive institutions. Finally, the effect of traditional integration rituals is also analysed, concluding that alternative student engagement schemes produce better impacts on first generation student experience.

Keywords: vulnerability, capabilities, parity of participation, Portugal, higher education, first generation students, economic crisis.

Introduction and Disposition

Massification of higher education, a process that occurred after the 1960's in American higher education and that later extended to the European context (Trow, 2005), brought issues of diversity into the centre of university debates, as it questioned one of the core functions of the institution: the production of elites (Castells, 2001). New students started to enter the university, eager not only for learning but also looking for better life chances, demanding institutions that delivered credentials that opened the doors to a better life. Through the dissemination of human capital theory, education was increasingly seen as a means to train a skilled labour force, but also as a legitimate platform to attain social mobility.

First generation students are the quintessential student group of this massification process, one that distinguishes itself from other widening participation target groups for being the first in their family to reach higher education attendance. While their identity can overlap with that of other underrepresented groups, such as women, ethnic minority students, or low income and part-time students, first generation students owe their "vulnerable" status to the assumption of cultural intergenerational transmission, that, due to their families' low or median educational status, would narrow their chances of reaching a tertiary education degree. Whether this assumption is verified or not (and there are few studies that isolate and outline clearly the negative impact of familiar cultural background in first generation students' chances, regardless of other participation barriers), the fact is that first generation students remain an underrepresented group in most higher education systems. This underrepresentation can be a consequence of less inclusive higher education systems or of different stages in the massification of higher education process, that is, some countries may be already with a low rate of first generation students' participation because most parents in a given age cohort already attended higher education. This is the case for instance of Scandinavian countries, although the Norwegian experience suggests that even when there are no fees barriers and participation is stimulated, social inequalities subsist due to cultural capital aspects (Aamodt, 2008). Unlike other European countries, Portugal presents a majority of first generation students coming from a low educational background (whose parents have at most 9 years of education). This situation is recent, since in 2005, and according to Eurostudent data, the target

group was severely underrepresented in the country, despite the low levels of education of the overall Portuguese population. Inclusive participation policies that flexibilised access to higher education, namely to mature students, caused this change that started to show since 2010. However, widening access without strengthening participation and pushing for retention generates inconsequent equity policies, since student retention is not encouraged. According to Belyakov, Cremonini, Mfusi, & Buck, (2009) the notion of access is popular and problematic. It embraces several dimensions, among which institutional survival, (which revolves around the issue of numbers), extension of educational opportunity (in terms of equity in relation to gender and other gaps in opportunity), the view of access as a catalyst for change in teaching and learning in higher education and as a tool for increasing economic development in a country and coping with the demands of globalisation. On the other hand, while access is seen as a liberal goal and is a consensual demand among different stakeholders and institutions, participation is a concern linked to social justice ideology and success (or attainment) appears within the human potential and fulfilment ideologies in a framework of social inclusion (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010).

Relationships between higher education and society are of an import and export nature (Brennan & Naidoo, 2007), that is, higher education produces and reproduces the social inequalities found in a given nation. That said, while only recently the Portuguese higher education systems seems to reflect the composition of its overall population, that does not mean that the Portuguese society is now one of increased social mobility. In fact, Portugal is one of the most unequal countries in the OECE, with a Gini coefficient of 34 points, and as research shows, unequal societies are also socially immobile (Piketty & Goldhammer, 2014; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). On the other hand, as credentials multiply, massified higher education is no longer filling the promise of distinction necessary to thrive in the job market. Rather, the value of higher education should be found also in social benefits, such as increased voter turnout (McMahon, 2009). Still, and despite decreasing enrolments, first generation students in Portugal are a new majority that was never studied as such and thus deserves special attention.

This research targets first generation student experience in Portuguese higher education through a biographical approach, aiming at unveiling not only access routes,

but also participation and success aspects. From a capability perspective, the aim was to enlarge the informational basis used to make judgements about social justice in the Portuguese higher education system. The study looks at student participation as a holistic issue, thus intending also to understand the dropout phenomena and its causes. Policy-wise, it pays attention to accessibility and affordability of the Portuguese higher education system. Regarding equity, it addresses all its three forms: equity from above, concerned with systems of rules and fairness; equity from below, concerning participation and representation; and equity from the middle, associated with the processes that facilitate flows of information and resources (Unterhalter, 2009b). Its fundamental task is to interrogate the constitution of first generation students as a vulnerable group in widening participation research, taking the Portuguese case as a unique setting where first generation students are a new majority. Through an empirical account of vulnerability and capability, this research aims to unveil the influence of parental education in first generation student experience and to uncover other positive or negative factors that impact the participation of this student group.

Research problem

How is first generation student experience constructed?

This problem was identified in order to address the holistic nature of student experience, which from a spatial perspective, surpasses the campus/family divide, reaching outside classroom schedules, and from a temporal perspective, encompasses upper secondary experiences and future projects), privileging the individual reflexivity of the student while attending simultaneously to the collective nature of biographical research.

Research questions

Research question 1.

- How do parental education and family culture influence the capabilities of first generation students?

Research question 2.

- How do macro level policies and micro level structures (institutions) protect or expose first generation students' vulnerability?

The research is theoretically informed by the parity of participation theory of justice of Nancy Fraser, by the capabilities approach of Sen and Nussbaum and by the vulnerable subject theory of Fineman. Methodologically, it follows a mixed methods approach, that comprises documentary and statistical analysis, combining it with an interview programme based on problem centred interviews, biographical narratives and visual methods. Its findings point to the parentalisation effect on first generation student development and identity, and to vulnerabilities that can be of three types: economic, familiar and academic, having a cumulative and interdependent character. The parentalisation effect found in several cases of this research seems to have a positive output, favouring adaptation and resilience. However, the vulnerabilities found are not specific to first generation students, and rather result from institutional action. The research then analyses the role of macro level policy changes occurred due to the economic crisis that affected Portugal since 2010, and its effect on individual autonomy and expectations, concluding that economic deprivation is the main cause of academic vulnerability. Finally, the research also analyses aspects of general institutional culture regarding student engagement (namely academic hazings and extracurricular activities) and their role in fostering resilience and integration.

The EDUWEL Marie Curie ITN

The project was developed under the Initial Training Network EDUWEL (2010-2014), dedicated to the study of vulnerable youth and welfare state policies, under the theoretical umbrella of the capabilities approach. That said, one of the objectives of this research was to extend the application and operationalisation of the capabilities approach to new contexts and research topics, specifically in this case to first generation students in Portuguese higher education. The use of vulnerability as a conceptual tool was also a product of the EDUWEL ITN, specifically from Working Group 3, dedicated to researching post-compulsory education. However, the specific choice of Fineman's vulnerable subject theory was linked to the specific task of this research (to interrogate first generation students constitution as a vulnerable group), a choice that was also adequate due to the economic crisis context in which that fieldwork took place. While other conceptualisations of vulnerability are possible, this

research was the first to apply Fineman's theory to higher education research, adding to its originality. Finally, this research acknowledges the need to examine higher education policy in light of its relationship with welfare systems, a standpoint that was also a product of the EDUWEL training programme.

Objectives and aims of this study

- To evaluate the current policies for widening access, participation and success in Portuguese higher education, raising awareness on the major barriers faced by disadvantaged students.
- To explore the higher education experience of this specific target group, focusing on vulnerability and resilience.
- To contribute to the creation of new policies on an institutional or national level, which foster the empowerment of first generation students, based on a capability perspective.

Disposition

This thesis is delivered following the requirements for a cumulative dissertation stated by the Faculty of Educational Sciences from the University of Bielefeld, including three published empirical research pieces, all single authored and peer reviewed, that analyse data and discuss findings gathered in this project. A fourth research output was extracted from the theoretical framework based on the capabilities approach, which will be published by the end of 2015. The thesis organises a framework for all three papers, providing conceptual definitions, the historical and policy contexts, the theoretical framework and the methodology adopted, seeking to clarify aspects that were not explored deeply in the research papers due to their limited structure.

Chapter 1 supplies a literature review about first generation students in higher education research, mostly by exploring the concept in literature of English and Portuguese language. While the concept was generated in the North American context, it is having an increased expression in Europe, although in Portugal the definition first generation is not in use, being referred to as part of other groups, such as mature

students or working class students. The chapter thus explains the diverse definitions of first generation students and relates this target group with working class students and part-time students, highlighting the links with parental background and low economic status. Finally, the chapter provides the working definition of first generation students applied in this study.

Chapter 2 offers an overview of accessibility and affordability aspects of the Portuguese higher education system, based on statistical and documentary analysis. The chapter intends to further characterise a new historical period on equity polices in Portuguese higher education, initiated with the economic crisis of 2010, pointing to its unstable and exclusive arrangements. For that reason, socio-economic data regarding the welfare state, social protection, employment and demographic trends from 2010 to present is included, as it is assumed from the biographical data collected that the socio-economic structures have strongly impacted the experience of first generation students, although Portugal does not produce specific statistical data about these target groups. Particular attention is given to needs scholarship figures and legislation, as most of the participants in this research were needs scholarships holders.

Chapter 3 elaborates the theoretical framework of the thesis, based on the capabilities approach, the parity of participation theory of justice of Fraser and Fineman's vulnerability conceptualisation. It offers an account of the capabilities approach as a higher education theory, providing its operationalisation in this thesis and integrating it with the other theoretical contributes. The parity of participation conception of justice establishes interdependency among redistribution (material), recognition (cultural) and participation (political). Finally, Fineman's vulnerability shifts the focus of analysis of justice from identities to institutions and structures responsible for fostering resilience in its citizens. The end of the chapter provides a graphical figure that integrates the three contributors, placing first-generation students in its focus and clarifying its purpose: to provide an empirical account of vulnerability and capability that widens the informational basis used to make judgements about social justice in Portuguese higher education.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the research methods applied in the thesis: media monitorisation, descriptive statistics and documentary analysis, and biographical narratives in a problem centred interviews form. The choice of a partially mixed

methods approach is justified for triangulation purposes and it was also a consequence from the data sources available at different stages of project development. The main methodology employed was the qualitative biographical interview, performed with 18 interviewees selected through snowball sampling in one Portuguese campus. Analysis of the narratives was done using Atlas.ti software and followed a cross case horizontal perspective, with vertical analysis of anchor cases that served as hypothesis generators.

Chapter 5 delivers a summary of the 3 research pieces published in peer-reviewed publications, all single authored. Article 1, published in *Praktyka Teoretyczna* in 2013, is a research piece that analyses one single case from this study, an anchor case, which allowed generating the hypothesis used to analyse the whole data set. These hypotheses stated first that vulnerability and resilience were caused through institutional action, secondly that students felt misdistribution events as having misrecognition effects, and thirdly that social conversion factors impacted negatively on the capabilities of first generation students. Article 2, published in *Social Work and Society* in 2014, is an overview article of the whole thesis data, focusing on economic vulnerabilities and equity policies and its effects on the biographies of first generation students, using the same hypothesis stated in Article 1. Article 3, a chapter published in a Council of Europe volume of 2015 concerning student engagement in Europe, focuses on institutional student welcoming and integration schemes and its effects on first generation student experience, specifically on the development of their capability for voice and personal networks through the analysis three types of activities: hazings, artistic clubs and student unions. It uses the capability approach and Porter's social capital concept as analytical tools, thus concluding that Portuguese institutions should monitor and regulate closely these kinds of activities (particularly hazings), as they have both positive and negative effects upon student participation.

Conclusively, the Findings section discusses findings supplied by all three-research pieces and explores other conclusions that were not highlighted in the previous publications, namely concerning parentalisation aspects. While material parentification had the negative impact of overburdening these students with responsabilities at an early age, it has also taught them how to become responsible for their actions, how to deal with social services alone, and to be self-reliant and persistent, experiences that have been useful through their university experience. However, emotional parentification also brought them the negative awareness of

being misguided and having to find alternative moral role models to look up to, mostly found in teachers or other relatives who worked as surrogate families. Familiar influence thus needs to be tracked having this extended network in consideration. Regarding autonomy, some academic choices like degree and institution were constricted due to systemic and economic reasons, and ultimately they were second and third options. But it is also argued that the ability of these first generation students to adapt can also be seen as a capability in itself, as it allowed them to endure in higher education. Overall, and considering also cultural rationales introduced by the nature of the Portuguese welfare state, the economic crisis period sharply impacted all narratives and policy developments in this study and thus material causes showed once again to be the main factor behind student retention, with needs scholarships being a critical factor that determined these first generation students' survival. The piece finishes by elucidating the contributions of this thesis and indicates further research routes.

Chapter 1. Identities: Defining first generation students

First generation students are generally defined in the literature as students whose parents have no higher education frequency (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Stuber, 2011), being targeted as an "at risk" group in terms of higher education success, given their general underrepresentative figures in international higher education (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). The construction of first generation students as belonging to a vulnerable population in higher education is curious, given that they presumably document a story of upward mobility: they are the first in their family to attend higher education (Hurst, 2012). Neverthless, the majority of studies in the area (particularly those of quantitative nature) portray first generation students as having several characteristics that put them into a disadvantaged position if compared to their non-first generation peers. As an object of research, the concept of first generation students places an emphasis on socio-cultural background and seeks to explore the relation between intergenerational cultural transmission and higher education attendance, focusing on access, choice of degree and institution, experience, representation and outcomes.

As Spiegler & Bednarek (2013) observe, the operationalisation of the concept of first generation students faces several challenges. One of them is the diversity of status criteria that can be found in research. A working definition of first generation students needs to consider:

- a definition of family (extended or nuclear)
- a definition of higher education attendance (regarding the type of establishment: vocational or technical , length and type of degree, and attendance or attainment)

In their literature review, Spiegler & Bednarek (2013) found that, on one hand, most research uses a very broad definition of first generation students, that is then overlapping with several other widening participation target groups, namely with part-time students and working class background students (Davis, 2010; Jehangir, 2010; Lehmann, 2012; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). While identity as a research category has permeable boundaries, and individuals are not only the result of structural categories but also of their own performance and agency (Gewirtz & Cribb,

2008), the uncontrolled exchange of these identity categories fails to account for the cultural capital transmission variable that the concept of first generation students proposes to address. On the other hand, the representation shares of first generation students among different countries vary a lot. The issue here is that the expansion of the higher education system since the 70's lead to an increase of higher education credentials in the overall population, so the higher the share of academically educated parents over time, the lower the numbers of first generation students. Hence, the share of first generation students present in a system cannot be taken as an equity measure per se, without a careful examination of the whole educational system and a sharper outlining of the nuances of first generation students' status.

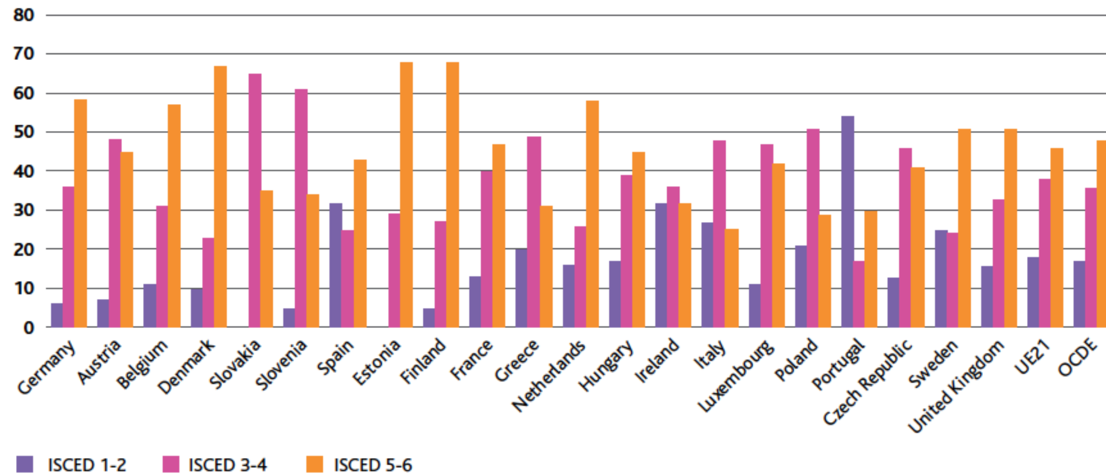
In the Eurostudent survey, Germany, Norway and Denmark account for 20 % to 35% of the student body, and in Italy, Spain and Portugal they represent the majority of the student population, namely being overrepresented in Portugal with a share of 76% (Orr, Gwosc, & Netz, 2011). According to Eurostudent data, the Portuguese case can be taken here as an example of this. The country has historically a large qualification deficit and the majority of the population has up to 9 years of education. Only 12% of the population has a higher education degree and 13% completed upper-secondary education. The high share of first generation students is recruited among students whose parents have upper secondary education, while those graduates with parents with up to lower secondary education accounted until recently for only 10% (results concerning 2005), being even the European higher education system that reproduced the most social inequalities (Eurostudent, 2005). Therefore the system is classified as a transitional one, since despite the regular numbers of students from high socio-cultural background, students from low socio-cultural backgrounds are comparatively underrepresented (Eurostudent, 2009; Orr, 2012). The Portuguese case demonstrates how the broad category of first generation students gains significance for widening participation studies if disaggregated into different levels of parental qualification. Unfortunately the latest Eurostudent round has no data for Portugal. However, it has a strong focus on first generation students' participation in European higher education, and based on the data collected, advances some conclusions. Students with no higher education background tend to enter higher education later, hence the higher average age of this group. Also, they tend to choose non-university higher education institutions over universities, and to choose degrees with shorter length. The results

suggest that the way first generation students experience university is substantially different than that of their peers with higher education background (Hauschildt, Gwosc, Netz, & Mishra, 2015).

Other data from the OECD indicators (OECD, 2014; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012, 2013) employ different criteria in variable definition, including also students that aim for a tertiary degree of two years. Still, the results are not substantially different, indicating overall that the likelihood of a student participating in tertiary education is twice as great if at least one of the parents attained upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education, and about 4.5 times as great if both parents attained tertiary education, and that on average, only 9% of tertiary students have parents with low levels of education (OECD, 2014, p. 26).

Unfortunately, the latest OECD indicators of intergenerational mobility and odds of higher education attendance by parental cultural level are not available for Portugal, since they are based in PIAAC (Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies) in which the country did not participate due to funding cuts. However the OECD 2012 indicators show a very different picture than the one portrayed by the Eurostudent survey, with Portugal being even the country with the highest probability (0,65) of higher education attendance from students with parents with up to lower secondary education (see Graphic 1).

Graphic 1. Percentage of Students aged 20-34 years old enrolled in higher education according to educational background, 2009



Source: OECD Education at a Glance 2012, Indicator A6

This means that in 2009, 54% of higher education students in Portuguese higher education were from a low educated background, a percentage only comparable to that of Ireland and Spain, with 32%. The sudden enlargement of the recruitment base of higher education can be attributed not only to differences in survey design but also to policies of differentiated access schemes to higher education, namely for those over 23 years old (designated as non traditional, mature students), that originated a higher demand for higher education. However, the figures for enrollment of this specific population are decreasing since 2010, with less 44,7 % of applicants (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2014) and one could therefore expect a change in the numbers presented in 2009.

The bulk of research done about first generation students concerns the American context, followed by studies in the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, and some others in Germany and France. Due to linguistic limitations, I focus my literature review on the English and Portuguese available literature. As the concept of first generation students generally comes associated with other widening participation target groups, my literature review also covered research about working class, part-

time students and low-income students. The definition of working class students as first generation students is more common in USA higher education literature, since in the USA there is the assumption that social classes are less salient (Hurst, 2012). However, in UK research context, the term working class is more used, as it best illustrates the stratification and power relations of British society (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002; Crozier, Reay, & Clayton, 2010; Reay et al., 2010). As the use of class is so frequent in studies about first generation students, it requires an adequate conceptualisation accounting for demographic and historical contexts. It matters here therefore to clarify how class and identity are employed in this investigation, before moving into a summary of the most prominent conclusions of Portuguese and English language research.

1.1. Class and identity

Social class is one of the most used concepts in educational and sociological research, and though its importance has been obscured in the 90's due to an emphasis on individualisation or structuration theories (Beck, 2002; Giddens, 1986)), recently it has made a comeback into public debates due to the economic crisis and the subsequent inequalities it has generated. In education in general, the seminal contribute (contributor?) for the class debate comes from (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), who see schools and universities are key institutions in reproducing the privileges of middle classes and the unfavourable conditionings of the working ones. In the context of this research, an overview of class definition is useful, for positions about the formation of class may place more emphasis on institutional culture or on individual factors, even though this polarisation is far from providing uncontested explanations about social mobility.

While reviewing the main theoretical approaches to social class and higher education, Archer (2003) distinguishes two main currents: one more categorical/modernist/quantitative and another more focused on processes, designated as postmodernist/qualitative. The first approach has its genesis with Marx, who introduced the topic of class struggle within an economic analysis of society. Marx considered that positions in society were shaped by work experience and ownership of means of production. Therefore, relations in social sphere were of power and

domination, with the bourgeoisie exploiting an alienated working class. Max Weber later developed the concept, considering that social class (conceptualised on the basis of economic capital) also affects life chances, but so do status groups and parties, (Nathan, 2010) therefore expanding the range of influences that determine individual well-being. A widely used class categorisation scheme that draws on Marx and Weber contributions is the Erikson-Golthorpe-Portocarrero (Marshall, 1998) class scheme, which classifies individuals attending to the nature of labour contract and type of work. Such conceptions of class see the school as a state instrument for reproducing the conditions of capitalism, and therefore, widening participation requires changes in the structure of society. Assuming the opposite point of view, functionalist theorists assume that education has the role of legitimising social class by means of meritocracy with the individual places in society being distributed by means of "natural" selection based on merit (Young, 1994). Though this view has been largely criticised for focusing on individual differences and assuming that the minor participation of working classes in education is due to their lack of ability, meritocracy is an ideology that still presides to many access policies (Brennan, 2013).

Though categorical approaches to social class are quite useful when doing quantitative research, they present problems when for instance; a student has parents that belong to different occupational labels or that have different educational backgrounds. Post-modernist theorists of class therefore argue that class cannot be reduced to socio-economic status, and that belongs to the wider process of identity construction where gender, age, or race can interact. Such theorists are more prone to advocate microanalysis of class and qualitative research, and understand class not as a fixed construct, but one produced by social interaction (assuming a subjective view of reality). Regarding the interaction of several identity categories and in the case of higher education attendance, the growing trend of feminisation puts male students at a disadvantage, and this is truer for the working class. To this respect, Furlong & Forsyth (2003) have found out that one of the reasons of male dropout is the seductive nature of an existing working alternative, but also Archer, Pratt & Philips (2001) observe the refusal of higher education by male students results from the belief that education threatens their constructed representations of male identity.

Within the poststructuralist currents, Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977, 1999; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) stands out as one of the main theorists of the relations between class

and education. He has extended the notion of economic capital of Marx to social capital (related to social networks) and to cultural capital (related to knowledge, language and culture, defined more in *Distinction*). Such resources shape the habitus; a disposition enabled both by practice and acquired views, which accounts for individual choices. In higher education research, the mention of different types of capitals, not only the ones that Bourdieu identified, but also others, as identity capital (CôTé & Schwartz, 2002) or family capital (Gofen, 2009), are very useful tools in the understanding of how young people develop and make use of several resources at their disposal. As well "habitus" is frequently employed when analysing institutional culture of individual decisions. However, some critiques have pointed out that Bourdieu's approach is economicist (in the sense that uses the designation "capitals") and that his notion of habitus is too strict and does not sufficiently account for human agency. Bourdieu's class definition is often unmentioned in these debates, given his resistance to establishing class schemes. Bourdieu defends that class boundaries are the product of field struggles, and rather than making schemes, one should be concerned with the nature of them, as they shift along a continuum. According to Nathan (2010), the notion of class in Bourdieu is concerned with the total volume of capital, the ratios of different types of capital, and the shifting, convertible nature of them, stressing that individuals may be in different positions in different fields, so there is no logic presiding class distribution, though there is some isomorphism in inequalities. Such position may be understood as a compromise between structuralist and postmodernist class theories; also, Bourdieu self classified his work as a constructive-structuralist contribution.

Though I recognise the use of Bourdieu's notions of economic, social and cultural capital, and that its contribution cannot be ignored in this research due to my concern with the influence of educational and familiar background on social mobility, on the other hand I also share with him the resistance to employ the term "working class" to define first generation students. First and foremost, because "class" is a sociological construct with several interpretations, it poses many challenges as a category of analysis. And secondly, because despite the great inequalities present in Portuguese society, (a Gini coefficient that reached 34.5 in 2013 and is rising[1]), a recent research about attitudes towards democracy after the crisis shows that the majority of

[1] Source: PORDATA.

Portuguese citizens do not identify themselves with the category. The Portuguese tend to identify with middle class groups, as happens in most European countries (Silva, Vieira, & Cabaço, 2013), and thus make judgements according to the social standing they identify with. While I do not demand that all people have a self-identification that matches the sociological category that is attributed to them (as such a demand would easily be compared to demanding class consciousness in Marxist terms), I do interrogate the reasons behind this phenomenon. Some hypothetical explanations can be exposed. On one hand, working class experiences come frequently associated with shame, that is, more than the effective lack of money, they also come with lay morality values. The rich, who are in power to make claims and be heard, often get to associate their wealth with deservedness, while the working classes have been classified as inferior: "dangerous, polluting, threatening, revolutionary, pathological and without respect" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 1). Whereas shame can also exist for not behaving according to standards and values imposed by a community, shame that is derived from lack of goods "may be a largely unarticulated feeling existing below the threshold of awareness – one that is difficult 'to get in touch with" (Sayer, 2007, p. 7). Hence, it can be indeed that people have some sort of conscience of their own social standing, but one that they try to silence for being too painful. On the other hand, there is also some difficulty associated with determining what is poverty, when does it start and end, and how it differs from misery. There are of course criteria (for example the criteria that lead to classifications of "at poverty risk"), but these are never consensual. However, Simmel's seminal study about the poor as a category constructed by social assistance (2001) recalls that the poor are part of society, but that only when targeted by others as in need of assistance (that is, when they are perceived as problematic, or even potentially violent) that they become members of an underprivileged group. Hence, target groups are also constructed by institutions and embody moral judgements about who people are and about what they should be like, claims that are legitimised by their vested power and thus impact (positively and negatively) individuals. It is worth now recalling that identity categories matter insofar as people identify themselves with them, and that there is a distinction between identities and roles, in which identities are sources of meaning available in society and co-constructed and re-signified by the subject through processes of individuation (Castells, 2010; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2008). This takes us back to the influence of individualisation and structuration theories in today's conceptualisation

of class. While I do not agree with Beck's (2002) assumption that social class as an empirical category is obsolete - any statistical study will reveal that the concept is still useful and that there are group inequalities regarding income and education, I do agree that life course outcomes are far too complex to be predicted in the basis of a structural location. Identities and structures change overtime, are context driven, and are materially and discursively shaped. In the field of higher education, a good example of this is the study from Reay, Crozier, & Clayton (2009) about institutional habitus and its influence upon working class students, where more elite universities granted more support and communication to their students and these, in response, tended to develop more confident learner identities. However, there are some pitfalls with the notion of individuation, namely its excess emphasis on individual choices, ignoring constraining factors upon such choices, such as one's lower ability to be reflexive or the lack of information. In the context of higher education, Ball et al. (2002) study about higher education decision making suggests that this diversification of lifestyles options accentuates the role of parental decisions in education, who often carry the blame of making poor choices for their children. Also, as even Beck (1992) himself suggests, poverty is associated with risks, and wealth with protection, therefore classes still exist in the risk society, although in a less evident way. Not referring to stratification in class terms, I would rather rely here on the notion of moral economy, since it allows for recognition of individual agency while it still acknowledges material power (Taylor, 2014). Moral economy investigations have determined that people, even in famine conditions, have certain values that motivate their actions behind material necessity, values that can even be shaped because of it. Reciprocity or obligation (of intergenerational nature, frequent in families) are patterns of solidarity observed in working class families that have often found out that there is more to gain together than apart (Crompton, 2006). Therefore, moral economy is a useful analytical tool when analysing first generation students' biographies.

Because "low income" is a less subjective category than working class, and because poverty objectively poses certain restrictions to individual choices, I use that term to characterise the economic background of students in this research. In an international study about first generation students, Thomas et al. (2007) sustained that there are four main factors that determine low income status: income, occupation, geography

and parental education, though there is no international consensual definition. Low income is also the term used in several widening participation literature reviews (Moore, Sanders, & Higham, 2013; RANLHE, 2011), even including first generation students as a subset of that categorisation, as parental education is also seen as an indicator of low income status. In fact, parents with lower educational qualifications are less likely to have well paid jobs, and that is more true in a country where the private return of having a degree is the highest in the European Union. Given their economic limitations, "learners and parents from lower socio-economic groups may be less likely to view higher education as worth the cost. Key anxieties are fear of failure, attitudes to debt, and concerns about employment prospects" (Moore et al., 2013, p. 9). Many students from these backgrounds also engage in part-time work to pay for their education, having less available time to study (Callender, 2011; Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008). Further stressing the role of economic support schemes in favoring the presence of disadvantaged groups, 'low-income' and 'first-generation' students declared that being offered an institutional bursary 'legitimised' their presence at the university, and this was linked to the institution's role in administering the scheme (Harrison, Baxter, & Hatt, 2007). While no doubt can be posed about the low-income status of the students interviewed (either because of their needs-scholarship receiver status, low parental education and blue collar occupation, and in certain cases, part-time workers status), much research about first generation students from low-income backgrounds uses the designation "working class students". Therefore, I will respect the category used by the original study I am referring to, hence the presence of class sets in this work. Having clarified this, I will now analyse research findings about these groups.

1.2. First Generation students in Portuguese research

In Portugal, the designation "first generation students" is not an object of research or of targeted policies. The only focus on students' generation concerns second-generation migrants, so it addresses ethnical inequalities rather than educational background. When the democratisation of the Portuguese higher education system was still under construction, some studies were concerned with working class students (Machado et al., 2003). More recent studies focus on access and participation of students in general from an individualisation perspective, mostly using large surveys

and with an institutional framework, approaching aspects as academic failure, gender differences and degree preference (Almeida & Vieira, 2009; Almeida, Guisande, Soares, & Saavedra, 2006; Tavares, Tavares, Justino, & Amaral, 2008). In these studies, socio-cultural background is mentioned but is not the focus of the study. Overall, it is observable that both socio-cultural origin and gender have an impact on degree and institution choices, with most students from disadvantaged backgrounds choosing applied subjects in vocational higher education institutions and students with higher education backgrounds being found in "elite" fields like medicine, law and fine arts. Another recent study about student choice of degree, but with a qualitative approach, found out that students first form a degree preference informed by socialisation networks, and only then seek information about that degree, not behaving as "rational consumers" (Tavares & Cardoso, 2013). Also, the same study verified that choice of degree is based on preference, but choice of institution is based on feasibility (Tavares, 2013), which could explain the reduced geographical mobility of Portuguese students due to economic constraints. Studies with a defined target group choose to focus on mature students, due to the special access regime implemented in 2007 (Amaral & Magalhães, 2009). A very interesting research project about non-traditional students is being done at the University of Algarve and University of Aveiro (Fragoso et al., 2013). Though its main focus is mature students, the biographical methodologies employed are of interest for this research. For the same reason, a study about trajectories in higher education combining a large scale survey with biographical narratives was also consulted (Firmino da Costa & Teixeira Lopes, 2008). In both studies, one can observe the overlapping of first generation and working class identities.

The study of Fragoso et al. (2013) focuses on mature students (another fluid concept that in Portugal refers to students that entered higher education through the access system for those over 23 years old), who are more likely to face problems of time management, since they need to conciliate family care and work schedules. The competing agendas of academic life, work and family overload these students, despite their already developed organisational skills. Considering factors that could aid their university transition, family stability ranked higher, above income or academic background. The authors stress that when analysing "non-traditional students" it is important not to stigmatise the categories of analysis, as the target groups differ a lot

and cannot be captured by a generic definition. Often, the findings of biographical interviews are contradictory between individuals, and do not allow one to state in what way are mature students different or similar, as the presence of one or two typical disadvantage factors does not constitute in itself a barrier, but is often their cumulativeness and interaction that results in a disadvantage. This seems also to apply for the first generation students in this study.

The study of Firmino da Costa & Teixeira Lopes (2008) about trajectories of students in higher education was concerned mainly with factors that lead to success, failure or abandonment of higher education. Several academic and life paths are identified, and one of them is of particular relevance for this study of first generation students, as its characteristics are similar to those I found in my interviewees. Designated as "countertendency trajectories", this type of path is unexpected considering the constraining structural factors surrounding the student, namely low income, unstructured families and low cultural background. These students achieve ascending trajectories in higher education, resulting from either enhanced institutional support or from their own reflexive agency. Conversely, it is also found that students with good starting points (in terms of cultural background and income) can also exhibit descending and unexpected higher education trajectories. The issue here is that structural conditionings vary according to degree and institution, and weigh differently according to their interaction with other biographical factors. Ultimately, some agency roles should be acknowledged to individuals, but this agency does not occur in a social void, and it is rather enhanced by supportive families, teachers or peers. Firmino da Costa & Teixeira Lopes, (2008) state that while some families of low cultural background instil aspirations of upward social mobility via academic achievement, others oppose to it, forcing the student to opt out of the family approval. In other cases, it is the contact with hard life conditions that catalysis the student's wish to achieve a degree. Generally, these students have clear life prospects and work hard to realise them, despite school paths that sometimes have led them to fail some years or attend vocational degrees in post-working hours schedules. Delayed transitions are common within these populations, and also unfortunate first degree choices, that when corrected lead to a very rewarding higher education experience, but also further delay the conclusion of the degree. Success and failure thus need to be seen in a more holistic and encompassing manner, as some abandonment can indeed

relate to a change of degree. Also, most students declared to have worked before the degree or during it, which also proves that transitions to adult life are not as linear as they used to be. Finally, the study highlights the role of social networks in enabling these students to succeed and endure through difficulties, acting as reference and care groups. Peer networks have a stronger positive effect than any institutional hosting mechanisms. Finally, extracurricular activities are extremely valorised by students with ascending countertendency paths, who see them as complementing academic skills with relational and organisational ones. Unlike them, students with descending trajectories seem to find these activities competing with their attention to studies.

1.3. First Generation Students in North-American and British Contexts

Regarding the North American and British literature, most research portrays first generation students either from a deficit perspective or from class conflict analysis, often using the conceptual tools of capitals, field and habitus imported from Bourdieu’s sociological method. Several studies describe how first generation and working class students face number of challenges regarding access to university, full participation in academic activities, degree completion and integration in the labour market, due to educational pipeline restrictions, lack of adequate information sources and unfamiliarity with application and costs procedures (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Jehangir, 2010; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Thomas & Quinn, 2007). These challenges often result in an interrupted and irregular academic track (Forsyth, 2003). Regarding access and transitions to higher education, Archer & Hutchings (2000) noticed that higher education working class non-participants perceived higher education as a high cost risk yielding uncertain returns. In the same strand, Reay (1998) describes higher education choice as a process where family “habitus” plays a great role, and class intersects with type of secondary school, students’ parenting responsibilities, income and ethnicity, presenting considerable disadvantages for working class backgrounds. Consistently, Ball et al. (2002) and Jetten, Iyer, Tsivrikos, & Young (2008) state that for many working class students, higher education choice is more a decision of whether or not to enrol, rather than a choice between courses and institutions, due to economic constraints. As they put it: “choice for a majority involved either a process of finding out what they cannot have, what is not open for negotiation and then looking at the few options left, or a process of self-exclusion

(Reay, 2005, p. 85).

Regarding enrolment patterns, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini (2004) and Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) note that first generation students are more likely to enrol in short term programmes, take longer time to complete their degree, and attend less prestigious institutions (even when controlling for economic circumstances, expectations and after degree plans), a fact that can be related with the will to fit in that motivates application to institutions perceived as “low risk” and where social adaptation seems easier (Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001). Similarly, first generation students are less likely to enter postgraduate studies, a fact that can both be related to financial restrictions, but also to the perception that such an option is not suitable for their own class (Gardner & Holley, 2011).

Considering student experience, research shows that these students had lower academic results in the first year, were more likely to have a worker status, and generally report distant relations with academic staff (Cooke, Barkham, Audin, & Bradley, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Regarding extracurricular activities and peer interaction, first generation students derive more benefit from these activities than average students, even if frequently their work load or off campus residence does not favour participation (Pascarella et al., 2004). Similarly, Próspero & Vohra-Gupta (2007) found positive correlation between academic and social integration and the development of intrinsic motivation for studying in first generation students. Other studies focus on the alienation feelings that university culture represents for these students, since historically higher education is a middle class dominated institution, and as Reay et al. (2010) notice, the making of one class is done at the expense of the other, though certain students can perform different roles and identities according to spaces and exhibit a critical distance towards the academy (RANLHE, 2011). Despite that, Leathwood & O’Connell (2003) describe experiences of working class students in higher education struggling to fit in, indicating debt fear, lack of self-confidence and lack of institutional support as major causes of stress. Particularly, the authors consider that the myth of the independent learner is found to be unsuitable for disadvantaged students, who would rather have more support, and also that middle class dominant culture makes working classes feel as if their access to higher

education is a privilege, rather than a right. Analysing a group of first generation students in one North American institution, Stuber (2011) argued that the intersection of variables such as financial stability or race with class generates diverse patterns of college adjustment: while the majority of students are integrated, some experience persistent and debilitating marginality, and others express resilient behaviour, by transforming their marginality into motivation for social change and engagement on campus. Mann (2001) also describes that the learning experience can be an alienated or engaged one, as learning represents a threat to the safety of the self and of the habitus. In itself, a rich higher education experience can only be acquired through deep learning, and several studies attest that non-traditional students are more likely to emphasise comprehension on their study methods (RANLHE, 2011). However, other research observes that widening participation students are more prone to apply cosmetic learning strategies, more oriented towards final grades, acquiring only credentials that easily lose value in an increasingly competitive labour market (Redmond, 2006). Such utilitarian approaches to learning are founded in an ambivalent attitude towards higher education: if on one hand working class students want the legitimation of a diploma, on the other they also fear the subordination and loss that exposition to the dominant middle class culture brings (Reay et al., 2001). Another aspect of university experience is the confrontation between former relational network (family, friends, partners) and the network and lifestyle established in higher education, also referred by Bourdieu as the contradiction of inheritance: the more the student climbs the education ladder, the more she is rejecting her parental cultural heritage, therefore experiencing success as failure or transgression (Bourdieu, 1999). To this respect, Redmond (2006) reports that it is almost as if the student juggles with a double habitus, with different levels of cultural capital. In the same study, the author observes that labour market aspirations of non-traditional students are vague and that they refer more to jobs rather than careers, which illustrates their inability to project long term. While I am not certain that the first generation students I have interviewed hold such instrumental views about higher education, evidence from Canada also confirms this tendency, based on the enrolment in most professional oriented degrees, such as Law, Medicine, or Teaching, sustaining that for these students, higher education functions a lot like highly qualified vocational training (Lehmann, 2009).

As it is observable, the majority of research done about first generation students

focuses on the difficulties they face in their academic experiences, which is sort of surprising, since they are the high achievers of their group. Nonetheless, they depart from a disadvantage point in comparison to their non-first generation students peers, and effectively have a diverse student experience, caused in many cases not due to their own lack of ability, but as a consequence of life circumstances. The influence of educational background is hard to distinguish, but from the above studies, one gets the impression that it is felt mostly through the absence of information and guidance that they can provide to first generation students. Few studies portray family influence in a positive manner, but Gofen (2009) sustains that first generation students do succeed because of their family capital and not despite of it. In her qualitative study about Israeli families that broke the intergenerational cycle, Gofen discovers that time horizon (that is, the future projection) played a major part in daily life of these families. Parents regularly repeated sentences like “Don’t become like us”, since they were aware that the chances of earning a stable income and avoiding unemployment are higher if one has higher education. Also, Gofen notices how parents support their kids through attitudes like waking up early to drive them to a faraway school or paying for books, actions that do not entail familiarity with education as an institution, but that do show how much they care. These particular attitudes are also observed by Thomas et al. (2007) and by Hurst, (2012). Gofen also states that a factor that supports mobility of first generation students are interpersonal relationships, referring to the event in which the student’s education will help him/her to perform a given role, like translating documents and mediating interactions with institutions. Although this in fact can act as a reinforcement, it is also possible to look at this ascribed role as a form of parentification (Hooper, 2008), in the sense that the student is burdened with responsibilities that should not be theirs to carry, generating an inversion in familiar roles. In my interviews I found some examples of material and emotional parentification, either because the students worked to support their families or because they gave emotional support to parents when they were unstable or going through divorces or familiar tumult. Often, these extra responsibilities negatively affected their studies, in the sense that they had less time to dedicate (case of material parentification) or that they were emotionally unstable (in the case of emotional parentification). Regarding school counselling, Gofen indicates that supportive teachers can also have a positive impact on mobility. She states that good feedback provided by previous school experiences helps to build self-esteem and enhance

responsibility, and that on a more practical level, counselling can help to guide students through the process of applications for higher education and supporting grants. In Portugal, such support is not institutionalised in lower and upper secondary educations. There is vocational counselling (a psychologist applies tests in 9th grade in order to establish what would be the adequate track and content of studies) but no support is given with university applications, unless any teacher provides it voluntarily. Recently some start-ups and companies have begun to enter schools and provide support and information to students who want to attend higher education, but that support is generally given upon payment. Finally, family shared values like respect for parents, and family solidarity and achievement were indicated as favourably influencing higher education attendance. There is a need to please parents and in return, parents act as positive role models. In a sense, these finding echoes much of what Yosso (2005) defines as community wealth and resilience ability, in the context of coloured families, and also Stuber's (2011) study on campus attitudes of first generation students, were she argues that working class experiences are more an asset than a liability for these students, in the sense that they enable them to persist and endure in higher education, and that gaining conscience of their social class situation (in this case, through the contact of similar experiences of discrimination with African-American peers), has motivated them to succeed and seek social change. Stuber sustains that the majority of first generation students do endure, and only a small subset feels marginalised on campus.

As it is visible from the summary above, research findings about first generation students are contradictory, and often need to be interpreted carefully, taking into consideration contextual variables. The use of educational attainment as a proxy for familiar cultural capital can be misleading, as much is learned outside the educational institutions and, ultimately, care and attention matter as much as information in terms of support. Also, the intersection of several disadvantage characteristics in first generation students may be contributing to their portrayal from a deficit perspective. Spiegler & Bednarek (2013) observe that if first generation students were seen as legitimate participants of higher education, shortcomings should then be attributed to specific institutions and institutional structures, classroom practices and information policies. It could be the case then that structural problems inherent in the organisation of education are being camouflaged as cultural deficits of individuals. A factor that

contributes to this assumed cultural deficit is the dropout rate, usually higher among first generation students (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). For this reason, and also because during this research the economic crisis led to high drop-out numbers in Portuguese higher education, special attention will be given to it in the next section.

1.4. First Generation students and drop-out: concepts and concerns

When constructing first generation students as an "at risk" student group, the assumed risk is that of dropping out. Student dropout is a major concern for higher education institutions, though its measurement is complex, due to the several definitions available. Dropout can be defined as abandonment of a degree or as abandonment of the system, and its causes can range from economic impediments to demotivation with course contents. Qualitative research is thus necessary to evaluate a phenomenon that is more a symptom of other issues than a problem in itself.

In a recent international study about student drop-outs in European higher education, Quinn (2013) observes that completion rates vary greatly between countries, and that if Denmark has a completion rate of 80%, Italy or Poland only see half of their students successfully completing their degrees. For Portugal, the completion rate for tertiary degrees is about 67% (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013), with the average being about 70%. Completion rates are the proportion of new entrants into a specified level of education who graduate with at least a first degree at this level, and are calculated as the proportion of graduates among a given entry cohort. As Almeida & Vieira (2009) observe, the descriptive power of this indicator is limited, since it does not account for withdrawal or transfers between degrees caused by changed expectations deriving from academic experience. While dropout rates were never constituted as an indicator before, since 2014 the Ministry of Education is publishing them online, along with information about degree switching. Defining dropout as the percentage of students that were not found in the higher education system after the first year of enrolment, the RAIDES report shows that dropout rates for undergraduates are of 11,8% in universities and of 12,6% in polytechnics. For master degrees these percentages are about 23 % in both sectors (these results will be further explored in the next section). No information is given here about first generation students' specific completion or dropout rate. However,

Quinn's (2013) study sustains that coming from a poor socio-economic background is still the major cause behind student drop-out in higher education, and relates this status with first generation students. Also, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013) shows that full time students have higher chances of graduating than part-time students. Quinn’s study offers a typology of six causes for higher education dropout, which should be seen as interrelated. They include:

- Socio-cultural factors (self-fulfilling prophecies on non-achievement and Pygmalion effects deriving from community’s expectations)
- Structural factors (derived from poor households that determine also school choice and quality of education in previous years)
- Policy factors (in the case of funding cuts that affect social support grants)
- Institutional factors (when institutional culture of evaluation or student engagement is not favorable)
- Personal factors (mental health, traumatic experiences, religious issues, or other)
- Learning factors (relates to poor study habits from students or low qualified teachers that prevent students from finishing their degrees).

On the influence of parental background on dropout, Thomas et al. (2007) refer that although parents did not have university education themselves, they wanted this for their children and in many respects welcomed the opportunities for family mobility, but also accounted for sustainability and family survival. In that sense, they had aspirations and saw higher education as something useful, but the economic constraints were determinant in the decision to drop out. Hence, the decision to drop out was many times a rational decision and entailed the wish to come back into higher education at a more convenient time. These findings are consistent with other research done in non-traditional students, that shows that around 20% of early leavers of education successfully reapply to higher education (Moore et al., 2013). However, the study of Thomas & Quinn (2007) also shows that when confronted with abandonment impulses, students mostly turned to parents for advice, and that parental unfamiliarity with university norms and systems had a negative impact on the students, although parents were determined to help as much as they could, demanding more flexibility in education delivery. The quest for flexibility could mean that part-time study or

distance education could be a solution. The problem is that part-time study is not so flexible, both in terms of studies and in terms of employment, and distance education requires a high degree of self-discipline. On the other hand, this type of provision sometimes may lack the esteem that is awarded to “traditional” education degrees (Moore et al., 2013).

It is also important to see dropout from a less dramatic perspective, as some students do claim that giving up their studies has helped them to clarify what they wanted to do and that they feel more prepared to return in the future (RANLHE, 2011) From another viewpoint, delayed course completion can erroneously be taken as failure, and many first generation students have more diverse enrollment patterns than their peers. However, employers and job agencies look down upon dropouts. Students feel they have acquired some skills during their time in higher education, but these are not recognised, and thus the impact of dropping out is negative (Quinn, 2013). Pointing towards improvement in student retention, several authors indicate the need for more transparency in information and requirements and supplementary educational courses to fix possible skills deficits, adopting a transformative institutional strategy that does not blame individuals.

In this research, three cases of students that were no longer enrolled in their university degrees are examined, with economics reasons being the main factor behind the student’s withdrawal decisions. Some students exhibit patterns of interruption in studies for part-time work and later come back, and others show consistent negative grades and year repetitions. These cases all account for the diversity found in first generation student motivations, and also mirror the impact national policies have on particular experiences.

1.5. First Generation students in this research: a working definition

Based on the previous literature review analysis, the following working definition for first generation students in this study was elaborated:

- First generation students are students of public university degrees, in and out of the system, whose parents have at most low secondary education and who are at least on their second registration year.

It was with this definition that I started my fieldwork in 2011. As I used snowball sampling, low socioeconomic status from my interviewees was a consequence either of the sampling procedure or for the quest for parents with low educational levels. As it was previously noted, low educational levels generally lead to unskilled, low paid jobs, hence they can also be used as proxies for low income status. My definition accounted both for the contextual specificities of Portugal and to international patterns of completion, as I target the group of first generation students that is underrepresented (Eurostudent, 2009; OECD, 2014). The need for at least one year of university frequency accounts for my examination of student experience, which the interviewees needed to have. The next section will describe the Portuguese higher education system and the socio-economic developments, occurred from 2010 to this date.

Chapter 2. Socio-economic contextual data: statistics and legislation

This section aims to frame the research both in the European and Portuguese socio-economic contexts, recurring to the analysis of legislation, policy documents, statistics and other secondary data. The research was deeply marked by the economic crisis period, since it occurred during the International Monetary Fund (henceforth, IMF) intervention in Portugal. That period is described in a very compact manner in two of the three publications of this thesis. Complementing that information, this section will first provide a brief account of the Portuguese state in the aftermath of the troika intervention. Next, it will refer to the main European policy instruments and their impact on Portuguese higher education. Finally, it will analyse equity aspects in Portuguese higher education, focusing on accessibility and affordability.

2.1.Macro-level Policy Influences

2.1.1. The Portuguese Economic Crisis: the theft of the present

From 2010 to today, Portugal is witnessing one of the worst social and economic crises of their history, one that has lead to a decrease of the quality of life to levels of the previous decade. In the European Union context, the crisis was first presented as a financial crisis consequence of the 2008 USA crash, evolving later into a crisis of economic recession and finally crystallised into the conception of the crisis as a crisis of credibility of in the markets, whose fixing entailed an austerity logic that generated pervasive effects over people (Observatório de Crises e Alternativas, 2013). Austerity is a deceiving term that although loaded with moral high meaning (austerity can be seen as a vow of poverty and detachment followed by certain religious orders), is in fact another word for impoverishing of populations and for a "creative destruction" of the welfare states that resembles Schumpeter's entrepreneurial definition, in the sense that allows markets to determine a collective way of life. The idea of austerity invaded European policy and resuscitated the debate over class war (Atkinson, Roberts, & Savage, 2012; Blyth, 2013), but its application in countries like Ireland, Portugal or Greece has disastrous consequences, even recognised by the IMF itself. For Bento (2015), the causes of the crisis are due to the Eurozone architecture itself, that on one hand, exhibits a philosophy of financial but not of political merger, and on

the other forces some countries to be consumers (the Southern European countries) and others to be exporters (the Northern European ones).

Portugal has a number of structural characteristics that aggravated the effects of the austerity measures, specifically:

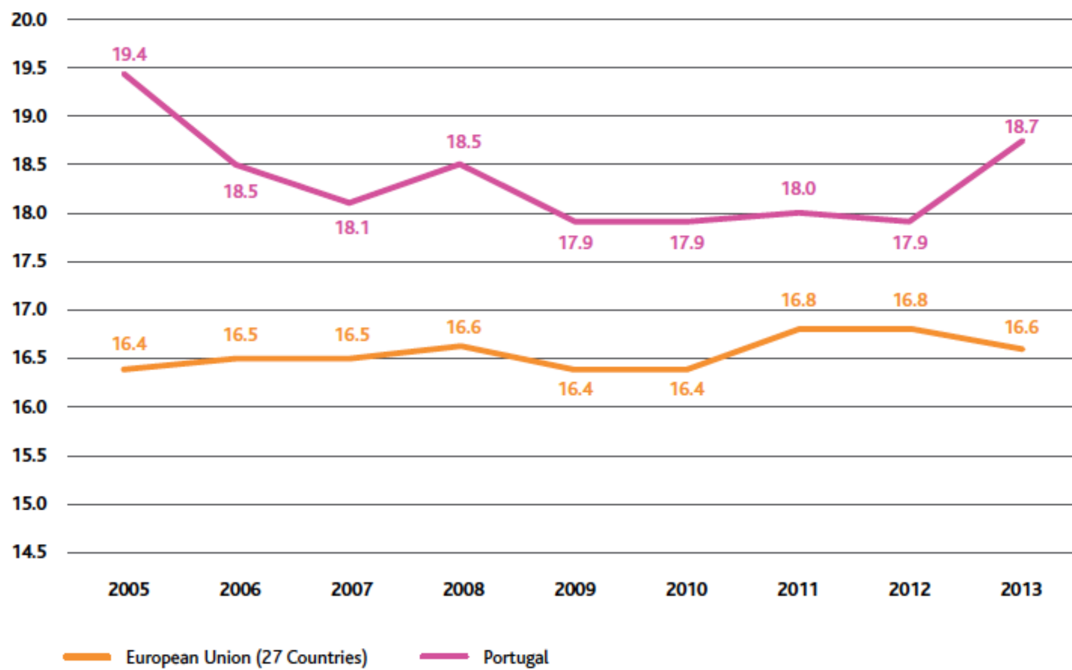
- The previous economic stagnation (between 2001 and 2007 Portugal experienced only 1.1% average annual growth);
- Its people's educational deficits (half of the population has less than four years of schooling);
- The semi-peripheral geopolitical position, that places the country both as marginal to European decisions and close to third world former colonies (Trindade, 2013);
- The country's cultural matrix, still marked by the largest dictatorship period in Western Europe, that lasts from 1926 to 1974, ended by the Carnation Revolution.
- A decolonisation process done on the run and that did not allow for the building of an alternative economic system that was autonomous from the colonies' products exploration and for the integration of those who returned to the country.

The crisis began with the downgrade of the public debt, which lead to the demission of the former Socialist Executive and to the "troika" intervention programme, executed by the new coalition government (more centre-right wing and conservative oriented, constituted by the Social Democratic Party and the Popular Party). Despite the usual harshness of the IMF interventions (for example in countries like Argentina or Madagascar), the Portuguese programme was "expanded" by the local government action that aimed to surprise and "go beyond the troika aims" [2]. This aim was materialised into a Memorandum of Understanding and several reviews that comprised consolidation measures such as controlling health spending and increasing fees, reduction in pensions, reduction of public bodies budgets, decrease of public wages spending, increase of personal, property and commercial taxes, and

[2] Quoting Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho in the elections winning speech, 6th June 2011: http://www.publico.pt/economia/noticia/passos-coelho-diz-que-governo-pode-ir-alem-das-medidas-da-troika-1497781

privatisation of state owned enterprises. Curiously, the memorandum also implied the increase support to banks, even after the bailout in 2009 of the Portuguese Business Bank (BPN) that was partially responsible for the increase of public debt. The application of these measures resulted in an increase of the unemployment, and to the result visible in Graphic 2, depicting the evolution of at poverty risk rate to levels of 2005.

GRAPHIC 2. RATE OF PEOPLE AT POVERTY RISK, PORTUGAL AND EUROPEAN UNION AVERAGE, AFTER SOCIAL TRANSFERS



Source: Eurostat, updated16-2-2015

While in 2013 Europe announced the end of the crisis with the decrease of the at risk poverty rate, in Portugal social exclusion rose to levels similar to those of 2006. One out of five Portuguese is poor, and it is worth noting the role that education level plays in poverty protection. In 2012, of those with higher education attainment, only 3.8 % were at risk poverty, against 21,2% with lower secondary education at most. Children (from 0 to 17 years old) whose parents have low education are in most danger of falling into poverty (EU-SILC 2013). This data reinforces the vulnerable socio-economic condition of first generation students in this research. It is also worth noting that, according to a 2010 OECD study on intergenerational mobility (understood as the relationship between the socioeconomic status of parents and the

status their children will attain as adults), Portugal had the highest wage persistent across generations, meaning that social mobility is quite low, a consequence of inequality in earnings that thus exacerbates the influence of background on achievement.

Social transfers (family allowances, unemployment, education and health allowances) alleviate these figures critically, even though the cuts in welfare benefits and the narrowing of eligibility conditions have decreased the number of beneficiaries. The Portuguese welfare state can be placed within the Mediterranean model, being considered weak by comparison with North European models. It relies heavily on families and informal networks to play the role of social security cushions, and aid to the poor is scarce and fragmented. Nevertheless, some peculiarities can be found in it, namely its universal health care system (which prevented the effects of the economic crisis from generating the humanitarian crisis verified in Greece), and the expressive participation of women in the labour market, virtually due to household low wages.

For those who remained employed, the changes in the labour market (specifically introduced with the Law 23/ 2013) lead to a devaluation of work and wages that resulted in a transfer of wealth to employers (Observatório de Crises e Alternativas, 2013). In fact, the elimination of public holidays, the changes in payment of supplementary work hours and on the compensation for dismissal resulted in losses for workers similar to those that originated one of the largest public demonstrations in the country (against the decrease of employers' contributions to social security on 15th September 2012). For those who lost their jobs, the government presented the crisis as an opportunity to create their own employment, and developed a discourse of entrepreneurial mind-sets as the alternative to secure employment, (despite the lack of evidence of consistent growth provided by start-ups), an option that was critically challenged by some of my interviewees, who questioned its individualism. Regarding the downturn of the unemployment rate, (that was in 2013 16.2 % and in 2014 fell to 13,9%[3]), it is wise to critically consider it, given that criteria for its measurement have changed since 2011[4]. In fact, people who are unemployed but occupied in a

[3] Data collected in Pordata.
[4] Specifically, people who attend occupational programmes promoted by Employment Centres are now considered employed (before 2011 they weren't), and changes in

programme from the Employment Centre were 7% in 2011 and reached about 30% in 2014 (Observatório de Crises e Alternativas, 2015). If when considering unemployment, one counts inactive people (those who lost hope of finding a job, and therefore do not look for it), occupied unemployed, migrants and underemployment, the real rate of unemployment reached 29% in 2014 (Observatório de Crises e Alternativas, 2015).

Regarding the education budget, funding suffered a decrease of 5% or more (European Comission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2013), and the share of the GDP allocated to education investment has also been decreasing, with higher education spending barely reaching 1,4 % of the GDP in 2011, below the European average. Considering that the Portuguese GDP is falling since 2010, one can suppose that education cuts are much higher than the figures announce.

Despite the worsening of the social situation, the recent downturn of unemployment figures and the shy return of economic growth seems to support the government's claim of making Portugal one successful example of expansionary austerity. In their own words: "*Today, Portuguese are worse, but Portugal is better*"[5]. Yet, one can interrogate: but what is a country without its people? In demographic terms, one of the strategies to cope with crisis resides in the ability to emigrate, and the figures of Portuguese emigration could not be more compelling: more than 200000 Portuguese emigrated since 2011, figures that only match the 1960's period, where people would emigrate to escape the colonial war and the dictatorship. Indeed Portugal is today the European Union country with the highest emigration as a proportion of its population, with more than 20% of the Portuguese population living abroad (Observatório da Emigração, 2014), and the outgoing number of citizens can explain the decrease of the unemployment rate. Dreams and prospects of emigration were often mentioned by interviewees in this research, as a reflection of the lack of opportunities in the country. On the other hand, demography also tells that the fertility rate is falling since 2008[6], and many families state that they do not have the financial capacity to have children,

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consideration of underemployment situation (http://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_estudos).

[5] Quoting from a member of the Social Democratic Government, Luís Montenegro, in 21 February 2014: http://www.jn.pt/live/Entrevistas/default.aspx?content_id=3697968

[6] Data collected from PORDATA.

despite their wishes. Hence, the crisis made Portugal a country with less and less citizens. However, the crisis did not impact all people negatively, and the wealthier could even see their income rising. According to Eurostat, from 2010 to 2013, the ration S20/S80 rose from 5.6 to 6, meaning that the earnings of the 20% wealthier were 6 times higher than those of the 20% poorest. The Gini coefficient also rose from 33,7 in 2010 to 34.2 in 2013.

Overall, the Portuguese crisis left scars that will endure in the coming years, for it is easy to destroy trust in the future, but very hard to rebuild it. In its anthropological review of debt, Graeber (2011) pointed to the identification in several languages of the word "debt" with "guilt" (visible for instance in German, with the term *Schuld*), unveiling the moral nature of the concept. A debt weighs morally upon those who need to repay it, as in a moral economy logic, it makes part of an informal credit system in which most of human interaction is based. However, when a debt is enforced upon a population who has no fault upon its making and its payment threatens the very economic and social system that supports a country, its reimbursement is questionable. Besides the guilt, the Portuguese also bared the humiliation and powerlessness associated with an external intervention that denies state sovereignty. The crisis became an idea that colonised daily existence, affecting everything from bills to academic production, leaving no free room to imagine existence otherwise. Perhaps the most accurate account of the psychological effects of that period over Portuguese people comes from philosopher José Gil, who designated the feeling of "theft of the present":

> The present is not an abstract dimension of time, but what allows the consistency of movement in the life flow. What allows the meeting and the intensifying of the living forces of past and future- so that they can irradiate in the present in multiple directions. We have been taken away the means for that encounter, and we cannot affirm therefore our presence in the public space. Currently, people hide, exile, and disappear as social beings. The systematic impoverishment of society is producing the atomisation of the population: it is not the "each men by himself" because nothing exists in the horizon of "by himself". The sociability weakens at a fast pace, the families disperse, closing upon themselves, and for the Portuguese, the "other" ceased to populate their

> dreams- because the texture from which dreams are composed is falling apart. (Gil, 2014, p. 64, my translation).

2.1.2. European policy instruments: Bologna's social dimension and the EU2020' targets

Within the European context, and following the Bologna reforms, concerns about equity, expansion and diversification of the student body have been addressed under the concept of "social dimension". In the EHEA discourse, concerns about social justice are gathered under the concept of social dimension. According to the Bologna Process website, the social dimension aims at achieving equality of opportunities in higher education, in terms of: access, participation and successful completion of studies; studying and living conditions; guidance and counselling; financial support, and student participation in higher education governance. This achievement requires equal opportunities in mobility, portability of financial support and provision of incentives among all countries in the European Higher Education Area. However, this is far from the truth, as results from Eurostudent[7] reveal. Despite the London Communiqué of Ministers in 2007 stating the aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations, obstacles to participation related to socio-economic origin are constant throughout European countries, and affect several aspects of the social dimension, from transitions to completion. Since all European countries present diverse equity policies that are hard to harmonise, the impact of the social dimension recommendation was weak, with only few countries promoting integrated strategies against social exclusion (Eurydice, EACEA & European Commission, 2011).

According to Eurydice, the most striking differences rely on social support and fees systems, that generally impact participation of low income groups. While in Northern European countries the majority of students receives a grant to study, in Southern Europe it is the parents who support educational expenditures of students, who are

[7] In the Bucharest Communiqué (2012), the EUROSTUDENT Network, Eurostat, and Eurydice were assigned to *'monitor the progress in the implementation of the Bologna Process reforms'*.

seen as "dependent children" (Bohonnek et al., 2012). Previous studies found no positive impact between governance and funding recommendations at the EU level and access and equity to higher education (Jongbloed, de Boer, Enders, & File, 2010; Westerheijden, 2010). Holford (2014) observed that the constitution of the social dimension as rhetoric more than a practise was caused partially due to the European Union's valorisation of the competitiveness in the Lisbon process, particularly after 2008. In light of the relative failure of the social dimension due to the absence of benchmarks, the Education Council of European Union (2013) invited each country to adopt national objectives regarding access, participation and completion of disadvantaged groups in higher education, a recommendation that in Portugal has had no impact so far.

The European influence on national policies of education can also be tracked by following the two European Union broad strategies, the Lisbon Agenda and its recent follower, the EU2020 strategy. Both Agendas developed as supranational recommendations that are not mandatory, following the open coordination method. This of course places severe challenges to the achievement of the previously set goals. Overall the targets set by the Lisbon Agenda were not met by 2010, and the initiative was considered a failure, with some arguing that it was used to push forward a neoliberal strategy of structural reforms in the core countries of the Continental European model of capitalism and not to ´renew´ the European social model (Amable, Demmou, & Ledezma, 2009). Concerning higher education, two key documents were launched, the Modernisation Agenda (2006) and the Education and Training 2010 strategy. The former focused on institutions and its efficiency, autonomy and competiveness of institutions, and the latter addressed students and equity concerns, thus reinforcing the cleavage between research and teaching. Regarding measures with impact on higher education, the Education and Training 2010 strategy sustained the goals of reducing the percentage of early school leavers to no more than 10%, of increasing the number of university graduates in mathematics, science and technology by at least 15%, and to decrease the gender imbalance in these subjects and to ensure that at least 85% of young people complete upper secondary education. Portugal did not meet any of these targets, despite remarkably reducing early school leaving (from around 50% to 30%). The EU2020 strategy proposes again to reduce early school leaving to no more than 10% and to increase the share of 30-34 years old with tertiary

education attainment to 40%, even though it can be pointed that the strategy makes no reference to the composition of the student body (hence, more students does not mean more diverse). In 2014, the Portuguese share of 30-34 year olds holding a tertiary degree was 31.5, and early school leavers are estimated at 17 %, hence the slow progress towards those goals, moreover that the IMF intervention exempted Portugal from having any Country Specific recommendations on how to tackle poverty and social exclusion, as the austerity policies were conflicting with the goal of inclusive growth (Caritas Europa, 2014).

2.2. Equity in Portuguese higher education: Accessibility and Affordability

2.2.1. Accessibility

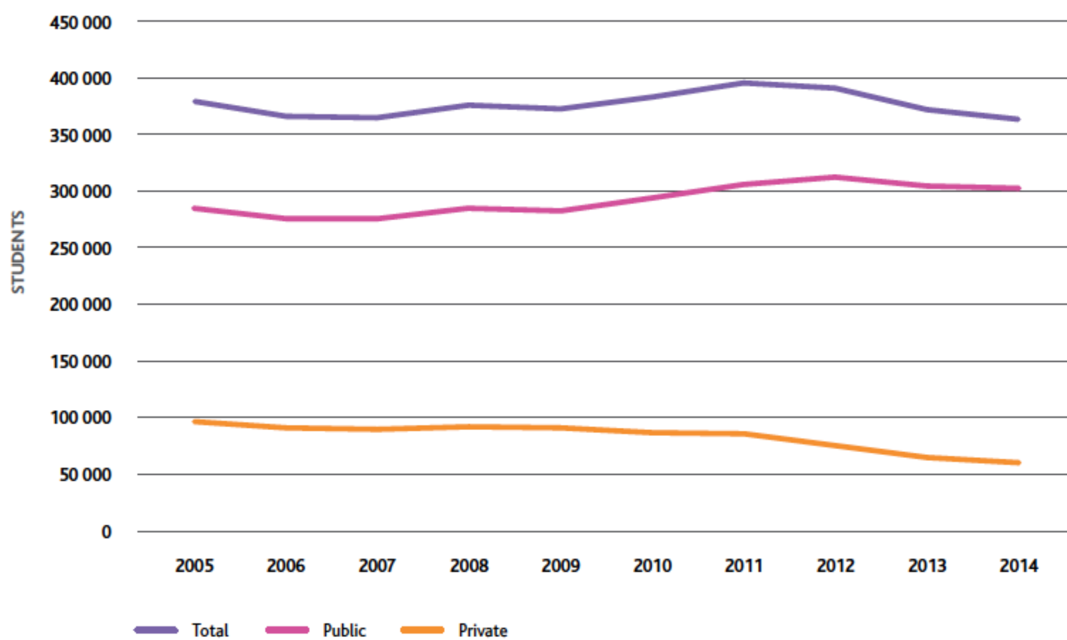
The accessibility of a higher education system can be defined as the ability people have to attend higher education, regardless of their socio-economic background. In order to evaluate this, it is important to look at participation and completion rates in a comparative perspective, but also to look at the conditions of access (differentiated routes, for instance), and to eligibility criteria, that will then shape students' aspirations and perceptions of the costs and benefits of getting a degree, and of the risks of not being able to finish it.

2.2.1.2. Access system

The Portuguese higher education system is currently a binary system, with public and private institutions divided into universities and polytechnics. Currently the public higher education system comprises of 13 universities, an Open University (Universidade Aberta), a university institute (ISCTE – University Institute for Labour and Business Studies), 15 polytechnics and 32 vocational colleges. The private system is consisted of 7 universities (including a Catholic university), 4 polytechnic institutes and 72 colleges. The system had an expansionist period after the 1974 revolution, and evolved rapidly from what was an elite system to what is now considered a massified one, with over 50% of the age cohort enrolled, following Trow's definitions. Presently, there is a decrease in enrolments, as we can see on Graphic 1, which was further accentuated after 2011 and in the private sector, which can be explained by the economic crisis. Access to higher education is done mainly through a centralised system of *numerus clausi*, meaning that generally the state yearly defines how many vacancies will be available for a given degree and subject. Presently institutions have

some degree in autonomy in the distribution of these vacancies per offer, provided that they comply with the limits set by the government for disciplinary areas (Tavares, Cardoso, & Sin, 2014). In the private sector, the government still defines the number of vacancies per degree, but the admission process is done at the institutional level, and not by the centralised state system that defined a minimum admission grade according to student demand in a given year.

GRAPHIC 2. EVOLUTION OF ENROLMENTS IN PORTUGUESE HIGHER EDUCATION 2005-2014



Source: PORDATA, updated 03-12-2014

There are three main access routes to higher education. The main route is the national competition, that has a general track for students who finished upper secondary studies and did national final exams, and special tracks constituted by positive discrimination for students that come from the Azores and Madeira archipelagos (autonomous regions), emigrated students, students with disabilities and those in the military. The main route has two phases of admission, and if the vacancies are not filled, higher education institutions can run a third round of applications. There is a second route for mature students (over 23 years old), that access higher education through local competition run by the institutions, and a special regime access, for

students who come from former colonies, athletes and other special cases that do not require national exams. The access grade for a given degree is composed by 3 eligibility criteria: the students' performance in upper secondary studies (at least 50% of the final grade), their performance in the national exams required by the degree of their choice (at least 35% of the final grade) and in certain cases, the satisfaction of pre-requisites (15% of the final grade). In very competitive years and degrees, the *numerus clausi* system leaves a lot of students unsatisfied or placed in a second choice degree, severely hindering the students' motivation. First generation students in this study often have accessed higher education by indirect routes. It is common to enter a second-choice degree and then switch to their preferred degree, or to access higher education in a second or third application round, or through a special access regime (for athletes or emigrant status). Some students have been even more strategic in their application process, and followed a specific route in upper secondary to avoid Mathematics or other problematic disciplines and thus increase their performance grade. These unusual access routes reflect that for these students, higher education is a desired but not easy choice, and one that sometimes needs to conform or elude the obstacles posed by the state policies.

2.2.1.2. Participation according to social background

In a 2007 education review of the Portuguese higher education system, the OECD stated that many universities "appear neither to have understood nor accommodated the shift from elite to mass higher education participation over the last two decades, where students are drawn from diverse backgrounds" and that "too many institutions refuse to accept responsibility for the success of those they admit" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007, p. 80) The OECD considered thus that higher education institutions should expand their enrolments and offer new types of programmes via new modes of delivery that cater to a much wider diversity of learner backgrounds, experiences, aptitudes, motivations and learning opportunities.

As it was previously observed, the Portuguese higher education system is currently one of few where the majority of the students come from a low educational background (that is, where parents have at most 9 years of education). However, this data (presented by the OECD in Education at a Glance 2012) were gathered in 2009,

not reflecting the impact of the crisis and of the policies enacted by the current coalition government (Social Democratic Party/Popular Party), but rather resulting from the policies of the previous Socialist government, specifically:

- The creation of second-chance programs and diversification of routes in upper secondary education, that enabled the increase of completion of upper secondary education
- In 2009, the introduction of 12 years of compulsory education (before compulsory education encompassed only 9 years of education)
- The creation of a special access regime for students above 23 years old.

Considering that second chance programmes were terminated in 2012, that the enrolment rates of mature students have been decreasing since 2009 and that there is a downturn in overall enrolment figures (particularly in the polytechnic system), it is expectable that the number of first generation students coming from low income backgrounds in the system has decreased since 2010. However, no data is available on that matter regarding the period 2010-2014. Considering the flexibilisation of higher education provision, some institutions started to provide a part-time enrolment mode (where the student is only registered in half the ECTS numbers of a given year) and others provide classes in post work schedules, usually at night (though these are rare cases, more frequent in the private and polytechnic sector). However, no data about this sort of provision is available for the Portuguese system, and for many other countries that do not differentiate part-time student status. In Portugal, the General Work Law recognises "working students", who are formally granted some rights, such as the right to have between 3 to 6 hours off schedule to attend classes, to skip two working days per each examination and to have special holidays regimes (changes updated in the revision of the General Work Law -Lei n. º 23/2012-, on June 25th 2012). However, and as my interviews show, most students work in precarious conditions, and thus cannot enforce their rights to their employers or they would otherwise lose their jobs. Another common situation is that some of them do not declare their working student status or their income, or they would otherwise lose their needs grant. Hence, the working student status works more as a formality than a *de facto* protection for students. Again, no data about working students are available.

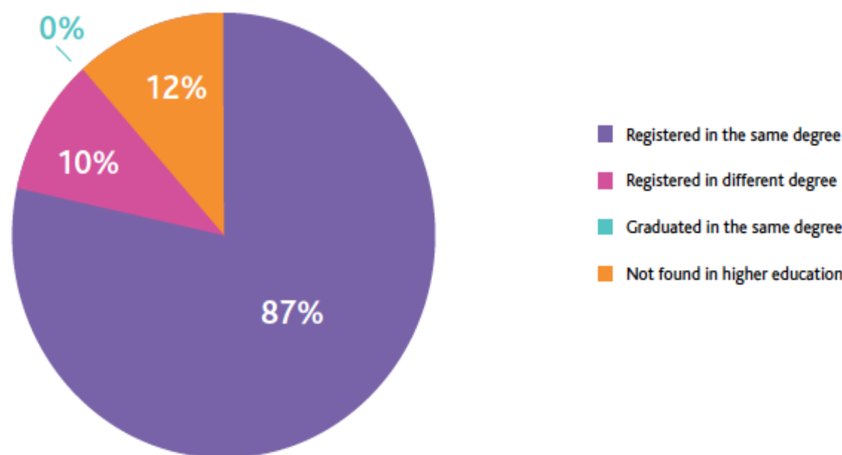
Regarding the influence of social background, Koucký, Bartusek, & Kovarovic (2010) created an Inequality Index of attainment of higher education, based on European Social Survey data. Considering household income and parental education and occupation, they concluded that inequalities in higher education access (referring to composition of the student body) were growing since 2000, after a long period of higher education expansion and democratisation. Thus, Portugal does not follow the European trend of decreasing inequalities of the student body (at least until 2009). Until 1950, the mother's education was the most important predictive factor, as children whose mothers had a higher education attainment had 9 times more probability of attending higher education than those who had mothers with low schooling. This difference was very sharp because up until 1974 the country lived through a 50 years dictatorship, where few women had schooling, and mostly men were the breadwinners, regardless of their socio-economic origin. According to the same study, today the most important family background factor in terms of access of young people to tertiary education in Portugal is the fathers' education (similarly to Spain and Turkey) and, on the contrary, the least important one is their mother's occupation. Children of the quartile of fathers with the highest level of educational attainment had more than three times (and often even four times) higher chances of achieving tertiary qualifications as compared to children of the quarter of fathers with the lowest level of education. However, the data in Koucký et al., (2010) study must be taken with reservation, since most Portuguese research still indicates mother's education as the strongest impact factor on children's attainment.

Usher & Medow (2010) did a similar study also evaluating accessibility, focusing on how many people and from what socio-economic background could participate in higher education. In 14 countries (some European, New Zealand, Australia and USA), Portugal ranked 12th regarding attainment of the student body, with an attainment rate of only 20% for the population between 25-34 years old. The authors explain the good rank of countries like the USA as the result of second chance programmes. Usher and Medow have also constructed an Educational Equity Index based on parental education. According to it, and comparing the share of higher education students with parents with university credentials with the share of males between 40-60 with the same status, Portugal ranked 13th, only surpassed by Mexico, the most unequal country in the study.

2.2.1.3.Completion and drop-out

Responding to the public alarm of dropout increase as a consequence of the crisis, and also to the National Education Council recommendation for the constitution of a dropout indicator, in 2014 the Ministry of Education published the first figures on dropout, referring to the academic situation in 2012 of those registered in 2011 for the first time. In this section I will only refer to figures from the public sector, from undergraduate and integrated master degrees, as these cases concern my sample.

GRAPHIC 3. SITUATION OF UNDERGRADUATES IN 2012

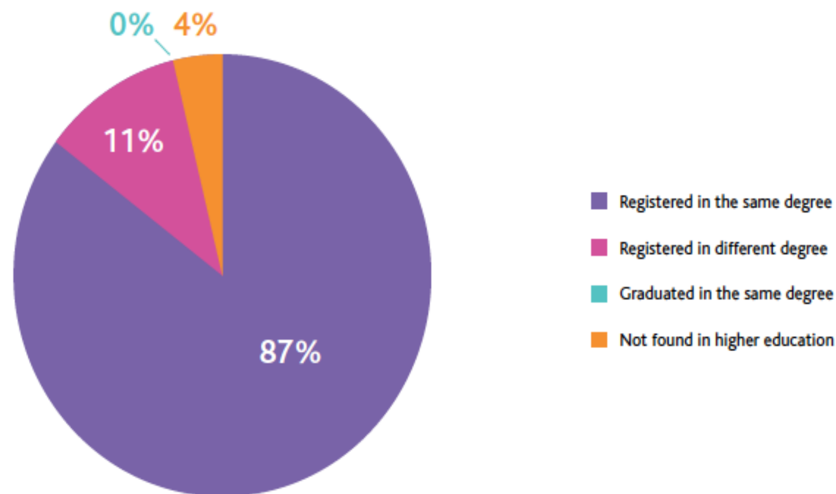


Source: General Directorate of Education and Science Statistics (DGEEC), 2015[8]

When looking at Graphic 3, it is possible to see that it differentiates between those who were not found in higher education and those who have switched degrees. Both have close percentages (12% to 10%). Disaggregating the data according to field of study, it is also visible that in public institutions, the highest dropout rate is located in degrees of Agriculture (15%) and Social Sciences and Law (14%), followed by Arts and Humanities (13,8%) and Education (13,3 %). The switch of degrees and of institution is also identified, being higher in the fields of Sciences, Mathematics and Computer Science. The lowest numbers of dropout and degree switching were found in Health and Social Protection fields. Regarding route of access, the highest figures of dropout were found in students who have accessed through the special regime for those above 23 years old (29%), and in those students with a higher education degree who have accessed though a special graduate route (33,9%). Regarding degree preference on application, dropout was about the same in those who have entered the

first, second, third and fourth degree option, however degree switching was increasingly higher according to how far students were from their first option degree, reaching 11,7% for those who were placed on their 6th application option.

GRAPHIC 4. SITUATION OF INTEGRATED MASTER STUDENTS, 2012



SOURCE: GENERAL DIRECTORATE OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE STATISTICS (DGEEC), 2015[9]

Numbers of dropout were significantly lower for those students in integrated masters, however for degree switching they were similar to those of undergraduates. There are no significant differences regarding dropout and degree-field, but social sciences and law continue to have the highest dropout rate (5,7%), and agriculture has the highest institution switch rate (10%). Considering access routes, the dropout trend for mature students and degree holders observed in undergraduate degrees is maintained, followed very close by students who are holders of a one year higher education degree (technological specialisation courses). Finally regarding degree option in application, the trend verified in undergraduate degrees is also verified. While dropout rates are stable between those who have entered the first, second, third and fourth degree options (around 2%), course switch rates increase according to how far the students are from their first option degree, reaching 30,3% for those that entered the 6th option of the application form.

Overall, the data gathered shows that disaggregating the data of dropout is useful, namely to observe the effect of the *numerus clausi* system on degree switching and the distribution of dropout according to field of degree. However, no data connecting socio-economic background is available on this survey, hence no connection with first generation students is possible. Finally, most recent data on attainment concerns completion rates of first degree students, where a significant improvement between 1995 and 2012 in university graduation rates is visible (14,89 to 40,50 %), slightly above the OECD average of 37,31 in 2012, although the impact of the economic crisis is felt on an average decrease of 4 points (OECD, 2014). According to a recent Eurydice brief on retention and access, 1 out of 3 students in the European Higher Education Area do not conclude their degree, and a major factor behind it is that the few universities who actually have retention strategies are not getting any financial compensation for it (EACEA, 2015).

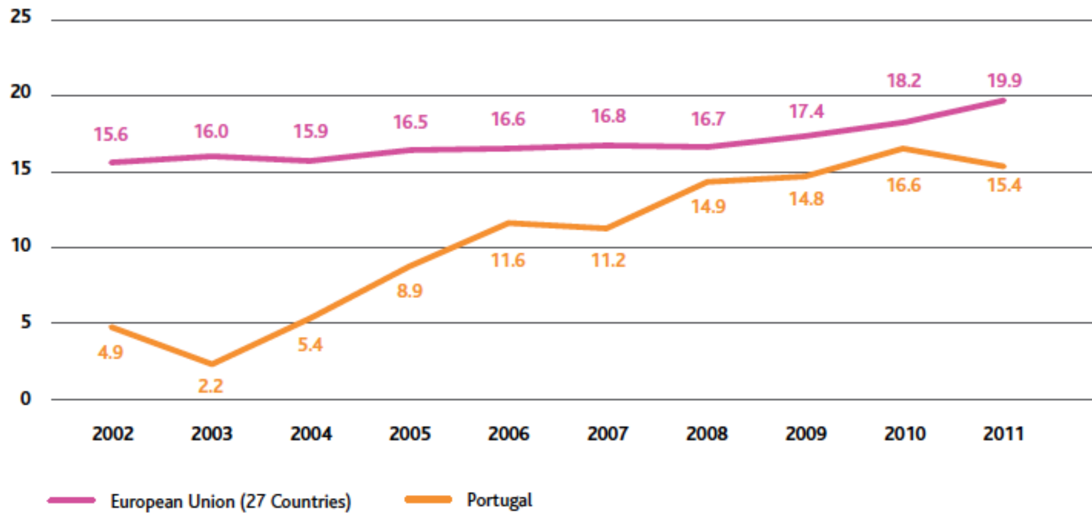
2.2.2. Affordability

While the accessibility of a system can be evaluated looking at participation and attainment rates in a comparative perspective, the affordability (an economic indicator of equity) of a higher education system can be determined looking at its social support policies, tuition and loans.

2.2.2.1. Social Support

Due to funding cuts that affected higher education budgets in the last decade, the social support schemes associated with higher education attendance have also decreased, as their economic resources derive from institutional budgets. As it is visible in the Graphic 2, the amount of social support in higher education is inferior to the European average, and though it has improved a lot during the last 10 years, it suffered a decline with the economic crisis.

GRAPHIC 5. FINANCIAL AID TO STUDENTS AS % OF TOTAL PUBLIC EXPENDITURE ON EDUCATION, AT TERTIARY LEVEL OF EDUCATION (ISCED 5-6)



Source: Eurostat, updated 10-03-15

Data indicates that between 2010 and 2011, the financial aid to students decreased from 16,6% to 15,4% while the European average kept rising with 19,9 % of the education budget dedicated to students. According to EACEA (2015), the social supports policy depends highly on a country's social and cultural perspectives regarding parental obligations and European countries present several differences considering their social support policies, with Scandinavian countries presenting an independent student model, with no fees and full government support for students regardless of familial situation, and the United Kingdom presenting a student-centred model, where students are primarily responsible for paying their studies, facing high tuition and subsequent loans, and support is targeted to those who need it most, taking familial contribution into consideration. The Portuguese system (along with the Spanish, Italian and French) is then classified as a parent-centred model, where parents are morally obliged to support their children, being entitled to small allowances and tax benefits to do so, and a small percentage of students (around 30%) receive a small social support grant. This tendency for looking at governmental aid as complementing family support had tragic consequences in the crisis period, where

familiar income suffered severe tax increase and simultaneously the social support budgets were cut. In the 2010/2011 academic year, and considering indicators of affordability (education costs, living costs, grants, loans and tax expenditures), Portugal was one of the countries where educational expenditures weighed more heavily on familial income (1934 €) corresponding to 22% of the average familial budgets, ranking 10th on a list of 16 analysed countries (Cerdeira, Cabrito, Patrocinio, Brites, & Machado, 2012). According to the same study, the overall cost of a student in higher education in 2011 was of 5841€, a cost that has weighed more than 6% on families between 2005 and 2011, shifting costs from the state to individuals. Still, the majority of students live at their parents' house or in a family house (50%) in order to control the costs.

According to Eurydice (European Comission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2012, 2014), the value of a needs scholarship in 2012 could range from 987 € to 6018 €. This value varied from 1066 € (the minimum scholarship that is equivalent to a fee waiver) to 5677 €, evidencing a decrease on the amount of social support. Between 2010 and 2014, several legal changes occurred in the social support system, specifically concerning the needs scholarship scheme, as the merit-based grants remains stable at 2425 € (the value for 2012, decreased to 2415 € in 2014), and it is only offered to few students who are the best in their degree. Table 1 summarises the main legislation concerning student support, evidencing the experimentalism and instability of the area during the crisis period. The most emblematic measure of the period continues to be the enactment of a policy that prevented students whose families had debts to social security or due to tax from getting a degree, a policy that remained active from 2011 to 2014.

TABLE 1: MAIN LEGAL DEVELOPMENTS CONSIDERING STUDENTS' SOCIAL SUPPORT 2010-2014

Year	Designation of Legislation and Date	Implications of Law
2010	Dispatch 14474/2010 (16/09/2010)	New Regulation for Attribution of Needs Scholarships in Higher Education. • Establishes that the social support will be granted according to a linear model (a formula) and not according to a scale with categories, that is, each income will be evaluated in order to get a specific amount, which left several students with no support • There is an increase of the number of credits necessary to conclude to be eligible for a scholarship, from 40% of the credits to 50% she was registered for).
	Notice 906-A /2010 (19/10/2010)	Establishes the Technical Norms for Application of the New Regulation for Needs Scholarships • Determines that within 6 months all institutions should receive applications through the centralised electronic platform of the Ministry of Education and Science. • Students should register on the platform when applying to higher education, and upload several documents concerning household wealth (other social support, ownership of house, car, etc.).
2011	Dispatch n.º 1416/2011 (17/01/2011)	Establishes that students registered in less that 30 ECTS can also be eligible to apply for a needs scholarship, as they are finishing their degree.
	Dispatch 12780/2011 (23/09/2011)	New Regulation for Attribution of Needs Scholarships in Higher Education. • Establishes that students whose parents have debts either to social security or to tax services will not be considered to get a scholarship. • There is an increase of the number of credits necessary to conclude to be eligible for a scholarship, from 50% of the credits to 60% she was registered for). • It is not possible to apply without presenting evidence of income, as the application will be considered as incomplete. Students that are in special situations (detention, members of religious institutions and with hosting organisations due to absence of family support) will have a tuition waiver paid to higher education institutions.

2012	Dispatch n.º 4913/2012 (10/04/2012)	Indicates that students whose scholarship application was refused due to parents' fiscal and social security debts can re-apply as long as the family's debt situation is solved (with a plan for payment initiated, or with a legal reclamation upon those debts, for instance)
	Dispatch n.º 8442-A/2012 (12/06/2012)	New Regulation for Attribution of Needs Scholarships in Higher Education. • Maintains that students whose parents have debts either to social security or to tax services will not be considered to get a scholarship. • Enlarges the scope of subsidies that will be included in household income, namely training allowances, minimum income support, allowances of age, disability, survival or other kind, and bank deposits, among others.
2013	Dispatch n.º 9226/2013 (15/07/2013)	Recommendation from National Council of Education concerning the student condition. It specifically addresses: • The rise of dropouts in higher education, the financial cuts in higher education and the need to develop measures of reintegration of former students, conquest of new audiences and flexibilisation of provision. • The social support system, pointing deficiencies such as poor communication between services and students, insufficient coverage, delays in analysis of applications and in payment of grants. It recommends a different social support scheme, independent from institutional budgets, in order to even the access to social support among the different institutions.
2014	Dispatch n. º 627/2014 (14/01/2014)	Establishes that parental debt is no longer conditioning the attribution of needs' scholarships to students who apply for it. Also, determines that students that in the academic year of 2013/2014 were excluded from getting scholarships due parental debt can re-apply within 30 days.
	Normative Dispatch n. º 8-A/2014	Creates a program to support the return of students who interrupted their studies (Programa Retomar). These students get 1200€ if they are in NEET situation, plus 300€ to aid graduation. As the measure is financed by European Funds under the Youth Guarantee action. Students need to be under 30 years old and able to finish their diploma before they reach 30 years old. Applications for 2014/2015 should be done until 30 September.
	Normative Dispatch n. º13-A/2014 (1/10/2014)	Extends the deadline for application to Programa Retomar with 10 days extra, as the program online received 500 applications when it was able to give 3000 grants[10].
	Dispatch n. º 11306-C/2014 (8/09/2014)	Establishes the Program + Superior, destined to attract students to study in higher education institutions located away from major cities in coastal areas, promoting the sustainability of the system and internal mobility. Students receive 1500€ per year when studying at these institutions, provided that they are not located in their usual residential area. The program received 1500 applications, and could only give 1000 grants[11]. Students are selected considering their application grade, hence students with higher averages will benefit, and no positive discrimination concerning social support needs is mentioned.

Source: the Author, based on legislation.

As it can be seen, major changes occurred in scholarship attribution policy in Portuguese higher education, mostly making it more difficult for students to be

eligible to receive a needs grant, because the student had to increase the number of credits done in one academic year, and her family needed to include in the household income other social allowances received from social security, as well as bank accounts and other revenues. The enactment of the policy that impeded students from being eligible for a scholarship due to parental debt had severe repercussions on student dropouts, reported by universities and students unions. The National Council of University Rectors even issued a Recommendation to the Government in 2012, sustaining that the measure was against the legal basis of positive discrimination of poorer students that was behind the whole scholarship scheme. Despite the several warnings, the policy was only removed in the beginning of 2014. Possibly, as a response to the high number of dropouts, a remedial measure to attract students who had to abandon their studies (Programa Retomar) was created, but had little impact[8]. Possible reasons can be the timing of the announcement and also the restricted conditions to apply, namely not being employed. I would also had that while the measure could cover yearly fees, it states nothing about previous debts that the student can have at a higher education institution, and that can effectively constitute a barrier to return to studies. In fact, some higher education institutions started since 2012 to coercively charge fees in debt by freezing bank accounts and other goods.

The consequences of the general instability on social support were mirrored in the interviews done, where students would confess to not know whether or not they were going to have a grant, and feeling confused with the new electronic submission system, that also lead to further delays and misinformation. In fact, some argued that the electronic submission lead to a depersonalisation of the whole system, since it all accounted to numbers, and fewer interviews with students were done. Universities locally managed the previous system, and the general slowness and lack of transparency of the whole process was known for years. Several students only knew if they had a grant after the first semester, when they already had a fee debt and would pay (those who could) even when dropping out. On the other hand, one can also look at the dates of enactment of measures. In most cases, they are announced in the

[8] Information collected from Jornal Público, 13 October 2014 (http://p3.publico.pt/actualidade/educacao/14107/adesao-ao-programa-retomar-muito-aquem-do-esperado).

beginning or during the academic year, so there is no chance for students to plan their lives. The situation obviously lead to the decrease of grants illustrated in Graphic 3.

GRAPHIC 6. STUDENTS WITH A NEEDS-SCHOLARSHIP AS PERCENTAGE OF THE STUDENT POPULATION. TOTAL FIGURES AND DISAGGREGATION BY HIGHER EDUCATION SUBSYSTEM

Source: PORDATA, updated 03-12-2014.

According to data from the General Directorate of Higher Education, in the 2012/2013 academic year there were 88600 scholarship applications, from which 29640 were denied. In 2013/2014, 85159 requests for scholarship were done, and 22068 were denied, clearly illustrating the growing insufficiency of the system.

2.2.2.2. Fees

As it is described in Article I and Article II, fees have continued to rise during the economic crisis period, but following the annual variation verified since their major increase in 2003. Until 2003, and under the Funding Law from 1997, the annual value of fees was equivalent to the minimum wage. Since 2003, under the New Financing Law 37/2003, some of the stakeholders (namely families and individuals) of higher education were instigated to take extra charge of higher education costs, and fees were established each year as a minimum value equivalent to 130% of the minimum wage, with the maximum amount actualised each year according to the Consumer Price

Index. This established an annual variation of the maximum amount of about a 2 to 3 % increase.

TABLE 2. MINIMUM AND MAXIMUM VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION FEES 2005-2014

	2005/2006	2007/2008	2009/2010	2011/2012	2013/2014
Minimum fee	487 €	524 €	585 €	631 €	631 €
Maximum fee	901 €	949 €	996,85 €	1000 €	1066 €

Source: Cerdeira et al. (2012) and European Comission et al., (2014)

In private institutions, tuition fees oscillated between 2700 € in the mid-90s to 3600 € in 2010 (Cerdeira et al., 2012). The increasing of fees has been seen as the major tool of funding diversification of higher education institutions, which are still very dependent on government support to lead their activities. According to Teixeira & Koryakina (2013), while the contribution of the government to universities reaches about 70%, with severe cuts in the last years, the institution's revenue is decreasing since 2007, while the weight of tuition fees on higher education institutes' budgets is rising since 2004. Most interestingly, while universities in 2003 promised to invest tuition money on education quality, but instead treated fees as self-generated income, allowing for greater flexibility in the application of that money. The result is pointed in a recent cost-sharing study that points that in Portugal, per-student expenditure decreased by 20% despite the fee reform of 2003 which brought additional funds into the system, and the ratio of students per academic staff started to rise after 2005 in public higher education institutions, clearly showing that quality of education was hardly improved (Usher, Orr, & Wespel, 2014). The government financial cuts observed till 2010 in the study, and that were much harsher during the crisis period, did not balance the enrolment growth, that was between 2005-2010 of plus 15 %, but that decreased during the crisis period. Hence, cost-sharing measures are benefiting institutions, but not the students.

Higher education institutions are free to establish their tuition fees up to the maximum limit, however due to the decrease of state funding, most charge the maximum fee (European Comission et al., 2014). The proof that tuition fees are still the main source of funding diversification was the recent implementation of a differentiated fees

regime for international students, who are now paying much more tuition than Portuguese students for studying in a public higher education institution (Decree of Law 36/2014), with no cap limit.

2.2.2.3. Loans

Since 2007 there exists a credit line for students, sponsored by the Government in partnership with seven financial institutions, making it possible to fund undergraduate and graduate studies with low spread rates, according to the grades the student obtains. The amount of the loan can be of a maximum 5000 € per year, and it should be reimbursed between 6 and 10 years after the conclusion of the degree. After finishing the studies, the student benefits of a period of one year until he/she finds a job, and starts to repay the loan. This system can be conciliated with having a needs grant, though it should be intended to complement the insufficiency of the social support system. Still, about a third of the students that request a loan are scholarship holders (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2014).

TABLE 3. EVOLUTION OF PORTUGUESE STUDENT LOAN SYSTEM 2007-2013

	Number of loans	Contracted Credit Value	Used funds	% of debt based of contracted credit
2007/2008	3302	36513696	32746862	4,22%
2008/2009	3886	44097135	37726563	2,27%
2009/2010	4074	47147583	35209577	0,60%
2010/2011	4537	52102335	26493329	0,12%
2012/2012	1951	22561214	5565983	(not available)
2012/2013	1822	22300000	1625769	(not available)

Source: Conselho Nacional de Educação (2014)

According to data on Table 3, the number of loans was increasing until 2011/2012, and had a severe fall, which could be explained by a decrease of the amount of credit available (accorded by the state with the financial institutions) and by the crisis that warned everyone about the consequences of debt. The line is also suspended several months during each year (it was suspended in 2013/2014 until December 2013 and it is still suspended in some banking institutions this year, which does not favour its utilisation by students).

Chapter 3. Theoretical framework: the Capability Approach, Parity of Participation and Vulnerability

This section presents the theoretical framework that informed this research, composed by the capability approach (henceforth, CA) of Amartya Sen, Nancy Fraser's parity of participation theory of justice, and the vulnerable subject concept of Martha Fineman. This theoretical framework is used in two of the three papers presented. The third one is informed by notions of social capital and moral economy enounced in Portes (2010), although it also engages with the capability approach and Fraser.

Given the fact that the capability approach was the theoretical umbrella that united the EDUWEL Marie Curie ITN under which this project was developed, it is the CA's contribution that I acknowledge first, clarifying how it was operationalised in the interview guide. Next, I continue to a resume of Fraser's theory of parity of participation. Finally, I clarify how Fineman's vulnerable subject theory informed my theoretical hypotheses and I point the value of this particular theoretical framing for higher education research.

3.1. The Capability Approach

The Capability Approach is an heuristic framework created by Amartya Sen (1999) to evaluate the quality of life using freedom as the basis to assess individual well being, although it was later conceptualised from a relational-political perspective (Nussbaum, 2011). A capability can be defined as the set of real opportunities an individual has to choose from in order to achieve the life he/she has reason to value (Sen, 1999). While capabilities are defined as potential, their actual materialisation is defined as functionings. Born in the realm of development economics, its uses have extended to public policy in a number of fields, especially as an alternative to human capital theory for scholars concerned with social justice and inequalities within higher education systems. The application of the capabilities approach is now frequent in topics such as widening participation in higher education, gender segregation, curricular design or student choices, although the issue of its operationalisation is not yet fully resolved. For a better understanding of its complexities, it is necessary to distinguish between both versions of the approach.

3.1.1. Sen's Human Development Approach

The birth of the capability concept can be traced back to 1979, in Amartya Sen's Tanner lectures "*Equality of what?"* Though equality and justice are long shared concerns among political scientists and philosophers (Dworkin, 2011; Rawls, 1999; Sandel, 2010) , the answer to the question depends upon the values of the questioner; in other words, one's standpoint allows difference to become inequality and vice-versa (Beuret, Bonvin, & Dahmen, 2013). The answer for Sen (1979) seems to be equality of freedom, since the capability is indeed a metric of individual freedom, one that is behind the Human Development Index from the United Nations. The capability approach is a normative evaluative approach that was proposed by Sen as an alternative to resources and utilitarian-based forms to make judgements about the quality of life. It makes two central claims: the claim that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance, and that the way to evaluate well-being freedom is to measure people's capabilities, that is, their real opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2011). Freedom is important then not only for its substantive value, but also for its empowering potential, since freedom is the means to achieve the person's valuable outcomes.

For Sen, "A person's capability to achieve functionings that he or she has reason to value provides a general approach to the evaluation of social arrangements and this yields a particular way of viewing the assessment of equality and inequality" (Sen, 1995, p. 5). A capability is the substantive freedom one enjoys in order to live a life she has reason to value (Sen, 1999), that is, the possibility she has to reach diverse beings and states, an opportunity enabled by all the necessary conditions to become genuine. Hence, a capability is located in the potential realm. Another important notion in Sen's conceptualisation is functioning. A functioning is an action or a state of being resulting from the exercise of one's capabilities. If a capability is potential, the functioning is the outcome of that potential. The combination of several capabilities is designated as the capability set and it is that potential realm that should be evaluated in a human development perspective.

Mediating the capability set and the diverse functionings are conversions factors, which are what allows one to convert a capability into a functioning. According to

Robeyns (2005), there are three types of conversion factors: personal, social and environmental. Personal conversion factors are those that are internal to the individual, such as intelligence or physical characteristics. Social conversion factors are related to social norms, public policies and institutions that have power over one's life. An example of these would be gender, understood as a product of cultural values. Finally, environmental conversion factors relate to climate, location, accessibility and other factors related to where one lives. Conversion factors play a crucial role in the capability approach, as they account for human diversity and contextual specificity. They justify the expression "substantive freedoms" in Sen's formulation of the capabilities, since conversion factors call attention to the fact that different people may need different amounts or types of resources in order to achieve the same functioning. Here Sen states a critique about well-being theories supporting equality of resources, since the latter will not necessarily lead to equal outcomes.

Besides the conversion factors categorised above, Sen (1999) further points to the need to pay attention to the distribution of wealth within the family and differences in relational perspectives (for example, cultural differences regarding what is required to appear in public without shame). All these aspects are left unattended when one considers well-being in terms of resources, income or outputs. In other words, a conversion factor shapes how much use one can get out of a given resource. A classical example of this is bicycle riding (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). A person can own a bike, but for various reasons, that does not mean that she can ride it. It may be the fact that she does not know how to or that in the place where she lives bicycle riding is not allowed. Hence, it is the resource access coupled with the conversion factors that promotes the capability (the real opportunity) to ride her bike whenever she wants to. The fact that she actually does ride her bicycle is what we call a functioning.

For Sen, freedom has two aspects: opportunity, referring to the fact that a given opportunity is available, and procedural, that has to do with agency: the pursuit of selected goals. So far we have just focused on the opportunity aspect of the definition of the capability, but Sen also stresses the fact of people having reason to value a given opportunity, that is, that something is worth achieving for intrinsic and individual reasons independent of constraining external factors and of their own well-being. Here Sen focuses on the other aspect of the capability, the procedural

mechanism that allows one to make choices, and the various issues that can arise in that process. One of those issues is that of adaptive preferences, preferences that are reported subjectively by individuals that in situations of deprivation (be it of an information, education or material nature) declare choices that conform to that harmful condition. An example is the case of women who prioritise their role as family carers over paid work outside their homes, an option that can be seen as an adaptive response to a given cultural setting with ascribed gender roles (Robeyns, 2007). The notion of adaptive preferences was further explored by Nussbaum (2001) and is strengthened by Haushofer & Fehr (2014) who show that poverty causes stress and negative affective states which in turn may lead to short-sighted and risk-averse decision-making, possibly by limiting attention and favouring customary behaviours at the expense of goal-directed ones. For this reason, Sen (1999) argues that utilitarian evaluations of well-being that focus on self-reported happiness are not an adequate measure to evaluate the quality of life. One other aspect to consider when examining what people have reason to value is that it is not the opportunity alone that should be considered when making interpersonal comparisons, but rather that opportunity combined with other opportunities available to the subject, what is designated as the capability set (Ziegler, 2010). This is because not only I do not value the same way all opportunities available to me, but also because it will not be possible to use all those opportunities simultaneously (Robeyns, 2011). For instance, a student may want to be a part-time worker while pursuing her degree, but some degrees will not provide her with tailored schedules, hence, she will have to choose between working or studying, though both options would be feasible and valued by her.

The capability approach conceived by Sen is deliberatively incomplete, and therefore cannot be considered a theory of justice, since it lacks the substance to make claims about what is the good life. Still, the capability approach is a strong framework that allows for the enlargement of the informational basis used to make judgements about justice, accounting for multidimensional, cumulative and intersectional aspects of social inequality (Salais, 2014). The reason to resist prescription is that Sen (2004) considers that it is through public reasoning and deliberation that one should reach a consensus about what is a life one has reason to value, establishing then a link between democracy and justice while accounting for the diversity of human contexts and conceptions of the good life. While some appreciate the flexibility of the

approach, others criticise the difficulty of its operationalisation. For the latter, Nussbaum's version of the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2011) as theory of justice can be more appropriate, as explained in the following section.

3.1.2. Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach

While sharing the same concerns about the quality of life beyond the capability approach, Nussbaum's version of the framework takes it one step further, adding to it the necessary substance that turns the approach into a theory of justice of its own. Her concern is that the flexibility and incompleteness of the approach can be compatible with cultural relativism, as her aim is that the approach constitutes a solid base for public policies that secure citizens` rights in universal terms (Deneulin, 2011). While Sen's matrix of the approach stems from development economics, Nussbaum's version is rooted in philosophy, namely in the Aristotelian conceptions of the good life. She proposes a list of ten basic capabilities that constitute the minimum threshold required to live a human life with dignity (Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 78–80). Summarising, these are:

- Life: being able to lead a human life of normal length
- Bodily health and integrity: being able to have good health, have shelter and adequate nourishment.
- Bodily integrity: having opportunity to move freely without suffering violence of any kind, including sexual and domestic; being able to choose in matters of reproduction.
- Senses, imagination, thought: being able to use senses, think and reason, in a human way supported by adequate education. Being able to author works of one's choice, to solve problems or express imagination freely.
- Emotions: Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development damaged by fear and anxiety
- Practical reason: Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life
- Affiliation: Being able to live with and toward others, to recognise and show

concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; having empathy. Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be considered as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others.

- Other species: Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
- Play: Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
- Control over one's environment: on a political level, having the right to political participation and on a material side, being able to own property, having the right to seek employment. In work, being able to work as a human being, using practical reason (work that is not alienating).

Within the list, special attention is given to the capabilities of practical reason and affiliation, as they are organising the other capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011), such as being informed about reproductive rights has an impact on individual health, or having empathy will affect one’s relation with other species. Hence, the value of education is acknowledged. Nussbaum’s list is, according to herself, open-ended and can be contested and remade, and it has indeed inspired other lists of basic capabilities, such as Robeyns’ capabilities list for gender justice (Robeyns, 2003) or Walker’s list for capabilities in higher education (Walker, 2006). Despite that, there is much debate around the necessity of a list of capabilities. Nussbaum argues that having a list is vital for avoiding the omission and power issues that occur as a result of adaptive preference, since an individual deprived of a certain basic capability can have been educated not to value that same capability (Nussbaum, 1988). As much as the argument of adaptive preferences provides a ground for avoiding omission issues, the challenge of power is far more complicated, as Nussbaum is indeed claiming to know what is human dignity in universal terms, limiting individual freedom to state different conceptions of human life, and speaking for the subaltern (Spivak, 1988). Hence the critiques of the list as having a neo-colonialist character, being ethnocentric and paternalistic (Charusheela, 2009). Her claim is that having the list will indeed secure individual rights to choose, since only when these basic capabilities are assured will one be able to choose to exert them or not. Therefore the value of addressing these concerns as capabilities and not as functionings, since the potential realm leaves enough room for plural conceptions of what is a valued life (Nussbaum, 2006). On the

other hand, Nussbaum also sustains that the specification of some basic capabilities is necessary because not all individual desires are good just because they were freely chosen, and some can be considered damaging, if used for the wrong ends. In her view:

> "no society that pursues equality or even an ample social minimum can avoid curtailing freedom in very many ways, and what it ought to say is: those freedoms are not good, they are not part of a core group of entitlements required by the notion of social justice, and in many ways, indeed, they subvert those core entitlements" (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 45).

In her assessment of both versions of the Capability Approach, Deneulin (2011) sustains that Sen's version can be termed as liberal-evaluative, as it is only concerned with evaluating social arrangements in light of their provision of freedom, whereas Nussbaum's version of the CA is rather on the transformative-relational side, since it is concerned with changing and correcting oppressive social situations. Nussbaum's version, despite maintaining the ethical individualism of Sen's capability, can be said to have more communitarian roots, because of its commitment to a common conception of the good and its acknowledgement of the constitutive aspect of human relations. Regarding education matters, it is noted that Sen's work has tended to be used in general discussion of policy and critiques of theories regarding education and economy, while Nussbaum's writings are directed to the content of education, therefore being more used to analyse the process of education itself (Unterhalter, Vaughan and Walker 2007). While both versions of the CA can be seen as conflicting or complementary, the framework highlights the value of education for human development, and I hold it in that respect both versions converge, as we shall see in the next section.

3.1.3. Education in the Capability Approach

A great number of capability scholars have recognised the crucial role that education plays for the achievement of a life one has reason to value. Education is considered a fertile functioning (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007), one that not only has intrinsic value as it allows one to understand the world and engage in fulfilling activities, but also carries an instrumental and positional value (Unterhalter & Brighouse, 2007). Education has instrumental value in the sense that it will allow one to perform a job, but also has a positional one, since the value of education credentials is related to the

educational achievements of a group, originating social status issues related, for instance, to where one studies.

The recognition of education as more than an instrumental activity is an added value of the capability approach, particularly when compared to the human capital approach (Becker, 1993), that is the basis of most Western educational policies. As a rational choice theory, the human capital approach was developed in the 1960s by establishing a correlation between educational achievements and economic growth. Therefore, investments in science and education would yield economic returns, and individual aspirations were disregarded in favour of the labour market needs (Patrinos & Psacharopoulos, 2002). The main goal of education would be to train a skilled labour force, hence the current emphasis on vocational training and under-appreciation of the humanities as having no measure utility, a policy trend long criticised by Nussbaum (2010). This conception of economic growth as the main driver of education is from a capability perspective, reductionist, since education's main task is to develop human flourishing, and should aim not only for the development of skills but also for practical reasons (Unterhalter, 2009a). Apart from this normative differential, the human capital approach also underestimates the impact of education, which brings collective as well as private benefits, leading for example to more informed health decisions or increased participation on elections (McMahon, 2009). However not all kinds of education leads to this, as Nussbaum notices:

> Nothing could be more crucial to democracy than the education of its citizens. Through primary and secondary education, young citizens form, at a crucial age, habits of mind that will be with them all through their lives. They learn to ask questions or not to ask them; to take what they hear at face value or to probe more deeply; to imagine the situation of a person different from themselves or to see a new person as a mere threat to the success of their own projects; to think of themselves as members of a homogeneous group or as members of a nation, and a world, made up of many people and groups, all of whom deserve respect and understanding. (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 387).

Hence the effort for many capability scholars to determine what kind of education could lead to the development of capabilities to several audiences. Terzi, (2008) in the case of disability, has developed a framework that justifies additional resources for

disabled students on the basis of equality of capability. In the case of girls' schooling, Vaughan (2007) distinguished between the capability to fully participate in education (referring to structural determinants like ability to attend) and the capabilities gained through education, such as employment or ability to monitor information in order to make autonomous choices. While these theoretical developments do not refer specifically to higher education, the next section will debate issues of operationalisation of the approach with examples of theory application in the higher education context.

3.1.4. Operationalisation of the capability approach: examples from higher education

While the capability approach is indeed a multidimensional theoretical framework that seeks to gather an holistic picture of the quality of life, its operationalisation is challenging at minimum, starting with the question: how to measure or analyse potential? Indeed, the conceptual vagueness of the capability requires contextual specification to become operationally feasible. Considering objects of analysis, functionings have been taken as a proxy for capabilities, as the existence of a certain achievement proves that a given opportunity existed, though it tells nothing about the individual choice process or satisfaction, since the functioning may exist and not correspond to an individual desire. In the case of education, tests are an example of how a given functioning (test scores) signals a student's capability to master a discipline, being short of stating anything about the learning process. Considering the units of analysis, the capability approach is keen on ethical individualism, so individuals are generally taken as the main unit of analysis. This requires that interviews (namely of biographical nature), are performed in order to account for human heterogeneity (Watts & Bridges, 2006). However, if one attends to the empowering aspect of the approach, participatory research methods and action research are also a sound option, for instance in pedagogical communities of practice or in developing contexts (Apsan Frediani, Boni, & Gasper, 2014). Ethical individualism is meant to evaluate one's autonomy over choices and to illuminate intragroup diversity that would otherwise be obscured, not forcing methodological options. In fact, the CA has been elaborated in quantitative research, using data from large data sets such as the European Social Survey (Ilieva-Trichkova, 2014) or the British Cohort Study (Burchardt, 2009; Peruzzi, 2014), but often fighting with the

insufficient information gathered by these instruments, that does not allow for complete operationalisation of all the dimensions of the approach.

On a second note, the CA supposes that the individual is an autonomous capable chooser, and this raises the question of whether children and young people are capable of distinguishing their own immediate desires from their future well-being (Unterhalter, Walker, & Vaughan, 2007), or on another level, if people are willing to participate all the time in all their decisions or if they would prefer not to participate or delegate that responsibility (Cohen, 1993). Skeggs (1997) research shows how agency of a particular group (working class women) is more motivated by the fear of losing security and the desire to become respectable in the community's eyes than a result of informed decisions. Wolff & De-Shalit (2007) also note that under insecure conditions, individuals feel blocked and unable to make decisions and project the future. Such examples reinforce critiques of the approach for its emphasis upon the liberal subject, which is but an aspiring horizon and not a reality, and its failure to acknowledge cultural contingency and power disputes (Dahmen, 2014; Dean, 2009). Sen's conception of agency supposes a great deal of reflexivity to mediate structural constraints, reflexivity that very few would be able to perform. As for example Boltanski & Thévenot, (2006) work suggests, individual decisions are justified by a number of regimes, and are strongly dependant upon the situation in which they occur.

Finally, a third flaw can be pointed regarding the use of the term capability itself, which has been used in several contexts with other meanings than the ones pointed by these approaches, namely those connected with student skills and competencies. For instance, in the context of stating the development of student capability as an aim of higher education, Stephenson, (1998, p. 2) defines it as "an integration of knowledge, skills, personal qualities and understanding used appropriately and effectively - not just in familiar and highly focused specialist contexts but in response to new and changing circumstances". While this definition also refers to potential and moral judgement aspects (necessary to operate in unfamiliar settings), it is far from referring to the opportunity and agency dimensions stated in Sen's and Nussbaum's capabilities. Nussbaum distinguishes between basic, combined and internal capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 20–25), where basic capabilities are innate, internal capabilities correspond to trained or developed traits and abilities developed with social environment (more related to the Stephenson's definition), and combined capabilities

to the opportunity and agency dimensions pointed by Sen. However this distinction is not enough to avoid the elusive language created by the approach, hence I recommend caution in its use.

In higher education research, the capability approach has been gaining relevance in the past years. Topics range from curriculum development, employability, social exclusion or aspirations, using Sen's and Nussbaum's versions, with cases from diverse settings, ranging from China to the United Kingdom. Boni & Walker (2013) provide an extensive overview of the research done in the field. I will briefly review some examples of research that applies the capability approach in higher education, in order to clarify how the speculative complexity of the approach can be applied to specific problems with heuristic gain.

Walker (2006) was among the first to use the capability approach in higher education. Based on extended literature review of other capabilities lists and on analysis of researchers` and students' voices present in previous research, she proposed a list of capabilities to be fostered by life long learning curriculum as a minimum threshold for student development. These capabilities are:

- Practical reason (being able to make informed and critical judgements),
- Educational resilience (ability to negotiate risk and persevere academically),
- Knowledge and Imagination (being able to acquire knowledge for pleasure as well as for economic purposes,
- Learning disposition (being curious, being an active learner),
- Social relations and social networks (being able to establish trusting relationships with peers)
- Respect, dignity and recognition (being able to be respected and respect other regardless of gender, race, age or religion, having intercultural competencies, being empathic),
- Emotional integrity, emotions (not being exposed to anxiety or fear in the learning situation) and
- Bodily integrity (safety and freedom from all forms of physical harassment).

Walker's list echoes very much Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 2000), in that she assumes that one cannot dissociate quality of equality in education, addressing power relations present in the pedagogical processes. Her list was one of the sources used to selected capabilities to analyse in this research.

Other contributions relating the CA with higher education access comes from Hart (2013), that examined higher education aspirations of British students in transition from lower and upper-secondary to higher education, examining in two institutional settings and in different moments their aspirations and needs on one side, and their higher education participation decisions on the other. Finally, an inventive example for policy analysis using the capability approach comes from Wang (2011), who framed social exclusion as capability deprivation in Chinese higher education using Sen's criteria of constitutive deprivation (exclusion in itself, for example being excluded from social relations) and instrumental deprivation (a capability deprivation that may result in further social exclusion, such as having access to loans and credits).

In this research, the CA was operationalised by selecting four relevant capabilities to appreciate in the interviews, following Sen's version, that is, as a basis to inform the quality of student experience. Sen's version of the capability approach presents a more bottom up standpoint, which is more compatible with the biographical methods used here. I selected the capabilities through careful literature review, not intending to form a list of basic capabilities for higher education, but just to map areas where I would like to focus my analysis. In fact, the refusal to constitute a fundamental capabilities list is what determines my preference for Sen's version of the CA, although I recognise the utility and universal value of many of the capabilities pointed by Nussbaum. Therefore, her list was also a source in my informed selection of capabilities, and it is worth noticing that both versions of the approach can be seen as complementary. Addressing the specific critiques pointed to the capability approach, namely paying insufficient attention to human dependency and to the exploitative nature of capitalist economies, Fraser's parity of participation theory of justice and Fineman's vulnerable subject concept were coupled with the capabilities approach, providing further explanatory power to the framework. These contributes will be explored and integrated into a theoretical scheme. Finally, I will integrate them in the description of the four selected capabilities.

3.2. Parity of Participation: Nancy Fraser's Threefold Theory of Justice

Nancy Fraser is a feminist philosopher concerned with matters of justice regarding gender and class. Her work follows a pragmatic approach that aims to conciliate the socialist egalitarian orientation (which guided second wave feminist struggles in the 70's) with the more identity-focused politics (fruit of the post modern cultural turn) of the third wave feminists. Her theory of justice states then that the economic and cultural aspect of justice is intertwined and one cannot replace the other, as the public preference of recognition aspects in detriment of redistribution seems to suggest. In fact, in developed countries, the expression "social inclusion" has replaced poverty as the key concept in welfare policies, contributing to the invisibility of class and social stratification in public debates. It is in this setting that Fraser and Honneth's (2003) philosophical exchange takes place, with Fraser arguing against Honneth for a less idealist approach to justice, one more concerned with the daily life and constraints that people face.

When mapping injustice in people's lives, Fraser detects two clusters of problems: problems resulting from misdistribution, that is, from an unfair and uneven distribution of material resources, and problems resulting from misrecognition, that is, from a denial of respect that should be granted to a person or group, a consequence from cultural patterns that are institutionalised and refuse further questioning. Justice then should fight to eradicate economic exploitation and cultural oppression. While both aspects are conceptually separated in order to facilitate analytical exposition, and not because of any binary conception of justice (Lovell, 2007), they can overlap and both types of injustice (economic and cultural) can indeed occur at the same time. It is worth noting here that Fraser entails her own revision of the status and class concepts. In her own words, "status represents an order of intersubjective subordination derived from institutionalised patterns of cultural value that constitute some members of society as less than full partners in interaction" and class as "an order of objective subordination derived from economic arrangements that deny some actors the means and resources they need for participatory parity" (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 49).

This conceptual revision (that goes beyond Weber's notion of prestige in the case of status and beyond Marxist ownership of means of production in the case of class)

sustains Fraser's parity of participation, a conception of justice that aims at securing both the objective and intersubjective conditions for granting the participation of all as full members of society. Particularly, the interpretation of misrecognition as a case of uneven institutional status and not as a case of damaged self-esteem and distorted group identity (as proposed by Honneth) is the key to solve the separation between the claims for redistribution (belonging to a moral stand) and the claims for recognition (belonging to an ethical stand). Parting from the deconstruction of the recognition concept, Fraser's proposal is to extend the notion of justice through the norm of parity of participation, which requires two conditions. First, that the "distribution of material resources must be such as to ensure participants' independence and voice" (Fraser, 2001, p. 29), that is, that all material inequalities, be it of income or leisure time, are eradicated, in order to permit fair interaction between peers. Second, that "institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem" (Fraser, 2001, p. 29), that is, that institutions balance their individual perceptions in order to adjust any unjustified differential treatment or any blindness to evident distinctiveness. In Fraser's most recent version of the parity of participation concept, representation obstacles (social exclusion from networks that are in power to make claims and decisions in public processes of contestation) join redistribution and recognition and form a threefold theory of justice (Fraser, 2007).

The emancipatory aspect of Fraser's view of recognition entails several advantages. First, it avoids the identity essentialisation that group labelling often leads to, obscuring the diversity within every group (and here Fraser shows some affinity with an intersectionality perspective[9]); second, is a more empowering approach to those who are oppressed (who are no longer seen as psychologically damaged, a view that, according to Fraser, adds insult to injury and is one step away from "blaming the victim"); and finally is a non-sectarian position that suits diverse conceptions of the good life, embracing the spirit of subjective freedom that allows each one to define what constitutes a life worth living (ethical approaches to recognition must part from an idealist, top down approach of what constitutes a good life). By not imposing on others a single, legitimate model of a "good life", Fraser fiercely refuses to patronise

[9] For a more detailed account of intersectionality and Fraser please check Yuval-Davis (2011).

those who are in a subaltern position, by questioning the grounds of interpretation of what is silenced, a position rooted in her feminist background (Lovell, 2007). Conversely she also reserves herself the right to critically reflect upon several claims of identity, not adopting the humanist stand that considers all difference as fruit of oppression. In that sense, Fraser sustains that one can make judgments about difference, allowing some differences to be eliminated, others to be universalised and others to be enjoyed. Thus, despite being attacked for not granting enough attention to group identity claims, Fraser's parity of participation concept welcomes difference, and moreover, "makes a virtue of diversity, envisaging a plurality of dialogic discourses that are *in principle* non-integrated, and in contestation, one with another (Lovell, 2007, p. 81). For educational theory, and especially for widening participation topics, adopting Fraser's recognition concept allows us to critically analyse current approaches to widening participation policies, such as raising aspirations programs (which are based on a deficit portrait of the subject), based in neoliberal ideologies that sustain a totalizing lifestyle model severely anchored in middle class needs and gendered preferences (Burke, 2011; Leathwood, & Read, 2009).

By adopting a compromise between egalitarian distributive politics and status recognition aspects, Fraser aims to distance herself from plain affirmative politics, which while seeking justice often reinforce the inequality gaps, and move to transformative politics, where the actual structural conditions that lead to inequalities are dismantled. Like Judt (2010), she considers that a focus on identity politics leads to narcissist and individualist vindications that obscured the collective concerns that human beings have in common, namely economic inequality. In this sense, parity of participation is a norm that appears especially suited not only for today's female struggles but also for all struggles faced by diverse people when limited to second class positions, for neoliberal policies ultimately enlarge economic differences, as the OECD "Divided we stand" figures show (2011). This is because in face of contemporary social stratification, economic inequalities bear little relation with moral worth and as Sayer observes, "it is easy for the rich to 'recognize' their others as equal, but giving up their economic advantages is quite another matter" (Sayer, 2007, p. 99).

The sociological value of Fraser's parity of participation for higher education research has been praised by among others, Burke (2012), who considers that in terms of institutional analysis, the recognition aspect of the theory can aid non-traditional students in admission procedures, for instance. Tikly & Barrett (2011) have also paired the capabilities approach with parity of participation for evaluating the quality of education in developing contexts, so the framework has proven its feasibility. As for Fineman's vulnerable subject concept, it is the first time it is applied to higher education research, deserving special attention.

3.3. Fineman's Vulnerable Subject: bridging equality and difference

Drawing on her previous work about autonomy as a myth in contemporary legal theory (Fineman, 2005), Martha Fineman proposed a vulnerability conceptualisation that has gained increasing attention since its presentation in 2008. Her critique of autonomy intended to address the inequalities caused by the autonomy assertions behind the notion of social contract. Fineman characterises state-citizen relationships as being noted for its independence, generating a society of self-interest individuals that wish from the state nothing more than the freedom to pursue their own interests, that is, to make their own contracts and choices, which in turn generates state withdrawal and family and individual responsabilisation for all sorts of misfortunes. While I do not agree with this conceptualisation of autonomy (and in that sense, I favour the concept of relational autonomy, as I will explain further ahead), I find it relevant that Fineman compares this conception of autonomy to that of privacy, that is invoked as a justification for placing families outside state intervention, thus allowing for many abuses. Family is as much a myth as autonomy, in the sense that there is an institutionalised assumption of "natural" ties of affection and care that are legally enforced through laws and subsidies. Conceiving families as institutions and not as "natural entities" is particularly pertinent for Mediterranean contexts that base their welfare models in the assumption of family support, excusing the state from providing protection and excluding those who cannot count on that resource.

Extending her critique of autonomy as the basis of social contract, Fineman suggests trading the liberal subject for the vulnerable subject, a notion that will allow for politics of equality that go beyond sameness of treatment. Her vulnerability theory

was firstly presented as a disguised version of a human rights approach to equality, but one that was fashioned to an American audience, focusing more on the human aspect than on the rights claim (Fineman & Grear, 2013). To Fineman (Fineman, 2008), focusing on humanity is focusing on vulnerability, because she conceives vulnerability as a constitutive characteristic of human nature, one that is undeniably present at least when we are born and young, and at the ultimate stages of our lives, that is, when we are dependent upon the care of others to survive. If dependency is episodic and related to development stages, vulnerability is constant in times that we are exposed to risks of many kinds. While this assumption is also present in other authors' works (Butler, 2006; MacIntyre, 1999; Mackenzie, 2014; Misztal, 2011; Nussbaum, 2006), Fineman's aim is to avoid identity categories that label certain groups of the population as "vulnerable". In her view, this distinction is ineffective in terms of justice for several reasons. First, because it establishes equality for these labelled groups in terms of sameness of treatment, which does not prevent several discriminations and injustices to occur, and in certain cases, even justifies them (see for instance cases of "special access conditions" to higher education, that later do not result in success for non-traditional students because of inadequate pedagogical support). Second, because only certain groups are recognised after several struggles, and others, who do not have the same bargaining power, can be negatively discriminated against at the same time (and here Fineman provides examples from the LGBT community fighting for marriage equality). This argument is also invoked by Skeggs (2004), when she notices:

> To make a recognition claim one must first have a recognisable identity, and this identity must be proper: that is, it must have recognisable public value. This immediately presents a problem for those who are not considered to have "proper" identities and are continually misrecognised; it also presents a problem for those who are forced to inhabit an identity category not of their own making, as well as those who are forced to be visible in order to be seen to have a recognisable identity. (Skeggs, 2004, p. 178).

Finally, Fineman considers that the labelling of certain groups as "vulnerable" can be stigmatising and offending on one hand - an argument also invoked by Fraser, (2001) - and on the other, it can be inaccurate, as group labelling always obscures individual

differences. Her critique of identity is of particular relevance for this research, as I am dealing with first generation students, a group that is arguably constructed as "vulnerable", although its vulnerability is hard to map given its broad and diverse characteristics. However, her vulnerability conceptualisation has been criticised by its lack of refinement, in the sense that Fineman only provides two types of vulnerability: one that arises from one's embodiment, leading to harm or injury, and in that sense, universal; and another that is particularly experienced according to the quantity and quality of resources one can possess or command. Expanding the conceptualisation of vulnerability, Mackenzie, Rogers, & Dodds, (2014) propose a taxonomy of three different sources of vulnerability (*inherent, situational,* and *pathogenic*) and two different states of vulnerability (*dispositional* and *occurrent*). Inherent forms of vulnerability are those related again to corporality and affective dimensions of being, while situational vulnerabilities arise from personal, social, political or economic constraints. These two sources of vulnerability often appear related in a continuum, in the sense that inherent forms of vulnerability can be influenced by situational conditions. Distinctions regarding the state of vulnerability are more relevant, in the sense that they distinguish between potential vulnerability (dispositional) and actual vulnerability (occurring). Finally, for the authors, pathogenic vulnerability refers to those situations when institutional action meant to mitigate vulnerability actually exacerbates it, and examples from sexual abuse of cognitively impaired people are provided. As much as this taxonomy can aid in furthering the vulnerability conceptualisation, in the case of my research it is not useful, as vulnerabilities that I am focusing one are of social and economic nature, and for that Fineman's conceptualisation is more convenient.

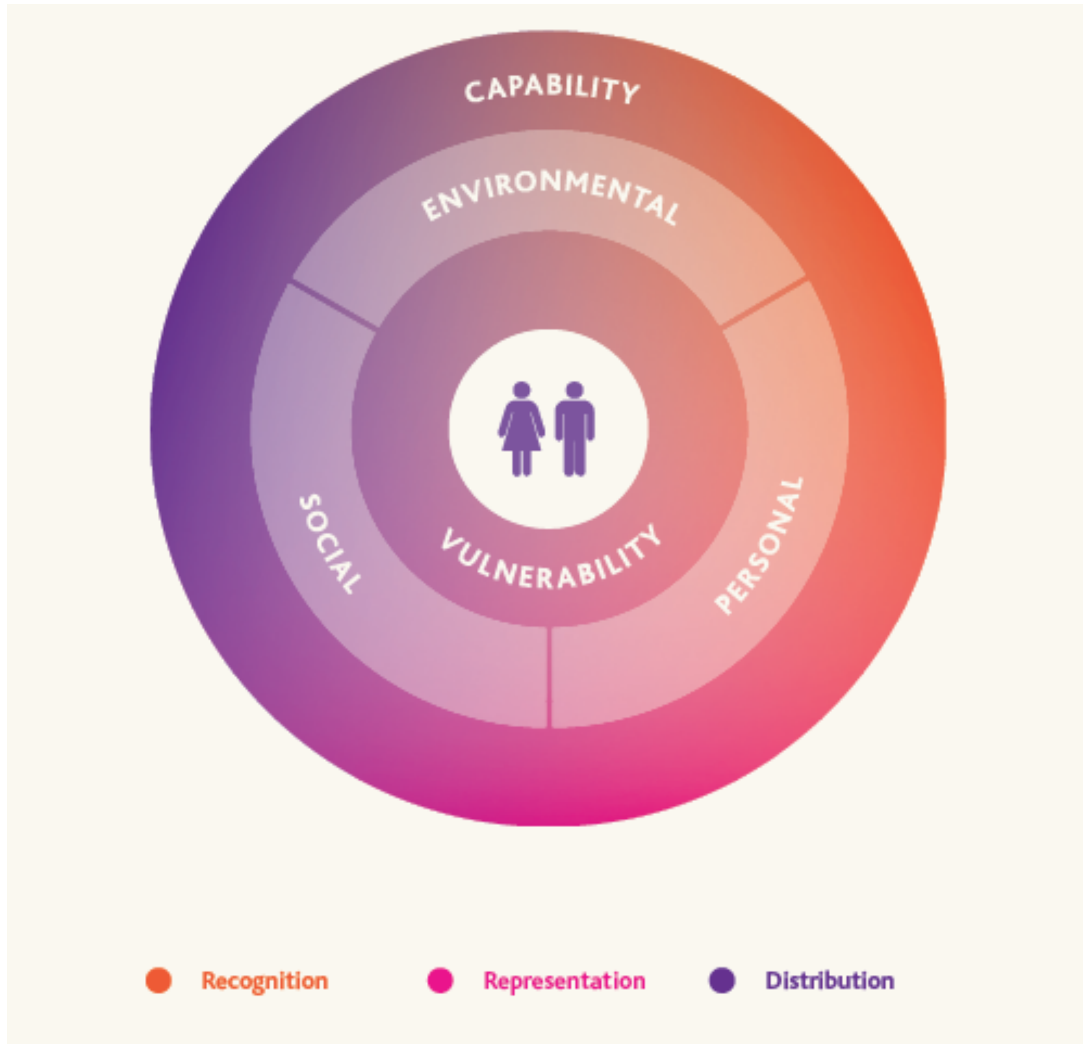
Having stated her universal vulnerability proposition, Fineman then notices that some individuals are resilient, individuals that are cherry picked as evidence of the well functioning of the meritocratic system, given that they were given the same treatment as everyone else. However, she states that this resilience is not given by any innate individual attributes, but is potentiated by institutional action, that creates webs of privilege and disadvantage by providing resources or assets. These assets can be of physical, human, social, ecological and existential nature. Here I consider that the assets categorisation recalls Sen's conversion factors, a categorisation that I consider to be more adequate since the term conversion betters illustrates a relation that can be

positive or negative. Nevertheless, the particular role played by institutions in fostering inequalities and privileges has aided my analysis, particularly in order to explain the resilience of my interviewees in the face of many adversities. In her words, "society cannot eradicate our vulnerability either. However, society can and does mediate, compensate, and lessen our vulnerability through programs, institutions, and structures" (Fineman, 2008). It is this attention to the effects of programs, policies and institutions that I call for my analysis, since they are critical in contexts of economic crisis where everyone is affected, and even institutions itself are fragile and prone to failure. Rather than proposing plain legal de jure rights, as a traditional human rights approach would, Fineman suggests that the state should pay more attention to institutions and their role on policy translation, as they are the real implementers of privilege and disadvantage.

3.4. Integration of theoretical contributes

Figure 1 shows the integrated scheme that unifies both approaches. The student is at the centre of the diagram, surrounded by justice dimensions (material, cultural and political). Around him/her there are circles of agency. A wider circle of agency illustrates a stronger capacity for self-determination and development; a narrower circle shows vulnerability that is to a degree constitutive but passible to be mitigated by institutional action. The middle circle illustrates conversion factors that mediate opportunities and resources, thus enabling them (or not) to pass to the wider circle of agency. Though the circles are represented by a regular round shape, their colour is a continuum of shades, alluding to the interconnect dimensions of justice of distribution, recognition and representation, since one cannot exist without the other two. Justice dimensions in the diagram are fields where one can map student experience. Smaller circles of agency configure then a situation of vulnerability and capability deprivation.

FIGURE 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



As it is reasonable to assume from the diagram, capability development is the desired state that students should achieve. For that reason, I now conceptualise the four capabilities to map in this study, further integrating the concepts of the framework.

3.4.1. The capability for autonomy

Within Sen's capability framework, agency and freedom assume a preponderant role, as the individual makes her own choices guided by reason. For Sen, "an agent is someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives" (Sen, 1999, p. 19). Crocker & Robeyns (2009) define four conditions to observe agency, the first two being *self-determination* (the person decides for himself or herself rather than someone or something else making the decision) and *reason orientation and deliberation* (the person bases his or her decisions on reasons, such as the pursuit of goals). These two conditions may fall

under the category of motivation and choices on an individual that is, for instance, the drive and impulse that makes someone pursue higher education studies. A more broad term to conceptualise this self-determination aspect would be the notion of autonomy, but an autonomy that is relational rather than liberal, as it is negatively conceived by Fineman (Mackenzie, 2014). Relational autonomy is autonomy viewed from a feminist perspective, that sees people as socially embedded not only by their social identities, but also by their historical contexts, people that are also emotional rather than just rational and whose decisions respond to a number of factors beyond their own self benefit. As seen in the literature review about first generation students in the Portuguese context, studies with first generation students show that institution and degree choice are sometimes constrained by *numerus clausi*, financial, geographic or structural situations, but can also be by adaptive preferences. The individual then tends to adapt her preferences to her perceptions of what she can do, rather than what she wants to do. In other cases, higher education candidates are not aware of all the options they have, which may signify for instance lack of awareness of available scholarships, or the opening of a particular course that matches one's needs. In either case, the interrogation of such processes allows you to unveil the process of student choice and to reach deeper than the cost-benefit analysis proposed by human capital.

3.4.2.The capability to aspire

Around the debate of widening participation in education and particularly in higher education, aspirations have aroused a growing interest (Bok, 2010; Hart, 2013; Sellar, Gale, & Parker, 2011). It is commonly assumed that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds lack the capability to aspire and therefore do not enrol in higher education, or when enrolled, are more prone to drop out or to picture their future with uncertainty. Underneath such observation lies on one hand the conception of aspiration as a resource (or capital) that some have or have not, a sort of innate psychological attribute from which the individual is solemnly responsible, and on the other hand an homogeneous identification of the good life with the pursuit of higher education, retaining its value and use unquestioned. As observed by Sellar, Gayle & Parker (2009) such conception calls for institutional change and requires an examination of the mismatch between cultural norms of widening participation groups and the norms of the university. Not to do so would favour a positive discrimination

approach that aims at "elevating" aspirations of the working classes to the middle class pattern (the legitimised conception of the good life), without questioning and dismantling the structures that lead to the exclusion of the disadvantaged groups in the first place (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Fraser, 1997).

While most research about aspirations focuses on aspirations to enter higher education, aspirations as approached in this research have more to do with the capability for hope and expectations upon exiting the university, a process influenced by contextual aspects. Appadurai's anthropological conceptualisation of aspirations (Appadurai, 2004) informs this conceptualisation, emphasizing the cultural nature of the construct and pointing out structural and contextual features that fashion the capacity to aspire. For Appadurai, everyone aspires; the problem is that the capability to do so is unevenly distributed in society, given different cultural settings with different access to economic and social resources. The capacity to aspire is defined as the ability to read "a map of a journey into the future" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 76) and such capacity is more common among the upper classes, who have more opportunity to experiment different paths of life and experience success during those experiments, which has a positive effect on reinforcement of that capacity. Appadurai also states that aspirations are more than individual preferences, they are part of normative scripts contextually produced, and should rather be situated in collective narratives, bridging past and future, for projections and hopes that are largely historically driven. Appadurai's conception also influenced Duflo, (2012), who refers to aspirations as related to the capability for hope and calls for the examination of the ways in which the expectation of a negative outcome (a hope deficit) changes the decision making process itself. In the field of higher education, scholars like Burke, (2012) have also demonstrated that aspirations are relational and contextualised, and that a recognition of different cultures and value along with institutional change are necessary for widening participation effectively. In that sense, Appadurai underlines for the need of changing the recognition politics of the disadvantaged by focusing more on an asset perspective rather than on a deficit one, by focusing and valuing the culture of those oppressed, rather than treating it as an anonymous mass, ignoring their voice. Therefore, Appadurai links strength of aspirations with the capability for voice, for the capability to aspire "thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69). Such capability will be approached next.

3.4.3. The capability for voice

Drawing on the previous concept of aspiration, the capability for voice is in this research conceptualised as *"*the ability to express one's opinions and thoughts and to make them count in the course of public discussion" (Bonvin & Thelen, 2003). This supposes the opportunity to fully participate and intervene in public life, be it in the university environment, in the familiar and personal context or in the broad public sphere. Ontologically, it is linked with the concept of parity participation (Fraser, 2007) and with the agency concept of Sen (1999).

While addressing the issues of social justice, Fraser (2008) refers that justice requires social arrangements that allow all to participate as peers in social life. Participatory justice then includes the rights of individuals and groups to have their voices heard in debates about social justice and injustice and to actively participate in decision-making. According to Fraser (2008), people can be underrepresented in ordinary political institutions (on local educational context, this supposes not being able to be intervene on institutional governance, for instance) and on a broader global level, by not being able to be heard in supranational agendas settings. This concept of participation can be linked to agency, defined by Sen on individual and collective terms, because the agency entails that the subject acts not only in self-benefit, but also in terms of intervention in the collective life, in a direct, indirect or intentional manner (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). On a conceptual level, the agency links to the capability for voice in the sense that by having the liberty of expressing one's thoughts, one can have what Crocker & Robeyns label as "*action*: the person performs or has a role in performing X; and impact *on the world*: the person thereby brings about (or contributes to bringing about) change in the world" (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010, p. 80). While agency "is related to other approaches that stress self-determination, authentic self-direction, autonomy, self-reliance, empowerment or voice" (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009, p. 37), and it is connected to more individual/internal processes, such as self-determination and reason, orientation and deliberation (addressed in the capability for autonomy), the capability for voice is more concerned with democracy and public reasoning aspects of action in the academic sphere. However, it is also possible to conceptualise the capacity for voice as Appadurai, relating it with the opportunity of

rehearsal and experiment, a dimension that is also approached in the third article of this thesis.

3.4.4. The capability for resilience

In clinical terms, resilience has been commonly defined as referring to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity beating the odds associated with risks (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Consistently in the literature review about first generations students one can find examples of such capability, individuals that despite being in a disadvantaged condition, could face the challenge of being in a university competing with benefited peers, managing to integrate and succeed. This not only confirms the heterogeneity within working class backgrounds, but also calls for the need of recognition of different capitals, rather than pointing out the lack of the mainstream ones, following an asset model aimed at identifying positive traits. Examples of such capitals are enounced by Yosso (2005) as being for instance navigational capital (dealing with institutions that are not user friendly, being able to sustain high levels of achievement when surrounded by stress), resistance capital (knowledge that is passed in community networks about how to resist adversity and inequality, such as self esteem, and conscience of structural oppression that fosters the will to fight for social change) or family capital (community bounds, emotional support in dealing with problems coming from family or friends). However, addressing the capability for resilience in capitals that are focused on individual resources is dismissing the responsibility of institutions in nurturing such potential. To that respect, Fineman (Fineman & Grear, 2013) conceptualises resilience as the ability to resist misfortune through ownership of assets or resources that institutions can provide. In educational contexts, resilience can be attended in education by fostering critical thinking and imagination (practical reason), in the form of one of Nussbaum's ten universal capabilities: Senses, imagination and thought. Finally, Walker's list of 10 capabilities for higher education also identifies resilience as a key capability in the sense that fosters ability to persevere through difficulties that may arise in educational experience (Walker, 2006, pp. 128-129), and given the context of higher education dropout in which this research was undertaken, it sounds appropriate to address it.

3.5. Advantages of this theoretical framing

This theoretical framing that combines contributions of different fields (development economics, political science and law) aims to obtain an holistic account of social student experience from a social justice perspective. Based on the analysis of vulnerability and capability on the narratives of a group of Portuguese first generation students, this study aims to grasp the "plurality of sustainable reasons" (Sen, 2009, p. 186) that are beyond their agency. Widening the informational basis used to make judgements about equity in higher education by privileging the point of view of individuals allows for a critical appreciation of the functioning of institutions, conceptualised here as responsible for fostering resilience, and for a reappraisal of the role of identity categories (such as first generation students) in the misrecognition of these students.

Some theoretical hypotheses were driven from this model. Article I and Article II were guided by the following assumptions:

H1. Resilience and vulnerability observed in certain individuals is due not to innate personal characteristics but to the existence or absence of institutional support.

H2. First generation students due to social conversion factors such as low socio-economic origin and austerity measures need extra and targeted resources to overcome difficult times.

H3. Low economic status is a "corrosive disadvantage" that prevents students from being recognised as full social actors and of being heard, that is, without redistribution, recognition and representation are not possible.

H4. In the event of state failure, informal alternative protection systems are activated based on interdependency networks, further entrenching vulnerability to the private sector.

Article III combined the capabilities approach and Fraser's parity of participation with Porter's social capital model. It presented the following hypothesis:

H1. Integration activities based on enforced trust strategies have a negative impact on first-generation students' sense of belonging;
H2. Socialisation based on bounded solidarity patterns favours voice and collective agency;
H3. First-generation students engage in social activities both for consummatory and instrumental concerns.

These hypotheses were confirmed and developed in all three research pieces included in this thesis. The next chapter discusses the methods employed in this empirical study and methodological aspects of fieldwork.

Chapter 4. Methodology: Research design and data collection

This section reports on the research design of this study and its methodological options. The overall research design follows a biographical approach, composed by multiple case studies, as my unit of analysis is the individual. Within the biographical research entailed for this study, I used problem-centred interviews as the main instrument of data collection, although transforming its original programme with some contribution of German biographical narratives methodology and visual methods. Because the construction of a mixed data collection instrument requires an overview of the original methodologies, I provide here a brief account of the foundations of biographical methods and of the problem-centred interview. After I report my own interpretation and adaptation of the PCI programme to serve the purpose of researching first generation students. Other data collection methods were employed, namely media monitorisation and statistical analysis. These other data sources served the purpose of contextualisation and triangulation of biographical data, which formed the main corpus of analysis of this study. For that reason, the study should be considered as only partially employing a mixed methods strategy, since the qualitative/interpretive paradigm is dominant in the form of biographical narratives. The chapter also describes sampling, access, recruitment, interview procedures and analysis, and finally considers ethical issues and limitations of the study.

4.1. Biographical methods

The option of following mainly a qualitative biographical research strategy in this research was determined by the research questions and the theoretical framing adopted. The need for uncovering familiar influence on first generation student experience demanded a data collection method that illuminated the life course until reaching university of these students, something that could only be accomplished by gathering their personal biographies. On the other hand, following a theoretical framework based on the capability approach demands grasping fine information that is concerned with individual identity, choice and motivations, something that can only be grasped through qualitative, holistic methods of research such as biographical

interviewing. Hence, a short summary of the characteristics of this methodology is now provided.

Biographical methods are a relatively new branch of qualitative research that has aroused from the growing concern with individual accounts of reality, fruit of postmodern paradigms that emphasise relativism, change and uncertainty (Rustin, 2000). Biographical research methods are a specific type of qualitative research "which uses stories of individuals and other personal materials to understand the individual life within its social context" (Roberts, 2002, p. 3). Its genesis lies in the reaction towards what was the objectivity and generalisation requirements of research, while ignoring human subjects, and the overall power scripts and cultural myths that shape their experience, and which cannot be observed without direct interrogation. Its intent is to interpret the lives of others as part of human understanding, and make sense of subjective experience framed by wider social and historical contexts; therefore they are rooted in the Weberian notion of *verstehen* (Ringer, 1997), inherent to all qualitative research. Historically, biographical methods own much to the Chicago School and to the symbolic interactionism theories, that focuses on how subjects perform their actions individually rather than obeying to previously set rules, norms and structures, and how the subjects interact with each other constructing what we call social reality. In that sense, biographical methods open the door to much inductive research grounding understanding in experience (Merrill & West, 2009).

In the words of Schutze (2007a, 2007b), there are two basic assumptions behind the use of biographic methods. First, that not only subjects give a unique account of social reality through their own stories, but that the very same account is altered, contested or restated in the course of their life path, therefore providing a progressive account of identity formation. Second, that social reality consists more of social processes and less of solid structures, one assumption that gains more supporters as globalisation templates (the liquid modernity of Bauman) increasingly embed most of our interactions. Thus, biographical methods emphasise both identity and agency.

According to Betts, Sandra, Griffiths, Schutze, & Straus, (2007), identity is a dual process of differentiation and belonging to ascribed categories that is done simultaneously by the subject and her peers, that is, there is an interplay between the self and the social, where the autonomous aspects of identity are contrasted with the

structural categorisation. Regarding agency, perhaps the most eloquent example is provided by Goffman's metaphor of the dramatic performance, where the actor despite having a text and a plot to follow, is always free to improvise between the lines, and therefore may choose to act upon all that is left unsaid by the play. Individual agency is therefore mediated by social structures and contexts, derived both from our roles (classed and gendered) and larger historic and cultural scenarios. While one's identity and life story is constructed over time announcing an open ended and *in fieri* process, certain moments such as transitions (from school to university, from university to the labour market, from single to married life) constitute keys to understanding that despite the stable core of one's self, choices are negotiated with the current social context, bringing often unintended changes to one's life. Thus one life's course and history is the result of the interplay between structure and agency, providing further insight upon matters of power and awareness, as some individuals are in more privileged positions to negotiate their choices due to better access to cultural and economic resources, as this research further illuminates.

4.1.2.Biographical interviews and the distinction between narrative, life history, life story and autobiography

Biographical research can be undertaken upon several data collection methodologies. While some researchers choose journals, letters to portray a given period of time or life course (what is sometimes designed as biography in historical scholarship), others prefer face to face interviews in order to fully grasp a contemporary social reality (what is generally assumed as autobiographical research, also named as such because of high involvement the researcher assumes in the analysis, particularly on feminist research). Concerning interviews, it is important to clarify the different types of interviews usually defined though the terminology narrative interviews, life history and life story interviews. Fundamentally the distinction is analytical. Narrative interviews focus the time sequence of events narrated and how these are intertwined by the subject in order to produce a story, privileging then the creative role of the subject as a fiction producer, and also examining how shared myths act upon one's own vision of life, assuming myths as a program for action (an example of this would be the shared assumptions of age limits to be allowed certain experiences in life, such as voting, drinking, or marrying; or how children's stories and oral tales often carry a

morality within them). Distinction between life story and life history is for instance in Scandinavian research, assuming that the life story carries the subjective point of view of the interviewee (the told story) and the life history is how the same events are interpreted by the researcher in light of her own experiences and confronted with social contexts (Bjorkenheim & Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2008; Merrill & West, 2009). Considering the distinction between life history and narrative, Schutze (2007b) acknowledges that there is a difference between the sequence and shape of events in a life course, and the narrative account of these, that in his opinion is more the matter of sociolinguistics and of analysis of language as a medium to tell the story. However, the need not to believe at face value what interviewees tell, but to examine also silences and omissions in a given narrative is also underlined by Schutze (2007a) who considers that how a story is told is as revealing as its content. Despite these conceptual distinctions, many authors opt to use these terms interchangeably, which leads to much confusion, as there is no universal understanding of these terms, and their own use is linked to different approaches and national traditions of doing biographical research. To this respect, a recent European project about access and retention (RANLHE) provides a good example of the diversity comprised in biographical interviews, illustrating the UK approach framed by symbolic-interactionism, critical theory and feminism and the German approach oriented towards the hermeneutic tradition, which attempts to situate personal narratives in a wider context by making use of content analysis (Johnston et al., 2010). In the Portuguese context, one of the few examples of biographical research conducted in higher education student itineraries is provided by Firmino da Costa & Teixeira Lopes (2008), but complemented by extensive quantitative contextualisation. On the area of youth transitions, Nico (2011) provides an analysis of the Portuguese case combining data from the European Social Survey and biographical narratives of Portuguese young adults, situating the Portuguese case in European Union context. She refers to other small scale biographical studies that have inspired her work, namely Pais (2001) and Machado & Silva, (2009), studies that document experiences with precarity, untraditional family structures and irregular school paths of young people living in peripheric neighbourhoods. When classifying the biographical paths of young people from Amadora, Machado & Silva, (2009) distinguish paths of social vulnerability (with student living below the poverty line, with broken families by divorce or death and negative school experiences), paths of upward mobility (when students reach

higher education and have no record of early pregancies or negative peer gruop influences) and paths at crossroads (with contradictory and balancing effects, such as high school achivement but job mismatch or early pregancies and stable families. Considering the object of this research, the paths of upward mobility would find strong affinity with the subject in this study, although as we shall see, many contradictory elements can also be found in their biographies.

According to Bryman (2008), biographical interviews are particularly indicated to explore micro contexts and agency, but they can pose questions about data organisation, since they are less structured (Flick, 2002). Because of this, I have decided to adopt (and adapt) a specific type of interview method, the problem centred interview, developed by Witzel (2000), and widely used in German research. This is a method that combines features of structured and unstructured interviews, allowing the comparability of singles cases, and fomenting the dialogical and reflexive emphasis of feminist traditions. While problem centred interviews have been used in biographical research, this use is not very common outside the German research community, which made difficult my full understanding of the PCI particularities. Therefore, a synthesis of its foundations and own epistemic grounding is necessary in the scope of this research and can be of interest to other foreign researchers interested in the method.

4.2. Problem centred interviews as a biographical research method

Problem centred interviewing is a method of data collection developed by Wiztel (2000) in the context of his own PhD dissertation in the early 1980's. His aim was to create an interview whose epistemological and ontological foundations were more adequate to grasp the complexity of social realities than the common semi- structured interview, and also one that replied to critiques to social science research culture at that time: the fallacy of non reactivity, originated in quantitative methodology, and the fallacy of non intervention, originated from radical qualitative research like the narrative interviews of Schutze, (2007a). The PCI addresses both these critiques assuming that the researcher does interact and affects the social reality she is studying and that her role in the interview process should be one of active listener and thought stimulator, creating a less asymmetric relation with the interviewee and relying less

on his/hers ability to develop and unfold a narrative account of his reality, a highly skilful and demanding task. Ontologically, the PCI is founded on the interpretative paradigm, and therefore, requires openness to the perspective of actors. The researcher refrains from doing any pre-hypothesis (that could bias the interpretation of data towards *apriori* theoretical tools) and constructs her understating of the research problem focusing on the subjective perspectives gathered in data collection. Causal models are rejected, as the PCI aims to allow for theory generation parting from the importance and meaning actors invest in their perspectives.

Epistemologically, the PCI is based in symbolic interactionism, and aims to bridge both deductive and inductive approaches by connecting the first order constructs of subject with the second order social scientific constructs (the sensitising framework) of the researcher. Assuming the interview as a reactivity situation in which the researcher will influence the interviewee and vice-versa, that PCI is organised in such a way that allows a power balance in the communication situation, taking into consideration individuals intervene in reality according to meanings they attribute to things, and these meanings are socially constructed, interpreted (symbolic), revised and modified (Denzin, 2004, p. 84). The dialogic nature of the research process is emphasised, as the researcher's role is to reflect and contrast his pre-conceptions (informed by the selective sensitising framework he devised to her research) and examine those in light of the empirical knowledge brought by the subject, therefore remaining open to reality and new meaning production. This attitude shall also allow for the creation of trust between both intervenients and consequently favours the inclusion of more detailed accounts.

Methodologically the PCI is influenced by ethnomethodology, which requires the researcher to consider meanings and actions referring to their context, that is, as documenting a given time and space, and as evidence of wider patterns. This perspective allows us to interpret what subjects say in relation to wider patterns of signification (constructed by the collection of interviews) but also to use those patterns in return to make sense of individual accounts (for instance, to back up possible interpretations of the actual meanings of what the respondents say). The analysis and interpretation of data is therefore a two-way process between particular and general, designated as the documentary method of interpretation (Witzel & Reiter, 2012).

The structure of the problem centred interview obeys to 3 principles, aimed at dealing with theoretical biases (the problem centring one), with communicative nature of social research (process orientation) and the object orientation principle, that deals with the indexicality of the accounts mentioned in the last section. The principle of problem centring recommends that in order to facilitate the conversation structure around the topic of the research problem, the interviewer should inform herself with prior knowledge about her research problem, for example by doing a conceptual and theoretical literature review, by doing field visits or analysing the social and historical context of her interviewees. This work will allow her to develop an interview guide, that despite not being a structure to follow *ex-libris*, allows her to have a battery of questions or topics that will help her smooth the course of the interview and make meaning of what is being said, as many subjects have only reflected on a given topic, or about their life path for the first time in their lives. This principle allows to acknowledge the second nature of the researcher as someone that is an "informed traveller", that may, nevertheless, throw away her travel guide to pursue some new interpretation in light of the meaning provided by the field work, as her prior concepts are categories with no empirical content. Such work also allows for abductive insights (what one could call a hunch, rather than a deductive or inductive conclusion) on data interpretation, only mentioned here for they have actually occurred to me. The principle of process orientation is thus connected with the dialogical interview situation referred before, aimed at theory generation through flexible analysis of data, alternating deductive and inductive processes. This comprises both a moment of theoretical sampling done in coding procedures, aimed at selecting the conceptual constructs best suited for our analysis; and after the interview situation a pre-interpretation of data, that will later on be revised and tuned. This procedure is common in grounded theory research and allows for the co-construction of meaning with the interviewee (a position also taken in feminist research) and also for producing more historically relevant accounts, which is particularly relevant in the case of biographical narratives, as they can also be understood as documenting on a micro level wider socio-economic structures. Finally, the principle of object orientation supposes that the research object should guide the methodological choice and that the method itself should be flexible enough in order to be adapted appropriately to the research questions. In the case of this research, the PCI was followed as a method for biographical research, and so maintained some of its original

features of open questioning followed by a more interactive dialogue; however other features were introduced and the interview sequence was changed according to the feedback of my exploratory field interview. The principle of object orientation prevents the researcher from blindly applying any theoretical or methodological recipe, stimulating her to remain attentive and creative regarding her own work.

4.2.2. The problem centred interview structure in this research

The problem centred interview has been used mostly in German research as a method for biographical research, being adapted freely by researchers according to their own needs. The PCI narrative space in the interview appears as a basis for exploring a given research problem with further questioning and debate. Though there is a difference between the life path moment and the argumentation moment of the interview (which could find its correspondence in the analytical distinction between the told life and the actual life), the PCI considers that when the subject tells her story she is already reflecting upon it in order to make sense, selecting relevant events and even hiding facts that she does not want to show (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 31). In my particular case, I have maintained the original Witzel's mixed methods approach to the interview, because of its richness in terms of interaction styles with the subject, and also because the combination of a structured method of inquiry (the questionnaire) with the biographical interview helped to structure the information provided in the narratives, an aspect also noted by Scheibelhofer (2005, p. 22). However, and unlike what is proposed by Witzel in ontological terms, I have constructed *a priori* theoretical hypothesis based on my literature review, as I found that in a limited time frame, some interpretation guidelines would support the initial states of analysis. Another difference between the PCI in this research and the one proposed by Witzel was that I have placed the questionnaire first and not after the biographical interview. This decision was taken based on the exploratory interviews, since filling in the questionnaire first together with the student gave them insight upon what kind of topics I would be interested in, and would help them tell their life story, which for many was a first time experience. Hence, the organisation of the interview did not evolve from a more open setting to a more structured, but rather the opposite.

The interview procedure followed these steps:

1. I started with a generative question about the subjects' life history until reaching the university.
2. I engaged in a dialogue approaching topics from my interview guide.
3. After that, I introduced a section of visual methods, in which I showed photographs of academic life, and asked the participants to report their comments and feelings. The introduction of photo-elicitation driven by the respondent is a form of empowering the student's role in the interview process, and encourages them to add data that they consider relevant in a more creative and democratic way, since some people are more able to relate and express themselves through images, rather than just verbal communication forms (Prosser & Loxley, 2008).
4. Finally, after the interview was over, I wrote up a post-script about my immediate impressions on the encounter.

The use of the PCI as a method worked quite well in my perspective because the classic German narrative interview developed by Schutze only allows for questions that emerge during the subjects' narrative, and I was interested in a specific research problem, which in such an open method could not be explored. Also, the narrative interview leaves the interviewee alone with all the burden of the interview, and many times, not knowing very well what he/she is doing. The dialogical approach of the PCI offers more support to the respondents, and at the same time, keeps the conversation around the key topics that are relevant to the researcher (through the use of the interview guide), though remaining sufficiently open to integrate aspects that are of the most importance in the subjects' lives. The questionnaire and the interview guide of the interview can be found in annex to this chapter. For privacy matters, the photographs are not attached.

4.3. Mixed methods data collection strategies

The object of this study is first generation student experience in the context of the economic crisis that is affecting Portugal since 2010. Student experience is a holistic concept, that encompasses not only what occurs inside the classroom but also what happens beyond the campus limits and that can affect one's academic experience, such as economic and social limitations that were highlighted during this period.

According to the previously established theoretical framework, four central areas of student development would be explored in this study: autonomy, integration, resilience, and aspirations. Given the individual nature of choice and of preference formation processes, a problem centred interview was firstly conceived as the main data collection instrument, as it would simultaneously allow for the gathering of very rich and diverse data, and maintain the uniqueness of individual stories. Each individual narrative constitutes a case study, composing overall multiple case studies. Case study research often involves other data collection methods than interviews, such as documents or descriptive statistics analysis (Bassey, 2012).

Due to the extraordinary nature of the crisis period and the social and economic changes it reflected on individual life courses, it was necessary to collect contextual data that would help to make sense of the individual narratives and would draw a wider socio-economic picture. This wider data was collected sequentially and concurrently during the interview analysis. Since 2010, I entailed media monitorisation and content analysis of daily newspapers and television programmes (Castro, Mouro, & Gouveia, 2012; Macnamara, 2005), as there were no statistics available with data referent to 2011-2013. This data served as contextualisation for Article 1 and Article 2 in this thesis. Over 300 news items were collected, mostly from daily and weekly newspapers (*Público* and *Jornal I* are daily newspapers, *Expresso* is a weekly newspaper). Articles belonged to the Education section mostly, although some articles concerning social affairs and economy were also analysed. During my analysis I was mainly concerned with substance rather than form, that is, with clues about legal changes on social support for students and the overall population, as well as with student reports on dropping out and university funding cuts. Titles, style or tone of news were not taken into consideration, although source trustworthiness was a concern, therefore I analysed the same event reported by different sources as much as possible.

Since 2014, official statistics referring to the period between 2010-2014 are increasingly available, allowing for the kind of strong contextual picture provided in Chapter 2 of this thesis. For a balanced overview, I have consulted national and international databases and reports, such as the Portuguese Ministry of Education and Science reports, National Education Council reports, Portuguese National Statistics Institute, Eurydice, Eurostat and OECD databases. This wider data was used not only

for contextualisation but also as a triangulation strategy, and thus has confirmed the trends identified during the interview analysis.

When choosing to employ a mixed methods data collection strategy, I follow pragmatism as my philosophical positioning regarding the nature of knowledge (Biesta, 2007; Hibberts & Johnson, 2012). This means that I do not believe in absolute truths in educational research, but that my goal is rather to provide the best evidence I can to support my claims, which are of hypothetical nature, and dependant upon my research problem and circumstances. I aim at reaching an epistemological justificatory status as Dewey's "warranted assertability", one that can only be fully proven once my hypotheses are tested against reality. Pragmatism advocates pluralism in methodological and theoretical choices while endorsing an explicitly value-oriented approach of research, favouring equality and progress (Hibberts & Johnson, 2012, p. 125). Finally, it is an especially recommended philosophy for educational research as it allows enlarged discussion of means and ends of education, in an experimental and democratic manner (Biesta, 2007). To that respect, the choice of thesis presentation as a cumulative dissertation format where articles have been submitted and discussed by the wider research community is in line with this epistemological current.

I now move to a detailed description of the process of recruitment and sampling of subjects, as interviews are the main data source of the study.

4.4. Access, recruitment and sampling of subjects

The first part of my fieldwork was done in Autumn 2011. I recruited my respondents in one Portuguese public university, chosen because of my personal knowledge of its functioning and personal contacts on campus. In the scope of this research, I have defined first generation students as " university students whose parents have at most 9 years of education and that are over their second registration year". The context, aim, task and target group of the research were clearly stated in the participation briefing I delivered to my potential interviewees through my personal contact networks. My original idea was to recruit people via the university electronic mailing list, but this revealed to be ineffective in a trial mailing performed with narrower mailing lists. Students did not reply to emails or calls, and so I had to recruit my subjects on site, through what is generally described as snowball sampling, an adequate technique for

hard to reach populations (as people with this kind of socio-economic background do not like to expose it publically). This required a diversity of approaches: I have been to some classes explaining my project, contacted student unions, left flyers and wall posters, went to canteens and student bars, talked to friends that teach in that university and finally went door to door. After a month I started to have some replies, and one interview led to another until a fair number of cases was collected, and the sample was gender balanced. Most students perfectly matched the target group, with both parents having less than 9 years of education. Some students had parents that were at the time attending a second chance programme that would enable them to reach upper secondary level education. I choose to include them as well, considering that their cultural influence upon students would be equivalent to the other interviewees (however this can be contested, because the fact that the parents themselves are attending education can constitute encouragement for the students).

The second part of my fieldwork occurred in Summer 2012 and was aimed at finding students that had dropped out. The recruitment was once more facilitated through friends and former interviewees. Three more interviews were added and the sample was complete.

4.5. Interview setting and process

The interviews took place either in my house or their house. The choice of location was intentional. After performing an exploratory interview in an academic office and being interrupted either by phones or people, I realised that biographical interviews require intimacy and time in order to be truly reflexive. That said, I always tried to make people come to my flat, so that I could also show them who I am, and expose my privacy, as this would encourage my respondents to do the same. This choice entailed some risks because I did not know who the person was that I was going to meet. Nevertheless, I decided to do it, since I shared my flat with other people, and that guaranteed me some safety. I have also done some interviews in the respondents' home (the case of a student hall where I interviewed around 6 students).

I started the interview with a welcome coffee and short briefing about how our interview would unfold, and that it would be recorded. After that, the student and I

would fill in the questionnaire, and by doing that I would immediately have some idea of how his/her life was. Because during the filling in of the questionnaire some important information was exchanged, I started to sound record immediately after the briefing. Also, important pieces of information were exchanged after the recording was stopped that I noted in my postscript. The length of interviews varied between 30 minutes to 120 minutes. As I observed above, not all subjects have the same ability to reflect upon their life paths in a structured, meaningful way, and the younger ones in particular were more uncomfortable with this task, so the initial self-presentation part was cut short in favour of a more interactive approach. I finished the interviews asking them if they would like to add something more that was not approached during the interview. Some interviewees were concerned if their testimony had been useful (I always assured yes), and others would like to ask me questions about how to emigrate and study abroad, an overwhelming discourse in today's Portuguese agenda. I answered these questions after stopping the recorder.

In total, I have done 25 interviews. However for the purpose of my analysis I selected 18. Other interviews were put aside due to either location problems (as explained above, an intimate setting is determinant for the quality of a biographical interview) or because the person was not in the target group (either because the parents had more education, or because the person was in her first year and did not have much student experience). Even if these interviews were not considered in the analysis, I have used them to gain insight on the interview process itself and observe other target groups.

Below I provide an overview profile of my sample with some socio-economic information.

TABLE 4. INTERVIEWEES PROFILE

Name and gender	Age	Degree	Educational Route	Support status/other relevant data
Jorge (M)	22	Social Work (3rd year)	Delayed entry one year	Social scholarship student
Paulo (M)	22	Law, 1st year (2nd registration)	Changed degree from Educational Sciences	Social scholarship student
Maria (F)	22	Educational Sciences (3rd year)	Delayed entry one year	No social support or part-time job. Firewoman
Marta (F)	26	Management 3rd year, 7th registration	History of repeating degree years, due to part-time working. Borderline drop out	Currently unemployed (previously call-centre assistant) and full-time student
Lucas (M)	20	French (3rd year)	Studied in religious seminar, history of academic success	Social scholarship support
Susana (F)	21	Psychology (4th year)	Normal route	Social scholarship support (on hold)
Tiago (M)	20	Law (4th)	Normal route	Social scholarship support (on hold) and part-time worker (bookstore)
Cátia (F)	26	Nursing (3rd year, 6th registration)	History of repeating school years since upper secondary. Borderline dropout.	Part-time worker (waitress). Firewoman.
Luís (M)	20	Physics Engineering (2nd year, 3rd registration)	Changed degree from Physics	Social scholarship support
Marisa (F)	20	Psychology (2nd year)	Entered the degree through a special upper secondary route.	Social scholarship support

Elsa (F)	24	Social Work (4th year, master)	Delayed entry one year	Social scholarship support, used to combine with part-time work (bakery)
Henrique (M)	23	Civil Engineering (2nd year, 3rd registration)	Entered the degree on the 3rd application call	Social scholarship support (on hold), used to be part- time worker (pizza delivery)
João (M)	19	History	Normal route	Scholarship support, part-time worker (waiter)
Beatriz (F)	20	Artistic studies (2nd year, 3rd registration)	Changed degree from Law	Support from private scholarship, used to be part-time worker (shop assistant)
Cristiano (M)	24	History (2nd year)	Dropped out in 2011	Call-centre assistant
Carolina (F)	23	Psychology (5th year)	Normal route	Scholarship from Swiss government (mother is Swiss citizen)
Claudia (F)	20	Educational Sciences (3rd year)	Normal route	Social scholarship support; firewoman
Vânia (F)	20	Geography (1st year)	Dropped out in 2011	Had no scholarship support, works full- time now (waitress)

4.6.Transcription and analysis

The transcription was partially outsourced and partially done by me using the software F5. I opted to produce a simple transcription, omitting paraverbal and non-verbal elements of communication (Dresing, Pehl, & Schmieder, 2012). My goal was to analyze the semantic content and to make it as simple as possible, considering that the statements would have to be translated into English after the analysis. During the transcription I could also gain further insight on some omissions and contradictions in the interviews.

Considering the dimensions time and space, a critique frequent in biographical analysis is the one that concerns what Bourdieu (1986) termed as the biographical illusion, referring to cases in which the researcher is overwhelmed by the individual narrative of the subject, not paying attention to historical facts that may or may not confirm the story that is being told, and simply presenting large pieces of direct speech of the interviewees, as if it is the researchers' task was to give voice to and not to analyse critically what is being said. Subjects are always historically situated, and

for that reason media, statistics and legal data were used to make sense of the individual narratives. This choice for triangulation with contextual data also resulted more to the production of a portrait of first generation students in Portugal rather than a film (evolution, life path perspective), given the focused nature of the problem-centered interviews and the limited time frame of the study.

I did my analysis with the support of the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti. This software is widely used in German research and was conceived adopting the inductive logic of grounded theory. I had a workshop on the software (as it was my first time using it) and after that I followed the procedures described by Friese (2011). First I proceeded to a phase of open coding, where I would freely tag all the aspects of an anchor case that would seem relevant to me. With the code list from that first case, I coded two more cases. Some patterns and recurrent themes started to emerge, and I finally coded one more case until I had saturated the themes and stabilised my code list. With my code list set, I then coded the rest of my interviews doing axial coding, and grouped my codes according to some of the conceptual categories of my theoretical framework. During this process, I also observe the density of some codes and sharpen my definitions of some categories.

One critique generally posed to computer analysis is that there it risks losing sight of context and contour of each individual case. To avoid this, after coding each interview, I wrote an individual profile with the main story, socio-economic characteristics and family background, and what particular features the overall narrative highlighted (sometimes with a key sentence from the student's statement). In this form, my horizontal analysis (coding across cases) was also complemented by a vertical analysis. Finally, my cross-case analysis was structured around three types of vulnerability: economic, familiar and academic. In the majority of the cases, these different types of vulnerability are entwined, and foster one another. After this, I then isolated the responses to these vulnerabilities, focusing on agency from the individuals. A code cloud extracted from Atlas.ti analysis can be found attached, where economic vulnerability and emotional parentalisation are highlighted.

4.6. Quality criteria

4.6.1. Authenticity

The issue of reliability (understood as the possibility of replication of the same research methodology leading to the same results by other researchers) is fuzzy when using interviews as the main data collection methodology, more so if those interviews are of a biographical nature and suppose the uniqueness of each narrative and the interaction of a specific researcher. Nevertheless, the choice of problem centred interviews and the enclosure of the questionnaire and interview guide constitute an attempt to fulfil this criteria. Also, the choice of conducting a software- based analysis improves the chances of replication of the same analysis, provided the same code categorisation is followed.

Other quality criteria, namely validity and triangulation were also followed in this research. Validity (concerned with the application of the conclusions to the research problem they intended to study) was followed in its internal form, that is, paying attention to the researcher bias (Bush, 2012). For that reason, an exploratory interview was conducted to test that the questions were clearly adequate for the purpose and understood by the interviewee, and also by leaving some margin to interviewees to express any other ideas or concerns they deemed appropriate. External validity was not an aim of this project, since it is a small-scale qualitative study that is not aiming for generalisation. Triangulation (understood as data cross checking in order to determine the accuracy of a conclusion) was followed in this research on a theoretical and methodological level. On a theoretical level, three theoretical contributions coming from different fields (law, economics and political philosophy) were combined in order to create an explanatory framework for the data. On a methodological level, different data collection methods were employed (statistical and documentary analysis, media monitorisation and problem centred interviews) in order to contextualise and strengthen the interviews findings.

5.6.2. Trustworthiness

Ethics in the social sciences focus on the set of concerns a researcher should care for when doing research with human beings. In the case of this research, before the interview all participants signed a consent form in which the research content,

purpose and context were disclosed, as well as their rights and the conditions of their contribution. Confidentiality was assured through a pseudonym (some of them even wanted to choose it), and the fact that the research is written in English and in a country outside Portugal also strengthened their sense of privacy, as if their story was somehow very far way from their daily context. A copy of the consent form is included with the thesis.

In the particular case of biographical research, many times sensitive information is shared in the interview, and also because of that, a close relationship (sometimes of empathy) is established between the researcher and subject. In this research many participants have reported episodes of vandalism, illegal work, sexual harassment, double-dealing with social support authorities and family negligence. Such events provoke rather emotional rapport between researcher and subject, and although I respect the divide between a biographical interview and counselling/therapeutic work, some support (even if just on a situational level) must be provided. In the beginning of my fieldwork I was not ready for such intense exchanges and many times I found myself overwhelmed by their testimonies. However my attitude in the long run evolved from a more detached approach to a more participative one, also as I gained confidence in my interview skills and was more aware of the kind of stories my respondents could bring.

4.7. Limitations

As a study that proposes to question the constitution of first generation students as a vulnerable target group by widening participation schemes, this research carries some limitations to be noted. First, it should allow for a comparison between first generation and non-first generation peers, an option that was not devised due to lack of time. Comparison is then done through the subjective declarations found in the interviews, where students compare their situations with those of their wealthy peers (and not with those whose parents have higher educational qualifications, although the two categories blend in social reality). On the other hand, accounting for institutional factors by performing interviews in two different universities was indeed an intention, one that was not carried out due to weak participation from students from the other campus contacted. In fact, it was the difficulty in finding interviewees that dictated

the snowball sampling methods of the research, and that consequently did not allow for the gathering of further interviews, also in the case of non-first generation students. Nevertheless, the sample achieved was representative and diverse, concerning gender, field of study and geographical origin. Ultimately, the findings of the project were confirmed in other studies being published (specifically concerning the role of support networks in resilience), which can serve as a measure of their validity.

Chapter 5. Summary of Articles

Article I

Ribeiro, A. S. "*Life is a struggle and we have to keep on fighting": first generation students in Portugal in the age of economic crisis*, "Praktyka Teoretyczna" 7/2013 (http://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/PT_nr7_2013_NOU/13.Ribeiro.pdf), ISSN: 2081-8130 (peer-reviewed).

Abstract

This paper aims to provide a critical account of the impact of the economic crisis over the public higher education sector in Portugal, by analysing the biographical case of one particular first generation student, whose narrative mirrors the precarious and unstable condition of this young group. It argues that the current state redistribution policies are based on a negative recognition of those in need, and that over emphasising the cost-sharing role of families in the support of first generation students further enlarges their disadvantaged social position when compared to their peers. Finally it concludes that resilience of certain students in the system is possible due to intervention of private networks of care.

Life is a struggle and we have to keep on fighting": first generation students in Portugal in the age of economic crisis

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Introduction

The global economic crisis initiated in 2008 in the USA, and rapidly spread its effects into Europe, where it has been felt strongly in Southern European countries, namely those object of an International Monetary Fund intervention. Unlike other crisis, which resulted from public deficits and inefficiency, the current crisis is rather caused by the unregulated operation of the markets (Varghese, 2012). While the Greek case has wide visibility in the international arenas, Portugal (where the crisis reached in 2010, when a rating agency downgraded its rating) has quietly adjusted to the role of the good student, applying austerity measures that severely shake its already fragile welfare state and increase poverty.

According to Pechar & Andres (2011) the expansion of educational systems was only possible to the growth of welfare states. As Santos (1998) observes, the Portuguese welfare state can be considered a quasi welfare state that does not fit in the categories enounced by Esping-Andersen (1990), presenting therefore characteristics of all three models of capitalism, such as an emphasis on family as the major source of individual support present in conservative states, an almost universal healthcare present in social democratic states, and insufficient, minimal welfare for the disadvantaged present in liberal regimes. Lack of autonomous organisational and negotiation capacity and segmentation of the social actors, the corruption associated with the discrepancy between the written law an its practice, associated with the government perception of social expenses and services as a favor rather than a right-based claim result in welfare inefficiency (Santos, 1998). Here I argue that the financial crisis and consequent cuts and reforms on the already fragile Portuguese welfare state have devolved to families its original role providing material protection to the students, furthering inequalities of access and participation in higher education that were already present due to the diversity of socioeconomic background of students

achieved with the massification of the system in the mid 90's (Neave & Amaral, 2011). Particularly, the increase of fees and reforms in needs' grant support can lead to a situation similar to that occurring in the UK, where a 1,000 British pounds increase in tuition fees reduces university participation by 3.9 percentage points, while a 1,000 British pounds increase in maintenance grants increases participation by 2.6 percentage points (Dearden, Fitzsimons, & Wyness, 2011). The article is based on an undergoing research project that focuses first generation students' experience using biographical methods. It first presents a brief contextualisation of the recent changes in funding and social support in the Portuguese tertiary sector, followed by a theoretical section introducing the contributions of Fraser, Sen and Fineman. Finally it presents a single case study that illustrates both the strength of the theoretical framework and its appliance to the Portuguese setting.

The Portuguese economic and social context

Portugal is undergoing great challenges posed by an economic and political crisis that resulted in the "troika" (the IMF, EU and Central European Bank) recent intervention, which accelerated the growth of inequality and unemployment, as it did previously in other countries (Graeber, 2011). Figures point towards one of the greatest Gini coefficients in Europe (34,2 points) and the current unemployment rate is at the record of 17,5%, with 38.2 % of youth unemployment (Eurostat, 2013). Emigration numbers have risen 85% in 2011 if compared to the previous year (Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, 2012a), testifying that many followed the Prime Ministers advice to leave . Against this background of unequal distribution and lack of job perspectives the Portuguese education system had recently impended major changes that aimed at enhancing equality of opportunity, rising attainment levels and widening the basis of recruitment for higher education. The Bologna restructuring was concluded in 2010, however the social dimension aims of the reform have not yet been achieved, since socio-economic factors still impact completion figures. As many other systems in Europe, the Portuguese system focuses on equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes, showing that meritocracy rewards rather than effort, achievement, (Sandel, 2010). Despite the recent figures on the probability of a low-schooled background student attending higher education in Portugal being 54%, the highest in EU (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012), attainment for those whose parents have low educational

background is still below the EU average, as only 15.4% of individuals aged between 30-35 have a higher education degree against 22.9, % of EU average (Eurostudent, 2009). When it comes to labour market integration, social inequalities become visible in earnings: the difference of salaries between one male individual whose parent has a higher education degree and one whose parent has lower secondary education is of 66,9%, the highest value among OECD countries, quite revealing of the social immobility of Portuguese society (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). As the wage premium is strongly connected with individual educational achievement, the study also verified the persistency of educational qualification among generations. To this respect, in Portugal the persistence rate in tertiary education is 37,1% for a male individual, and 52,4% for the females, though in all OECD countries the student's whose parents have higher education present better chances of also achieving a higher education degree. Despite the current discourse around the value of higher education being undermined due to saturation of the credentials, the latest figures show that private returns from higher education degree are among the highest in Portugal (about 400000 $ for males, only supplanted by USA private returns), even considering the substantial gender gap. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). This can be explained by the structural under qualification of the Portuguese population, attested by the Census 2011 (Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, 2011), that shows that only 12% of the population have completed an higher education degree, and that 44% of the population have at most 4 years of education. These figures raise the value of the diploma on the Portuguese labour market, offering its owners a relatively stronger protection from unemployment and better salaries.

The financial crisis and the funding of higher education

In the context of the financial crisis, the Portuguese higher education system has suffered several changes since 2010. From an historical perspective, fees have been introduced in 1992 (Cerdeira, Cabrito, & Patrocínio, 2013) testifying the presence of neoliberal policies in higher education that the implementation of the Bologna process would later consolidate (Neave & Amaral, 2011) with the 2007 General Law of higher education, According to the authors, it was fundamentally the advent of European convergence policies (namely the Bologna process) that precipitated the shift from a university for citizens to a university for clients, dismantling institutional

collegial structures of governance and autonomy under the leitmotiv of the "negative exceptionality" of the Portuguese system, which supposedly led him to fall behind its European peers in the adaptation of international trends and was responsible for the apparent inefficiency of funding management.

Following (Amaral & Magalhães, 2009) theorisation regarding access and participation policies, Portugal undergone three different moments. The first moment, designated as "more is better", comprises 20 years after 1974 to 1997, and it is generally characterised by policies that aimed at enlarging access and expanding the system, with the creation of a polytechnic sector and the implementation of a private higher education system that had the function of offering an alternative to those left out of the public sector by the numerus clausus policy suggested by the World Bank due to the economic limitations of the country. This allied to a facilitated entry requirements, led to in 1996/1997 an enrollment increase of 178% (334,125 registrations), if compared to 1981. Such prosperous period was followed by a decade designated as "more is a problem", between 1996 to 2004, where the explosive growth of the system, that in 1997 counted 40% of enrollment in 20-24 age cohort (approximating the mass higher education system) brought concerns about quality of courses (particularly those of private institutions), and controlling the enrollments through accountability and accreditation became a priority. Such policies combined with a declining birth rate resulted in a downturn of enrollments, first felt in the private sector (while the public sector, particularly the polytechnic system, was still expanding) and later in the public sector. Finally, from 2006 on, the Socialist government entailed the period designated as "more is different", where the focus is equity of the student body, since according the Eurostudent survey from 2005 the Portuguese system had the highest rate of students in HE coming form higher schooling background, and underrepresented the lower schooled family backgrounds (Tavares, Tavares, Justino, & Amaral, 2008). Efforts done in this area through second chance programs and diversification of entry routes bared its fruit (mainly to the entry of mature students), with recent results attesting the balanced and diverse composition of the Portuguese higher education system, where 45% of the student body comes from a low educated family (Orr, Gwosc, & Netz, 2011). Unfortunately, due the economic crisis and the political changes that led to the election of the current parliamentary majority in 2011 (a right wing colligation between the Social Democrat

party and the Popular Party), the efforts that were previously done may be about to fall. Financial cuts to higher education institutions in 2011 and 2012 constitute less 20% of funding (Varghese, 2012), which led to rising fees since universities depend more on the students' payments to survive. Further more, the investment in education was in 2011 of 3, 8% of the GDP (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012), a level bellow the one of 1995 (4,9% of the GDP) and far away from the OECD average of 6,2 %. Finally, regarding social support scholarships, there have been cuts both in tax relief linked to participation in education and in study grants (European Comission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2013). Because such developments are very recent, I will briefly provide an overview of the current state of affairs regarding fees and social support, mostly based on newspapers and statistical data available online, since the research literature requires more time to produce sound data from this period.

Fees and social support

Until 2010 fees for students students in public higher education were of 1000 euros per year for an undergraduate course (Licenciatura), about 1250 Euros per year for a Master degree, and around 3000 euros per year of enrolment on a Phd course (Fonseca, 2011). In 2012 the fees for a Licenciatura degree were raised to 1037 euros. Although this amount may not seem high, when considering that the minimum wage in 2012 was 485 euro and that the average net salary was of 805 euro (Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, 2012b), the weight of such fees gains other expression. In 2012, Portugal was already among the top 10 European countries with the highest fees, but if one considers that most of these countries do not charge fees to all their students, then Portugal is among the top 3, following UK and Liechtenstein (European Comission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2012). Also according to the same study, 26% of the students in Portugal receive social support that ranges between 987 and 6018 euros per year, but the average amount of this support only covers 25% of the student's costs on a total of 6624 euro per year (Cerdeira, Cabrito, Patrocinio, Brites, & Machado, 2012). A loan system was established in 2007, with low spreads (1%) and state sponsorship. Despite the limit of 5000 euro per year, the loan system became so popular that some banks had run out of plafond for such loans in May 2012 (Expresso, 2012). Students who come from lower socio-economic background and who are older are more likely to take a loan (Cerdeira et al., 2012) and most students

only recur to them as alternative or complement for social scholarships (Firmino da Costa, Caetano, Martins, & Mauritti, 2009). As the loan system only begun in 2007, there are no available data on student debt, as the first repayments should have started in 2012. However, the current youth unemployment rate forecasts a difficult repayment of such loans (Público, 2012c). Regarding delayed fees, in 2012 about 5% of all students had not paid tuition, and in 2013 there are reports from several universities on thousands of students with fees indebt, though institutions have different regulations and procedures for dealing with such situation (Jornal de Notícias, 2013).

Finally, regarding social support scholarships, the instability in the eligibility rules for such support have left several students outside higher education, as I should further report. First it is necessary to clarify that the Portuguese support system is a family based one rather than universal, that is, families are expected to cover student's living costs and so needs grants are not dependant on students' own circumstances (Ward, Ozedmir, Gáti, & Medgyesi, 2012). In 2010, the state established that the scholarships would be granted according to a formula and not to a progressive bracket system (Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, 2010). This measure while apparently more just (since the amount of the scholarship would be calculated specifically for each family and would not favour or hinder those families in the extremes of the distribution), was accompanied by the increase of the number of ECTS necessary to be eligible from 40% to 50%, which made several students ineligible for support . In 2011, a new scholarship regime established that students whose parents have debts either to social security or to taxes are not untitled to have a scholarship (Ministry of Education and Science, 2011). This policy of "blaming the victim" was extremely harsh for those students who are in worst economic situations, who end up paying for their families' mistakes. Along with these change, other rent sources such as bank deposits begun to be considered in the overall familiar income and there was a new increase of the minimum number of credits the student must fulfil from 50% to 60% ECTS. The press counted more than 40.000 students being denied scholarship (45% of the applications), with less 15% supported students that in 2010/2011 (Público, 2012a). A national query from several student unions revealed that almost half of the students were experiencing financial difficulties, and nearly a third feared having to give up their degree (Público, 2012b). Finally in 2012 a new

law (Ministry of Education and Science, 2012) while aimed to correct partially the unfairness of the previous eligibility rules by allowing the student to reapply to a needs scholarship in case a debt payment plan was presented, maintained that debts from household element can determine the refusal of the scholarship application. Also, the government speeded up the processes of evaluation of applications, so that the student can start receiving scholarship sooner (previously scholarships could be paid up to 8 months delay, with the student having no income in between).

From the evolution of events that were above described, and following the historical categorisation provided by (Amaral & Magalhães, 2009) in the beginning of this section, I believe that Portuguese higher education policies of access are entering a new period, one that I could dare naming “more with less”. Indeed the particular changes in the funding and social support system, with the aim of increasing its sustainability by decreasing the state’s contribution to it seem to point in the direction of a fierce minimal state characteristic of neoliberal governments. I will further my thesis with the introduction of some theoretical tools that will support the analysis of my empirical data.

Parity of Participation, vulnerability and capabilities: a threefold framework of analysis

The following section briefly shades light upon the concepts of parity of participation, vulnerability and capabilities, which compose the theoretical support for the analysis of the single case study presented afterwards. Parity of participation (Fraser & Honneth, 2003) provides a workable definition of justice, while vulnerability (Fineman, 2008) and capabilities (Sen, 1999) focus more institutional and individual aspects of the parity of participation norm that also privilege a comparative approach.

Nancy Fraser is a feminist philosopher concerned with matters of justice regarding gender and class. Her theory of justice states that the economic and cultural aspect of justice is intertwined and one cannot replace the other, as the public preference of recognition aspects in detriment of redistribution seems to suggest. In fact, in developed countries, the expression “social inclusion” has replaced poverty as the key concept in welfare policies, contributing to the invisibility of class and social stratification in public debates.

When mapping injustice in people's lives, Fraser detects two clusters of problems: problems resulting from misdistribution, that is, from an unfair and uneven distribution of material resources, and problems resulting from misrecognition, that is, from a denial of respect that should be granted to a person or group, a consequence from cultural patterns that are institutionalised and refuse further questioning. The main concern of justice should then be the eradication economic exploitation and cultural oppression. Whereas both aspects are conceptually separated in order to facilitate analytical exposition, and not because of any binary conception of justice (Lovell, 2007), they can overlap and both types of injustice (economic and cultural) can indeed occur at the same time. Specifically, the interpretation of misrecognition as a case of uneven institutional status and not as a case of damaged self-esteem and distorted group identity (as proposed by Honneth (Fraser & Honneth, 2003)) is the key to solve the separation between the claims for redistribution (belonging to a moral stand) and the claims for recognition (belonging to an ethical stand). Parting from the deconstruction of the recognition concept, Fraser's proposal is to extend the notion of justice through the norm of parity of participation, which requires two conditions. First, that the "distribution of material resources must be such as to ensure participants' independence and voice" (Fraser, 2001, p. 29), that is, that all material inequalities, be it of income or leisure time, are eradicated, in order to permit fair interaction between peers. Second, that "institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem" (Fraser, 2001, p. 29), that is, that institutions balance their individual perceptions in order to adjust any unjustified differential treatment or any blindness to evident distinctiveness. In Fraser's most recent version of the parity of participation concept, representation obstacles (social exclusion from networks that are in power to make claims and decisions in public processes of contestation) join redistribution and recognition and form a threefold theory of justice (Fraser, 2007).

Because it avoids identity essentialisation, Fraser's parity of participation is a concept that serves well many contexts and groups, avoiding the trap of labelling and patronising certain target groups considered "in need" or "damaged", while also allowing for each to define the way a good life should be lead. The refusal of identity based equity policies is also the concern of Fineman, a feminist legal theorist known by her vulnerable subject conception. While vulnerability as a concept has been

closely tied to the characterisation of subjects socially and economically excluded, Fineman's (2008) postulates that vulnerability is inherent to the human condition, as people born and die in a dependency relation towards each other, an assumption similar to that found in Butler (2006), Arendt (1998) or Misztal (2011). This dependency is generally placed in the private sphere, in the family realm and considered an initial stage of development of the autonomous rational liberal subject. But while families do provide some shelter for their members, they do not mitigate outside harms to which themselves as a social cluster are exposed constantly through their lives. Therefore, addressing vulnerability is acknowledging that all of us, particularly in a risk society, can undergo transition periods that require further support and attention from the public sphere and the community. Vulnerability is then not a negative state endorsed to disadvantaged sectors of the population, but a common characteristic of us all, one that can be amplified or reduced by institutional action. According to Fineman (*ibidem*), the success of certain individuals that belong to "disadvantaged groups" can be explained by their access to certain institutional privileges, and it is the intersectionality (of privileges) that justifies their resilience. Therefore, "it is not multiple identities that intersect to produce compounded inequalities, as has been posited by some theorists, but rather systems of power and privilege that interact to produce webs of advantages and disadvantages" (Fineman, 2008, p.16). Fineman's argument comes in line with some of Rawls objections to the meritocratic justice ideal, since it sustains that success and achievement of some is due to interaction and support both of circumstances and others, and therefore its erroneous that one claims entitlement for her own success (Sandel, 2010). She then claims for a responsive state that secures equal protection to all, in a post identity move that replaces the liberal subject that is the basis of current public policy (a subject that is always adult and autonomous), for the vulnerable subject, a transitional and more universal category that allows all to mobilise beyond their group interest against uneven institutional arrangements and unequal distribution of assets. These assets can be material (wealth), human (health and education) or social (networks of relationships).

While it is useful to delimitate the vulnerability as an intrinsic human feature, such conceptual framework would not be complete without introducing the capability approach as a positive counterpart of vulnerability. The capability approach is a

normative framework for evaluating the quality of life developed by Sen (1999) and further used on the United Nations' Index of Human Development. According to Sen (1999), capabilities are the set of real opportunities an individual has to choose from in order to achieve a life she has reason to value. Such opportunities are mediated by conversion factors that interfere with the person's ability to function, that is, to become the person she wishes and act accordingly to such vision. These conversion factors can be personal (mental or physical talent), social (cultural norms and roles) and environmental (institutional infrastructures or climate) (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). Given the heterogeneity of conversion factors among people and their contexts, Sen considers that different individuals will have different needs. The use of the capabilities as a metric of human development rather than opportunities is useful in the context of this research for it highlights the fact that inter individual differences and contexts interfere with the translation of a formal opportunity into a reality.

Based on these theoretical contributes I have formulated the following premises:

- Misdistribution of material and social assets is perceived by FGS not only as a matter of curtailed freedom of choice but also as a sign of disrespect.

- Resilience observed in certain individuals is due not to innate personal characteristics but to external support provided by institutional intervention.

- The Portuguese policy makers are not assuming their responsibility on protecting the students from the economic crisis, remitting that task to the private sphere (where family or other alternative support networks and institutions play that role).

- Higher education attendance is negatively affected by social and environmental conversion factors.

These assumptions shall be proven by the exposition of the following case study.

"Life is a struggle and we have to keep on fighting": Patricia's case

For researching first generation student experience in Portugal, I have conducted 25 problem centred interviews in one public Portuguese higher education institution,

with individuals selected through snowball sampling. Problem centred interviews is method that combines both features of deductive and inductive reasoning (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) and that can be understood as a valid method for conducting biographical research (Scheibelhofer, 2005). Biographical research is particularly suited to understand issues of individual agency, and moreover, carries, as (Bourdieu, 1986) notices, a double value: the narrative value of the individual story, and also the historical value of testifying a given time period. For this reason, I have selected one single case study of all my data set, one that is particularly rich for both the illustration of the current effects higher education policies have on first generation students lives, but also rich for the confirmation of the theoretical premises enounced above. This case then constitutes in the words of (Flyvbjerg, 2006), a critical case, that is, suited to the falsification or verification of hypothesis applicable to the whole data set. Given the particular structure of qualifications of the Portuguese population, I have operationalised first generation students as students whose parents have at most 9 years of education.

Patricia's is 20 years old and is on her 2nd year of Artistic studies. She entered the university on the academic year of 2009/2010. I interviewed her in 2012. Patricia has a sister (still in school) and a brother (who gave up studying at 9th grade), and they are all from different parents. Because of domestic violence, her mother got away from her biological father when she was 3 months, and for that reason she never met him. Since them, her parental life was juggled between several foster families and caretakers, together with her brothers. One of brothers died for negligence of Patricia's mother and an ill foster parent, which led Patricia's mother to be arrested for 6 years. Despite the separation, Patricia is still very attached to her. After being released, her mother began working as a cleaning lady in a hotel, and studies part-time to get the 9th grade diploma (in one second chance programme).

Up to her 9th grade, Patricia was an average student. Everything changed when she received a merit grant from the Ministry of Education on her upper secondary. She was then reassured of her intellectual abilities, though she was very indecisive about going or not going for the university (because she would not have how to afford it), and whether to pick Law or Artistic Studies. She also applied to a military career (because of the economic security), but lack of Mathematics did not allow her to succeed. The advice of her working class family lead her to pick Law, which revealed

to be a disappointment, as she felt an “annulation of identity” and resented the favours conceded to her middle class peers, who were better networked within the faculty: “I started to see that the professors, the young ones were sons or relatives of the old ones, I started to see that things were facilitated for certain people but not to others.”. She also had no updated books, because the books she had were old and borrowed from an aunt. “ I couldn’t follow the classes, the pages and content were different, almost every year they launch a new edition (…) It’s a lot of money for the professors, maybe that’s why they change the books every year, which doesn’t allow for people to study for other books.” At the time, her grandmother fell hill at the hospital, and Patricia got the extra responsibility of doing housework and taking care of her younger sister (here is observable the house work responsibility that holds upon her for being a woman). Because of that she had no time to study for the exams and dropped out, even though with reported shame. At the time her mother said that she needed to work, because there was no money to support her. She recalls “I was very angry at the time, because I was a bit depressed, and also because she was demanding from me something that was never asked from my brother, who dropped out in 9th grade and is unemployed till today”. She had to find a precarious job as a shop assistant. In 2009/2010 she was not granted a scholarship, but only received the final response to her application by the end of the academic year, when she was not even attending classes anymore (and here one can see how long can processes for scholarship applications be delayed). Since she had no scholarship, she could not pay her fees, and because of that debt was prevented from applying to another degree. She then went on a struggle with social services, explaining her situation, and after many bureaucratic exchanges, she managed to be exempted from the fees. She then entered Artistic Studies in 2010/2011, but again the university social scholarship was refused to her because of a bureaucratic error (an internet document went missing) and also her mother’s debts to social security (despite the legislation that officially penalised debts only being applied later, having debts was already presented as a valid reason for being dismissed for the scholarship consideration). She tried to apply for a loan, but again her mother’s debts would not allow her to have her as a sponsor. When facing the possibility of Patricia having to drop out again, her mother talked to a church institution that according to what she read on the paper was helping some students to pay the fees. They agreed to help her because she had good grades, and introduced her to another private institution that is now paying her tuition, since again

in 2011/2012 a scholarship from the state was denied, on the grounds of family debts. The institution also offered Patricia psychological support which she refused, because she reasons it is not for her: “I think that there is the concept of resilience, which is basically you have a lot of problems and obstacles and you get over them without breaking down. I think I may have that intrinsically, there is that thing of always fighting for something always fighting…” Regarding scholarships she reports that she know a lot of colleagues that have scholarship but do not need: “ These are situations that make you upset, you see it and you just think: while someone is spending the scholarship money on clothes, another had to quit because she had no money to eat or to study. And that’s it, you get more revolted against the system, against the country, against the university…” When I asked Patricia about her future, her aspirations were vague, as she is prepared to leave because of the countries’ inexistent job prospects. However on a shorter term, she expresses the wish of being independent, because as she explains: “you stop studying because you don’t have any money and you can’t do anything about it, because you don’t invent money, I can’t make my brother go to work, I can’t make my mother find a job just like that, you know, is not in my hands. What I see many times is that my life is much entwined with theirs, and if their life is stuck, mine consequently gets stuck as well, and that is happening still today, and what can I do, what is my only option? I don’t know, moving out to live alone and try to get rid of all this mess they create voluntarily or involuntarily”. She has a boyfriend who goes to Medical school and comes form middle class background, his family also acts as a material support for Patricia, helping with schoolbooks for her sister for example. Despite that, both of them consider emigrating, as “Portugal is a hole of recognition, with illiterate people who don’t know in who they vote. I want to live and to be happy and so staying here is, I don’t know, choosing not to live.”

While reading through Patricia’s biography, one is confronted with the constant association of misdistribution and misrecognition. For many students getting a scholarship is a sign of recognition from the state, moreover if it is a merit scholarship as it was her case in upper secondary. The scholarship thus represents not only money and material support, but as a symbolic reward of personal effort either academically or socially, since for many of these students, surviving their families requires as much skill and engine as achieving good grades in school. Patricia had in her upper secondary an external sign of recognition, but that was taken away from her at the

university, where she felt excluded both materially and socially from the assets that her wealthiest peers had (she had no money to buy books nor inside contacts in the faculty). When she compares herself to others who were granted privileges, her fury is evident as she observes that parity of participation is not granted to those who come from an unfavourable background like her. On top of that, because she is a woman, her unstable family life overcharged her with domestic responsibilities and here the social conversion factor of gender furthered her already disadvantaged situation.

The successive scholarship applications and subsequent refusal mirror well the unreliability surrounding the criteria for selecting those who get supported and also the deficient response of the public institutions. Furthermore, the fact that the student is held blame for her family's economic mistakes (and attending a higher education course constitutes itself a risk, because the student incurs in debt for fees) transforms the desire of getting a degree in a personal saga of resistance of how to deal with bureaucracy and survive the unfair defeat. It is of no doubt that Patricia's personal strength and experience in dealing with social services acquired through her difficult life path have helped her to navigate the process of exemption of fees on her first year; but her consequent years would have not been possible without the intervention of a private institution who provided for her fees and guided her to another private support scheme. Here it is worth noting that knowledge of such schemes is granted only to insiders, that is, to those who managed to get in certain networks, and that also her boyfriend acts as a source of material support, showing that again private action and not innate personal qualities is the main secret behind those resilient characters that appear to beat all the odds.

The fact that the state's response to the economic crisis seems to be decreasing economic support implies that the students' survival is mostly reliant on their families' possessions (or lack of them). This further perpetuates a situation of dependency from the student's towards their family, and denies the student her individuality and autonomy, by not distinguishing her for her parents, which if for some students is a solution, for many first generation students is part of the problem. As she states, the only way to have some stability is to leave home, as if only the separation from her family environment would bring her some peace. By circumscribing the scope of personal agency to the chances of the household, the government is thus denying the promise of social mobility advertised by higher education, as only those with material

assets can actually succeed in the university, further reaffirming the reproduction of class through the system.

Patricia is well aware of the role the government has on her conditioning, and her critical thinking leads her to classify Portugal as a country that does not recognise its own worth, “a hole of recognition”. The life she has reason to value must be somewhere else, because as she states, “staying here is choosing not to live”. But is emigration a real choice when is the only one? Here one can actually confirm Sen’s insight on individual agency being limited by conversion factors, namely on this case social and environmental. Her structural vulnerable situation and the lack of responsiveness by the competent authorities leave Patricia with no options but to leave.

Conclusion

The present case study tried to illustrate the consequences of the economic crisis in the higher education sector in Portugal, showing that the government disinvestment is provoking a sharpening of the socio-economic background differential present in higher education access and participation. It did so by providing an updated description of the recent events on policy making in the country, formulating some theoretical hypothesis and contrasting them against a particular case study. Patricia’s particular narrative fitted the purpose of confirming that parity of participation is not yet achieved due to misdistribution errors and that this economical barrier also constitutes a lack of respect for those students more in need. It also clarified in which way are the state’s policies pushing to the private sphere the responsibility of protecting these students, and the negative effect such trend may have, by re-establishing the class differences a public education system should aim to erase. Finally it did exemplify how individual agency is circumscribed or nurtured by one’s conditions, particularly those that come from institutional sources, and how resilience often seen as a innate gift is indeed the product of the interference of institutions that provide the individual with material, social and human assets that she relies on to thrive.

Despite the lack of state support, Patricia’s story is one of success, confirmed by the resilient label she proudly owns. On the basis of this label lies the meritocratic conception of justice, which sustains that those who work hard should receive the

prize for their effort, thus portraying justice as matter of investment, a human capital affair. It is such narrative that allows the government to claim that the system does work for those who try hard, in logic of "survival of the fittest", though the deserving of those laurels can be questioned. Patricia's story not only shows that many who deserve are not being supported, but also that their resistance does not depend on them alone, but mainly on the care others are able to provide. Furthermore, when the future prospects emigration as the only viable option, one can clearly see the lack of capabilities these students are facing. While it can be argued that Patricia's case is peculiar and should not be generalised, many other interviewees present similar testimonies of material deprivation, parentification and disrespect. If the current economic debt is threatening and demands immediate action, public intervention should aim to protect those more vulnerable and create alternatives to the precarity caused by the financial crisis, with policies that aim not at human survival but at human development. Yet, the government seems determined to see how many more can do with less.

Acknowledgements:

The author would like to express her gratitude to Prof.[a] Luísa Cerdeira, Pro-Rector from the University of Lisbon, for her valuable comments and support.

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Article II

Ribeiro, A.S. " Why am I less than the others? A biographical study of first generation students' vulnerability in Portuguese higher education". Social Work and Society, Vol.12 ,N. 2, October 2014. (http://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/400/769), ISSN:1613-8953. (peer-reviewed)

Abstract

First generation students are internationally underrepresented in higher education systems, regardless of the several idiosyncrasies the concept may entail. However, and when considering the European context, the Portuguese higher education system stands out as one of the most inclusive, with a share of 76% first generation students, the highest in the EU, reflecting the diversity of its student body (Eurostudent IV). Nevertheless, these figures only refer to what is called "equitable participation", and not to the effective achievement of a degree of these participants, prone to drop out for reasons that range from unfamiliarity with the institutional procedures to feelings of mismatch or economic barriers. Also, they portray the period before the International Monetary Fund intervention, which according to the press and student unions led to the silent abandonment of many undergraduates. This research targets first generation students (understood here as students whose parents have at most 9 years of education). Using a mixed methods approach composed by problem centred interviews and biographical narratives, I analyse how student experience is constructed by 25 first generation students cases. Findings point to 1)first generation student as an identity category is often overlapping with others disadvantaged target groups, such as low-income background and part-time students; 2) Instability and cuts in social support schemes forces the abandonment of some students; 3) Other students' resilience results from seeking sources of institutional support beyond the state, often provided by care networks.

Why Am I Less Than the Others? A Biographical Study of First Generation Students' Vulnerability in Portuguese Higher Education[1]

Introduction

Widening participation debates are a recurrent issue on higher education policy agendas, arguably more due to the industry's need to develop new audiences and maximise talent than to the pursuit of equity of access and outcomes *per se* (Amaral Magalhães, 2009; Orr, Gwosc,Netz, 2011). However, in more recent times, the global economic crisis brought back concerns with social justice within tertiary education, as students from several countries are prevented from accessing the system for lack of economic means. In the European context, the Portuguese case provides a unique example of the negative impact of austerity measures over public institutions in general and of higher education in particular. Hit by the crisis in 2010, Portugal became object of an International Monetary Fund intervention in 2011, applying severe cuts in salaries and social transfers that despite claiming to minimise the impact of consolidation over the vulnerable (International Monetary Fund, 2012), further deepen their disadvantaged situation (Callan, Leventi, Horatio, Matsaganas, Sutherland, 2011).

The Portuguese higher education system made some progresses regarding the diversity of its student body, as the evolution of the data in the Eurostudent survey illustrate. If the 2005 data showed that only 10% individuals coming from a low schooled family background had an higher education degree, against an European average of 16% (Eurostudent, 2009) in 2011 data reveal that 45% of the student body comes from a low educated family (Orr et al., 2011). More recent figures show that the probability of a low-schooled background student attending higher education is of 54%, the highest in European context, reflecting the huge efforts in expanding the recruitment base promoted by the country (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). There is then reason to believe that in Portugal, similarly to what happens in the U.S. colleges (Jenkins, 2012), these students, formerly called "untraditional", are the new majority. Nevertheless, these figures only refer to what is called "equitable participation", and not to the effective achievement of a degree of these participants. Also, they portray

the period before the " troika programme", which according to the press and student unions led to the silent abandonment of many undergraduates. This paper is based on the analysis of 25 biographical narratives of first generation students (in and out of the system) collected in one public university campus between 2011 and 2012, focusing their personal and academic experience. First generation students are still an internationally underrepresented population in higher education (Jehangir, 2010; Thomas, Quinn, Society for Research into Higher Education, 2007), prone to drop out for reasons that range from unfamiliarity with the institutional procedures, to feelings of mismatch or economic barriers. By examining their stories and current policy developments, I shed light on the student experience of this new majority, confronted with challenging historical circumstances that can make higher education a formal but not a de facto opportunity for them. In order to do so, I first provide an overview of the Portuguese economic and welfare context, followed by an historical perspective of access and equity policies in Portuguese higher education. After that, I introduce the social justice framework that informs my analysis, with the contributes of Fraser (2007), Fineman (2008) and Sen (1999). The capability approach was the basic framework used to design the interview guide of the interview. Four core capabilities for first generation students' experience were selected, in order to better grasp areas of agency and vulnerability. Finally, I move to the analysis of selected cases, matching the individual voices with the collective setting.

1. The economic crisis and its effects upon the Portuguese society

Portugal is currently going through a period of economic contraction that is the consequence of not only the austerity programme measures promoted by the "troika" (the IMF, the European Commission and the Central European Bank) and the government, but also of the structural problems that obstruct its recuperation, such as its education deficit. Low levels of qualification (according to the last Census in 2001[2], 45% of the Portuguese population has at most 4 years of education and the early school leaving rate is 23%, well above the EU average) allied to low GDP growth and productivity since the joining the Euro currency (Menéndez, 2012) do not forecast a fast recovery. Before 2012, when the effects of the contention programme started to reveal its major damages, the rate of at risk poverty was already above the European average (18% in 2011, against 16,4% in the EU in 2010), as well as the rate of working poor (10,3% in 2011, against an European average of 8.4 %). The crisis

began with the downgrading of a rating agency in 2010, leading to the fall of the Socialist government in April 2011, and to the election of the current Democrat executive, whose task has been to implement the troika austerity programme, following a economic strategy of "front loading", that is, going beyond what was agreed in the memorandum and applying violent resources cuts in the beginning, expecting a fast recovery that did not occur.

The austerity measures taken since 2009 (first under the Socialist government, after with the right wing colligation under the IMF intervention) include cuts in civil servants' salaries, increase of VAT tax to 23%, increase of tax over individual income and reduction of unemployment assistance, as well as family benefits and minimum living income. Such measures were taken under the fragile support of the weak Portuguese welfare state, which still is a quasi welfare state, where family plays the role of major individual protection and where social expenses and services are perceived as a favor rather than a right-based claim, resulting in welfare inefficiency. Despite the initial acceptance of such measures, the figures soon declared their failure. From 2010 to 2012 the Gini coefficient rose from 33.7 to 34.5 (Eurostat, 2014a) and the unemployment rate reached the record of 17,5%, in 2013, being currently of 15,4 %, with 34.8 % of youth unemployment (Eurostat, 2014b). Also, emigration numbers have risen 85% in 2011 if compared to the previous year (Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, 2012a), a wave only comparable to the 60's one under the dictatorship period. In a recent paper about how inequality affects economic growth (International Monetary Fund, 2014), the IMF recognises the need to conciliate redistribution measures with fiscal consolidation policies, namely by improving the access of lower income groups to higher education. However, the registration numbers for higher education are falling since 2011, from 73.468 to 59.012 in 2013 (PORDATA, 2014), in a country where austerity measures were applied in a regressive way, cutting more on the poorest groups rather than those of high income (Callan et al., 2011) and where non governmental organisations report an "alarming increase in people seeking their help" (Caritas Europa, 2013, p. 47). Recent data from the EU-SILC survey point out that in 2012 18,7 % of the Portuguese population was at poverty risk, a rate that would reach 46,9 % if one considers only income from salaries, capital and private transfers (Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, 2014). Nevertheless, and despite the debate to whether austerity is the best policy to fight deficit unbalance and public debt

(Herndon, Ash, Pollin, 2013), the government has applied the troika programme beyond its limits, constructing what seems to be a "state of exception" (Agamben, 2005), a state where the normal jurisdiction is suspended, giving rise to governance often against the people's will. Such determination has been legitimated by recent economic indicators that show the decrease of unemployment and a timid growth on exports, that have lead the IMF to consider the Portuguese case a success. However, such figures must be read with caution, since the Portuguese debt is currently of 123% of the GDP, against 94% in 2010 (Caritas Europa, 2014), illustrating the perverse result of the policies implemented. The privatisation of the gains and the socialisation of the losses have held citizens responsible for the banks' negligent conduct, and the difference of income between rich and poor is growing since 2009 (Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, 2014), making it obvious that a privileged minority is profiting from the crisis. To sum up, it is certain that effects of "expansionist austerity" are to be felt long after the external intervention is over (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014).

2. Access and participation policies and the funding of higher education

Regarding cost-sharing, funding and social support, the Portuguese higher education system has suffered several changes since 2010. From an historical perspective, fees have been introduced in 1992 (Cerdeira et al. 2013). Until 2009, and following Amaral and Magalhães (2009) theorisation regarding access and participation policies, Portugal undergone 3 different moments. The first moment, designated as "more is better" comprises 20 years after 1974 to 1997, and it is generally characterised by policies that aimed at enlarging access and expanding the system, with the creation of a polytechnic sector and the implementation of a private higher education system, what allied to facilitated entry requirements, led to 1996/1997 an enrollment increase of 178%, if compared to 1981. Such prosperous period was followed by a decade designated as "more is a problem", between 1996 to 2004, where the explosive growth of the system (which in 1997 counted 40% of enrolment in 20-24 age cohort), brought the necessity of controlling the enrolments through securing degree quality, policies that combined with a declining birth rate resulted in a downturn of enrolments. Finally, from 2006 on, the Socialist government entailed the period designated as "more is different", where the focus was the equity of the student body, since according the Eurostudent survey from 2005 the Portuguese system presented

the underrepresented to a very high degree students coming from low schooled backgrounds (Tavares, Tavares, Justino, Amaral, 2008). Efforts done in this area through second chance programs and diversification of entry routes bared its fruit (mainly due to the entry of mature students), with recent results attesting the balanced and diverse composition of the Portuguese higher student body (Eurostudent, 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). Unfortunately, due the economic crisis and the political changes that led to the election of the current parliamentary majority in 2011 (a right wing colligation between the Social Democrat party and the Popular Party), the efforts that were previously done may be about to fall, Financial cuts to higher education institutions in 2011 and 2012 constitute less 20% on institutional budgets (Varghese, 2012), which led to rising fees since universities depend more on the students' payments to survive. Further more, the investment in education was in 2011 of 3,8% of the GDP (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012), a level bellow the one of 1995 (4,9% of the GDP) and far away from the OECD average of 6,2 %. Because such developments are very recent, I will briefly provide an overview of the current state of affairs regarding fees and social support, mostly based on newspapers and statistical data available online, since the research literature requires more time to produce sound data from this period.

3. Fees and social support

Until 2010 fees for students students in public higher education were of 1000 euros per year for an undergraduate course (Licenciatura), about 1250 Euros per year for a Master degree, and around 3000 euros per year of enrolment on a PhD course (Fonseca, 2011). In 2012 the fees for a Licenciatura degree were raised to 1037 euros.[3] Although this amount may not seem high, when considering that the minimum wage in 2012 was 485€ and that the average net salary was of 805 € (Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, 2012b), the weight of such fees gains other expression. In 2012, Portugal was already among the top 10 European countries with the highest fees (European Comission, EACEA, Eurydice, 2012). Also according to the same study, 26% of the students in Portugal receive social support that ranges between 987 and 6018 € per year, but the average amount of this support only covers 25% of the student's costs on a total of 6624 € per year (Cerdeira, Cabrito, Patrocinio, Brites, Machado, 2012). A loan system was established in 2007, with low spreads

(1%) and state sponsorship, and students who come from lower socio-economic background and who are older are more likely to take a loan (Cerdeira et al., 2012) and most students only recur to them as alternative or complement for social scholarships (Firmino da Costa, Caetano, Martins, Mauritti, 2009). Regarding social support scholarships, there have been cuts both in tax relief linked to participation in education and in study grants (European Comission, EACEA, Eurydice, 2013). The instability in the eligibility rules for such support has left several students outside higher education, as I should further report. In 2010, the state established that the scholarships would be granted according to a formula and not to a progressive bracket system (Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, 2010). This measure while apparently more just (because the amount of the scholarship would be calculated specifically for each family and would not favour or hinder those families in the extremes of the distribution), was accompanied by the increase of the number of ECTS necessary to be eligible from 40% to 50%, which made several students ineligible for support.[4] In 2011, a new scholarship regime established that students whose parents have debts either to social security or to taxes are not untitled to have a scholarship (Ministry of Education and Science, 2011). This policy of "blaming the victim" is extremely harsh for those students who are in worst economic situations, who end up paying for their families' mistakes. Along with this change, other rent sources such as bank deposits begun to be considered in the overall familiar income and there was a new increase of the minimum number of credits the student must fulfil from 50% to 60% ECTS. The press counted more than 40.000 students being denied scholarship (45% of the applications), with less 15% supported students that in 2010/2011 (Público, 2012a). A national query from several student unions revealed that almost half of the students were experiencing financial difficulties, and nearly a third feared having to give up their degree (Público, 2012b). In 2012 the new law for social support (Ministry of Education and Science, 2012) maintains that debts from household element can determine the refusal of the scholarship application but allows the student to reapply to a needs scholarship in case a debt payment plan is presented. After the evident decrease in higher education enrolments and recommendations of legal bodies, the government has just changed the scholarship regime, withdrawing the impossibility of students whose parents have debts to be eligible for a scholarship (Ministry of Education and Science, 2014).

From the evolution of events that were above described, and following the historical categorisation provided by (Amaral, Magalhães 2009) in the beginning of this section, I believe that Portuguese higher education policies for access an support have entered a new period, one that I named “more with less”. Indeed the particular changes in the funding and social support system, with the aim of increasing its sustainability by decreasing the state’s contribution to it, point in the direction of economic exclusion. This is visible in many of my interviews, which I analyse with the help of the following theoretical tools.

4. Parity of Participation, vulnerability and capabilities: a threefold framework of analysis

If the aim of this paper is to analyse student experience from a social justice perspective, its theoretical framework must include a theory of justice. To that respect, parity of participation (Fraser, Honneth, 2003) provides a threefold theory of justice, that encompasses economic, cultural and political aspects. In order to complement it, I use the vulnerable subject theory of Fineman, (2008) to reinforce the role of institutions in assigning privilege and prejudice and the capabilities approach from (Sen, 1999) to focus the interactional aspects of individual and its environment.

When mapping injustice in people’s lives, the feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser (Fraser, Honneth, 2003) detects two clusters of problems: problems resulting from misdistribution, that is, from an unfair and uneven distribution of material resources, and problems resulting from misrecognition, that is, from a denial of respect that should be granted to a person or group, a consequence from cultural patterns that are institutionalised and refuse further questioning. Parting from the deconstruction of the recognition concept (interpreting misrecognition as a case of uneven institutional status thus avoiding identity essencialisation), Fraser’s proposal is to extend the notion of justice through the norm of parity of participation, which requires two conditions. First, that all material inequalities, be it of income or leisure time, are eradicated, in order to permit fair interaction between peers. Second, that institutions balance their individual perceptions in order to adjust any unjustified differential treatment or any blindness to evident distinctiveness. In Fraser’s most recent version of the parity of participation concept, representation obstacles (social exclusion from networks that are in power to make claims and decisions in public processes of

contestation) join redistribution and recognition and form a threefold theory of justice (Fraser, 2007). For the purpose of this research, it is particularly relevant that redistribution, recognition and representation are achieved together, because in cases like class based discrimination, recognition alone will not do much (Sayer, 2007), as class is not a natural difference to be recognised, but an unbalance on the distribution of wealth that needs to be corrected.

While agreeing with Fraser on the definition of recognition as cases of uneven institutional status, I found stronger support on Fineman's vulnerable subject theory and on Sen's capabilities approach to disentangle the way institutions and environment interact with subjects. Fineman's (2008) postulates that vulnerability is inherent to the human condition, as people born and die in a dependency relation towards each other, an idea that can also be found in other feminist authors (Arendt, 1998; Butler, 2006; Misztal, 2011). This dependency is generally placed in the private sphere, feeding the autonomy belief that sustains the rational liberal subject (Fineman, 2005). If family is the realm of dependency, addressing vulnerability is acknowledging that all of us can undergo transition periods that require further support and attention from the public sphere and the community (such as the case of an economic crisis). Vulnerability is then not a negative state endorsed to disadvantaged groups of the population, but a common characteristic of us all, that can be mitigated or augmented by institutional action. Given this, the vulnerable subject should be the basis of current public policy, for its transitional and universal character allows all to mobilise beyond their group interest against uneven institutional arrangements and unequal distribution of assets. These assets can be material (wealth), human (health and education) or social (networks of relationships).

Similarly, Sen's capability approach highlights the role of conversion factors in the fostering of capabilities. The capability approach (henceforth, designated as CA) is an heuristic framework that is the basis of the quality of life index of the United Nations, and that seeks to place freedom at the core of evaluations about individual well being, as an alternative to approaches that privilege the measurement of resources (for instance GDP) to assess how well off a person is (Alkire, Deneulin, 2009). Although the CA also acknowledges the role of commodities such as money, the freedom metric unit of this approach is the capability, which Sen (1999) defines as the set of real opportunities an individual has to choose from in order to achieve a life she has

reason to value. Other important concepts in this approach are functionings and conversion factors. While capabilities can be placed in the potential realm, since they constitute a set of valid options, functionings are the achievement or the materialisation of some of those options, that can be as diverse as states of being or acquired skills, such as reading, for instance. For the CA, what matters is not how much resources one has, but what can one do with them, which is mediated by conversion factors that interfere with the person's ability to function. Conversion factors are determinants that are generally outside the control of the individual and that affect (by improving or constraining) her ability to make use of opportunities. These conversion factors can be personal (mental talent or physical robustness), social (cultural norms, laws, power structures and public policies) and environmental (infrastructures or climate), and is through the conversion factors that the CA accounts for human diversity (Robeyns, 2005). For example, a student that works part-time will have less same time to study than another who studies full time, which can affect her performance. Given this she needs more resources (more time or more money to stop working) to perform on an even level when compared with her full-time peers, and furthermore, to fully profit from her education experience beyond the simple attainment of certain outcomes. Conversion factors are then what mediates a commodity and allow it to become a real opportunity. Given the heterogeneity of conversion factors among people and their contexts, Sen considers that different individuals will have different needs, and therefore refuses to define a list of universal capabilities or entitlements that should be aimed by all human beings, unlike Nussbaum (2000), who through a list of selected capabilities seeks to implement the CA as minimum threshold for social justice. For Sen, the CA is concerned fundamentally with how free people are to determine their lives, and it is a tool for evaluating public policy. Such position maintains the flexibility of the approach, though some critics point to its individuality as one of the barriers to its implementation in terms of policy, since it ignores the interdependency of human beings and the exploitative nature of capitalism (Dean, 2009). Attending to these critiques, and to the need for a more consistent theory of justice, matching the CA with Fraser's and Fineman's contribution seemed to provide a balanced theoretical outline, while maintaining the emphasis on processes and individual differences that the capability approach entails.

Based on the conceptual framework, the following hypotheses were postulated:

· Resilience and vulnerability observed in certain individuals is due not to innate personal characteristics but to the existence or absence of institutional support.

· First generation students due to social conversion factors such as low socio-economic origin and austerity measures need extra and targeted resources to overcome difficult times.

· Low economic status is a “corrosive disadvantage”[5] that prevents students from being recognised as full social actors and of being heard, that is, without redistribution, recognition and representation are not possible.

· In the event of state failure, informal alternative protection systems are activated based on interdependency networks, further entrenching vulnerability to the private sector.

Methodology and Analysis

A mixed methods approach was adopted during field work, combining both biographical interviews as defined by (Schutze, 2007) and problem centred interviews (Witzel, Reiter, 2012) a method that combines both features of deductive and inductive reasoning, suited for researching specific topics. The method of open questioning of biographical interviews was employed for gathering information about path and private life of the subject, sensitive areas where I have opted to give freedom to the student to select what is of most relevance to them, and also to understand their particular context. The subjects were selected through snowball sampling, using their parents schooling level as a proxy for socio-economic background (both parents would have to have at most 9 years of education). For the purpose of this research, institutions can be considered the state, the family, non-governmental organisations, friends and partners. When developing the interview guide, and after maturated literature review, questions were structured around 4 selected capabilities considered structuring for the higher education student development: the capability for autonomy (choice and motivation), capability for voice (participation on academic activities), capability for resilience (critical consciences and bounds) and the capability to aspire (self-projection and expected outcomes of HE). The selection of these four areas of inquiry was based on other lists of capabilities, such as the one developed by Walker,

(2006) for higher education and the one developed by Nussbaum (2000) as a minimum threshold for social justice. Regarding the quotations used in this article, pseudonyms were adopted in order to preserve the student's privacy, and the translation into English language is the author's responsibility.

6. Vulnerability, parentalisation and precarity

As previous research shows (Jehangir, 2010; Reay, Crozier, Clayton, 2010; Thomas et al., 2007), most first generation students are double disadvantaged due to not only to their parents' low cultural background, but also to the consequent low economic status that comes associated with it. Most of my interviewees were also part-time workers, an understudied group (Moore, Sanders, Higham, 2013), displaying then a triple disadvantage identity. As young workers, they belong to the precariat class (Standing, 2011), suffering from exploitation, low income and lack of social protection. In country where inequalities are already very accentuated and in a context of crisis, situations as the one described by António, a 19-year-old History student, are quite common:

– "My father, while he was working left some debts that became too high to pay. The last year was a lot worse in financial matters, because me and my mother (…) in the last five years we have paid many debts, large amounts. Now we asked for a family loan (loan not to the bank but to other family members), and we have been trying to pay little by little. Now with the illness of my father and my mother is a bit trickier. I also have a younger brother that is in school, but he behaves very badly (…). My mother receives the minimum wage, but since three months ago she does not get anything from the factory. Now she is receiving, because she is sick".

António lives in a student hall reserved for students who receive a need grant from the university. The money he receives is not enough however to pay the debts from the family, and that is the reason why he also works part-time as a waiter in weddings (not declaring it, since it is not legal to accumulate a scholarship with self income). Parentification[6], that is, a role reversal situation in which the student assumes the parental responsibilities whether in material or emotional sense, feeds the juggling between demands that are somehow competing: being the student, the parent and the

provider is not easy to conciliate. Gabriel, Law student, activist and working in a bookstore, explains:

– “If I didn’t have to work, I would have time for everything. I waste 6 hours per day in between going to work and coming. I have 18 hours left, 8 to sleep and now I don't really sleep so much. And then I also have to be with my girlfriend”.

Gabriel started to work because he was afraid of loosing his scholarship, due to the law changes, as his father has debts.

The situation of familiar debt is the reason why some students are not eligible to the needs-scholarship. Patricia, a 20-year-old student from Artistic Studies, is one of those situations. Coming from a very complex family background, with several siblings from different parents and a mother than was in detention for 6 years charged of negligence, Patricia was always used to fight for what she wanted. Even since the first year of her university studies, when she drop-out of the Law degree because she had to take care of her sister and her grandmother, she was struggling to be exempted from fees and to get a scholarship. When she drop-out, her mother said:

– “Well, now that you are not studying and your grandmother will stop receiving the allowance you need to work (…) I was disappointed when I heard that, and revolted, because I was kind of depressed and she was asking me to do what she never asked from my brother, because he finished the 9th grade and is unemployed to this day”.

Patricia managed not to pay fees in her first year, and reenrolled in Artistic Studies, but on that year her scholarship was denied because her mother had debts to social security. Catarina, a 19-year-old student from Psychology, stresses other situations of unfairness:

– “I have the minimum scholarship, that covers only fees. So the scholarship is not for much. Maybe because both my parents are working, I don’t know… Some people get really upset, because I know people that have a much higher scholarship than me just because the goods are not in their family name (…) One gets really disappointed, because we are here, we try to save money, we try to live a simple way…and then other people spend more money because they have more to spend”.

Catarina clearly addresses the disrespect she feels when comparing herself with her colleagues.

Working for these students comes sometimes as a way of gaining autonomy from the family, though associated with precarious situations, as Marta, a 26 year old student from Management, previously working in a call center, reports:

– "I was fired in a very unfair mode. They changed all my schedules, sometimes I entered at night, sometimes in the morning, and one day I complained, because I have always been collaborative, but they have to show some respect. I was very good at my job, (…) so I had confidence. But on the next month I received the letter letting me go".

Finally, working also comes with the associated price of not being able to fully participate in the academia's most symbolic events. Jorge, a 22-year-old student of Mechanical Engineering, works in as a pizza delivery boy. Due to a severely troubled family background (both parents had drug related problems) he had several hosting families. Currently he lives with his grandmother, but since in 2008, when a new regime for foster families was approved and members that are directly related were no longer eligible to be official caretakers[7], his grandmother lost the allowance and so he had to find a job to support the house. He confesses:

– "For me it is a sad season, the Queima das Fitas[8]. First because I have no money to spend there, and second, because I am not integrated in any particular group, because in the meantime, I began to work".

Jorge also asked for a family loan to some wealthier members, so that he continues to study. In exchange they only required him to spend time with his grandmother.

7. Resistance, networks and dreams

Despite the delicate economic situation surrounding these students, many times their sustainability is made possible through informal networks, whether those are families, friends or larger associations such as non-governmental organisations. The solution for Patricia's fee related situation was found at church related NGO:

– "My mother read on the newspaper that a church institution paid the fees for some students. She was desperate and went to talk with the priest, who was very

moved. Then I was integrated into a solidarity fund that pays my fees, and this year they directed me to the Rotary Foundation support that also covers the fees of few students".

In Beatriz's case, a 24-year-old student of Social Work, it was the boyfriend that provided some backup when her scholarship was delayed:

– "(…) I had some savings from when I used to work, and my boyfriend was always helping. At the time he was living with me for a while". She recalls there was a period when they broke up: " I have always had that safety net until a period when we broke up for a while. And that is terrible. When you are in a place, you are alone...you want to follow your path…and it's all very… It's an individualist society isn't it? What they put in our heads is "You won't have success if you're not good, if you don't make an effort, if you don't have the ability. And so, it seems it's all our fault, isn't it? And it's all very hard, because you have to get the degree, but if you have a good cv it's really good, full of stuff… but how are you going to do lots of stuff you are always thinking about the money you will spend, and if with that stress you have to focus on study?"

Nevertheless, such networks of care depend on good will and the single assumption that family will provide for their own is not an overall rule. Vânia drop out her Geography degree on her first year, after finding out she did not have a scholarship. As she is not in good relations with her mother, she lives with her but pays for her room with the small money she gets as a waitress. She also does most of the housework. In her words, the good thing is that

– "I have some other people that care for me, that ask "Are you alright, do you need something?" These are my mums. (…)For instance the lady cook for the restaurant where I work. She is great, even gives me money for gas to go to work".

Vânia still owns fees to the university and cannot go back to study until she pays them.

For those students who are still in the university, other forms of resistance come together with the participation in student union activities and other communitarian engagement, whether because they do not identify with the current individualist/

entrepreneurial values that are being infused in society, whether because they really wish to “make a difference”. Gabriel states:

– “This is where we can change some things. For instance we in Law we could maintain at least for another year, the working student statute, that they were trying to terminate…We could change the schedule of exams…”

Beatriz, also belonging to the student union of her faculty, goes further when reporting a situation where the students decided to block the faculty for protesting against lack of support:

– “the director said it was antidemocratic (…) We tried to use the several ways of participation that we have at our disposal, but they are monopolised by other groups of interest that make decisions…”.

After spending hours at bureaucratic offices, she cannot avoid experiencing:

– “That feeling of revolt, of “Why am I less than the others?” Because if I did not have a scholarship, or done this and that for following through, I wouldn’t have made it. And I’m as good as anybody else”.

Perceiving the failure of the student unions on voicing her problems, Joana, a 22 year old student from Psychology, created a group, initially to solve the problems in her student hall, after to support any kind of students:

– “So there is a group that is elected and stays at the Academic Union, right? What we do is showing an alternative, basically. Our activity is not only in the election period. We are all year long trying to reach all students…”

Representation is then associated with agency, because whether or not these students achieve change in their circumstances, they keep trying to have a voice.

When asked about the future, students confess vague aspirations. The most common desire is stability: a job, a house, a family. But all of it is very uncertain, and the current economic climate is far from a dream scenario. José, a 24-year-old former student of History, does not see any way out. He dropped out when he lost his job, two years ago. Since then, he has a debt of fees he cannot pay, and is going from one precarious work to the next. He sights:

- "There are moments when you enter that self denial scheme in which you don't want to think about expectations because there aren't any. Or if there are they are very weak and unrealistic at the moment. I feel very frightened; I feel I have no ground… When you start planning is when you have hope. When you stop to plan, that it is very scary".

Vitor, a student from Social Work finishing the degree, wishes to

- "work in the health area. At an hospital. Having my little room, helping people...But this is a little uncertain isn't it? The way the country is, it doesn't help much...to anticipate the future. We have to see it day by day...I would like to...I don't know".

Both José and Vitor express insecurity regarding their future. As Duflo (Duflo, 2012) puts it, hope (or aspirations) is a key capability for the human development, for lack of expectations or fear can drive an individual to "hold back" and reduce the ability to realise her full potential. Only, in an environment that is constantly changing and not for the best, optimism is hard to come by given the likelihood of disappointment. Dreaming is then another risk that not many are willing to take.

8. Conclusion

The narrative' fragments above examined illustrate quite vehemently the difficulties these students and their families face under the current austerity context. Economic disadvantage is overwhelming, and together with the great deal of responsibility in their households, curtails the capabilities of these young people to be autonomous and integrated in the academic setting. The need to cope with economic demands and the constant uncertainty that changes in social support systems leads to forces these first generation students to make decisions under fear rather than under hope, lowering expectations and living on a day to day basis. Misdistribution is then felt as an affair of personal disrespect, and struggles through the already existent representation channels have limited impact, consummating the feeling of invisibility and powerlessness of these particular group. Thus, the "less with more" period alluded to previously seems to be installed and Fraser's three folded conception of justice unveils how material scarcity translates both in cultural positioning and in the political fights entailed by first generation students for a fairer recognition and representation

for their own group, who nevertheless reveals some collective agency, more evident in the university arena than in their precarious professional contexts.

Considering the theoretical and methodological framework with the proposed aim of this research, the selected capabilities were used as a tool to map vulnerability and to expose some of the possible causes that can lead first generation students to resign their studies. The major conclusion points to the role of social conversion (namely, of the crisis context), on the shaping of these students' experience. On one hand, entry routes and consequent academic paths are irregular within this target population due to the necessity of correcting the hazard of an unwanted first degree, either because of inadequate choice, or because of system barriers, since the capability for autonomy of these students is compromised by a system of *numerus clausus* where a restricted amount of vacancies to higher education is available. The choice of students for a certain degree in then subject to their talent (a personal conversion factor) to score enough grades to enter in it. On the other hand, the capability for voice of these students, that is, their full participation in academic activities, is made difficult for lack of two resources, time and money, that almost never coexist. In the case of part-time students, the money exists, but the time is short for studying. In the case of full time students, family debt is overburdening and leads some to consider dropout. Cases of long-term exclusion from the system can then be related to lack of financial support, whether from the state, whether due to absence of other means of income, such as employment. Fortunately, the capability for resilience of these students is strong: their critical stance on adverse social circumstances prevents them from loosing self-esteem and the ability of some to fight for better conditions is nurtured by community culture and family bounds. However, this capital of resilience relies heavily on individuals, while is due to state and institutions to provide support in such tough times. Finally, most of the students' seem to be trapped in the present time, without the capability of aspire and to project themselves clearly into the future, since the feeling of insecurity and the constant changes in social policies and economic flows impede any attempt to plan beyond the next few months.

The contrast between capabilities as "positive" opportunities or freedoms (determined by the subject) and the vulnerabilities exposed by the harsh economic circumstances of the examined period reveals that institutions play a decisive role in enhancing or restricting the opportunities for this group of students. To this respect it is worth

noticing the role that fees, private debt and defective social support play in excluding these students from the system. Till 2011, the insufficient and delayed response of social support structures to scholarships application made it unreasonable to count on that assistance to survive, forcing the students to seek viable alternatives for their subsistence, and sometimes entering into illegal schemes such as accumulating work and state transfers, persistently tricking the system. But from 2011 on, the policy that prevented students coming from indebt families to receive state support narrowed even further their chances to escape the poverty trap. The few students who can overcome their economic deprivation count on the assistance of private institutions, such as non-governmental organisations, family and friends. Fineman's insight on resilience being a product of external support and not of superior individual ability is then consistent with the findings of this research.

It is too soon to tell if the recent changes in economy will positively affect higher education participation. To this point, it is the traditional civil society and informal networks that have been covering the failure of the welfare state under the crisis. Most of these students have managed to endure through others and their comfort, showing that care provides sustainability even in hard times. Still these resources do not reach all and are also unevenly distributed, either on a first come basis or through privileged access for those who know or have where to look. It is the general rule to ask more state protection under a crisis setting. Yet when the response of that state is not only ineffective but also offensive, one should also wonder whether it is a state of welfare or warfare we are talking about.

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Article III

Ribeiro, A.S. (2015). Belonging, social capital and representation: First generation students' voices in Portuguese higher education. In KLEMENCIC, M., BERGAN, S., PRIMOŽIC, R. (eds.) (2015). Student engagement in Europe: society, higher education and student governance. Council of Europe Higher Education Series No. 20. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, pp. 323-336. ISBN: 978-92-871-7971-5.

Abstract

The ability to belong and feel integrated in education institutions has been recognised as one of the factors that prevent dropout and student disengagement in higher education. Belonging can be defined via a psychological and sociological matrix and it can flourish through relational ties nurtured by universities. Considering investments in social capital as a moral economy exchange where one gains access to resources through network affiliation, this contribution uses the narratives of 25 first-generation students from one Portuguese campus, and analyses their experiences with three distinct types of peer interactions: hazings (traditional integration rituals), student union participation and creative clubs. It argues that the enhancement of belonging on campus needs to distinguish forms of socialisation that encourage representation and voice from others that are oppressive and diminishing to students, and that extracurricular activities should be clearly supported, as they provide not only network ties but also add to individual development.

Keywords: social capital; belonging; extracurricular activities; capability for voice

Belonging, social capital and representation: first-generation students' voices in Portuguese higher education

Ana Sofia Ribeiro

Introduction

Student engagement in higher education has long been an area of research (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Mann 2001; Kuh et al. 2007; Kuh 2009). As a multidimensional construct, student engagement can be defined as "a psycho-social process, influenced by institutional and personal factors, and embedded within a wider social context" (Kahu 2013: 768), a definition that integrates the socio-cultural, psychological and behavioural views on the topic. The interest in student engagement is raised by its understanding as a proxy for student success and achievement (Reschly et al. 2012; Trowler 2010). As much as the economic crisis in Europe highlighted the role that material scarcity plays in student dropout rates, other factors have to be considered when unveiling the reasons behind students abandoning their studies. Cultural attrition, unfamiliarity with institutional procedures and lack of tutoring support can also lead some students astray, particularly those from "vulnerable" groups, such as first-generation students. Recent research suggests that a sense of belonging can be the key to the engagement of such students (Strayhorn 2012; Thomas 2012) and that universities can play a decisive role inside and outside the classroom to foster this.

Framing belonging within a social capital perspective, justified by the relational nature of the concept, this chapter critically examines integration activities in one Portuguese campus, based on the biographical narratives of 25 first-generation students collected between 2011 and 2012. It confirms that engagement in extracurricular activities is decisive for establishing academic resilience in this group. However, it alerts us to the need for such activities to promote representation and voice, as traditional integration practices are viewed as oppressive and threatening to human rights and personal integrity. The chapter is structured as follows: I first present a conceptual overview of belonging and its relations with social capital, then I

move to a characterisation of integration activities in the Portuguese higher education context. Subsequently I present my theoretical framework, based on Portes' social capital theory (Portes 2010) and the capability for voice (Appadurai 2004; Crocker and Robeyns 2009). Finally I proceed with data analysis and conclusions, highlighting the need for better institutional monitoring and planning of integration actions.

Belonging: towards a definition

The ability to belong to and feel integrated in educational institutions has long been recognised as one the factors that prevent dropout and student disengagement in higher education. Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) as well as Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) have addressed the need to fit in and to belong of students from underrepresented segments (such as working-class and mature students) as crucial to avoid disconnection with institutions. Tinto's (1993) pioneering model for student retention highlights the need for the student to feel integrated. Despite critiques that suggest excessive weight is allotted to student adaptation to institutional culture and not to the need for environmental change, integration is still a key concern on the agenda of student engagement strategies, more recently due to the renewed interest in the concept of belonging.

Belonging can be defined from a psychological (individual and affective) point of view and from a sociological (historically and cultural situated) stand. Considering the individual, belonging relates to the emotional geographies that connect one to an education institution where one feels accepted, respected and heard. Thomas (2012: 13), citing Goodnow (1993), offers the following definition of belonging:

> Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual.

A more comprehensive model for belonging can be found in Strayhorn's (2012) work. The author defines belonging as the student's perception of affiliation and identification with the university community, and locates belonging within Maslows' (1943) hierarchy of basic human needs (physiological necessities, safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation). Strayhorn's model for a sense of belonging in higher education highlights the fluctuating nature of the concept, which assumes particular relevance on certain occasions such as life transitions or uncontrolled futures; and delves into the relatedness of "mattering" to belonging, that is the reciprocal feeling that one is needed and appreciated by others, which can be a motivation driver; as well as the way belongingness is influenced by intersected social identities (such as being gay, Latino, first-generation or coloured, as the author illustrates in his research). Strayhorn also stresses that belonging predicts other positive outcomes, such as well-being, happiness and optimal performance (in a given context), since people will want to maintain and nurture social bonds created on campus, and for this they will closely engage and invest in academic activities. However, the author also maintains that the feeling of belonging is subject to change due to circumstances and conditions and therefore needs constant nurturing through activities and interactions, or can otherwise fade and lead to disengagement from college through attrition (Strayhorn 2012: 23). Therefore, student involvement can have a positive or negative effect over an individual sense of belonging, and institutional engagement in such actions can be determinative in encouraging belonging.

Both definitions highlight the role that environment and institutions play in fostering belonging, and both understand belonging as a relational construct, where a dialogical dynamic is constructed among peers, faculty members and the university's extended network. Belonging is thus related to what is commonly defined as social capital, that according to Portes (2010) can assume a more communitarian view (Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 2000) and another more critical view, associated with Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), which sheds light on the mismatch between the cultural and social capital of students from lower socio-economic status and that of the university, as a result of class differences and values that are inherited from one's family background. Such a mismatch can result in a persistent feeling of alienation from one's original place that leads the student to drop out or change institution/degree. Research shows that this

cultural disengagement can be overcome through network ties fostered by universities organising extracurricular activities and other events (Thomas 2012). Moreover, student involvement in such activities not only contributes to the development of deep learning experiences, but can also represent a competitive advantage when entering the job market. As Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) note, such activities are crucial to developing soft skills (e.g. leadership and ability to work in groups) that are increasingly valued by employers, who need to distinguish between candidates with the same qualifications. This insight is also confirmed by a recent project, the findings of which reflect the value of extracurricular activities for the building of personal capital that is crucial in overcoming class barriers (Bathmaker 2012). Nevertheless, and while investigating the weight of such activities in job prospects, Lehmann (2012) observes that first-generation students and their working-class peers have difficulties in participating in extracurricular events due to lack of time and money. This situation ends up restricting these students' opportunities when seeking employment.

Regarding institutional culture, its ability to create and feed organisational mythologies can be more or less favourable to the creation of ties of belonging. Clark (1986) stresses the importance of belief in the construction of an organisational saga, that is a collective understanding and presentation of an organisation's history, stories, developments (including shared feelings) as a set of beliefs and symbols. This narrative's strength and efficiency depends on organisational scale, age, competitiveness and consistency, and is mediated through different student subcultures (the academic, the collegiate or the non-conformist, to name a few). Despite acknowledging the importance of investigating institutional cultures in order to develop adequate belonging strategies, this paper focuses on interactions between students themselves since interviews were collected on a single campus. However, a brief introduction to integration traditions in Portuguese higher education will follow this section, as it is necessary to contextualise the data analysed.

Integration activities in Portuguese higher education institutions

Most higher education institutions in Portugal allow for practices of integration promoted by students, which are commonly designated as “praxe” (from the Latin *praxis*). The praxe can be defined as a “set of practices, traditions and rituals taking place repeatedly over the years in a given community, be it academic or not” (Nascimento 2010). The praxe had its origins in the 13th century at the University of Coimbra, which until the 18th century had special jurisdiction in order to enforce mandatory sleep and study schedules. Later, the praxe was extended to other universities, gaining particular popularity with the massification of the educational system in the late 1980s (Frias 2003). The praxe has a written code (with no legal value) which comprises certain rules that extend from dress code to behaviour when going out that newcomers should observe if they wish to wear the academic suit and participate in the many student gatherings over the academic year (parades, parties, trips, dinners, among others).[10] As historically observed, the praxe had its genesis in the need to discipline members of the academy, and it can be seen as a reminder of a time where the university had its own jurisdiction, with its own court, police and prison (Cardina 2008), confirming the thesis that education institutions are spaces of control and sanction (Foucault 1995). Though its general intent is allegedly to welcome and introduce new students to the institution, the praxe has assumed progressively the guise of hazings, that is mocking of younger students by older peers, by forcing them to publicly humiliate themselves through heavy drinking, the simulation of sexual acts and the singing of obscene chants, to name a few.[11] This has led to a degeneration of its rationale of integration and its evolution into a power game aimed at oppressing new students, in some cases with tragic results. Cases involving the hospitalisation of a female student and the rape of a first-year female student attest to the violence of such practices.[12] Unfortunately, these are not isolated

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10. Despite older students telling newcomers that if they refuse to participate in praxe activities they will not be able to wear the academic suit, any student can wear the traditional suit, if she wishes to.

11. For a clarification of such practices, see the documentary “Praxis” (2011) by Bruno Cabral, trailer available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=xawGvGsL4yU, accessed 8 October 2014.

12. “Caloira acaba no hospital de Beja depois de praxe”, *Jornal Público*, 29 September 2012, available at http://www.publico.pt/educacao/noticia/caloira-acaba-no-hospital-de-beja-depois-de-praxe-1564956 ; “Cinco anos de prisão para veterano que violou caloira”, *Jornal Público*, 13 February 2010, available at

cases, and complaints of symbolic violence and physical abuse caused by praxe activities have long been reported (Frias 2003). More recently, the death of six students on a beach during a weekend promoted by a praxe commission[13] reignited the debate over the legitimacy of such rituals within the academic community, as the parents of the victims pressed criminal charges against one of the praxe leaders (the Lusófona University *dux*, which means "chief") who refused to make any declarations about the event. In general, when incidents such as these occur, institutions suspend the praxe for some period, but the students bring it back, as most of the praxe regulations are traditionally set up by the students themselves. Despite several appeals from human rights observers and heated public debates, institutions have refused to take a legal collective position on the matter.

On the other hand, this is in many institutions the only welcoming integration activity that exists (Assembleia da República – Comissão para Educação e Ciência 2008 [Education and Research Committee of the National Assembly]). Some higher education institutions offer extracurricular activities through societies, fraternities, sororities and clubs, often for culture or sports. This is the case of theatre groups, radio clubs, choirs and sports' teams. Such groups constitute social networks outside the classroom, but they also demand that additional time be devoted to extracurricular activities. Membership acceptance in these societies can be subject to selection if the number of applicants is too high, however, according to members of such groups, the number of students seeking such activities has decreased in recent years. Student unions, too, constitute alternative spaces of socialisation, chosen by those with political affinities or just curious to learn the institutional trades. Each faculty, class or institution has its own student representatives, who assume in most cases a consultative role. As reported for the cultural clubs, participation in student unions and associations is also undergoing a crisis, as many students are now more dependent on their parents' income and usually go home every weekend (and in many cases

www.publico.pt/portugal/jornal/cinco-anos--de-prisao-para-veterano-que-violou-caloira-18790641, accessed 13 October 2014.

[13.] "Student deaths spark debate over hazing at Portugal's universities, *New York Times*, 18 March 2014, available at www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/world/europe/student-deaths-spark-debate-over-hazing-at-portugals-universities.html?emc=eta1&_r=1, accessed 8 October 2014.

continue to live at their parents' house while studying, to avoid the costs of renting accommodation). They therefore spend less time at the university campus (Estanque 2008), which in turn leads to greater pressure to complete their studies. However, the importance of such extracurricular activities for the education and job prospects of higher education students was recently recognised by the National Council of Education.[14] In a recent recommendation, the Council urged universities to acknowledge these activities through the Diploma Supplement, since they contribute not only to the formation of new skills but also to graduate differentiation (Conselho Nacional de Educação 2013).

Social capital and the capability for voice

Due to the relational nature of belonging, the concept of social capital is an adequate exploratory tool to frame the analytical findings of this research. Social capital has been researched differently across educational and sociological fields, ranging from small units of analysis (Bourdieu 1984; Coleman 1988) to organisational and international comparative studies (Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 2000). According to Portes (2010), social capital can be defined as the ability to gain access to resources through network affiliation. Such affiliation can be family mediated (also understood as cultural capital), non-family mediated (networks of friends, for example) or a case of social control or cohesion (Coleman 1988; Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 2000), emphasising communitarian and economic benefits. The latter approach tends to be used in macro-level quantitative studies and often disregards the contradictions collective social capital entails on an individual level, more visible when biographical methods are employed. For that reason, Portes' (2010) approach is the one adopted in this research.

Social capital can be found in the relationship ties people establish with each other. For Portes (2010), motivations for social connections can be categorised as consummatory or instrumental. Consummatory motivations can be found in bounded solidarity patterns, where sharing ethical values creates groups, or in internalised norms (people feel morally compelled to be civic, for instance). Instrumental motivations can be found in reciprocity patterns (people do something in exchange for

[14]. A collegiate body that advises the government on matters of education policy.

something else, provided that the return is not always scheduled or previously accorded), or in ties of enforced trust that rely on fear of community sanction mechanisms of public shame or ostracism (that is trust is secured by the established community culture). These diverse sources of social capital can have positive effects (such as norm observance, family support and traded benefits) as well as negative ones (restricted access to opportunities, restricted individual freedom, excessive demands on members or accordance to group standards that are diminishing).

The adoption of Portes' view on social capital allows a critical view of the construct, as different sources have consequences that clash with each other. In the case of a student population, social capital derived from secure ties may lead to social control and may benefit those who want to maintain their status and organisational culture as they come from a privileged social context, but does little for those who come from a disadvantaged background and need to reach outside their social sphere to gain social mobility. For the latter, the looseness of their original network can be the driver to look elsewhere for support. In this respect, it is interesting to note how class mobility is often manifested in actual mobility, visible in changes of jobs or changes of residence, with the possibility of escaping your natural social circle and establishing relations that go beyond geographical circumstances.

As student voice is also a strong component of belonging, the social capital framework proposed is complemented by the concept of capability for voice (Bonvin and Thelen 2003; Appadurai 2004). The capabilities approach evaluates quality of life in terms of opportunities and freedom (procedural and factual), freedom depending on the extent and quality of the opportunities one is provided with (Sen 1999). In that sense, this is an approach that privileges agency, both individual and collective, as the subject does not only act for private benefit but also looks to bring about change and have an impact on others (Crocker and Robeyns 2009). Capability for voice is conceptualised as "the ability to express one's opinions and thoughts and to make them count in the course of public discussion" (Bonvin and Thelen 2003: 3). This presupposes the opportunity to fully participate and intervene in public life, be it in the university environment, in the personal context or in the broader public sphere. Ontologically, it is linked with Fraser's (2007) concept of representation, which understands participatory justice as including the rights of individuals and groups to have their voices heard in debates about social justice and to actively participate in

decision making (Tikly and Barrett 2011), thus avoiding underrepresentation in local and broader contexts. Another perspective on the capability for voice comes from Appadurai (2004), who links it with the ability to experiment and rehearse different roles, an activity that shapes aspirations, for the capability to aspire "thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation" (ibid.: 69). The capability for voice, then, has a double substance: it signals both participation (in a democratic and collective sphere) and self-expression (of an individual, projective identity). Such capability takes on particular relevance in contexts of social integration, where groups of people often exert peer pressure on new students, disseminating values that support conformity to prevailing norms and can repress dissonant opinions and voices.

In line with the described theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were fashioned:

– integration activities based on enforced trust strategies have a negative impact on first-generation students' sense of belonging;
– socialisation based on bounded solidarity patterns favours voice and collective agency;
– first-generation students engage in social activities both for consummatory and instrumental concerns.

The data analysed was gathered from 25 biographical interviews with first-generation students from one Portuguese campus between 2011 and 2012. First-generation students are defined in this research as students whose parents have at most nine years of education and account for the majority of Portuguese higher education participants. The interviews followed a mixed methods approach, uniting problem-centred interviews, visual elicitation and features of the German tradition of biographical narratives (Schütze 2007; Witzel and Reiter 2012). The interviewees were given a pseudonym to be used for research purposes, in order to preserve their privacy.

Academic praxe: enforced trust and silent compliance

The first-generation students interviewed recognised a sense of belonging related to

social ties as a key factor behind academic resilience. When questioned about difficult times during which they might have thought of leaving the university, students consistently affirm that it was mostly their social network inside the university that kept them going. Marisa, a 19-year-old Psychology student, says:

> In the beginning it was really hard, I cried a few times, but I had a lot of people to support me, and that was it, in the first year I was much more lonely. This year I am more close to people from my faculty and so it helps.

Academic traditions and rituals are commonly regarded as the main way to meet people and make connections, despite the heated debates around their violence and legitimacy. Being able to wear the students' traditional suit is a desire shared by many, either because they wish to please their family or because they see it as a way to validate their membership of the institution. Jorge, a 22-year-old Social Service student, declares that he always wanted to have the suit:

> It's that pride of reaching the university. Not because of issues of exhibitionism, not just because "I have the suit, I did it." No, it's a different pride, something you have always had the ambition to have. When I was younger, I used to see students from musical groups performing and I thought, "Wow, amazing! I can hardly wait for my turn, when I can have mine." It's nice to reach the end of upper secondary and think, "Now I will go to university and have my suit."

However, getting to wear the suit requires the students to comply with rules and activities imposed by older colleagues, and these practices are often humiliating and carried out under the threat of exclusion. Paulo, a 20-year-old first-year Law student who was in Educational Sciences for a year since he did not have grades necessary to get into the degree of his choice, observes:

> My brother had to ask permission to pass in front of everyone he saw with the suit. Does this make any sense, a person having to crawl to someone just because they have more registration years than you?

Another difficult episode is reported by 22-year-old Maria, student of Educational Sciences and a volunteer firewoman:

> Once I had to leave the hazings earlier because there was going to be a dinner and I couldn't attend, I was going to spend the night at the fire unit and I couldn't reschedule. And an older student said: So you don't go! And I thought that was so low of her and I was so angry that I never participated in such praxe rituals again. And they overreacted a lot, it seemed that they went there just to release the stress from going to classes upon others. And that for me is not pedagogical, and means nothing.

Violence is also a constant, and some students suffer physical harm when participating in praxe rituals. Vânia is a 20-year-old who dropped out her Geography degree for lack of economic support. She remembers:

> Yeah, I have integrated well, I was at the praxe. I had my back injured, we were playing a game and I went up and down some stairs, running, on my knees, and my back started to hurt. And when I have back pain I have to take something. Otherwise I just fall to the floor and cannot move. And I asked them if I could take my pill, and showed it to them, and they did not let me. I cried with pain, but they did not care. On the next day there was the praxe, and I did not go, I stayed in bed. You know, there are some things in the university that… (goes silent and nods with a negative expression)

Other students are more critical towards these rituals and refuse to participate in them, declaring themselves anti-praxe. However this assertive attitude can have hard consequences. Marta, a 26-year-old student of Management and a borderline dropout,

recalls that she had huge problems with integration in her first year:

> There were two things that were very complicated in my adaptation here. The first was the fact that I did not enter the praxe rituals. That in my faculty…I don't know if it was because the information did not reach me, or I didn't look for it, but I felt like an outsider because I didn't align with the praxe. Then, I had no friends in my first year here.

When asked what role the praxe played in their integration, students are ambiguous. Lucas, a 20-year-old student of French Language in his 3rd year of studies, states that the praxe:

> helped me to meet other people from my degree. At least to see them, and get visual contact. But not more than that. That bonding feeling, from belonging to a group…that does not exist in reality, it's a myth created around integration. I think this is not the best way to integrate someone. It's a way, but not the best.

Susana, a 23-year-old student of Psychology, observes that the students in the praxe are not really supportive outside the rituals:

> There can be a lot of fun in their group, but after that, when one needs to count on them for other situations, they are not available … So I wasn't in the rituals, I just used the suit in my first year, and after that no more, because I didn't identify with it. But it was a conscious decision. I have other ways to mark my passage here.

Extracurricular activities: bounded solidarity, reciprocity and the space of voice

Unlike traditional integration rituals, extracurricular activities such as theatre, choirs, poetry clubs or student politics seem to foster institutional engagement, as students

spend a longer time at the university on their own initiative, even when they have to accommodate this extra time with a part-time job. In that sense, data confirm Portuguese working-class students' preference for socially centred projects (Machado et al. 2003). Tiago, a final-year Law student, explains what activism means to him:

> when I was in upper secondary, I was on a list for the student union. But after that that political vein went numb. Until I came here. … There are people I have been working with since the beginning in Law that motivate me. People that actually want to change things. I grew a lot here as a citizen. Some people may think this is a bit limiting, but I think this helped me to open my eyes and to care about society.

Here the identification with common values described as bounded solidarity is visible, as is its translation into collective agency. For some students, participating in such activities provides room for the exploration of alternate selves necessary to build what is commonly termed "aspirations", that is the ability to plan the future and project oneself in a meaningful fashion. Cátia, a 26-year-old student of Nursing, has been repeating every school year since her upper secondary. She has considered dropping out, but theatre has given her a reason to continue her studies. She justifies her decision to join student theatre thus:

> I still think…I had theatre in upper secondary and I liked it a lot, this is where I got my best grade. And at the time I said, "Hey, maybe this is cool." But I left it there. And later I remembered: "I need to try something. To know if I like it or not." In the meantime, I developed this mechanism. To know if I like blue, I need to see blue first. It's a bit like that, to know if I like caramel sundae, I need to taste it. And so, to know if I like theatre, I have to do it. … I am at this stage in my life doing this, this mechanism. Twenty-six years old is a bit late, but I don't blame anyone, its not worth it.

In Cátia's case, theatre is allowing her to voice her long-held aspirations.

On the other hand, some students see participating in social activities from a pragmatic point of view: they are valued by the labour market, and thus they can be a plus once you finish your degree. Luis is a 20-year-old student of Physical Engineering. In his first year at university as a Physics freshman, he got burned out for studying too much and not getting the results he was used to. He decided to change his degree and compensates for not being the best in class with lots of social activity. As he explains:

> I'm in the student union of my faculty, I'm the head of this students' hall, I belong to a fraternity, I also have other responsibilities related to fraternities. … This will help me a lot in my future, because as an engineer employers are looking less for people with good grades and more for people with entrepreneurial spirit.

Paulo, the first-year Law student, also considers engaging in the students' union for curriculum purposes:

> I'd like to join the students' union of the whole university or just in my faculty. But for that I need to know more people, since I only know a few. They…it's not exactly discrimination, maybe they don't mean it, but the people who are not from the faculty discussion group are not supported. Those who rule in the faculty are always the same ones. So I have to be friends with them. … I think it is nice for those who make it. For example, a few years ago, a student that was the president of the student union is now working in one of the biggest law firms in Lisbon. He participated in several demonstrations, maybe that is why he organised them, I don't know. But it seems to be working out for people, to take responsibilities.

This approach resembles what Portes (2010) referred as reciprocity exchange, as the student invests time and energy anticipating later profit, though the latter is not guaranteed or specified. Students like Tiago, the final-year Law student, who are perhaps oriented towards other values, condemn such an attitude:

> Many people who are here in student unions only care about themselves. They only care about the positions they will get, of their curriculum … and if they do not get what they want in a given project, either they get out of the project or they are there, they have their role but they do not do what they are supposed to do. And that is a shame, for me.

Conclusion

Relations with peers do play a substantial role in a population considered vulnerable for their poor socio-economic background, as the previous data analysis confirms. However, it is necessary to stress that not all relations with peers are beneficial for these students, and that the quality of such relations must be considered. Traditional integration rituals as a strategy for socialisation forge relations based on domination and oppression, and should therefore be questioned as a valid integration method, as hardly anyone wishes to belong to a setting in which hostility is encouraged. On the other hand, activities such as those promoted by cultural clubs and political unions seem not only to promote belonging but also to enhance soft skills and contribute to the students' overall well-being. It is therefore necessary to distinguish forms of social capital that encourage representation and voice from others that are oppressive and diminishing. Universities as sites of knowledge creation foster often contradictory dynamics: if on one hand they demand respect for the scholarship and authority of those who came before, on the other hand they also thrive on critical thinking and on challenging the status quo. If both dynamics are to cohabit respectfully and participants are to flourish, individual freedom should be respected.

While fostering belonging in Portuguese universities is very much left to the students themselves, universities in general seem to profit from the "branding" and strengthening of institutional identity that activities such as the praxe and artistic groups promote. However, this negligence can work both ways, as many students can be demotivated and even afraid of showing up for courses because of the violence and humiliation certain practices entail, and on the other hand, artistic clubs and student

unions risk disappearing for lack of explicit support.[15] Power hierarchies among students cannot be left unchecked, as they can cause further inequalities inside and outside the institutional setting. In that sense, and in the absence of a clearly defined strategy for promoting institutional engagement, it is necessary for both activities to be closely monitored, namely by informing students about their rights in the case of hazings, and of the other options for institutional engagement at their disposal, such as those provided by student organisations, that can also enrich a student's curriculum. Extracurricular activities can build institutional attractiveness and community, as long as its procedure dignifies the students, and their participation is not coercive. Otherwise, institutions should be ready for the unintended consequences that occur when cultural traditions are imposed on students at any cost rather than being adopted and adapted by them.

Acknowledgement

This chapter was made possible by the funding of the Marie Curie Initial Training Network EDUWEL (www.eduwel-eu.org).

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Chapter 6. Findings and Conclusion

This research intended to discuss how first generation student experience in Portuguese higher education is constructed, focusing on:

- Their autonomy regarding parental will, for instance on degree choice and study decisions.
- Their voice during their studies, whether it was through extracurricular activities, through fraternities, institutional integration mechanisms or student politics.
- Their aspirations regarding their post-graduation path, namely discussing job prospects and individual projects.
- Their resilience, that is, their ability to persevere and withstand the many challenges posed not only by academic life itself, but also by contextual constraints posed by socio-economic conditions.

To do this, two research questions were formulated:

Research question 1: How do parental education and family culture influence the capabilities of first generation students?

Research question 2: How do macro level policies and micro level structures (institutions) protect or expose first generation students' vulnerability?

Although research question 1 was indeed focused throughout the study, none of the three research pieces included in this thesis focused deeply on parental influence. Two reasons can be provided for this. On one hand, the economic crisis climate affected the whole study, the many policy changes that affected the interviewees were overwhelming, and the need to publish results about it that could on some level impact their lives was privileged in detriment of other research findings that were of a more timely nature. On the other hand, while this thesis integrates three publications, the collected data will be furthered explored in future papers, as its depth withstands several layers of analysis. This being said, I feel the need to clarify what was only a side issue on paper 1 and 2, and that provides a possible answer to research question 1: the parentalisation aspect.

6.1. Research question 1: How do parental education and family culture influence the capabilities of first generation students?

Firstly, it is significant to notice the diversity of families observed in the interview sample, which doesn't make it easy to locate parental influence within the notion of the nuclear family. There are cases of second marriage and stepparents, of early abandonment and new affiliation with older siblings, mono parental families and cohabitation with extended families, and also of traditional family structures. While this is a reflection of the several transformations that the family institution has underwent in the last decades, it also signals the fallacy of researching first generation students as a vulnerable group in light of traditional family structures, since family is less and less a stable, linear entity. For example, Henrique's father was a drug dealer and his mother a drug addict, with no education other than elementary school. After abandoning him to escape abroad, his father went to jail and Henrique's grandmother sent him and his mother to live in Australia, were his aunt lived. He lived there until he was 5 years old and then returned to Portugal, where he was living with other siblings until he was fourteen. During this period, his natural parents fought for his custody, and he lost contact with his father. His siblings were wealthier, had 12 years of education, and had no children at the time, which allowed him to attend private education, which was in his words, a great advantage. Thanks to that, he could gain contact with upper class culture, learning namely to enjoy classical music. However, his emotional relationship with his new family was not so good and became worse after they had their own children, including some physical violence scenes. He then moved to live with his grandmother and continued to face family struggles that have led him to live on the street for some periods. Even with all his familial instability, he was always a good student, and now studies Mechanical Engineering, declaring that his choice of degree was very much influenced by his siblings living experience. He wanted to study Naval Architecture since they spend a lot of time near the sea, but since he had no grades to enter his desired school, he switched to Mechanical Engineering, which also has a lot to do with the influence of his uncle, who provided him with a computer and helped him to learn the Pascal programming language. Despite how unusual Henrique's story may sound, it provides a good example of how families can switch and how one single individual is in contact with several family environments during his childhood and adolescence.

The heterogeneity of family structures documented in the interviews does not allow establishing a pattern of familiar influence in classical terms. Regardless of the figures that point to an overall misrepresentation of first generation students in higher education worldwide, none of the interviewees reported that parents were against their enrolment in higher education and all stated that they wish to study and that they were very autonomous in that decision. Here it is also relevant to note that I interviewed students who are already in the system, and who are the "upwardly mobile" of their group, that is, the ones that actually could make it into higher education. It is possible that students who are in upper secondary studies would report otherwise; since the sample pool would also include those who do not want or cannot go to higher education. Despite not having any experience in higher education, first generation students' parents were very much supportive towards higher studies, always stressing the importance of having a good education to succeed. Not so often they would risk pointing to an area of studies for their children, as their lack of experience prevented them from having sufficient knowledge of different fields. Most parents just tell their children that they should pick whatever they like, and then a teacher or an older friend comes with first hand knowledge that can inform a decision. However, Paulo's case is an example of how, irrespective of their own education and experience, a father can actually influence a student to pick a given study path. Paulo is 20 years old and is the first in a wide family circle to enter university education. His mother is a housekeeper and his father is a construction worker who had problems of alcoholism, but is now recovered. Both have elementary education. His father always told him that the most important people in society are judges and doctors, and that is why Paulo now studies Law, after spending a year in Educational Sciences because he had no grades to enter his desired degree. Paulo's role models after his father and considers him to have strong willpower (because he left addiction) and wishes to be like him. The father figure plays a decisive role in his ambitions, almost eclipsing his own desires and needs. Here it is possible to witness what Gofen (2009) and Yosso (2005) reported as family capital and resilience, referring to values and norms like effort, willpower and persistence that are crucial to achieving higher education, and that compensate for low educational credentials, for school is not the only learning site and one's experience and example can be a great learning resource for others, even if that experience would otherwise be considered as shameful and unworthy. Also, Paulo's story confirms here the aspect of relational autonomy (Mackenzie, 2014), in the sense that one's decisions

are always affected by contextual and affective variables, such as seeking approval and confirmation from others, or in this case and in the previous one, the *numerus clausi* admission system that limits one's option to a certain degree.

What analysis revealed to be consistent is an aspect of parentification across all interviews, one that can negatively or positively effect the student's development. Parentification is a psychological concept that refers to situations in which children (or youth) need to perform the role of parents of their own parents, due to situations of incapacity of the parents derived from lack of money, drug or alcohol abuse, mental illness or emotional distress, a concept that shows affinities with trauma, in the aspect of neglecting the child's needs and in the chronic anxiety that creates (Jankowski, Hooper, Sandage, & Hannah, 2011). This parentification can be temporary or permanent, and is generally characterised as instrumental, when the child is asked to assume the role of caretaker for other siblings, or needs to perform certain tasks that the parent is unable to do, such as working to support the family, translating and filling in documents, or expressive, when the child needs to offer emotional support and comfort to the parent, for instance, in a situation of divorce or loneliness, sometime acting as the role of confidant or even mediating emotional situations. This situation is incredibly demanding for a young person who is still developing, and in many cases demands that the child grows up faster in certain aspects of the personality, ending up curtailing the right to be young. However, if most research highlights the negative impact of parentification, namely of expressive nature, research also shows that parentification can also have positive effects, such as improved interpersonal skills, and that the factor allowing for this positive and negative outcome is perceived personal injustice, that is, whether the child perceived the responsibility burden as having a reciprocity compensation or not. Having said that, this research classifies situations of parentification in two types.

6.1.1. Material parentification

There is material parentification that is concerned mostly with situations of economic distress in which the students needed to work outside the house to provide for the family and for themselves, becoming part-time students, and situations in which the student needs to take care of young siblings and of themselves, either by cooking,

helping with school and performing other duties that should otherwise be the role of an adult figure. These situations are well documented in papers 1 and 2, where also some gender aspects are observable, for instance when a student complains that she is demanded to do more things than her brother, such as taking care of her family besides going to university. Another relevant aspect is that some families lack of information about how to deal with institutions, visible in case of another student who needs to work on weekends as a waiter in order to pay for his parents' debts, debts that arose due to the perceived inability of his father to deal with legal and bureaucratic instances (more specifically, his father did not know he had to pay social security). These conditions have the negative impact of stealing time from studies or other activities that would be freely chosen by the subjects. However, students do not negatively report them, at least, not by overly accusing parents of injustice. Rather, situations like the ones described above are perceived as inevitable and to be dealt with, rather than situations that could be avoided or that are to blame on someone else. Students merely adjust and perform the necessary tasks to maintain the household running, also because they perceive themselves as being necessary in the family and fulfilling duties of reciprocity towards their parents, who support them the best they can. In many respects, material parentification operates on the basis of a moral economy exchange.

6.1.2. Emotional parentification

The other type of parentification is the expressive one, that I classified as emotional parentification, and concerns situations in which the student is called to support the family in the role of a confidant and mediator of family conflicts. This sort of parentification was stronger than the material one on the interviews (as it is visible in the annexed chart that illustrates code density), and is according to the literature the type of parentification that can bring more negative outcomes in terms of psychological health. But again, it is how one perceives it that marks the threshold of positive or negative impact. To elucidate this aspect, it is useful to recall Claudia's case. She is a 22-year-old student from Educational Sciences; her parents both have lower secondary education, though her mother studied from fifth to ninth grade in a second chance programme as an adult. Claudia comes from a difficult familial situation. Her parents got divorced when she was 9 years old, because of her father's

irresponsible behaviour either through emotional cheating or debt incurrence that left the family (Claudia and her mother) in a very delicate situation. Claudia has been parentified deliberately by her father, that confessed to her his adventures with other women when she was a child, and by her mother, who had no choice but to leave her alone to take care of herself because she had to work and be away from home for more than 12 hours per day (she is a professional housekeeper). Claudia constantly reports on her narrative that she had to grow up very fast, and this fact shaped her choice of degree, in the sense that she always felt an urge to take care of others and take responsibility as a response to her father's irrational behaviour. Her grandfather acted as a substitute parent for her and was a great enthusiast of her going to university, as she would be the first in the family. The word responsibility is also very present in her speech and constantly she reports that her many duties towards her mother, her boyfriend's daughters, her volunteering work as a firewoman, prevent her from getting more engaged in the university. Claudia did not enter her first option for degree, which was Psychology, because she did not have enough grade average, and so she entered Educational Sciences, her second choice. She never tried to switch degrees; because she says that since her life was always all about adapting to things that she cannot change, she rapidly could see that the degree had its advantages and that she would not be as bored by it as in Psychology, because this degree is more applied. She commutes to campus and still lives at home with her mother. She received a needs grant, and recriminates her mother who is recurring to credit, saying that she would work to support the house, if only she would not lose the grant for that. Claudia does not complain much about her parentalisation history, she has a good academic performance and faces her obligations with courage and serenity, although financial constraints do affect her well-being. Her narrative provides a classic example of emotional parentification in which her difficulties have enabled her to endure several limitations, and created a sort of "super adult" that is profoundly critical of some peers who seem immature and engage in silly integration schemes, for instance. While it is important to question if Claudia was ever allowed to be a child, the fact is that she seems to be an organised and capable young adult – but then again, adapting and facing was her only way to survive. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that the capability to adapt is an opportunity in itself and thus a positive feature in some first generation students' biographies, unlike Nussbaum's adaptive preferences conception seems to suggest. While it is true that her degree choice was a second

option, her coping with the circumstances determined a positive outcome of that experience.

Regarding the affiliation of parentalisation with trauma, some interviewees also mentioned early experiences of trauma as being the root of their own resilient take on life. While Paper 1 clarifies *viva voce* in one narrative about the student's perspective of herself as a survivor, other narratives mentioned the death of a close friend or a girlfriend as experiences that brought an illumination about life and suffering, one that helped them to make choices and face problems without fear. These experiences were termed in the code analysis as critical events.

Overall, parentification seems to provide an appropriate answer to the role of parental influence in first generation students' experience. Although none of the students perceived parentalisation either material or emotional as negative, it is visible that the process left its scars. On the other hand, even if they felt they were not being properly recognised as children by their own parents, these students did not have much choice besides coping with the situation or looking for alternative or substitute parental figures, which some did. In any case, descriptions of several families throughout the narratives stress once more that families need to be deinstitutionalised as sites of unquestioned biological domain and privacy, with mothers and fathers that are always present and willing to perform their caring roles. Such image of the family does not match the contemporary challenges placed by divorce or women entering the labour force, nor protects individuals that are exposed to dysfunctional families from the negative outcomes such a situation may entail. Once again, these students portray the "successful" share of their group, the one's that could make it despite (and in certain cases, because of) the adversities that surrounded them, since they were able to capitalise on the knowledge acquired through suffering and apply it to future situations. However, that should not lead us to the absurd generalisation that resilience has anything to do with trials, when it is visible the role that other caring figures and structures had in shaping these students' autonomy and resilience. The role of these external factors will be further examined in the next research question.

6.2. Research Question 2: How do macro level policies and micro level structures (institutions) protect or expose first generation students' vulnerability?

The answer to this research question was provided clearly in all the research papers included in this thesis. Articles 1 and 2 have examined the economic barriers presented to first generation students in Portuguese higher education. Article 3 has taken a closer look at institutional culture and integration schemes in Portuguese higher education and analysed its impact on first generation student experience. The findings will be discussed in this section according to these two categories.

6.2.1. Economic barriers

As much as first generation students is an identity category created to examine the hypothetical impact of familiar cultural background on higher education experience, the fact is that economic barriers still play a big role in this target group's well-being, along with other widening participation target groups. The economic crisis brought several changes in social support schemes that have affected families and students at the same time. The instability and eligibility narrowing of the social support schemes, summarised in the table of Chapter 2, had a negative impact on the student experience of my interviewees that were supported by a needs scholarship, as they were confronted with the insecurity of not knowing if that support would be renewed or not. Those students who did not receive any grants and had part-time jobs were confronted with precarious working conditions and eventually were laid off or had to choose between working or studying, as the two options were impossible to conciliate. There are also a number of students who work although they receive a needs scholarship, because the amount they receive is not enough to meet the expenses of their household, namely to account for parental debt. In such cases, the student cannot declare the extra-income she receives, contributing then to a parallel economy. It is worth noting that needs grants are always conceded as a complement to the parents' support, who are legally obliged to contribute to their descendants' provision until they are 24 years old (Wall, 1995). Therefore, the amount received becomes insufficient when the family becomes unemployed or faces income cuts, which was the case for many families since 2010 (see figures about at poverty risk on Graphic 2), leaving students with no means to pay for fees and living expenses. On the other hand, and as a consequence of this situation, it is also relevant to point out that in certain cases, the needs grant is used not to support academic expenses but to support the familial household, only marginally benefiting the student. Such situations allied to a

scholarship regime that excludes those students whose parents have debt from receiving any social support may have been the cause behind the dropout of around 8000 students in the academic year of 2011-2012 and behind the fall of registration figures since 2010.

As both Article 1 and 2 show, institutions and particularly welfare institutions play a decisive role in determining the survival chances of a given student, by recognising her (or not) as an individual worthy of support. The withdrawal of the state as the main (and fragile) provider of social support has resulted in an increased relevance of civil society institutions such as non-governmental organisations as agents of solidarity and support for students in economic distress. The fall of the number of scholarships between 2011 and 2014 (witnessed in the figures presented in Chapter 2) led institutions like AMI, CARITAS or even banks and private corporations to create schemes that cover fees and living costs, allowing students to finish their degrees. However, these schemes have a sporadic character and cannot be envisaged when planning mid-long term to attend higher education; they can be classified then as remedial rather than transformative, and will most likely be temporary, as other solutions of a more permanent nature will be created to bring students back into higher education attendance.

Economic barriers also seem to play a determinant role on the dropout of the three cases examined. If in the case examined in Article 1 the dropout was temporary and the student could find herself an alternative to civil society organisations, the other two cases were outside the education system for over a year and did not foresee a return. On the case of Cristiano, it was the loss of his part-time job as a cinema doorkeeper that upset his work-study equilibrium, and confronted him with economic dependence from his family (that was already putting four dependants on his fathers' salary alone), he lost self-esteem and confidence and eventually stopped attending classes and looked for other jobs (of a more precarious nature) to support himself and the household. The case of Cristiano illustrates that in some cases, working part-time during studies does not result in a distraction from studies, but is the very balance that enables them. Although he sometimes wishes to return, his fees debt prevents him from doing so. Hence, and in the event that so many of these students do work while receiving a needs scholarship due to the insufficiency of funds to face their necessities,

it should be possible to legally maintain both sources of income, as they seem to have a positive effect of student success.

The case of Vânia (22 years old) is slightly more complicated. When her needs grant application was denied, her mother demanded her to stop studying and to start working, which she did, finding work as a waitress in two different cafes, a job in which she is underpaid and reports several precarious experiences. Since her father died at 17, she started to have several disagreements with her mother, having left the house for some period. The situation has evolved to the point where her mother exploits her both for money and housework, and Vânia is severely depressed and only wishes to leave. Because she only knew the result of her grant application on the beginning of the second semester, she created a fees debt to the university, a debt that she needs to pay in order to re-enrol, a debt that keeps increasing and that she does not know when she will be able to pay. When questioned about her aspirations, she states that she would like to go back to school:

> What I'm looking for is this: I enjoyed being there. Truly. Because there are people who go there (to the university) to drink, and to spend their parents' money. I do not; my goal and the goal of many people is to get out there and do the degree. (...). I would like to finish my degree, I'd like to be sitting at a desk with papers, with a computer, with a pen. A paper and a pen. Seriously, I miss it. I miss. I have to read the newspaper every day because I feel dumb. Really. I was a good student before, I could write Portuguese, I gave errors like everyone else, but rarely, often accents. And today, I have to think how to spell. (Vânia, 22)

Vânia's case is one of parentalisation where public economic support would have been crucial to realise her will and enable her autonomy from the familial structure. It is also one of those cases where families are not sources of care but of burden, although the familialism characteristic of Portuguese public policy does not seem to acknowledge that possibility. Although the reasons behind her denial of support are not clear to herself, since she belongs to a single-parent family and her mother is a cleaning lady and does not earn a high salary, she still wishes to return, although that seems far beyond her command.

Economic scarcity also affects aspirations and projects, whether they concern the short term or long-term future. Mobility is seen during the course of studies as impossible, due to lack of funds and emotional commitments, but paradoxically, emigration is seen as the way to escape the lack of opportunities expected upon leaving university. Here it is also worth noting that despite their high resilience and courage, material constraints deeply affect their chances. Lucas, a 20-year-old student of French literature, provides a good example of this. Coming from a very poor family, he was educated in a seminar to become a priest, giving up his vows when he met his girlfriend. In his words: "Although this will sound arrogant, my social status was always surpassed by my intellectual ability. A hand full of euros is not enough to beat a brain full of grey mass. However, this is nice to say, but the reality is quite another. Is not even social status, is economic power, the influence game…I believe in meritocracy, I think it's the only good thing about capitalism, but it's complicated in practice. For instance, I wanted to do Erasmus last year, and I couldn't, for economic impossibility."

For most of these students, choices were more the product of a reality constrained by economic scarcity, and one must wonder if in the end, self determination as a basis of human development is not a "biographical luxury" (Nico, 2011) reserved to middle and high classes who can to afford the freedom to choose the life they have reason to value. Finally, I would like to highlight that material scarcity and economic deprivation is a concern of not only this group of first generation students but also of other groups that are not monitored or targeted by the Portuguese system. It is possible that this is the case because not only first generation students in Portugal are overrepresented, and so they do account for the majority of students, but also because their identity overlaps with other "at risk" groups, such as part-time students. For them, time and money to study are two resources that never seem to co-exist. Working full-time for having money to study makes them lack the time to dedicate the necessary attention to studies. And dedicating to study while worrying about paying the bills is impossible. In the event of an economic crisis and external intervention such as the one occurred in Portugal since 2011, almost everyone is at risk from falling in poverty, that is, everyone can be said to be facing a vulnerability period. What is observed in the analysis is that because students are portrayed as being dependant from their families, a risk that affects one element affects all the

family members, resulting in a systemic issue of social exclusion. Again, it is the adequacy of familialism as the core value that shapes welfare states' institutions that should be revised. A reform of the social supports schemes in higher education is needed, one that works towards inclusion and protection regardless of family assets, enabling students to reach economic autonomy and favouring social mobility.

6.2.2.Institutional barriers

As it was previously stated, the students in this study do not see themselves as culturally disadvantaged when compared to their non first generation peers. What they do feel is an economic disadvantage that prevents them from attending the same social sites, sharing networks, and experiencing some cultural events. As it was theoretically posed, economic disadvantage cannot be decoupled from recognition processes, therefore parity of participation is compromised if the conditions of economic, cultural and political inclusion are not met simultaneously.

It would not be appropriate to refer to institutional habitus in this thesis, because it was not possible to carry the intercampus comparison that was originally envisaged. Nevertheless, Article 3 refers to processes of student engagement found in the university attended by these students, and that are common to all Portuguese campuses, regardless of faculties and degrees differences. The academic rituals described, although followed by the majority of students, awaken mixed feelings among the interviewees, who adhere to them fearing negative consequences of being excluded by peers if they do not. Integration procedures in this case are experienced as common pains that freshmen must endure in order to be accepted by older students and by the institution. Despite the devastating consequences that result from these integration rituals, universities have not so far been successful in restraining the academic praxis, and the issue is that to some extent they have complied with them. Academic rituals and its humiliation are a form of reinstating the elitism of the academy, highlighting hierarchies and chains of command that are contrary to the critical spirit that should be nurtured in universities. Although many students claim that these hierarchies and orders intend to amuse rather than abuse, the fact is that these funny games have consequences that mark individuals forever, for better and for worse. Again, here it is assumed that students over 18 years old freely consented to

enter these submission activities, but as it was clear during the interviews, disinformation on student's rights and duties is common among first year students, and it should be the role of the university to provide information to students on these topics, as well as to position these activities regarding higher education goals. The very nature of the praxis itself is not voice enhancing, in the sense that hierarchies express a power dynamic that silences the young and does not aid individual agency, since it relies on the collective majority to enforce its legitimacy.

Article 3 also provides evidence of the ways extra-curricular activities aid to student integration, specifically examining student politics and cultural clubs related to theatre or musical performance. These experiences provide students with valid social networks while at the same time develop professional and interpersonal skills that are recognised as useful both by students and future employers. Plus to some students, these activities constitute a space for rehearsing aspirations related to alternative futures or secret aspirations that find a space to develop here. These findings confirm those reported by Firmino da Costa & Teixeira Lopes (2008) study that observed the importance invested by first generation students in extracurricular activities, at least by those first generation students that showed a successful trajectory. Curiously, students themselves largely maintain these activities and institutions provide little economic support for their maintenance, despite their role in enhancing individual and collective agency and in fostering students' civic and cultural development. As a consequence, less and less students have access to these kinds of activities, also because they require extra time to organise and to participate in.

Once again, the disadvantages of academic rituals affect all sorts of students, not only first generation ones. Hence, targeted solutions for this problem would not be appropriate, but an overall transformation of the university culture would be necessary in order to create dignifying and effective welcoming schemes for newcomers.

6.3. Contributions of this thesis

This thesis provides a profile of first generation students in Portuguese higher education. While other studies have approached this target group (while studying working class students, for instance) no other study was dedicated to solely analysing this population in the Portuguese context. For that reason, and because first generation

students in Portugal are a fresh majority and not a minority as once before, this research had to refine and reach a working definition of first generation students, one that was contextually adjusted. The literature review done in the first section of the thesis also suggested that the category is under conceptualised, and it is not entirely clear to what extent the parental influence can be said to be independent of other exclusion factors that seem to affect many first generation students. While this thesis was devoted to mapping the capabilities and vulnerabilities of this target group, its main aim was to question the relevance and usefulness of this identity category, whose problems and specificities seem to be common to other non first generation students, at least in the Portuguese higher education context. It is fair to wonder then if “first generation students” is not just another soft expression to refer to poverty in higher education, a problem that is structural and that has intensified with the economic crisis advent worldwide. This questioning does not entail, however, that identity categories are not relevant in social analysis, despite subjective (non) identification with them. It rather demands deeper monitorisation of identity categories, namely in the Portuguese higher education context, where data about part-time students or socio-economic background is not freely available and regularly published. Also, another idea for future research would be to profile first generation students in polytechnic institutions, as statistical data indicates that the distribution of this population is even stronger in that institutional sector than in universities.

The conception of first generation students as vulnerable due to their parental low educational capital does not apply to the interviewees examined. This deficit perspective, also found in the literature review, is not suited for the Portuguese context, but also a conversely heroic portrayal of resilience is not the answer. Interviews have shown that parentalisation, a psychological process associated with trauma and accelerated development, is the main effect of familial background in the lives of these first generation students. Some even portray themselves as resilient, due to their resistance and persistence despite hardships. Both discourses (that of vulnerability and that of resilience) focus on innate student characteristics, diverting attention from the role of the institutions in assigning and denying status and privileges, of economic and cultural nature. This was well pointed by Fineman’s theoretical contribution, which was critical to the development of my hypothesis in the thesis. Fineman’s contribution also informed my views about families’

construction in Southern welfare systems as "natural" privacy and dependency shelters, a construction that generates the familialism observed in Portuguese society, as well as in others. This research was the first to apply Fineman's vulnerable subject theory to higher education research, and so it also adds to the validation of its heuristic value.

Another theoretical contribution of this thesis was done through the advancing of the applicability of the Capability approach as a higher education theory. While the use of the Capability Approach in education is not new, particularly in the fields of inequality and diversity, its application to higher education is relatively less common, and in the Portuguese context, it is almost inexistent. The analysis of individual agency present in the narratives of first generation students shows the value of instrumental freedoms in enabling capabilities. Particularly, this research elucidates the role of not only economic resources but also of social opportunities (here in the form of welfare systems) in providing the necessary encouragement that allows individuals to lead a life they have reason to value. The use of the capabilities approach was also crucial in unveiling the several social conversion factors that can turn a formal opportunity (the opportunity to enter higher education) into a de facto one (the opportunity to succeed in higher education). Gender norms and institutional insufficiency negatively impacted the higher education experience of these students, and could be overcome if institutions would cater to students' needs on a planned and personalised case analysis, unlike the centralised and unprepared scholarship application system that is currently in action. Hence the capability approach affirms itself as a valid normative framework for researching widening participation issues for its value in widening the informational basis used to make judgements on the topic, by documenting the diversity of needs and the specific life conditions of these first generation students.

Finally, one unintended contribution of this thesis was to document the historical period of the economic crisis and consequent external intervention in Portugal, a period that exposed the fragilities of the national welfare state and that left numerous people exposed and vulnerable to the instability of political and economic developments. For higher education equity policies, and building upon the characterisation of Amaral & Magalhães (2009), this thesis unveiled a new historical moment designated as "more with less", alluding to the severe cuts in social support

for students in higher education and to the consequent downturn of enrolments and the dropout of around 8000 students since 2011. By outlining a new period in equity policies associated with the economic crisis effects, this thesis joins the growing scientific corpus dedicated to investigating the social impact of this era and its possible solutions. While this period in still unfolding, reflecting upon its effects through the biographies of these first generation students can aid in the development of alternative policies that are responsive to their voices and hopes.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Socio-economic query used in Problem Centered Interviews (in Portuguese)

1. Dados pessoais

1.1. Idade

1.2. Sexo

1.3. Curso

1.4. Ano

2. Dados parentais

2.1. Escolaridade Pai

2.2. Escolaridade Mãe

2.3. Profissão do pai:

2.4. Profissão mãe:

3- Origem

a) do distrito da universidade
b) fora do distrito da universidade

4- Morada

a) casa partilhada com colegas
b) casa dos pais
c) república ou casa comunitária
d) residência de estudantes

5- Trabalhador estudante

a) sim (indique ocupação)
b) não

6. Apoio social

6.1. Candidatou-se a bolsa de estudo

a) sim
b) não

6.2. Beneficiário de bolsa de estudo

a) sim
b) não

7- Atividades extracurriculares (dentro da universidade)

a) teatro
b) música
c) rádio
d) desporto
e) ativista estudantil
f) outro (especifique)
g) não está envolvido em catividades extracurriculares

8. Mobilidade

8.1. Fez ou vai fazer período de mobilidade (Erasmus)

a) sim
b) não

8.2. Se responde não, foi porque:

a) não tem interesse
b) os pais não permitem
c) candidatou-se e não conseguiu vaga
d) não tem apoio financeiro
e) outro motivo (p.f. especifique)

9. Atividades de lazer (indique 3)

Appendix 2. Formulary of Informed Consent

Formulário de consentimento informado

Investigação no âmbito da rede EDUWEL-Education and Welfare.

Autora:
Ana Sofia Ribeiro Santos
Early stage researcher na Universidade de Bielefeld

O atual trabalho de investigação, intitulado **"First generation students in Portuguese higher education: mapping capabilities and agency through biographical research"** insere-se numa rede de investigação (EDUWEL) que incide sobre a educação como promotora da inclusão social de jovens. Este estudo tem como principal objectivo compreender a experiência académica dos estudantes de primeira geração, com vista a desenvolver políticas de maior justiça social. Para o efeito é necessário entrevistar vários estudantes com pelo menos duas matrículas no ensino superior, cujos pais tenham até ao 9º ano de escolaridade. É por isso que **a sua colaboração é fundamental**.

Este estudo insere-se no programa de doutoramento em Educação da Universidade de Bielefeld na Alemanha, e é orientado pelo Prof. Holger Ziegler.

Este estudo não lhe trará nenhuma despesa ou risco. As informações recolhidas serão efectuadas através de um questionário e de uma entrevista biográfica que deverão ser gravados para permitir uma melhor compreensão dos factos.

A sua identidade será confidencial e nunca revelada a terceiros.

A sua participação neste estudo é voluntária e pode retirar-se a qualquer altura,
ou recusar participar, sem que tal facto tenha consequências para si.

Depois de ouvir as explicações acima referidas, declaro que aceito participar nesta investigação.

Assinatura: ____

Data: ___________

Appendix 3. Interview Guide

Generative question

Please tell me everything you can recall about your education experience, since you were a child to the present day.

Questions for capabilities dimensions:

Autonomy/self-determination (individual agency)

- How did you enter this degree?
- Why did you choose this subject?
- Do you feel autonomous at the university? If yes, why?
- What do you think would make you feel more autonomy, in case you don't feel enough? Are there aspects of your life where you feel limited or constrained?

Voice/participation (collective agency)

- How do you spend your free time?
- Do you participate in extra-curricular university activities?
- Are you member of any groups?
- Did you vote for course representative? Did you vote in the last legislative elections?
- Do you participate in class (why yes, why not)?

Aspirations (projection into the future/narrative imagination)

- What do you think will happen when you finish your studies?
- Do you have any dreams about what you want to be?
- Do you know how to fulfil them?
- What are some of your fears and worries?
- How do you see yourself in the future?

Resilience (critical thinking/family capital/ resistance/self-confidence/self-respect)

- In what way does your degree helps you to think about the world critically?
- How does your family feel about you being in the university?
- Do you think being in the university changed you?
- How do you feel about your academic performance?
- Did you ever drop out of school, or missed a year?
- Did you ever feel like quitting? Why?

Appendix 4- Code Analysis Visualisation from Atlas.ti

atlas.ti XML

XSL Stylesheet: **HU Tag Cloud with Code Colors** - A simple tag cloud viewer browser for HU entities

Description: A tag cloud is a visual depiction of content tags used in your HU. More frequently used tags are depicted in a larger font; display order is alphabetical. This lets you find a tag both by alphabet and by frequency. Codes can also show their assigned colors (both in the code selection and the result box).
HU: **PHD FGS interview analysis-bymk** by **Super**