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***Understanding aspirations and choices of
upper-secondary TVET students in transition
to post-school trajectories in Chile***

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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April 2022

Abstract

The aspirations of disadvantaged young people in transition to post-school life trajectories matter for the relation they have with individuals' perceptions of opportunities available to them to be, do or become what they have reason to value, with their decision-making processes and choices to seek work, continue studying or stay inactive. At a micro-level, these affect young people's socioeconomic outcomes, life trajectories and future well-being. Likewise, these have effects on macro-structural processes such as social (im)mobility, the expansion of education and economic growth (OECD, 2017b; Gardiner and Goedhuys, 2020).

Structurally, poverty and precariousness have often been associated to 'poverty of aspirations' deeming individuals responsible for their disadvantaged social positions and for their social stagnation (Sporher *et al.*, 2018). Policy interventions to raise vulnerable youth's aspirations and as the solution to socioeconomic and educational inequalities have heavily drawn on Human Capital Theory (HCT), assuming rational-instrumental decision-making when making transitions and the maximisation of employability as youth's main concern. This is particularly so in the field of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) (Valiente *et al.*, 2020). This thesis argues that traditional structuralist and rational-instrumental approaches to understand aspirations are insufficient to capture the complexities behind aspirations and have, indeed, resulted in inaccurate theoretical explanations and inadequate policy interventions.

Thus, this thesis contends that understanding aspirations and the courses of action to achieve these is key to challenge traditional social action theories explaining aspirations (trans)formation in youth transitions and to problematise orthodox TVET theoretical and policy accounts so to redirect policies accordingly. By means of in-depth, semi-structured biographical interviews and within a qualitative longitudinal research design, this study addresses the following main research question: *How do TVET graduates form and transform their educational and professional aspirations and what choices do they make to achieve these during their post-school transitions?* To answer this question, the study situates the analysis of aspirations in Chile, a context resplendent with HCT assumptions and neoliberal ideologies. The findings are analysed and discussed by combining the explanatory (sociological) approach of Critical Realism (CR) and the normative framework of Capabilities Approach (CA). This allows to understand causal mechanisms explaining

aspirations (trans)formation (CR) and the relationship between causal mechanisms and fairness (CA).

The findings show that in a context dominated by the neoliberal meritocratic hegemony of endless opportunities through education, TVET graduates' professional and educational aspirations can only be properly understood if linked to the construction of their self-worth, to the determination of escaping poverty and to individual plans for a life with dignity. The 'high' aspirations that these young people have, before and after transitions, have to be interpreted as a reflexive response to a highly unequal society and education system and to precarious working conditions awaiting TVET graduates in a highly liberalised labour market. Their aspirations are rational if considering the rhetoric that they face, although this does not mean that they are realisable. Furthermore, 'high' aspirations are not necessarily encouraged by positive and fair transition outcomes, but also by situations of 'capability deprivation' (Powell & McGrath, 2019a). The study reveals that the rationale behind TVET students' aspirations and decision-making is informed by reflections that include, but also go beyond, instrumental thinking and economic calculations. Indeed, the Chilean case demonstrates the existence of a new form of rationality, 'hegemonic' or 'aspirational' rationality, that is more informed by the dominant/cultural meritocratic discourse and aspirational society than (exclusively) by the assessment of individuals' circumstances. The thesis provides evidence in support for the need to reimagine TVET's roles and identity from a human development perspective which puts at the centre of the discussion students' wellbeing, needs and concerns and which endows them with skills, knowledge and opportunities to be able to benefit from a fast-changing world of work and to live a dignified life (Powell, 2012; Powell & McGrath, 2019b).

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Acknowledgments

First, I want to thank who made the beginning of this journey possible, Dr. Tejendra Pherali for forwarding me the scholarship's application, Prof. Mario Novelli and Dr. Naureen Durrani for supporting my application, Prof. Oscar Valiente for choosing me as his LKAS student and for trusting me fully in the development of this project, and LKAS Scholarship for funding this research. Thanks also to Marlène Buchy for her encouragements to embrace this adventure over our breakfasts in Kathmandu in 2016.

My deepest gratitude goes to my supervisors, Prof. Valiente, Dr. Scott Hurrell and Dr. Adrián Zancajo, for their valuable advice throughout the 4 years, for their trust in my abilities and for encouraging me to publish. Thanks also to Dr. Queralt Capsada-Munsech for being such a good mentor and supervisor in my first year of PhD.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the academic team in Chile, Dr. Leandro Sepúlveda and María José Valdebenito, for introducing me to the Chilean context and for their support during my fieldworks. Sincere gratitude to the students who took part in this study and to all the educational stakeholders interviewed, for their time and cooperation.

Most importantly, I am deeply thankful to those who have been with me throughout this long journey, which has been particularly tough and isolating during COVID lockdowns. My special thanks go to Eu, Giacomo, Giuli, Madlen, Manon, Marias, Marta, Melinda, Vale. Lastly, I believe that my family situation has motivated me to aspire 'high' and be different, and I am grateful for this. So, thank you, mum, despite all.

Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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Signature:

CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

Overview

The interest in educational and professional aspirations of working-class vocational students in transition to post-secondary education life trajectories has gained international prominence in academic debates and international and national policy agendas targeted at widening participation in Tertiary and Higher Education (TE/HE) (OECD, 2017b; UNESCO, 2018; Gardiner and Goedhuys, 2020). In the global capitalist societies, this expansion of education has been rationalised by governments as crucial to both create globally competitive economies and tackle poverty, unemployment and social inequalities through increased employability opportunities, central assumption of the Human Capital Theory (HCT) (Olssen & Peters, 2005). In the ILO working paper on youth aspirations and future of work, Gardiner and Goedhuys (2020) state that “the aspirations of young people are essential to their human capital investment, educational choices and labour market outcomes” and that “understanding aspirations is important when developing effective employment policies” (p. 4). Aspirations matter as they relate to individuals’ future plans, decision-making processes, choices, socioeconomic outcomes and future well-being and to their effects on macro-structural transformation processes (Pasquier-Doumer & Brandon, 2013; DeJaeghere, 2018; Gardiner and Goedhuys, 2020; Sumberg, 2021).

Educational aspirations have been assumed as key drivers of the expansion of education. Participating in TE/HE has become a proxy for high aspirations and achievements. Structurally, low educational aspirations have been consistently associated with lower class status and social immobility. Consequent discourses on ‘deficits or poverty of aspiration’ in young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have deemed individuals responsible for structural disadvantages and life outcomes and have justified political interventions aimed at raising aspirations as the solution to socioeconomic and educational inequalities (Atkins, 2010; Spohrer *et al.*, 2018). Interventions, including those emphasising the role of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), have heavily drawn on HCT’s narrow assumptions of instrumental rationality when making transitions (Valiente *et al.*, 2020). This thesis argues that this approach is insufficient to capture the complexities behind aspirations and has resulted in inaccurate theoretical explanations and inadequate policy interventions.

It is against this backdrop that transitions from upper-secondary school to labour market or Tertiary Education (TE) have become critical moments in the life of young people where current academic and policy assumptions on aspirations, choices and life trajectories, may be challenged. Yet, despite its academic and policy relevance, little is known about how vocational, working-class young people conceptualise their aspirations in their transition to adulthood, meanings and motivations they attribute to these, and how and why these form and transform during transitions. Traditional academic approaches on social action theory and the orthodox TVET theoretical and policy accounts, namely HCT, Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and structural/reproduction theory, have failed to adequately problematise these aspects. This is particularly evident in the field of TVET which is resplendent with assumptions from HCT, RCT and reproduction theory. A growing body of research has started to problematise the extensive and predominant use of HCT, and neo-liberal interpretations of poor aspirations, to inform policy and practice of TVET worldwide, drawing on the normative principles of the Capability Approach (CA) (Tikly, 2013; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2016; Powell & McGrath, 2014, 2019b; McGrath *et al.*, 2020).

The thesis will critically engage with extant academic debates between the above-noted dominant approaches in explaining educational and career aspirations. Using empirical evidence, the thesis will problematise the limits of these approaches, and proposes an alternative analytical framework that better addresses the concern of the CA. To enable this, this thesis looks at Chile, one of the most extreme market-led education systems in the world (Zancajo & Valiente, 2019). Such a context exemplifies a system where individualism and meritocracy are foregrounded to the point that class structures are regarded as less problematic in transitions to adulthood. Furthermore, Chile currently achieves higher levels of upper-secondary completion and access to Tertiary Education than the OECD average (*ibid.*). Paradoxically, in a country where secondary TVET policies were originally designed to provide a quick insertion in the labour market for disadvantaged youth, today an increasing number of TVET graduates want to pursue TE, often combining education and work in prolonged post-school trajectories. While TVET continues to play a strategic role for vulnerable youth, reducing its role to employability in the specific economic sector vocational students chose in their teenagerhood fails to acknowledge TVET graduates' realities and broader ambitions. This thesis argues that understanding aspirations is key to explain and problematise macrosocial transformations like the large and sustained expansion of education in emerging economies like Chile and to redirect TVET policies in ways that can better support TVET graduates in their transition to adulthood. This is particularly urgent

now given the persistent social inequalities and poverty, precarious working conditions, liberal and fast-changing labour markets and societies such as in Chile (McGrath *et al.*, 2020).

The key aim and objectives of this thesis revolve around the exploration of vocational students' aspirations and choices in transition to adulthood. Specifically, it aims to understand how TVET graduates (trans)form their educational and professional aspirations in their transitions from upper-secondary vocational education to TE or labour market; how they make their decisions to achieve their goals; what they manage to achieve in the course of their post-school transitions in a context dominated by neoliberal ideologies and with high social inequalities such as the Chilean one; and how the transition process impact on their initial aspirations (Chapter 4 will further develop aims and objectives). Broader objectives include 1) understanding the role of secondary TVET in the formation of aspirations; in facilitating or hindering their achievements; and in expanding opportunities for TVET graduates; 2) problematising TVET policy assumptions in Chile; and 3) connecting the macro-level of the policy with the micro-level of young people's realities.

Research questions

To address the above-mentioned aim and objectives, the thesis sets to answer the following main research question (RQ): How do TVET graduates form and transform their educational and professional aspirations and what choices do they make to achieve these during their post-school transitions?

This is explored through the following supplementary RQs:

1. What do TVET graduates aspire to after the completion of their secondary vocational education and why (i.e. meanings of aspirations)?
2. What factors contribute to form TVET graduates' aspirations and how?
3. How do TVET graduates plan to achieve their aspirations (i.e. courses of action envisaged)?
4. Have TVET graduates managed to achieve their aspirations six months after completing their upper-secondary vocational education and how? If not, why?
5. How do TVET graduates experience their proximal post-transition situations and the match/mismatch between aspirations and achievements?
6. How has the transition process conditioned/transformed TVET graduates' initial aspirations and why?

Theoretical Framework

This thesis puts students' aspirations, lived experiences, perceptions and realities at the centre of the discussion. In so doing, it sits within the perspective of the micro-sociology. Yet, it places the 'micro' component in dialogue with the 'meso' component of the educational institutions and the 'macro' level of social structures for a thorough understanding of meanings and mechanisms behind aspirations' formation and transformation. Both the meso and the macro factors can enable or constraint the formation, achievement and transformation of aspirations (DeJaeghere, 2018) and affect TVET graduates' "aspirations windows" (Ray, 2006, p. 410) and "horizon for actions" (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 34). To address the RQs and their complex interdisciplinary dimensions, this thesis draws on Margaret Archer's (2003, 2007, 2012) Critical Realist (CR) approach to social action and on Capabilities Approach (CA) to enrich the analysis on what TVET graduates value and on how social inequalities shape their aspirations (trans)formation.

The normative framework of CA allows to put students' needs and voices at the centre of the debate, before the tenets of productivity (economic growth, efficiency, income, and employability). For this doctoral study, this approach is particularly relevant for the following reasons. First, it allows to problematise from a moral perspective what matters to the students, what they value and have reason to value, what (valuable) opportunities they perceive as available to them, their freedom to choose whether they want to continue with their education, seek job or stay inactive and to transform real opportunities into achievements towards the realisation of their aspirations (Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2006). These are tenets of individuals' wellbeing, which the CA is concerned about (Powell & McGrath, 2019b). Second, it allows to distinguish the instrumental and intrinsic subjective value that students ascribed to their educational or professional aspirations. Despite these being a very important analytically distinction for CA (Sen, 1999b), in practice instrumental and intrinsic values can be simultaneously present (Walker, 2008; Mkwanaenzi, 2019). Finally, and most importantly, it allows to assess how social inequalities play out in achieving, maintaining or transforming TVET graduates' aspirations by focusing on processes more than outcomes (functionings). It does so by normatively addressing the questions "what are [young] people really able to do and what kind of person are they able to be?" (Robeyns, 2017, p. 9), looking particularly at TVET's role in expanding or

constraining students' array of valuable opportunities to choose from (Powell & McGrath, 2019b).

Despite the contributions that CA brings to studying of aspirations, CA is a normative rather than an explanatory framework. This means that it allows researchers to ask normative, philosophical questions on how inequalities intersect and affect processes such as the formation and achievement of aspirations. However, it does not provide a social theory or a methodology for investigating human action and individual wellbeing. Indeed, it fails to provide an explanation of how structures affect individuals and how agents, in turn, exert their power. By integrating Archer's CR approach with CA, this study overcomes this limitation.

As this thesis will demonstrate, Archer's view of structures as 'emergent' social properties that pre-exist individuals who, in turn, are not merely passive subjects of the structures is fruitful for this study for the following reasons. First, it allows to overcome the limitations of structuralist and rational choice perspectives which both conceptualise agency naively as either determined or constrained by structural factors or informed by instrumental rationality. Second, it allows us to understand the generative/causal mechanisms operating between structures and agency which bring about different outcomes. This is particularly relevant for this study on aspirations in transition. As Archer (2007) points out, understanding what individuals want, why they want it and how they go about getting it, namely the main questions underpinning this doctoral study, "involves a dialectical interplay between their 'concerns' – as they reflexively define them – and their 'contexts' – as they reflexively respond to them" (pp. 19-20). Third, it utilises the concept of reflexivity as an analytical tool to understand how disadvantaged young people exert agency, assess their concerns against their context and devise new projects and courses of action accordingly within the "concerns → life project → practices" trajectory (Archer, 2003, p. 133).

This thesis also draws on fundamental concepts within the structuralist perspective, such as the Bourdieusian notion of *habitus* and *doxa* in aspiration (trans)formation (see Chapter 2) (Akram, 2013; Decoteau, 2016) to address the limitations of Archer's over-reliance on reflexivity and her downplaying of the role unconscious actions. Furthermore, given the extreme model of neoliberalism adopted in Chile, its high level of education marketisation, its highly liberalised labour market and scarcity of qualified jobs awaiting TVET graduates, and the rampant social inequalities, the study will analyse to what extent instrumental

rationality and individual's income maximising assumptions, which are predominant in such context, play a role in the logic for actions behind young people's aspirations (trans)formation and choices.

Methodology and methods

To operationalise the combination of Archer's CR with CA and to address the above-mentioned research questions, this study will consist of a longitudinal qualitative research (QLR) approach (Lewis, 2007) conducted in two rounds of in-depth, semi-structured biographical interviews with the same cohort of student participants. QLR combines the possibility that qualitative research offers to explore individuals' voices and experiences and to emphasise their subjective experiences with the possibility to understand these over a period of time. Thus, it is increasingly recognised as key to delve into meanings individuals attribute to social phenomena and issues as they unfold, their attitudes and behaviours, how they change and how the change is experienced and situated, and to stress the crucial role of subjectivity and individual interpretations in the research process. QLR will allow to dig into complex causal processes (Neale, 2021), what in CR terms is defined as generative mechanisms, behind the structures and agency interplay in the formation of aspirations. From a capability perspective, the dual identity (qualitative and longitudinal) will be crucial to explore in depth participants' valued capabilities (their perceived and their real opportunities and freedom of choice after secondary vocational education) and to evaluate how they transform these capabilities (real opportunities) into functionings (actual achievements). In so doing, QLR will allow the study to overcome one of the main critiques to the operationalisation of the approach, namely the difficulty in observing how capabilities are transformed into functionings (Robeyns 2005; Otto 2015).

By asking young people to reflect upon and report their past experiences and their future possible pathways, interviews will allow to: 1) understand what young people perceive as future possibilities; their aspirations and plans; 2) understand how perceived possibilities and aspirations are mediated by their class, gender, family and significant others, cultural expectations and educational, labour market and social processes; 3) understand how young people perceive and experience structural factors, and whether they perceive themselves as agentic within these contexts (identifying constraints and possibilities in the exertion of the agency); 4) analyse young people's motivations and meanings attributed to past and present actions and future orientations; and 5) understand how the transition experiences impact on

TVET graduates' perceptions of their concerns and of their contexts and how these reflect in their post-transition aspirations (Evans, 2002, 2007; Lahelma, 2009; Caetano, 2015, 2017).

Main arguments

This thesis will argue that in neoliberal contexts, such as Chile, aspirations must be understood against the backdrop of highly unequal societies and education systems. In other words, it is precisely, and paradoxically, the high social inequalities that push young people to have 'high' aspirations. It will demonstrate that educational and professional aspirations of TVET students can only be properly understood if linked to the construction of individual self-worth ("to become somebody"), to the determination of escaping poverty and to individual plans for a life with dignity, as considered by the CA (Powell & McGrath, 2019b). It will argue that when students reflect upon these assumptions, they develop high aspirations which are rational regarding the rhetoric that young people face, but which may not be realisable. The findings will show that the rationale behind TVET students' aspirations and decision-making is informed by reflections that include, but also go beyond, instrumental thinking and economic calculations. These entail (reflexively) habituated class dispositions and *doxa* but also hope for better futures, redemption narratives and desires to aspire high as it is the right thing to do in neoliberal contexts (Zipin *et al.*, 2015). The combination of Archer's (2003, 2007, 2012) Critical Realism (CR) and theorisation of reflexivity with concepts of *habitus* and *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977), and bounded rationality (Bonal & Zancajo, 2018) will offer an innovative and holistic explanatory framework for such analysis.

Indeed, the Chilean case will demonstrate that the interplay between the hegemony of the neoliberal *doxa* of meritocracy, institutional and structural factors, and individual factors (a strong sense of agency, sense of control over life and belief in choices) generates a complex and fascinating mode of reflexivity, emerging alongside with autonomous and meta-reflexivities. This will be defined as 'hegemonic' or 'aspirational' for its being more grounded in the hegemony of meritocracy and aspirational society than on the assessment of individuals' circumstances. The study will argue that in front of the deeply ingrained *doxic* order of neoliberalism and due to the high social inequalities it generates, young people have to aspire 'high' as this is their only way to make it through the world and achieve a dignified life. These 'high' aspirations are actively reflected upon, however their context means these reflections are not necessarily sensible nor fair on themselves. This is a critical point of the

thesis and a key theoretical contribution to the understanding of aspirations in neoliberal contexts in relation to Archer's modes of reflexivity that will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis. Therefore, at the theoretical level, this study will provide empirical evidence for the need to depart from drawing exclusively on traditional structuralist or instrumental rational choice analysis, and to engage in more dynamic understandings of the interplay between agential and structural factors at the roots of differential aspiration development.

CA will complement CR in understanding aspirations in post-school transition processes and indeed will be informed CR's ontological assumptions (Dejaeghere, 2020). By stressing the importance of looking at processes (more than at outcomes), CA will allow to assess to what extent the ability TVET graduates have to achieve certain goals is mediated by unequal capabilities. In other words, it will allow to reflect on how inequalities play out in TVET graduates' ability and freedom to actually do what they wanted to and had reason to value, whereby the fairness (or unfairness) of unequal transition outcomes was not about the results themselves but about the mechanisms leading to them. Similarly, this approach will allow to consider the difference between the freedom to aspire (capability) and the functioning of aspiring (the act of voicing or deliberating aspirations), uncovering inequalities that affect disadvantaged young people's lives, but that fall beyond immediate understanding as hidden by their optimism and meritocratic beliefs. Ultimately, using CA together with CR will allow this thesis to be concerned with what matters for disadvantaged young people and the dynamic relationships between their aspirations and social injustices and inequalities. This will be reflected in the ethics principle of placing the voices of young people at the centre of my study underpinning this study. While these normative and moral grounds intrinsic in CA are important in development studies, they are absent in social sciences. This capability analysis will be the first step that can lead, through appropriate policies or practices, to the disruption, or decrease, of inequalities such those identified in this study by means of longitudinal analysis, and to achieving fairer social systems and greater equality.

Related to this, this thesis will also have important policy implications. It will demonstrate that investigating how aspirations of TVET students are formed is key to develop new approaches that go beyond rational instrumentality and narrow employability perspectives. Thus, it will provide evidence to respond to the need for looking at TVET from a human development approach to inform new international TVET agendas as claimed in recent studies (McGrath *et al.*, 2020). This study also echoes studies claiming for the need to reimagine TVET's roles and identity in the light of human flourishing, and not just as an

easy access to the labour market after compulsory education (Powell, 2012; Powell & McGrath, 2019b). Given that it will be shown how students attributed their development and flourishing to different outcomes, this will have implications for the design of educational pathways and careers guidance.

Finally, it will be argued that new policy agendas in TVET cannot be blind to systemic structural barriers that limit post-secondary educational and labour market opportunities for socially disadvantaged students. In contexts of high social inequalities with scarce quality job opportunities, education policies will not be able to single-handedly address these structural problems, but they also face an issue in instilling high aspirations within some TVET students that they may not be able to fulfil, despite the façade of meritocracy.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters. After this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 will critically present and discuss the debates in the literature around the formation of aspirations by drawing on theoretical perspectives and on empirical studies applying these. It will first introduce the concept of aspirations as debated in the literature from a multidisciplinary perspective. Then, it will review literature on the (trans)formation of aspirations and choices in transition to adulthood from a normative perspective (CA) and an explanatory (sociological) perspective, critically discussing social actions according to rational choice theories, structuralist perspectives, and ‘reflexive’ approaches. It will conclude by highlighting the literature gaps that this thesis aims to address, providing a brief justification of the approaches adopted in this study (this will be further developed in Chapter 4).

Chapter 3 will present the Chilean context. It will start by presenting the Chilean case as a paradigmatic market-led education system showing meanings and consequences of an extreme educational marketisation such as the Chilean one. This will also entail providing evidence of the impacts of this model on socioeconomic segregation in education, with a particular focus on upper-secondary education. The chapter will then contextualise TVET system and transitions to post-school education trajectories of TVET graduates, showing trends and issues of such transitions. Lastly, it will clarify the fit between the Chilean context and the theoretical debates presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 4 will present the research methodology and methods. The first part will outline the research rationale, aims, objectives and questions. Then, it will position this thesis within the debates presented in Chapter 2 justifying the analytical perspectives adopted to discuss the findings. The second part will present the research design and methods of data collection. This part will include reflections on data analysis, ethical considerations and the researcher's subjectivity and positionality.

Chapter 5 and 6 will present the findings of this thesis. Chapter 5 will focus on the findings from the first round of data collection, whereas Chapter 6 will present findings from the second round of data collection. Chapter 5 will be organised around the typological analysis of aspirations, and it will consist of three main parts 1) the meanings and rationale for students' aspirations; 2) the institutional, structural, and individual factors that contribute to form aspirations; and 3) the courses of action envisaged to achieve them. Chapter 6 will consist of three overarching sections which follow the typological analysis of the previous chapter. Each of the three main sections consists of further sub-sections to present the transition processes and outcomes for each type of aspirers. Each sub-section starts with an overview of young people's aspirations emerged in first round of interviews and where they were at when the second round of interviews took place. This will be followed by an analysis of young people's reflexive assessment of their current situation in terms of well-being (what they have been actually able to do and be and how they feel about it) against their aspirations. The last part of each sub-sections ends by presenting and discussing the impact of the transition process on aspirations transformation, expectations and life projects.

Lastly, Chapter 7 will firstly summarise the main findings and discuss them by answering the research questions. The discussion will be situated against the existing literature and informed by the analytical framework as presented in Chapter 4. The second part of the chapter will provide conclusive remarks by reflecting on the key arguments of the thesis and outlining its theoretical contributions and policy implications. It will end with reflections on the study's limitations and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2 - Researching youth aspirations in transition to adulthood: a review of the literature

The value of aspirations lies in their bearing on individual's forward-looking behaviour; decision-making processes; choices; socioeconomic outcomes; and future well-being and their spillover effects on macro-structural transformation processes (Pasquier-Doumer & Brandon, 2013; DeJaeghere, 2018; Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020; Sumberg, 2021). Research on aspirations in relation to social (im)mobility, (in)equalities of opportunities, and life trajectories has been widely investigated within the literature of youth transitions in sociology (Furlong & Biggart, 1999; Reay, 2001; Bradley & Ingram, 2013; Hegna, 2014; Gale & Parker, 2015b; Hart, 2016; Stahl *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, research on the impact of aspirations on social, economic, human development, and poverty alleviation have increasingly attracted interest across a variety of other social sciences' (inter)disciplines including anthropology, social psychology, classical and behavioural economics, and development studies (OECD, 2017b; Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020). Sociologists and anthropologists are concerned with the relationship between aspirations, social stratification, mobility and unequal power relations/access to resources. They consider aspirations as individuals' strong desires for their futures which are structurally and culturally embedded (Appadurai, 2004; Hart, 2016).

Social psychologists look at aspirations in relation to individually determined factors, namely motivations, self-perceptions and goal-orientations, in social and collective contexts (Bandura, 1997, 2001). Mainstream economists and political science theorists conceptualise aspirations as preferences, explaining these as rationally determined and aimed at maximising individual's utility on the basis of risks and benefits calculations (Becker, 1993; Goldthorpe, 1998; Boudon, 2003; Elster, 2007). More recently, influenced by sociological perspectives on how social interactions influence individual preferences, behavioural and development economists have focused on the role of the exposure to the social group of belonging in aspiration formation and human behaviour to explain correlations between poverty, inequality and aspirations (poverty/aspiration trap) (Ray, 2006; Heifetz & Minelli, 2015). Development studies look at aspirations in a conceptual relationship with capabilities and agency. They explain aspirations as forerunners of, and empirically intertwined with, capabilities, which are real and valued opportunities that people can use to be or become what they want and have reason to value. Development scholars are concerned with human

well-being and the enhancement of one's freedom to choose and pursue what she has reason to value through the expansion of capabilities (Sen, 1999b; Nussbaum, 2002).

Although these disciplines hold different approaches and emphasis on the investigation of aspirations, they also have some overlaps. They share the interest in understanding, with different level of analysis, the relation between the material and non-material constraints and enablements at a macro-level (structural constraints and enablers) and the micro-level of the individuals (agency) in influencing individuals' aspirations and, possibly, their choices and life trajectories (Siddique & Durr-e-Nayab, 2020).

This chapter critically engages with the debates on structure and agency behind aspirations formation, decision-making processes, and choices of young people in their transition to adulthood. It will draw mainly on theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence from the sociological literature on youth studies but will also include contributions from other disciplines of social sciences. The development perspective through the Capabilities Approach (CA) and its application in the field of TVET will be drawn on to enrich the discussion and problematise orthodox TVET theoretical and policy accounts, heavily based on HCT explanations. The next section of the chapter provides a review of how social sciences' literature conceptualises aspirations. Then, it will look at aspirations from the normative framework of the capability perspective by reviewing a growing body of literature that applies the CA to aspirations to enhance the understanding of young people's ambitions for their futures as part of broader processes of human flourishing in becoming adult in unequal capitalist societies. Lastly, the chapter will engage with sociological theoretical explanations and empirical studies on how structure and agency interact in aspirations formation, transformation and decision-making. Given the scope of this thesis, the review will explore how these debates and approaches play out in TVET research field.

The following section aims to answer the following question:

How are aspirations conceptualised?

Conceptual discussion of aspirations in the literature

Scholars consider aspirations as a conceptual tool that can provide a way to frame young people's thinking about their futures within a combination of theoretical and conceptual explanations. These include one's perceptions of opportunity structures and social

positioning in the present, internalised sociocultural values and meanings, self-concept and motivation to act and achieve goals that individuals have reason to value (Sumberg, 2021). However, in the literature on aspirations, there is no univocal and clear understanding or established definition of the concept of aspirations. These can be indeed framed as dreamed, desired, hoped, preferred projections of self in the future, and can include differing degrees of calculations, plans, intentions. The ontological question of what aspirations are is partly associated to its relation to the concept of agency which social sciences scholars articulate as active subjectivity, the intentional process of setting goals and make choices, plans, decisions to achieve them (Beck, 1992; Coffey & Farrugia, 2014; Bryant & Ellard, 2015; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016, 2017). Capability scholars consider it a fundamental capability entailing the freedom to define and pursue goals that one values and has reason to value (Sen, 1999b; Conradie & Robeyns, 2013; Hart, 2013; DeJaeghere, 2018; Mkwanzani, 2019).

Differentiating aspirations from plans

The notion of aspirations can appear as vague, ambiguous, lacking specificity and inflated. The ambiguity and lack of specificity concern the frequently unproblematised conceptual distinction between aspirations and expectations, hopes and plans, dreams and intentions, often used all synonymously (Fuller, 2009; Hart, 2013; Hardgrove *et al.*, 2015; Sumberg, 2021). Brannen and Nilsen (2007) claim for the need to conceptually distinguish between abstract goals not constrained by the present (dreams); vague goals but connected to the present (hopes); and goals which are related to present circumstances and contextualised in time and place (plans). The scholars contend that conflating ‘planning’ with ‘ambitions’ and ‘forethought’, as done in other quantitative-based studies (see for example Anderson *et al.*, 2002), fails to consider the different degrees of uncertainty, of sense of control over the future and of relation with time that each term carries. This leads to simplistic theorisations of young people’s future orientations in their transitions to adulthood, such as the idea that in late modernity biographies are ‘chosen’, which the authors critique as lacking the analytical considerations of the opportunity structures permeating young people’s thinking of the future. Finally, they argue that conflating aspirations with plans obscures the essential elements of aspirations (wishes, hope, dreams).

Even when research investigates future orientations, the very term ‘aspirations’ is not always explicitly used in empirical studies, what can create empirical and interpretive challenges in

researching these. Hardgrove *et al.* (2015) prefer the notion of ‘possible selves’ to ‘aspirations’. According to the authors, ‘possible selves’ entail young people’s envisioned future projections informed by their self-concept which is grounded in, and developed from, their opportunity structures and their horizon of possibilities. Ultimately, it is suggested that the ‘possibility’ intrinsic in this notion aims to be devoid of any ‘inflated’ ambition, mainly informed by subjective orientations. They argue that it is precisely the self-concept’s rootedness in past and present experiences and circumstances that can provide a theoretical link between youth’s imagined futures and motivated, goal-directed actions manifested in the present.

By means of in-depth interviews to young adults carried out in the UK and Sweden to investigate aspirations, Devadason (2008) conceptualises these through a typology of future orientations which are defined according to their alignment or misalignment with means and ends and the capacity of young people to elaborate plans. Therefore, she defines as ‘vague hopes’ those orientations where means and ends are aligned, and young people express no need or urgency to plan usually due to their contentment with the present situation. On the contrary, ‘vague wishes’ express the inability to clearly state ambitions and/or to link ambitions/wishes to plans/means to achieve them due to uncertain/averse present circumstances. Likewise, where these future orientations can be accompanied by the ability to elaborate precise, aligned plans (‘detailed precise’) or by more hypothetical and potentially misaligned plans (‘detailed blue sky’). Similarly, Frye (2012) uses the term aspirations to refer to desires or ideals which in the interviews she conducts with her participants are prompted by words such as ‘want’, ‘hope’, ‘desire’ and ‘aspire’. On the contrary, she refers to expectations for accounts that describe concrete plans and plausible scenarios, prompt by words like ‘expect’, ‘plan’, ‘think’. However, she also acknowledges that empirically it is not always possible to distinguish between aspirations and expectations as participants may refer to them interchangeably. These studies demonstrate that although aspirations cannot be reduced to plans, planning remains key to aspirations.

‘Hope’ as crucial dimension of aspirations

For as much as plans (and choices) are critical dimensions of aspirations and can be more easily determined/measured, conflating aspirations with plans (and choices) can be misleading. Indeed, not all plans and choices may follow aspirations. In fact, plans or choices can be influenced by contingent circumstances (Roberts, 2009). As Bryant and Ellard (2015)

suggest, what seems to be often neglected or not thoroughly articulated in this literature are the less instrumental forms of envisaging the future and, therefore, also the forms they take, their values and meanings. Furthermore, empirical research across Europe, USA and Australia (Devadason, 2008; Howard *et al.*, 2010; Bryant & Ellard, 2015) has shown that while not necessarily all youth from disadvantaged backgrounds are able or are willing to make plans, they still ‘hope’ for better futures and a ‘good life’. The argument here is on the need to better understand aspirations also as crucial element of hope and a form of expressing agency that marginalised youth have despite the structural barriers which delimit their space for action and hamper their capacity to envisage their future.

In line with this, Conradie and Robeyns (2013) underly the strong element of hope intrinsic in the concept of aspirations (from the Latin *spero* = hope). They argue that aspirations express ambitions that people strongly yearn for and aim to achieve. Yet, conflating aspirations to plan would be reductionist as aspirations carry a greater element of uncertainty and are more idealistic than plans. The authors acknowledge that aspirations are ‘life dreams’ which entail people’s perceptions of what a good life is, their values and their priorities. Taking the framework of ‘hope’ further (Snyder, 2002) and introducing it into the study of aspirations from a development economic point of view, Lybbert and Wydick (2018) claim that hope is the bridge between ideal and real. They sustain that studies on aspirations and poverty have failed to look at more intangible ‘aspirational hopes’ (aspirations) and ‘wishful hopes’ (dreams). They argue that naïve interpretations have neglected the production of a richer knowledge on people’s meanings, values, purposes in life which has led to likewise simplistic and often unsuccessful policy and development interventions. Carling and Collins (2018) sustain that differently from ‘intention’, ‘plan’ and ‘wish’, “‘aspirations’ mark an intersection of personal, collective and normative dimensions” (*ibid.*, p. 916).

The capacity to aspire

The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2004), one of the main theorists of aspirations particularly in relation to poverty, takes these wider dimensions into account. Appadurai sees aspirations as entailing general visions and axioms of ‘the good life’, usually translated into narrower and specific preferences, desires, choices and calculations, which reflect the dominant vision in any given community. He develops the notion of aspirations as complex cultural capacity, that he refers to as the “capacity to aspire” (*ibid.*, p. 59). He argues that although they might seem as idiosyncratic, aspirations are profoundly culturally and socially

embedded within any given community. This cultural capacity to imagine, yearn, prefer, choose and pursue desired futures necessitates the ability to read “a map of a journey into the future” (*ibid.*, p. 78) that is the capacity individuals have to navigate information on future desired trajectories available to them and to make powerful choices to pursue these. Appadurai suggests that while a range of similar aspirations are seen in every group among within a society, the capacity to aspire and to navigate aspirations are not equal between poor and wealthy groups. Indeed, the latter group can access to a wider range of material and non-material resources and life experiences which allow them to be exposed to and explore alternatives and possibilities, to be able and free to choose which one they want to pursue and how to get there. Consequently, poor people tend to be more pessimistic about their life chances and, thus, have a low capacity to aspire (Flechtner, 2014; Gardiner and Goedhuys, 2020).

Yet, as every capacity, Appadurai argues that it is dynamic and it can increase or decrease if people are given the opportunity to capacitate their agency to imagine, articulate and activate to achieve alternative/aspired futures. His action-based research on Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) in Mumbai shows the empowerment process of poor communities through an increased capacity to voice aspirations and understand how to pursue them. While Appadurai's contributions to the literature on aspirations will be further discussed in this Chapter, here it is important to highlight that introducing the idea of ‘capacity to aspire’ has broken significant new ground in understandings aspirations, inspiring many researchers across social sciences’ disciplines.

Appadurai's (2004) much quoted definition of aspirations as formed “in interaction and in the thick of social life” (p. 67) paved the way of much of the modern theories on aspirations as a cultural capacity. This modern conceptualisation represents a point of departure from the two main theoretical approaches on aspirations literature within the education-to-work transitions, the development model and the opportunity structure model. The former was particularly influent in the 50s and 60s based on accounts of self-concept and vocational interests/aspirations as predictor of individual motivations, intentions and plans. According to this approach, aspirations were conceptualised as goals leading to, and nurtured by, choices and experiences (Gottfredson & Holland, 1975; Gottfredson, 2002). The latter became a popular approach, especially from the 80s, in explaining aspirations in the school-to-work transitions as determined by a number of factors (e.g. class, gender, cultural perceptions) which limit individual's available opportunities and their freedom to choose as

well as their abilities (e.g. educational attainments) (Roberts, 1968, 2009; Jacobs *et al.*, 1991).

Influenced by the work of Appadurai, the behavioural economist Debraj Ray (2006) investigates the link between aspirations, poverty and inequality. He enriches the notion of aspirations by introducing the concepts of aspirations window, aspirations gap and aspirations failure. As Appadurai, Ray grounds his conceptualisation on the aspirations for a 'good life' and what it entails on the belief that these are common among people from different classes in a society. What differs between poor and wealthy groups is the perception of what they can reach and their behaviour towards the efforts needed to achieve aspirations. Ray sustains that individuals construct their aspirations against the understanding they have of what is available for them by drawing on life experiences, achievements, failures of individuals similar to them and whom they can identify with (e.g. from similar socioeconomic and cultural background, or sharing traits such as ethnicity, gender, religion, etc) (Lybbert & Wydick, 2018; Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020; Siddique & Durr-e-Nayab, 2020). These boundaries or points of reference regarding their future possible selves define the aspirations window. Aspirations gap refers to the distance between where a person is and where s/he wants to go. Ray explains that the dimension of the gap can be a deterrent or an incentive to turn aspirations into actions. Therefore, setting too high or too low aspirations leads to limited actions because they are perceived as unattainable or worthless the effort. This 'lower effort-too high/low aspirations gap' trap is the aspirations failure which occurs when the aspirations window becomes narrower, or the aspirations gap increases.

Recently, empirical research has drawn on Ray's framework to explore the link between aspirations failure and poverty trap in developing countries. For example, Ibrahim, (2011) explores the interrelatedness between poverty, aspirations and wellbeing in Egypt, mainly looking at aspirations failure in two areas, education (continuing education/studying what they wish) and labour market (finding a job/working in a satisfactory job) (what she refers to as neglected capabilities). She argues that poverty is a result and a cause of failed aspirations and that the downward spiral of aspirations, which are valuable for the individual but unachievable/unfulfilled due to structural and institutional constraints, is transmitted across generations as "poor people's failure to achieve their aspired capabilities not only nurtures their feelings of powerlessness and frustration, but also affects their children's capabilities" (p. 16). Pasquier-Doumer & Brandon (2013) explore the disincentive effect that aspirations gap (i.e. having too high aspirations given individuals' current situation and

structural constraints) had on indigenous children in Peru to adopt a ‘forward-looking behaviour’ (e.g. investing in education). Bernard *et al.* (2011) investigate the relationship between narrower aspirations window, narrow aspirations gap and fatalism, which seemed to lead to aspirations failure, translated into lower demands from poor rural households for credit for productive purposes in Ethiopia. This, in turn, perpetuated families’ poverty.

Drawing on Appadurai’s conceptualisation of aspirations, Zipin *et al.* (2015) define these as complex socio-cultural phenomena concerning individuals’ perceptions of viable alternative, worth-imagining futures. This entails individuals’ capacity to desire, imagine, voice and pursue these emergent visions for alternative futures besides habituated aspirations (possibilities within the limits of socio-structural positions) or *doxic* aspirations (dominant-ideologically mediated impulses to pursue out-of-reach dreams of, for example, upward social mobility as in highly unequal and neoliberal societies). Habituated, *doxic* and emergent aspirations are conflicting processes of identities and strategies formation within future orientations which are analytically distinct but empirically often intertwined. Although praised for their heuristic potential to investigate and capacitate agency for social changes, the authors recognised intrinsic methodological as well as ethical implications of researching power-marginalised young people’s aspirations in the current late-capitalist historical present. As for the former, they argue that emergent aspirations are hard to be detected with common qualitative research methods as the researcher needs to remain close to participants and adopt participatory methods such as action research. As for the latter, asking about aspirations can elicit anxiety in cases when individuals’ circumstances “frustrate even reasonable senses of worthwhile possibilities” (*ibid.*, p. 241). In these cases, narratives on aspirations can betray “cruel optimism” (*ibid.*), that is the optimism for dreamed futures that are unlikely to be pursued but towards which one has to cling to preserve a sense of selfhood.

Caroline Hart (2013, 2016), a capability and Bourdieusian scholar who has extensively researched on youth aspirations in relation to education and work, provides a rich conceptualisation of aspirations which brings together multiple dimensions and recognises the empirical and analytical complexities in researching them. Through her qualitative work on young people’s aspirations to HE in the UK, Hart (2013) empirically demonstrates that the criticality in researching and conceptualising aspirations lays in the relationship between aspirations and agency, namely the capacity of young people to voice and claim their aspirations. She defines aspirations as slightly different from ‘imagining’ or ‘hoping’ being

the former “goal-oriented [and related to] the future of the self or the agency of the self in relation to goals concerning others” (*ibid.*, p. 79). However, she acknowledges that when researching aspirations, these can be interpreted by participants as hopes, wishes, dreams ambitions or goals; they can be idealist or realist, collective or individual and can convey different temporal dimensions (short-term vs. long-term aspirations). Analytically, Hart differentiates between ‘true’ aspirations which are wishes or desires that express young people’s ‘real’ aspiration (their own and initial ambitions), and aspirations that are ‘adapted’ (subject to change both for exogenous and for endogenous factors), ‘apparent’ (aspirations that are consciously or unconsciously imposed by others), ‘concealed’ (hidden aspirations) and ‘revealed’ (aspirations that are voiced).

As it will be further discussed in the next section on aspirations and the CA, Hart (2013) understands aspirations in relation to individuals’ freedom and possibility of aspiring, which entail both the act of abstract thinking and voicing or expressing aspirations, and the freedom to aspire as forerunners of further meaningful opportunities and achievements. As she argues, these are shaped by sociocultural circumstances and influenced by individual agency. DeJaeghere (2018) sustains that despite Hart’s claims to situate aspirations in the ‘thick of social life’ (Appadurai, 2004), her conceptualisation of aspirations through binary accounts (low/high, real/adapted) may overshadow the dynamic nature of aspirations. In her study on young women’s educational aspirations in Tanzania, DeJaeghere (2018) defines aspirations in a dialectical relationship with agency, contingent to time and social context’s opportunity structures. She suggests that considering these intertwined and dynamically changing over time can open new opportunities of interpreting aspirations, not necessarily as low or downwardly adapted.

Conclusions

The review of the notion of aspirations reveals its complex relations to structures, community and agency. These complexities make aspirations hard to operationalise as well as theorise. As the American anthropologist, MacLeod, (2009), puts it:

Aspirations, as a mediating link between socioeconomic structures (what society offers) and individuals at the cultural level (what one wants) [...] offer the sociologist a conceptual bridge over the theoretical rift of the structure-agency dualism. (p. 22).

To capture this complexity and overcome shortcomings intrinsic in each position, this study draws on different conceptualisations of aspirations which combine the intersection of individual, collective and normative dimensions (Carling & Collins, 2018). *In this thesis, aspirations are understood as hoped and desired projections of self in the future (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013; Bryant & Ellard, 2015), grounded in the perceptions individuals have of their opportunity structures and horizon of possibilities (Ray, 2006; Zipin et al., 2015), and entailing socioculturally embedded visions of ‘the good life’ (Appadurai, 2004).* Aspirations include differing degrees of capacity and freedom to imagine and voice desired futures and to be goal-oriented (i.e. able to elaborate plans and courses of action to achieve aspirations) (Hart, 2013). Including individuals’ plans and courses of action to achieve aspirations is key to understand the real opportunities individuals have to live the life they have reason to value, the freedom to choose among these opportunities, and the opportunity to effectively take actions to do what they want to do and be whom they want to be (Sen, 1985; Robeyns, 2003; Alkire, 2005), which is of particular concern from a capability perspective.

The next sections aim to answer the following questions in relation to working-class young people’s aspirations in transition to adulthood from a normative and an explanatory perspective:

Why do aspirations matter?

How are they formed, transformed and achieved?

How do young people make decisions to achieve their aspirations?

Aspirations as Capabilities

This section will look at aspirations from a philosophical and normative perspective. It will do so by drawing on the Capabilities Approach (CA). This approach allows to normatively bring to the forefront of the discussion what is that matters to working-class young people, what life they want to lead, what they want to do, be and become in the light of the injustices and marginalisation that they may experience. Importantly, being a normative, not an analytical, framework, the CA allows to question the role of education, and TVET in particular, in narrowing or widening young people’s aspirations, opportunities and freedoms to become active agents of their biographies and lead the life they have reason to value (Sen, 1999b).

Aspirations, capabilities and functionings

Over the past decade, a growing body of literature has looked at aspirations drawing on the principles of the CA (Hart, 2013; Tiwari & Ibrahim, 2014; DeJaeghere, 2018; Mkwanzani & Wilson-Strydom, 2018; Mkwanzani, 2019; McGrath *et al.*, 2020). Pioneered by the Indian economist and Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen, (1985, 1990, 1999a, 1999b), the CA postulates that the purpose of development should be human well-being through the expansion of meaningful and real opportunities (*capabilities*) from which individuals have the freedom to choose (agency freedom) to be, do and become what they have reason to value. In capabilities terms, the actual achievements of a person in life are referred to as *functionings*. Importantly, the focus of Sen's approach is not exclusively on outcomes (i.e. actual achievements), but mostly on the processes (i.e. the real opportunities individuals have to live the life they have reason to value, on the freedom to choose among these opportunities, and the opportunity to take actions to do what they want to do and be whom they want to be) (Sen, 1985; Robeyns, 2003; Alkire, 2005; McGrath & Powell, 2015).

Differentiating functionings and capabilities is crucial for the challenges posed by the subjective internalisation of unfavourable circumstances leading to adaptive preferences (Leßmann *et al.*, 2011), namely the tendency of disadvantaged people to downplay aspirations to conform to unfavourable living conditions (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013). In other words, while individual functionings (achievements) provide a window into individual's capability set and achieved well-being (Tiwari & Ibrahim, 2014; Mkwanzani, 2019), focusing solely on functionings does not allow to see inequalities beneath the different set of capabilities and the capabilities deprivation that individuals may experience in contexts of marginalisation and social injustice (Powell & McGrath, 2019b, 2019a).

On the importance of differentiating between capabilities and functionings, Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2002, 2011), the American philosopher who has further developed capability theory, argues that the question to ask from the capabilities perspective is not whether an individual is satisfied or not with their current situation. Rather we should ask what they are "actually able to do and be" (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 123). She goes on maintaining that, if policies focus solely on functionings (achievements), they ignore what people value but cannot achieve or fulfil due to structural, institutional or cultural constraints (neglected capabilities):

The core idea seems to be that of the human being as a dignified free being who shapes his or her own life, rather than being passively shaped or pushed around by the world in the manner of a flock or herd animal. The basic intuition from which the capabilities approach begins, in the political arena, is that human abilities exert a moral claim that they should be developed. Capability, not functioning, is the appropriate political goal. (*ibid.*, p. 124).

Conversion factors

Along with the importance that both Sen and Nussbaum place on understanding individuals' capabilities, rather than simply limiting evaluative reflections on functionings as most policies do, they acknowledge that the set of real opportunities people have to accomplish what they value depends on the conditions, resources or commodities available to them. The use of resources, services or commodities to transform antecedent valued functionings (aspirations) → capabilities → valued functionings depends on personal, social and environmental *conversion factors* (Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2006).

Personal conversion factors include individual's physical and mental characteristics (age, gender, cognitive skills, intelligence, attitude, creativity, sense of initiative, resilience, motivation, physical conditions) (Hart, 2013; Otto, 2015; Robeyns, 2017). In their study on educational aspirations of African migrant youth, Mkwanzani and Wilson-Strydom (2018) included individual background (e.g. educational functionings and parental education) in personal factors that were identified as key in enhancing or constraining youth's educational aspirations. *Social conversion factors* comprise of policies, social hierarchies, power relations, discriminatory practices (related to class, gender, ethnicity, religion, caste), and social norms. The authors define social factors as both living conditions (environment and social ecology), socio-political conditions and factors such as socioeconomic status and exposure to role models as influencing the conversion of resources into functionings. *Environmental conversion factors* have to do with the geographical, physical/natural and built environments where an individual lives (Hart, 2013; Robeyns, 2017). To these three canonical conversion factors, the authors add the institutional conversion factors referring to the impact of institutional resources and services (e.g. asylum seeking process) on educational aspirations.

Aspirations' adaptation

As previously commented, aspirations can be adapted if due to the unfeasibility to achieve specific aspirations, individuals unconsciously decide they no longer want to pursue them (Elster, 2007). Adaptation can also be a more rationalised process where individuals change their aspirations due to contextual or internal constraints (e.g. lack of material resources, parental expectations and lack of motivation can scale down an initial high educational aspiration) that they acknowledge and voice (Hart, 2013). As Hart (2016) maintains, aspirations are forerunners of capabilities. Adapting aspirations implies not converting aspirations into capabilities and, thus, renouncing the doings, beings and becomings that people had reason to value. It is the normative understanding of the impact that adapted aspirations have on well-being and social justice that capability scholars like Hart and Nussbaum (2000) are interested in. Particularly this happens in cases when “ignorance, malice, injustice, and blind habit” (*ibid.*, p. 114) lead people to normalise having low aspirations and limited opportunities (Conradie and Robeyns, 2013; Mkwanzanzi and Wilson-Strydom, 2018). An example, as Nussbaum (2000) argues, is the restrictions to the freedom to aspire, to have opportunities and to choose them, that women often experience because of patriarchal systems. Thus, their capabilities and functionings are often jeopardised by sociocultural expectations and norms. Similarly, Sen (1999a) looks at enduring deprivations of people living in underprivileged situations and how these result in “taking pleasure in small mercies” (p. 14) because they have learned to have ‘realistic’ desires even when more and more valuable options could be available to people.

Capabilities Approach in education

In the field of education, CA has been increasingly used as alternative to the traditional economics approach of HCT (Walker, 2005, 2012; Hart, 2012; Mkwanzanzi, 2019). As previously shown, the latter focuses exclusively on economic aspects of educational investment through the acquisition of skills which enhance young people’s employability’s opportunities and economic advancement. By contrast, the former provides a conceptual and normative framework that puts students’ well-being, their quality of life, their social development and freedom to choose what have reason to value at the centre of discussions and evaluations of educational programmes and initiatives (Tiwari & Ibrahim, 2014; Robeyns, 2017; Moodie *et al.*, 2019; Powell & McGrath, 2019b). Challenging HCT assumptions from a capability perspective allows a better understanding of the instrumental and intrinsic values that students attribute to education and, thus, to their educational (and professional) aspirations. As Robeyns (2006) states, this distinction relates to the CA’s

analytical distinction between means (instrumental to reach well-being) and ends (endowed with intrinsic value).

In this respect, Chiappero-Martinetti & Sabadash (2014) look at the intrinsic/instrumental value of education as analytical dimensions to assess individuals' well-being, opportunities and living conditions. They argue that education can be seen as an ends in itself (intrinsic value of education) being a cultural-enriching experience that endows individuals with abilities and competencies (e.g. literacy, numeracy, practical reasoning and critical thinking). The authors also discuss the role of education as means to other capabilities (instrumental value of education). In this case, the achieved level of education is the resource that can be transformed into opportunities to work, being employed or undertake higher educational or professional projects from which individual are free to choose what they value the most. Finally, education can be a capability itself as it can open up opportunities to make informed decisions for individuals' well-being beyond educational and professional spheres. Although the authors do not make it explicit, these capabilities encompass Nussbaum's (2000) list of ten basic capabilities, namely life; health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation (both in terms of being able to engage in social interactions, social justice and friendship and in terms of being treated with respect and as a dignified human being); other species; play; control over one's environment (both in terms of being abler to engage in political participation and in terms of being able to hold material properties). However, the individual's ability to access and make instrumental or intrinsic use of education depends on internal and external factors and sheds light on social inequalities which are often neglected in HCT (Walker, 2012; Tiwari & Ibrahim, 2014; Powell and McGrath, 2019b).

Education, capabilities and aspirations

The relation between education, capabilities and aspirations is a complex one. Strengthening the capabilities to aspire through education is a central tenet in education and development interventions to tackle poverty and inequalities (Sen, 1999b; Powell & McGrath, 2019b). It is also the principle of policy discourses and initiatives aimed at raising aspirations (Atkins, 2010; Spohrer *et al.*, 2018). Yet, some authors point at issues that may arise when education prompt 'overambitious aspirations' (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013; DeJaeghere, 2018), for example, when students are encouraged to think that different visions of the 'good life' and new material and cultural lifestyles are within their reach of possible future selves (de Haas,

2021). This was the case for some disadvantaged students in Australia in Bok's (2010) study. The author explains the ethical tensions arising when the teacher had to negotiate between supporting students' high aspirations which she thought to be unrealistic for several structural constraints including educational performances and lowering students' aspirations towards more achievable outcomes. This tension raises ethical questions as labelling aspirations as overambitious could be a rhetoric device that may keep aspirations low, preventing people from changing their life and creating forms of subjectivation and acceptance of the *status quo*. DeJaeghere (2018) points at conceptual and empirical questions related to whether having educational aspirations is enough to achieve them, whether being educated expand people's capabilities, or if scaling down aspirations goes against the premise that education should spur social change and human development. In this respect, some capability scholars argue for the need for guidance and conducive environments to help young people develop and exert the capability to aspire (Appadurai, 2004; Hart, 2013).

Similarly, Hart (2013) highlights that using CA helps address the complexity and diverse nature of educational aspirations which are neglected or simplified in interventions such as the Widening Participation (WP) policy in the UK within the neoliberal agenda. Particularly, it can help understand the meaning and values of young people's aspirations. She argues that although the policy is potentially in line with the scope of CA (enhancing disadvantaged youth's aspirations, in this case by widening their participation in HE), it has paradoxically contributed to excluding rather than including disadvantaged young people in HE. As Hart (2016) states, "aspirations matter because they are a manifestation of the freedom to aspire which is valuable for human flourishing in its own right" (p. 13). However, she also denounces that amid neoliberal ethos and policies that promote certain aspirations as valuable and others not so much valuable (e.g. the aspirations to HE vs. alternatives to HE), the success of policies such as the WP is mistakenly measured on the functioning of aspiring to HE. A closer and deeper understanding of aspirations by means of CA shows a different story. Her mix-methods case study informed by "Sen-Bourdieu analytical framework" (Hart, 2013, p. 49) shows that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds participating in her study had made their choices about participating or not in HE influenced by several internal and external factors. These include the lack of navigational capacity to identify the diversity of possibilities beyond HE, the strong narrative around the value of HE, which linked high aspirations to HE, the neglect of other valuable alternatives, significant others' expectations etc. Findings show that in some cases students had felt constrained (having low level of agency) in their well-being freedom to choose what they wanted and had reason to value for

their own development and for the development of their life projects. Hart explains an important difference between the freedom to aspire (capability) and the functioning of aspiring, which differs from functionings as these are achievements while the functioning of aspiring is the act of voicing or deliberating aspirations (Fig. 2.1). She states that policies neglect the former and espouse a narrow view of the latter to support policy aspirations. As she puts it, “education participation cannot be assumed to constitute valued ways of being and doing for a given individual. Nor can it be assumed to be indicative of relative freedom between individuals” (*ibid.*, p. 158).

Figure 2.1: Aspirations’ process. Self-elaboration.



However, she does not clearly explain choices that reflect a more transformative interpretation of *habitus*. Findings raise ethical questions around which learners’ identity and what aspirations formation are promoted in educational institutions and by educational discourse like Widening Participation. These are informed by assumptions of instrumental choices and linear aspirations and often fail to acknowledge cultural differences and diversity among young people’s aspirations. In Hart’s study some students expressed aspirations (e.g. religious and family-oriented) that weighed more than or were concurrent or in conflict with, participating in HE, but that they had concealed or adapted to avoid prejudices. In this respect, one of the critiques to traditional, HCT perspectives that largely inform education policy worldwide is the neglect of individual diversity. From a capability perspective, this, in turn, neglects individuals’ well-being freedom to choose alternative valued functionings (Robeyns, 2005; Dang, 2014; Tiwari & Ibrahim, 2014; Moodie, Wheelahan and Lavigne, 2019).

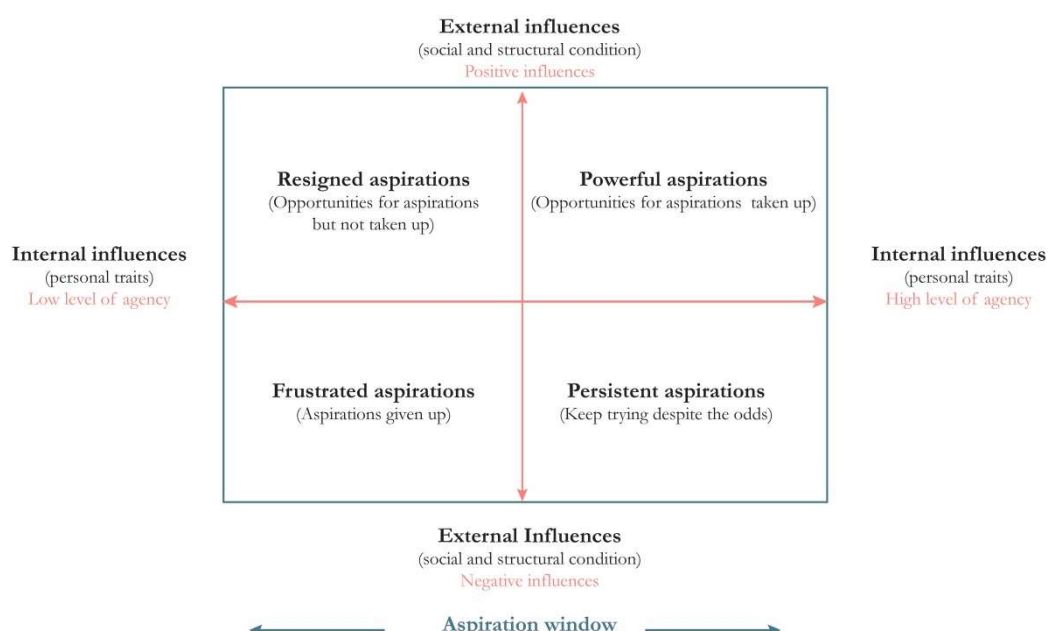
Other scholars have claimed for the need to look at young people’s educational aspirations through a dynamic understanding of their capability to aspire. This implies focusing on the degree of agency they have to form and express their aspirations (their freedom to choose for their well-being) without underplaying the role of different conversion factors in enabling or constraining the transformation of capabilities into functionings (their freedom to achieve well-being) (DeJaeghere, 2018; Mkwanzani, 2019). Mkwanzani (2019) for example investigates educational aspirations of marginalised youth who migrate to South Africa from

another Southern African country. In her qualitative study, she draws on Ray's (2006) concepts of "aspirations window" (*ibid.*, p. 410) and "aspirations gap" (*ibid.*, p. 411) and engages in the narrative of young people to have a holistic understanding of the multidimensional disadvantages the migrant youth were experiencing. In ways similar to Hart (2013), but with a more dynamic and fluid interpretation of agential power, the author identifies four types of higher educational aspirations by intersecting the influence of sociocultural, economic and institutional factors on youth's degree of agency to develop educational aspirations (Fig. 2.2). Young migrants were said to hold 'resigned' aspirations when, within their space of aspirations window, they had favourable social and structural conditions but low level of agency, for example, a loss of confidence in their ability to succeed due to past experiences, which did not motivate them to make use of available opportunities. In other words, their state of being in the present weighed more than better future selves. Resigned aspirations become adapted aspirations as young people negotiate a scale-down version of initial valued aspirations and re-direct their efforts towards more achievable functionings. As already commented (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013; Hart, 2013), this adaptation challenges the assessments of linear human development progression resulting from development strategies (e.g. aid programmes to tackle poverty), policy initiatives (e.g. Widening Participation in education) or institutional provisions (e.g. TVET institutions). It can also contribute to the generational poverty trap if resigned aspirations imply the internalisation of the absence of basic resources and the acceptance of having basic needs unmet (Dalton *et al.*, 2014; Flechtner, 2014). However, when the intersection of agency and structural circumstances was positive (e.g. they were able and willing to identify and make use of structural opportunities amid constraints they encountered and, thus, were pursuing what they valued in life), aspirations were classified as 'powerful'.

Aspirations were 'persistent' when young people exerted their agency to pursue their aspirations although jeopardised by the limited social and structural opportunities (outcomes of past choices or constraining circumstances in the present). Instrumental values and intrinsic motivation were found as influencing youth's persistence. Importantly here, youth narratives highlight how constraints do not necessarily lead to lowering agency and aspirations. Persistence can resolve in powerful aspirations if changes in structural circumstances occur, including thanks to the intervention of corporate agency. Yet, it can also result in adaptation if the "stagnant position" (Mkwananzi & Wilson-Strydom, 2018, p. 87) of persistent but unmet aspirations endure. Lastly, when low level of individual agency and negative social and structural conditions intersect, youth's aspirations were seen as

‘frustrated’. Differently from resigned aspirations but with similar outcomes in terms of strengthening the poverty trap, frustrated aspirations did not leave space for opportunities (e.g. lack of hope and motivation along with constraining circumstances). Mkwanzani (2019) underlines the fluidity and multidimensionality of young migrants’ aspirations which were contingent to internal and external circumstances. She also differentiates between short- and long-term aspirations showing gendered analysis of what young people valued more (intrinsic and instrumental aspirations) over time. In this, young women valued financial and job security more than pursuing educational qualifications both in the short- and long-term and valued family and community more than education. By contrast, young men placed the highest value in education over time which they saw as enabler of other capabilities (e.g. providing for their family, gaining respect, giving back to their community).

Figure 2.2: Interplay of conversion factors and agency in aspirations formation.



Source: Adapted from Mkwanzani, 2019, p. 219.

TVET, capabilities and aspirations

Understanding the difference between intrinsic and instrumental value of education as well as what young people have reason to value in life appears particularly important in the field of TVET. This is so given the extensive and predominant use of HCT and the narrow neo-liberal interpretations of poor and economic-oriented aspirations of vocational students that inform orthodox TVET policy and practice worldwide. Indeed, in the past decade some scholars have started to draw on CA to problematise, through the perspective of students,

their participation in TVET and its role in expanding their freedoms to choose and aspirations, especially in situation of inequalities, marginalisation and social injustices (Tikly, 2013; McGrath & Powell, 2015; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2016; DeJaeghere, 2018; Powell & McGrath, 2019b, 2019a; Suart, 2019). The paucity of TVET literature on upper-secondary students' aspirations raises the need for a better understanding of what matters to vocational students, who usually belong to the poorest quintile of the population to be able to develop new and more appropriate TVET theories, policies and practices that align with the real experiences of TVET students (McGrath *et al.*, 2020).

Bonvin (2019) argues for the necessity to move beyond the view of TVET as producing workers and the consideration of TVET students as solely interested in exploiting their human capital and becoming workers through the acquisition of skills and the enhancement of their opportunities to be employed. While economic growth is important, from a capability perspective it is a means for enhancing human flourishing. Suart (2019) gives an example of how for the English young women participating in her qualitative study, TVET was a means to their empowerment through skills acquisition but also through the development of self-confidence. The author explains how learners' initial aspirations reflected their narrow aspirations window and the narrow instrumental policy goals and how, due to exposure to new opportunities, these transformed over time from being purely instrumental to encompassing intrinsic individual gains. This sense of empowerment would help them escape intersectional discriminations (gender, class, ethnicity, race) at work, low-paid and precarious jobs, but also abusive relationships and would enlarge their possibilities for a better life. As Suart (*ibid.*) puts it, "pursuing education had enabled them to (re)claim their lives as they improved their mental health, confidence, self-esteem, and well-being" (p. 15). DeJaeghere (2018) offers another example of how looking at TVET from a CA allows to understand educational aspirations of Tanzanian young women as expression of their agency to challenge structural constraints and live the life they have reason to value. Critiquing Hart's (2013) binary approach to aspirations (aspirations as true or adapted), DeJaeghere shows that adapting aspirations does not mean necessarily downplaying them but reconsidering them in the light of new knowledge and skills gained which enhance learners' capacity to aspire, when education allows them to aspire towards valued functionings.

Summary and shortcomings of aspirations as capabilities

As it has been shown, the CA is a normative evaluative framework which places human flourishing and well-being at its centre. Yet, it is not a theoretical framework which explains or helps understand how individuals take decisions and “how aspirations are formed, enacted or transformed” (McGrath *et al.*, 2020, p. 15). Nor does it explain how education (but also labour market and other societal institutions) should operate to expand capabilities that can be transformed into functionings. For this reason, CA has been extensively criticised for its detachment with sociology and in particular for not considering the key role of the structure in shaping beings and doings that are considered valuable to the individual and the different set of opportunities given to each individual according to their position within the socioeconomic structure where they live. Resultantly, capability scholars who have empirically used the framework, have complemented it with sociological theories as they help explain how power is exerted in the structures and agency interaction (Hart, 2013; Robeyns, 2017; Powell & McGrath, 2019b). In the field of TVET, McGrath *et al.* (2020) propose a critical capabilities account of vocational education and training (CCA-VET) which combines the normative framework of CA with critical sociological theories, particularly CR. This thesis draws on these combined approaches but extends these to provide a thorough and holistic understanding of aspirations which also examines the role of *doxa*, rationality and *habitus* in aspiration formation (see next section and Chapter 4).

Structure and agency in youth aspirations

To address CA’s limitations, this section will review the theoretical, explanatory frameworks in relation to aspirations formation, decision-making and social action in sociology. In theorising educational and professional aspirations and choices in post-school life trajectories, researchers have adopted different positions within the structure/agency debate. These differ according to the understanding scholars have of the structure and agency interaction and the consequent power mechanisms this interaction drives. On the one side of the spectrum, the structuralist approach considers aspirations as predominantly determined by structures (such as class; gender; ethnicity; religion; family background; education, market and cultural systems) which shape working-class youth’s ideas or perceptions of what is accessible and possible and what is not, beyond individual control. This strand mainly draws on the sociological reproduction theory of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1986). On the other side, more agentic approaches emphasise the role of instrumental rational choices (Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001; Elster, 2007) in forming aspirations and making biographies irrespective of structural constraints. In between the structural and individualist poles of the

debate, a wide range of “middle-ground positions” (Bryant & Ellard, 2015, p. 487) have developed among social scientists. These have shown empirical evidence of the limits (and inapplicability) of the extreme theoretical positions and have provided theoretical as well as empirical contributions to overcome them. Overall, middle-ground positions acknowledge that exerting agency through individual factors such as reflexivity, resilience and judgment have become prominent in youth transitional outcomes in the late modern social world where social structures, however, still exist and can constrain or enable the exertion of agency. In line with this, aspirations lie at the intersection of individuals’ agency who reflexively form their ambitions, desires, calculations within their (perceived) opportunity structures (to mention a few, Archer, 2003, 2012; Akram, 2013; Bryant & Ellard, 2015; Gale & Parker, 2015a; Zipin *et al.*, 2015). The next sections will show strengths and weaknesses of these approaches providing theoretical and empirical evidence in support of ‘middle-ground’ reflexive approaches, particularly Archer’s (Archer, 2003, 2007) CR approach.

Aspirations as rational choices

Research on aspirations and youth transitions in TVET is heavily dominated by theoretical assumption of the utilitarian Rational Choice and Human Capital Theories (RCTs and HCT) (Pantea, 2019). RCTs assume agential power of young people over structural constraints. Drawing on neo-classical economics, RCTs take the market perspective on human actions, which are boiled down to young people’s maximisation of their utility. What follows is that young people are considered as “rational optimizers” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 314) able to identify their ‘best’ option that will maximise their (subjectively expected) utility, based on the costs and benefits of different alternatives, given their circumstances (Elster, 1991). The actor-focused models of RCTs is founded upon the principle of individualism which states that explanations of social phenomena rest in individuals’ actions (Goldthorpe, 1998). From a Rational Choice perspective, educational (and future professional) aspirations are explained exclusively in terms of potential economic benefits of educational investments compared to alternative labour market paths. This is very much in line with the HC Theory postulated by Becker (1993) which sees educational choices as investments in the present for future rates of returns (boosting chances of future success). The assumption is that investing in human capital by expanding knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes through education promotes growth, security, welfare both at the micro-level of the individual and the macro-levels of society (OECD, 2001; Wallenborn, 2010; Bonvin, 2019). For neglecting the role that structures hold in shaping human action, RCTs are often

presented in opposition to structuralist approaches (Hay, 2002; Glaesser and Cooper, 2014; Hegna, 2014; Bryant and Ellard, 2015).

Primary and secondary effects

In the field of education, RCTs have been used to explain class stratification on educational outcomes, social mobility and inequalities, based on the distinction between ‘primary effects’ and ‘secondary effects’ of stratification on educational attainment pioneered by Boudon (1974). The former refers to individual socioeconomic background and cultural identity that influence students’ school performances. The latter are the costs and benefits analysis of different educational alternatives for students and families from different social background based on rational assessment of school achievement, individual ability and probability of success, and rates of returns. As Boudon states, when influences of primary effects are controlled for, class differences in educational attainments remain high. This means that secondary effects of stratification are crucial in the creation of class differential in educational attainments. In other words, Boudon maintains that class differences and stratification manifest in educational choices more than in classed values and tastes. Drawing on Boudon (1974), Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) make explicit the following assumptions of Rational Choice approaches in education. First, the assumption that individuals’ priority is to avoid social downgrading more than to pursue social mobility (relative risk-aversion). Second, the assumption that failing in a highly valued option (e.g. academic path compared to TVET) leads to higher probability of experiencing downward social mobility than avoid attempting such option. Therefore, they conclude that aspirations are better explained by these costs-benefits analysis than by structural characteristics.

School transitions and aspirations in empirical studies

Empirical evidence of the applicability and feasibility of RCT in choices and aspirations during post-school transitions remains controversial and thin (Jüttler *et al.*, 2016). Methodological limitations of RCTs result from studying aspirations as abstracted from quantitative data examining correlations between other (more macro) variables related to primary and secondary effects, and not critically exploring the values students ascribe to their aspirations. These limitations are evident, for example, in Hillmert and Jacob’s study (2003). The scholars use a rational choice approach to theoretically analyse the different educational outcomes and class stratification in educational decisions after upper-secondary

education in a system that offers institutional alternatives to HE (i.e. vocational training programmes or entering labour market). They explain German students' preferences and choices for university after upper-secondary school as classed costs and benefits calculations of returns (expected future income in a given period of time). The parameters of their utility-maximisation models comprise risks of failure and expectations of success which are attributed to family educational background and economic situation, time horizon, qualification-specific income, length of educational and training programmes. In line with Boudon's (1974) theory on the importance of secondary effects over primary effects in educational choices, having vocational alternatives put school-leavers from low socioeconomic families, who had low expectations of success in university and short horizon of calculation, off university. Vocational programmes were, thus, their optimal choice as they provided them with intermediate qualifications and the possibility to either continue their studies in university in their future or enter the labour market as skilled workers. Likewise, students from wealthier and more educated families were more likely to participate in HE. Similarly, Hegna's (2014) quantitative study on educational choice, aspirations and transition to upper secondary school in Norway found that while primary effects were key in understanding aspirations during the decision-making process of which upper-secondary education to choose, secondary effects explained post-upper secondary education aspirations better than students' structural characteristics. This means that while students socioeconomic and cultural background seemed to be more relevant in understanding compulsory education choices, costs and benefits analysis were more relevant when young people had to take the choice of what to do after their compulsory education.

Other studies consider educational aspirations in relation to cost/benefit analysis of the context. For example, Glauser and Becker (2016) investigate the impact of opportunity structures on educational aspirations and transitions after upper-secondary education in Switzerland. They explain 'realistic' aspirations that German-speaking Swiss students have for TVET or for baccalaureate schools as informed by an instrumental logic of decision-making based on thorough information on opportunities and constraints related to different educational alternatives and labour market conditions that students and their families have. In this study realistic aspirations are used as a measurement of the secondary effects of stratification and measured by means of a survey which differentiated educational wishes (idealistic educational aspirations) from expectations (what they thought they would actually do) after compulsory education. The study demonstrates that once realistic aspirations are controlled for, the effects of school type attended at lower secondary level on post upper-

secondary school's transition are significant. Thus, students from low socioeconomic background who attend TVET at lower secondary have higher probabilities of choosing TVET paths after compulsory school than their peers from higher socioeconomic background. However, findings also show a positive relationship between the opportunity structures (broader range of educational alternatives and good possibilities in the third sector of the labour market), and the probability of choosing academic paths, providing more generally applicable human capital. Likewise, limitations and lack of offers in the supply side (particularly in the third sector/non-profit sector) results in an increase probability of choosing TVET, to provide human capital that is more specific to the available opportunities. Similarly, Malin and Jacob's (2019) study on German students' career aspirations describe these as rational adaptations to opportunity structures (availability of apprenticeships, job and relative levels of competition) that would maximise students' labour market opportunities. The authors explain that occupational gender segregation in TVET reflects occupational aspirations of adolescents which are heavily influenced by rational calculations of expected career opportunities and success, thus reproducing inequalities.

By contrast, Jüttler *et al.* (2016) associate vocational baccalaureate Swiss students' preferences for academic or vocational tracks at tertiary level or work mainly to calculations on their subject-related (economics) abilities and relate these to future career prospects. The study shows that students with higher economic skills and knowledge and attitude towards economics are more likely to have stronger educational aspirations. This suggests that economic competencies mediate structural factors, e.g. school profile, in the formation of aspirations. Notably, students with a higher intrinsic motivation in economics are more likely to aspire to work after Baccalaureate, which the authors explain with the nature of jobs often based on economic contexts. The authors suggest this might be due to the better job prospects awaiting these students. Theoretically, these findings seem to be in line with the wider, cognitive-subjective interpretation of rational choice approaches that have been later developed where 'good' and 'meaningful' reasons can explain the logic behind aspirations and choices more than (only) market calculations (Boudon, 1996, 2003).

The concept of 'bounded rationality'

In sociology, RCTs have received ample criticism. Some critiques question the very notion of instrumental rationality. As Hodgson (2012) observes, the key theoretical assumption that individuals make decisions based on the knowledge they have of the context fails to

acknowledge the fallibility and multiplicity of human interpretations of reality and, hence, the dynamic nature of people's preferences and goals. Herbert Simon's (1997a) conceptualisation of 'bounded rationality' puts forward more realistic and tenable approaches of the theory for sociology. He acknowledges a form of rationality which considers the limits everyone is subject to when making 'free' and 'rational' choices. These are, thus, rational within the (limits of) time, information available to individuals and their cognitive capabilities. Bounded rationality, thus, considers a subjective rather than objective rationality which is helpful to explain choices and behaviours driven by 'good reasons' people have given the circumstances under which they take decisions, which are not necessarily linked to utility maximisation. The concept of bounded rationality has been extended to consider an analysis of the real conditions under which decisions are made (Ben-Porath, 2009) and how these conditions differ significantly across social groups and classes. In other words, choices are bounded by constraints and to external circumstances which affect the decision-making process. From this perspective, "choices may rather be the result of an interaction between objective constraints and specific dispositions" (Bonal and Zancajo, 2018, p. 24) that individuals have when choosing.

To similar conclusion landed Boudon in later works. Despite recognising the strength of RCT, he acknowledges its restricted vision of human behaviour, motivations behind behaviours and future goals to mere economic-driven considerations, which, in turn, represent only one trigger of individual's choices (Boudon, 2003). The "cognitivist model" (Boudon, 1996, p. 123) he developed later aligns with the wider conceptualisation of rationality as it aims to address the limits of the orthodox RCT in explaining behaviours and choices that can be interpreted as irrational. This approach assumes that individual's actions can be triggered by (individual or collective) beliefs beyond the cost-benefit rationality. What is important is that they have to be meaningful to the individual and that actions that follow are grounded on (subjective, fallible, contingent) 'strong reasons' (Boudon, 2003). Empirical research conducted by Boudon on education, social mobility and reproduction of inequalities in 1970s/80s Europe showed that the increasing demand for educational credentials resulted in people being overqualified for their job positions, a phenomenon still relevant today. Short-cycle courses on higher education were set up in many countries to address the mismatch in the rate of returns. Yet, the assumption that many students would opt for short courses was incorrect. Boudon explains that students were aware that they were making their choice within the same set of alternatives available to other students. Therefore, many chose long-term programmes, acting contrary to instrumental rational self-interest,

because they believed that the majority would choose short-term course, thus reducing the chances of success in terms of rates of returns. By contrast, only a minority of students chose to enrol in such courses and benefitted by having (more) chances of well-paid jobs (Giddens, 1984).

At issue is the knowledge formation which is key to the decision-making process in Rational Choice models. Knowledge formation, and access to knowledge in the first place, is indeed highly structured. Individuals' social positioning limits their opportunities to access useful information which inform choices. As Goldthorpe (1998) states, "the information available to actors [is] a product of the social relations in which they are involved" (p. 182). Similarly to Furlong's 'epistemological fallacy' of late modernity and the illusion of free choices under the guise of weakened structural constraints, Hay (2002) points precisely at this 'paradox of rational choice'. The paradox lies in the fact that the theory argues for individual's actions as result of secondary effects more than primary effects. However, these actions stem from a specific social framework with determined set of opportunities within which individuals choose the 'best' option. Thus, human behaviour and actions are ultimately bounded to structural factors and contingent circumstances.

Summary of rational choice perspectives and shortcomings

Notwithstanding the contributions of RCTs in highlighting the significance of rational decision-making and instrumental value of education in educational choices and aspirations, there are shortcomings that need to be considered. As noted above, one of the issues with this utility-driven model of decision is that it considers aspirations and decision-making as static, relatively stable across time and exclusively as means-to-ends, when aspirations have a transformative, changing and adaptive nature and not necessarily instrumental. In fact, the orthodox theory often neglects concepts such as desires and values which are key in the understanding of aspirations (Kroneberg & Kalter, 2012). An example of this is the operationalisation of aspirations as 'realistic' (e.g. expectations) as opposed to 'idealistic' (wishes, dreams) within RCT literature (see for example Hegna, 2014; Glauser & Becker, 2016; Malin & Jacob, 2019). Instrumental rationality also relies on the ability and predisposition of young people to make rational decisions assuming their realistic understandings of educational and labour market opportunities (Polesel *et al.*, 2018). However, the logic of action behind educational aspirations and choices cannot be confined to utilitarian goals as empirical studies have shown the importance of non-utilitarian goals,

driven by socially and culturally embedded values, moral or ‘non-instrumentally rational’ beliefs (Hatcher, 1998; Frye, 2012; Glaesser & Cooper, 2014; Powell & McGrath, 2019b).

A number of studies question the RCT approach. In a qualitative study on UK vocational college students’ perceptions of vocational education, Atkins and Flint (2015) found that serendipity rather than instrumental rationality played a role in students’ ‘choice’ of vocational education. A qualitative study on students’ aspirations, choices and post-school transitions in Spain reveals the limits of applying RCT to interpret young people’s accounts of future orientations. It shows the role of emotions in guiding students’ transitions, alongside gendered and classed dispositions, perceptions of own abilities, and future opportunities (Tarabini & Curran, 2018). Another qualitative study on ambitious educational aspirations of disadvantaged Malawian young girls shows that contrary to considering aspirations as rational choices contingent on contextual factors and subjective beliefs to maximise potential benefits, aspirations are assertion of morally worthy future selves and a way to transcend their present reality. Despite the odds of realising their high educational aspirations, young women’s persistent optimism in striving for them lies in the belief that resolute future aspirations enhance present narratives about themselves. This underlines a strong moral value concerning the person they want to become beyond rational calculations of utility maximisation (Frye, 2012). Drawing on school-to-work transition studies and on secondary educational choices, Hatcher (1998) sustains that while middle-class orientations can be overall described as ‘rational choices’ as families and students aim to maintain their class status and position, findings show more complex and less uniform orientations when it comes to working-class aspirations, choices and transitions. These range from avoiding unemployment to ambitious educational and professional goals reflecting aspirations to enter the middle-class. It is clear that rational choice explanations describe only part of these aspirations. He concludes saying that,

If intra-class differences cannot be explained by differences in the ‘rational choice’ equations, they must be the product of goals and aspirations which are not simply utilitarian in economic terms. (p. 15)

As this review has demonstrated, the shortcomings of RCTs are very much related to the methodological limitations resulting from studying aspirations drawing on large-scale quantitative data, which predominates RCT studies. These limitations are noteworthy for abstracting the decision-making process, and only providing indirect ways of inferring its underlying mechanisms, based upon correlations between other variables, and not providing

space for critically and deeply exploring the value students ascribe to their aspirations. In their qualitative study on German and English secondary students' educational aspirations and plans, Glaesser and Cooper (2014) found that young people had an instrumental view of their educational credentials linked to better jobs or good income and were taking into accounts potential failures linked to demanding educational choices and their costs. However, the study found that students were not always acting on thorough information, but on incomplete but 'satisficing' information (Simon, 1997b). This means that they chose the alternative that was satisfactory (i.e. good enough) rather than optimal (i.e. the best to maximise the utility). For example, working-class students were more likely to feel concerned about possible failures whereas middle-class students did not show such concerns. Likewise, while middle-class students expressed aspirations to go to university as their minimum standard, working-class students' lower boundary was getting any qualification at all to find a secure and decently paid job. Yet, working-class students in selective schools (as in the case of some English students) showed higher aspirations than their peers in non-selective schools. Higher aspirations were also found as reflecting family's *habitus* on desires of upward social mobility. Thus, their rationality was subjective and bounded to their circumstances and class position.

To conclude this section, paradoxically, despite being actor-focused and based on methodological individualism, the review has shown that RCT provides explanations of aspirations as empty of any real sense of agency. This is why rational models have to be displaced by/combined with other theoretical frameworks which put grater weights on individual reflexivity to get a holistic and thorough understanding of aspirations and choices.

Aspirations as structurally determined

Research on reproduction of social and cultural inequalities in educational (and professional) choices, attainments, aspirations, and trajectories has heavily drawn on structuralist approaches. For structuralist approaches, aspirations are determined by the opportunity structures that young people perceive. Structural constraints such as social class, gender, ethnicity, religious orientations, socioeconomic and cultural structures which determine individual's socioeconomic position in the society and their ability to access resources are seen as crucial predictors of both aspirations and educational and labour market trajectories (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Reay, 2001; Ball *et al.* 2002; Furlong 2009). Structuralists largely foreground their studies in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1986; Bourdieu &

Passeron, 1990), his theory of social reproduction and his conceptualisation of *habitus*, fields and capitals that he uses as analytical toolkit to explore and understand social reproduction, educational inequality, social mobility and aspirations.

Habitus, fields, *doxa* and forms of capital

Bourdieu (1977) conceptualises *habitus* as individual's embodied social structures and cultural forms within society which inform and shape dispositions, values, norms, tastes, roles, determine routinised thinking, behaviours, and actions. These enduring generative dispositions are acquired from family and significant others, class, social environments and partly reflect individual and collective practices (e.g. how people talk, walk, feel, think, speak). These, in turn, tend to reflect individuals' social positions and ways into which individuals have been socialised (Bourdieu & Wacquan, 1992; Reay, 2004; Threadgold, 2017). Bourdieu uses *habitus* to encapsulate and interpret "the intentionality without intention, the knowledge without cognitive intent, the pre-reflective, infra-conscious mastery that agents acquire in the social world" (Bourdieu & Wacquan, 1992, p. 19).

Foundational to Bourdieu's approach is the belief that through the interiorisation of the social structure, agency and subjective dispositions are shaped by the structural contexts, or 'fields', of practice. Individuals are positioned within these fields from infancy (e.g. the family field) and move through different fields (e.g. the educational field, the work field) throughout life. According to Bourdieu, individuals own different levels of competency, or 'capitals', depending on which field they encounter, and they have the tendency to (re)produce the social structures they have been socialised into (Bourdieu, 1977; Hatcher, 1998; Akram, 2013; Farrugia, 2013). Therefore, structural disadvantages (e.g. class differences) are internalised through socialisation and reproduced to different degrees (Stahl *et al.*, 2018). Contributing to structural disadvantages is the unequal access to and possession of different forms of capitals. Bourdieu (1986) outlines three forms of capital, economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital refers to the economic resources (e.g. money and properties) people have which allocate them to specific social class groups. Economic capital determines the degree of possession of the other forms of capital and, thus, sits at their roots. Social capital consists of the networks of mutual support and connections that people have or belong to, that can be mobilised to expand opportunities and possibilities of success in different fields. Cultural capital comprises the embodied enduring dispositions and behaviours the individual possesses, such as cultural knowledge, linguistic skills, accent,

tastes, norms and values. These can transform and expand through life experiences (e.g. getting education). As some scholars underline, different forms of cultural capital are not equally valued across the society. The cultural capital owned by the dominant group, the middle-class, is presented as universal and endowed with superiority and legitimacy (Ecclestone, 2004; Fuller, 2009; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016; Threadgold, 2017). This legitimacy pushes the ‘dominated’, working-class, to negotiate conflicting identities, cultural demands and aspirations (Ingram, 2009).

Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquan, 1992) states that fields are places of power and conflict where forms of misrecognition can take place when individuals move across fields having a different *doxa* they are not familiar with. *Doxa* is a set of shared values, understanding, norms, knowledge, points of view that inform “what goes without saying” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.170) (e.g. what is legitimate and what is not) in a field which reflects the dominating cultural capital (dominant discourses). Misrecognition and conflict take place when the *doxa* of the dominants is imposed as universal (Threadgold, 2017). He asserts that aspirations are essentially determined by the probability of success in achieving a desired goal and reflect a “sense of reality’ i.e. the correspondence between the objective classes and the internalized classes, social structures and mental structures” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164). Therefore, aspirations contribute to the “reproduction of the power relations of which they are the product, by securing the misrecognition, and hence the recognition, of the arbitrariness on which they are based” (*ibid.*). Unlike rational logics and statistical calculations of probabilities, Bourdieu (*ibid.*) further states that:

the likelihood of the success of a given action in a given situation brings into play a whole body of wisdom, sayings, commonplaces, ethical precepts (“that’s not for the likes of us”) and, at a deeper level, the unconscious principles of the ethos which, being the product of a learning process dominated by a determinate type of objective regularities, determines “reasonable” and “unreasonable” conduct for every agent subjected to those regularities. (p. 77)

In terms of educational aspirations this could translate in middle-class adolescents aiming to Higher educational pathways because they have been socialised into this predisposition and they possess the capitals to be able to have a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 61), to compete and succeed. In their case, *habitus*, and capitals (especially cultural capital) are recognised and valued in the fields and *doxa* of HE, whereas working-class young people’s competences, knowledge, tastes and identities are not valued (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Likewise, this would explain the general trend about lower educational performances and

aspirations of working-class students compared to their middle-class peers regardless the country and the indicators used (Tarabini & Curran, 2018). The assumption here is that the institutional *habitus* of schools and its *doxa* reflect the dominant requirements, knowledge, tastes and values of the middle-class (Fuller, 2009; Ingram, 2009).

Post-school transitions in empirical studies

Empirical studies have shown that this misrecognition may have different consequences on students' educational aspirations. Based on Bourdieu's tools, Tarabini and Curran's (2018) qualitative study on young people's educational aspirations and post-16 expectations in Spain shows that this misalignment can lead to the development of a sense of inadequacy (*symbolic violence* in Bourdieu's terms) in the students who feel incapable and unmotivated to meet the academic requirements and to make future educational plans. It can also provoke strong resistance against school's ethos and practices for neglecting and devaluing their working-class *habitus*, which in the long-run result in students' social immobility. This is related to feeling a sense of uselessness and rejection of education, as it was also eloquently showed in Willis' (1977) classical ethnography on post-secondary education aspirations and plans of English working-class students. Willis' study shows that the 'lads' reinforced their sense of identity and their working-class *habitus* through the rejection of the middle-class *habitus* imposed by the school. They did not see any purpose or any benefit from getting an education and complying with an authority that misrecognised their identity, their culture, their values. Their choice of standing up against the educational institution informed their counter-school culture. As in Tarabini and Curran (2018), this 'sense of futility' would explain how, in Willis' terms, 'working-class kids get working-class jobs'.

Willis' (1977) study has been a landmark for youth researchers interested in the reproduction of class inequalities through aspirations and educational/life choices (see for example Hatcher, 1998; Walker, 2007; Roberts, 2009; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016; Threadgold, 2017; Tarabini & Curran, 2018). Many sociologists of youth transitions in the UK state that aspirations are determined by the opportunity structures that young people perceive, and that structural constraints such as social class, gender and ethnicity are still crucial predictors of both aspirations and educational and labour market trajectories (Furlong, Biggart and Cartmel, 1996; Furlong & Biggart, 1999; Fuller, 2009; McCulloch, 2017). For example, Furlong, (2009) claims that working-class young people's aspirations and lifepaths remain shaped by class identity and constrained by sociocultural and economic resources, locality,

subjective and unequal capacity to manage their life transition. He acknowledges the weakening of collective, class-based responses to structural constraints and the post-modern emphasis on individualised and reflexive life projects. However, despite the belief that life is no longer structured by class, gender, ethnicity, and the illusions regarding increased life opportunities and possibilities of choice, which he calls the “epistemological fallacy” (*ibid.*, p. 349) of late modernity, he suggests re-conceptualising social class, rather than overlooking it, to capture new complexities behind transitions which, he argues, have never been simple but rather simplified by theoretical paradigms. Hodkinson and Sparkes’ (1997) studies on career decisions argue that marginalised young people construct their aspirations within their subjectively perceived “horizons for action” (p. 34). They suggest that meanings behind career aspirations and choices are determined by pragmatic negotiations between personal experiences, advice from significant others and opportunity structures.

Continuing with the post-16 educational aspirations and transitions, studies have focused on how class structures determine HE aspirations, choices and experiences. Reay (2001), for example, argues that class-inherited cultural capital and *habitus* heavily influence individual’s aspirations and educational attainment, with post-school choices between academic and non-academic paths classed and gendered. Therefore, low social class is regarded as the crucial predictor of low aspirations and educational attainment. In other studies, the author further points at a psycho-social barrier to educational aspirations and attainments which manifest in feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, misplacement and social exclusion experienced by UK working-class students who make the transition to HE against the odds (Reay, 1998, 2015).

Others (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016) note the complex emotional toll that identity negotiations had on working-class university students and the strategies put into place to ‘fit in’. In a research on post-HE trajectories of working-class graduates, Burke (2018) suggests a relationship between their limited aspirations and expectations and the awareness of the constraints they face within and outside educational institutions. This is consistent with Bourdieu’s (1977, p. 77) view of aspirations as informed by the probability of success and what is (in)accessible that “for the likes of us”. Bradley and Ingram’s (2013) work is significant in that it shows “a class-based aspirationalism” (*ibid.*, p. 59) informed by the ‘experiential capital’ (e.g. the experienced struggles of parents and the limited opportunities working-class students have grown up with) and the emotional, psychological and economic investment in education that English working-class students draw upon not

solely to ‘fit in’ in elite universities, but also to succeed in ‘the making of (middle-)class’ subjects (Avis & Atkins, 2017).

Research conducted in Australia corroborates European findings (see for example Tarabini & Curran, 2018) on the impact of the institutional habitus, especially enacted through the role of teachers’ expectations, on school leavers’ aspirations and transitions. The study of Polesel *et al.* (2018) found a strong relationship between transitions to university and students’ background with higher expectations of disadvantaged students transiting to the labour market. Polesel and colleagues consider it ‘disturbing’ the finding on the significantly low expectations teachers had of probability of successful transition to university for working-class students, which were lower than students and parents’ expectations and even lower than actual transition outcomes, compared to expectations for students from high socioeconomic families. This aligns with Bourdieu’s view of aspirations as structured and limited within ‘real’ chances of success. It also confirms the role of education’s institutional *habitus* affected by the *doxa* which sets the benchmark of what is desirable and valuable but at the same time its role in reproducing the structural inequalities by defining what future fits young people according to their social class, labelling working-class students as ‘underachievers’(a manifestation of symbolic violence).

Threadgold and Nilan (2009) explore the impact of cultural capital on aspirations. Researching secondary school students’ attitudes towards the future in three schools located in different socioeconomic areas, they found relationship between lower cultural capital and lower abilities to identify and manage information to plan for the futures. The study also reveals that disadvantaged students were more concerned with structural risks they would face in their future, mainly related to material disadvantages. Therefore, their aspirations were largely informed by ‘realistic’ and grounded accounts. Contrarily, students from higher socioeconomic background, shielded from structural risks, were more ‘philosophical’ in their discourses of future selves and aspirations, willing to be flexible and to reinvent themselves. The authors define this risk negotiation a ‘new’ reflexivity constitutive, in part, of cultural capital, thus, unequally distributed across classes. They come to the controversial conclusion that middle-class students negotiated their future (more) reflexively. However, what seems to be the case is that middle-class students were more sophisticated in voicing their reflections on aspirations and future plans compared to working-class peers. A higher sophistication does not necessarily mean being more reflexive. As other studies illustrate, for being HE a natural progression for middle-class students, going to university was a ‘non-

choice’ for them (whereas which university to go may be a choice), which implies less engagement in reflexive processes and strategies to make their way to university and fit in (Archer *et al.*, 2007; Bradley & Ingram, 2013).

The importance of these debates lies in the need to go beyond naïve interpretations of agency and aspirations as structurally determined and to consider more productive conceptualisations of these, informed by forms of rationality and reflexivity, as this thesis does (Chapter 4). In this respect, some scholars criticise the overly-deterministic and unreflexive interpretation that has been done of Bourdieu’s theories and analytical tools and claim for the need to move beyond the traditional interpretation of and engagement with Bourdieu’s theory and conceptual tools (Mills, 2008; Atkinson, 2012; Webb *et al.*, 2017; Stahl *et al.*, 2018; Threadgold, 2018). Whether it is correct to label Bourdieu as a ‘structuralist’ is still under debate with many scholars critiquing the. Engaging with such debate falls beyond the scope of this study.

In the field of TVET, the reproduction of social inequalities has been mainly reflected in the classed and gendered ‘head/hands’ division and the orientations TVET students have towards waged labour (Lahelma, 2009; Lappalainen *et al.*, 2013; Avis & Atkins, 2017). Research in Finland on post-compulsory (after 16) educational choices illustrates that the dichotomy mental/manual related to theoretical or practical subjects is reiterated in teachers and students’ accounts and reflect what it is expected from the students in terms of professional development. Despite the emphasis on individual choices and self-responsibilities of post-modern ethos, this division is still strongly classed and gendered. Young people from working-class families or with ethnic background were more likely to take the vocational route than their middle-class peers. The choice was also related to the construction of self-identity, e.g. perceiving themselves as brainy students or readers, or as handy and practical students who do not like reading (Lahelma, 2009).

Gender segregation manifests stronger in the choice of TVET track of studies than in the choice between academic vs. vocational education. However, while male students tended to reproduce working-class masculinities to “position themselves correctly” (Lappalainen *et al.*, 2013, p. 199) by choosing male-predominant tracks, female students were more open to choose differently (‘against their gender’ and class). Yet, in a progressive context such as Finland, unconventional choices are not negotiated between different and conflicting *habitus*. In fact, ‘choosing differently’ is highly supported and rewarded by social

institutions (*ibid.*). By contrast, a qualitative study conducted in the UK on young people's perceptions of TVET reveals that class and gender affect the decision-making process by constraining disadvantaged students' 'horizon for actions' (Atkins, 2017). The students who took part in the study were more prone to accept reality for what it was rather than engaging with possible ways of transforming it. The author found that this disposition was linked to students' limited access to information and low ability to navigate and manage it. Consequently, in some cases their transition decisions were likely to be left to serendipity more than pragmatism compared to their better-off peers. This might be due to the lack of institutional support that characterises highly liberalised contexts such as the UK.

Summary of structuralist perspectives and shortcomings

Without questioning the undeniable contributions of structuralist approaches on how social reproduction can take place routinely and unintendedly through aspirations formation, choices and life trajectories, limitations are also evident. Structuralist approaches fail to consider how individuals respond to their socioeconomic and cultural structures and how this interaction shapes aspirations. The social, cultural, and human development nature of aspirations need to be taken into consideration for a more thorough understanding of how aspirations are (trans)formed. These approaches especially overlook working-class young peoples' ability to exert their agency and aspire to alternative futures, other than those determined or constrained by their social positioning. Indeed, misrecognition and struggles over identity and aspirations formation emerging from the literature imply that young people are engaging in reflexive assessments of what they have to deal with, rather than being solely at the mercy of structural constraints. Another limitation is the failure to problematise the meanings that working-class young people attribute to their aspirations, tending to label them in terms of inferiority as lower achievers 'in deficit' of aspirations. Lastly, they fail to capture changes in the collective identity of the working-class, as well as subjective orientations within the social group and how these affect the conceptualisation of aspirations.

Drawing on these critiques, some authors have provided alternative interpretations of, reportedly, 'low' educational aspirations as aspirations to values, lifestyles or professions (e.g. parenthood; ability to immediately earn a wage and enjoy 'the good things in life'; self-employment or vocational/practical jobs) that do not require HE and for which, in fact, HE could be a deterrent (Brown 2011; Grant 2017). Others have looked at aspirations as proxies of individual and collective identity formation, stressing the moral value informing young

people's aspirations (Baker, 2017). Some critics highlight that in the neoliberal age, disadvantaged youth have different attitudes towards education. They argue that more often young people feel that opting out of education after compulsory schooling, as Willis' 'lads' proudly intended to, is untenable for their life advancement (Stahl *et al.*, 2018). Other qualitative studies conducted in South Africa and in Canada have found that working-class students do not resist middle-class values and social mobility. In fact, they embrace them (Lehmann, 2009) and "sweat[ing] their bollocks off [because they see] their time at college as an opportunity to be privileged, appreciated and respected" (Powell, 2012, p. 649).

Stahl (2016) explores the tensions which result precisely from the contrast between working-class English boys' identity and aspirations and dominant neoliberal ethos around aspirations which are proxies of middle-class status, educational and career success and socioeconomic competition. He uses the concept of *habitus* to interpret cultural practices that certain ways of being and behaving can produce in the encounter with the field of the school's institutional context. He argues that the internalisation of deeply ingrained values and of new experiences is a process of ongoing acceptance and resistance which reproduces students' subordination but also arises conflicting dispositions. As a result in his study, on the one hand, working-class male adolescents want 'to do well' at school; on the other, they tend to preserve a sense of 'loyalty to self' as they do not strive for academic success, partly because it falls beyond their reach and because it is not needed to pursue their vocational goals (e.g. becoming trade worker) and, thus, it is not what they desire. It is against this neoliberal backdrop that working-class learners are labelled as underperforming and as having low or modest aspirations. Zipin *et al.* (2015) argue that aspiring entails a process of identity and strategy formation within future orientations, understood if considered in the 'thick of social life' (Appadurai 2004, p. 67). Limiting aspirations to habituated and *doxic* manifestations neglects individuals' capacity to desire, imagine and pursue emergent visions for alternative futures. This overall lack of flexibility and the correlated risk of over-determinism make it necessary to combine structural perspectives with other approaches "to continually 'evoke and provoke' Bourdieu's work" (Webb *et al.*, 2017, p. 153).

Strengths of structuralist and rational choice approaches

This review has indicated that while structuralist and rational choice approaches might not have a universal value, they both provide useful explanation to understand the complexities behind aspirations (trans)formation, decision-making processes and choices. Structuralist

perspectives have stronger explanatory power in cases where individual agency is constrained by internalised classed, gendered, ethnic or religious-based set of norms, values, beliefs, dispositions which frame what is and what is not for ‘the like of us’. Orthodox rational choice perspectives have explanatory value for macrophenomena (e.g. the classed HE participation and the effects that TVET programmes have on education expansion, such as in the Widening Participation initiative) which they attribute to instrumental rationality. The next section reviews the body of literature which considers reflexive perspectives that acknowledge a more dynamic stance on the structure and agency interaction and have explanatory value for situations where aspirations are not exclusively the result of constraints or free choices.

Aspirations as reflexive practices

As this review has shown, aspirations, especially educational aspirations, have extensively been described in comparative and hierarchical terms (e.g. ‘high’ vs ‘low’), and associated with young people’s intention to achieve and/or accumulate academic credentials, especially through university education (Fuller, 2009; Kintrea *et al.*, 2015) and with the ambition of attaining professional jobs, regardless of constraints (Campbell & McKendrick, 2017). Critics of structuralist and rational choice approaches contend for a shift away from dichotomies that either neglect individuals’ capacity to challenge structural constraints and deterministic life trajectories or that overlook the role of social inequalities and consider individuals as free choosers, utility-maximisers and prone to make choices based on cost-benefit-probability calculations.

Critical Realism

Precisely as an attempt to address these limitations, Critical Realist (CR) approaches allow for the examination of the interplay of structure and agency. One of the main theorists of CR is the English sociologist Margaret Archer, pioneer of the conceptualisation of reflexivity in sociology (Caetano, 2015). Archer (1995, 2003, 2007, 2012) grounds her work on the ontological stratification of the social reality. Consistent with her adoption of CR, she considers the reality as separated in the domain of the empirical reality (the world that individuals can access to, have experience of, through their fallible knowledge, and produce knowledge about); the actual world (known/observed or unknown/unobserved events that occur when activated by generative mechanisms outwith direct empirical access); and real domain (that exist independently of our knowledge of it and which has causal powers, or generative mechanisms, that may or may not generate events) (Archer, 1995, 2003). Applied

to aspirations and choices in transition to adulthood, the real world can comprise real possibilities in the labour market or in further education. These have their institutional mechanisms, such as their policies, ethos, governance; and the cultural/structural mechanisms, such as class, gender, neoliberal ethos that may or may not generate events in the actual world, whether young people are aware of these or not. The actual world can include the potential freedom to access educational and labour market opportunities and choose among valuable educational or professional options that educated young people might have. These may however not be realised e.g. due to the (in)ability of the students to comply with institutional requirements. The empirical reality can comprise what young people (often fallibly) perceive as available for them in terms of opportunities in a specific moment in time, which informs their aspirations in that moment and might impact on their decision-making.

Archer (2003) contends that structure and agency are not in a mutual constitution, but rather they are related to each other in an interplay over time and ontologically separated. While structures are ‘emergent’ social properties that pre-exist individuals, agents are not merely passive subjects of the structures. In fact, for this emergentist view of structure and agency, agency is shaped by social structures, but not necessarily determined by them. Likewise, social structures can be affected and shaped by collective ‘corporate agency’, albeit in temporally distinct moments. Therefore, Archer (1995, 2010, 2017, 2020) acknowledges the possibilities of transformation (morphogenesis) as well as reproduction (morphostasis) in society.

Analytical dualism vs. structuration

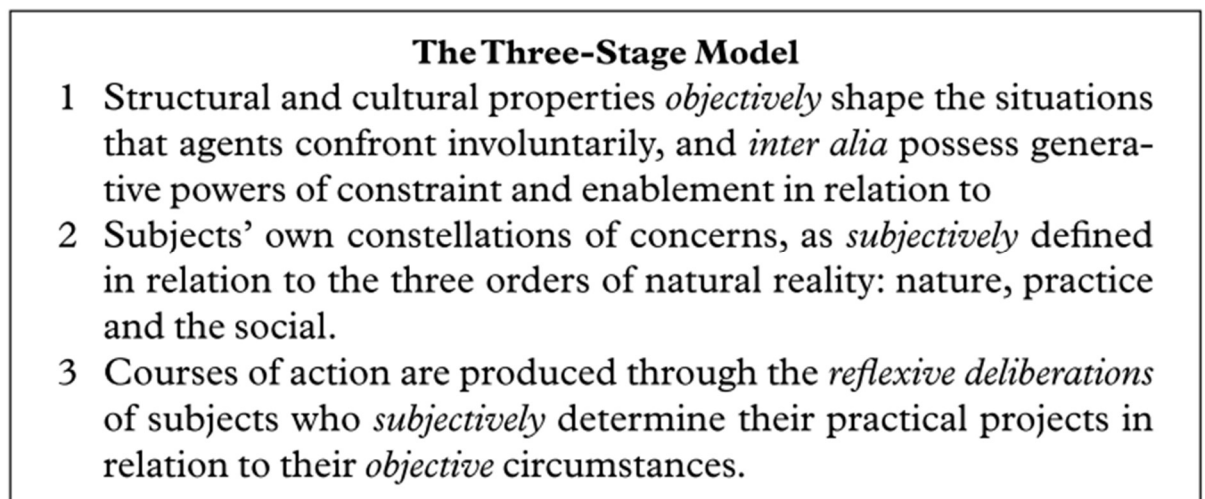
Archer’s position differs from that sustained by structuration theory which conceptualises structure and agency as ontologically intertwined as flip sides of the same coin, as mutually constitutive and interdependent (Giddens, 1983, 1984, 1986). According to this perspective, individuals act within a context of rules and resources (Giddens’ definition of structure) embedded in social systems which are socially constructed and, thus, they do not exist independently of agents (Akram, 2013). It is through the individuals acting within a context of rules they have not chosen and in compliance with these that structure is reproduced across time and space. However, knowledgeability of rules and routinisation of actions (pre-reflexive, unconscious practices) do not imply predictability of consequences as individuals can modify social structures through exercising reflexivity. Therefore, actions can have

unintended consequences which can generate and be generated by structural conditions affecting agency at pre-reflexive (unconscious) and reflexive (conscious) levels. Giddens considers the exploration and problematisation of unintended outcomes and bounded conditions as one of the main task of empirical social research (Giddens, 1983 and 1984).

CR's ontological separation of structure and agency, as opposed to their ontological interdependence and mutual constitution as in structuration theory, allows to understand how structural and cultural factors affect agents and how agents exert their power (being agentic) to act in specific ways so to achieve their concerns which reflect their life projects (what they care about in terms of desired goals and ambitions) considering their circumstances. It is precisely CR's irreducibility of structure and agency as analytically (ontologically) distinct that is superior to structuration as it allows social researchers to empirically dig into the causal mechanisms behind aspirations and choices rather than staying in the descriptive aspect of the interplay.

Fig. 2.3 summarises Archer's (2007) three-stage model on structure, agency and causal mechanisms in the formation of life projects.

Figure 2.3: Archer's Three-Stage Model.



Source: Archer, 2007, p. 17.

Archer (2007) contends that structural factors and cultural factors are real conditions within which human beings act and which shape “the situations in which agents find themselves involuntarily – by moulding their circumstances, which were not of their making” (Archer, 2003, p. 131). To clarify, structural factors are those that determine the different individuals' social positionings in relation to resources and that impinge upon constellations of concerns

and course of actions. Cultural factors encompass ideologies, set of values and beliefs that characterise each community. The causal powers of structural and cultural properties (constraints and enablers) thus, ‘emerge’ only through projects that agents seek to pursue, and courses of action envisaged to pursue these. To these causal powers there is no single or universal answer or motivation and, thus, there cannot be predictable outcomes. This is so because individuals’ experience of constraints and enablers differ significantly according to their different projects, the different courses of action identified, or the different social contexts they belong to. Furthermore, individuals may or may not try to pursue their projects regardless of the opportunity costs perceived (Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2009; Powell & McGrath, 2019b). Likewise, in the attempt to pursue projects and fulfil concerns, individuals may face discouraging or encouraging experiences which may be internalised as expectations and lead to a scaled-down version of aspirations (Archer, 2007). Archer argues that individuals are not passive victims of discouraging experiences. In fact, they reflexively assess their concerns against their context “clarifying [their] predominant satisfaction and dissatisfactions with [their] current way of life” (*ibid.*, p. 20) and devise new projects and courses of action accordingly. The trajectory identified by Archer is “*concerns* → *life project* → *practices*” (Archer, 2003, p. 133), “which Archer argues is achieved through reflexivity and which, due to the fallibility of human understanding, is “constantly in flux” (Powell & McGrath, 2019b, p. 39). Resultantly, reflexivity is a crucial moment in, and element of, the construction of aspirations. As Archer (2007) puts it:

without examining agents’ subjectivity, their reflexive internal conversations [...] we cannot discover what ‘ideology’ or ‘social class’ has encouraged one person to believe but failed to persuade another to accept. [...] What reflexivity does do is to mediate by activating structural and cultural powers, and in so doing there is no single and predictable outcome. This is because subjects can exercise their reflexive powers in different ways, according to their very different concerns and considerations. (pp. 15-16)

Archer’s modes of reflexivity

While for Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) reflexivity is a moment of crisis that can occur when the *habitus* does not ‘fit in’ a new field, for Archer (2003, 2007, 2012) reflexivity is central to human agency. She insists that individuals are reflective human beings who can define their concerns, the related projects and course of actions in relation to their social and cultural context. Based on longitudinal interviews she conducted with 20 people in the UK across age, social class, gender and occupation she elaborates four different modes of reflexivity, namely communicative reflexives, autonomous reflexives, meta-reflexives and

fractured reflexives. Archer maintains that individuals may present different modes of reflexivity, with one dominating at any given time. *Communicative reflexives* tended to contemplate, mull over and consider their projects within themselves first and then debated these with, and sought advice from, significant others before making their decisions. Archer defines their reflexive patterns as “think and talk” (Archer, 2003, p. 167) as communicative reflexives needed external confirmation of their internal conversations and decisions. They showed a strong dedication for their family and friends which were prioritised over projects that could bring them away from their social context (e.g career development, educational opportunities). This ‘contextual continuity’ often implied remaining faithful to one life project, possibly curtailing aspirations and choosing life trajectories that may result in social stability/immobility and in the reinforcement of communicative reflexives’ working-class background (Archer, 2007). Yet, rather than structurally determined, these were aspirations and choices individuals actively made and they were content about. Archer defines communicative reflexives’ orientation to sociocultural constraints or enablements (their stance) as evasive given that they actively and reflexively chose to circumvent them and, thus, purposefully missed opportunities for improvements. (Archer, 2003). In her later work on reflexivity which Archer (2012) conducted by means of interviews to university students, she argues that in the “nascent morphogenetic social order” (*ibid.*, p. 163) with new social phenomena, such as widening the participation of working-class young people in HE, communicative reflexivity has declined. This is so because the generative mechanisms of this mode of reflexivity have weakened. Indeed, taking up new opportunities, e.g. entering university, often implies interrupting the background ‘contextual continuity’ and, thus moving away from family and friends, which are key elements in communicative reflexives’ decision-making process and elaboration of projects.

Differently from communicative reflexives, *autonomous reflexives* identified their concerns and thereto elaborated their projects in self-sufficiency. For them internal conversations were an autonomous, lone exercise as it was the assessment of decisions’ outcomes and the possible changes of direction during their life course. Autonomous were confident and decisive individuals who greatly engaged in reflexive practices and communicated their responses on concerns and projects in a clear and quick way. Unlike communicative reflexive, autonomous reflexives did not prioritise contextual continuity nor family and friends. In fact, they were willing to move away from their context of origins to prioritise professional aspirations over personal relationships. This trait was found in individuals across classes and seemed to be correlated to experiences of contextual discontinuity in their

childhood or teenagerhood (e.g. geographical mobility of the family, separated or divorced parents). Experiencing such discontinuity had induced them to embrace an “enforced independence” (Archer, 2012, p. 172). Given that their projects entailed engaging in new and unknown contexts, autonomous reflexives tended to reflexively contemplate enablements and constraints, costs related to the achievement of their projects, and means to reach these. Their stance was strategic as they tended to take advantage of resources and enablements and use it strategically to achieve their goals. Thus, they were more likely to experience upward social mobility and changes during their life course (Archer, 2007), being “authors of ‘transformatory’ projects” (Archer, 2003, p. 253). In the light of new situations experienced and successes or failures accumulated, they reflexively evaluated their concerns and accordingly assessed old projects to understand whether to adjust or transform them. Similar to communicative reflexive, the point Archer makes here is that autonomous reflexives are active agents. While the formers seek for stability, the latter group seeks for change and uses the information and knowledge they have to find strategies to overcome constraints and take advantage of enablements, regardless of their social class. Given the increased patterns of families’ ruptures in late modern Western societies, Archer (2012) contends that the generative mechanisms of autonomous reflexivity are not likely to decline and, in fact, will continue to generate ‘enforced independents’ as individuals react rather than proact. Furthermore, the durability of autonomous reflexives is also guaranteed by other generative mechanisms, namely the neoliberal ethos of individualism and social enterprise culture that late modern, capitalist societies are grounded on.

Meta-reflexives engaged in self-oriented reflexive processes. They were very critical of themselves, of the lives they lead and of the society. As with the autonomous reflexives, they experienced contextual discontinuity in their upbringing. Differently from autonomous reflexives, they were ‘contextually unsettled’ (e.g. geographical mobility, career changes, professional turning points) which they felt to be partly responsible for. Indeed, meta-reflexives were idealists with social concerns over inequalities of justice. Their social ideals were their ultimate concern for which they wanted to commit to and align their life thereto. However, while their ultimate concern remained stable, they were constantly searching how to align their life to it, changing their projects and practices. Their stance is defined as subversive as they were constantly striving for self-transformation and self-improvement, constantly critical of their external reality. The ‘unsettledness’ resulted from this constant search and attempts to align practices, projects and concerns given the growing knowledge about self and society acquired throughout work and life experiences which regularly

informed reflexive reconsiderations of past projects and actions. Unlike autonomous reflexives, meta-reflexives would experience a persistent contextual discontinuity mainly because their social and cultural ideals would hardly find an approximation in the real world. Interestingly, they came from both working- and middle-classes, but they all held high educational titles from universities. Indeed, for the working-class participants in Archer's study, entering HE against the odds of their social class had been pivotal to the formation of their ideals and aspirations in the break with their contextual origins (Archer, 2003). Despite their educated background, their rootlessness and restlessness may result in lateral volatility or even downward social mobility (Archer, 2007). In her later work on reflexivity, Archer (2012) sustains that in the current late modernity, meta-reflexivity is predominant among young, educated people. Corroborating the findings of her previous work (Archer, 2003, 2007), she maintains that the generative mechanisms of meta-reflexivity comprised durable, positive relationships with family. However, meta-reflexives' upbringing was characterised by strong and at times extreme parental contentions (and conflicts) mainly over religious or political issues often impacting life values and beliefs related to gender norms, society, political involvement, etc. The mixed messages they had grown up with had affected their identity formation, problematising their agential stance over the above-mentioned structural issues, which resulted in a shared feeling of 'not fitting in' with their peers. Archer explains that the meaning these young people attached to university was not instrumental in a rational, career-oriented way, but it held an intrinsic value. Being the institution of inquiry, University was for them the most valuable resource to give (fallible) clarity to some of these structural issues and, thus, the means to find their position within the social order.

Lastly, Archer defines *fractured reflexives* those individuals whose reflexive practices and powers have been suspended for contingent reasons out of individuals' control. This suspension implied that individuals were not able to purposefully mediate the effects of structures on agency in the construction of aspirations and projects. Without any internal guidance nor purposeful course of action to follow, fractured reflexives had difficulties in identifying what they wanted and how to achieve it. Given that, they inhibited the activation of structural and agential powers and, thus, were passively confronting the situations they encountered rather than making things happen actively (Archer, 2003). While generative mechanisms of fractured reflexivity can be different (e.g. becoming homeless, being deprived of the dialogical network, losing a job, having debilitating health conditions), Archer (2012) argues that late modernity and morphogenetic societies' logic of competition

of opportunities for all may contribute to generate this mode of reflexivity in individuals that find it difficult to comply with ‘the reflexive imperative’ of late modernisation.

Table 2.1 summarises Archer’s modes of reflexivity, main traits, generative mechanisms and stances to society.

Table 2.1: Summary of Archer’s modes of reflexivity. Self-elaboration.

Modes of Reflexivity	Main traits	Generative mechanisms	Stances to society
Communicative	Internal conversations need to be validated by family/significant others before leading to actions	Desire for contextual continuity (prone to social immobility)	Evasive
Autonomous	Internal conversations elaborated in self-sufficiency	Readiness for contextual discontinuity and change (prone to upward social mobility)	Strategic
Meta	Critical and self-oriented internal conversation	Contextually unsettledness, striving for self-transformation and self-improvement (prone to instability)	Subversive
Fractured	Internal conversations attached to affective/distressed responses not leading to purposeful courses of action	Social or natural/environmental accidents	Agential passivity

There has been common agreement that Archer’s modes of reflexivity and nuanced approach to agency have shed a light on how to theorise and interpret young people’s responses to changes in society, how these have affected or shaped young people’s perceptions of their opportunities or constraints and their aspirations, but also how young people’s experiences have influenced or changed socio-cultural structures (Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2009; Elder-Vass, 2010; Dyke *et al.*, 2012; Akram, 2013; Baker, 2018). In terms of educational or professional aspirations, Archer’s contribution is significant because, as the author herself suggests, the process of aspirations’ (trans)formation is strictly intertwined with acts of reflexivity that mediate between individuals’ desires, concerns, projects and their structural circumstances (Archer, 2003, 2007, 2012). Education and careers are, thus key sites of reflexivity.

Debates and extension of Archer's theorisation of reflexivity in empirical studies on aspirations

A growing, but still scarce, number of scholars have applied CR approach or the concept of reflexivity in their empirical studies on young people's aspirations and choices in constraining conditions (Czerniewicz *et al.*; Baker, 2018; Powell & McGrath, 2019b). Czerniewicz *et al.* (2009) draw on Archer to explain the motivations that led South African students from poor socioeconomic background to use ICT to access university off-campus against the odds of their circumstances. By means of a mix-methods survey questionnaire, the authors found that rather than passively accept their material limitations, students showed a strategic approach to circumvent or overcome the several structural constraints they encountered to use cell phones to access the Internet. Among students' motivations to access university off-campus despite the sacrifices, the authors found benefits, in terms of usefulness in having all the material needed in one microchip, or in not having to face lecturers personally, which was particularly daunting for poor students. This was also beneficial for their life projects, such as empowerment, learning to use ICTs as means to enhance future opportunities for a better life. These motivations, which were not universal across students from the same socioeconomic background, were informed by unique reflexive assessments of students' concerns against their circumstances and informed their actions to strategically deal with or circumvent or endorse their opportunity structures. As such, in this study CR problematises the homogeneous theorisation of young people from low socioeconomic background as lacking agency and capacity to confront their structural circumstances and challenges the naïve, deterministic description of the digital divide (who can/cannot access) to explain students' usage of ICTs.

Some scholars have extended Archer's theorisation on the acknowledgment of the impacts that the human existence's interacting nature have on modes of reflexivity (Dyke *et al.*, 2012; Burkitt, 2016). For example, Burkitt (2016) argues against Archer's individualistic stance on reflexivity and argues for an understanding created through agents as interactants, ones who are interdependent, vulnerable, intermittently reflexive, possessors of capacities that can only be practised in joint actions, and capable of sensitive responses to others and to the situations of interaction. Instead of agency resting on the reflexive monitoring of action or the reflexive deliberation on structurally defined choices, agency emerges from our emotional relatedness to others as social relations unfold across time and space.

Dyke *et al.* (2012) have noted that the impact that individuals' social network may have on hindering or expanding the freedom of the agency has been neglected in Archer's theory. This, as the authors argue, has resulted in a rather static and simplified theorisation of modes of reflexivity. Their qualitative study on educational and career choices of British working-class men non-participating in HE included interviews with participants' social networks (family, friends, work colleagues, partners). The findings show that participants presented different approaches to reflexivity which changed over time and according to their life circumstances and to the decisions they had to make. The authors, thus, suggest that reflexive modes should be considered "as strategies or capabilities people might use or develop in different circumstances" (*ibid.*, p. 836). Importantly, the research indicates that social networks were key in influencing their aspirations (e.g. life concerns that drifted them away from HE) and in creating or hindering life opportunities. In turn these, if undertaken, could determine a change in participants' approach to reflexivity contingent to the new situations encountered (e.g. a new job could imply new responsibilities and different approach to reflexivity needed) and, a reconsideration of aspirations (e.g. reconsidering the participation in HE). More broadly and over time, this could lead to a change in traditional working-class cultures.

Baker's (2018) longitudinal qualitative study on working-class Further Education students' decision-making and choices of HE corroborates findings on the existence of multiple approaches to reflexivity (Dyke *et al.*, 2012). Interestingly, some of the students showed two different approaches to reflexivity depending on whether they referred to their aspirations' formation (e.g. meta-reflexivity) or whether they described their strategies or approaches to negotiate constraints and achieve their aspirations (e.g. autonomous reflexivity). Others presented one main approach to their aspirations and course of action to achieve these (e.g. autonomous reflexivity) that shifted to another approach (e.g. communicative reflexivity) along the courses of events against 'non-negotiable constraints'.

Similarly to Archer, Evans (2002, 2007) emphasises the role of agency and of individuals' subjective perceptions of the structures in the formation of future imagined possibilities. As in Archer's theory, Evans acknowledge that structures influence, but do not determine, social actions. Thus, in line with Archer, she takes distance from structured individualisation without neglecting the role of structures. Yet, unlike Archer and more in line with Bourdieusian perspectives, Evans places more emphasis on the internalisation of structures

and argues that individual actions are guided and shaped also by individuals' past. She conceptualises agency as a 'bounded', specifically "a socially situated process shaped by the experiences of the past, the chances present in the current moment and the perceptions of possible futures" (Evans *et al.*, 2001, p. 17). Although her work focuses on youth transitions and especially on transition behaviours more than on aspirations *per se*, given that these are "forward-looking behaviours" (Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020, p. 9) her empirical conceptualisation of 'bounded agency' (Evans *et al.*, 2001; Evans, 2002, 2007) is likewise relevant for interpreting aspirations. The theoretical implications of Evans' conceptualisation of bounded agency in relation of aspirations are that aspirations are framed by boundaries which are subject to change over time but which are also structurally rooted in individuals' ascribed characteristics (e.g. class, gender, family background), in acquired characteristics (e.g. educational qualifications accumulated throughout life), as well as in structural circumstances and institutional framework (e.g. governance of education and labour market, cultural ethos).

Evans' mix-methods cross-cultural study on disadvantaged youth transitions to labour market in England and Germany reveals that young people were aware of classed social differences. However, they expressed agential power through their optimism for their future and the believe in choices and in individual effort as means to success, particularly in the liberal market economy of England (Rudd & Evans, 1998; Evans *et al.*, 2001). Individual effort, competences and educational credentials were perceived by young women as being more determinant than gender constraints. Evans envisages social changes similar to Archer's morphogenetic society as she does not exclude that young people "may be converting social and cultural inheritance into action in new but socially differentiated and bounded ways" (Evans, 2002, p. 264). She explains these as resulting from interactions between generations, from material possibilities that families have to secure better life and opportunities to their children and from sociocultural influences.

Similarly to Archer's stances to society identified for each mode of reflexivity (Archer, 2003), Evans (2007) found evidence of four individuals' orientations, or in Evans' terms "transition behaviours" (p. 86), to opportunity structures, which she defined as "strategic", "taking chances", "step by step", and "wait and see" (*ibid.*). While the first two behaviours reflect a more active orientation, the last twos are more passive. Unlike Archer, Evans' conceptualisation of transition behaviours was strongly influenced by individuals' structural and institutional systems. For example, strategic and taking chances were encouraged within

institutionally supported transitions (as in Germany) or in prosperous labour markets (as in England). Yet, a sense of accountability for individual failures and successes was mainly felt by English youth which manifested little fatalism and the need to ‘be realistic’ in what they could aspired to. As the scholar suggest, these were indicative of frustrated agency rather than lack of agency (Evans, 2002). At the same time, step-by-step behaviour was encouraged in weaker institutional contexts and more unpredictable opportunities (as in England), but also when highly structured systems provided differentiated opportunities in the long run (as in Germany). Wait-and-see behaviour was associated to more prolonged transitions to the labour market, justified by a stronger cultural and social legitimisation of staying in education after compulsory school (highly discouraged in the English liberalised context which praised individual independence), especially for working-class young people (Evans, 2007). While Evans brings to the forefront of the discussion the interplay of structural powers and young people’s endeavours to control their lives, her work does not explain the rationale behind decision-making and choices.

Some sociologists have questioned Archer’s over reliance on reflexivity as undisputed capacity of individuals’ agency and have pointed at her failure to acknowledge pre-reflexive, routinised actions human predispositions behind individual actions and the formation of individual’s identity (Sweetman, 2003; Elder-Vass, 2010; Akram, 2013; Decoteau, 2016). They suggest that due to socioeconomic and cultural shifts and to changing patterns in human relationships, in employment, in transitions to adulthood in this late modern era, for some individuals reflexivity is characteristic of forms of contemporary *habitus*. Sweetman, (2003) conceptualises this as reflexive *habitus*, a new perspective that acknowledges forms of reflexivity emerging within different manifestations of *habitus* for those who display more flexible *habitués* (i.e. transformative and emergent alongside with reproductive) prone to changes (Mills, 2008). In this perspective, aspirations are interpreted as a combination of unconscious *habitus* with reflexivity and consciousness.

Gale and Parker (2015b) sustain that in the current ‘neoliberal imaginary’ young people regardless of their social positions are increasingly pushed to reflexively seek individualised life courses to critical life moments (e.g. education to work transition) and to aspire ‘high’ by pursue self-maximisation through HE despite the declining rates of returns in the labour market (Atkins, 2010; Gale & Parker, 2015b). However, as previously commented, the endless possibility of choice to construct and determine our own life project is an “epistemological fallacy” (Furlong, 2009, p. 349) as the belief that life is no longer structured

by class, gender, ethnicity is an illusion. In this scenario, social researchers argue that late modern transitions are characterised by a shift away from ‘normal biographies’ (conceived as linear and structured) as individuals are deemed to have a reflexive capacity to take the lead of their own ‘chosen biographies’ (du Bois-Reymond, 1998). However, youth studies have shown that individualisation is still structurally patterned and young people continue to have awareness of the importance that their social positioning holds in shaping their life (Furlong, 2009; Atkins, 2010; Atkinson *et al.*, 2013; Atkins & Flint, 2015). As MacDonald and Marsh (2005) put it:

some contemporary accounts of reflexive modernisation underplay the social structuring of the psychic and emotional resources on which reflexivity depends and overplay the ability of personal life-planning to overcome the class-based, material bases of social exclusion. (p. 211)

This tension between reflexivity and *habitus* is evident in empirical studies on working-class youth’s aspirations in relation to HE. A qualitative study conducted by Archer and Hutchings (2000) on working-class non-participants’ perceptions of HE in the UK suggests that the value that these young people attached to participating in HE within the political context of Widening Participation strategies was the result of reflexive negotiations around identity, economic costs and benefits, class positioning and social interests. Students who perceived high levels of risks and fear of failure (expressed more in economic, personal, and social terms than in academic achievements) considered other trajectories being more worth it than pursuing a degree in HE. Others showed a more transformative *habitus* (Mills, 2008) as they looked at being stuck in their position as a non-desirable option and, thus, embraced the “value of trying” (Archer & Hutchings, 2000, p. 571) in participating in HE, regardless the extent to which this transformation was possible. Although the costs of participation were unequally distributed across social classes, the study shows that considering working-class as a homogenous category results in oversimplified and inaccurate understanding of motivations behind educational aspirations and choices. Interestingly, for example, some working-class students voiced a counter-elitist narrative in that they believed that going to university could change them for the worst by making them become middle-class people. The perception they had of success was “someone who ‘hasn’t changed a bit” (*ibid.*, p. 568). While the emotional attachment to working-class identity could be interpreted in deterministic ways, these findings suggest that understanding individuals’ ‘constellations of concerns’ is needed if researchers want to go beyond deterministic and rational explanations. The apparent resistance to middle-class values could be interpreted as in line with values,

priorities and concerns of communicative reflexives or as a form of critical appraisal against society as shown by meta-reflexives.

In line with this, Grant's (2017) study on working-class English students' hopes and plans for their future brings insightful contributions to the value students from low socioeconomic background attribute to HE as it further challenges the corollary higher aspirations-HE-successful life. In his qualitative participatory study, the author shows that working-class students who did not have a resolute, goal-oriented hope for university (or in Archer's terms a strategic stance) showed different concerns and modes of hopes which spun around family and friends. Indeed, for some students a successful life implied remaining close to their families and 'being there' for them. Therefore, the option of moving away from family and neighbourhood to go to university and pursue a successful career was perceived as hindering their 'constellation of concerns'. Thus, these students showed similar reflexivity and motivations behind aspirations of Archer's 'communicative reflexives' (Archer, 2003, 2007). Other students expressed torn feelings between the desire of being there for family and the aspiration to go to university and pursue an independent life while questioning how realistic the university option was for them. The author argues that tensions between transformative/reproductive *habitus* (exertion of agency in questioning *habitus*), socialising experiences, influences of significant others were likely to shape students' perceived levels of personal risk in undertaking a university trajectory and their possibility to succeed.

By contrast, scholars have noted that understanding disadvantaged students' motivations and value behind the choice of attending HE helps explain inflated aspirations against the odds of low socioeconomic and cultural capitals. For example, Baker (2017) explains the persistence of high aspirations among working-class college students in the UK as reflecting their broader concern regarding the sort of person they hoped to become and their desire to lead a respectable life. Participating in education was considered as a way of avoiding social shame, embarrassment and judgments, and a means to social dignity. Similarly, although in a more pragmatic and instrumental way, a study on working-class Canadian students' choice to attend HE (Lehmann, 2009) revealed that the dominant discourses (*doxa*) of the knowledge economy and the influence of media and students' socialising experiences were strong catalysts of their future motivations and hope for upward social mobility. More than internalising class dispositions, students showed an internalisation of the *doxa* which oriented their predispositions to *habitus* transformation. The pragmatism students manifested through their career goals (becoming lawyers, doctors, teachers, dentists) and in

their approach to university as a form of vocational education lied in the hope that a university qualification would confer them advantages in the labour market. This was assessed and asserted against the material and emotional sacrifices that going to university would imply, in ways that were similar to South African students in Czerniewicz *et al.* (2009) study. This approach reminds the strategic stance of Archer's autonomous reflexives. Canadian students' hope for *habitus* transformation through participating in HE was deeply rooted in their social background and in their working-class values of hard work, highlighting the complex interplay between identity formation, aspirations and opportunity structures.

Importantly, these studies show that while the moral concern over the possible future selves was a common concern shared among working-class students, their different life projects and courses of action reflected idiosyncratic reflexive approaches to opportunity structures. This means that aspirations have to be understood in relation to identity questions concerning the type of person these young people want to become. Such understanding of motivations behind choices can explain why some policy interventions, e.g. within the Widening Participation discourse, may not be as effective. The reflexive approach is seen as fruitful in addressing this need and in bridging the divide between structuralist and RCT approaches, which both conceptualise agency naively. Yet, empirical studies that try to look at the issue by combining reflexivity and *habitus* in one theoretical framework are scarce (Wimalasena and Marks, 2019); as are studies that apply structure and agency debates to TVET.

Powell and McGrath's (2019b) *Skills for Human Development* fills this last gap in the literature. Their study is one of the most important contributions in reimagining TVET drawing on Archer's critical realist ontology and on CA. Indeed, the authors develop a realist-capability model to qualitatively explore South African students' motivations for choosing TVET College and the perspectives they have of role of TVET in expanding or inhibiting their opportunities to live the life they have reason to value (their capabilities). As the scholars explain, Archer's emergentist explanatory framework of social actions allows to overcome the structure/agency impasse and to place students' views, experiences and responses to opportunity structures at the centre of the investigation, what is often neglected in TVET orthodox literature (Powell, 2012; Bonvin, 2019; Suart, 2019). This approach has allowed the scholars to emphasise individual agential power and understand their choices and concerns without downplaying the power of structural constraints nor representing these as passively experienced by disadvantaged students. Students were aware that their

circumstances had contributed to define their aspirations, for example limiting their possibilities to access high quality educational institutions. However, they actively reflected upon these constraints which were not seen as immutable, but as obstacles that they could overcome, negotiate or circumvent to better their lives. Thus, this study challenges the naïve view of TVET students in the orthodox literature which represents them as poorly performing students at the mercy of their material constraints, exclusively motivated by economic advancement. Archer's (1995) theorisation was helpful to explain the different responses to structural constraints that different young people sharing similar backgrounds had. These different responses were informed by the unique projects and concerns.

From a capability perspective, the authors have drawn on the analysis of the well-being themes and antecedent valued functionings (i.e. life projects) based on the students' reflections to develop broad dimensions of the capabilities that mattered to them and relative valued functionings. Furthermore, they contextualise their analysis within the exploration of a multidimensional notion of poverty that the students participating in their study were experiencing. In line with Sen, (1995, 1999b), they claim that poverty affects individuals beyond the economic deprivation. Therefore, understanding what young people have to go through in their daily life is key to dig into what perception of success and social mobility they have and if it matters to them, what can hinder or foster their educational success and what affects their choices. Findings reveal that while clearly economic advancement was important for these students to escape material poverty, the capabilities that mattered to them highlighted the intrinsic value of education for their human fulfilment, for growing confidence and self-esteem, for feeling empowered, for being active and engaged in their communities, in debates, in resisting oppression and for giving back to their community by capacitating its members. A crucial finding is the trust and the appreciation students had in and for their TVET college in enabling them to imagine better futures by expanding their capabilities which encompassed but went beyond being employable. As the authors comment, this finding stresses the important role that TVET college had in nurturing students' aspirations for a 'good life'.

However, in Powell and McGrath's study, the understanding of TVET College students' aspirations is only transversely touched as this fell outside the scope of the research. Given the growing importance and criticality of aspirations in theoretical and policy debates, the authors claim for the need to better understand, theoretically, aspirations' formation and transformation over time. Understanding the significance of aspirations and what matters to

young people in post-school transitions by taking into account the reflexive component that contributes to form these is crucial to challenge narrow neoliberal view of education as purely instrumental to economic advancement (individuals' main concern). It is also key to problematise the 'deficit view' of low-class young people's aspirations as it allows to explore moral implications attached to aspirations, which this thesis does.

Literature gaps and conclusions

The review of the literature has shown that despite the academic and policy relevance of exploring aspirations, traditional academic approaches and policy rhetoric have failed to problematise the meanings young people attribute to aspirations and how they are formed and transformed in the critical transition to adulthood. This gap is particularly evident in the field of TVET which is still resplendent with rational choice Human Capital Theory assumptions for social action. Understanding educational and professional aspirations is needed to 1) better understand young peoples' realities, explain their decisions to continue their studies, look for employment or stay inactive, and direct policy accordingly; 2) explain macrosocial transformations like the large and sustained expansion of education in emerging economies, such as the Chilean one, and failures or successes of policy initiatives like the widening participation one; 3) challenge the neoliberal rhetoric of 'higher aspirations/higher education/higher chances to meritocratic upward social mobility'. This corollary has justified policy discourses and assumptions on 'deficit of aspirations' or absence of "appropriate aspirations" (Roberts & Evans, 2012, p. 80) as inferior to those of middle-class young people. On the one hand, these debates have overlooked the role played by structural constraints in limiting marginalised young people's ability to exert their agency. On the other, they have also held disadvantaged young people responsible for their failures to be part of the neoliberal knowledge economy for their lack of motivation and ambition (Atkins, 2010, 2017; Roberts and Evans, 2012). Given that aspirations have been used as a neoliberal ideological and political tool, failing to problematise its unquestioned meaning has implied failing to consider alternative aspirations highly valued by young people (Baker, 2017; Grant, 2017). The review has further showed a dearth of studies on the decision-making process behind aspirations, how it changes over time and how this affects aspirations' formation and transformation. As Walther *et al.* sustain, "the review of the state of the art reveals the predominance of research that focuses on input (values and orientations) and outcome (practices) of young people's behaviour rather than on the processes of decision-making as such" (p. 352).

Alongside with these silences, the review has highlighted the theoretical and methodological limitations of structuralist and rational choice perspectives, which both conceptualise agency naively, and the complexity and multidimensionality of aspirations. This calls for the need to better understand aspirations by drawing on a combination of approaches and discipline. Archer's reflexive approach is seen as fruitful in bridging the divide between structuralist and RCT approaches. Despite some limitations in Archer's theorisation that have emerged from the review of the literature (mainly her underplaying of pre-reflexive, routinised actions), her usefulness outweighs these, especially when combined with other approaches. Yet, empirical studies that try to look at the issue by combining reflexivity with traditional frameworks are scarce (Wimalasena & Marks, 2019); as are studies that apply structure and agency debates to TVET (Powell & McGrath, 2019b).

The review has further demonstrated the importance to look at TVET and aspirations from a capability perspective to problematise the narrow and economic-focused assumptions on what has value for vocational students, why they make their educational choices and how this relates to their aspirations and life projects. So far, the work of Powell and McGrath in South Africa (2019b) is the only one that applies the critical-capability framework in the field of TVET. Yet, their study, as already commented, does not look at aspirations. In fact, one of their conclusions pointed at "the need for a rich account of how aspirations are formed and transformed" (*ibid.*, p. 175). Furthermore, they look at a different moment of transition as their student participants had already left school and were enrolled in Further Education and Training colleges.

As it will be further discussed in the methodological chapter (Chapter 4), this thesis combines the reflexive and traditional/orthodox sociological (explanatory) approaches to human action to understand aspirations of secondary TVET students in Chile and enriches the analysis on how social inequalities shape these by drawing on CA. The Chilean case presented in the next chapter helps elucidate the importance of combining these different approaches. Indeed, this is a context that is both dominated by neoliberal HCT assumptions, and resplendent with structural constraints. This context is ideal for examining both the structured and agential elements of aspiration formation, and to understand existing tensions between policy rhetoric and the realities of TVET students in neoliberal capitalist societies.

CHAPTER 3 - The Chilean context

This chapter presents the main characteristics and features of the education system in Chile from a political economy point of view, focusing particularly on upper-secondary vocational education and the transition to post-vocational education trajectories. It consists of three main sections. The first begins by explaining the marketisation of education in Chile, which has been the most distinctive characteristic of the Chilean education system since the 80s. This part describes the meaning and consequences of this marketisation in terms of diversification of educational offer and socioeconomic segregation by type of education and type of provider. The second section contextualises the Chilean upper-secondary education system within the market-led model showing the socioeconomic segregation within the TVET sector, TVET curricular offer and gender differences in enrolments. This section concludes by highlighting the weaknesses of upper-secondary TVET offer and set the background to understand the increasing demand for Tertiary Education (TE) from vocational graduates. The last section focuses on the transition to post-school education trajectories, describing the expansion of the demand for TE and presenting major structural barriers that vocational students face when transitioning from secondary vocational education to further education as well as policy initiatives to address inequalities in post-school educational trajectories of TVET students. The chapter ends by summarising briefly why Chile is a paradigmatic case to study vocational students' aspirations in transition.

Chile: a paradigmatic market-led education system

Chile is classified as a high-income country (World Bank, 2018). Yet, it is among the world's most economically unequal countries with a GINI coefficient¹ of 46.6 (between South Sudan with 46.3 and Malawi with 44.7) (World Bank, 2021) and consistently the most unequal among the OECD countries² (OECD, 2021b). This inequality is due to the staggeringly unequal distribution of income, with over 20% of income concentrated in the top 10% of the population (ILO, 2010; OECD, 2021b). At the roots of these inequalities is the military dictatorship led by Augusto Pinochet from 1973 to 1990, which has profoundly marked the

¹ The GINI coefficient measures the income distribution (thus, proxy of economic inequality) across a population within a nation. The coefficient ranges from 0 (or 0%) to 1 (or 100%), with 0 representing perfect equality and 1 representing perfect inequality.

² Based on the latest available data for Chile (2017). Mexico's GINI efficiency (based on 2018 data) after taxes and transfers exceeds Chile's.

Chilean political economy (Torche, 2005; Mayol, 2012). The implementation of a radical neoliberal market model of economic and social development from the 1980s, which has ever since regulated the economic, political, cultural, normative and social dimensions, has indeed had severe effects on social inequalities in Chile. Access to basic social rights and services (including education, health and pensions) as well as the allocation of resources and opportunities, the retail and finance's sectors have been mainly regulated by markets, while the State has occupied a subsidiary role, and ruled by the principle of profitability (Mayol, 2012; Orellana, 2018; Valiente *et al.*, 2021).

This situation has not been reversed since the 1980s, despite the economic growth experienced by the Chilean economy since the restoration of democracy in the 1990s. This is because the democratic administrations in power after the military regime gave priority to pro-economic growth policies rather than to policies aimed at redistributing more equally income and wealth (Solimano, 2012). Indeed, within what became the 'growth with equity' approach, the centre-left governments put into place some social policies which aimed at reducing extreme poverty (hence targeting the poorest and most vulnerable population, disregarding working- and lower middle-classes³) rather than tackling the structural causes of inequalities (e.g. by reducing the power of upper-middle class and rich elites and/or redistributing wealth) (*ibid.*; Valiente *et al.*, 2021). Thus, Chile has remained persistently unequal with no significant changes in the GINI coefficient since the restoration of democracy. A situation that was also facilitated by the country's constitution in place from Pinochet's era to 2021⁴ which gave primacy to markets and private sectors over state ownership and social rights and that has been normalised (Solimano, 2012). Mayol (2012) sustains that "the market culture that was established in Chile has made inequality tolerable ethically and politically" (p. 35).

As a matter of fact, the free-market model of development brought a cultural and ideological transformation to legitimise the neoliberal model itself. Ideologically and culturally, the tenets of individualism, individual initiative and meritocracy become 'common sense' ('cultural hegemony' in Gramscian terms), giving the working-class the illusion of equality of opportunities to become someone in society and obscuring structural inequalities that

³ Although the (lower) middle-class does not face the extreme levels of precarity faced by the working-class, they still experience some economic vulnerability. This is due to the fact that with the privatisation of public services, the middle-class has lost one of its defining features (professionals of the public service sector) and with it the privileges of stable, waged jobs (Espinoza & Barozet, 2008).

⁴ The draft of a new Constitution was started to be written in July 2021 by an assembly of elected members as a consequence of the social protests which broke out in Chile in October 2019.

would hamper the access to those opportunities (Orellana, 2018). A consequence of this Chilean social market economy is that the working-class populations still face high levels of deprivation which stretch beyond economic conditions and include social discrimination and frequent violation of their basic rights' (Araujo 2009; ILO, 2010; Mayol, 2012).

The marketisation of education: meaning and consequences

Neoliberal reforms in education gave birth to an extreme version of the market model of skill formation (Sung *et al.*, 2000), which has exacerbated already rampant social inequalities. From a comparative perspective, Chile has become the paradigm of the neo-market model of skill supply and demand and has been defined the most market-led education system in the world (Cabalin & Bellei, 2013; Bellei, 2016; Zancajo & Valiente, 2019). With the Organic Constitutional Law of Education (in Spanish, *Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Educación* – LOCE) established under the dictatorship and replaced in 2009 by the General Education Law (in Spanish *Ley General de Educación* - LGE) (Centro de Estudios MINEDUC [CEM], 2017), the market-oriented educational framework has implied a system based on family school 'choice' (by subsidising the demand-side of education through the vouchers system)⁵, school competition, and school autonomy to allow institutions the freedom to differentiate their offers and, thus, foster competition. At higher education level, the marketisation of education has promoted an unregulated system of private universities and vocational institutions (Solimano, 2012), as will be discussed later.

Types of educational providers at school level: a peculiar coexistence of public and private administrations

Currently, the governance of the education system in Chile is characterised by a complex spectrum where public and private (both for- and non-profit) governances coexist with a strong presence and power of the private sector. This has made Chile one of the countries with the highest participation of the private sector in education (OECD, 2010). Specifically,

⁵ One of the peculiarities of the Chilean system, compared to other school voucher systems such as the US, is that it funds the demand-side instead of the supply-side. Indeed, schools, public and private-subsidised alike (the latter both for-profit and non-profit) receive from the government a per-pupil subsidy according to the number of students enrolled (Mizala & Torche, 2012; Bellei, 2016). With the voucher system, parents are free to use the vouchers in the school they prefer for their children and funds are given directly to school (Cabalin & Bellei, 2013; OECD, 2017a). As Mizala and Torche (2012) specify, "It is important to note that a given private-voucher school receives the same per-pupil voucher payment as a municipal school of similar characteristics. Public schools can receive subsidies from municipalities, with the amount transferred varying according to the financial capacity of the municipality" (p. 133). Private-voucher schools are unevenly distributed throughout Chile whereby rural and poor municipalities do not have them at all.

there are four types of school providers: 1) public (or municipal) schools, managed by the municipalities (either a municipal education administration department or a municipal corporation) where schools are located; 2) private-subsidised schools (named also government-dependent private schools or publicly-subsidised private schools), governed by private organisations which can charge tuition fees from families to enrol their children, but can also count on public subsidies of the same amount as municipal schools for each student enrolled⁶; 3) private non-subsidised schools (or non-publicly-subsidised private schools), exclusively privately administered; and 4) delegated administration schools are Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET, or *Educación Técnico Profesional* – ETP, as it is known in Chile) schools managed by private companies, funded by the State although not through the voucher system, and linked to the business and industrial world (Santiago *et al.*, 2017). Figure 3.1 shows the percentages of each type of education provider at schools' level (from data available in 2015).

Figure 3.1: Number of education providers according to legal status, 2015.

Legal status	Number of providers	Proportion (%)
Municipal Education Administration Department	294	5.1
Municipal corporation	53	0.9
Publicly-subsidised private provider	4 956	85.2
Non-publicly-subsidised private provider	499	8.6
Delegated administration corporation	17	0.3
Total	5 819	100

Source: Santiago *et al.*, 2017, p. 52.

The Human Capital mantra

Since the dictatorship and with the marketisation of education, education in Chile has been institutionalised as synonym of Human Capital (HC) devoid of its intrinsic worth (Villalobos & Quaresma, 2015; Orellana, 2018). The HC approach which permeates the political debate in Chile (Consejo de Innovación, 2007; CEPPE/CIDE/CIAE, 2013; MINEDUC, 2016; Comisión Nacional de Productividad, 2018; DIPRES, 2019), conceives individuals as capitals and education as an economic action. Specifically, education is an individual investment that guarantees a secure, promising and stable future (Mayol, 2012; Orellana, 2018). HC Theory is commonly associated with the idea of equality of opportunities, based on utilitarian tenets of rates of returns to education. The notion of equity, in turn, is associated

⁶ The 2015 Inclusion Law aims, among other things, to end the shared financing system of these schools (OECD, 2017a).

with the assumption of fair and equal distribution of benefits and provisions. However, in socially unequal contexts, such as Chile, achieving equal access to resources and provisions is in itself a complex challenge (Espinoza & González, 2015).

As the next sections will show, despite the existing gap in accessing (quality) education has been reduced over the past two decades, the Chilean education system is still characterised by profound socioeconomic segregation, which limits disadvantaged youth's possibilities of accessing (and investing in) TE (Espinoza, 2017; Santos & Elacqua, 2016). This exacerbates income inequality as better income and employment outcomes are associated with higher education attainments (OECD 2016, 2017a). Considering the rates of returns to education, Chile registers the greatest inequalities based on educational attainment among the OECD countries. As stated in the OECD 2017 report (2017a), "Chilean tertiary graduates earn 160% more on average than upper secondary graduates; the corresponding figure for this difference among OECD countries is just 60%" (p. 39). This means that Chile has significantly high return to years of education compared to other OECD countries". This helps understand why this context is resplendent with HC Theory assumptions. Indeed, in Chile, TE is considered by poor and rich alike the agent for social mobility through the meritocratic tenet of individual effort. Those from low socioeconomic backgrounds see it as means to escape a life of poverty and deprivations (Orellana, 2018). As Mayol (2012) puts it, Chile is the country where (in theory) "becoming a millionaire is synonym of intellectual abilities" (p. 35). He further maintains that educational choices and aspirations are outcomes of the rationalisation of the demand-side, the customers, who take instrumental decisions to (in theory) maximise their rates of returns to education (by increasing their skills and, hence, their productivity in the labour market, income and social position):

A good degree is one that is useful for work and as long as the knowledge acquired is relevant later in the work scene, then it will be better. Knowledge is reduced to labour-relevant knowledge, while accreditations are understood as administrative alchemy aimed at transforming studies into relatively guaranteed money. (p.115)

The following section explains the socioeconomic and cultural segregation in education as consequence of its market-led model.

Socioeconomic and cultural segregation in education

Although the debate on the impact of the neoliberal reforms on issues of equity and quality in education is still open (Canales *et al.*, 2016b), evidence has shown a relationship between privatisation/school choice and increasing social stratification, school segregation and different levels of quality education provided (Bellei *et al.*, 2018; Orellana *et al.*, 2019). In terms of socioeconomic segregation in education, Chile registers the highest levels among OECD countries (OECD, 2017a, 2021b). Most public schools attend almost exclusively students from disadvantaged and poor families. By contrast, private non-subsidised schools attract students from high-income families (the elite)⁷. Private-subsidised schools stand in the middle, attracting students from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds, from (an increasing number of) lower-middle to upper-middle classes (OECD, 2017a; Santiago *et al.*, 2017). Yet, evidence shows that the socioeconomic composition of each private-subsidised school is rather homogeneous as some of them receive students from more advantaged backgrounds while others attract students from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Mizala & Torche, 2012; OECD, 2017a). While private-subsidised (on top of charging for school fees) are selective, as they choose students according to academic performance and socioeconomic and cultural background⁸, public schools cannot charge families and cannot be selective (Canales *et al.*, 2016b; CEM, 2017).

In the past two decades, the enrolments in public schools at secondary level have fallen compared to those in private-subsidised schools (Villalobos & Quaresma, 2015; MINEDUC, 2019). This is explained by the decreasing trust that families (particularly those middle-income families with greater purchasing power and the capacity to choose the education for their children) have in the public education system (OECD, 2017a). This lack of trust is mainly motivated by the low public spending in primary and especially secondary education (which places Chile among the lowest in the OECD countries) (OECD, 2021b), the consequently lower quality of education, lack of support and capacity-building to teachers and schools, and the lower prestige and rates of returns of public schools. Yet, there is also an important sociocultural factor to consider behind the decreasing number of enrolments in public schools. This has to do with the lower status that public schools have compared to private-subsidised (and private) schools and the interest lower-middle and upper-middle

⁷ With the voucher system, a significant number of students, mainly from higher socioeconomic background, migrated from public sector migrated to private-voucher schools. Those from lower economic background remained in public schools. Private non-subsidised schools have remained unaffected by the voucher system and continued to serve the elite (Mizala & Torche, 2012).

⁸ Among mechanisms of selection there are interviews with parents, observation of children playing/interacting with other children, requests for marriage, baptismal, rent certificates (Villalobos & Quaresma, 2015).

class families have in distinguishing and separating themselves from poor and vulnerable families (Canales *et al.*, 2016b). As Orellana *et al.* (2019) put it, “parents’ choice of school is determined more by a social class aspiration than by an academic aspirations” (p. 145). This motivation behind parents’ school choice is reinforced by the lack of evidence in support of greater effectiveness and better quality and performances of private-subsidised schools (Bellei, 2016).

The following section will contextualise the Chilean upper-secondary education system within the market-led model where HC discourse is particularly hegemonic within the TVET sector. The section begins by briefly presenting the Chilean education system at upper-secondary level and then outlines TVET education from a political economy perspective.

Upper-secondary education system

Upper-secondary education in Chile is the last cycle of compulsory education which consists of eight years of primary education (ISCED 1) (in Spanish *educación básica*) and four years of secondary education (ISCED-2 and ISCED-3) (in Spanish *educación media*)⁹. The four years of secondary education are divided into two years of lower secondary education (ISCED-2) and two years of upper secondary education (ISCED-3). While in the first two years, students follow a common curriculum, in the second two years they are sorted into the academic track (Humanistic-Scientific Mid-level Education, or *Educación Media Científico-Humanista* – EMCH, as it is known in Chile), or TVET track (or *Educación Media Técnico-Profesional* – EMTP). This implies that the choice of which type of school to attend often occurs at the beginning of secondary education as students tend to remain in the same school to complete the four years of secondary education (OECD, 2017a). The students who attend TVET upper-secondary schools are required to do a 450-hour-work-placement at the end of their last year of school if they want to obtain the qualification of secondary vocational education (in Spanish *Título de Educación Media Técnico Profesional*) (CEM, 2020).

TVET option represents a relatively low proportion of overall schooling options. Despite the number of schools offering TVET has increased since early 2000, it has reached a plateau

⁹ In Chile, secondary education corresponds to Years 9 to 12 (students aged 14 to 17 years old) in the English system. Appendix 1 shows the diagram of the Chilean education system (available at <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=CHL>, accessed 25 August 2021).

over the last decade, while the number of schools offering general/academic curriculum has increased steadily and is higher than TVET offer. Data from 2016 shows that 67% of upper-secondary schools in Chile offered academic education, 20% offered the TVET option, and 13% were comprehensive schools (offering both academic education and TVET tracks) (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Percentages of upper-secondary education schools classified by type of education, 2016.

Type of education	Total
Academic education	67
TVET	20
Comprehensive	13
Total	100

Note: Percentages added by the author.

Source: Arroyo & Pacheco, 2017, p. 6.

Concerning the type of upper-secondary schools' providers, 42% of upper-secondary TVET schools were publicly administered, 46% were private-subsidised, and 12% were managed by delegated administrations. By contrast, academic education schools were mainly managed by private-subsidised (63%) and private non-subsidised (20%) providers. As shown, private non-subsidised providers are absent in the TVET sector, while in the academic education track, they cover a greater share than public schools (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Percentages of upper-secondary education schools classified by type of provider, 2016.

Type of education	Public	Private-subsidised	Private non-subsidised	Delegated administration	Total
Academic education	17	63	20	0	100
TVET	42	46	0	12	100
Comprehensive	61	39	0	0	100

Note: Percentages added by the author.

Source: Arroyo & Pacheco, 2017, p. 6.

In terms of enrolments (see Table 3.3), evidence shows a steady decline of enrolments in TVET track over the years 2010-2018, whereas enrolments in academic education tracks have steadily increased. In 2016, when students participating in this doctoral study should have enrolled in upper-secondary education, upper-secondary TVET schools received

slightly less than 40% of students while the number of enrolments in general academic schools was hovering above 60% of students.

Table 3.3: Enrolments (%) in upper-secondary education classified by type of education, 2013-2018. Self-elaboration.

Type of education	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Academic education	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63
TVET	45	44	43	42	41	40	39	38	37

Source: MINEDUC, 2019.

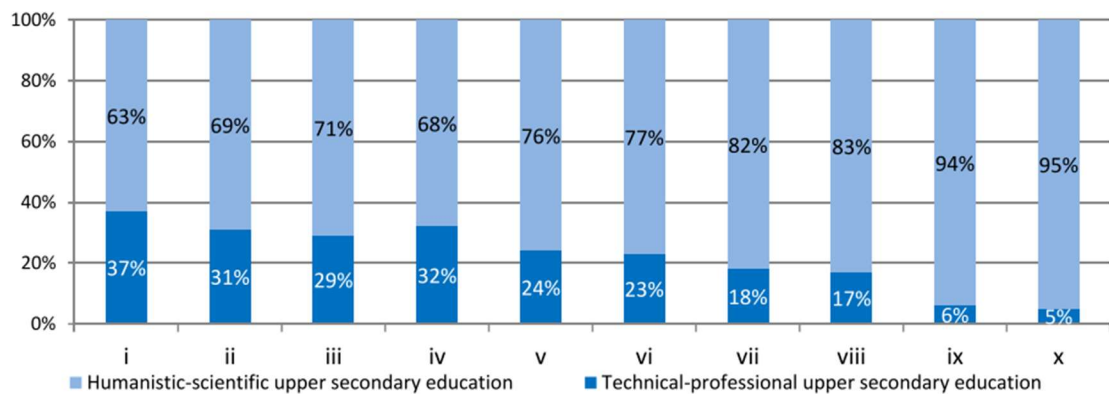
The political economy of upper-secondary TVET

Socioeconomic segregation in upper-secondary education

This chapter has so far shown how the marketisation of education has impacted the political economy of education in Chile. The different types of providers in education are one of the consequences of this system which has led to high levels of socioeconomic segregation in education. Much of the socioeconomic segregation in education occurs at upper-secondary level (Villalobos & Quaresma, 2015). As Fig. 3.2 shows, the rate of enrolment in TVET tracks decreases with increasing income, ranging from 37% in the lowest income decile to 55% in the highest income decile (Larrañaga *et al.*, 2013, 2014; OECD, 2017a)¹⁰. Beyond the economic disadvantage of vocational students, these students are more likely to come from families with lower levels of education compared to their peers from academic education and from indigenous communities and ethnic minorities (Sevilla, 2011). This means that within the education offer, TVET public schooling represents the least valuable option in the educational hierarchy (OECD, 2017a; Bellei *et al.*, 2018). As noted in 2021 OECD (2021b) report, despite the neoliberal rhetoric of endless possibilities, “access to quality education remains strongly linked to the socio-economic status of the family” (p. 11).

¹⁰ The average % of enrolment in the TVET track of about 40% in 2015 (see Table 3.3) does not equal the data in the Figure possibly because this data comes from a survey.

Figure 3.2: Enrolments in upper-secondary education classified by type of education (TVET or academic tracks) and by socioeconomic groups from the most disadvantaged (i) to the most advantaged (x), 2015.



Source: OECD, 2017a, p. 252.

Based on the availability of data on enrolments in upper-secondary education by type of provider, evidence shows that in 2020, 55.73% (the majority) of the students in academic education was attending private-subsided schools, 29.07% was in public schools and 15.19% (the elite) was in private non-subsidised schools. By contrast, the majority of TVET students was attending public schools (45.75%), 41.12% was in private-subsidised schools and 13.1% was in delegated administration schools (see Table 3.4).

Table 3.4: Share of enrolment (%) in TVET or academic education tracks by type of provider at national level, 2020. Self-elaboration.

Type of provider	Upper-secondary TVET	Upper-secondary academic education
Public	45.75	29.07
Private-subsidised	41.12	55.73
Private non-subsidised	0.01	15.19
Delegated administration	13.1	0

Source: CEM, n.d. Datos Abiertos.

<http://junarsemantics.s3.amazonaws.com/mineduc/BigData/Visualizaciones/VZ2/index.html>

Upper-secondary TVET curricular offer and gender distribution in enrolments

In terms of curricular offer, TVET consists of six economic sectors (Commercial, Industrial, Technical, Agricultural, Maritime, Arts) divided into 18 fields of study (see Table 3.5) (Santiago *et al.*, 2017; Espacio Público, 2018). In 2017, at national level the great majority of enrolments were concentrated in the industrial sector (40%), followed by the commercial sector (29.3%) and the technical sector (24.5%) while sectors such as agriculture, arts and

maritime received much lower shares of enrolments (4.7%, 1.2%, and 0.08% respectively) (CEM, 2019).

Table 3.5: Enrolments (%) in upper-secondary TVET classified by economic sector, fields of study and gender, 2017. Self-elaboration.

Economic sectors	Fields of study	Total enrolments	Males	Females
Commercial	Administration and accounting	29.3	37.4	62.6
	Total	29.3	37.4	62.6
Industrial	Construction	3.1	75.4	24.6
	Metal mechanics	14.5	91.5	8.5
	Electricity	12.6	87.3	12.7
	Mining	2.6	59.1	40.9
	Graphics	1.5	57	43
	Chemistry and industry	1.4	35.3	64.7
	Textile	0.4	7.5	92.5
	Technology and Telecommunications	3.6	75.8	24.2
	Total	40	81.1	18.9
Technical	Food	9.2	34	66
	Health and Education	10.7	9.7	90.3
	Hospitality and Tourism	3	33.4	66.6
	Total	24.55	21.1	78.9
Agricultural	Logging	0.8	69.7	30.3
	Agribusiness	3.8	61.5	38.5
	Total	4.7	62.9	37.1
Maritime	Maritime	1.25	66.9	33.1
	Total	1.25	66.9	33.1
Arts	Visual Arts	0.05	49.4	50.6
	Theatre	0.02	33.30%	66.70%
	Dance	0.01	38.5	61.5
	Total			

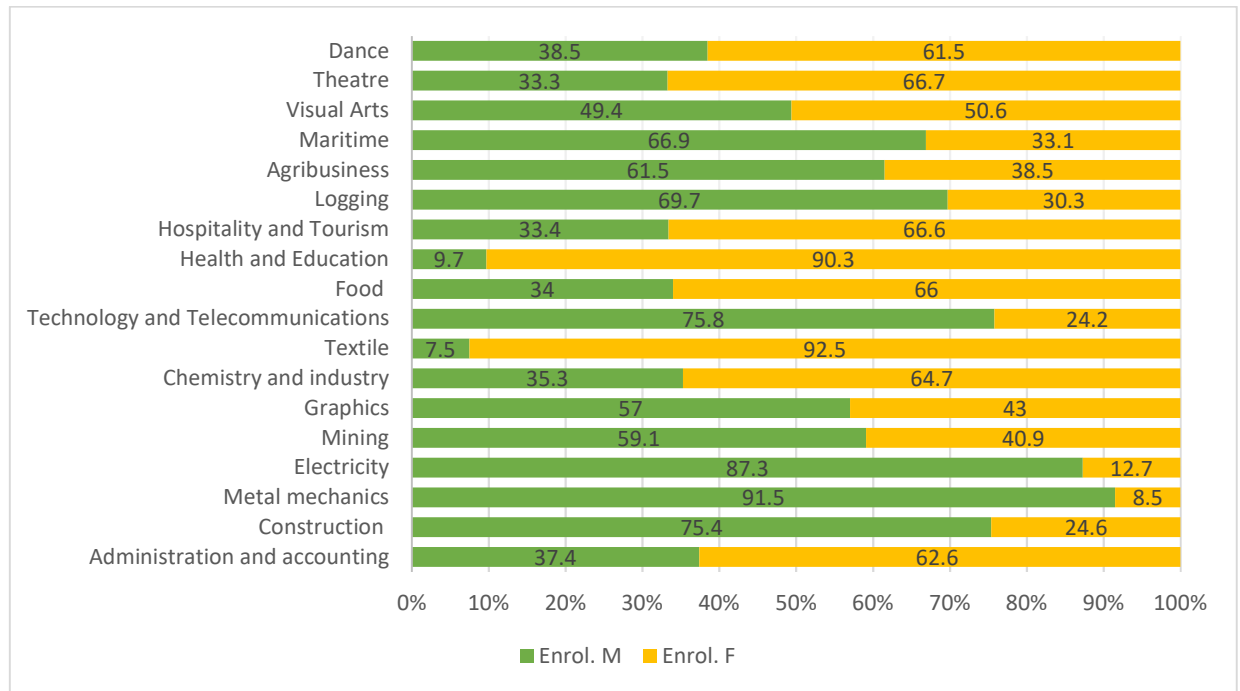
		0.08	43.80	56.2
Grand Total		100	52.5	47.5

Note: The percentages in bold represent the total distribution of enrolments across economic sectors (column 'total enrolments') and the total rate of enrolments in each economic sector by gender. Each economic sector is disaggregated into fields of study. For each field of study, the table shows disaggregated data on total number of enrolments and the share of enrolments by gender (percentages not in bold).

Source: CEM, 2019.

As Table 3.5 shows, in terms of gender differences in enrolments, in 2017 52.5% of students enrolled in upper-secondary TVET were male and 47.5% were female. There exists a skewed distribution of enrolments across areas of economic sectors and fields of study associated with traditionally feminine and masculine occupations (see also Fig. 3.3). National data shows that female students are mostly concentrated in the technical sector (78.9%) where there are track of studies traditionally viewed as feminine, such as early Childhood Care and Nursing (which are classified as technical specialisms under Health and Education), and in the commercial sectors (62.6%) (Administration and Accounting), again associated more with feminine careers, especially administration. By contrast, the industrial, agricultural, maritime sectors are predominantly male (with 81.1%, 62.9%, and 66.9% of enrolments, respectively), with areas of specialisation almost exclusively masculine (i.e. Electricity, Metal Mechanics, Technology and Telecommunications within the industrial sector). These gender differences in TVET have an impact on the transition to work and educational trajectories alike as they reflect gender inequalities existent in the labour market (Arroyo and Pacheco, 2017). Indeed, mechanics, electricity, construction, electronics (masculine sectors) are higher-paying sectors compared to administration, nursing, childhood care, and textile (feminine sectors) (Espacio Público, 2018).

Figure 3.3: Share of enrolments by gender at upper-secondary TVET across fields of study, 2017. Self-elaboration.



Source: CEM, 2019.

Much of the upper-secondary TVET national offer is concentrated in the Metropolitan Region (MR) around the city of Santiago (Castro Paredes & Holoz, 2014; CIDE, 2015; Arroyo & Pacheco, 2017). According to the latest data available on enrolments' distribution across economic sectors, in 2013 the commercial, industrial, and technical sectors had most enrolments in the MR. As Table 3.6 shows, enrolments in the MR were mainly concentrated in Administration and Accounting (42%), Electricity (11%) Mechanics (10%), Health and Education (10%), Food (10%), and Technology and Telecommunication (6%) (Castro Paredes & Holoz, 2014). This helps contextualise the data presented in Chapter 5 as the students participating in this doctoral research had attended the most popular vocational tracks (Administration and Logistics, Electricity, Mechanics and Telecommunication).

Table 3.6: Percentages of enrolments' distribution across TVET's economic sectors in Chile and MR, 2013. Self-elaboration.

Economic sector	Field of education	Chile	MR
Commercial	Administration and accounting	29	42
Industrial	Construction	3.1	1.8
	Metal mechanics	14.5	10
	Electricity	12.6	11
	Mining	2.6	0.2
	Graphics	1.5	1.8
	Chemistry and industry	1.4	1.8
	Textile	0.4	1
	Technology and Telecommunications	3.6	6
Technical	Food	9.2	10
	Health and Education	10.7	10
	Hospitality and Tourism	3	2.
Agricultural	Logging	0.8	0.1
	Agribusiness	3.8	1.2
Maritime	Maritime	1.2	0
Arts	Visual Arts	0.05	0.06
	Theatre	0.02	0.02
	Dance	0.01	

Source: CEM, 2019; Castro Paredes & Holoz, 2014.

The weaknesses of upper-secondary TVET and the increasing demand for TE

Despite the traditional role of secondary TVET education of providing a direct and quick access to the labour-market to those coming from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds, the system frequently struggles to equip students for jobs that interest them, even at the skill level they are ostensibly trained to (Arroyo & Pacheco, 2017; OECD, 2017a). Poor job prospects await TVET students after completing their secondary education cycle. This is due to the following factors (1) the low reputation that TVET schools have, especially public schools. The low investment in this education sector (significantly lower than the OECD average), the lower academic performance of upper-secondary TVET students compared to academic education's students resulting from the System of Education Quality Measurement¹¹, the low relevance that upper-secondary vocational skills and

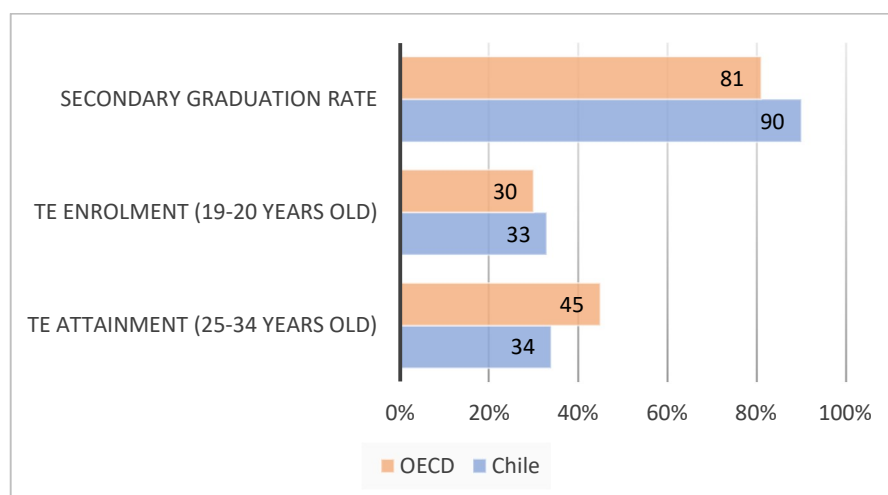
¹¹ The System of Education Quality Measurement (abbreviated as SIMCE is the Chilean acronym) which is the standardised national evaluation system of academic performance administered to students in four grades in primary education and two grades in secondary education, is published yearly and aimed to provide families with information on schools' score and ranking and guide them in school choice decisions (Centro de Estudios MINEDUC, 2017; Bellei & Muñoz, 2021). According to OECD (2017a) "Some 55% of students scoring in the lowest two quintiles of the System of Education Quality Measurement (SIMCE) test at the end of grade 8 enter vocational programmes, compared to 18% who score in the highest quintile" (p.255). This suggests that TVET attracts students with lower academic performances.

competencies have in the labour market helps explain why public vocational education occupies a low position in the educational hierarchy (2) TVET programmes' lack of flexibility and responsiveness to and coordination with employers' and local labour market's needs according to the employers; (3) the consequent low labour market relevance and weak ties with economic sectors of upper-secondary TVET, particularly those administered by the municipalities; and (4) the lack of trust that employers have towards TVET graduates' hard and soft skills considered inadequate to face the challenges of competitive and global markets (OECD, 2017a; Servat Poblete, 2017; Valiente *et al.*, 2021).

The low prestige of TVET compared to academic routes is reflected by the peripheral role that TVET has always occupied in the policy agendas and debates (Valiente *et al.*, 2021). Issues of social stratification, particularly strong in the field of TVET, and barriers TVET students face to access decent and qualified job opportunities or to continue studying in TE institutions have never been addressed directly in policy initiatives. The main initiatives that indirectly tackled some of these barriers by placing social and educational inequalities at the centre of the debate came with the second Bachelet's government (2014- 2018) and the change of paradigm from a focus on education as a good of the market to a focus on education as a social right (Zancajo & Valiente, 2019).

Paradoxically, in a country where secondary TVET was originally designed as a direct route to the labour market, an increasing number of such students have been transitioning to TE. It is emblematic that Chile currently achieves higher levels of upper-secondary completion and access to TE than the OECD average despite the extremely high costs of TE (see the next section) (Zancajo & Valiente, 2019) (see Fig. 3.4). This trend is partly explained by the above-mentioned deficiencies in the TVET education sector (especially at secondary level) and partly due to the internalisation of the neoliberal meritocratic mantra that better life opportunities come with the accumulation of educational credentials, the demand for TE/HE has increased significantly among TVET graduates (Valiente *et al.*, 2021). However, prospects are poor for upper-secondary vocational students who make their transition to TE as they "face even more difficulties gaining access to higher-level education opportunities" (OECD, 2017, p. 270) than their peers from academic secondary education.

Figure 3.4: Shares (%) of secondary- and tertiary-educated young people and shares of enrolments in TE institution, 2016-2020 (Chile/OECD average). Self-elaboration.



Source: data from OECD 2021a, 2021c, 2021d.

The next section will present major structural barriers that vocational students face when transitioning from secondary vocational education to further education or the labour market as well as policy initiatives to address inequalities in post-school educational trajectories of TVET students.

The transition to post-vocational education trajectories

The expansion of Tertiary Education's demand

In the past two decades, Tertiary Education (TE), and especially Higher Education (HE), in Chile have gone through an accelerated process of expansion, massification, transformation and diversification in provisions and enrolments. The sector saw an increase of enrolments of almost 79% between 2005 and 2013, especially among disadvantaged students, the highest among OECD countries (OECD, 2017a). To give an idea of the phenomenon of expansion of tertiary education in Chile, between 2004 and 2016 enrolments rose by 40.3% at traditional universities (the oldest universities created before the dictatorship in the 80s), by 120% at other private universities, by 266.4% at Professional Institutes (offering both professional degrees after the completion of 4-year-technical programmes and technical degrees after 2 to 2 and a half-year-technical programmes) and by 125.7% at Technical Training Centres (offering only technical degrees after the completion of 2 to 2 and a half-year-technical programmes) (OECD, 2017a) (the following section will further explain the different types of tertiary institutions).

From the supply-side of skills formation, the shortage of skilled human capital has been deemed responsible for hampering Chilean's economy productivity and competitiveness (Zancajo & Valiente, 2019). The knowledge-economy rhetoric behind this assumption is that the Chilean model of economic development based on the integration of local and national market economies with international market economies needs tertiary education graduates to booster its national competitiveness in global markets (Solimano, 2012). From the demand-side¹², getting TE/HE credentials have become synonym of upward social mobility, of becoming a professional and of having a middle-class lifestyle, archetypal of success and access to quality life, social rights and benefits (Orellana *et al.*, 2017).

Low classes have begun to see TE as means to escape poverty through social mobility. Consequently, the traditional role of secondary TVET to connect students to the labour market has become obsolete or at least less important (Arroyo & Pacheco, 2017; Zancajo & Valiente, 2019). Institutionally, transitions from upper-secondary TVET to TE institutions have been supported and promoted, particularly from the second Bachelet administration (2014–2018). The National Policy for TVET introduced during her administration in 2016 aimed to:

ensure that young people, adults and workers have opportunities to develop educational and labour market trajectories according to their expectations and abilities, consistent with the development needs of the country. (CEM, 2017, p. 189).

The National Policy included initiatives, such as the creation of 15 public tertiary TVET institutions, one in each region to be completed by 2022, and free TE for disadvantaged students, meant to facilitate the transition to TE for young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (CEM, 2017). Indeed, before 2016 all TVET provisions at tertiary level were fully private and greatly depended on student enrolments and deregulated tuition fees set by each institution (OECD, 2017a). The following section explains the marketisation of tertiary education.

Types of Higher Education institutions in Chile

The marketisation of education and the strong presence of the private sector in education, especially at tertiary level, have been determinant in the expansion of Higher Education institutions. The governance of the higher education system is to a large extent in the hands

¹² Although in terms of economy overall, increase in qualifications is supply side.

of private institutions (profit or not-for-profit), and it is organised in the following types of institutions.

Universities offer different types of academic degrees (bachelor, master and doctorate), but also professional degrees, with and without a bachelor's degree, and higher-level technical degrees (CEM, 2017). University institutions are classified in traditional and non-traditional universities. The formers are part of the Council of University Rectors (CRUCH). All traditional universities, 25 in total (16 public/state universities and 9 private, not-for-profit universities), are elites, selective and accredited institutions under Chile's quality assurance system and are considered more prestigious than non-traditional ones. By contrast, the non-traditional universities (non-CRUCH), 35 in total, are private institutions that have developed with the marketisation of education (MINEDUC, 2019). These are lower quality institutions compared to CRUCH universities as almost half of them are unaccredited. Traditionally, students from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be concentrated in private university institutions that are low quality and with more accessible and flexible, but less transparent, admissions processes (Canales *et al.*, 2016; OECD, 2017a).

Tertiary TVET institutes are private (for-profit and non-for-profit), non-selective institutions. Non-selective institutions have become proxy for students' low socioeconomic background (OECD, 2017a). Compared to universities, they offer more flexible programmes and modalities. For example, students can enrol in 2 to 2 and a half-year technical programmes in Technical Training Centres (known as *Centros de Formación Técnica* – CFTs, for its acronym in Spanish) to become higher level technician. Otherwise, they can enrol in 4-year-professional programmes or in 2 to 2 and a half-year-technical programmes in Professional Institutes (known as *Institutos Profesionales* – IPs, for its acronym in Spanish) to get the professional certificate (without bachelor's degrees). Students can also choose to enrol in technical courses and after the fourth semester (2 years) opting to continue in the professional path (OECD, 2017a). Since 2016, a small number of tertiary vocational institutions have been made eligible for *Gratuidad* upon meeting certain conditions (see section on financial aids below). Lastly, students can enrol in evening programmes (*modalidad vespertino*) to be able to work during the day, an option that many TVET students choose. In 2018 there were 46 CFTs and 40 IPs (MINEDUC, 2019). In terms of quality and prestige, only a third of CFTs and less than a half of IPs are accredited (CEM, 2017; OECD, 2017a).

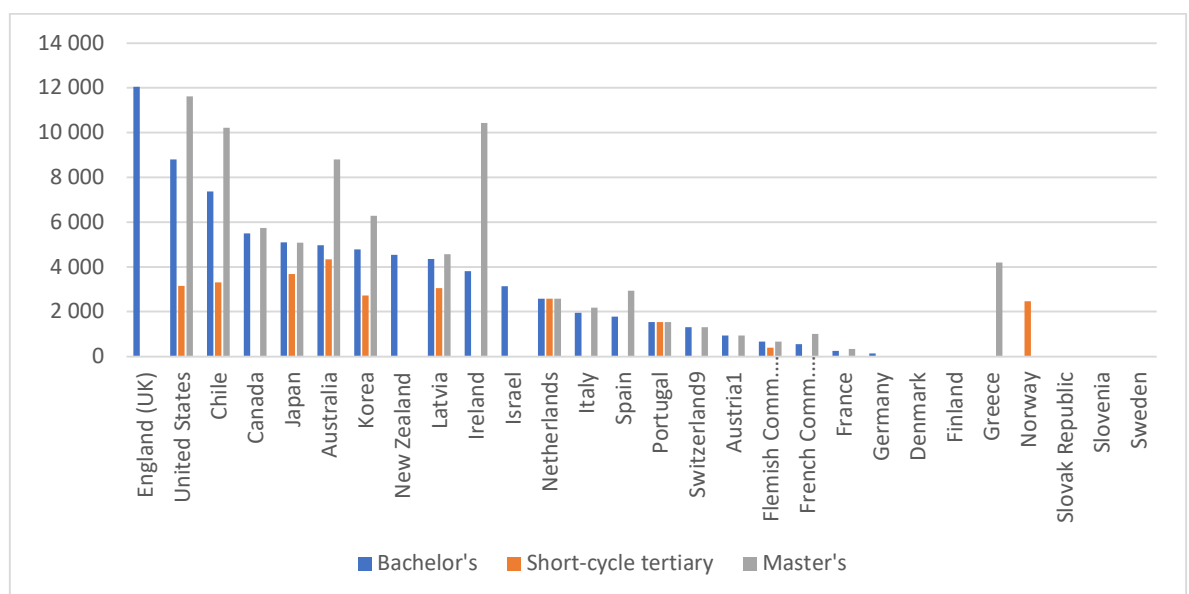
Access to TE

Until recently, accessing TE was largely uncommon for vocational students. This was particularly the case for university education for its prohibitive costs and the relative academic disadvantage TVET students faced in the University Admission Exam (known as *Prueba de Selección Universitaria - PSU*, for its acronym in Spanish) compared to those on academic tracks.

Costs of TE

Student fees for TE in Chile are among the highest compared to other OECD countries, and are particularly high at Bachelor's and Master's levels. This is particularly so considering that in Chile students receive lower public support (i.e. loans or scholarships) compared to the UK or USA (which register highest fees) and that loans in Chile only cover tuition fees (leaving aside costs of living and study materials), (OECD, 2020). Fig. 3.5 shows the annual average tuition fees (calculated in USD) charged by tertiary public educational institution according to the level of education (Bachelor's, Short-cycle tertiary, Master's). To contextualise the significance of tuition fees in Chile, these are more than double of any other OECD country in relation to the Gross National Income per capita (GNI) and considering that Chile is the most unequal society among OECD countries (OECD, 2017a).

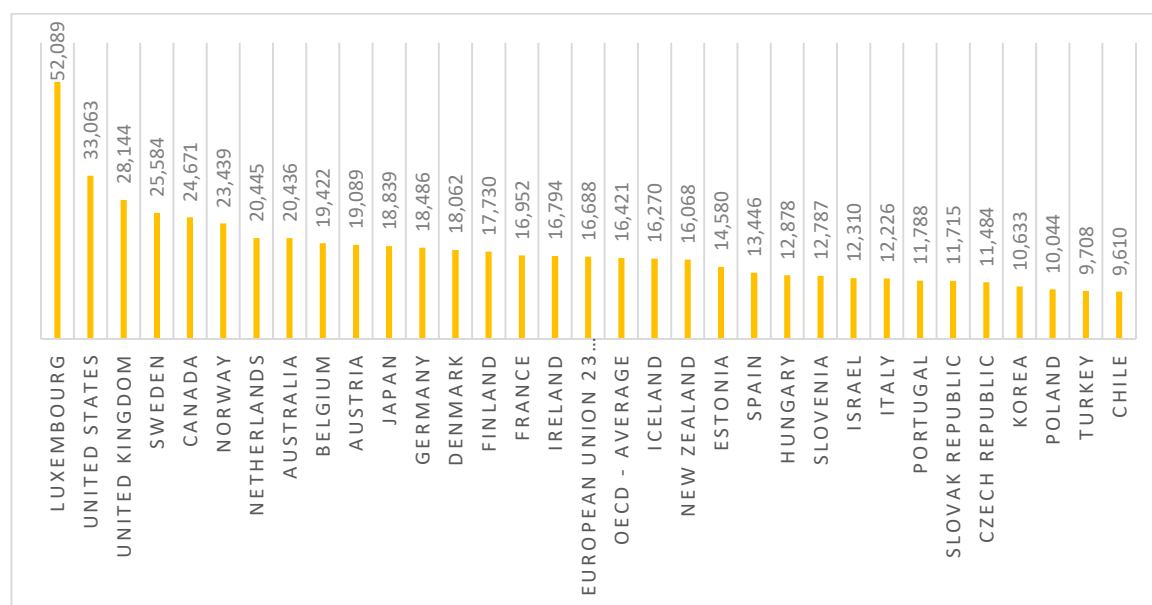
Figure 3.5: Annual average tuition fees (USD) charged by tertiary public educational institutions to national students, by level of education (Bachelor's, Short-cycle tertiary, Master's), 2016-18. Self-elaboration.



Source: OECD, 2020.

In terms of expenditures, in 2017, despite an increase in public expenditures on tertiary education, Chile spent only around USD 9600 per student compared to USD 16400 of the OECD average, registering the lowest total public expenditure on TE of all OECD countries (see Fig. 3.6). In 2015, 85% of public funds went to universities, whereas tertiary vocational education received only 15%.

Figure 3.6: Total expenditure on tertiary educational institutions (public and private) per full-time equivalent student (USD), 2017 (OECD countries). Self-elaboration.

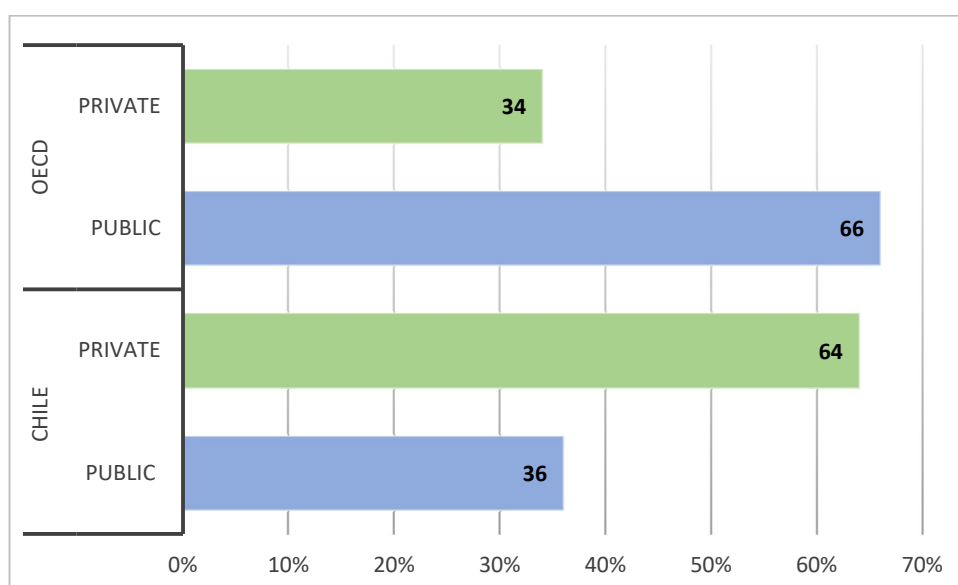


Note: Expenditure per student on educational institutions at a particular level of education is calculated by dividing total expenditure on educational institutions at that level by the corresponding full-time equivalent enrolment. Expenditure in national currencies is converted into equivalent USD by dividing the national currency figure by the purchasing power parity (PPP) index for GDP (OECD, 2019a: 272).

Source: OECD.Stat (n.d.). https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?datasetcode=EAG_FIN_RATIO

In Chile, two-thirds (64%) of expenditure on TE comes from private sources, most of which comes from households (OECD, 2017a), and only one-third (36%) comes from public sources. Among the other OECD countries the situation is opposite as two-thirds (66%) of expenditure on TE comes from public sources and only one-third (36%) comes from private sources (see Fig. 3.7) (OECD, 2019a, 2019b).

Figure 3.7: Share of expenditure (%) (private and public) on TE, by final source of funds, 2016. Self-elaboration.



Note: “Public spending on education includes direct expenditure on educational institutions as well as educational-related public subsidies given to households and administered by educational institutions. Private spending on education refers to expenditure funded by private sources which are households and other private entities (tuition fees and other private payments to educational institutions), whether partially covered by public subsidies or not, after the flow of transfers” (OECD, 2019a, p. 283).

Source: OECD, 2019b.

Academic requirements

While financial barriers to access Higher Education institutions have been at the centre of political debates and of students’ protests (2011), other non-monetary barriers hamper disadvantaged students’ transition to TE. These are academic-related barriers. Specifically, they concern the failure to satisfactorily complete secondary education or pass *PSU* (OECD, 2017a). Passing the *PSU* with a score of at least 450¹³ (out of 850) is mandatory for all CRUCH universities and a few other private universities require students to take the *PSU*. Most private institutions (universities, CFTs and IPs) have their own systems of admission. While IPs and CFTs only require that students sit for the *PSU* exam (therefore, they are non-competitive and non-selective institutions), non-CRUCH universities have their own unregulated mechanisms in place. Issues of equity in access higher education institutions arise as vocational students, on average, score significantly lower than their peers from academic education tracks. This is because while academic education prepares students for the academic path, vocational schools’ programmes have a weak focus on those academic

¹³ The score required by prestigious, better quality universities hovers around 550+. Furthermore, some scholarships require a score of at least 500 to be eligible to apply for the scholarship (i.e. the Bicentenary Scholarship known as *Beca Bicentenario* in Spanish) (OECD, 2017a).

subjects that students are tested on in the *PSU* test (Spanish, mathematics, history and science) (CEM, 2017; OECD, 2017a). As a consequence, they are both ruled out from accessing best quality higher education institutions or programmes, and from the eligibility to some of the financial aids¹⁴.

Measures to expand access to TE to students from disadvantaged backgrounds

Financial aids

In the last few years, to tackle these inequalities some significant compensatory measures have been adopted. On the financial level, in 2015 the Bachelet's government introduced the Free Tuition Programme known as *Gratuidad* which became effective in 2016. *Gratuidad* was adopted in, and launched in advance of, a context of larger reforms (the 2018 Higher Education Reform Law) that, for the first time in Chile, considered Higher Education as a right. The paradigm's shift, from a focus on education as good of the market to a focus on education as social right, was pushed by university students' protests that exploded in Chile in 2011 demanding the de-marketisation of the education system (Bellei, 2016; Zancajo and Valiente, 2019). Under the *Gratuidad* programme, in 2016 students from the bottom fifth lowest decile of income could enrol in one of the 30 participating universities without paying tuition fees. In 2017, six not-for-profit CFTs, six not-for-profit IPs and two new state universities were included in the programme. In 2018, *Gratuidad* was expanded to include students from the bottom six deciles of family income (OECD, 2017a; Arzola, 2019).

The introduction of *Gratuidad* has allowed many lower-income students participate in higher education. In 2016, almost 140 thousand students benefited from the programme. The number raised to about 250 thousand the year after (OECD, 2017a) and by 2020 to nearly 400 thousand distributed in the 53 institutions that have taken part in the programme (Ministerio de Educación [MINEDUC], 2020). Before *Gratuidad*, the Chilean government

¹⁴ Following the social unrest of 2019, a number of reforms have been introduced in Chile aimed to tackle social inequalities. In education, in 2021 *PSU* has been substituted by Transition Exam (known as *Pruebas De Transición* – PDT, in its Spanish acronym) to reduce the equity gaps in the admissions process for universities. Compared to the previous exam, the new one has been reduced (less questions in the same amount of time), its pedagogical contents are more accessible for TVET students, and it weighs less in the admission to university institutions giving more weight to the score for upper secondary education (known as *Notas de Educación Media* – NEM, in Spanish) and to the Score Ranking programme (known as *Puntaje Ranking* in Spanish) (Departamento de evaluación, medición y registro educacional [DEMRE], n.d.).

supported students mainly through loans such as the State Guaranteed Loan System (known as *Crédito con Aval del Estado* – CAE in its Spanish acronym) introduced in 2006 and with ungenerous interest rates. Assistance through non-repayable financial aids (scholarships) has grown only later and it is subject to eligibility criteria (i.e *PSU* scores, only in accredited institutions or only in CRUCH universities) (OECD, 2017a).

As other forms of financial aids, *Gratuidad* has also eligibility criteria. The eligibility is based on household income, according to a step-function mechanism. This means that a student's family income cannot exceed (even of just a dollar) the threshold of the sixth deciles to be eligible. Once being granted the *Gratuidad*, educational performances become key to maintain *Gratuidad* for the duration of the studies. Specifically, students are required to complete their courses within the nominal length to avoid being charged half of the fees for the first additional year of studies and full fees for the following years. Funds for *Gratuidad* are provided by the government to tertiary institutions that meet quality-related criteria. Therefore, being granted *Gratuidad* depends on the number of seats available in specific institutions and on whether family income falls within the bottom sixth deciles (OECD, 2017a).

Academic support

On the academic level, in 2014, the Programme for Support and effective Access to Higher Education (known as *Programa de Acompañamiento y Acceso a la Educación Superior* - *PACE* for its acronym in Spanish) was implemented. *PACE* engages with public secondary schools in vulnerable contexts to offer vocational guidance to students and activities to improve soft skills as well as cognitive and interpersonal abilities (OECD, 2017a; DIPRES, 2019). The main benefit of the programme concerns the fact that it guarantees quotas in specific university institutions to the 15% best performing upper-secondary students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who have taken part in *PACE* activities in their upper-secondary education. *PACE* students can access universities partnering with *PACE* without the need to accomplish with *PSU* requirements. *PACE* students are also offered academic and counselling support during their first year of TE. Recently *PACE* was extended to a few TVET institutions. The little evidence available on the impact of *PACE* on post-school transitions indicates that it has widened the access to good quality universities and selective degrees for disadvantaged students (DIPRES, 2019).

Trends in post-school transitions to TE

In the last few years, about 49% of upper-secondary students have accessed TE immediately after the completion of their compulsory education. Notably, the rate of enrolment in TE institutions of secondary TVET graduates has increased from 34.7% in 2013 to 43.7% in 2018. This contrasts the trend of students from academic education whose rate of enrolments in TE has dropped from 57.1% in 2013 to 51.4% in 2018 (SIES, 2020) (see Table 3.7). Given that *Gratuidad* scheme was introduced in 2017, this increment in the access to TE for vocational (low class) students does not seem correlated to (exclusively) the scheme but rather to the system of scholarships and loans introduced in the past two decades. These, combined with the ample offer of TE private institutions from the supply side and the pervasive meritocratic discourses of upwards social mobility through education, can explain the raising number of vocational students who prefer education to labour market.

Table 3.7: Transition to TE (%) immediately after secondary education, classified by type of secondary education and gender, 2013-2018.

Type of upper-secondary education	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Humanistic-Scientific	57.1	55.3	54.9	52.9	52.5	51.4
Female students	57.5	55.4	55.4	53.2	53.3	51.9
Male students	56.6	55.3	54.3	52.7	51.7	50.9
TVET	34.7	36.6	38.3	41.2	43.2	43.7
Female students	35.3	36.8	38.5	41.2	43.5	43.6
Male students	34.1	36.4	38.	41.2	43.0	43.7
Total	49.5	49.8	49.5	49.3	49.7	49.1

source: SIES, 2019.

As Table 3.7 also shows, in terms of gender differences, female vocational students' enrolments are slightly higher across the years compared to male peers. The proportion of women students in TVET has increased, although the number of male students in TVET has increased at a faster rate, to eventually (slightly) overtake women's number.

With respect to the transitions to TE institutions according to the type of upper-secondary education, overall vocational students tend to enrol in TVET institutions whereas academic education students tend to enrol in universities. Data in Table 3.8 shows that vocational students of the 2018 cohort preferred IPs (42.1%), then universities (31.8%) and lastly CFTs (26.1%). The number of upper-secondary vocational students in universities has slightly fluctuated over the years 2013-2018 with a peak of enrolments in 2015 (33.7%) to then

descend slightly in the following three years. By contrast, the number of vocational students in IPs has steadily increased since 2014. On the other hand, academic education students preferred universities (67.9%), then IPs (21.4%) and lastly CFTs (10.8%). The number of academic education students enrolling in universities has slightly fluctuated over the years 2013-2018 but overall increased, while the numbers of students in IPs and CFTs has decreased.

Table 3.8: Transition to TE (%) immediately after secondary education, classified by type of upper-secondary education and type of TE institutions chosen, 2013-2018.

Type of institution	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Academic education (Humanistic-Scientific)						
CFTs	11.8	12.1	10.4	11	10.5	10.8
IPs	22.7	23	22	22.4	21.6	21.4
Universities	65.5	64.9	67.7	66.7	67.9	67.9
TVET						
CFTs	28.7	29.9	26	27.4	26.2	26.1
IPs	41.9	40.2	40.3	40.8	41.1	42.1
Universities	29.4	30	33.7	31.8	32.7	31.8

Source: SIES, 2019.

In terms of enrolments in TE institutions according to the type of secondary education providers, the general trend shows that students from public, private-subsidised, and private non-subsidised schools alike prefer universities, followed by IPs and CFTs. Students from delegated administration tended to go to IPs as first option, then universities and lastly CFTs. The preference for university, regardless the type of upper-secondary institution's provider, can be explained by the presence of a significant number of private institutions (with different degrees of selectivity and different levels of accreditation) offering not necessarily quality education (Espinoza, 2017). However, as the table shows, the rates of students enrolling in universities vary greatly across different types of school providers. For the 2018 cohort, 91.5% of students from private non-subsidised schools went to universities compared to 57.8% of students from private-subsidised schools and 48.5% of students from public schools. TVET institutions were chosen by 8.5% of students from private non-subsidised, 42% of students from private-subsidised schools and about 51.5% of students from public schools (see Table 3.9).

Table 3.9: Transition to TE (%) immediately after secondary education, classified by type of upper-secondary education provider and type of TE institutions chosen, 2013-2018.

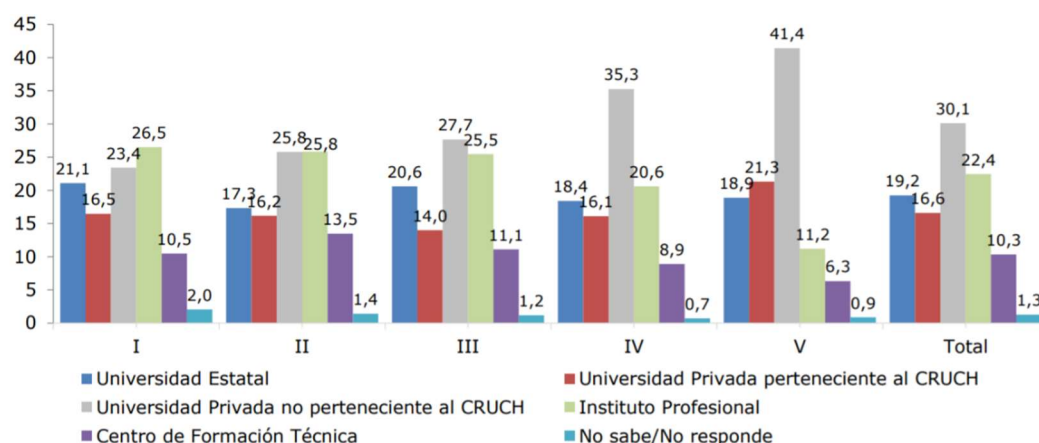
Type of TE institution provider	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Public						
CFTs	22.1	22.4	19.9	20.8	20.4	20.1
IPs	32.7	32.1	32.3	32.5	31.6	31.3
Universities	45.3	45.5	47.8	46.7	48	48.5
Private-subsidised						
CFTs	15.1	14.9	13.3	14.3	13.6	14
IPs	28.2	27.5	27	28	27.5	28.2
Universities	56.7	57.6	59.7	57.7	58.9	57.8
Private non-subsidised						
CFTs	2.8	2.8	2.4	2.3	2	2.1
IPs	7.7	7.6	7.3	6.6	6.4	6.4
Universities	89.5	89.6	90.2	91.1	91.6	91.5
Delegated administration						
CFTs	25	27.3	24.4	26.5	24.7	22.9
IPs	45.1	42.4	41.6	41.3	43.7	45.2
Universities	29.9	30.2	34.1	32.2	31.6	31.9

Source: SIES, 2019.

The above evidence suggests a persistent socioeconomic segregation in TE. If Chile is one of the most successful countries compared to other Latin American countries and to OECD countries in terms of reducing inequalities in accessing TE, this massification of TE does not imply that all students have access to quality education (Brunner & Álvarez, 2020). The paradox of the Chilean system is precisely that if, on the one hand, it can be considered inclusive for its significant expansion of, and the demand for, TE, on the other, it is exclusive as the access to quality education depends on students' socioeconomic backgrounds (not meritocracy). This means that the mechanisms underpinning the transition from upper-secondary education to TE still facilitate students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, who often comes from academic education schools. Talented students who do not have the resources to pay for high quality education are more likely to be excluded from high quality institutions (mainly CRUCH universities and private accredited universities) (Espinoza, 2017). Figure 3.8 shows that while students in the top quintile (the wealthier) are the least likely to enrol in TVET institutions and the most likely to attend universities, those in the lowest quintile (the poorer) are the most likely to be in TVET (IPs and CFTs). No significant differences are registered across quintiles in terms of those attending CRUCH universities (private or public), except for students from the third quintile whose presence in private

CRUCH universities is lower (14%) compared to the other groups. This similarity can be explained by the system of distribution of financial aids according to type of institution for which academic institutions (especially CRUCH universities) receive more funding for students than TVET institutions (OECD, 2017a).

Figure 3.8: Enrolments (%) in Tertiary Education by socioeconomic groups from the most disadvantaged (i) to the less disadvantaged (v).

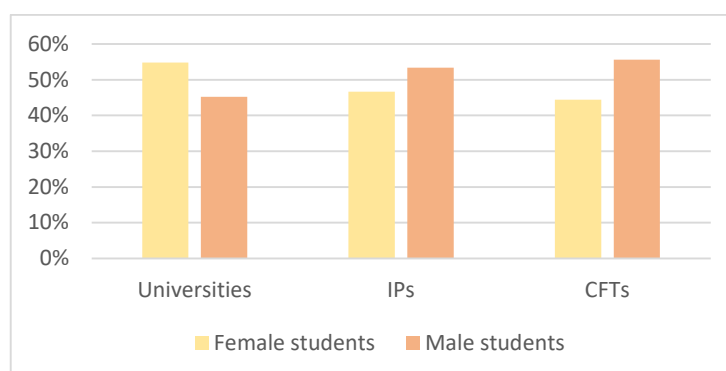


Note: Universidad Estatal= Public/State University; Universidad Privada no perteneciente al CRUCH= Private Non-CRUCH University; Universidad Privada perteneciente al CRUCH= Private CRUCH University; Centro de Formación Técnica= Technical Training Centre (CFT); Instituto Profesional= Professional Institute (IP).

Source: Ministerio de Desarrollo Social (2018a), n.a.

Lastly, on transition patterns related to gender differences in enrolments (figure 3.9), for the cohort of 2018, universities were the preferred choice of a higher number of female students (54.8%) compared to male students (45.2%). By contrast, 55.6% of male students were in CFTs and 53.4% in IPs compared to, respectively, the 44.4% and the 46.6% of female students (see Fig. 3.9) (CEM, 2019).

Figure 3.9: Upper-secondary TVET students' enrolments in Higher Education institutions by type of institutions and gender, 2018. Self-elaboration.



Source: CEM, 2019.

Research has paid little attention to field of studies TVET graduates choose to undertake at tertiary level, probably assuming a linear continuity of vocational track of studies from secondary to tertiary level of education, as expected by the market model of skills utilisation. However, recent trends indicate that a growing number of TVET graduates enrol in universities and opt for tracks that are unrelated to their previous vocational studies, especially those who come from administration and business (a female-dominated sector), while more congruence has been identified in technical fields (mechanics, electricity and electronics) (Sepúlveda, 2016). On top of being a waste of resources, this recent trend may be the unintended repercussion of the lack of a national qualification framework that connects and coordinates different programmes of study among different educational levels and institutions, and that states the different entry requirements and qualifications issued by type of institutions. This absence of articulation and continuity has also translated into a lack of adequate institutional support to help low-class students identify, understand, navigate the post-school options they have (Sevilla *et al.*, 2014; OECD, 2017; Valiente *et al.*, 2020).

Fit between the Chilean context and theoretical debates on structure, agency and capabilities

As this chapter has shown, Chile represents a paradigmatic case for exploring the interplay between structure and agency in the construction of aspirations for its deeply ingrained ethos of neoliberal meritocracy (which highlights the role of the individual as agent of change, obscuring the role of structures) and its rampant social inequalities (which reflect the presence of structural inequalities). Furthermore, given its highly marketised education system, resplendent with HC assumptions, it represents an exemplary case to problematise TVET policy assumptions. Specifically, it provides a case to challenge the role of TVET as direct route to the labour market and to question the taken-for-granted alignment between secondary and tertiary vocational education specialisations, as expected from the market model (rational instrumental choice perspective) (Valiente *et al.*, 2020)

Post-secondary school transitions have become one of the most significant challenges in the life of low-class Chilean youth who are the first generation forced to subjectively and individually navigate their biographies in the ambivalent combination of illusionary equality of opportunities and a still very rigid social structure, although slightly changing towards a fairer society. Yet, despite the academic relevance of such research and the potential policy implications, there is a significant lack of studies, especially qualitative and longitudinal, on

Chilean working-class vocational young people's aspirations after their upper-secondary vocational education (Canales *et al.*, 2016a). As Sepúlveda (2016) states:

To consider what happens with subjects and their experiences, during and after their passage through a formative experience, is a research trend in the field of education that can be very fruitful for the analysis of technical education in the region. From this tendency, until now, there have only been fragmented approximations in Latin American countries. (n.d.)

As this thesis argues, understanding the interplay between agential and structural factors informing aspirations and choices is key for a better and more comprehensive understanding and analysis of TVET's post-school transitions' trends in Chile and for redirecting policies on TVET's role and aims accordingly.

The next chapter explains in detail aims, rationale and research questions of this doctoral research and describes and justifies analytical framework, methodology and methods adopted to address the research questions.

CHAPTER 4 - Methodology and methods

This chapter draws on the review of the theoretical and empirical literature presented in Chapter 2 to outline the thesis' methodology, its ontological and epistemological underpinnings and the methods adopted to answer the research questions (RQs). It consists of two main sections. The first section begins by briefly summarising the research rationale, objectives and RQs. It then sets out the analytical and the conceptual frameworks used to ground the study and critically interpret and analyse its findings. The second section presents and justifies the research methodology, design and methods. It begins by explaining the qualitative longitudinal approach implemented, outlining the methods used, the recruitment of the sample and the two stages of data collection. After that, the chapter presents a description of how data were analysed and interpreted. It concludes by reflecting on the ethical consideration and the role of the researcher in this doctoral research.

Research rationale, objectives, and research questions

Research rationale

The review of the literature in Chapter 2 has shown that marginalised students' educational and professional aspirations after compulsory education have gained prominence in academic debates and policy agendas internationally. It has revealed how simplistic and problematic the structuralist and rational-instrumental understandings of aspirations are. It has also highlighted the theoretical and methodological limitations of structuralist and rational choice perspectives, which both conceptualise agency naively. Indeed, they depict young people as either homogeneously steered by a logic of maximisation of utility towards economic advancement, or in deficit of aspirations and responsible for their failures (Spohrer *et al.*, 2018; McGrath *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, they fail to investigate individuals' subjectivity and the power of reflexivity and how they differently respond to structural, cultural and institutional factors or circumstances (Archer, 2007).

Hence, the review has shown why exploring TVET students' aspirations by looking at their life projects and the courses of action they envisage and engage in is important to understand, rather than assume, their post-school choices. This is crucial to challenge assumptions of social action theories and of orthodox TVET theoretical and policy accounts so to direct

policy accordingly and reimagine TVET's roles and purposes at individual, institutional and national levels, towards fairer opportunities for human development. As argued by Powell and McGrath (2019b), TVET matters as it can make a difference in young people's life, particularly marginalised youth. While the conventional TVET's role of preparing young people to the labour market is important, reducing it to employability neglects both the degree of agency that TVET students have to imagine and achieve better futures and their realities and contexts of actions and decisions. It also fails to prepare them for their transition to adulthood. This role is perhaps particularly urgent now amid persistent social inequalities and poverty, precarious working-conditions, liberal and fast-changing labour markets such as in Chile (McGrath *et al.*, 2020). TVET for poverty alleviation, including but not limited to economic advancement, needs to look at aspirations and opportunities that young people consider valuable. As previously stated, judging policies' effectiveness on increasing human wellbeing simply by looking at young people's achievements (where they are and what they do - their 'functionings' in capabilities terms) is biased and partial. This is because achievements alone do not say much about underling social inequalities experienced by marginalised students, the different valued opportunities they can, and have the freedom to, select from or their ability to transform opportunities into achievements (Powell & McGrath, 2019b).

Research objectives

For these reasons, the doctoral study's overarching aim is to explore vocational students' aspirations and choices in transition to adulthood. Particularly, how TVET graduates (trans)form their educational and professional aspirations, how they make their decisions to achieve their goals, and what they manage to achieve in the course of their post-school transitions in a context dominated by neoliberal ideologies and with high social inequalities such as the Chilean one.

This is followed by a set of research objectives: (1) understand what TVET graduates want to do, be or become and the meanings they attribute to their aspirations at the very end of upper-secondary vocational education. This, in turn, implies understanding which valuable opportunities they perceive as available to them; (2) understand what structural and individual factors contribute to form their aspirations, the mechanisms that condition aspirations over the period of time of the investigation, and particularly the role of secondary TVET in the formation of aspirations, in facilitating or hindering their achievements, and in

expanding opportunities; (3) explore their decision-making process to achieve aspirations; (4) understand what contexts of decisions and factors allow one trajectory or another (i.e. TVET graduates' wellbeing or illbeing freedom to choose against their opportunity structures) and the achievement (or not) of their aspirations during the transition process (freedom to achieve); (5) understand how TVET graduates experience the match/mismatch between aspirations and achievements in their post-transition situations; (6) understand how the transition process impact on their initial aspirations; and (7) problematise TVET policy assumptions in Chile and internationally and connect the macro-level of the policy with the micro-level of young people's realities.

By focusing on young people's aspirations, experiences and perceptions, this thesis sits within the perspective of micro-sociology. Yet, it places the 'micro' component in dialogue with the 'meso' component of the educational institutions and the 'macro' component of the opportunity structures for a thorough understanding of meanings and mechanisms behind aspirations' (trans)formation. Both the meso and the macro factors can enable or constraint the formation and achievement of aspirations and delimit TVET graduates' 'aspirations windows' (Ray, 2006) and 'horizon for actions' (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

Research questions

To address the above-mentioned aim and objectives, the thesis explores the following primary RQ: How do TVET graduates form and transform their educational and professional aspirations and what choices do they make to achieve these during their post-school transitions?

The Supplementary RQs are:

1. What do TVET graduates aspire to after the completion of their secondary vocational education and why (i.e. meanings of aspirations)?
2. What factors contribute to form TVET graduates' aspirations and how?
3. How do TVET graduates plan to achieve their aspirations (i.e. courses of action envisaged)?
4. Have TVET graduates managed to achieve their aspirations six months after completing their upper-secondary vocational education and how? If not, why?
5. How do TVET graduates experience their proximal post-transition situations and the match/mismatch between aspirations and achievements?

6. How has the transition process conditioned/transformed TVET graduates' initial aspirations and why?

(See Table 4.2 for a summary of research objectives, research questions and the suitability of the analytical approaches adopted to answer these).

Analytical approaches and conceptual frameworks

This section sets out the analytical approaches and conceptual frameworks underpinning this doctoral research by stating the ontological and epistemological positions adopted by the researcher to answer the research questions.

Critical realist ontology and critical interpretivist epistemology

This study is situated within Archer's Critical Realism (CR) which contends the ontological stratification of social reality into empirical, actual and real world, and the separation between ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (how knowledge of the social world is produced). As discussed in Chapter 2, ontologically this implies the belief that the real world exists independently of individual's acknowledgment of it. Epistemologically, it means that what individuals know of the social world is reflexively, hence subjectively, mediated and, thus, always fallible (Archer, 2003, 2007). Yet, CR also argues for a hierarchy of knowledge which means that the knowledge individuals hold of the social world is not equally fallible. On the one hand, the empirical level (where ideas, events, decisions, actions, meanings occur) is 'accessible' through the experience individuals have of it and, thus, knowledge results from human interpretation. On the other, social researchers, who are part of the world they investigated and whose interpretation of reality in the production of knowledge becomes critical, can use theories to understand causal mechanisms (that exist in the real level) behind social events, decisions, actions, meanings, etc. (Dunne *et al.*, 2005; Fletcher, 2017).

The integration of a critical realist ontology with a critical interpretivist epistemology that this study adopts stand in-between the conflicting paradigms of realism/positivism on the one hand, and constructivism on the other (Fletcher, 2017). While Archer does not explicitly use the term 'critical interpretivist epistemology', she draws on it in her conceptualisation of analytical dualism. In this study, the use of 'critical' points to a differentiation from the

extreme interpretivism of constructivist paradigms. Table 4.1 summarises the philosophical underpinnings of CR adopted in this study and compares it to the other two extreme alternatives.

Table 4.1: Ontological and epistemological differences of competing paradigms in social science. Self-elaboration.

	Realism/positivism	Critical Realism	Constructivism
Ontology	<p><i>Realism</i></p> <p>Existence of a single reality independent of individuals.</p>	<p><i>Critical realism</i></p> <p>Existence of a stratified reality independent of individuals' acknowledgment of it.</p>	<p><i>Relativism</i></p> <p>There is no single reality, and no reality exists independent of individuals' constructions of it through knowledge and discourses.</p>
Epistemology	<p><i>Positivism/rationalism</i></p> <p>Scientific knowledge enables the discovery of an objective truth. The emphasis of research is on facts.</p>	<p><i>Critical interpretivism</i></p> <p>What individuals know about reality does not account for the whole reality. Human knowledge of the social world is mediated by individual's subjective, hence fallible, experience and interpretation of it. Social theories enable researchers to understand causal mechanisms beneath events that occur in the empirical world.</p>	<p><i>Interpretivism</i></p> <p>There is no single, objective truth/knowledge but multiple truths created by individuals and mediated by their interpretation of it. The aim of interpretive approach is to understand individuals' experiences from their own perspectives (emic perspective).</p>

Source: Adapted from Guba & Lincoln (1994); Dunne *et al.*, (2005); Fletcher, (2017); Hennink *et al.*, (2020).

Archer's theorisation, her ontological distinction of structures from agency and the emergentist view (structures are 'emergent' social properties that pre-exist individuals and agents are not merely passive subjects of the structures) is fruitful for this study in three ways. First, it allows to overcome the limitations of structuralist and rational choice perspectives because it considers structure and agency as (temporally) distinct powers in interplay shaping and affecting each other over time and space (analytical dualism). Analytical dualism overcomes the risk of committing 'upward conflation' in the neglect of structures (as in agential and rational choice perspectives), 'downward conflation' in the neglect of agency (as in structuralist perspectives), and 'central conflation' of structures and agency as mutually constitutive (as in structuration theory) (Archer, 1995). Second, and related to the first point, it allows the researcher to understand the generative/causal mechanisms operating between structures and agency which bring about different outcomes.

This is particularly relevant for this study on aspirations in transition. As Archer (2007) points out, understanding what individuals want, why they want it and how they go about getting it, namely the main questions underpinning this doctoral study, “involves a dialectical interplay between their ‘concerns’ – as they reflexively define them – and their ‘contexts’ – as they reflexively respond to them” (pp. 19-20). Third, it allows to draw on the concept of reflexivity as analytical tool to understand how disadvantaged young people exert agency, respond to their contexts and formulate aspirations within the concerns → project → practices trajectory (Archer, 2003).

To address the limitations of Archer’s over-reliance on reflexivity and her downplaying the role unconscious actions, the study examines the role of reflexive *habitus* and *doxa* in aspiration (trans)formation, given that the students are from a relatively homogenous social group (Akram, 2013; Decoteau, 2016). Furthermore, given the extreme model of neoliberalism adopted in Chile, its high level of education marketisation, its highly liberalised labour market and the consequent rampant social inequalities, the study analyses to what extent instrumental rationality and individual’s income maximising assumptions, which should be predominant in such context, play a role in the logic for actions behind young people’s aspirations (trans)formation and choices.

Capabilities Approach

Alongside the Critical Realist approach, this study draws on the normative framework of Capabilities Approach (CA). As Chapter 2 has shown, CA argues that development, social policies, institutions and social actions should be about the expansion of individual’s freedom to choose what they want to be or do and have reason to value. Therein, they should remove constraints, or ‘capability deprivation’ as Powell and McGrath’s (2019a) term it, that could impede the conversion of any form of commodity or individual capital into valuable opportunities (Sen, 1990, 1995, 1999a, 1999b; Bonvin & Farvaque, 2006). It is for CA’s emphasis on human development, over economic advancement (which is necessary but not sufficient to evaluate individuals’ wellbeing and human flourishing); its distinction between valued opportunities that students have available after completing their upper-secondary education and their achievements after transition; and the importance of understanding these opportunities and the freedom to choose rather than focusing on achievements that this approach is very valuable for studying aspirations.

Similarly to reflexivity, this approach allows to put students' needs and voices before the tenets of productivity (economic growth, efficiency, income, employability) and at the centre of the discussion. Differently from reflexivity, it allows to be concerned with and problematise what individuals value. For this doctoral study, this approach is particularly relevant because it allows (1) to examine what TVET graduates consider to be valuable, their perceived opportunity conditions and their freedom to choose to continue with their education, seek job or stay inactive from a normative perspective, crucial to understand students' wellbeing; (2) to assess the relationship between causal mechanisms and fairness/unfairness that facilitate or hamper the transformation of real (valued) opportunities into achievements (Hart, 2013) and, thus, their ability and freedom to use resources, services or commodities to convert opportunities (capabilities) into achievements (functionings) they have reason to value depending on personal, social and environmental conversion factors (Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2006); (3) to discern the *instrumental* and *intrinsic* subjective value that they ascribed to their educational or professional aspirations; (4) to address the normative questions "what are people really able to do and what kind of person are they able to be?" (Robeyns, 2017, p. 9); and (5) to understand the role of TVET in expanding or constraining students' array of valuable opportunities to choose from (Powell and McGrath, 2019b).

As already highlighted in other studies (Powell & McGrath, 2019b), besides being the application of this approach in education, particularly in TVET field, at its infancy, it also does not provide a social theory or a methodology for investigating human action and individual wellbeing. Indeed, it fails to provide an explanation of the influence of structural powers on individuals in the process of decision-making and aspirations' formation and how agents in turn exert their power. By integrating Archer's critical realist framework with CA, this study overcomes this limitation. The multidimensional approach adopted in this study enriches the analysis of aspirations, and it is facilitated by the conceptual and ontological compatibilities between the two main approaches.

Compatibilities between CR and CA

Before moving on to presenting the analytical model, the main tenets of the two main approaches are here summarised clarifying their synergies and points of departure. First, for both approaches, ontologically, agency matters. From the critical realist perspective, the interest is in understanding how agents respond to their opportunity structures to make their

way through the world and accomplish their life projects within their broader constellation of concerns. For CA, the interest is in the well-being and human flourishing of individuals through the emphasis on freedom of choices to lead the life they have reasons to value, inequalities and poverty. It acknowledges the existence of structural barriers to human development and choices, but it does not explain how different powers interplay. Second, both envisage a potential for achievement (CA) and for transformation or stasis (CR) and both agree on the unpredictability of outcomes/achievements. Capabilities are potential achievements and similar to causal mechanisms can or cannot lead to valued outcomes. For CA, the transformation of a set of opportunities into achievements depends on (personal, social, environmental) conversion factors. For CR, it depends on the tendencies and countertendencies (enablers and constraints) within causal mechanisms which, if not acknowledge, may lead to false interpretations of what we see in the empirical world (Powell & McGrath, 2019b).

Table 4.2 presents a summary of research objectives, questions and shows how the analytical approaches adopted in the thesis help address each objective and question.

Table 4.2: Summary of research objectives, questions and use of analytical approaches.

Research objectives	RQs	Analytical approaches
RO1: Understand what educational and professional aspirations TVET graduates have at the end of upper-secondary vocational education and the meanings they attribute to what they want to do, be or become.	1. What do TVET graduates aspire to after the completion of their secondary vocational education and why? (i.e. meanings of and rationale for students' aspirations)	CR – allows to understand individual's aspirations from an explanatory perspective on the interplay between structures and agency. CA – allows to be concerned with what matters to TVET graduates from a normative perspective (what they want to become which they have reason to value considering their circumstances).
RO2: Understand what structural and individual factors contribute to form aspirations and the mechanisms that condition aspirations over the period of time of the investigation.	2. What structural and individual factors contribute to form TVET graduates' aspirations and how?	CR – allows to understand structural and cultural factors, institutional framework and individual factors that contribute to form aspirations.

RO3: Explore the process of decision-making to achieve aspirations and the course of actions taken (or not taken).	3. How do TVET graduates plan to achieve their aspirations (i.e. courses of action envisaged)?	CR – allows to understand the interplay between agency and structures in the decision-making process on how to achieve aspirations.
RO4: Understand what contexts of decisions and factors allow one trajectory or another (freedom to choose) and the achievement (or not) of their aspirations after the transition process (freedom to achieve).	4. Have TVET graduates managed to achieve their aspirations six months after completing their upper-secondary vocational education and how? If not, why?	CR – allows to understand what structural, institutional and individual factors have contributed to achieving (or not) initial aspirations. CA – allows to reflect on wellbeing (or illbeing) freedom to choose at the moment of transition to post-school life trajectories.
RO5: Understand how TVET graduates experience the match/mismatch between aspirations and achievements in their post-transition situations.	5. How do TVET graduates experience their current post-transition situations and the match/mismatch between aspirations and achievements?	CR – allows to reflexively assess individuals' concerns against their context (TVET graduates' satisfaction and dissatisfactions with their current way of life) and the impact of fulfilled/failed aspirations on feeling in control of their lives and on aspirations vs. expectations. CA – allows to reflect on (mis)match between antecedent valued functionings (aspirations)/capabilities (opportunities)/functionings (wellbeing or illbeing actual achievements) and its impact on individual wellbeing (what they are actually able to do and be).
RO6: Understand how the transition process impact on TVET graduates' initial aspirations.	6. How has the transition process conditioned/transformed TVET graduates' initial aspirations and why?	CR – allows to understand the mechanisms behind aspirations' transformation, maintenance and achievements. CA – allows to be concerned with the relationship between causal mechanisms and fairness/unfairness of aspirations' transformation or maintenance, and with the relationship between aspirations, opportunities and achievements.

RO7: Understand the role of secondary TVET in the formation of aspirations, in facilitating or hindering their achievements, and in expanding opportunities for TVET graduates.	Questions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6	<p>CR – allows to consider TVET as analytical dimension within other structural factors in interplay with agency.</p> <p>CA – allows to focus on TVET’s role from an alternative perspective to the orthodox Human Capital.</p>
RO8: Understand aspirations to challenge assumptions on social action theories and of orthodox TVET policy accounts to direct policy accordingly towards fairer opportunities for human development.	All the above questions	<p>CR – allows to challenge the simplistic and problematic structuralist and rational-instrumental understandings of aspirations and to investigate individuals’ subjectivity and the power of reflexivity in responding to structural, cultural and institutional factors or circumstances.</p> <p>CA – allows to challenge the narrow neo-liberal and human capital-driven interpretations of poor and economic-oriented aspirations of vocational students that inform orthodox TVET policy and practice in Chile and internationally.</p>

Conceptualising and operationalising the study’s framework

This sub-section of the chapter draws on the main concepts related to the theoretical and empirical review to state the conceptualisation the study adopts for each one of them. The concepts considered are aspirations, agency, structures, life projects and concerns, reflexivity, approaches to social action, opportunities, achievements, well-being, and being successful. While this list was informed by the literature and, in turn, it informed methodology and data collection, it was also left flexible and open to give space to further develop new concepts that may emerge from the data or reinterpret these after their recontextualization (Fletcher, 2017; Maxwell, 2018). This *abductive* mode of reasoning concerning the relation between theory and data is consistent with CR ontology and epistemology as it implies a dialectical movement from theory to empirical data and back to theory’s (re)interpretation (Bergene, 2007).

The first and most important concept in this doctoral thesis is the one of **aspirations**. As stated in Chapter 2, this study draws on different conceptualisations of aspirations which

combine the intersection of individual, collective and normative dimensions. The concept of **aspirations** that the thesis adopts is twofold. On the one hand, aspirations entail the socially and culturally embedded capacity young people had to imagine, hope, dream, yearn, prefer for their futures; on the other, it comprises their ability to identify viable courses of action to achieve what they wanted to be or do. This definition involves a general vision of what ‘the good life’ meant for the participants in this study against their circumstances and places the experiences and perceptions of young people at the centre of the investigation. It also allows to explore the interplay between structures and agency. This seemed particularly relevant to discuss the findings of this study for two reasons. Firstly, by capturing the cultural and social embeddedness of aspirations, the capacity to aspire helps understand the role of the internalisation of the *doxa* in informing aspirations and disentangle it from reflexive deliberations or instrumental calculations (Bourdieu, 1977; Lehmann, 2009; Threadgold, 2017), what seems particularly appropriate in an aspirational society such as the Chilean one. Secondly, the emphasis on the capacity to navigate information is relevant from a methodological and theoretical point of view. The former relates to the possibility of exploring this navigational capacity during the process of transition to post-school trajectories through the use of a longitudinal design. From a theoretical point of view, the capacity to navigate information allows to problematise the main assumption of the market model which is dominant in Chile (see Chapter 3).

During the interviews, while the word ‘aspirations’ was not easily understood by all the interviewees, concepts that referred to future desires and plans were universally known and accepted. Before the transition, educational and professional aspirations were operationalised by considering young people’s highest and most ambitious educational or work trajectory available to them within a year after the completion of their upper-secondary vocational education and the courses of action they identified to achieve these. After the transition, they were operationalised by considering where young people ‘were at’ with reference to their initial aspirations (i.e. what they had managed to achieve) and where they ‘wanted to be’ within the next year and considering their broader life projects.

The concepts of **life projects** and individuals’ **constellation of concerns** (Archer, 2003) are drawn on to refer to young people’s broader (than educational and professional aspirations) life goals and overall perception of good and successful life. A project is defined as an “agential enterprise [which] involves an end that is desired, however tentatively or nebulously, and also some notion, however imprecise, of the course of action through which

to accomplish it” (Archer, 2003, p. 6). As Archer specifies further, “action itself thus depends upon the existence of what are termed ‘projects’, where a project stands for any course of action intentionally engaged upon by a human being” (Archer, 2007, p. 7). This conceptualisation is relational to constraints and enablements (causal mechanisms) as these are activated through the projects that agents seek to pursue, which in turn are subjectively formed (and transformed) in relation to their objective circumstances. It is also relational to the concept of concerns which Archer defines as “internal goods that [individuals] care about most, the precise constellation of which makes for their concrete singularity as persons” (*ibid.*) and which they try to realise through the accomplishment of life projects.

Structures refer to objective socioeconomic factors, cultural beliefs, institutional frameworks and individuals’ ascribed characteristics like class, religion, gender, ethnicity which determine young people’s social positioning and influence their access to resources as well as their agency and freedom to use these (Archer, 2003). This thesis looks particularly at (1) the role of education and specifically students’ experience of upper-secondary vocational education and their knowledge and perception of institutional possibilities to continue their studies in Tertiary Education (TE) institutions); (2) the role of family (their expectations, support, guidance or lack of; and (3) the circumstances of the labour market as perceived by young people, the job perspectives and work conditions awaiting them after secondary vocational education as well as employment opportunities for graduates from TE institutions.

In relation to the role of **education**, Chapter 2 has shown the impact of the institutional *habitus* of the school attended (Reay, 1998) on young people’s orientations to the future and on their self-consideration, encouraging or discouraging post-school choices. This study looked at young people’s educational experience among the factors shaping their future self-projections. The role of vocational education in hindering or fostering opportunities to achieve what young people aspire to was reflected upon before and after post-school transition. Within this, the following dimensions were explored: experience of last year of upper-secondary vocational education; relationship with teachers; school’s expectations of its students; reasons for enrolling in that type of school and in that area of vocational specialisation; and the experience of the work-placement they had to undertake once completed the in-school component of the vocational programme.

As far as the role of the **family** is concerned, studies have shown relationships between family background, parental educational and expectations for their children and young people's aspirations, motivation and educational or professional achievements (Schoon *et al.*, 2007; McCulloch, 2017). It has been suggested that parental expectations increase with social class and economic resource's available to the family, but also that parental aspirations are positively correlated to children's aspirations despite social class factors and socioeconomic disadvantage (Schoon *et al.*, 2004). In addition to parents' role, siblings, and young people's network (peers and friends) have been identified in previous studies as important in conditioning young people's aspirations and choices (Furlong *et al.*, 1996; Hart, 2013; Kintrea *et al.*, 2015). In this study, the dimensions of family background were not limited to material conditions, but included emotional/moral factors and cultural capital, parental involvement and support in their children's education and life plans.

Lastly, this study draws on previous research that identified **labour market** conditions among the factors influencing post-school aspirations and choices (Furlong *et al.*, 1999; Evans, 2007; Atkins, 2017; Powell & McGrath, 2019b). Labour market's factors were identified through questions on the steps needed to do to achieve work-related goals and how they thought the search for job would be like. This enabled to explore whether and to what extent young people's perceived labour market opportunities, the work conditions of their dreamed occupations and those awaiting them after their secondary education influenced their aspirations.

Agency refers to the degree of ability and freedom young people have to set and realise their aspirations, given and despite their circumstances (Evans, 2007; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017). Thus, the term includes intentionality, willingness, motivation, purposiveness, initiative and ability to resist, suspend or circumvent structural and cultural powers (Archer, 1995). Agency was explored in its interaction with structural and cultural factors and was empirically identified by interpreting young people's orientation to the past, present and future; their sense of self; their sense of control over their life; interests and motivations; identification of courses of action to achieve aspirations; and responses (approaches) to opportunity structures with reference to aspirations (trans)formation and achievement.

Another pivotal concept for this study is Archer's notion of **reflexivity** (Archer 2002, 2003, 2010). Within the concept of agency, this study uses the definition of reflexivity as individuals' ability to reflect upon themselves and formulate their projects and aspirations

considering their contextual, socioeconomic circumstances. The process of reflexivity was operationalised through participants' discursive accounts of their internal conversations prompted across different themes. For example, their concerns, projects, aspirations and plans; their perceptions on their social positioning and on what a good life entailed; how they valued their past choices and future aspirations. Verbs that implied reflections, thoughts, and deliberations such as 'to reflect', 'to think', 'to mull over', 'to consider', 'to weigh up', 'to contemplate' were considered external manifestations of internal reflexive practices. Within the concept of reflexivity and to acknowledge the theoretical limits highlighted in the literature review, the concept of reflexive *habitus* was also drawn upon to analyse the findings.

In this study, the courses of action identified by young people to accomplish their goals are referred to and encapsulate the concepts of **approaches** to social contexts (Archer, 2003, 2007) and **transition behaviours** (Evans, 2007). In Archer's (2003) terms, these concepts imply young people's strategic and reflexive stances towards their opportunity structures that enable them to identify the best or second-best course of actions to achieve life projects. For Evans, (2007) transition behaviours are not necessarily strategic or reflexive, but they can manifest in both more strategic or more fatalistic attitudes, depending on the level of agency and control over life that young people have, strongly influenced by individuals' structural and institutional systems. A broad definition that includes both perspectives was utilised in this study in line with the combination of the reflexive framework with the concept of *habitus* as stated in the previous section.

With reference to the CA, the current study draws on it as framework of moral and philosophical questionings to place the emphasis on what matters to vocational graduates and tease out valued opportunities and achievements that impact on their wellbeing and quality of life (Sen, 1999b; Alkire, 2009; Robeyns, 2017). One of the main critiques of using this approach concerns its difficult operationalisation which is left uncertain and in the hand of the researcher (Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2006; Walker, 2008; Hart, 2013; Powell & McGrath, 2019b). Similarly to agency, reflexivity, and aspirations, capabilities are neither tangible, nor observable compared to, for instance, functionings. To overcome this challenge, this study operationalised capabilities by grounding the investigation and the analysis in young people's voice, their reality and experiences; by discussing with them about what they wanted to achieve in their short (immediately after school), medium (approximately in 5-year-time) and long-term goals (approximately in 10-year-time) and why they had these

aspirations; by understanding the process and courses of action by which they could achieve what they valued; by exploring their reason for choosing to study at a vocational school and how/if that choice was connected to their future self-projections. This encompassed their reflections on what had been (and been not) valuable of their secondary vocational education for their learning in itself and in expanding (or constraining) their aspirations and their freedoms to choose, and how this had changed during the process of transition.

These conversations also teased out the difference between **intrinsic and instrumental value** that vocational students attributed to their education and how or whether it affected what they want to do or be after compulsory schooling. These reflections on intrinsic/instrumental value also guided understanding and analysis of meanings of aspirations and on the relationship between their vocational education and their post-school aspirations. In so doing, the micro-level of the individual connects to the meso- and macro-levels of TVET institutions and policies allowing to understand, always and crucially from the perspectives of the students, the kind of vocational education that a capability perspective would suggest (Robeyns, 2006).

Following Hart (2013), this study considers **capabilities** a corollary of aspirations since the freedom to aspire can be seen as forerunner of further meaningful opportunities and achievements. It uses the concept of **valuable opportunities** young people perceived as available for them and from which they could choose to achieve what they valued in life (their aspirations or **antecedent valued functionings**). It also uses the concept of **wellbeing** here defined as “how well a life is going for that person” (Walker, 2008, p. 481) with reference to both wellbeing (or illbeing) freedom to choose at the moment of transition to post-school life trajectories, and wellbeing (or illbeing) actual achievements (**functionings**) after the transition process (McGrath and Powell, 2015). Although Nussbaum (2002) states that from the capabilities perspective the question to ask on wellbeing is “not whether an individual is satisfied or not with their current situation. Rather we should ask what they are actually able to do and be” (p. 123), this study operationalised wellbeing also by drawing on Archer's (2007) theorisation of individual's satisfaction and dissatisfactions with [their] current way of life as result of reflexive assessments of their concerns against their context.

The concepts of capabilities and wellbeing are strictly related to the concept of **human flourishing** or human development within the connection *creation of social opportunities* → *expansion of human capabilities* → *impact on human flourishing* (Sen, 1999b). From a

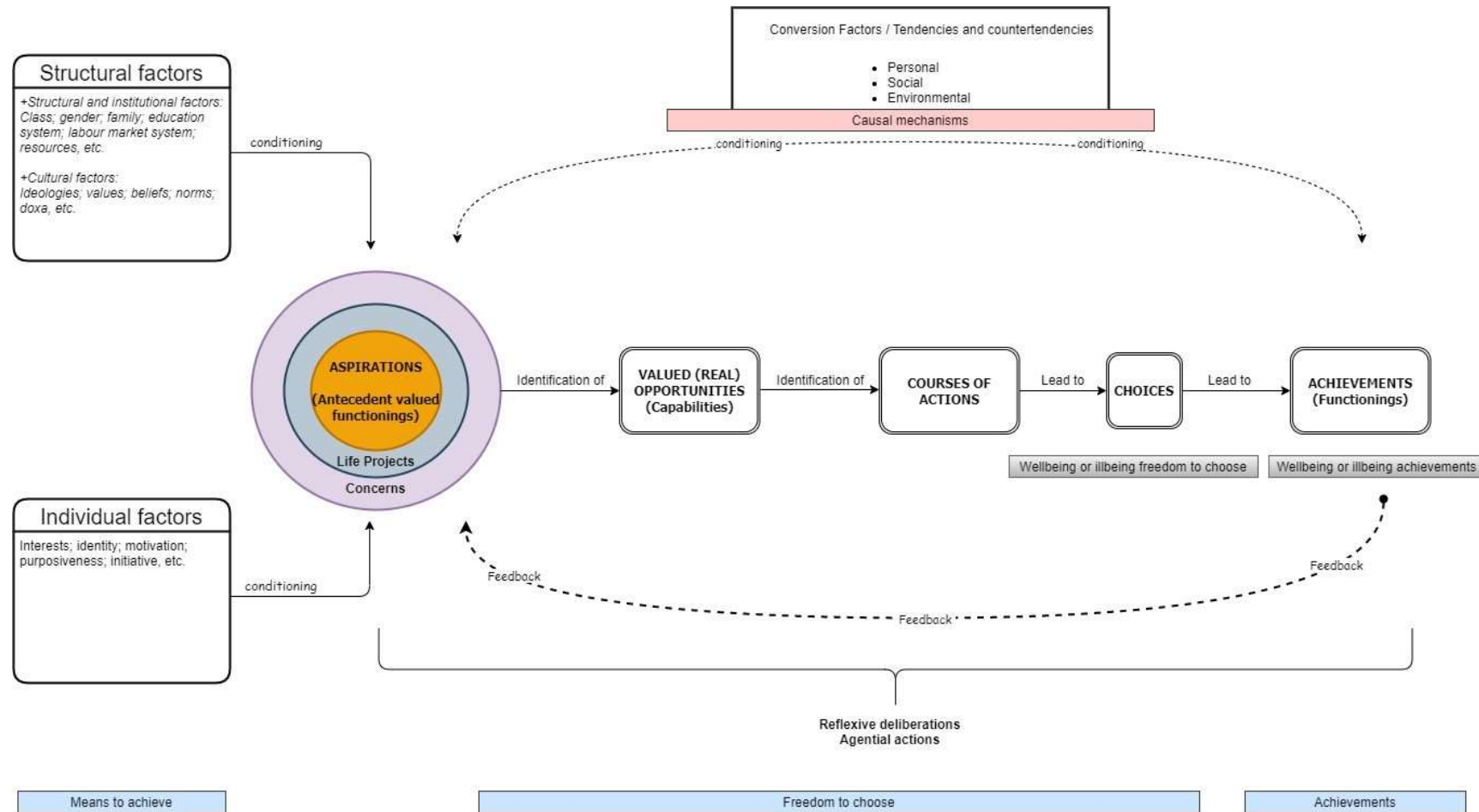
capability perspective, the Aristotelian concept of human flourishing and the ‘good life’ (*eudaimonia*) emphasises the quality of life and the substantive freedoms of individuals over concerns related to income and economic wealth. Human flourishing is also a concern of critical realists and Archer (2017) in particular. Similarly to Sen, (1999b) and Nussbaum (2011), for Archer (2017) a flourishing life involves “a skillful use of means towards certain ends” (p. 31). Thus, it involves reflexive activities to formulate and accomplish choices given the circumstances. Differently from Sen and Nussbaum, she emphasises the connection between human flourishing with reflexivity and internal conversations and, thus, with life projects. Although the notion of human flourishing is not directly drawn upon in the research questions of this study, it is still among its pivotal concepts. Building on Archer and Sen’s conceptualisations, the thesis considers human flourishing as involving agential activity (reflexive deliberations and freedom to act and choose) to transform opportunities into achievements given the sociocultural conditions that can foster or hinder it.

Finally, the concept of **being successful** is empirically explored by linking it to accounts on life projects, aspirations and capabilities. The aim is to understand how TVET graduates’ individual aspirations are influenced by their sociocultural context. As done elsewhere (Hart 2013), to overcome issues of adapted preferences, questions around meanings of successful life are generalised within the Chilean context rather than contextualised in young people’s own life.

Conceptual map

Fig. 4.1 shows the combination of the various analytical approaches adopted in this doctoral research and the potential relation between the key concepts this study aims to explore as described and operationalised above. It represents aspirations as shaped by structural and individual factors and as embedded within broader life projects and individual’s constellation of concerns. In turn, the capability to aspire is connected to the capability to identify valuable (and real) opportunities and courses of action chosen to achieve what matters to young people which they have reason to value. Wellbeing achievements (achieved aspirations) or illbeing achievements (neglected/failed aspirations) (the outcomes of the transition process) are dependent upon conversion factors or causal mechanisms and impact on future aspirations (leading to potential aspirations’ transformation) and choice

Figure 4.1: Conceptual map of this doctoral study. Self-elaboration.



Source: Drawn on Powell & McGrath, (2019b) and Robeyns (2005).

Research design, data collection and analysis

This section aims to describe and explain the thesis' research design (procedures of inquiry), research methods data collection and data analysis. First, the methodology is outlined providing a justification of the use of a qualitative longitudinal study to explore aspirations in post-school transition. Second, the methods used to collect data are presented and explained. This is followed by the description of the fieldwork, which includes explanations on how I accessed 'the field', how I recruited the research participants, and how the two rounds of data collection were carried out. This section concludes with reflections on research ethics and on my positionality as researcher within the study.

Qualitative Longitudinal Research

To operationalise the combination of Archer's CR with CA and to address the research questions as outlined in the previous section of the chapter, this study adopted a longitudinal qualitative research (QLR) approach which consisted of two rounds of data collection. QLR is a qualitative research which is carried out over an extended period of time through two or more rounds of data collection with the same cohort of participants (Farrall, 2006; Lewis, 2007; Elliot *et al.*, 2008). Differently from quantitative approaches which are grounded on pre-formulated hypotheses to be tested, qualitative and QL approaches require an open, flexible and emergent design. They place the voices and experiences of the individuals at the centre of the investigation and emphasise their subjective experiences, which are culturally and contextually bounded (Lewis, 2007). Identifying and knowing the 'insider's perspective' is fundamental to understand how young people, as in this case, perceive themselves and their position in relation to their social circumstances; how they value their secondary education in relation to their aspirations and life projects; what barriers or opportunities they see as available to them in their transition to adulthood. This understanding is, in turn, fundamental as it can provide advice to policy makers on how to support post-school transitions and help young people flourish as human beings and active citizens.

The added factor of time to qualitative approaches, which can be prospective or retrospective or both, such as in this study, has made QLR increasingly recognised as key to explore and understand meanings individuals attribute to social phenomena and issues as they unfold, their attitudes and behaviours, how they change over time and how the change is experienced

and situated, stressing the crucial role of subjectivity and individual interpretations in the research process (Holland, Thomson and Henderson, 2006; Lewis, 2007; Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Neale, 2021). QLR allows the researcher to dig into complex causal processes (Neale, 2021) and to “tailor-make follow-up interviews for each respondent and to plan to ask specific questions of them based on their previous answers and experiences” (Farrall, 2006, p. 6). Likewise, the follow-ups design of longitudinal qualitative studies provides participants with the possibility to reflect on changes which may (or may not) have occurred and which they have (or have not) experienced. Although time consuming, this methodology elicits internal conversations as participants are prompted to reflect over past choices and present circumstances and, thus, provides rich and complex data (*ibid.*). The choice of QLR for this study came as natural, informed by the development of the research aims, rationale, questions and the review of theoretical and empirical literature on the meanings attributed to aspirations in post-school transitions. Theoretically, QLR champions Critical Realism (CR) as the latter develops a qualitative theory of causality (Roberts, 2014) while QLR is a tool for disentangling structures and agency, exploring in depth processes (such as post-school decision-making and sense-making with regard to transitions and aspirations), and understanding causality as well as changes in individuals’ subjective perceptions and responses to structural and cultural circumstances over time (Elliot *et al.*, 2008; Hermanowicz, 2013).

From a capability perspective, a contribution of this design in this study is that by looking at subjects’ recollection of what happened in between the two moments examined (t0 and t1), it allows to analyse inequalities (fairness or unfairness of causal mechanisms intersecting among them) behind aspirations’ formation and transformation. In so doing, it avoids the issues of labelling transformed aspirations as necessarily adapted aspirations by questioning the level of agency in the interplay with structural inequalities during the process of transitions. Furthermore, QLR allows the study to overcome one of the main critiques to the operationalisation of the approach, namely the difficulties in observing how capabilities are transformed into functionings (Robeyns 2005; Otto 2015). Furthermore, QLR emphasises agency and subjectivity which is a common tenet of both CR and CA (Neale, 2021).

While longitudinal quantitative studies have a long tradition in social sciences, QLR remains scarce in its application which implies a paucity of relevant literature to guide researchers in its empirical application (Hermanowicz, 2013). This is reflected, for example, in the lack of common understanding or definition on how long longitudinal studies or intervals between

data collection should be. Research methods literature considers a study longitudinal if it consists of two and ideally three waves of data collection over months and, ideally, years (Holland *et al.*, 2006). On this respect, Saldana (2003) emphasises the importance of time and change but sustains that researchers and research design need to be flexible “since time is, and our social actions and circumstances within it are, contextual, change is contextual” (*ibid.*, p. 9). Hence, frequency and timing of a QLR which, for instance, employs serial interviews as method of data collection, such as this study, vary according to the research scope and questions and should be sufficient to assess changes in participants’ lives (Hermanowicz, 2013).

This QLR was initially planned in three waves of data collection that should have taken place respectively at the end of the cycle of upper-secondary vocational education, after six months from completing secondary education and one year after the first round of data collection. The choice of these three moments has to do with the fact that, firstly, they were identified as key in relation to the scope of the study. Indeed, the first round (which took place from October to December 2018) aimed to understand aspirations (meaning attributed to them and factors behind their formation) and strategies to achieve them that vocational students had at the very end of their compulsory education. By the time of the second round (April and May 2019), participants who wanted to obtain the Middle-Level Technician Certificate from their secondary vocational education should have completed the work-placement and those who had made the transition to Tertiary Education (TE) were at the beginning of their third month of studies. Data collection at this stage sought to understand the outcomes of post-school transitions, what decisions young people had made, whether they had managed to achieve their goals and why/why not, how they experienced the transition and how it had transformed their aspirations. The third round should have taken place after a year from the beginning of the fieldwork (October-November 2019) when those in TE should have been at the end of their first academic year, and those who had postponed the enrolment to 2020 would have been about to start the process. Unfortunately, this third round could not be conducted due to external circumstances (see Chapter 7 on study’s limitations).

Before describing access to the fieldwork and qualitative methods of data collection used in this thesis, Table 4.3 provides a summary of the two rounds of data collection with brief description of key events in each round:

Table 4.3: Summary of fieldworks.

Time period	Key events
<i>October-December 2018</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Finishing compulsory upper-secondary vocational education. b. Sitting <i>PSU</i> exam. c. Starting 450-hours-workplacement (compulsory if students want to get their secondary TVET certificate).
<i>April-May 2019</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Work-placements should have ended around March. b. TE/HE started in early March (first semester ending at the end of June; half-term exams in July); at the moment of the second interview, research participants who were in TE/HE were halfway in their first semester. c. For those who do not continue their studies, the working life should have started, or they should have been seeking job.

Accessing the field and participant recruitment

Sampling in qualitative research is a complex, but often overlooked, issue as it implies an iterative series of decisions that underpin the whole research process and which involves the selection of the study population, the access to the study population, the sample size and the process of recruitment (how to select the sample and under which conditions the selection takes place) (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005; Guetterman, 2015). Describing this process and justifying the decision made within it are key to provide quality, robustness and trustworthiness in a qualitative research. Delamont (2002) pushes further the need for, and the importance of, being reflexive in the way qualitative researchers select or recruit the sample and how this affects the data collected. She states that choosing a fieldwork site or a study population in specific settings is determined both by the research purposes and questions, and by pragmatic considerations. Beyond theoretical sampling, what is realistically possible to do in terms of accessing settings, population or documents, or “political feasibility” (*ibid.*, p. 79), considering the time limits of a doctoral research project and the resources available to the researcher, management feasibility (*ibid.*, p. 80), are of key importance in the sampling process.

In relation to this, this doctoral research project was developed in the context of an existing collaboration between academics from the University of Glasgow and from the Universidad Alberto Hurtado of Santiago de Chile in the TVETCHILE project (<http://www.tvetchile.org/en/>) (2016-2018). As part of this project, I had the opportunity to conduct two field visits in Chile prior to my actual fieldwork. During these, I participated in research meetings with academics and in meetings with policy makers and TVET stakeholders and assisted the research team in conducting a few interviews both to tertiary TVET students and to TVET stakeholders. These field visits helped me familiarise with the social context, contextualise TVET issues, and develop my own research project. Furthermore, and relevant to the sampling process, the research team in Santiago de Chile functioned as first gatekeeper (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), providing me with the access to the site (the municipality and the school where the researcher recruited the sample) and to other key gatekeepers (i.e. the responsible of TVET of the municipal corporation in the municipality where the school chosen was located and the school head teacher).

The selection of the study population

Differently from the defining principles of quantitative sampling which are generalizability and representativeness, the core principle behind qualitative sampling is appropriateness, meaning that the sample selected has to be appropriate or purposeful according to the aim of the study (Coyne, 1997). Compared to statistical generalizability of quantitative studies, qualitative studies seek to “generalize on analytic dimensions that establish a framework by which to authentically interpret a group, setting, or situation” (Hermanowicz, 2013, p. 193). This objective usually requires a purposeful sample meaning that the researcher identifies information-rich individuals chosen as they can provide relevant and comprehensive insights to address the research purposes (Robinson, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The findings presented in this thesis are based on a purposive sample of upper-secondary public vocational students. The criteria set to delineate the study population (Robinson, 2014) were in line with the object of the study (see above): (1) that the students were about to complete their upper-secondary education; (2) that the students attended a TVET upper-secondary school; and (3) in terms of social composition, that the students belonged to the working-class.

The selection of the municipality and of the school

The choice of the school was functional to the study population. This means that to respond to the characteristics identified for the study population, the school had to be a TVET school and a public school. The selection of the school where the students were recruited was strictly linked to questions of access negotiations (Delamont, 2002). This meant that sampling and recruitment could not start until I had been granted the permission to conduct the research by school stakeholders. However, this type of access had to depend upon the condition that I could safely and autonomously access the site (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2009). This in turn meant avoiding dangerous or hard-to-reach municipalities.

The school chosen was located in an urban municipality of Santiago. The choice of the municipality was made after extensive consultations with the research team in Santiago and depended on a combination of “opportunity sampling [that is] seizing the chances of a setting or respondent when the opportunity arises” (Delamont, 2002, p. 83) and gatekeepers’ availability (Hennink *et al.*, 2020). The opportunity arose in one of the field visits I did prior to my fieldwork when I took part in conducting an interview with the responsible of TVET of a municipal corporation of Santiago who granted me help to negotiate the access to conduct the study in that municipality.

A further important reason in support of the choice of that municipality was its socioeconomic and educational similarities to the national and MR with reference to multidimensional and income poverty; percentage of population lacking basic services as reported in the Social Registry of Households; levels of illiteracy; average years taken to complete school; percentages of people completing secondary and tertiary education. These similarities helped avoid research biases that would arise in more extreme settings (extremely poor, resourceless or unsafe). Tables 4.4 and 4.5 below compare data (socioeconomic and educational) between municipality, Metropolitan Region and Chile from the 2017 National Survey of Socioeconomic Characterization (in Spanish *Encuesta de Caracterización Socioeconómica Nacional* – CASEN) and from the Household Social Registry.

Table 4.4: Data on income and multidimensional poverty and data on population lacking basic services (self-elaboration).

	Chile	Metropolitan Region	Municipality
Income poverty	8.6%	5.4%	4.37%
Multidimensional poverty ¹⁵	20.7%	20%	26.28%
Population lacking basic services (average among Socioeconomic Qualification Tranches) ¹⁶	14.3%	8.6%	9.6%
Population lacking basic services (lowest Socioeconomic Qualification Tranche) ¹⁷	18.3%	10.6%	10.6%

Sources: Data aggregated from Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile [BCN] (n.d.); Sistema Integrado de Información Social con desagregación Territorial [SIIS-T] MDS 2017; Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2018b; n.d.; Cormup, 2018, 2019.

Table 4.5: CASEN 2017 on educational data (self-elaboration).

	Chile	Metropolitan Region	Municipality
Illiteracy	3.6%	2.4%	2.2%
Average years of school (15+ years old)	11.2	11.7	11.4
People completing secondary education	30.3%	30.8%	32.7%
People completing TE ¹⁸	19.8%	24.4%	19.5%
Students enrolled in public schools	36%	25%	22%
Students enrolled in private-subsidised schools	55%	60%	48%
Students enrolled in private non-subsidised schools	8%	13%	30%

Sources: Data aggregated from CEM, n.d.; Cormup, 2018, 2019, 2020; Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2018^a; n.d.

As Table 4.5 shows, the main difference concerns the number of students enrolled in private non-subsidised schools which is significantly higher in the municipality compared to national or regional levels. This is because the municipality was socioeconomically heterogenous but segregated in five areas with high levels of vulnerability, criminality and

¹⁵ Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI): “Percentage of the population that is multidimensionally poor adjusted by the intensity of the deprivations.” (UNDP, 2020, p. 19). The MPI identifies multiple deprivations at the household and individual levels in the areas of health, education, network and social cohesion, work and social security and the standard of living. Each member of a family is classified as poor or not poor based on the number of deprivations that their household experiences.

¹⁶ People present in the Social Household Registry (in Spanish *Registro Social de Hogares* - RSH) lacking basic services at home (average among the 7 Socioeconomic Qualification Tranches, in Spanish *Tramo de Calificación Socioeconómica* - CSE). The calculation considers in the numerator, the number of people lacking basic services present in the RSH qualified in each section of CSE; In the denominator, the total number of people from the RSH in the corresponding CSE tranche is considered.

¹⁷ People present in the Social Household Registry (*Registro Social de Hogares* in Spanish - RSH) lacking basic services at home belonging to the lowest Socioeconomic Qualification Tranche (0%-40%) as the study population.

¹⁸ Data on completion of secondary and tertiary education are from CASEN 2015.

poverty, as well new developments, safer and richer sectors. The growing number of population in the new sectors and the growing number of private schools explain this difference (Cormup, 2019, 2020).

In 2016-2017¹⁹, the municipality offered six public upper-secondary schools, three TVET schools and three academic schools (Cormup, 2018, 2019, 2020). The municipality offered its public TVET schools connections with the labour market through the agreement signed in 2016 with *FORGE*²⁰ (Cormup, 2018) and through initiatives and activities established in collaborations with companies (such as the 10-day-internship for students of Administration and Logistics that began in 2018 with the support of *Fundación Chile Dual*²¹) (Cormup, 2019). Regarding the connections with TE/HE institutions, the municipality in 2016 started agreements with the *PACE* Programme to which the three TVET public school took part. Lastly, it offered a tuition-free pre-university programme to help upper-secondary students attending public schools in the municipality prepare the *PSU* and familiarise with the academic environment of HE institutions (Cormup, 2018).

The selection of the TVET public school was based on the following considerations. First, of the three TVET public schools, the two of them not selected offered two vocational tracks, whereas the school selected offered four among the most popular vocational tracks in the MR (Administration, Electricity, Mechanics, Telecommunication) (Castro Paredes and Holoz, 2014). Second, besides having a greater variety of vocational tracks (and thus possibly a greater variety of post-school aspirations and choices), the school was in a fairly good position in terms of reachability and safety which would limit my personal risks to reach it (despite being located in a fairly vulnerable sector of the municipality).

The recruitment of the students

In accordance with ethics requirements (see section on ethics), I had to be granted the permission from the head of the TVET school to be able to recruit the students, which I obtained (see Appendix 2) thanks also to the gatekeepers. After getting the authorisation, in the last few days of the academic year (early November 2018) I was given access to the

¹⁹ In 2017 the study population of this research started the 2-year-upper-secondary cycle (2017-2018).

²⁰ *FORGE* is a foundation that collaborates with some selected secondary TVET schools to provide support to low-income students in their transition from education to labour market.

²¹ Chile Dual is an Educational Foundation dedicated to linking the world of business with TVET schools to improve the trajectory of young people.

school premises to introduce myself and the research to last-year-students across the four vocational tracks of studies. In that occasion, I explained that I ideally aimed to interview students who wanted to participate for three times over a period of a year and that interviews would be conversations around their dreams and goals after school so to help policy makers and relevant stakeholders within TVET understand the reality and lived experiences of Chilean youth in transition to adulthood. The voluntary character of the students' participation as well as their right to withdraw at any point of the research were clearly stated²².

To recruit the students²³, I gave them a questionnaire which included questions on students' demographic data (age, gender, municipality where they lived, who they lived with and post-school educational or professional plans), future aspirations and their willingness to take part in the study. Out of 70 students who were in school the day the questionnaire was distributed, 39 male students and 20 female students expressed their interest in taking part in the research. The final number of students who responded to emails and/or messages to set a date for the interview was 30 (12 female and 18 male students). This was considered a manageable and reasonable number of participants based on the review of the literature on sampling size for qualitative studies (Gaskell, 2000; Hennink *et al.*, 2020) and for QLR (Hermanowicz, 2013).

Originally, this study was thought as a three-wave-interviews. Attrition was considered into the size of the sample. This means that the initial number of 30 participants interested in taking part in the first round would have likely reduced by the end of the third round. As the section on method below also explains, the study eventually consisted of two rounds of data collection with an attrition of five students from the first to the second round. Furthermore, and related to the concept of management feasibility (Delamont, 2002), the researcher has to consider the issue of size of the data to be analysed. According to Gaskell (2000), if the researcher aims to go beyond the superficial selection of some illustrative quotations, she has to fully engage with the transcripts as well as to recall each interview, each respondent and each key theme emerged. This requires a significant amount of time which the researcher needs to consider in the planning of the research design, and which justifies the smaller sample.

²² See Research Information Sheet and Consent Form for students in Appendices 3 and 4.

²³ See Ethics Form and Approval in Appendices 5 and 6.

Table 4.6 shows the number of participants against the total number of students in the same cohort enrolled, divided by gender and track of studies. Participants' background information (pseudonym, sex, age at the time of the questionnaire, vocational specialisation and socioeconomic tranche of belonging) are provided in Appendix 7. As the Appendix shows, the majority of participants (and of the student population of the upper-secondary school in general) belonged to the most vulnerable socioeconomic group of the population (0%-40%) according to the Social Household Registry²⁴ with experiences of poverty beyond economic deprivation.

Table 4.6: Number of male and female participants (and total n. of students of the same cohort) classified by sex and field of studies. Self-elaboration.

	Electricity	Mechanics	Telecom.	Admin. & Logistics	Total
Female	2 (6)	0 (8)	1 (7)	9 (31)	12 (52)
Male	5 (31)	4 (29)	6 (27)	3 (9)	18 (96)
Total	7 (37)	3 (37)	6 (34)	12 (40)	30 (148)

Methods

As mentioned above, the findings presented in this thesis draw on longitudinal in-depth, biographical interviews in two rounds of data collection with the same cohort of young people. The first round took place at the end of their secondary vocational education and the second round was conducted about six months after the first round. In-depth qualitative interviews are among the specific methods used in QLR. This method was chosen as appropriate to research's purpose as it fosters "conversation with a purpose" (Roberts, 2014, p. 4). Within this method, biographical interviews have become popular in QLR (Elliot *et al.*, 2008). Gomensoro and Paredes (2017) sustain that in biographical interviews interviewees share some aspects of their life within a "open, in depth, comprehensive exchange" (p. 157) that allows the interviewer to get the interviewee's position and perspective of their own life course. Evans (2002) notes that biographical interviews are the best methodological strategy to connect 'lived realities' to theoretical frameworks of structure and agency that equally take into account the micro and the macro dimensions in

²⁴ Demographic and educational data of the study population provided by school gatekeepers.

the transitions to adulthood. In this respect, Czerniewicz *et al.*, (2009) state that biographical studies are valuable to specify the causal mechanisms which underlie different agential responses and, thus, appropriate to investigate social issues from a CR perspective. This thesis relies on Nilsen's (2012) definition of biographical interviews. According to him, a biographical account is "a story told in the present about a person's experiences of events in the past, [present] and her or his expectations for the future" (p. 4). Asking young people to reflect, in the present moment, on their past experiences and their future possible pathways, biographical interviews allows the researcher to: 1) understand what young people perceive as future possibilities, their aspirations and plans; 2) understand how perceived possibilities and aspirations are mediated by their class, gender, family and significant others, cultural expectations and educational, labour market and social structures; 3) understand how young people perceive and experience structural factors and how they perceive themselves as being agentic and able to act within these contexts (identifying constraints and possibilities in the exertion of the agency); and, 4) analyse young people's motivations and meanings attributed to past and present actions and future orientations (Evans, 2002, 2007; Lahelma, 2009; Caetano, 2015, 2017).

Biographical approaches have often used completely open methods of data collection (i.e. unstructured interviews) (Roseneil, 2012; Funston, 2014; Ross & Moore, 2016). The initial approach to biographical interviews that this thesis endeavoured to adopt was the Biographical Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2011). BNIM consists of two or three sub-sessions. In the first session, the interviewer asks the interviewee to tell his/her life story. In the second session (usually conducted a few minutes before the first one), the interviewer asks for more narrative (and only narrative) details following the sequence previously chosen by the interviewee to narrate the story and using the interviewee's words. The third stage consists of a semi-structured interview and should take place after a preliminary analysis of the two sub-sessions is completed, although the temporal gap is not mandatory (Burke, 2014). It draws on the narrative responses given previously to elicit analytical reflections related to the research interest or on unexpected important topics emerged in the first two rounds that are relevant to the research's objects and aims (Wengraf, 2011).

The rationale behind choosing (or attempting to choose) it in this thesis lied in the importance that subjectivity and agency have in this research, especially how young people gave sense to aspirations they had reason to value and what brought them to develop those aspirations.

The absence of the interviewer's interventions, at least in the first stage of the interview, would have allowed "a raw subjectivity" (Ross & Moore, 2016, p. 450) in young people's agency and motivations to emerge and to shape the narrative without interviewer's biases or preconceptions. Furthermore, it would have elicited more authentic and rich pre-conscious internal conversations concerning the interplay structures/agency, inner/outer worlds of a person as it enabled the story to be told in the way the interviewee feels like to (Burke, 2014).

First round of data collection: from BNIM to semi-structured biographical interviews

However, some difficulties related to applying rigorously the three-stage method emerged from the first few interviews, which made me decide to move from BNIM to semi-structured interviews for the rest of the interviews. Empirical studies that have adopted BNIM have indeed revealed difficulties in applying rigorously the three-stage method (Edwards, 2014) as it is very "resource-intensive" (Ross & Moore, 2016, p. 455), requires significant skills from the researcher, and it is extremely time-consuming for both the researcher and the participants. In the attempt to use BNIM, to avoid problems of attrition, which is one of the main challenges of QLR (Hermanowicz, 2013; Ovenden-Hope & Passey, 2016), I decided to combine all the three stages at once. One of the difficulties I encountered immediately had to do with the first open-ended question which seemed to be intimidating for some participants who were not sure about what to say or what I wanted to hear or what was worth it saying. Furthermore, combining stage 2 and 3 was a further challenge as I had to take notes for the narrative part while simultaneously understanding key analytical questions that I should have asked and actively listening to my interviewees. All this without interrupting the flow of the interview and without making the interviewee feel uncomfortable.

The first interview conducted for this doctoral research was the most rigorous attempt of BNIM. To the open question "*tell me about yourself*", the first student interviewed began talking about his hobbies and future aspirations in a disjointed and uncoherent flow of thoughts, shifting from abstract reflections on himself to accounts on his daily routine, what made it difficult to follow while taking appropriate notes. Furthermore, in the first minutes he would say repeatedly "I don't know what to say" or "what else can I say" until he explicitly asked for help. The extract below shows this critical moment:

I work three days a week. I work at a local supermarket... let's see, what can I tell you... I don't know, I'm a quiet person. [...] I really like drawing [...] when

someone dedicates time to something, to a passion, usually it's something material [...] I feel we are losing this... this passion for [non-material] things... I don't know, to feel something ... everything is being very shallow in life, very materialistic... what's the point in aspiring high [...] if I don't appreciate the daily life. The bread I have in the morning, or simply being alive every day. This is what moves me in life, being grateful to God and to life... What I aspire for my adult life... I think big [...] I don't know what else to say... ask me something... (Rafael)

During the interview, I had to intervene a few times with probes to ask the students to clarify his responses. This was mainly due to language barriers (see section on subjectivity and positionality below). Although I could speak and understand Spanish perfectly, during the interviews some young people would make extensive use of Chilean slang which I was not very familiar with. This language barrier and the rather incoherent narration of the life story made it very challenging to follow the interview and combine the three stages. Therefore, at times I stepped in to have some clarification or to summarise what the interviewee had been saying just to assess my understanding. Another reason behind my interventions was the uncomfortable feeling that probably the interviewee, and certainly myself, felt at moments of hesitations, uncertainties or silences.

The most critical point in this first interview occurred after about 40 minutes when the interviewee said he had to go, thus leaving the interview incomplete (also due to difficulties in getting in touch with the participant again in the following weeks). To prevent some of the issues that had arisen during the first interview, while still attempting to use this method, the following 6 interviews were conducted in a less rigorous way BNIM-wise. These were very rich and insightful interviews which provided me with relevant and useful data. However, although the early data collected via the BNIM remained valid, these first interviews were also good occasions for me to realise that the weaknesses/challenges in adopting BNIM were overcoming the strengths/gains, given also my inexperience with such method and the risks of losing participants and jeopardising my longitudinal research. These were risks that I could not afford taking due to time- and budget-constraints.

Therefore, similarly to other studies that have not used the open interview methods in their biographical approach (Bolzman *et al.*, 2017), I moved from BNIM to semi-structured biographical interviews. I thus designed interview guidelines used mainly as a narrative stimulus and checklist of main themes to be covered so to secure a balance between comparability among participants and the uniqueness of their life experiences (Walther *et al.*, 2015). This method was used for both rounds of data collection, although interviews

were tailored and personalised according to each participant's narration of specific life events or experiences. For example, some interviews begun with the interviewee talking about their family, others started by saying what they were doing in life when the interview took place. This tailored start of the interview depended on how the initial interaction before the interview with each interviewee developed and aimed to break the ice, make the interviewees feel at ease and build rapport with them (Hennink *et al.*, 2020).

The dialogical possibilities that emerged in a more democratic conversation (such as in semi-structured interviews compared to the BNIM) between me and the interviewee facilitated reflections "in the light of the dialogue or the frames of reference introduced" (Ross & Moore, 2016, p. 454) which resulted to provide valuable insights into young people's internal conversations. In some cases, participants would answer questions by saying "I hadn't thought about that" or "I hadn't considered it this way". Objective events and structural constraints and enablements would be explored against socially and culturally situated subjectivities to then abductively interpret structures and agency using the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the study.

In the first round of interviews, the interview guidelines (see Appendix 8) consisted of three main sets. The first concerned their recently completed upper-secondary educational experience, which was fresher in their mind and helped build participants' confidence in elucidating their subjective experiences (circumspective data – reflections on their current situation). This part focused on how they valued their vocational education, the reasons behind their educational and vocational subject choices, and their relationship with teachers. The second covered their personal biography, particularly their past educational choices, family situations, parental expectations and support, role models, and relationships with friends and peers (retrospective data – reflections on previous events and choices). The third referred to future orientations, centred more on their educational and professional aspirations and how they thought they would achieve these (prospective data – reflections on future aspirations and life projects). This part also included: their perceptions of the labour market, of the value of getting Tertiary Education's certificates and of their society; what living a dignified and successful life meant to them, whether it was important for them, and what it entailed to achieve it.

The interview guidelines targeted sets of themes that reflected the concepts of the research questions and of the conceptual framework of the study. This was done according to CR

approach to avoiding the impulse to convert *research method* questions into *research interview* questions. An example of this were the questions posed to understand the meanings young people attributed to their aspirations (research method questions) which were investigated by placing their current aspirations in wider processes over time through the exploration of past educational choices, current vocations, and future life projects as well as questions on their perception of a successful life and on the life priorities they had reasons to value (research interview questions).

Conducting the interviews

The interviews were recorded (upon participants' permission) and lasted from 60 to 90 minutes to allow in-depth conversations and develop comfort and familiarity with participants. During the interview, I would take notes of what was being said as a back-up of the recording and to note interesting or critical points about interviews' contents or process that could help the interpretation of the findings or that could give me indications on how to ameliorate the following interviews. In choosing a location where to conduct the interviews, I consulted with Chilean academic partners affiliated to one of the Universities based in Santiago and with extensive experience in interviewing young people and finally asked participants to choose the location they preferred (usually a café or the school's premises) that they could easily reach and where they would feel at ease. As the section on ethics will highlight, before starting the interview, participants were given detailed information on the research's scope and aims, the nature and expected length of the interview, the use of the audio-recording and of data and on their rights within the research process (i.e. the right to withdraw at any moment without the need for an explanation, the right to anonymity and confidentiality) (Lewis, 2017). Small talks and motivational probes (verbal reactions to interviewee's accounts to encourage him/her to continue to talk, or to show interest, or empathy) were employed to make interviewees feel at ease, especially at the beginning of the interview (Hennink *et al.*, 2020).

At times, to elicit meanings or reflections, or to understand young people's perspectives on topics that could made them feel judged (i.e. when discussing the significance of being successful in their society and how they felt about it) the projective technique was employed (Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000). The projective technique allows the researcher to understand the perspective of the participants without exposing them to uncomfortable feelings. For example, when commenting how they would reach their goals considering their current

circumstances, to minimise the emotional pressure that such question could pose, I avoided direct references to the specific situation of the participant and addressed it by generalising the question to vocational students in transition to post-school trajectories in their context. To clarify what the interviewees were saying and to assess my understanding, I would try to represent visually, through drawings or diagrams on my notebook what the participants were saying. This technique was particularly useful to double-check and/or summarise narratives on courses of action which implied sequences of events, or on different transition options they were considering, or to summarise their hierarchy of priorities regarding, for instance, short- and medium-term plans.

Second round of data collection: in-depth, semi-structured interviews

Similarly to the first round of interviews, the second one was characterised by retrospective, circumspective and perspective data. Differently from the first round which tried to obtain a life story perspective of the life of the participants to have a holistic understanding of their aspirations, system of values and decision-making processes, the second round focused on what happened in the time frame between the first and the second interview. The interview guidelines (see Appendix 9) consisted of three main sets. The first was about their current situation, or circumspective data (Powell & McGrath, 2019b) and aimed to understand what they were doing; how well they were doing in their current situation and reflections on how close or far they felt to what they wanted to do, be or become and had reason to value; their perception of real educational or professional opportunities opening up to them during the transition process. The second concerned the key events that had occurred between the first and the second interview (retrospective data). This sought to understand objective facts such as the *PSU* score, the work-placement, the enrolment process, what went well and what did not, as well as their subjective experience of barriers and enablements that might have led to one trajectory or another. The third related to their future plans and aspirations, their life projects and constellation of concerns (prospective data). It aimed to understand whether these were changed during the transition process and in relation to it and explore mechanisms behind changes.

Conducting the interviews

Similarly to the first round of data collection, interviews were recorded and lasted from 60 to 90 minutes approximately. Interviews took place in the same place the participants had

chosen the previous time and participants were informed about their rights, the research aims and objectives and the length and nature of the interview before starting with the questions. The rapport built in the first round of data collection and throughout the months in-between rounds and the familiarity that the participants had developed with the research and the interview process contributed significantly to make the participants feel comfortable this time from the very beginning and to smooth and speed up the beginning of the interview process.

In this respect, while building rapport with the interviewees was particularly important in the first round of data collection, maintaining it between the first and the second was crucial to prevent participants' attrition (Hermanowicz, 2013). To do so, I kept contact with the participants by sending them messages, for example, on celebratory occasions (such as Christmas), or a few weeks before the second fieldwork to start asking whether they were still interested in participating. Hermanowicz (2013) sustains that these practices may preserve and deepen relationships over time, which "enable a sharing of more private and detailed accounts than many initial interviews are able to obtain" (p. 202). Possibly thanks also to these contacts, only five participants pulled out from the second interview. Of these five, two were impossible to reach even after the attempt of the school counsellor. One missed the scheduled interview three times and preferred not to schedule a fourth attempt. Another participant decided to withdraw from the study and informed me via text. The last one was not in Santiago anymore.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews to key informants from the TVET sector

Although this study draws on experiences of a small cohort of upper-secondary vocational students, originally, it was thought as a multi-method qualitative research design (Cronin *et al.*, 2008) which would integrate the in-depth, biographical interviews to young people with cross-sectional interviews of informants from the education sectors that played an important role either in understanding the contextual circumstances within which young people's agency and subjectivity would develop or influencing young people's aspirations. Some of these interviews were part of the initial plan (deductively defined study population), while others were planned as the research developed (inductively refined study population), such as the interviews to schoolteachers (Hennink *et al.*, 2020)²⁵. These interviews were

²⁵ The Ethics Form was updated, and the amended version was approved by the Ethics Committee.

structured around a list of questions/themes to be explored during the encounter (Appendix 10). However, I adopted a flexible approach that allowed me to follow up any thread or interesting/relevant point raised by the interviewee. The interviews were recorded upon permission of the interviewees and lasted from 30 minutes to 90 minutes approximately. They were conducted at the workplace's premises of the interviewees.

Nevertheless, during the development of the data collection and even more clearly during the process of data analysis (see section below), the scope of the research and the research questions became narrower, clearer, and more refined. As seen in the first part of this chapter, the focus had shifted to emphasise exclusively TVET students' aspirations in transition. The section on researcher's subjectivity and positionality will explain further the reflexive processes behind this change. Therefore, despite these interviews helped me triangulate and assess my understanding of the issue in the context of the study, especially during the fieldwork phase, I decided to 'winnow' the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which implies focusing on the analysis of some of the data (the interviews to the students) disregarding other data (interviews to key informants) to stay within the scope of the research²⁶.

Other methods

Despite this thesis is a qualitative study, I also drew on secondary statistical data to contextualise the school chosen to recruit the students' participants and understand the sociodemographic characteristic of the student participants (Chapter 3). I used the database of student participants provided by the municipality corporation which included students' nationality; vocational specialism at secondary level; educational grades in secondary school; grades in the *PSU*; family's income; participation in *PACE* activities, *FORGE*

²⁶ During the first fieldwork, I interviewed the head of the school where the students were recruited (gatekeeper to the students' recruitment); the school counsellors (2); the teachers in charge of each vocational area (4); the responsible of TVET programmes in the school; and the responsible of TVET of the municipality corporation (gatekeeper to the school). These interviews aimed to get an understanding of the institutional habitus of the school (the reasons for offering those four vocational specialisms; whether/what support the school provided to students for the transition to post-school educational or professional trajectories); to explore the perspectives they held of TVET students and of the constraint and enablements of TVET graduates in their post-school transitions; to understand their views on the role, policies and practices, issues and strengths of TVET in Chile and how these could play out in the decision-making process of its young graduates at the moment of choosing post-school life paths. Guided by the same rationale of getting a more holistic perspective on TVET role in students' transition and development of life projects and aspirations, during the second fieldwork the researcher conducted interviews with stakeholders from *PACE* and *FORGE* programmes and with a policy maker from the Secretary of Upper Secondary TVET.

activities, or pre-university programme; Gratuidad or other scholarships; transition to TE. This helped with the analysis and interpretation of students' accounts.

Data analysis

The total number of interviews to young people analysed for this thesis was 51 (28 in the first round and 23 in the second round). Although in the first fieldwork I interviewed 30 students, at the moment of data analysis I realised that two students fell outside the typological classification identified to interpret the data. Furthermore, when the second fieldwork took place, of the 28 young people who took part in the first round of data collection, 4 dropped out of the research and 1 was pregnant and, thus, fell outside of the classification. Once the interview phase was completed, I handed over the verbatim transcription of the audio-recordings to transcribers²⁷. This allowed me to save a considerable amount of time that I used instead to prepare the second fieldwork, or to start analysing the transcripts.

The interview transcripts were coded with the use of NVivo software, which helped with the organisation and the storage of the data, although the thematic data linking was done manually. For each transcript, the first reading was done while listening to the audio-recordings upon which I would draw any time during the process of data analysis when I felt it necessary to recall specific moments of the interview or to check my initial interpretations. This process served two aims. First, it helped me double-check the accuracy of the transcripts which was a crucial aspect of the principles of credibility and robustness of the study as transcriptions are “powerful acts of representation [that] can affect how data are conceptualised” (Oliver, 2005, p. 1273). Second, it helped me immerse again in the moment when the interview was conducted, by recalling aspects of the communication that are lost in the denaturalised transcriptions (*ibid.*), and “be able to bring to mind the emotional tone of the respondent and to recall why they asked a particular question” (Gaskell, 2000, p. 7).

I conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun *et al.*, 2019). The analysis was abductive in line with CR methodology. This means that it started around themes/concepts drawn on from the theoretical and conceptual frameworks adopted in the

²⁷ For the first round of data collection, the researcher had two Spanish-speaking transcribers (one from Spain, one from Latina America). To assess transcription coherence, the researcher listened to audio-recordings while reading each transcription. For the second round, transcriptions were done by the transcriber from Latin America. The use of transcribers was possible as it was included in the LKAS budget allowances.

study (i.e. theme: factors influencing aspirations; categories: education; family/significant others; sociocultural context) and used the data collected to refine the theoretical understanding (i.e. within the category of sociocultural context, the cultural dimension of ‘meritocracy’ and ‘social discrimination’ affecting aspirations emerged from the data) (Bergene, 2007; Bygstad & Munkvold, 2011; Kennedy & Thornberg, 2018).

For the first fieldwork, the overarching themes (Fletcher, 2017) were the following: 1) what aspirations students had before transition and their significance; 2) logic/course of actions to achieve aspirations; 3) explanatory factors informing aspirations and logic of actions. For the second fieldwork, the overarching themes were the following: 1) what young people were doing at the moment of the second interview and why (match and mismatch with initial aspirations); 2) how young people were experiencing the transition’s outcomes (impact on their wellbeing); 3) the state of aspirations after transition. Throughout the coding process, the list was re-organised, re-named and refined several times, from being more descriptive to more theoretical and analytical, from a broader list to narrower one in a constant process of back and forth between themes, categories, codes, transcripts, audio-recordings, research questions, theory and overall research purpose (Bazeley, 2013; Fletcher, 2017).

For each theme and category, the following steps of breaking up the text and connecting data were taken (Bazeley, 2013) to identify:

- a. Potential values/dimensions of the theme/category.
- b. General patterns of responses within each theme/category (patterns of shared meanings).
- c. Differences in some dimensions of the responses.
- d. Differences across profiles of respondents.
- e. Links between differences in dimensions and profiles.

The longitudinal design of the study added a further layer of complexity to the analysis as it requires to look analytically at data first from a cross-sectional perspective and afterwards from a longitudinal perspective to identify how narratives change over time (Thomson & Holland, 2003). In this study, for the analysis of the first fieldwork (see Chapter 5), patterns across participants were identified and findings were organised in a typological analysis of aspirations. The cross-sectional analysis, or “looking at individual cases at a single point in time” (Lewis, 2007, p. 552), was the starting point for the longitudinal analysis that was conducted afterwards on the interviews of the second round of data collection. In-between

the two rounds, a summary and preliminary analysis of young people's accounts was carried out which allowed a more tailored and accurate interaction between researcher and interviewee, enhancing the level of reflections. For the longitudinal analysis (see Chapter 6), I interrogated the data to explore changes, or absence of changes, in the narratives around the formation and transformation of aspirations. To achieve rigor and facilitate the understanding of the findings, I organised these in sections that followed the typological analysis of the first round of interviews.

Ethical considerations

This research was conducted with the approval of the College of Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of Glasgow (see Appendices 5 and 6) and in compliance with ethical principles of research integrity and ethical guidelines of doing no harm to participants, guarantying their rights to anonymity, confidentiality and self-determination in the research participation (Hennink *et al.*, 2020). All following changes to the initial research ethics form approved were communicated, submitted to and approved by the Committee (see Appendix 11). To align with local research ethics in practice in Chile and avoid breaching any ethical procedure, I sought advice from the Chilean researchers' team of the partner university.

In compliance with the requirements of the Ethics Committee and with the local practices of conducting research in Chile, I obtained the approval of the head schoolteacher before proceeding with the recruitment of the study population. Once obtained it, I proceeded to brief the students with adequate information on the research purposes, objects, ways of proceeding and implications in participating in it, so that they could make an informed decision on whether to take part in the study or not. I explained participants' rights, including the rights to anonymity and to withdrawing at any time without the need of explanation. During my first contact with the study population in the school, I also made it clear that participants would be given a monetary incentive for the value of 10.000 Chilean pesos, which is the equivalent of 12£, for each interview they would decide to take part in. Payment is an accepted and used practice of conducting social research in Chile and, indeed, the idea of providing this voucher came from the Chilean research team. The reason for the monetary incentive was that students would be asked to give some of their time for two (initially three) times throughout the months. Furthermore, given the high price of means of transports in Chile (the social unrests started in October 2019 begun precisely due to a further increase of

the transport fare) and given that the study population of the doctoral research would belong to the lowest quintile of income population, this voucher was considered as a way of showing gratitude to participants. The use of the monetary incentive in compliance with the ‘ethics in practice’ in Chile (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) was clearly stated in the research ethics form.

Before starting each interview, I asked the interviewee the permission to audio-record the interview, explaining the use she would make of it. Furthermore, I explained again the research aims, objects, and reason that had led her to conduct the research. I clarified what the interview aimed at and that there would not be wrong answers as the aim was to understand their views and experiences they wanted to share. I reminded them of their rights as participants, for example that their names as well as the name of the school would be anonymised and replaced with pseudonyms. However, they were informed that the right to confidentiality of information supplied by them could not be guarantee in the event of the disclosure of potentially harmful, for them or other people, information. Luckily, there were no such cases. In some cases, participants disclosed harsh personal stories or feelings, often related to their upbringing. In such cases, I showed empathy towards them and let them continue with the flow of their stories without interrupting them. Before moving on with the interview, I would check whether they were okay with that.

Lastly, after having given the interviewees all the above information, they were asked to read and sign the Consent Form and the Information Sheet (see Appendices 3 and 4) and to keep with them the latter. For students that at the time of the first interview were minors, the Consent Form and Information Sheet were sent by email before the encounter and signed by their carers/parents. The procedure of signing Consent Form and Information Sheet was replicated in the second round of interviews.

Reflecting on researcher’s subjectivity and positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher plays a fundamental role in the knowledge production. Being upfront of the researcher’s role in data collection and analysis and how her identity and past experiences may influence interpretations is key to research integrity and trustworthiness (Finlay, 2002; Pezalla *et al.*, 2012). The two research visits within the TVETChile project I did prior data collection significantly helped me familiarise with the context of Chile and with issues related to TVET internationally and in Chile. This was particularly important at the beginning of the study as I was new to both the context and the

field of TVET. However, it is also important to acknowledge the epistemological influences that participating in meetings with TVET stakeholders from school actors and TE students to policymakers had especially in the initial phase of data collection. While analysing the data collected in the first fieldwork, I realised that I had biased views on TVET which emerged at times during the interviews. For example, when I posed questions or prompts to prove the assumption that coming from a public, vocational school would not facilitate post-school transitions. In-between fieldworks, through a preliminary analysis of findings and also in the phase of data analysis after the second fieldwork, this initial focus and the initial image of TVET students as disadvantaged and victims of a system shifted towards a less biased-led research and an emphasis on the voices and lived experiences of TVET graduates. As a reflection of that, I took the decision to draw the analysis exclusively on the (rich and complex) data from the interviews with young people and discard data collected from other interviews. Ultimately, evaluation and reflections on TVET policy and practice in Chile was done in the light of and through the analysis of the experience of TVET graduates in their transition process.

A further point to reflect about relates to issues of power imbalance between the researcher and the participants during the interviews (Finlay, 2002; Etherington, 2007). To minimise the hierarchy and foster comfortable and at ease interactions as much as possible, I introduced myself as student rather than researcher. Furthermore, the plain, accessible and friendly language that I used, my youthful look and the fact of being a foreigner (an Italian, studying in the UK, conducting research in Chile) helped diminish the power imbalance and facilitated openness and trust during the interview encounters. In this respect, although I could speak and understand perfectly Spanish, I was not quite familiar with Chilean slang (very much used by youth). The requests for explanation when slang was used and playing around with language misunderstandings was another way to balance the power out as I was myself in a 'disadvantaged position' when interacting with these young Chilean people. Thus, although 'outsiders' cannot fully grasp sociocultural aspects or cannot fully get 'the sense of the game' (Giwa, 2015), 'outsider-ness' can bring advantages such as in this case. Indeed, besides raising curiosity and willingness to exchange/share experiences in the young people participating in the study, being an outsider conferred a sense of neutrality which allowed or facilitated a level of confidentiality that it might not have been the same had the researcher been an insider (Arber, 2006). An example of this were cases when participants would tell me "I have never told this to anyone" as they would feel judged or compelled to accomplish what they had shared (i.e. the aspiration to go to university). In other cases, I

was asked if I was a psychologist (“if not, you should!”) referring to the fact that I was good at making them reflect over, for instance, past choices or the value of their secondary education.

The last one is a reflection that brings together the first point on the choice of interviewing informants from TVET and the disadvantage of being an outsider. Besides having started this doctoral research with a broader focus which would justify the initial intentions to interview TVET key informants besides students, this initial choice could also possibly be linked to the need for building a sound knowledge of the context more than for answering the research questions. This need did not reflect in any way a lack of respect of the time these informants dedicated to me. Rather, it reflected a lack of confidence (and clarity of research focus) that I initially felt in understanding a complex system such as the Chilean one²⁸.

²⁸ For being an extreme case of neoliberalism, it can be quite difficult and confusing for an outsider to understand the Chilean context, dynamics, governance.

CHAPTER 5 Findings - Students' educational and professional aspirations at the end of upper-secondary TVET

This chapter presents the analysis of vocational students' aspirations just at the beginning of the transition to post-school trajectories, which corresponds with the first round of interviews. The interviews took place when the participants had just completed their upper-secondary vocational education (typically, 18 years old) and were in the process of starting the 450-hour-work-placement compulsory to obtain the qualification of secondary vocational education (*Título de Educación Media Técnico Profesional*). Usually, secondary vocational students complete their work-placement during the summer holidays (between December and February). This allows those who want to continue studying after secondary education to start tertiary studies (either in universities or in VET institutions) in the forthcoming academic year (which in Chile starts within the first week of March and ends in December). Furthermore, when the interviews took place, some participants were about to do the *PSU* and some had just done it. As seen in chapter 3, the *PSU* score students get determines whether they can enrol in universities and in which ones, whereas it is not determinant to access VET institutions. Students are usually informed about their *PSU* score at the end of December.

The chapter presents the typological analysis of aspirations which are classified into three categories according to the participants' highest and most ambitious educational or work trajectory they perceived as within their reach within a year after the completion of their upper-secondary vocational education²⁹. The categories identified are 1) university education aspirations; 2) tertiary vocational education aspirations; and 3) work aspirations. For each type identified, the chapter illustrates 1) the meanings and rationale for students' aspirations; 2) the institutional, structural, and individual factors that contribute to form aspirations; and 3) the courses of action envisaged to achieve them.

The three types of aspirations

²⁹ For students who wanted to enrol in tertiary education institutions, within a year after the completion of their upper-secondary vocational education means either the forthcoming academic year (starting in March 2019) or the following (March 2020).

General remarks

When students were asked what they wanted to do after their upper-secondary vocational education, the great majority (24 out of 28³⁰) expressed their intention to continue with their studies in tertiary education institutions. Specifically, eleven students (39%) showed preferences for university institutions and thirteen (46%) students for tertiary vocational institutes. Only a minority, 4 students (14%), wanted to find a job after their secondary education. Table 5.1 shows two main trends. The first trend relates to gender and future aspirations. While most of the students aspiring to university were male students, the majority of students aspiring to work after secondary education were female. By contrast, there were no significant gender differences among students who aspired to tertiary vocational education. The second trend concerns the relation between vocational track of studies and aspired post-school trajectory. In this case, while students of Administration and Logistics would prefer tertiary vocational education or work, overall students of Electricity, Mechanics and Telecommunication expressed the intention to continue studying rather than finding a job and preferred university to tertiary vocational institutions.

Table 5.1: Aspired educational and professional trajectories by track of vocational studies and gender.

UPPER-SECONDARY VOCATIONAL TRACKS	ASPIRED TRAJECTORIES POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION		
	University	Tertiary TVET	Work
Electricity	4 (1 F / 3 M)	3 (1 F / 2 M)	0
Mechanics	2 M	1 M	0
Telecommunication	3 (1 F / 2 M)	3 (0 F / 3 M)	0
Administration Logistics	2 (1 F / 1 M)	6 (5 F / 1 M)	4 (3 F / 1 M)
Total	11 (3 F / 8 M)	13 (6 F / 7 M)	4 (3 F / 1 M)

The following sections present each type of aspirations by addressing the first three Research Questions (see Chapter 4): 1) What do TVET graduates aspire to after the completion of their upper-secondary vocational education and why (i.e. meanings of and rationale for students' aspirations)?; 2) What structural and individual factors contribute to form TVET graduates' aspirations and how?; and 3) How do TVET graduates plan to achieve their aspirations (i.e. courses of action envisaged)? Although the first two questions are very much

³⁰ As explained in Chapter 4, two participants (2 M) fell outside the typological classification identified during the analysis of the data. One of them had European origins and had the intention to move to Europe after completing secondary education. The other respondent aspired to create an artificial intelligence through self-learning.

linked as some of the factors discussed are critical in understanding rationale and meanings of aspirations, the chapter aims to present them separately, when this does not disrupt the flow of the analysis.

University education aspirations

What university education aspirations mean

Despite the low odds of TVET students accessing university education in Chile (see Chapter 3), 11 (39%) of the 28 students interviewed shared the willingness to go to university as the highest preferred post-secondary transition. University aspirers considered enrolling in university as a possibility within their ‘horizons for action’, which they would attempt to fulfil in the forthcoming (seven students) or following academic year (four students). Deferring their university aspirations depended mainly on their *PSU* results and being granted free tuition fees under the Gratuidad scheme. Two students would continue in the same vocational track of studies while nine would undertake a different field of studies compared to their upper-secondary education.

In order to understand the different meanings students ascribed to university aspirations, an analytical distinction was made between aspirations *for* university and aspirations *through* university (Carling and Collins, 2018). While both groups attributed an instrumental value to university as a means to enhance professional opportunities, those aspiring *for* university justified their choice in the instrumental symbolic value informed by the social prestige such institutions were endowed with. On the contrary, aspirers *through* university showed a stronger intrinsic/vocational motivation for available fields of study, liberal or professional occupations and considered university as a means to establish themselves in their dreamed professions.

Aspirations *for* university

The academic prestige of university was prominent and determinant in the decision-making of aspirers for university (3 students), as the next quote from Enrique illustrates:

I will continue studying . . . [. . .] at the university, I think it will be a cool environment [. . .] Because it has more prestige . . . Besides, I have always liked it more than a [TVET] institutes [. . .] everyone sees [university] as difficult.

Instead, they think it is easier [in TVET institutes]. [. . .] I don't care if it is more difficult or easier. I feel that university is going to be a better environment.

This higher social value ascribed to universities was perceived as influencing individual's social status through credentials. As explained by Maria, the symbolic meaning students had reason to value was seen as instrumental in gaining respect from others, social recognition and increasing their self-esteem:

Actually, it was not in my plans to continue studying, I always thought 'I'll go to work' [but] now here you cannot do much with a secondary certificate [. . .] the best thing is to get a university degree so that people have a higher consideration of you.

Enrique and Maria were the only participants in this study who had been selected as *PACE* beneficiaries for their high academic achievement. Findings suggest that their university aspirations were encouraged by *PACE* as they would be academically facilitated in accessing a *PACE*-affiliated university institution and would receive support to make informed decisions on choices concerning institutions and programmes. Interestingly, both had decided to attend university institutions that were offering programmes in the same field of studies they had taken in their secondary vocational education (Accounting and Electricity and Industrial Automation, respectively). Findings suggest that the continuity in the field of studies between secondary TVET and university education was due to a combination of individual and institutional factors (these are further explained in the next section). On the one hand, the subject knowledge they had already accumulated, their interest for the field, and the positive perception of their own abilities (being the best performing students of their cohort) contributed to their confidence in succeeding in university. Furthermore, both had a positive learning experience at school and appreciated the combination of in-class and hands-on learning. They also affirmed that they had good relationships with their teachers, which motivated them to further their studies in the same area of specialisation. On the other, as *PACE* recipients, they had the possibility to receive the psycho-social and professional support to make informed and reflected transition decisions, which is not provided for most students.

The third aspirer *for* university had high aspirations in terms of universities she was considering and attributed significant value to the institution of university. Gabriela confidently said she was aiming for the most prestigious universities in Chile and the highest ranked in Latin America as "it would be cool to be recognised as someone who graduated

from La Católica”³¹. Yet, she showed an ambiguity between *for/through*. She had less definite ideas around what to study and what career to pursue but made clear she would change specialism. The main reasons for this lack of continuity between her secondary TVET and university specialisation were a combination of an overall disengagement with, and perceptions of gender discrimination in, her TVET sector (Telecommunication) and personal interests in new and liberal professions. She felt very confident in her own intellectual abilities, and she firmly believed in the meritocratic principle that education in Chile was offering endless opportunities to be or become whatever she wanted in life.

Aspirations *through* university

Aspirers *through* university (eight students) looked at university as a means for self-development and were drawn to specific subjects by personal interests more than other considerations. Differently from aspirers *for*, aspirers *through* did not ascribe a strong symbolic meaning to university, but saw it as a way to establish themselves in their dreamed professions. Three students wanted to become teachers; one a veterinary; one a sports trainer; and some wanted to work in creative arts (i.e. becoming a professional dancer, becoming a theatre performer, and opening an art gallery possibly in Europe). A minority aspired to set up their own business. The majority of these students attributed normative and pro-social meanings to aspirations. For example, becoming good educators and role models for young people by helping them form critical thinking towards their society was the motivation of those who wanted to become teachers, despite being aware that the low salary that teachers receive could be a deterrent. Francisco commented that:

What I like the most is to be a teacher. Teaching something that could help youth to not being carried away by our mass and consumerist culture [which controls us]. [I want them to know] the truth of things, to open their minds, to not being narrow- minded and blind, that’s what motivates me [. . .] at the same time, I could be put off by the low salary of teachers [. . .] although I am not a capitalist, I will still have to provide for myself [. . .] but if I like it . . .

Aspirers *through* university were not exempt from instrumental considerations on the costs and benefits of their desired future professions. Yet, economic advancement was not the main determinant of their aspirations. In fact, some wanted to pursue careers they knew it would not be well-remunerated or easy to pursue (e.g. becoming a teacher, becoming a

³¹ The *Pontificia Universidad Católica* is one of the most prestigious and important universities in Chile, leader in research and 1st in the 2018 QS Latin American rankings (when the research took place) (<https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/latin-american-university-rankings/2018>).

professional dancer). For example, Antonio, a student of Administration and Logistics, affirmed that he aspired to become a professional dancer and had already started the process of enrolment in a private university. However, he knew that the vocational sector he was leaving behind had good career prospects whereas “in Chile everything related to (performing) arts or humanities is not valued and artists need to do more than one job to survive and even sell their personal stuff”.

Overall, students in this sub-category showed less clarity on what university degree to pursue and on how to link their imagined future professions to a specific field of studies. This was probably due to the fact that achieving their aspirations implied abandoning their TVET routes and navigating new and less defined trajectories. In many cases, students constructed their aspirations mainly on the belief that acquiring university credentials would grant them a corresponding position in the labour market or on the imaginary they had of their dreamed professions rather than on information on university or labour market’s requirements. In fact, there was a general lack of clarity on how the qualifications they aimed at would lead to the types of professions they aspired at. Marcos, for example, wanted to become a teacher but he had not made his mind clear yet on what subject he wanted to teach nor had a real understanding of what becoming a teacher entailed. It seemed that his intrinsic motivation to teach children would overtake other, more practical, considerations:

I know I want to be a teacher. [...] I just like it ... I like to form people. Now the children are just taught the subject and that’s it. Instead, I want the children to learn values besides the subjects [...] Honestly, like deep in my heart, I don't want to study. I am lazy to continue studying... [...] I like studying, but without reading... I am more hands-on. I am not so much about theory [...] the good of pedagogy is that... After so much study, everything becomes practical.

As will be further discussed in the section on labour market below and in Chapter 7, despite different degrees of clarity between aspirations and capabilities to achieve these, these findings suggest that what students had reason to value through university education was not solely linked to economic advancement. Motivations behind their aspirations included desires to raise self-esteem, contribute to their family, expand life aspirations, feel proud in their work, and be treated in an equitable and dignified way.

Factors informing university education aspirations

In the previous section, some factors have been mentioned to explain the motivation and rationale behind aspirations. This section will look deeper at the ways in which upper-

secondary educational choices and experience, family, friends/peers, and perceptions of the labour market contributed to inform young people's aspiration to go to university.

Upper-secondary education

The educational experience students had in upper-secondary schooling contributed to inform aspirations to continue further education in the same field of studies (*for*-university aspirers) and to change field altogether (*through*-university aspirers). Contrarily, findings indicate that this experience was not particularly determinant in explaining the preference students had for university compared to tertiary vocational institutes.

For example, aspirers *for* university had a positive learning experience at school and appreciated the combination of in-class and hands-on learning. They also affirmed that they had good relationships with their teachers, which motivated them to further their studies in the same area of specialisation. This implied that, despite the very work- and vocational-oriented school's institutional *habitus*, teachers had been supportive or appreciative of them and of their future aspirations for university. This support could also possibly be due to the fact that these students were among the best performers in their cohort. Teachers responsible of the vocational area of study emerged as particularly important in influencing students' aspirations and in encouraging and discouraging dreamed trajectories compared to the other teachers.

Correspondingly, an overall negative learning experience in school played a role in motivating aspirers *through* university to change their specialisation altogether. For example, in the case of students aspiring to become teachers, having had disengaged and unmotivated teachers themselves, or having felt unappreciated by them, contributed to inform their intentions to become good educators.

In other cases, the disengagement with the vocational area of study and the desire to change specialisation was also consequence of a growing understanding of what the corresponding profession would be about. In this respect, Julián said:

One realises what the work is about just by doing it, when one gets his hands dirty. And maybe it is at the point that one realises that it is not quite like what he expected it to be. At least, this happened to me. I liked [mechanics] a lot but I soon realised that it was not as I expected [...] it is not that nice. [At the end of the school day] you go back home with feet sore and arms sore... and nobody understands you because people think that if you are in a vocational

school you don't do anything. But actually, you work! It's like proper working. I think it is even tougher than a normal job, at least in mechanics because it requires a lot of strength.

The above comment indicates that the choice of track of study had not necessarily been based on a thorough knowledge of the professional path corresponding to the track but guided by an interest or curiosity informed by their idea of the specific vocational subject (for example, some chose Mechanics for their interest in car race, other chose Telecommunication for their interest in videogames, and so on). It also suggests that upper-secondary vocational choices (choice of type of school and of vocational track) were not necessarily made in view of gaining knowledge, skills and experience for their aspired post-school trajectories. In fact, as discussed in Chapter 3 on the little value that vocational public schools have in Chile, students' socioeconomic background and their experience of vulnerability and poverty emerged strongly as powerful determinant of their and their families' school 'choices'. Julián said:

Vocational education is for poor people, people who do not have the money to pay for a good secondary school [...] who is in vocational studies is different from those who can afford humanistic-scientific studies in private schools. [...] we [in my class] are all poor and we made significant efforts to reach the goal of completing upper-secondary education.

The school/vocational track choices of university aspirers seemed to have been informed mainly by the short-term necessity of completing compulsory schooling with a profession in their hands that would guarantee some economic security rather than being related to real vocations/interests and aspired career paths. However, findings reveal that students considered vocational education as a means to guide them towards understanding (through learning by doing/learning to labour) what they wanted or did not want to be, do or become in life. Specifically, they valued their vocational education positively in relation to understanding their aspirations in comparison to choosing the academic/general track because it had helped them understand whether or not they wanted to continue investing in their vocational track after their upper-secondary education. For most of the students, liking the vocational path chosen or not, was often left to fate. For example, Enrique (aspirer *for* university) commented "honestly, I was lucky. I was lucky because if I didn't like [Electricity], I wouldn't know what to study now". For others, the choices of which school to attend and which vocational track to choose were made by exclusion upon reflecting on a combination of factors such as school proximity to home and gender discrimination in specific TVET sectors. Lastly, and paradoxically, they also valued vocational education as

means that allowed them to continue studying what they liked and, eventually, to become somebody.

Institutional framework

Evidence shows that the aspiration to go to university was significantly spurred by, and dependent upon, some forms of institutional support. Firstly, the possibility to apply for and obtain the recently introduced *Gratuidad* made it possible to consider university as first option after compulsory education. In some cases, receiving the practical support from the school counsellors to go through the bureaucratic procedures needed to apply for *Gratuidad* was another important institutional factor that helped them believe in their aspirations.

Another institutional form of support that contributed to inform university aspirations was *PACE* programme. However, while *Gratuidad* was a major factor for university aspirations, only a few university aspirers mentioned *PACE* during the interview. Among the students interviewed, Enrique and María were the only *PACE* beneficiaries (for being the best performing students of their cohort). As such, they had the possibility to access a *PACE*-affiliated university without the need for the *PSU* and receive the psycho-social and professional support to make informed and reflected transition decisions, which is usually not provided for most students. Furthermore, for the duration of their first year at university, they would be assigned an academic tutor and a counsellor, what seemed to be crucial to increase their confidence of succeeding in university. For other university aspirers who had attended the programme's activities during their upper-secondary education, these appeared to have been important to develop socialisation skills and to gain knowledge of and familiarity with scholarships, *PSU*, and the world of higher education. However, there is not enough evidence to make inferences on whether there were correlations between attending *PACE* activities and developing university aspirations. This aspect could benefit from further studies.

Another transitional support granted by the school was the possibility for students of upper-secondary classes to attend a no-fee-pre-university course twice a week. This course aimed at preparing students for the *PSU* by teaching the national curricular subjects (mathematics, language, history, social science and science) that vocational schools, compared to humanistic-scientific schools, did not thoroughly cover (see Chapter 3). However, none of the university aspirers took full advantage of the free pre-university course. Most of them

said they had attended it only for a while and a minority had never attended it. Finding it boring, useless or a waste of time because not aligned to what they were taught in school or because it was too disorganised and, thus, they were not learning anything were the major reasons for dropping out or not attending it.

Family

To set the background for this section it is necessary to remind that the great majority of the students' families belonged to the lowest quintiles of income and had experiences of poverty, discrimination and marginalisation. Generally, parents were uneducated and were either unemployed or employed in casual and precarious jobs or in minimum wage jobs with inadequate mechanisms of social protection and often indecent work conditions. Situations of single-parent families or parents with financial issues, debts, in a few cases with problems of alcoholism and drugs, and struggling for decent life conditions were common among students.

All students, with no gender differences, reported that their parents wanted them to continue studying rather than finding a job, as the only way to become somebody, and do better than them, was through education. Parents' beliefs in the generational project of meritocratic social mobility and social redemption through education powerfully dominated students' narratives. In most cases, parental expectations and hopes seemed to positively influence young people's aspirations and were experienced as spur that contributed to nurture their capability to aspire 'high'. In a few cases, students experienced these as a burden and a significant individual responsibility. In general, making parents/family carers proud of them was important for participants to the point that their hopes and expectations would be taken into account in their decisions about the future.

Yet, there does not seem to be a relationship between parental high hopes and expectations and aspirations to go to university, but rather for continuing in further education in general. Antonio commented:

[My mum] just wants me to keep studying, she doesn't care what, but she wants me to study [...] because if I don't, I will be left behind. So I have to constantly study.

This might be due to the lack of appropriate knowledge parents would need to properly guide their children in their choices concerning tertiary education and especially university (i.e.

knowledge of and ability to seek for and understand information about post-compulsory education options and about new mechanisms of financial support). Marcos who wanted to become a teacher said:

My mum does not understand much, I have to explain myself to her over and over again and so it's better if I don't explain anything [...] she will be happy with whatever I decide to do but she wants me to become somebody, and this means studying in a university. I think my mum is worried that I end up like her. She wants me to be different. This is what she cares the most.

Indeed, the level of support young people received from their parents varied greatly. They felt generally morally supported in any choice they would take. However, some reported to feel unsupported in terms of educational and professional advice and guidance. In this respect, it is important to remark that for the generation of working-class participants' parents, getting a secondary education qualification was already a significant achievement which the great majority of them had not managed to reach. In almost all the cases, university aspirers would be the first in their families to attempt to pursue a tertiary education degree. In the very few cases where other family members (i.e. siblings or extended family members) had successfully completed university or were studying in university institutions parents seemed to be more demanding in wishing their children to go to university.

Lastly, the desire to become teachers that a few aspirers *through* university shared seemed to be also driven by the lack of parental support and guidance they had experienced in their childhood which along with the absence of proper guidance in school encouraged them to become good educators.

Friendship and Peers

The implications of peer and friend relationships on aspirations were not systematically explored in this study. Rather, they emerged from broad questions such as "do you discuss with your classmates about future plans?" or as follow-up questions in those cases where friendship emerged as important factor for their aspirations.

While having friends and belonging to a group in and out school settings emerged as important for the construction of students' social identity, in the majority of the cases friendship seemed to be more influential for secondary school choices than for post-school choices. A possible explanation can be that in general none of their peers and friends shared

their ambition for university. In fact, they either were already working or studying in tertiary vocational institutes, or they wanted to go to work or enrol in vocational institutions or take a sabbatical as preferred post-school trajectory. In a few cases, students seemed to reinforce their ambitions to aim high precisely against the lower aspirations of their friends/peers and considered university as a means to differentiate themselves from their peers in the believe that they would become somebody if they aspired high.

Lastly, a few university aspirers reported that they preferred to conceal rather than reveal their plans and aspirations to friends because they were afraid of failing to accomplish them and, thus, to lose face in front of their friends. Others found it useful to discuss about their future with older peers who could share their first-hand work or tertiary education experiences.

Labour market

The perceptions students had of the viable opportunities in the labour market and how/if they linked these to their university aspirations were solicited by generic questions on the steps they would take to do to achieve their life goals and how they thought the search for job would be like. Overall university aspirers did not tend to consider labour market's conditions and requirements of their dreamed occupations in their reflection on aspirations. There seemed to be a general trust that obtaining a university degree would open up to them the corresponding professional opportunities. Specifically, they were confident in their abilities to get a university degree, if this was what they really wanted, and they trusted their meritocratic society that would reward university education with the possibility to access good/aspired careers. This confidence and trust seemed more determinant in explaining their university aspirations than any labour market consideration. As mentioned above, aspirers *through* university showed less clarity than aspirers *for* university on how to link their imagined future professions to a specific field of studies which could be due to the fact that they would change field altogether without having specific support or role models to refer to.

Only a few students made comments on the labour market conditions of the aspired professions. These referred, for example, to the poor salary they would receive as teachers or to the difficulties they would encounter in building a career in their dreamed occupations (e.g. the industry of performing arts). For example, Francisco, who aimed to abandon the

field of Telecommunication to become a history teacher, said that although he did not consider money more important than doing a job he liked, he also said that not receiving a fair reward after many years of efforts to get a university degree could possibly put him off on the long run, but was not a deterrent factor to his university aspirations. Antonio, a student of Administration and Logistics, affirmed that he aspired to become a professional dancer and had already started the process of enrolment in a private university. Yet, he knew that the vocational sector he was leaving behind had good career prospects whereas establishing himself in the performative arts as professional dancer would be very difficult as “in Chile everything related to (performing) arts or humanities is not valued and artists need to do more than one job to survive, even selling their personal stuff”.

For some students, perceptions of possible gender discrimination in some TVET sector (Telecommunication and Electricity) were among the main reasons behind the willingness to change career path *through* university specialism. For Claudia and Gabriela, the aspirations to go to university was mainly driven by their interests in professions that required university degrees. Yet, the predominantly male work environment and the likelihood to be treated unequally in their vocational sector contributed to inform their aspirations to become a veterinary and to become a women rights activist or work in international relations.

Gendered considerations on job market opportunities were determinant for the choice of upper-secondary track of study of María (*PACE* beneficiary) who aspired to build a career in Administration and Logistics (a sector in expansion in Chile). For her, the enhanced employment opportunities she would have in the field of Administration compared to the field of Electricity she initially had wished to undertake were determinant to the choice of upper-secondary vocational track. The interest for the field of study chosen grown during her upper-secondary education and the belief that higher education would reward her with better job opportunities informed her aspiration to further her knowledge in a university institute.

Approaches to achieve university education aspirations

As shown, university aspirers considered university as their highest possibility within their ‘opportunity window’. However, they all acknowledged that getting the *Gratuidad*³² and meeting the educational requirements (mainly calculated on the *PSU* score) access to university were the major factors that could undermine the successful accomplishment of their university aspirations. When interviewed, these students were waiting to know their *PSU* score and whether they had been selected for *Gratuidad*. What they would do in the next few months (the transition period) depended on these outcomes and they were deemed to make their decisions amid this uncertainty. Antonio said:

I need *Gratuidad*, I really don't have the money to study anything... All [the poor] can apply, but some don't get it ... It is somehow weird ... One should be able to get it. This system makes me nervous. What if I don't get it? I already pre-enrolled ... if I don't get it, I have to appeal, first, and ... if I eventually don't get it, I'll have to work for a year, re-sit for the *PSU*, apply again until I get *Gratuidad*.

Despite the highly uncertain scenario they were dealing with, participants appeared optimistic about their futures and confident in their motivation, hard work and ability to be in control of their life and muddle through difficulties. However, while some students showed more proactivity and intentionality to achieve their aspirations, others would leave the success of the achievement to serendipity and fatalism.

Aspirers *for* university appeared to be more realistic and grounded in reflexive and seemingly contextually bounded rational thought processes (they were more likely to be receiving support from the *PACE* programme). Aspirers *through* university seemed to be more idealist and not quite grounded in bounded considerations of their circumstances in terms of approaches to achieving their aspirations to go to university. However, when reflecting on alternative plans to university, they showed more grounded attitudes.

Regardless being more/less proactive and realist or more/less fatalist and idealist, most of the students showed an individual disposition to take risks and adapt to changes and contingent events across participants. Specifically, if they had not been able to overcome their structural constraints, either they would have put their aspirations on hold and have tried again the following year (i.e. by retaking the *PSU* or by working for a year to save money and be able to pay for university fees) or they would have found another pathway

³² Although the majority of participants met the economic requirements to apply for *gratuidad*, they did not have the certainty they would be granted it. To be selected, they had be ‘the poorest among the poor’ (see Chapter 3).

that would have been ‘as good as the aspired one’ (e.g. enrolling in a tertiary vocational institute). That is, they would have adjusted their aspirations to give themselves a route out of the structure. Francisco, who had the dream of eventually becoming a secondary school teacher of history, but who also had to find a way to combine work and studies to help his single-mother at home, said:

It can be that things drastically change all of a sudden. It can be that the work-placement does not work for me, that they do not employ me. I need to have back-up plans... So that if something happens, I do not end up frustrated and stuck with my mind in that project that did not work out as I wanted. But, if something happens, boom, you have to change path immediately.

A minority had not thought of an alternative plan yet. Although there is not enough evidence to make inferences, it seemed that those with no alternatives to university path could rely more on a network of support from their parents and/or extended families or had less precarious situations at home. However, given that they all belonged to the poorest quintiles of income is not clear, the kind of support they could receive.

The following sections describe the main approaches to transitions that emerged when discussing plans envisaged to achieve aspirations. Although some students showed more than one approach, categories were identified through the most salient characteristics of each student.

‘Wait and see’

‘Wait and see’ students, almost half of the aspirers *through* university, did not have clear goal-motivated strategies to face the structural constraints that could prevent their access nor completely clear ideas on what to study. The achievement of university aspirations appeared to be mainly left to serendipity and fate. For example, Marcos did not prepare for the *PSU* exam and hoped the (limited) subject knowledge he had of Spanish and mathematics was enough to achieve the minimum score needed. He had looked up at universities which required low *PSU* score requirements³³:

Depending on how the *PSU* goes, I have two options. If it goes bad, I will study Telecommunication in a TVET institute and next year I re-sit for the *PSU*. If it goes well, I’ll study pedagogy. Pedagogy in what I have no idea... So I have many options. If I want to go for pedagogy, I have many options [I can be a

³³ Usually low-quality and low-resources private institutions have less strict entry requirements, but they are liable to sudden shut down for lacking to provide minimal quality assurance (see Chapter 3).

teacher of science which is what I like, history not so much...]. If I want to study Teleco, then I go to TVET. Another thing I need to be able to study the coming academic year is *Gratuidad*. If I get it, then I study next year. If not, I don't. [...] I was searching for a university that accepted students with very low scores as I haven't studied to prepare for the *PSU*... so that I would not need to put too much effort on *PSU* [...] the university I found required a score of 450 [...] usually for pedagogy they want [at least] 600. [...] but I have been told that it might shut it down eventually...

Therefore, without much/any preparation or efforts, they would wait and see whether they would meet the requirements to access university the forthcoming academic year. If not, they would resort to alternative plans. While 'wait and see' students had an idealist approach to the achievement of their university aspirations, they demonstrated more bounded rationalities when mulling over alternatives to university that they considered with optimism. If university had been an unfeasible for their immediate future, they would have opted for tertiary vocational institutes or work, parking or eventually abandoning their aspirations *through* university. This last step was uncertain as it would depend, firstly, on the motivation they would have to pursue their aspirations *through* university and, secondly, on life circumstances.

'Step-by-step'/aspirations on hold

A few aspirers *through* university and the student who showed an ambiguity between *for/through* had planned to put their aspiration on hold for a year to better prepare themselves for university. Indeed, they felt unready to face such a change (going to university and studying something completely different from their vocational track) immediately after school and needed to take it step by step. During this year, they would work and save money to face upfront higher education costs, they would prepare for the *PSU* (for example, one student expressed the intention to use the gap year to work and enrol in pre-university courses to prepare the *PSU* exam) and make up their mind on what to study and in which university.

Evidence suggests that this approach was associated to a general lack of confidence in exclusively rely on financial aids or a preference to sustain educational costs independently. Male students had to provide for their family and, thus, would have combined studies with work. Female students adopting this approach could seemingly rely on the material support of their families and take their time to better prepare for the transition to HE.

‘Taking chances’

Some students showed a stronger proactivity in searching for and making use of opportunities that facilitated their transition to higher education. ‘Taking chances’ implied being able to navigate and understand information and making strategic use of social, cultural and institutional resources available (e.g. advice from teachers, bureaucratic support from counsellors). This attitude seemed to potentially make a significant difference on the likelihood students had to successfully transit to higher education. For example, chance takers were the two *PACE* beneficiaries, aspirers *for* university. For their remarkable academic performances and their commitment to attend *PACE* programme outside school hours, they would be receiving academic support and vocational guidance from the *PACE* programme to successfully transition to university institutes. Two aspirers *through* university were also classified chance takers because they were proactive in gathering information on the Internet, from their significant others and from teachers on different university programmes, and in seeking help to apply for *Gratuidad*. Julián reported that he had created a file to gather all the information he could get from the Internet and from former teachers on the different programmes he was interested in. Antonio was already in the process to enrol in private university in a dance programme he had happened to know thanks to an open day at school. He was confident about obtaining the *PSU* score that university required and was only waiting to know the results of the *Gratuidad*.

Tertiary Vocational Education aspirations

What vocational education aspirations mean

Thirteen students (46%) aspired to enrol in a tertiary TVET institution as the highest preferred post-secondary transition. For most of them, acquiring a tertiary vocational qualification was instrumental to achieve economic security and social mobility in their life. Seven students would enrol in the forthcoming academic year, after completing their work-placement, and six of them would postpone or were likely to postpone it to the following academic year. Deferring depended mainly on the high costs of tertiary education, the particularly insecure economic circumstances and/or the need to have clearer ideas on which vocational track to undertake. Nine students intended to continue in the same vocational area, while four students said they would change track of studies.

“Stability”, “making money”, “buying a house” and “providing for their family” were some of the goals associated with their life projects. Equally important aspects informing the aspirations of these students were to “do better than my parents in life” and “to become someone”. In other words, as for university aspirers, what students valued through acquiring a tertiary vocational qualification was not just economic advancement, but a certain financial stability and social recognition to escape a life of deprivation, exclusion and discrimination and to be valued at work and in their society. In contrast to *through* university aspirers, tertiary TVET aspirers displayed more awareness of the social structures that constrained their choices. They recognised that having just a secondary TVET certificate would not guarantee a dignified life as “without tertiary qualifications, people look down on you” (Matías). Yet, they considered university as not for ‘the likes of them’ for both economic and educational reasons. As Carlos commented:

I see myself with my flat . . . finishing my TVET studies in 5 years, having my own place . . . not having to depend on anybody, being my own source of support . . . I want to see myself happy, stable, with my job, my house, without debts, without worries . . . bring my family to live with me. [. . .] I know I have limits [university] is like a step out of my reach [. . .] it is already tough to access a TVET institution, I cannot even imagine how much university could cost financially and academically.

Besides having more instrumental motivations, some students expressed their desire to further their knowledge in the same specialisation they studied in secondary TVET. Indeed, an overall positive learning experience and good relationships with teachers resulted in the growth of an enduring individual/dispositional interest in TVET and strong vocational orientation. Most of them, who wanted to continue in the same specialism, were not just aiming to get technical qualifications (2-year-programmes) but showed ‘high’ aspirations, for eventually getting professional qualifications (4-year- programmes) to become engineers and attain professional jobs.

The four tertiary TVET aspirers that expressed their willingness to follow a different specialisation in their tertiary studies justified this decision based on strong personal interests in a different careers (becoming a pastry chef, a personal trainer, a TV camera operator and a music producer) Similarly to aspirers *through* university, for them TE was the means to pursue their dreamed vocations, although they had mulled over the implications of embarking on riskier and less familiar pathways. In some cases, these positive projections on alternative careers were made realistic by Chile’s marketised education system and liberalised labour market, and were reinforced by a general sense of disaffection for their

secondary TVET field or, in some cases, by concerns about gender discrimination in certain occupations (as for the female student of Electricity).

Factors informing Tertiary Vocational Education aspirations

Upper-secondary education

Evidence shows that a positive learning experience, good academic achievements and good relationships with teachers were significant factors that contributed to inform students' aspirations to continue studying in tertiary vocational institutions in the same vocational field (continuity). Similarly to the university aspirers, students valued more, and felt more engaged in, hands-on learning than in-class, abstract and book-based learning. Indeed, learning by doing, feeling able to do skilled jobs and seeing progresses in their level of competencies, were factors which appeared to be very important in developing enduring interest in their vocational field and the willingness to specialise in it. Overall, it emerged that students' engagement in learning grew with their understanding of the subject, which presumably made them feel confident about their abilities of doing the job. In this respect, school visits to TVET institutions appeared to play an important role in developing students' perceptions that TVET institutions were the right 'fit' for them.

This hands-on, experiential learning was experienced more by the students of Administration and Logistics thanks to their more proactive teachers. Compared to students from the other vocational tracks, these students had the possibility to gain some practical experience in warehouses of companies through a 2-week-internship they completed just before the end of the academic year. Furthermore, students over 18 were given the chance to take the Forklift driving license, which would be of great value in the labour market. Students reported that having a first-hand experience in real companies' warehouses contributed enormously to their understanding of what to expect after school. It also helped them get a first-hand experience of workplace hierarchies and the importance of educational credentials to climb the ladder, more than work experience. It was also a crucial occasion for them to feel capable of doing the job required. This sense of responsibility they experience during the internship along with the practical job experience were determinant to inform participants' desire to further specialise. For example, speaking of her experience in a logistics warehouse, Isabel explained that it helped her understand that she particularly enjoyed carrying demanding physical labour that did not require contact with the public:

I realised that if you work in logistics you wear cargo pants, safety boots, reflective vest . . . I said ‘yes, this is for me’, because I am not so formal. [. . .] I like movement. In logistics there is much more movement than . . . than being in an office, or if not being on the phone, or sitting at the computer . . . From what I saw in the internship [. . .] I really liked it . . . I loved it. That is what I want work there. [. . .] [That’s why I want to study] technician in logistics management.

A counterexample of the above was the learning to labour that the students of Telecommunication experienced through the predominant in-class teaching of ‘soft skills’. Pablo and Mateo reported that they had found their programme too abstract. The emphasis on how to become a respectful and submissive employee seemed to have contributed to students’ disillusionment towards their vocational area for two of these three TVET aspirers interviewed. They perceived a lack of relevance of what learnt in school and a mismatch between school teachings and labour market’s requirements. Findings seem to suggest that this disillusionment contributed to students’ willingness to change specialism and pursue what they were more interested in (i.e. becoming a personal trainer and work in the music sector). By contrast, for Carlos learning to labour through the teaching of soft skills was important to raise his self-confidence, maturity and sense of responsibility and obedience needed in the workplace. This contributed to his aspirations to build a career in Telecommunication, possibly through further education.

As mentioned, the relationship with teachers seemed to be another factor contributing to (dis)encourage tertiary TVET aspirations. This relationship was valued positively or negatively depending on whether students felt appreciated, supported or encouraged by their teachers, and on whether teachers were engaged in teaching and committed. However, findings show that overall positive learning experiences outweighed negative relationships with teachers in informing continuity in fields of study. By contrast, discontinuity was better explained by strong personal interests for different subjects and for future careers in other fields, an overall disillusionment with the vocational track and gendered occupational choices.

Lastly, tertiary vocational education aspirations do not seem to be informed by the school and the vocational track chosen to complete compulsory schooling. As for university aspirers, these choices were motivated by the need to complete their secondary education with a profession in their hands, and not “empty-handed”, that could guarantee some financial stability. Overall students believed that specialising in a vocational, work-oriented

subject, rather than gaining generic knowledge, would facilitate their transition to tertiary education by giving them the basic knowledge and skills they would further explore in tertiary institutions. School-home proximity was the main determinant of the school choice. A number of factors, such as personal/vocational interest, gendered considerations in the labour market, choices by exclusion underpinned the choice of vocational track.

Institutional framework

In terms of institutional framework and how it played a role in informing tertiary vocational education aspirations, students reported to find the extracurricular activities that *PACE* programme implemented at school for all upper-secondary students valuable as they offered academic and vocational guidance and information on scholarships and *Gratuidad*. Thanks to this support, some students felt motivated to enrol in TVET institutions and reassured about the financial aid they could receive. Isabel said:

A guy from *PACE* spoke very well about [one of the most popular] tertiary TVET institute. So I went to see that institute and when they explain to me [about the institute and the programmes] my motivation to enrol there was even bigger.

In some cases, attending *PACE* activities seemed to reinforce the perceptions the majority of the participants had about their social and academic suitability for TVET institutions compared to universities. As Cristián explained:

University is another world for the rich [...] even those from *PACE* say that only two or three vocational students end up in universities. The majority goes to tertiary TVET institutes. They say it like that, and so one thinks “I’m not going to make it [to university]. Better to settle with it [vocational institutes].

By contrast, school counsellors did not seem to play a role in helping students with vocational or academic guidance. Rather, they offered students psychological and emotional support and some students referred to them as “being like mothers”.

The support of the free pre-university course did not seem to be a relevant factor to explain vocational education aspirations for the majority of the students. Indeed, tertiary TVET aspirers were not worried about the *PSU* since they only had to sit for the exam in order to access TVET institutions (see Chapter 3). Yet, attending the pre-university course played an unexpected role (accidental symbolic violence) in reinforcing beliefs a student had of being unsuitable for university. Sol explained that she had attended both years of pre-university course and found it useful as they provided academic and career guidance and information,

including information on the employability opportunities linked to tertiary education qualifications. As part of this information, former vocational students from their school would be invited to share their (unsuccessful) experience in university and, as for the example of *PACE* described above, it had the effect of further discouraging her from enrolling in university institutions.

A factor which was very important for university aspirers but did not seem to inform aspirations of tertiary vocational education aspirers was the governmental financial aids (mainly *Gratuidad*, but also scholarships) that the majority of students had applied to. Receiving or not financial aids seemed instead a determinant factor informing the strategies to achieve their tertiary TVET aspirations.

Family

Tertiary TVET aspirers experienced similar family situation of university aspirers. For them, family had an important role in their aspirations' formation. Overall, students reported that their parents wanted them to continue studying in tertiary institutions as they considered tertiary education the means to happiness, respect, and dignified life. These expectations emerged as wishes parents had that their children would have better lives than they had and that they could grow up as adults entitled of social respect. However, if parents preferred their children to continue studying, they would not impose any decision or expectation on them and trusted their capacity to make the right choices. In most cases, parental hopes and expectations were experienced by participants as source of motivation to get ahead in life and to enrol in tertiary TVET institutes. Yet, in a few cases, students experienced with anxiety and concern parents' expectations to live a better life, to become somebody, to make them proud. In these few cases, although students said they did not feel completely ready to start tertiary education the forthcoming academic year, they also felt compelled to do so. Sol commented:

I feel pressured... The other day I told my mum I was not ready to continue studying in tertiary TVET institutes and that I'd rather work. She told me that I have to study and all that... that I cannot stop here... I know she wants me to continue studying but I wouldn't have [academic] support if I did that. If I am not able to do something [some homework], if I need some help to study something, I'd need someone's support, but I don't have it at home [...] I'd have to do it myself because they cannot help me.

The above comment shows that, as for university aspirers, parental hopes and expectations were not necessarily accompanied by the capacity to guide or support them in embarking in the unknown paths of tertiary educational. A weaker support was associated to a possible non-perseverance in pursuing their educational ambition. Yet, a weaker support did not necessarily correspond to low parental educational expectations, as the comment above shows.

Lastly, a minority of students who intended to continue studying in the same vocational area of their secondary education said that their mothers' guidance and suggestions had been determinant in the choice of secondary vocational track. Students explained that they felt grateful for their mothers' advice as they could now appreciate that the vocational track eventually chosen would give them more opportunities in the job market (either because less likely to experience gender discrimination or because the sector chosen was not so saturated as the one they wanted to go for initially).

Friendship and Peers

As for university aspirers, peers were important for the development of participants' identity and sense of belonging to a group. In some cases, having peers who shared the same goal of getting ahead in life boosted similar motivations in participants. Although a higher level of inference is required, this finding could suggest that having positive examples among peers contributed to the intention to continue studying and flourish in life.

In other cases, participants did not share the same life plans and aspirations of some of their classroom peers. This was the case of peers who, according to participants' own words, were not interested in gaining more knowledge and skills through education and were only interested in finding a job and making money after secondary education. These examples did not negatively influence participants' aspirations. In fact, they seemed to help participants understand that they wanted to do more with their life which meant continuing studying and not settling with the knowledge they had and the first job they could find.

Lastly, in some cases, the experiences of some older friends and past years school peers who were attending the same TVET studies participants aspired to or who had taken the decision to work after secondary education and ended up having routine and unskilled jobs, contributed to boost participants' tertiary TVET aspirations.

Labour market

Reflections on future labour market opportunities seemed to be important in the formation of aspirations of TVET aspirers, mainly for those who intended to continue in the same field of study. Reflections on the likelihood of gender discrimination in the workplace were also determinant in the case of Marta, student of Electricity who wanted to change field and aspired to work in Gastronomy. School visits to companies and workplaces, the internship that students of Administration and Logistics were able to do and the work-placement that some of the participants were already doing at the time of the interview seemed to be crucial for some of them to better understand the value that secondary vocational qualifications had in the labour market. As Cristián commented:

Now without a [tertiary education qualification] you cannot become somebody. You can get a stable job, but no more than that. On the contrary, with further studies you can get ahead and continue to grow in the workplace. [Social mobility in the workplace with an upper-secondary qualification] is impossible. You can get ahead, but with time and you don't go past a certain level. All the people I know that work and don't have degrees have regular jobs and don't earn much money. The necessary to survive and cannot save any money at the end of the month.

However, responses to these experiences were different. For the majority, these reinforced the aspiration to continue studying in the same vocational track so to be able to get ahead professionally and to feel entitled of respect in the workplace and climb the occupational ladder. By contrast, for a minority of them, they reinforced the belief that accumulating years of experience within a company/in the workplace, being a hard and reliable worker, responsible and proactive had more weight than getting educational qualifications (or compensate not having education). These were mainly the students who were more doubtful about enrolling immediately in tertiary education because of motivation, dispositions and self-perfection, like Sol, and the students from vocational tracks that seemingly rewarded years of experience more than studying. For example, Leandro commented that for mechanics working in a garage, what really matters is “life experience because most mechanics made themselves mechanics through what they have learnt in life [learning by doing]”.

Lastly, the policy narrative on the need in Chile of more qualified technicians (than engineers) as they are ‘the power that moves Chile’ was reiterated among many tertiary vocational education aspirers and appeared important to inform or validate tertiary TVET

aspirations and strategies to achieve these. Some made references to the saturation of the labour market in managerial/engineering positions and to the plenty of opportunities for technicians they had heard about. Others referred to the preference that companies had to employ a technician for being humbler, and submissive, than engineers. In any case, it seemed that students had the perception that people with tertiary TVET qualifications could compete with university graduates and, indeed, could have more opportunities.

There have always been university graduates, but nowadays professional technicians can compete with them. what they explain to us at school is that sometimes they even ask for more professional technicians than university graduates. (Juán)

Approaches to achieve Tertiary Vocational Education aspirations

The great majority of tertiary vocational education aspirers showed an overall proactive, goal-motivated approach grounded in reflexive and contextually rational thought processes towards the achievement of their educational aspirations. The following sections describe the different approaches to aspirations achievement that emerged when discussing with students how they thought they would accomplish what they wanted. As for the previous group, some students showed more than one approach. These categories reflect the most salient characteristics of each student rather than representing mutually exclusive groups.

'Step-by-step' strategy

The majority of tertiary TVET aspirers who intended to continue in the same field of study showed a 'step-by-step' approach to achieve their aspirations. This means that these students aimed at achieving the professional certificate (4-year-programmes at an IP). However, instead of attempting immediately the 4-year-programme, they would start with the technical qualification (2 years) and, based on how well their study progression would go, they would (or not) opt for continuity. This approach was informed by three main factors. The first had to do with students' self-confidence and their education achievements. Some students commented that they felt their teachers discouraged them from taking the leap and enrolling directly in the 4-year-programme because it would be a very difficult one. Thus, step-by-step students had grown stronger confidence in their chances to achieve the first step (getting a higher-level technical qualification) rather than directly attempt the 4-year-course to get a professional certificate. They hoped that knowledge and skills gained in their upper-secondary education would help them succeed in the first step. Likewise, they hoped to be

capable of capitalising on the knowledge and skills they would gain in their first step to eventually accomplish the professional certificate.

The second factor was financial. Some students were concerned that they would be charged fees, had they failed to attain the educational achievements needed to maintain *Gratuidad* during study progression. This concern contributed to inform the caution underpinning the step-by-step approach. Isabel, who had study Administration and Logistics and wanted to become a professional (an engineer) in her field, said:

[*Gratuidad*] is a very good opportunity. If they can pay for me all that, they would do me a great favour, because I don't have a very stable situation at home [but if] I lose *Gratuidad*, then I have to pay for my whole career and I'm really scared of this. I really want to study for the technical qualification first, I want to start safer rather than put myself directly in something [riskier] that may go a little wrong.

The third factor had to do with participants' perceptions of their local labour market. For a few of them, the step-by-step way of proceeding was further informed by the consideration that by getting two vocational qualifications they would boost their chances of employability in the labour market. This perception was based on the previously mentioned widespread discourse that "the labour market for engineers has collapsed in Chile". Therefore, they believed it was more likely to find a job as technician than as engineer. Having the two qualifications would definitely secure them a job. Such reflections emerged particularly among male students of Mechanics and Electricity.

'Taking chances'

The 'taking chance' approach was mainly found among the students who had clear ideas on what to study and where, and often, but not exclusively, they would continue studying in the same vocational area of their upper-secondary school. Taking chances meant that students had applied for scholarships or *Gratuidad*, had attended school visits to tertiary vocational institutions and student orientation fairs organised in their school and aimed at helping students make informed post-school choices. Some 'step-by-step' students were also chance takers, but not vice versa as they getting a professional certificate was not among chance takers' short- or medium-term aspirations.

As for university aspirers, the decision to pursue vocational aspirations in the forthcoming academic year would largely depend on whether they were granted *Gratuidad*. As already

emerged above, *Gratuidad* came across as a great opportunity but a risky one as well. The risks would be losing it in case of unsatisfactory educational progresses, but also missing the chance to enrol in the programme wanted if by the time the results had been released, all the places in the programme and institute chosen would have been taken. By contrast, for this group *PACE* programme and the pre-university course seemed to have a minimal role in informing approaches.

The uncertainty they were left with by the financial aids system meant that these students would seek help from their families' network to find where to do their work-placement rather than waiting for the teacher's to find it for them. Chance takers would be likely to count on finding a good place where to do their work-placement hoping to be employed afterwards and be able to self-fund their studies, taking the opportunity of the *vespertino* modality (working during the day and studying at night). Carlos, a student of Telecommunication, was hoping to be employed after the work-placement and to combine study and work regardless being granted or not *Gratuidad*. This would give him the financial stability he needed to be able to study and look after his family:

I applied for *Gratuidad*. If I don't get it, I'll work for a year and save money to then study. [...] And besides that, at the moment, considering the circumstances, I need money to help in the house. Because, things are not very good. [...] So after that year, I would study and work at the same time [...] I have faith that I will get *Gratuidad*. [...] If I get it, I see myself studying at night and working during the day. [...] Unfortunately, in this world, today, one has to adapt to the 'the rest' because 'the rest' is not going to adapt.

'Wait and see'

A minority of vocational aspirers showed a less agentic attitude towards the pursuit of aspirations, leaving the success of their achievements mainly to serendipity rather than to a proactive and goal-oriented attitude. This approach was mainly found among the students who would not continue in the same field of study and who were more undecided on what to study and in which institute. They would 'wait and see' how the work-placement would go, whether it could result in an employment opportunity or whether they would need to find a job after that.

Living the present rather than projecting themselves too ahead in the future informed the 'wait and see' approach. Underpinning this, there was the belief that "things happen when they have to happen", that "there is time for the right thing to happen if one has the patience

to wait” and that they would know what to do when time to take decisions came. This group was overall more likely to postpone educational decisions of a year. Differently from chance takers, they did not seem to identify or capitalise on resources available to make the transition happen immediately after school.

Work aspirations

What work aspirations mean

Interestingly, only four students (14%) hoped to find a job as their first and preferred choice. Work aspirers prioritised economic independence for their near/short-term future over possible transitions to TE. What differentiated work aspirers from the other students was a stronger work than educational orientation, which they had developed since young age:

What I have always wanted has been to finish my upper-secondary vocational education and work in my area of studies [. . .] I want to work, more than anything [. . .] and I want to have my things, my money, my house and all that [. . .] Since my young age, I have had this dream to finish compulsory education and work to be independent. (Natalia)

Although work aspirers prioritised their short-term future and economic independence to possible transitions to tertiary education, none of them excluded the possibility of going back to education in the long-term. It is unclear whether participants talked about going back to studies as a trajectory they would want to follow because it was a real desire. When elaborating on this point, going back to study was a distant possibility that could become a concrete plan if their life circumstances allowed it. That means having reached economic stability such that they would be able to pay for their education and avoid being a financial burden for their families.

Work aspirers made references to the high costs of TE in Chile as a significant structural barrier. They used expressions such as “studying in Chile is very difficult for the average people [. . .] there are many barriers [. . .] you need money to study”, “I need to see whether I can afford to study, some can study [not everybody], at the end studying is a luxury”. Alongside these structural factors, the lack of clear ideas on what to study made the tertiary education option even riskier and not worthy. Individual factors such as motivation, dispositions, self-perceptions, and the ability to identify realistic possible paths or opportunities played a significant role in prioritising work and short-term plans. Their

family's economic hardship weighed heavily on their short-term intentions to reach economic independence from their parents.

All the four participants under this type were studying Administration and Logistics, and the majority were women. Two of them wanted to build a career in Administration or Logistics as these are large sectors in Chile. Daniel had enjoyed his vocational field and expressed his intentions to start working in administration to deepen knowledge and skills. He had entrepreneurial aspirations to be able to “manage everything the way I want”. Natalia did not expand much on her future working aspirations. She was focused on the short-term future and did not seem to be able to project herself into a longer-term future. She expressed the desire to find a job in logistics, for which she had developed an interest during her last year of upper-secondary education, and possibly be employed in a warehouse of a company. The other two students expressed the intention to work in their TVET specialisation only for the near future. As highest ambitions for their future, both aspired to move abroad to study and work in Europe or US. Furthermore, both had the intention to leave behind the linear achievement of a professional life through TVET to be free to explore what would fulfil them. Camila was interested in foreign languages, in travelling and exploring new things. For her medium-term future she was considering applying to become a flight attendant and for a longer-term future she was mulling over the possibility of studying audio-visual communication or working in tourism. Rafaela had what she called the “crazy dream” of moving to Spain to become a beautician or a pastry chef for her long-term future. At the time of the interview, she wanted to find a job in administration and save money.

Factors informing work aspirations

Upper-secondary education

Work aspirers valued very positively their learning experience and talked enthusiastically about their vocational upper-secondary education. These students had particularly appreciated the hands-on learning experience and the connections with the labour market that their course had provided compared to the other three vocational courses. Specifically, they talked about the school visits to business or companies as their first step into the real world of employment; they particularly valued the two-week-internship they had the opportunity to do at the very end of their upper-secondary education; they were grateful for the opportunity to have a forklift training for free and get the driving licence as it would

enormously enhance their employability chances. Students said that these hands-on learning experiences contributed enormously to create a concrete idea of what could expect them after school. For example, they reported that the internship helped them overcome concerns they felt about their skills and capabilities of doing the job. They also said they have felt very proud for being appreciated in the workplace and for being considered by other employees one of them.

Work aspirers held a positive and appreciative consideration of their teachers. The overall perception was that their teachers, especially the responsible of the course, were always there for them, available to help and give guidance and support. Their guidance and concrete advice on job opportunities and salaries had helped them create realistic expectations on the job market awaiting them and seemed to have played a role in reinforcing students' aspirations to work. Indeed, students felt their teachers had prepared them well for entering the labour market by teaching them basic skills and knowledge that would allow them to know what they were told to in the workplace. At the same time, work aspirers said that their teachers did not discourage students who were interested in continuing their studies in tertiary education. In fact, they were always available to provide them with advice on programmes and institutes based on students' subject ability and interests, encouraging them that with hard work and motivation nothing was impossible.

Concerning the relationship between upper-secondary educational choices and aspirations, as for the other two groups of aspirers, the choice of vocational education was motivated by the need to complete compulsory schooling with a profession in their hands, while the proximity with home or having siblings that had attended that school informed the choice of the school. In the case of work aspirers, choosing a vocational school seemed correlated to their intention to work after compulsory schooling. By contrast, findings suggest that rather than being based on considerations on future labour market opportunities, the choice of vocational track had been informed mainly by an interest for the field chosen they had developed in their first two years of secondary education. Indeed, in the first two years students had to attend workshops organised by the school aimed at helping them familiarise with the four vocational tracks of studies offered so that they could do an informed choice of which track to specialise in.

To conclude, work aspirers held a highly valued learning experience which contributed to inform their aspirations to work in their sector immediately after school. Yet, this did not

necessarily imply the desire to engage in that sector over a prolonged period of time. As showed above, the interest that Camila, for example, have grown for her sector seemed to not be strong enough to motivate her to engage and invest in that sector for her future career.

Institutional framework

Findings suggest that work aspirers did not consider the possibility of having financial aids to support further education, nor they seemed to have benefitted from the support the school provided through the counsellors for their post-school transition. From the comments it emerged a lack of clarity, and a seemingly lack of interest in finding out more, about financial aids/application processes/eligibility criteria. It also seemed that work aspirers held a sense of mistrust in, and disillusionment towards, the Chilean educational system, which they considered as highly unequal and made for the elite. Rather, these students preferred to rely on themselves and on their predisposition to hard work, save money and pay for further education, had this been what they wanted in their future. On this point, the crosscheck of participants' demographic data revealed that 3 out of the 4 work aspirers belonged to the fifth decile of income distribution³⁴. This means that participants might not have met the requirements to apply for *Gratuidad*, but they could not afford to pay for tertiary education either. The fourth work aspirer was cut off from financial aids because did not meet nationality criteria. However, there is not enough evidence to infer whether work aspirers were aware of their possible ineligibility for financial aids. Nor is it possible to infer whether this has reinforced their intention to work.

Lastly, Camila was the only one to mention *FORGE* programme as helpful in the support they gave with matters concerning finding a work-placement and, later, a job. The main reason for which she would rely on *FORGE* more than on her schoolteachers was that *FORGE* would aim to find companies willing to hire students after completing their work-placement with them.

Family

As for university and vocational education aspirers, family was a crucial institution in the life of work aspirers. Students said they felt supported by their families in any choice (work or study) they would make after school after school. Although some said that their parents

³⁴ The fifth decile is also known as 'turning point' as the eligibility criteria for many financial aid programmes in Chile is based on income falling in the bottom five.

preferred them to study, they were also already proud of children for achieving upper-secondary vocational qualification and trusted them in choosing what would be best for their future. For example, Natalia said that despite the family economic hardship, her parents were willing to financially support (and very likely going into debts) her if she wanted to continue studying after secondary education. Yet, they did not impose their preferences and let her decide what she considered to be better for her future. In this sense, it seemed that having more pliant parents, content with any choice that would allow their children to live better lives than theirs had contributed to the formation of lower short-term ambitions compared to the ones expressed by the other participants of the study. By contrast, Camila talked about the frequent fights she had with her mother who wanted her to enrol in university and was very pushy and demanding. She said that her mother's high expectations came from a very low consideration that vocational education had in their home country (they were not Chilean). However, these demands and expectations did not seem to influence Camila's aspirations.

Lastly, those who had older siblings in the labour market commented they had discussed their choice of working after compulsory school with them. Their siblings' experience seemed to contribute to the perception that finding a job in the related sector after upper-secondary vocational education was feasible.

Friendship and Peers

In the case of work aspirers, findings suggest that school peers played an important role in motivating participants to search for a work-placement together and in one case in finding it. In some cases, school friends with similar aspirations reinforced participants' work aspirations. This sense of companionship and mutual reinforcement of aspirations emerged mainly among female work aspirers.

Labour market

Evidence shows that there was a fully consistent view among work aspirers that administration (mainly linked to working in human resources) and logistics (working in companies' warehouses) were fast-growing employment sectors. Logistics was perceived as particularly fruitful because it was relatively new with many job opportunities and high demands of technicians. Therefore, work aspirers were overall confident that with their secondary vocational qualification they could get a job in that field and this had seemingly

strengthened their intentions to work after compulsory schooling. Furthermore, having the forklift driving licence augmented their perception of having high chances to be employed and receive a good salary (i.e. hovering above the minimum national wage). Contrarily to tertiary TVET aspirers, the school visits to companies and the internship in warehouses contributed to develop the impression that companies did not pay much attention to educational qualifications as long as they had the willingness to work and met the requirements of the job positions. Rafaela said:

I'm interested in Logistics for its labour market [...] to work in that area and put effort in it [...] with a secondary vocational qualification in administration and logistics you can find a job because the labour market in this area is very good [...] especially in warehouses [logistics].

Amid contradictory reflections, work aspirers acknowledged that having tertiary education qualifications made it easier to find a job and, in some cases, it would be preferred. However, contrary to the previous two types of aspirations presented, work aspirers were overall optimistic that their secondary vocational qualification would be valued labour market:

I don't think young people need to study further. If you finish your upper-secondary and you put a lot of effort in what you do, you don't need to study [...] For example, if I show my best, I think I don't need to study more [...] If in the work-placement you show your best, they will take you into account. There are companies that [do not pay attention] if you come from a school or from an institute ... There are people who value your learning. So if in my work-placement I show that I can, perhaps [they employ me]. At school they prepare you for that, anyway. (Natalia)

This was a crucial finding given the strong neoliberal narrative around education as means to become somebody. In this respect, work aspirers valued individual effort, willingness to labour and hard work more than educational qualifications.

Similarly to other students who aimed to leave behind the linear achievement of a professional life through TVET and establish themselves in different fields, work aspirers who had the ambition for their futures to change career path altogether through further studies did not make considerations on job opportunities linked to their dreamed professions. This was possibly due to the lack of concrete ideas as to what to study and where; to the belief that tertiary education qualifications would lead them to get a corresponding job in the labour market; and to the perception that studying and working abroad would be easier than in Chile 'for the like of them'.

Approaches to achieve work aspirations

The extent to which work aspirers had thought through the process of how they would find a job after the work-placement varied across the four students. Generally, their aspiration to enter the labour market in the sector was not followed by concrete plans of action. In fact, they seemed to mostly rely on the hope of being hired by the company where they would do the work-placement. Alternatively, as second-best option they would search for other job opportunities preferring their sector to others. However, some seemed to have reflected more on the options available to them in or outside their vocational sector. In their reflections, their family's social/work network appeared fundamental in the job seeking process. Daniel, for example, would resort to his father or older sibling's work connections as alternative plan if the municipality where he was doing its work-placement did not employ him. The majority, would take a 'step-by-step' approach, focusing on their immediate present and, specifically, on the outcomes of their work-placement and adjusting their actions and plans accordingly. Their overall optimism about finding a job (preferably in their sector) was informed by a strong belief in the importance of individual effort and motivation, perseverance and hard work.

Although for them finding a company/business/institution which could provide possible employability opportunities after their work-placement could make the difference in their future plans and trajectories, work aspirers displayed a predominant 'wait and see' approach (i.e. rely on their teachers or on their friends/network) to find a work-placement. However, this approach seemed to be accompanied also by a more proactive one. For example, while students were waiting for their teachers to find a work-placement for them, they also had started to actively search for it, usually together with friends:

I have to wait to be called by the school, because they are the ones who search for work-placements [but] I'm not just waiting, I'm looking for it myself too. So, I'm waiting [...] I apply to job through the Internet as our teacher gave us a webpage where we could apply for jobs and also this Wednesday with a friend from school, we will go for companies to leave our CV... (Natalia).

As already commented, only one work aspirer seemed to 'take chance' of the opportunity given by the school to take part of *FORGE* and be supported in her transition to the labour market.

To conclude, work aspirers appeared overall optimistic about finding a job. Although they acknowledged that it would not come easily, the possibility to be employed in either

administration sector (e.g. human resources) or in logistics sector (warehouse logistics) made them confident of the many opportunities they would have.

CHAPTER 6 Findings - Students' educational and work realities, choices and aspirations six months after the end of upper-secondary TVET

This chapter presents the analysis of TVET graduates' educational and work realities, choices and aspirations six months after the end of upper-secondary TVET, which corresponds with the second round of interviews. In this timespan, participants should have completed their work-placement and those who had made the transition to TE were at the beginning of their third month of studies³⁵. Specifically, once completed the in-school component of the vocational programme, upper-secondary vocational students obtained the secondary school-leaving certificate. They had to undertake a 450-hour-work-placement in order to obtain the Middle-Level Technician Certificate (OECD, 2017a). In the case of the participants in this study, creating work-placement opportunities for students was mainly the responsibility of the school, although students' initiatives and proactivity in finding a work-placement was encouraged. Failing or completing the work-placement was the responsibility of the students as it was their responsibility to try to complete it during the summer period to avoid overlaps with the starting of the academic year for those who aspired to continue their studies in TE institutions.

The chapter is divided into three overarching sections, which follow the typological analysis of the previous chapter: university aspirers, tertiary vocational education aspirers and work aspirers. In each of the three main sections the transition processes and outcomes for each type of aspirers are presented. Each section starts with an overview of young people's aspirations emerged in the first round of interviews and where they were at when the second round of interviews took place. This is followed by an analysis of young people's reflexive assessment of their current situation in terms of well-being (what they have been actually able to do and be and how they feel about it) against their aspirations. The last part of each sub-sections ends by presenting and discussing the impact of the transition process on aspirations transformation, expectations and life projects.

³⁵ The academic year in Chile starts in March.

Post-school trajectories

General remarks

Figure 6.1 shows participants' transition outcomes, comparing their initial aspirations with where they 'were at' when the second interview took place, and the transition outcomes disaggregated by track of studies. The following are the main trends observed. First, overall, the aspirations that participants had expressed in the first interview were not met in a downwards direction. Indeed, out of 23³⁶ participants who took part in the second round of interviews, only 6 had achieved what they aspired to. Strikingly, these were among the students who had aspired higher (three university aspirers and three tertiary TVET aspirers). Second, the majority of participants (mostly university aspirers) fell within both the 'grey area', which represents the transitions to work or tertiary TVET institutions in continuity with their TVET specialism (and in line with TVET policy expectations), and the unemployment area. Those who fell within the unemployment category were mainly work aspirers (prevalently female participants) and aspirers *through* university (prevalently male participants). Third, those who had dreamed of changing field of studies had failed the most to achieve their aspirations. Fourth, male participants had higher aspirations compared to their female peers (the majority aspired *through* university, some aspired to get a professional certificate from TVET institutions, and only a small minority aspired to become higher-level technician or to work). For this reason, they had experienced more divergence between what they wanted and what they achieved and had adjusted their aspirations in a downward direction. Fifth, transition patterns by vocational track of study are biased by the different participants' distribution across the four vocational tracks. What can be observed is that students of Administration/Logistics and Electricity seemed to have been less disappointed by the transition's outcomes compared with students from Mechanics and Telecommunication. These were also the students who mainly aspired to go to university and to change career path (aspirers *through* university).

³⁶ Of the 28 young people who took part in the first round of data collection, 4 dropped out from the research and 1 was pregnant and fell outside of the classification identified.

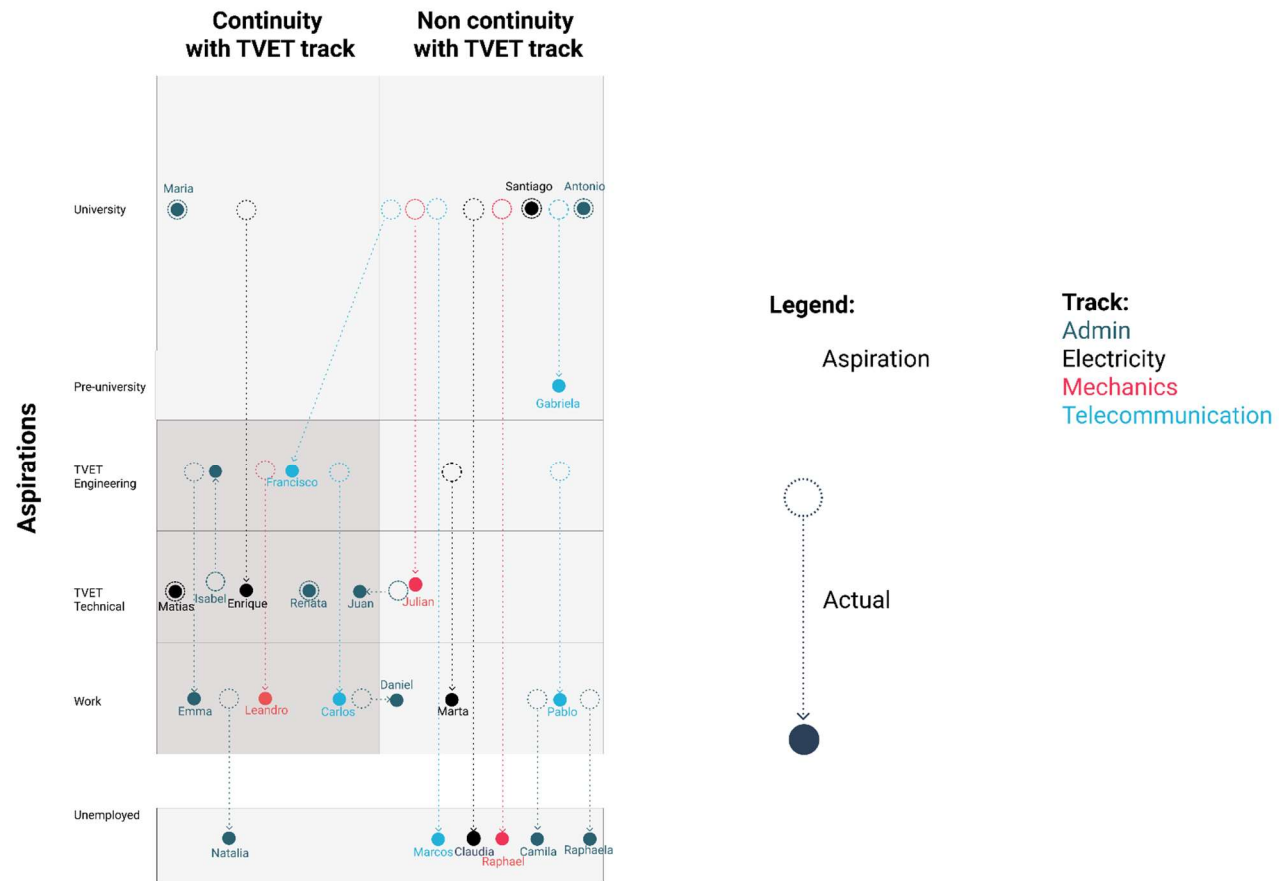


Figure 6.1: Transition outcomes six months after the first interview. Self-elaboration.

University education aspirers

As seen in the previous chapter and summarised in the figure above, 11 (39%) of the 28 young people interviewed the first time aspired to go to university. When the second interview took place, only 3 university aspirers had managed to access university institutions. Of the seven who were not at university, three were attending tertiary TVET institutions, three were unemployed and seeking work, and one was attending a 1-year-pre-university course³⁷³⁸. The following sub-sections describe the transition of university aspirers' three main sub-groups (those who managed to be in university; those who were attending a TVET institute; and those who were not in Tertiary Education), explaining the mechanisms behind the success or the failure in achieving aspirations and informing future aspirations.

University education aspirers in university institutions

Six months after completing their upper-secondary education, three university aspirers were enrolled in the university programmes they had aspired to. María, (aspirers *for* university and *PACE* beneficiary) was undertaking a degree in Accounting in continuity with her vocational track and in a traditional public university. Antonio and Santiago, (aspirers *through* university) had changed specialism and were studying Dance and Sports in private universities.

Factors allowing the achievement of aspired transitions and explaining transition outcomes

The interviews with university achievers revealed that complex interplay between one, or a combination of, institutional factors (*PSU*, *Gratuidad* and *PACE* and institutional guidance) and agential factors was key for the achievement of university aspirations. Concerning the institutional factors, first, having been granted financial aids that had guaranteed a no-fee or low-fee university access. Second, having attained a good enough *PSU* score to allow them

³⁷ As mentioned in Chapter 4, students who want to enrol in university institutions after their upper-secondary education and need to better prepare for the *PSU*, or familiarise with the academic, cultural and social environment of universities and improve/learn study methods (usually students from vocational schools), can enrol in pre-university programmes. These programmes can be free (as the one offered by the school where the students were recruited for this doctoral research) or may require a tuition fee.

³⁸ One university aspirer had dropped out of the research.

to access those private university institutions they were enrolled in (see Chapter 3). Third, being beneficiaries of *PACE* scheme by virtue of academic performances during upper-secondary education which, as seen, guaranteed admission quota to *PACE*-associated universities regardless of the *PSU* score and provided further academic assistance during the first year of study (transitional tutoring programme). As seen in Chapter 5, among university ‘achievers’, only the aspirer for university was a *PACE* beneficiary.

The uncertainty that characterised the transitions of most vocational students, particularly low achieving students and those experiencing economic hardship or dysfunctional situations at home (as described in Chapter 5), explained the surprise that university achievers experienced for being admitted to a university institution. Apart from the case of the aspirer *for* university who would be supported by *PACE* in her transition to university, findings suggest that although university aspirers had shared their high aspirations during the first interview, their expectations for the forthcoming year were lower (i.e. they would expect to put their aspirations on hold for a year and try again the following year). For example, Santiago commented:

Many of the things that I planned have changed... I went to study at the university [...] It was weird because I hadn't planned to study [...] in 2019 and it turns out that I got a good *PSU*. [...] I didn't expect it, I was meant to work [for a year]. [...] I got a scholarship [it] gave me [1.500 £] and I pay [50 £] a month [...] Without it, it would have been 175,000 [173 £] a month.

Besides institutional enablers, for the achieving university aspirers, a critical factor which made their transition to university possible, and which emerged more powerfully in the second interview, was the support they received from their secondary school's teachers and counsellors. Importantly, this support stretched outside the school's walls and after the completion of their secondary education. For some it consisted in receiving advice on which career to study (mainly from the teachers). For example, teachers' recommendations were important contributing factor in María's choice of Accounting over International Trade. Other factors were her self-confidence, interests and labour market considerations. Interestingly, she had been classified as ‘chance taker’. This suggests a positive relationship between a more agentic and proactive approach to post-school transitions and the achievement of aspirations.

For others, the help provided by the counsellors to navigate the bureaucratic processes required to identify, understand and make them take opportunities available to them was

crucial. For example, Santiago, who had unexpectedly managed to enrol in the Sports Degree he had aspired to (alongside with Theatre Degree), explained that it was exclusively thanks to the school counsellor who informed him that his *PSU* was accepted by some private universities and that he could apply for scholarships. Findings indicate that his predominant ‘wait and see’ approach would have not pay back in the realisation of his aspired transition. Indeed, had it not been for the intervention of his school counsellor, he would have been “destined to work” as a mason in construction for a year to save money to eventually fund his further studies. It was also thanks to the counsellor that he managed to enrol without having to pay for the admission fees that would be a prohibitive amount for him (the equivalent of 175£). As he explained:

I told [the counsellor] that this university offered the degree I was interested in, so we looked it up on the Internet and we saw that that one was the last day for free enrolments. I was in the school with her [the counsellor] when she called them. It was 12 pm and I had until 3pm to go and enrol for free. [...] They allow a period for free enrolments and when this is over, we have to pay for it.

In some cases, achieving university aspirations had also come with a cost. Specifically, some students talked about personal sacrifices they had made and opportunities or interests that they had to give up in order to pursue their ambition. For example, María had done her work-placement at her municipality human resources department. She described her experience with pride and as an opportunity of incredible professional growth that she had handled very well. Thanks to the good job she was doing and to her commitment to the job and sense of responsibility, her managers started to request her ‘in’ with them (and not only ‘out’ assisting/welcoming people) to help them out with secretary tasks. She commented on this ‘upgrade’ as being “among the Olympians”. To her great surprise, they offered her a job after the work-placement, which would require a change in her university plans to be able work during the day and study at night:

Actually, they offered me a job... it was like so weird because there was another girl doing the work-placement, a peer from the school, and they asked me to stay and even tried to... how can I say... to change my mind and study at night at the other university so that I could work during the day...it was very much like “please we need you”.

She had considered enrolling in the other public and *PACE*-affiliated university that would allow the *vespertino* modality to be able to combine study with work. However, due to enrolment procedures and rules of each institution, she could not change university and, thus,

had to turn down the possibility of being employed. Findings suggest that she would have changed university, if she had been given the possibility.

Santiago had renounced his dream of becoming a professional football player and had taken the risky choice of not doing the work-placement and, consequently, not getting his Middle-Level Technician Certificate³⁹ to prioritise the opportunity to study in a university. He was confident that with a university degree “everything would be okay and fall into the right places”.

The above evidence suggests that transitioning to university resulted from the interplay between institutional structures and individual actions overcoming structural constraints where forms of mediation always operated in individualised and, thus, unpredictable ways making it difficult to envisage the effects of institutional enablers or constraints on choices.

Experiences of transition’s outcomes on wellbeing and on feeling in control

University achievers expressed overall a sense of fulfilment that came from having realised their educational aspirations and from enjoying their university experience. “Happy”, “entertaining” and “awesome” were some of the words used to describe how they felt. They referred to their lecturers as demanding but also motivated, available and encouraging and described an overall supportive learning environment with peers of different ages and from different educational backgrounds (private and public, academic and vocational schools) helping each other out by sharing subject knowledge. This positive experience contributed to increasing their self-confidence, engagement, motivation and the sense of being in control and in the right direction.

However, their positive experiences were not devoid of feelings of inadequacy, frustration and concerns. These were mainly related to a lack of ‘study habit’ that the three of them experienced. Some of their academic performances reflected this lack of study habit, which created frustration and disappointment in them, but which triggered motivation and determination to do better. They had realised that nobody in school had taught them how to “review the subjects or prepare in advance for the subjects they will teach me the next day”.

³⁹ After completing his secondary education, Santiago had taken up a job as a mason in construction because it paid better than doing a work-placement in Electricity. Yet, he had planned to do work-placement after the summer so to get the Getting the Middle-Level Technician Certificate and secure a safer, option in case the university path would not work. However, the plan changed when he was informed of his good *PSU* score.

In fact, at school what they learnt in class was enough “to make it” and if they did not study or did not understand something, the teachers were there to help them. What they had been taught, compared to students from private schools, was how to behave and be respectful and grateful for the huge opportunity of studying in a university they were having. By contrast, at university, they were supposed to be independent and autonomous learners and felt strongly the pressure that their learning and their study progress were exclusively in their own hands.

An important finding is that frustration and concerns were felt by the three university achievers regardless of whether or not they had changed field of studies. This means that continuing in the vocational specialisation did not seem to have facilitated the transition to university. Indeed, María admitted that she was “feeling lost” because the first two-month-programme of her course covered topics that she should have been taught in her secondary and upper-education. However, especially referring to mathematics and accounting, some parts of the programme were completely new to her. Despite her love for the subjects and for numbers, she was struggling with it a lot and felt surprised about her low performances given that back in school she had been one of the best performing students in her cohort.

These first two months focus on pure subjects supposedly [taught] from 1st to 4th grade in schools and [...] half of the subject that the lecturer is teaching now I did it in 4th grade, but I didn’t do the rest... I’m like all lost.

Related to this are the financial repercussions students may have to face if they fail their study progression. Indeed, the three university achievers expressed concerns about losing their financial aids (*Gratuidad* or scholarship) for failing to meet the academic standards required. This would happen in the case they failed core annual subjects which they would need to retake the following year, thus, holding back the completion of the degree and having to pay fees for each extra year taken. To these structural constraints, university achievers responded ‘neoliberally’. They all were nonetheless determined to “change the chip” (attitude/mindset) and succeed in university as they considered it their chance to a “greater future”.

Aspirations (trans)formation, expectations and life projects

Reflecting on their futures, all university achievers wanted to get their university degree and establish themselves in the corresponding professions (i.e. become an audit accountant, a personal trainer/coach, and a dance artist). Having successfully made the transition to

university contributed to reaffirming the educational and professional aspirations they had shared in the first interview. In this respect, they had maintained the professional aspirations they had before starting university. However, these were now influenced by a more informed and grounded understanding that these students were gaining of structural contexts and new opportunities. The clarity they were gaining on how to link their imagined future professions to their specific field of studies and on the opportunities that their degrees/fields could offer seemed to expand their aspirations. Indeed, findings suggest that the lived experience at university and the exposure university achievers had to a new environment and to like-minded people were helping them better articulate, nurture and expand desired professions and future life projects. These students were determined and committed to take the most out of the opportunity of attending university. Their narratives on their medium- and long-term future projections were imbued with confidence and optimism. Importantly, they perceived to have an array of professional opportunities and the freedom to choose what they would value the most.

Expanded aspirations implied, for example, the desire to continue studying after getting the current degree to increase their professional horizons, gain more knowledge and skills in different areas within their sector in which they were developing an interest. For example, Santiago wanted to study pedagogy to become a physical education teacher alongside with being a personal trainer and a football coach. Likewise, they all had the ambition to create their own business. As seen in Chapter 5, entrepreneurship seemed to reflect a desire to escape from vulnerability, discrimination and precarity that exist in waged labour as consequence of highly competitive and neoliberal systems that often these students had been experienced by observing their parents. For example, Antonio said that through university he “got to know [like-minded] people and the sector of dance more closely” and realised that, although still underrated, being a professional dancer was possible in Chile because “all these young people do things and put effort on it [to make the sector of dance flourishing]”. Although he was still unclear on “how to place dance in his future”, this new awareness encouraged him to establish himself as a dancer in his country. He had thus abandoned the idea shared in the first interview of moving abroad to make a living as a dancer. Significantly, despite a strong ‘here and now’ attitude he displayed, when prompted to think about future professional possibilities he expressed the intention to join one of the most famous and prestigious Chilean dance companies, to continue studying, become an interpreter dancer and working in theatres, and maybe, one day, create his own company.

While economic returns were important to these young people “to be able to lead a life with dignity”, their expanded aspirations were better explained by growing interests and vocations than purely by economic considerations. For university achievers, the broader life project included reaching economic stability as means to eventually “be resolved”. Being resolved meant becoming independent, self-sufficient, having a peaceful life, owning a house. Equally important for them was to help their family and give them a better future. For them achieving this would mean being successful. The concepts of being independent, autonomous and of reaching their goals with their own hand were reiterated and appeared to be linked to wanting to be free from any form of debt or dependency which could cause abuses or discrimination:

Be successful ... personal success would mean not depending on someone, but depending on me, I think that would be like a success ... being able to just depend on myself... like, not paying the rent for a house that is not mine, not asking for money to my parents anymore [...] job success is like climbing the ladder [of my vocational specialism], going from being a subordinate to a boss ... but I don't care about working in a super low position if I *am resolved*... I find that the being resolved in life is like the greatest success, not depending on anyone. (María)

Alongside with more clarity and a sense of confidence and optimism for their futures, findings also suggest a sense of caution in their narratives which seemed to be correlated to being the first generation in their family not just attempting the route of tertiary education but trying to navigate the prestigious and demanding route of university. For example, María commented that she needed to get the Accounting degree first to then be able to focus more concretely on what would come next.

University education aspirers in transition

When interviewed the second time, four university aspirers were still ‘in transition’. This means that they were unemployed and looking for job, or they were not in university nor in TVET institutions. During the first interview, two of them (Gabriela and Claudia) had shared their intention to put their educational aspirations ‘on-hold’ for a year, postponing university decisions and the enrolment process to the following academic year. Both wanted to find a job and one of them wanted to prepare for re-taking the *PSU*. They were confident that their ‘step-by-step’ approach, as explained in the previous chapter, would help them better prepare for university (i.e. get clearer ideas on what to study and where). After six months, Gabriela was attending a pre-university paid course and was still searching for a job, while Claudia

was unemployed and also searching for jobs. By contrast, the other two (Rafael and Marcos) had initially expressed their preference for starting university that same academic year. However, when the second interview took place, they were neither in education nor in employment. Both had shown a ‘wait and see’ attitude, leaving to serendipity and fate the possibility to make a successful transition to university, with no clear ideas on what to study, no clear goal-oriented strategies and a seemingly lack of understanding of what requirements the university enrolment process would involve. Although the initial intentions of the former two and the latter two students were different, they all were still in a phase of ‘transition’, as they all seemed to be in their educational decision-making process (or still in ‘the waiting room’ of their decision-making process), all unemployed and in search for a job.

Factors hindering the achievement of aspired transitions and explaining transition outcomes

As above summarised, for the two female students in transition, finding a job and work for a year was a fundamental part of their ‘step-by-step’ approach to make their transition to university the following academic year. For both, a combination of gender discrimination in the workplace, work preferences, and the underestimation of how difficult the process of finding a job would be were crucial structural factors that were hampering their job search. For example, alongside attending a pre-university course, Gabriela had hoped to be employed by the telecommunication company where she did her work-placement. As seen in Chapter 5, she had no intention to build a career in her TVET sector due to overall disengagement with, and perceptions of, gender discrimination in Telecommunication, and for personal interests in new and liberal professions. However, she also reflexively assessed the importance of getting the one-year-work-experience in her sector usually required in the labour market as a prerequisite to be employable, what she considered useful in case life circumstances would become more precarious. Yet, she described a very discouraging work-placement experience, where she was considered “just a young inexperienced woman” and where knowing how to (gendered) behave seemed to be valued more than skills and knowledge. Instead of being compliant with, and surrender to, that mentality, she challenged it by seemingly refusing the job offer at the end of the work-placement. Unfortunately, finding a part-time occupation (e.g. working as waitress in cafes or pizzerias or as cinema attendant) had been more difficult than expected. Again, this seemed to be due to a combination of factors, such as the requirement of one-year-experience that most employers asked for and the restrictions to her freedom to search for a job or take up work opportunities offered through her friends’ network imposed by her patriarchal family. To circumvent these

structural barriers and gain some money, she was starting an online store on Instagram with her sister.

Evidence suggests a growing awareness of a narrow opportunity structure and limited freedom to choose were felt by both these participants. Given that in their situation, postponing the university enrolment process for a year seemed more rational, it was interesting to find that their lived experiences of transition made them perceive the university path as more viable, less discriminatory and approachable than working in their vocational sector or finding a job in a different sector. That is, their university aspirations seemed reinforced by their experiences of hardship, rejection and discrimination in finding a job and/or suffered in the workplace. As Claudia commented:

I didn't start [studying] this year because I wanted to take a proper sabbatical [but if I could go back in time] I think I would start this year [...] I thought that finding a job would be easier... [employers] prefer someone with experience to someone without... in electricity [is even worse as] women are not well accepted.

For the other two university aspirers a combination of institutional and individual factors informed the failure to achieve the transition to university. Specifically, both failed the *PSU*. In one case, this was for the poor score obtained, in the other for missing the documents needed to sit for the exam. The lack of effort in preparing for the exam and an overall non purposive nor agentic ('wait and see') approach to transition cut these university aspirers off from the possibility to make it to university for that same academic year. Similarly to Santiago, both participants showed a lack of understanding of how the *PSU* system worked in terms of how to understand the score. For example, Marcos had not realised that he had not got the minimum score needed. He thus applied to the university but was rejected.

The alternative plan of working for a year, possibly in their TVET sector, or combining work with studying in a tertiary TVET institute had not been successful either. The work-placement seemed to have played an important role in this. Although they had very different experiences and in different sectors (Mechanics and Telecommunication, respectively), both did not lead to employment's opportunities. In fact, in one case the lack of enjoyment and engagement felt for the work resulted in a general lack of interest in the sector. As Marcos explained, for his work-placement in the telecommunication sector, he was assigned to do cash machine monitoring which was completely unrelated to what he expected and what he had been trained for at school. Findings indicate that because of his disengaging work-

placement experience, he might have decided to abandon the idea of pursuing a tertiary vocational qualification in his sector which he had considered as alternative plan.

By contrast, Rafael had had a great work-placement experience at the minibus company where his father works as a bus driver. The sense of recognition, self-worth, companionship and meaning resulting from feeling part of something, learning and being engaged in doing something worthwhile were fundamental aspects that informed the value he gave to his experience. Due to a work accident, he could not complete his work-placement. Evidence suggests that the work injury would prevent him from the possibility of working in the sector of heavy mechanics⁴⁰.

The hardship in finding employment was another factor for their current unemployment status. The fact that in Chile to get a job people need either “a degree in their hands” or the right social connections or both was reiterated by these young people. Rafael said that in Chile they had a specific term, *pituto/a*, to refer to those who have a job thanks to their social connections. In his case, for example, while he had had a long work experience in his hands, first as handyman in his aunt’s family minimart business, and then in “all sort of sectors”, and had, thus developed a strong work orientation, he also had experienced precarity, low salaries, poor work conditions, exploitation, and discrimination. As for the other two university aspirers in transition, evidence suggests Rafael’s and Marco’s post-school experiences had reinforced their aspirations to get a tertiary education qualification as a way out of exploitation and discrimination and also as means to choose what they liked and valued. Rafael said:

Now, I want to study because I feel more mature, I feel that what has happens [in these months] helped me grow up. [...] I want more for myself [...] To have my little house in the countryside and my small business [of auto repair], I need money [and since I don’t have money], I have to go step by step [and get an education].

Experiences of transition’s outcomes on wellbeing and on the feeling in control

Feelings of dissatisfaction, discouragement, boredom and frustration emerged throughout the conversations with university aspirers in transition, and they seemed to stem from unexpectedly finding themselves in a limbo, not engaged in anything meaningful or socially

⁴⁰ In this respect, although this falls out of the scope of this thesis, the prohibitive costs of healthcare and health insurances represent for many a real barrier to recover from injuries. This emerged from Rafael’s narrative.

valued. These feelings were boosted when comparing themselves to other peers who either were studying in tertiary education or were studying and working. For example, Gabriela, who was attending the pre-university course (and thus was the only one who was engaged in something that would help achieve her aspirations to enrol in a prestigious university), commented that although she felt satisfied with the course environment and motivated by like-minded people in her course to aim high in life, she felt disappointed for failing to meet the high expectations she perceived many had for her:

I compare myself a lot with my ex-classmates who all continued studying, perhaps they did not go to university, they went to TVET institutions, but still they will finish with a qualification [...] there are many who are working and studying and I was going to see myself like this this year and they all had very high expectations of me, so when I tell them that I'm doing a Preu, it's like "ah, good luck then"... so it's like [disappointing].

As described above, they all had suffered forms of discrimination (e.g. gender discrimination, classed prejudices, exploitation, patriarchy) within the workplaces or in the process of job searching, which seemed to have reinforced their aspiration to study the following academic year. Namely, the contexts of discrimination they had experienced during their transitions and that seemed new to them had spurred reflections that went beyond their individual dimension and that hint to increasing awareness of the false hopes of the rhetoric of opportunity for all. Rafael said:

If only they chose to focus more on youth... of those between 15 years old and 22... I don't know, like giving them job opportunities that make them feel fucking valued and which are worth doing... this is why I think that today young people are more rebellious [and] try to get their things through 'bad' routes... because what used to happen before is that children from their 14 years old were paid the same as everybody else... I remember my granpa telling me 'I have been working since I was 9 and I have been paid since I was 9'.

The above comment seems to indicate the perception that opportunities were open to all those with valuable educational qualifications. This strengthened the view of education as their only means to escape low-skills, low-pay, highly discriminatory labour market and endless experiences of social marginalisation. To a different extent, they expressed regrets for having postponed the process to access university as in their view doing it this year would have avoided being stuck in a meaningless limbo. From the little evidence at disposal on this point, this thought was seemingly voided by reflections on the preparation needed to enrol in university institutions and on their chances of achieving these. In some cases, this might be due to an overall confidence that they would have found their way either through

university or by adjusting their dreams. In others, it betrayed a lack of appropriate guidance to make informed choices.

Aspirations (trans)formation, expectations and life projects

For all four of these young people, the lived experiences of transition after their secondary education had made them be less naïve regarding their space for actions. However, this did not change their aspiration for tertiary education. In fact, all of them reaffirmed their intention to enrol in a tertiary education institution the next academic year, in some cases with changes in what they aimed at (type of institutions and/or what to study). Three of them maintained the aspirations to enrol in a university and to pursue a career in sectors they were interested in and that differed from their vocational track. In one case, aspirations were adapted and grounded in more reflexive and contextually bounded rational thought processes, although with different perceptions of what was available for them.

Maintaining aspirations was motivated by the same personal interests that informed their aspirations *through* university in the first round of interviews. The diverse educational offers of the market-led model of education contributed to make the aspirations of going to university as feasible in their mind. For example, they would choose a university that required a lower (than usual) *PSU* score (Marcos) or a university that also offered technical programmes alongside academic programmes in the field they aspired to (Claudia). In the case of Claudia, available evidence seems to indicate that she was aiming at the (non-selective) technical path. Both entrusted the achievement of their aspirations to personal effort, hard work and commitment to get the information needed about the enrolment process (e.g. understanding better how the *PSU* score worked and how to match it with the university opportunities it would open/limit for them). Together with the perception of the transformative value of education as a means to escape what they had experienced in their post-school trajectories, social influence, community/family expectations and peer pressure were other factors that informed their ambitions.

The discouraging experiences of transition had become internalised expectations for one participant. Having accumulated more experiences than his peers of discrimination and exploitation in workplaces and having had very vague and too high initial aspirations not backed by a reflexive assessment of, and clear connectivity between, concerns against contexts seemed the reasons that led Rafael to downplay his dreams. From dreaming of

opening an art gallery in Europe or becoming an architect, he was now planning to specialise in his vocational track. His more grounded aspirations were also underpinned by the awareness that without education he would not have any possibility of social mobility:

If I start working today and I start without a qualification, they will leave me at the bottom of the ladder [...] always working in the same position and always earning the same salary. But if I enter a workplace with a qualification at least I will have a good starting point ... So then I keep earning more money and I am able to study more, so I can 'go up' [the ladder] a little more.

If forms of instrumental rationality were present in his thinking towards his future life, findings indicate that he was not purely interested in pursuing economic advancement, but also in social recognition, in doing something meaningful to raise self-esteem, gain the respect of his family, and feel valued in his society. Despite being more bounded in his limits, he was not agentless in front of structural constraints and indeed was contemplating the idea of getting a professional qualification and of becoming entrepreneur in a niche market (e.g. restoring and painting vintage cars).

Similarly to university achievers, this group of young people aspired to have a better life than their parents and be able to give a better life to their families. Having a house, being independent, being engaged in something meaningful and that they valued, and gaining social respect were their main concerns and what they would have worked hard for.

University education aspirers in TVET institutions

Six months after completing their upper-secondary education, three university aspirers were enrolled in tertiary TVET institutions. Francisco (aspirer *through* university) was studying a 4-year-programme in continuity with his vocational specialism. The other two students, (Enrique, aspirer *for* university and *PACE* beneficiary, and Julián, aspirer *through* university) were in shorter, technical programmes (2 and a half years). The former was attending a programme in continuity with his vocational specialism and the latter had changed from Mechanics to Logistics Management.

Factors hindering the achievement of aspired transitions and explaining transition outcomes

The interplay between the following institutional structures and individual actions explained why some university aspirers were studying in tertiary TVET institutes: 1) the *PSU*; 2)

personal interests, preferences and dispositions. Compared to previous transitions, for this sub-group the forms of mediation between structures and agency largely operated in individualised ways, making it difficult to identify patterns and envisage the effects of institutional enablers or constraints on choices.

For instance, the *PSU* had been a structural constraint for one of them, leading the student (Francisco) with no chance to enrol in university institutions that academic year. In his case, having left the success of the *PSU* to fate within a predominant ‘wait and see’ approach towards the post-school transition had not helped him achieve his dream of studying pedagogy. His choice of pursuing a professional certificate in his vocational sector was informed by reflections against the inequalities of the Chilean education system. It seemed that going through the *PSU* process increased his awareness on unfairness of such mechanism of selection. However, it was also underpinned by some rational considerations on feeling compelled to capitalise on the technical knowledge and skills gained in his sector to increase his work opportunities in the future and to be able to dedicate himself to make music, his main interest.

The *PSU* had not represented an impediment to university aspirations for the other two students, both identified previously as ‘chance takers’. In their case, a seemingly less agentic behaviour (Enrique) and personal interests and preference (Julián) were determinant in explaining their transition. Enrique was the only one in this sub-group with a facilitated and privileged access at a *PACE*-affiliated university. Yet, he had lost his opportunity due to failure to accomplish with the bureaucratic steps needed to confirm his place at the university. There is not enough evidence on this to understand whether the student felt intimidated by the idea of going to university and decided to negotiate a scale-down version of his aspirations. In the case of Julián the score obtained would allow him to enrol in a school of education at the university, but that he had chosen to not pursue a degree in pedagogy and instead study “what I liked the most”. This choice of not trying to maximise the level of education he would obtain can be explained by a combination of individual and factors and labour market considerations. On the one hand, for personal interests in the sector of logistics he had developed since young age by observing his father at work and that he had cultivated in his first year of vocational education he had done in another school. On the other, while he would have not had any academic support if embarking in the path of pedagogy, he had greater confidence in his abilities to succeed in logistics as he could rely on the subject knowledge of people in his network when he would need academic-related

help. Related to this, he experienced a frustrating enrolment in a TVET institute because he was unable to understand documents and needed help to translate them in simpler language. Although there is not enough evidence to support this, it can be inferred that this experience might have reinforced the perception that university could have been out of his reach. Furthermore, his choice was supported by extensive research on the Internet he had done on the employment rate in logistics. Although he took his decision autonomously, the discussion he had with significant others reinforced his perception that his future career would be brighter and more promising in the sector of logistics than as a teacher. Therefore, whilst he displayed an intrinsic motivation for his chosen vocational specialism, he did thus demonstrate more bounded rationality than he did in his first interview.

It was interesting to notice how these students had all completely changed their narratives by downplaying the value of university in their life so to make sense of their choices and to justify their actions as agential and purposely taken. Namely, they reflected over their transition outcomes as the best option they could have for achieving what they wanted in life. That was having professional stability, being able to become somebody, being engaged in something they valued or that would give them the opportunity to cultivate their hobbies in ways similar to what they would have done through the university path. An example of this is given by Francisco who said that his interest in studying pedagogy to teach history was merely linked to his interest in gaining knowledge on texts, narratives, historical facts and using it to create lyrics and music. Similarly, Enrique justified his new pathway by affirming that with a certificate from a TVET institution, he could still compete with university graduates if he worked hard enough once in the labour market.

Their decision to pursue a tertiary TVET qualification as alternative to university could also be explained by the fact that none of them would have had the Middle-Level Technician Certificate as two of them had not done the work-placement and one of them had not completed it for issues in the workplace. A tertiary educational qualification was their only way out of menial, low-paid, low-skill jobs they were destined to. Lastly, the three students had been granted *Gratuidad*, which had allowed them to make the transition to tertiary institutes affiliated with *Gratuidad* scheme immediately after the completion of their secondary education.

Experiences of transition's outcomes on wellbeing and on the feeling in control

As anticipated, the participants in this sub-group had all made their own sense of their transition outcomes. However, how they felt towards their current situation seemed to be based on and varied according to whether they had experienced it as an actual choice or as a constrained choice. Students who perceived to have exercised their freedom to choose reported a general sense of satisfaction, engagement and enjoyment for what they were studying, felt confident about successfully completing the programme and about the corresponding future career (and life) prospects that the qualification would lead to. By contrast, lack of engagement, fulfilment and enjoyment were expressed by the student who considered his post-school choice as an obligation. This was the case of Francisco, who commented that he was not motivated by personal interests in building a career in telecommunication but felt that the only choice he had was to capitalise on the knowledge and skills gained in his upper-secondary education. Interestingly, unlike the other two students, Francisco was enrolled in the longer programme that would confer him a professional certificate, but considered his tertiary professional qualification as purely instrumental to find a good job, reach economic stability, and invest it to dedicate himself to what he was passionate about (making music).

[I don't like it] but I do it because I just know it, I already studied that, I already have the knowledge, I already know how to understand some new things that they teach me. If I start from scratch in a programme that I don't have the knowledge about, I will be lost, that's why I wanted to continue with that [...] I don't like it, I don't like it at all, but I have to do it, it's like my own obligation [...] to be able to earn money, just that.

Having a positive educational experience and having obtained good grades did not seem to be necessarily correlated to how well they felt in their current situation and to their future aspirations. Indeed, the three of them were valuing positively their educational experience. This was assessed on their teachers' engagement, preparedness, encouragement, and willingness to assist the students in need after class and to accommodate their teaching methods according to different levels of knowledge and experience of their learners. It was also based on the environment of their institutes that they found to be more stimulating than their school's environment, and where students "have a sort of aspiration to study, to improve themselves, the hunger to succeed and become someone [which you do not find in schools]". This was generally appreciated, although the lightness of a more relaxed and entertaining environment was occasionally missed. Lastly, contrary to what previously commented by a university achiever, those in continuity with their field of studies felt facilitated in their learning so far as they were taught what they had learnt in class.

Aspirations (trans)formation, expectations and life projects

The three students in this sub-group had dropped their university aspirations adapting or transforming their preferences. However, they were all aiming at getting the highest educational qualification in their TVET pathways (the professional certificate). They also had high career ambitions, aiming at managerial positions, showing entrepreneurial aspirations, or dreaming of becoming famous (in the music sector). For example, Julián said: “I’ve always wanted to be the boss, the head of the entire logistics area, I’ve always liked it [...] my idea is to always reach the top”. However, these high aspirations also concealed lower expectations and a more cautious approach to the future. This means that, for example, they were contemplating the possibility of just becoming technicians instead of professionals or managers in their sector, or that they could consider themselves satisfied with making music as a hobby rather than becoming famous and make a living out of it.

Ultimately, while some instrumental rationality informed their logic behind aspirations, the high educational and career aspirations these students showed went beyond purely economic calculations as ends in themselves. In fact, this included the need to gain social respect and self-worth; end social abuses; exceed the expectations that society had for those like them being engaged in something they valued; being appreciated in the workplace; having the possibility of career changes and advancement; and, importantly for all of them, being able to provide for their single mother families. For example, Francisco commented that it had not been for the responsibility he felt towards his mother and younger sister, he would have chosen to muddle through life, working in whatever he would have found just to self-sustained and be able to dedicate himself to music, without feeling the obligation to pursue a tertiary vocational education certificate.

Tertiary vocational education aspirers

When interviewed the first time, 13 (46%) of the 28 young people interviewed aspired to go to tertiary TVET institutions as their preferred (or most likely) post-school transitions. After six months, four tertiary TVET aspirers were attending TVET institutions and five were in the labour market⁴¹. As for the previous group of university aspirers, the following subsections present findings of the transition to tertiary TVET institutions and to the labour

⁴¹ Three students in this category had dropped out of the research and one student was pregnant and thus fell outside the categorisation.

market, explaining the mechanisms behind the success or the failure in achieving aspirations and informing future aspirations.

Tertiary vocational education aspirers in tertiary TVET institutions

Four tertiary TVET aspirers had successfully made transitions to tertiary TVET institutions and the four of them were in programmes in continuity with their vocational field of studies. For Isabel, Renata and Matías, this choice was in line with their initial aspirations. Isabel and Renata from Administration and Logistics were studying respectively Engineering in Logistics and Technical in Logistics. Matías from Electricity had enrolled in a technical programme in Electricity and Industrial Automation. Although they all had planned a ‘step-by-step’ approach, starting with a technical programme to then proceed in the professional one, Isabel was already enrolled in a 4-year-programme (professional) at an IP, while the other two were enrolled in the shorter technical programmes. Juan, who during the first interview had expressed the intention to change vocational specialism, was instead studying a technical programme in Business Administration in continuity with his vocational field of studies.

Factors allowing the achievement of aspired transitions and explaining transition outcomes

The achievement of tertiary vocational education aspirations had been possible thanks to the interplay between institutional enablers and agential factors. First, given the non-selectivity of tertiary TVET institutions, while the *PSU* score did not represent an institutional factor for these aspirers, *Gratuidad* was still a determining factor to hinder/allow access to these institutions. Having received *Gratuidad* had allowed tertiary TVET aspirers to enrol that same academic year, instead of having to postpone it to the following academic year. Importantly, if *Gratuidad* scheme had been an enabler to accessing tertiary education, the way the scheme is managed, in terms of timing of information released to students on their application outcomes, in some cases had narrowed down the possibilities to choose what to study and where. This is because by the time students were informed about the results, the places for the programmes or at the institutes they had preferred had already gone⁴². In two cases, this affected the choice of where to study or the choice of what to study, respectively.

⁴² As previously commented, paying the enrolment fees is the only way to secure a place. However, many of the students interviewed, including tertiary TVET aspirers, could not afford to pay for it (usually around 130£) and had to wait to be given *gratuidad* first to then be able to enrol without fees.

For Juan, for example, it implied abandoning his initial aspiration to change specialism and instead choosing a programme in continuity with the vocational specialisation:

That TVET Intitute is the only one that had free audiovisual communication, all the other that had audiovisual communication were very expensive, so it was that one or nothing... so I went for the second option, that was choosing 'my thing' [what I studied in my upper-secondary education]. I remembered that at school I was very good at business administration and so I told myself "Let's see if the other Institute [accept *Gratuidad*], if it has that programme... I've always been good so why don't I try?" and here I am...

Findings suggest that a combination of agential factors, such as feeling competent and familiar with his vocational sector, having an interest in it, and the confidence of transforming his educational credentials into employment opportunities, together with the perceived many opportunities his sector would open to him in the labour market had contributed to influence his choice.

Another factor that shaped their transitions was the work-placement. They described it as an important formative experience because they were exposed to the reality of the workplace in their sectors. By observing dynamics in the workplace and by talking with managers and workers, students reinforced their ideas that getting a tertiary TVET qualification was needed if they wanted to compete and be eligible for decent, stable, rewarding jobs in their sector with the possibility of career progression. Indeed, they had got a glimpse of what settling with their secondary vocational certificate would imply in terms of low-paid jobs and scarce possibilities of career progression. Renata commented:

[While I was doing my work-placement] there was a guy who arrived very recently, and he had a [tertiary education] qualification and there was a gentleman who had been working there for many years. Both wanted that position and they gave it to the guy who had the qualification, the old man could I have been a good friend of the boss or have worked for many years there, but he did not have a qualification, he had nothing. Then someone [with the qualification and knowledge] replaced him just like that... Although the old man had knowledge of everything that happens in the warehouse, he does not have the qualification.

Similarly to university achievers, for tertiary TVET achievers the advice and guidance they sought and received from their social connections had an important role in motivating them to continue studying in tertiary vocational institutions or in helping them choose which programme to study. This support came from people who had the educational or professional experience to help them make informed decisions (e.g. schoolteachers,

employers/employees met in the work-placement, broader social connections). For example, Isabel had found courage in, and followed, the advice of one of her work-placement's managers to take advantage of *Gratuidad* and enrol directly in the 4-year-programme to become an engineer as she "would waste [her] time studying a technical programme first" as she had planned to do.

As seen for some university achievers, transitioning into tertiary TVET institutes came with some costs. Specifically, three of them had given up to a full-time job offered by the company where they had completed their work-placement to be able to attend their programmes. Evidence indicates that this was not an easy decision they had to make. In fact, they all had mulled over it and discussed it with their families and people that could give them advice. Recognition and remuneration were the two aspects that they valued the most of these offers. Indeed, they all described fulfilling work-placement experiences for the practical and technical knowledge acquired, for feeling capable of doing the tasks required and appreciated by managers and employees. They had worked extra hours and showed proactivity and willingness to learn and 'to labour'. In most of the cases, they had been given responsibilities and duties broader and beyond what they had been expected to do and had accepted new charges with enthusiasm. Overall, they felt they had been treated as adults and with respect, what they valued the most. Alongside with this, more rational considerations emerged from some of their narratives. For those students who were experiencing economic hardship at home and who felt responsible for their families, turning down the job offer was a risky decision they took motivated by the worth and leverage that tertiary education qualifications would have in achieving better futures. For example, Matías was the only one in this group of students who had opted for evening programmes at the professional institute to be able to help his family by working during the day and studying at night. He could not accept the job offer because of logistics issues, i.e. the distance between the company and the only TVET institute he had managed to enrol in after waiting for *Gratuidad* was too far to be able to reach the campus on time for his evening classes.

The above evidence suggests that post-vocational school transitions to TVET institutions are not necessarily linear, straightforward, effortless and simple. In fact, they are shaped by a complex inter-linkage between institutional structures and agential factors mediated by mechanisms which often operate at individual levels, making these transitions to adulthood a highly individualised and risky endeavour.

Experiences of transition's outcomes on wellbeing and on the feeling in control

Overall, tertiary TVET achievers expressed feelings of satisfaction and fulfilment for having achieved their educational aspirations. Being the first one in their families going that far made them feel proud and determined to keep working hard to steer the course of their lives towards bright future career and life prospects. They used expressions such as “I’m satisfied with what I achieved, and I really like what I’m studying” or “I feel good about my studies and I like what I’m going to become, and I’ll put all my efforts to finish my studies and find a job in what I want”.

However, the different learning experiences they were living impacted on how confident they felt in their abilities to succeed in tertiary education and how much in control of their life they were. Findings seem to suggest that female students had lower self-perceptions and were experiencing more difficulties in adapting to a faster pace of learning and a more demanding academic environment. Although to a different extent, they both felt unprepared not only in new subjects but also in vocational subjects that they had been taught at school. They also had difficulties in adapting to an environment which praised students’ self-sufficiency as they were used to being able to rely on their schoolteachers’ academic support and mercy anytime they needed further explanations or if they had not complied with homework. Renata, for example, was particularly suffering the transition. Her educational expectations were completely unmet in the reality of her transition to tertiary vocational education, and she felt her secondary school had left students totally unprepared for such transition. She said:

I thought I knew about logistics and I told myself that it would be easier for me since I was coming from Administration and Logistics. [...] I was listening to the [tutors teaching the] subjects and I was like “what are they talking about?” [...] Also the teachers at school taught us everything about the warehouse, but apparently logistics is broader than just the warehouse [...] the tutor from day 1 told us “if you think that logistics is the warehouse, you are wrong, you can leave the programme now because here we are not only going to talk about a warehouses” ...like this and I was like ... I thought that logistics was just pure warehouse... yes, it's complicated. It bothers me because I feel like I'm falling behind, I feel like I'm not making progress [...] Learning costs me a lot, I thought it would be easier, that's what discourages me. [...] I'm falling behind with accounting for example, I don't understand anything from the teacher, nothing, he speaks to me in Chinese, there is no way [I can learn].

The above case is important to reflect on the mismatch expectations/reality in students who decided to continue their tertiary studies in the same specialism they had taken in secondary

education, confident that their subject knowledge and their interest in the vocational area would help them in their school-to-tertiary education transitions.

By contrast, male students seemed to feel more in control of their transitions and valued more positively the preparation received at school. Juan commented that his subject knowledge was “so fresh” that when the programme started, he already knew what it would be about and felt advantaged compared to fellow classmates who did not have a secondary vocational education in that sector. Although Matías was experiencing more difficulties in adapting to a new and more demanding educational environment while catching up with new subjects, this seemed to be due to the need of getting used to night classes and juggling between helping at home, studying and seeking job.

Noticeably, three of the tertiary TVET achievers had been in the same vocational course at school (Administration and Logistics), with the same teachers and same programmes. However, while female students, and particularly Renata, were having significant difficulties in following TE programmes and were reconsidering the preparation received in school, Juan described his new learning experience and his good grades obtained so far enthusiastically, praising the vocational preparation received in his upper-secondary education. This gendered experience of TE seems to be related to a lower self-perception that mainly emerged across female participants.

Aspirations (trans)formation, expectations and life projects

Despite the different experiences of transitions to vocational tertiary institutions and the different levels of confidence in successfully completing their tertiary vocational programmes, for the majority of tertiary TVET aspirers achieving their transition experiences contributed to reaffirm or expand their educational and career ambitions. In terms of educational aspirations, this means that they wanted to get the highest TVET qualification which would confer them the professional certificate. Professionally, they aimed at climbing the ladder attached to their TVET sector and possibly occupy managerial positions. Findings indicate that having made it to tertiary education and the new educational environment they were exposed to augmented belief in choices and opportunities of upward mobility through education. Furthermore, the new educational environment together with their work-placement experiences helped them link better their educational paths with career opportunities.

In some cases, high aspirations betrayed lower expectations, particularly in students with lower self-perceptions. However, interestingly, these did not seem to be necessarily grounded in bounded rational thoughts, but also in serendipity and in more idealistic plans. For example, in case his career in his TVET sector “would not work out for any reason”, Matías’ alternative plan contemplated the idea of moving abroad to study it and build a career in gastronomy in the US. By contrast, Renata, who was struggling the most in her new path, was pondering the idea of abandoning tertiary education and moving to the North of Chile where the local labour market could offer her more and better paid work opportunities in her sector within the mining industry. What she wanted the most was finishing her studies, which would lead to good future job opportunities and possibilities of professional development. Yet, she expected to abandon her studies and giving up the idea of getting a tertiary TVET qualification, move to the north and start working because “I know myself... no matter how much effort I make, perhaps I will not fulfil everything that I am aiming at”.

Evidence indicates that these students were aware that the secondary vocational certificate would give them limited opportunities. They believed that ‘becoming someone’ implied accumulating educational credentials and knowledge. However, they were becoming more conscious of their limits and of their real opportunities and possibilities and were trying to accommodate their dreams accordingly:

Still, if it doesn't go well, I'll be independent anyway because I'm going to go somewhere else, to the North [...] I have a license to drive the forklift, and they pay good, good money... so if I go there I would make money and then come here to work too [...] but I know that if I go there, yes, I will earn money, but it is not the same, because I go without knowledge, I know I am not going to be satisfied without knowledge of what I am doing [...]... it is not so much for the money, it is for the knowledge, also to be able to opt for something bigger later on...(Renata)

Instrumental calculations behind their future aspirations were apparent, but so were their reflective deliberations on their different concerns. This ranged from gaining social respect by acquiring middle-class social status, to finding a good, collaborative work environment, a stable job with a contract and a good salary to be able to buy a house for themselves and their families, to becoming a fair-minded manager who would work alongside her employees and support them. Similarly to what expressed in the first interview, behind these concerns, what students confirmed to value through acquiring a tertiary vocational qualification was financial stability, social recognition to escape a life of precarity, deprivation, exclusion and

discrimination and to be valued at work and in their society. For some, making their families proud and being able to provide for them, give them a better life and an escape from their precarity was what motivated them the most. Juan's narrative on future aspirations is interesting as it shows the pervasiveness of the Chilean individualist, capitalist and consumeristic society in shaping disadvantaged young people's aspirations. For him, the ambition to change social status and become a middle-class professional, move to a well-off municipality of Santiago, own a department, buy a nice car, have a nice mobile phone and a big TV, "all those things that people like" were key motivators. Being successful for him would imply "having what I have always wanted to have and become more than ordinary people [...] occupying a higher social rank than those who earn the minimum salary, those who could not get to achieve what I have". The above evidence suggests that when speculating on their future, compared to male students, female TVET achievers showed more bounded rationality grounded in reflexive considerations of their concerns against their (limited) opportunities.

Tertiary vocational education aspirers in the labour market

Six months after the first interview, five tertiary TVET aspirers were working instead of attending tertiary vocational programmes. Three of them were employed in the companies where they had done their work-placement. Carlos was working in the communication services of a telecommunication company; Leandro was working as a mechanic repairing cars in a garage; Emma was working in the inventory area of an automotive company's warehouse. Two were working in sectors not related to their vocational education. Marta was a care worker for young people with disabilities; and Pablo was working as a mason with his father.

Factors hindering the achievement of aspired transitions and explaining transition outcomes

Students in this sub-group had been identified as predominantly 'wait and see'. Although in the first interview they had expressed their desire to enrol in tertiary TVET institutions after their secondary education, they also would not have rushed the enrolment but waited to assess how feasible it would have been for them enrolling that same academic year considering their circumstances and priorities. Indeed, the urgency to find a job, for the majority possibly in their sector, and start working had emerged across their narratives in

the first interview. Therefore, had they managed to enrol in TVET institutions immediately after their work-placement, they would have combined study and work.

A complex interplay between institutional, structural and individual factors explains the transition experiences of these young people. Having successfully completed their work-placement and had been offered a job after that was a determinant factor in explaining the choice of working for a year and postponing tertiary education to the following academic year. This was the case for the majority of this sub-group who felt very lucky to be given such a great opportunity. Indeed, as often stated by research participants across categories, in Chile usually graduate secondary vocational students find skilled jobs in their sector if they are employed after their work-placement or through “the right social connections”, a much-referenced factor throughout most of the interviews across groups. These were students who also showed more personal dispositions to postpone the enrolment in tertiary education of a year. Carlos said:

I was lucky because in my company they usually employ people with a tertiary education qualification. I have a qualification, but it's a secondary education qualification, I don't have a professional qualification, and in my company, they only offer job to professionals. [...] But in January a colleague of mine got sick and I took over all his shifts and that's why they offered me the job... I mean, they saw that I was responsible, that I didn't leave them in troubles... so they hired me.

Regardless of whether they had been granted *Gratuidad* or not (not all of them met nationality or economic criteria or had applied) and after mulling possibilities over for weeks, they had eventually decided to start working and put their aspirations (and *Gratuidad*) on hold for a year. Family economic hardship and contingent family circumstances, the need for economic independence and for financial security, and personal dispositions were major factors that informed their choices to accept the job offer.

The bureaucracy of school-to-tertiary education transitions was another relevant factor informing the transition outcomes of the majority of this sub-group. The complexity of the enrolment's bureaucracy and the late timing in releasing information on *Gratuidad* or *PSU* had hampered the possibilities these young people had to enrol in the programmes of their choice and at a vocational institute accepting *Gratuidad*. Interestingly, individual responses towards this intricate system differed across participants. Pablo had taken personal responsibilities for starting the enrolment's process late, which he also found to be more complex to understand than he had expected and, thus, longer to complete. Self-blame

narratives and ruminations on his course of actions were predominant in the way he described his transition experience especially because he felt responsible for “having the *Gratuidad* and blowing it up”. By contrast, students whose enrolment was affected by delays on information concerning the outcomes of students’ application for *Gratuidad* and the results of their *PSU* expressed resentment for such a system. For example, Marta had started the enrolment process in advance, but the delays on *Gratuidad* and *PSU* results had left her with no places for the programme she wanted to attend in the institution of her choice. Carlos had a similar experience and commented that he had been like a “table tennis ball jumping from one office to the other trying to understand the reason for the delay”. They both felt discouraged by the system. Carlos said that “this was one of the reasons for which I did not study”. Although in his case these delays did not jeopardise his choice between education and work as he already had been offered the work contract, they had put him down.

Unlike Carlos, Marta’s work-placement experience in the electricity department of a small machinery maintenance company had not ended with a contract. Despite the enriching, inclusive and enjoyable experience she described, it emerged powerfully that she had experienced gender discrimination. Nevertheless, Marta seemed to have internalised patriarchal social system and to have normalised gendered abuses to the point that she would refer to her employees as “incredible colleagues” downplaying the fact that it was likely due to false sexist rumours that her all-male colleagues spread about her that she was not offered a job there. Reflecting over what had happened, she felt disappointed and angry for the lost opportunity which left her in desperate need to search for a job. Yet, she blamed herself for trusting people too easily and felt relieved for not having to deal with those people anymore. Findings suggest that gender discrimination and abuses she would find in her sector reinforced her aspiration to change specialism.

The above evidence indicates how the interplay between structural, institutional factors inter-linkage and individual factors are mediated in ways that can result in cumulative (dis)advantages making transition experiences unique and hard to predict. While all post-school transitions did not seem to be void of complexities and individual self-blame for wrong choices, evidence indicated that changing specialism either for personal interests in other areas or for gendered occupational considerations and experiences of sexism seemed to lead to more complex and prolonged transitions and higher possibilities of facing precarity and being stuck in low-paid, low-skills, unstable jobs.

Experiences of transition's outcomes on wellbeing and on the feeling in control

Despite the diverse transition experiences and the discouragements that some felt in the transition process, the majority of participants in this sub-group expressed contentment and fulfilment with their choices and transition outcomes. They used expressions such as “so far, I believe I have taken the right decision in choosing to work” (Carlos), “I’m satisfied of what I’ve reached! It’s even more than I expected!” (Emma), “I truly don’t regret my choice” (Leandro), “at the beginning it was tiring, but now I’m loving it, it completely fulfils me” (Marta).

Having reached some independence, self-sufficiency, and economic security by doing something that they liked, that constantly challenged them and taught them new things, in a positive working environment and with possibilities of progression in their workplace explained the sense of fulfilment and control over their lives that the majority expressed. This was well summarised by Leandro:

I already have a good job and I'm learning a lot [...] I even study at home, apart from working, I study at home, I do research, I ask [my colleagues] what that piece is called and I go and research it on Google [...] A good job is when you feel good at work because there is nothing worse than say ‘Oh, I have to go, I don’t want to’! or something that I do not like and [...] a good work environment makes it a good job, a place where one feels good.

Economic security was allowing them to contribute to their family’s needs and to ease the economic burden of their parents, to go out with friends, buy new clothes and save some money for their tertiary education. When this economic security was not linked to a job they liked or that they had chosen because it was a path they wanted to invest in, findings indicate that giving a purpose to what they were doing as instrumental to the achievement of their educational aspirations helped them feeling in control of their futures. Marta commented:

I told myself that I dedicate this year to make money and next year I go back to study and if they ask me for the tools for gastronomy, I will have it... I won’t need to worry about where I can get the money this month to buy the material... I plan to have everything ready so that nothing will be missing next year and I won’t have to worry about anything.

Contentment and fulfilment seemed to also be informed by the very fact of having a job and not having to face the harsh realities of job seeking, unemployment, precarity. For example, Marta, who appeared to have suffered the most from cumulative disadvantage in her transition experience, made some gendered occupation reflections on the unlikelihood to

find a job in her vocational sectors (electricity) as a young woman. She described her utterly discouraging experiences of job seeking for all sorts of qualified and unqualified jobs, and expressed her gratitude and sense of being in control again of her life and able to steer her future thanks to a job opportunity as a care worker she had found and which had saved her as she “was left with nothing, not even 10 £ ... you know what it means having nothing?”

Aspirations (trans)formation, expectations and life projects

Despite the frustration and disappointment towards their education system that some had experienced and in spite of the sacrifices that getting further education would entail in terms of combining work with studying that all of them would do, they maintained their high aspirations to get the highest tertiary TVET qualification and become professionals in their vocational specialism or other sectors of their choice. They still believed that getting a tertiary educational qualification was the only way to climb the ladder attached to their vocational sector or change specialism and fulfil themselves in their dreamed professions.

Those who were working in their area of specialism, the work-placement experience and the work experience accumulated so far had helped them clarify their mind about which programme to study and how to link this to their future career development. They trusted that the professional experience and the specialised knowledge that they would acquire over a year or two of work would enhance their probability of success in their studies. They also had confidence in the linear achievement of a professional life through TVET.

However, this trust and clarity of mind varied according to different perceptions of their own abilities which contributed to their confidence in succeeding in their paths and the opportunity costs of their aspirations. Lower self-perceptions, family responsibilities and economic hardship at home were associated with lower expectations on the achievements of high educational and career aspirations. Interestingly, these were not necessarily more rationally bounded to their opportunity structures. For example, Carlos expressed uncertainties over the possibility of becoming an engineer in telecommunication and considered changing to gastronomy and becoming entrepreneur by opening a restaurant as an alternative to his aspirations.

As emerged from previous research participants, the aspiration to become entrepreneurs was particularly strong in this group had seemed to reflect the desire to escape discrimination

and abuses that exist in waged labour as consequence of highly competitive and neoliberal systems and that often these students had been experienced by observing their parents. It also reflected their desire to be better and more just managers for their employees. This experience of class abuses and discrimination for ‘having less’ and the aspiration to change status, to gain a better position in the society, to ‘have my own things’, but also to become a better human being is well expressed by Marta:

There are people who may discriminate against you a lot, either for having more money, having a better economic situation, a better house, a better neighbourhood [...] for this I have to be patient because there are people who for having a little more, they walk on you... this gives me a lesson to learn for *when I have my own things*, not be the same as these people [...] it’s not that having a little more makes me discriminate others... when I fulfil my dreams [to open a restaurant] and someone comes out of nowhere [to ask for job], I am going to forget *where I come from*... if I have gone through the same discrimination or worse, I am [not] going to discriminate [other people for having less]. My idea is to give everyone the opportunity, although I don't know... there will be people who may fail you, you may stab you in the back, [the important things is] not be spiteful and continue to give other people a chance.

Among the broader life aspirations, what these young people valued the most was “having my own things”, “owning a house”, “having my own business and being my own manager” and “having my family happy and worriless” and achieving all that on their own, that is free from moral or economic debts for their own successes. Related to this, ambitions of developing a sense of self-worth, gaining social respect, and being acknowledged in their society emerged powerfully.

Work aspirers

When interviewed the first time, 4 (14%) research participants had expressed their intention to find a job in their vocational sector (which for the four of them was Administration and Logistics) and start working soon after completing their work-placement. Six months after completing their upper-secondary vocational education, none of them had achieved what they had aspired to. Rafaela, Natalia and Camila were unemployed and seeking work, while Daniel was self-employed in the informal sector.

Work aspirers unemployed or in informal work

Factors hindering the achievement of aspired transitions and explaining transition outcomes

The main factor that was hindering the achievement of work aspirers' ambitions to find a job (preferably) in their sector was correlated to the labour market prospects of unskilled, precarious jobs or unemployment awaiting young graduates if not employed after their work-placement. Work aspirers described unexpected difficulties in finding a job, both within and outside their sector. The main barrier to employment they encountered was the experience required by employers. Within their sector, for jobs that did not need a tertiary education qualification, the work experience required varied from a minimum of one year up to five years (presumably depending on the type of job they were looking at). The year-experience was a requirement including for more precarious and unskilled, low-paid jobs (e.g. shop assistant, supermarket attendant, waiter), what work aspirers did not expect. Indeed, they describe the job seeking as "unexpectedly difficult" and were discouraged precisely by the work experience employers required. For example, Natalia commented:

I don't understand how they can expect that people who recently graduated from school access the labour market if everyone asks for a minimum of a year of working experience. It's impossible that someone who has just completed secondary education has that experience... she has just left school! [...] Honestly, I thought it would be easier, but in life nothing is easy, you always have to break your back!

As emerged for previous groups, work aspirers preferred to seek job through their social connections, although they also used the Internet, newspapers or job fairs. Findings indicate that work aspirers were not just passively accepting these deadlock situations but were reacting to these in different and individual ways. For example, by taking up odd or informal jobs while still looking for something better, as in the case of Daniel, or by applying to all sorts of jobs even without the year-experience required and considering being a street vendor while seeking proper jobs, as it was for Natalia. Although they were still giving preference to their sector, they were looking for any work in any sector. As Daniel put it, "I keep sending CVs through my family members, even to where my father works, in a belt factory [...] it's not like I need to work in this [vocational sector], it's more like, I need to work".

Concerning their work-placement experience, the four of them had successfully finalized it in national/international companies and local government's institutions. They all described it as an enriching, transformative and fulfilling experience. The skills gained, the friendly and collaborative work environment, feeling welcomed and appreciated by colleagues and

managers, having made valuable contributions in the workplace were the main factors mentioned across the group. These experiences had been crucial to improve soft and hard skills in the workplace, to make them feel competent in their work and confident in their employability opportunities, and it had also reinforced their interest in working in their vocational sector (although this was still a temporary interest for some).

Notwithstanding their commitment to performing well in their work-placement, their ‘willingness to labour’ longer hours, and a general “good disposition to work, as everything they asked me to do, I would do it” (Daniel), none of them had been employed after the work-placement. This was due to businesses’ organisational challenges, impossibilities to enlarge the workforce or internal dispositions rather than to the individual’s (in)capacity to have made good use of that learning/professionalising experience. Individual proactivity and willingness to labour seemed to be still fundamental in facilitating employability opportunities in case of favourable organisational circumstances. For example, Camila and Daniel’s positivity, dynamicity and resourcefulness during the work-placement emerged strongly from their narratives on their work-placement experiences. Both had been left with hopes to be employed as the places where they had done the work-placement expected to be in the condition to create new job opportunities and expand their workforce in the forthcoming future.

Experiences of transition’s outcomes on wellbeing and on the feeling in control

Unexpectedly, despite their current difficult and discouraging experiences in finding a job, work aspirers were proud of and fulfilled by their achievements and still positive about their futures. They were proud of having finished their vocational upper-secondary education, of having successfully completed their work-placement and having obtained the title of middle-level technician. There was also a general sense of being in control of their lives and in the right ‘track’ to achieve a good life. Camila said:

What’s important is that my CV now says ‘technician’. Before it said ‘aspired technician’... I love it! I didn’t think this would ever be possible. Indeed, the other day I was thinking of going to school and tank them. I’m super grateful to the school, to those where I did the work-placement, to *FORGE* for helping me now with the job seeking... I’m grateful to everybody!

A factor that seemed to emerge as important in contributing to their sense of achievement was their family support and pride for their successes. Their families valued very their

educational achievements strongly as it was considered essential to enhance life conditions, increase work opportunities and lead a better life than their parents have had.

Aspirations (trans)formation, expectations and life projects

The majority of work aspirers reaffirmed their long-term professional aspirations and were optimistic about achieving what they had hoped to after secondary education. For the two work aspirers who wanted to continue in their TVET sector, this meant being able to better define what position they wanted to occupy in their future within their sector and how to get there. One of them had still entrepreneurial aspirations which were better explained by the willingness to be empathetic with the employees and to treat them fairly than by economic considerations. One of the two work aspires who aimed to change sector and move abroad for her long-term future but was unsure of what career to pursue and where, still wanted to leave behind the linear achievement of a professional life through TVET. However, she had clearer ideas of what career she wanted to achieve (becoming PR manager of a company in Chile) and what she needed to achieve her aspirations.

Importantly, what differed compared to the first interview was that three of them had expanded their educational aspirations. That is, their vague idea about pursuing a qualification in tertiary education had become a concrete plan for the following academic year. While two of them expressed preferences for university (for the prestige of university institutions), one was aiming at TVET institutions. They all aimed to combine study and work. Regardless of where they aimed to study and how feasible their plans were, their transition experiences had enhanced their understanding of labour market requirements, making them realise the value of tertiary educational credentials if they wanted stable jobs, with a permanent contracts and opportunities for career progresses. As Natalia said:

[Getting into tertiary education is now a priority, even if someone offered me a job with a contract]. Probably in that case I would try to combine work and studies. [this is the biggest change in my life], going from not being motivated to study to be willing to do that.

There was only a case where aspirations had been adapted and bounded to restrictions faced during the transition. Rafaela, whose highest aspirations in the first interview was to move abroad and establish a career in the sector of gastronomy, she was now aiming to work in her TVET sector in Chile. Findings suggest that she had internalised the harsh reality of the job market and the limitations of her opportunity structures which had led her to negotiate a

scale-down version of aspirations. This means she had lowered these to possibly attending some course of gastronomy as a hobby, without the ambition to make a living out of it. Furthermore, compared to the other work aspirers, she had lower work aspirations and was settling with the idea of being a simple technician as she had been in her work-placement. This was for the unaffordable costs of TE in Chile, as commented in the first interview as well. Data suggest that she did not meet the economic requirement to apply for *Gratuidad*. Yet, neither was she able to pay for her education, nor she could count on her family's economic support:

It is difficult to study and it is difficult to work [...] Next year I want to study, but that is another problem [...] It is like my last solution [...] Because what I was seeing with my partner is that [one has to be the poorest among the poor], basically one has to live on the street to have a scholarship or something like that [...] if I find a job [to pay for my studies, I will study] because if I cannot find it, I can't afford to study. [But I would not consider studying further if I found] a job in my sector.

If work aspirers' long-term professional aspirations were overall reaffirmed and educational aspirations were made more concrete and, for most of them, expanded, their work expectations for the short-, medium-term future were scaled down. In other words, the discouraging and unexpectedly harsher reality of job seeking had been created a breach between their desirable transition and what they could achieve in reality. This means that they were ready to adapt to any sort of job if no valuable job opportunities came up.

In terms of broader life projects, work aspirers wanted to "be happy" and have a "good life". This entailed having a stable job and, consequently, the economic stability to be able to "give back" to their families. This "giving back" and redeeming their families through their successes was a very important life goal for this group and was a priority. Other things they wanted to achieve in life included buying a house, having their own things, building a family and being able to travel. Being successful in life for them involved having the right approach in front of hardships because "life is full of difficulties, but the important thing is having a problem-solving and goal-oriented mindset with the support of family and friends". The case of work aspirers is emblematic of how low-class individuals respond to structural constraints in a highly neoliberal and capitalist society, which creates unequal possibilities, which foments poverty, but praises competition, self-efficiency, and the individualisation of failures and successes.

The following chapter concludes this thesis by giving a summary of the main findings presented in this and in the previous chapter and discussing these against existing literature and relevant theoretical perspectives. Policy implications, limitations of the study and recommendations for further studies are also provided.

CHAPTER 7 - Discussion and Conclusions

In this thesis I explored the educational and professional aspirations and choices of disadvantaged students in transition from upper-secondary vocational education to further education or work in Chile. By delving into students' perceptions of valuable possibilities and opportunities, the thesis aimed to understand how individual agency factors interact with and respond to structural conditions and circumstances, cultural and institutional factors shaping aspirations in the making of post-school transitions (Archer, 2003, 2007, 2012). I have argued that understanding aspirations and the courses of action to achieve these is crucial to show strengths and limitations of social action theories in youth transitions and of orthodox TVET theoretical and policy accounts. To address its aims and objectives (Chapter 4), I developed the following research questions:

How do TVET graduates form and transform their educational and professional aspirations and what choices do they make to achieve these during their post-school transitions?

1. What do TVET graduates aspire to after the completion of their upper-secondary vocational education and why? (i.e. meaning and rationale)
2. What factors contribute to form TVET graduates' aspirations and how?
3. How do TVET graduates plan to achieve their aspirations?
4. Have TVET graduates managed to achieve their aspirations six months after completing their upper-secondary vocational education and how? If not, why?
5. How do TVET graduates experience their proximal post-transition situations and the match/mismatch between aspirations and achievements?
6. How has the transition process conditioned/transformed TVET graduates' initial aspirations and why?

This chapter consists of two main parts. The first presents the main findings and discusses them by answering the above research questions. Analysis and discussion are situated against the existing literature and informed by: 1) Archer's Critical Realism (2003, 2007, 2012) and her conceptualisation of structures and agency as distinct and reflexively mediated in the development of aspirations, life projects and courses of action. The role of reflexive *habitus*, *doxa* and instrumental rationality behind aspiration (trans)formation and logic for actions are also examined; 2) Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1995, 1999b, 2005), its focus on human development and individuals' wellbeing and on the importance of focusing on students'

valuable opportunities, the well-being or ill-being freedom to choose and to transform opportunities into achievements. Ultimately, the combination of these two approaches (see Fig. 4.1) allowed to investigate the question “what are people really able to do [which they value] and what kind of person are they able to be?” (Robeyns, 2017, p. 9) from a normative and from a sociological perspective (Chapter 4). The second part of the chapter reflects on the key arguments of the thesis, outlining its original contributions. To conclude, possible policy implications, reflections on the study’s limitations and recommendations for further research will be discussed.

Major findings and discussion

Before transition

RQ1: What do TVET graduates aspire to after the completion of their upper-secondary vocational education and why?

As findings in Chapter 5 indicate, when asked about what they wanted to do, be or become after completing their secondary vocational education, despite the low odds of vocational students accessing university education in Chile (Larrañaga *et al.*, 2013, 2014), 11 (39%) of the 28 students interviewed expressed their desire to go to university, 13 students (46%) aspired to enrol in tertiary TVET institutions as the highest preferred post-secondary transition, and only 4 students (14%) hoped to find a job in their vocational sector as their first and preferred choice.

Acquiring tertiary education qualifications was central for most of these young people’s life projects and ambitions for upward social mobility (Frei, 2017), what reflects the internalisation of the *doxa* on meritocratic hegemony of endless opportunities through education. This cultural embeddedness of aspirations and of the vision of what ‘the good life’ entailed (Appadurai, 2004) seemed to outweigh habituated class dispositions and, in fact, to orient vocational graduates’ predispositions to *habitus* transformation (Bourdieu, 1977; Lehmann, 2009; Threadgold, 2017).

Findings suggest that the rationale behind TVET students’ aspirations and decision-making was informed by reflections that included, but also went beyond, instrumental thinking and economic calculations. Indeed, these entailed hope for better futures, redemption narratives

and desires to aspire high as it is the right thing to do in neoliberal contexts (Zipin *et al.*, 2015). A sense of agency, control over life and the belief in choices emerge as important agential dimensions for analysing the meanings attributed to aspirations, strongly encouraged by the neoliberal “enterprise culture” (Rudd & Evans, 1998, p. 57). When students reflect upon these assumptions, they develop high aspirations which are rational regarding the rhetoric that young people face, but which may not be realisable (Aldinucci *et al.*, 2021).

The analytical distinction between aspirations *for* and *through* university (Carling & Collins, 2018) encapsulated university aspirers’ different rationale underpinning their aspiration to access university. This distinction reflects the intrinsic (education as an ends)/instrumental (education as a means to other ends) value of education distinction, with the former especially concerned with the CA (Robeyns, 2003; Bonvin, 2019). Despite being a very important analytically distinction for CA, in practice instrumental and intrinsic values can be simultaneously present (Walker, 2008; Mkwanzani, 2019). Indeed, although the difference came across as less intuitive and neat from empirical data, this distinction allowed to explore what the students valued about going to university and to challenge narrow productivist assumptions. Those aspiring *for* university (a minority) justified their choice more in the instrumental symbolic value and prestige of these institutions than in reflections concerning specific occupational paths. Therefore, although they did not consciously acknowledge it, they showed some degree of instrumental concern (i.e. for social status). The high reputation and social value of universities in Chile (Chapter 3), seen as proxies of (or means to) an (upper-)middle class status and lifestyle, and of individual social value, are widely acknowledged and tacitly accepted (Canales *et al.*, 2016b; Orellana *et al.*, 2017). This pervasive discourse on university institutions has created collective aspirations and attitudes towards higher education that helps understand this pursuit of prestige that aspirers *for* university dreamt about.

Indeed, among their motivations behind the aspiration to access (the most prestigious) universities, were benefits in terms of life projects, and social redemption through acquisition of university credentials. Findings indicate that a complex interplay between individual, structural, institutional and cultural factors contributed to explain the choice *for* university of these students and their willingness to continue in the vocational field of studies of secondary education. Such complex interaction may have augmented their perceptions of ‘*doxic fit*’ with the fields in HE they aimed at, informed by seemingly contextually bounded

rational thought processes. These findings challenge the homogeneous theorisation of young people from low socioeconomic background as lacking agency and capacity to confront their structural circumstances. It demonstrates that aspirers *for* university's aspirations were informed by unique reflexive deliberations on what they valued assessed against their circumstances, to strategically utilise their opportunity structures in ways similar to Archer's autonomous reflexives (Archer, 2003).

Chapter 5 has described the stronger intrinsic/vocational motivation for available fields of study of aspirers *through* university (the majority) who considered university as a means to establish themselves in their dreamed professions (always non in continuity with their vocational field). Findings suggest that aspirers *through* university seemed to have the least clear links between their aspirations and the capabilities to achieve these. As found in other studies (Walker 2007), this was probably due to the fact that changing field of study altogether implied, in Bourdieu's (1977) terms, a degree of *doxic* and habitual discontinuity as they would leave behind the linear achievement of career progression through their TVET route to embark in unfamiliar, less defined and riskier trajectories, made even more so by being the first one in their families to consider such routes. This finding echo studies (see for example Valiente *et al.*, 2020) that challenge the market-model's assumption that secondary vocational graduates make their professional choices based on thorough information assessment.

Although findings show that aspirers *through* university were not exempt from instrumental considerations on the costs and benefits of their desired future professions, contrary to some previous research on the strong employment value that working-class students ascribed to university (Bradley & Ingram, 2013), these students attributed more normative and pro-social meanings to aspirations. In this respect, some aspirers *through* university showed meta-reflexivities (Archer, 2003) as their professional aspirations reflected moral concerns on issues of equalities of opportunities and social rights informed by the social inequalities, abuses and discrimination they had directly or indirectly (through observing their parents) experienced.

Archer's (*ibid.*) emergentist explanatory framework of social action allows us to understand TVET students' university aspirations as an overestimation of benefits against costs and not (just) as structurally or economically determined. Furthermore, through the CA it was possible to understand that what students had reason to value through education was not

solely linked to economic advancement. Central to their motivations was the recognition aspect (Powell & McGrath, 2019a) which included desires to raise self-worth, contribute to their family and make them proud, expand life opportunities, be engaged in something meaningful and feel proud in their work, be treated in an equitable and dignified way in the workplace and in the society. Therefore, evidence indicates that the rationale for university aspirations, and for discontinuity of fields between secondary and tertiary education, were a desire for social mobility and a reflexive response to social inequalities and meritocratic discourses of endless opportunities to do whatever they wanted, if they had worked hard.

Findings on university education aspirers represent an emblematic example of the limits of interpreting aspirations exclusively in terms of rationalistic cost-benefit analysis, but also of social positioning as a predictor of aspirations. They also challenge structuralists' homogeneous theorisation of young people from low socioeconomic background as 'in deficit' of aspirations, lacking agency and capacity to confront their structural circumstances and aspire to alternative futures, other than those determined or constrained by their social positioning (Reay, 2001; Furlong, 2009; Bradley & Ingram, 2013; Burke, 2018). Their inflated aspirations (particularly so for aspirers *through* university) can be understood if considered against the pervasiveness of the culturally embedded and collectivised belief in the neoliberal meritocratic mantra of individual effort and endless opportunities to be or become whatever they wanted in life. Without this contextual understanding, these high aspirations could come across as irrational. Yet, they are rational regarding the rhetoric that young Chileans face, but which may not be realisable (Aldinucci *et al.*, 2021). This is suggestive of a new form of rationality, a sort of 'hegemonic rationality' or 'aspirational rationality' as it stems from the dominant cultural discourse and aspirational society rather than from individual's assessment of their own situation.

In this sense, findings show that before the post-school transitions, when young people had not yet experienced the real world out of school and could not draw on their own experiences of failures and successes, it was the deeply-ingrained neoliberal ideology of endless opportunities for all, the belief in personal effort as means to achieve what they valued and to be the project makers of their own biographies (du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Bryant & Ellard, 2015), and the positive perception of their own abilities that informed university aspirers' understanding of what was available for them and against which they constructed aspirations (aspirations window) (Ray, 2006). Thus, the Chilean case contradicts previous literature,

especially among structuralists, which conceptualises aspirations that as bounded to the social position individuals occupy in the society (see also Appadurai, 2004).

Differently to university aspirers, and particularly *through* university aspirers, tertiary vocational education aspirers and work aspirers showed aspirations that were more bounded and adapted to the restrictions they faced within their opportunity structures (Bernard *et al.*, 2011). Bourdieu (1977; Bourdieu & Wacquan, 1992) sustains that individuals internalise structural disadvantages (e.g. class differences) creating endure and generative dispositions which reflect individuals' social positions and ways into which individuals have been socialised. In this view, aspirations are essentially determined by the probability of success individuals have in achieving a desired goal and reflect a "sense of reality" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164) of what constitutes their aspirations window (Ray 2006).

Tertiary vocational education aspirers recognised the importance of tertiary education credentials to have a dignified life but considered university as not for "the likes of them" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 77) for both economic (unaffordable costs directly and indirectly correlated to university education) and educational reasons (the academic standard needed to access and to progress in such institutions). In aspiring to tertiary vocational education, students may be reflexively transforming their habituated class dispositions into a logic for aspiring in bounded and differentiated ways, which reflected structural constraints as well as individual dispositions and preferences (Aldinucci *et al.*, 2021). As Bonvin (2019) argues, by looking at education from the CA rather than from HCT, it can be potentially transformative rather than simply as adaptive to the requirements of the labour market. This is consistent with Bourdieu's (1977) *doxic* view of aspirations as informed by the probability of success and what is (in)accessible 'for the likes of us'. However, it also shows "a class-based aspirationalism" (Bradley & Ingram, 2013, p. 59) informed by the experiential capital (e.g. the experienced struggles of their parents and the limited opportunities they have grown up with) and the emotional, psychological and economic investment in education to succeed in 'the making of (middle-)class' subjects (Avis and Atkins, 2017).

The logic behind tertiary TVET aspirations included some instrumental rationality but less than that encapsulated in conventional HCT and rational choice approaches. The high educational and career aspirations that this group manifested (i.e. getting the professional certificate, becoming professionals in their sectors, having managerial/entrepreneurial aspirations) included the need to gain social respect ("become someone"); end social abuses

such as “constantly being treated like rubbish by the society” that they also experienced by observing their parents; and live a life with dignity. These students were fully aware that tertiary TVET offered them the only feasible route to TE in an extremely marketised and socially stratified education system. Continuity or discontinuity in fields of study were better explained by past educational experiences, vocational interests/intrinsic motivations and gendered occupational choices, rather than simply returns to education. This might represent a degree of reflexive *habitus* and of *doxa* related to certain fields. Thus, these students were not passive victims of structural constraints. In fact, they reflexively assessed their concerns against their context, demonstrating a range of bounded, reflective and motivational reasons for their choices. Some forms of communicative reflexivity (Archer, 2003) seemed to emerge especially among female participants who would mull over their post-school aspirations and opportunities within themselves and seek advice from their parents or family members. This might be due to patriarchal norms which is reflected in inequalities in women’s freedom to choose, possibilities of achievements, and in the traditional role they have in the family and in the society (as wives and mothers). As Arujo and Martuccelli (2012) state, this is particularly so in working-class families as they are usually less exposed to cultural influences that promote gender equalities and are more rooted in traditional models of relationships between men and women. However autonomous reflexivity seemed to predominate, what reflected the responsibility students felt for being the makers of their own biographies. This finding provides empirical evidence in support of Archer’s (2012) argument that communicative reflexivity is reducing in late modernity.

In ways similar to tertiary TVET aspirers, a combination of structural, institutional and individual factors has contributed to inform the long-held habituated, classed aspirationalism of work aspirers, making them reflect on their short-term opportunities in bounded and instrumental ways. Chapter 5 has demonstrated that structural barriers in access to TE, together with perceptions of low academic abilities and low motivation for studying, partly explain the work aspirations of these students. The unaffordability of TE, reiterated by work aspirers, can be interpreted as a capability deprivation that impacted on their freedom to choose, thus affecting their well-being, their flourishing and their achievements (Powell & McGrath, 2019a).

Yet, this classed aspirationalism came together with hopes for better future, redemption narratives and dispositions to aspire high spurred by individual desires as well as neoliberal ethos (Zipin *et al.*, 2015) which go beyond rational instrumentality and narrow employability

perspectives and contradict assumptions about working-class youth's 'deficit of aspirations'. This suggests the need to consider more productive conceptualisations of these, informed by forms of rationality and reflexivity. They aspired 'high' as they wanted to become entrepreneurs or move abroad to study and establish themselves in their dreamed professions in (dis)continuity with their TVET field, despite the risks associated with their aspirations. Rather than being purely a strategy to respond to changes of their modern, globalised labour market and fulfil the social and individual responsibilities for their future (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2013), desires for entrepreneurship (across groups) seemed to reflect a desire to escape from vulnerability, discrimination and precarity that exist in waged labour as consequence of highly competitive and neoliberal systems, often experienced by observing their parents.

Again, the neoliberal aspirational culture of endless opportunities, interests for their vocational economic sector and personal interests for different sectors explain the aspirations these young people had to invest in their vocational sector in the long-run or to change sector in the medium-term future better than instrumental calculations based purely upon future wage benefits weighed against the costs of education. Whilst instrumental rationality was apparent, so was autonomous reflexivity on what was possible in students' current circumstances, going beyond both HCT and purely structural considerations. Indeed, they showed engagement in internal conversations to identify their concerns and the course of actions to achieve these (Archer, 2003). Access to TE still appears in the future plans of these students, although they could not delineate a realistic strategy to achieve these long-term goals. Work aspirers' desires for their near future to have their own things, and especially their own house, concealed the urgency of stability and a desire to escape from precarity that can be interpreted as reflexive *habitus* from a CR perspective, as forms of reflexivity emerged within different manifestations of *habitus* (Akram 2013; Decoteau 2016). Work and economic independence were not ends in themselves but means to achieve other ends that they valued which suggest a broader and more comprehensive perspective on human well-being (Tiwari & Ibrahim, 2014; Mkwanzani, 2019).

RQ 2: What factors contribute to form TVET graduates' aspirations and how?

In relation to the role of **education**, previous studies have shown the impact of the institutional *habitus* of the school attended, the educational experience and the role of teachers (Reay, 1998; Bok, 2010; Spohrer, 2016; Tarabini and Curran, 2018) on young people's orientations to the future and on their self-consideration, encouraging or

discouraging post-school choices. In this study the role that such educational factors had in shaping vocational students' aspirations differed across groups and can be understood if considered in combination with other structural and individual factors.

Findings suggest the school's institutional *habitus* and its *doxa* discouraged students to pursue the academic path through university and instead prepared them mainly for the labour market but also to continue their studies in tertiary TVET institutions, in continuity with vocational field between secondary and tertiary education. This school orientation resonated with role and purposes of vocational schools in Chile (MINEDUC, 2016; CEM, 2020). Whereas these contributed to inform the aspirations of tertiary TVET and work aspirers, it did not influence students' ambitions to go to university. As explained above, in this latter case, more than internalising class dispositions reproduced by the school's institutional *habitus* and *doxa*, students showed an internalisation of the dominating sociocultural *doxa* which oriented their predispositions to *habitus* transformation (Lehmann, 2009). The finding for the case of Chile contradicts studies on the impact that institutional *habitus* can have on creating feelings of inadequacy, misplacement and social exclusion for not 'fitting in' with the *doxa* of university institutions (Reay, 2001; Ingram, 2009; Tarabini & Curran, 2018) and on reinforcing working-class *habitus* and identity (Willis, 1977; MacLeod, 2009). Concerning tertiary TVET and work aspirers, developing aspirations to go to tertiary TVET institutions or to find a job as opposed to continuing to study in university institutions were better explained by the interaction of family and individual factors than exclusively by institutional *habitus*. The former included household economic situation and hardships, being exposed to role models who had undertaken pathways similar to the ones participants aspired to and family's expectations. Individual factors included the perceptions of own abilities, individual ambition, interests, motivation to study or enduring predisposition to work, and reflexive modes which mostly recalled Archer's (2003) autonomous reflexives.

Findings illustrate that students' educational experience in relationship with individual factors were important in the choice between continuity or discontinuity in fields of study more than in explaining the ambition to go to university, tertiary TVET or work. For example, a positive learning experience, a growing interest in the vocational field, a positive perception of individual's own abilities in the vocational field, good academic achievements and good relationships with teachers were significant factors that contributed to inform students' aspirations to continue studying in tertiary vocational institutions in the same vocational field.

Students across the three categories associated a positive learning experience with hands-on learning and with connections to the labour market that their course had provided. Findings also indicate that having had hands-on learning increased tertiary TVET and work aspirers' engagement in their vocational sector and their understanding of the subject, which boosted their confidence about their abilities of doing the job. This was particularly so in the case of work aspirers for the numerous connections to the labour market that their vocational programme (Administration and Logistics) offered to its students (seemingly more than the other three courses). Through these opportunities (internship, forklift course and driving licence, school visits to companies) they could put into practice what learnt in class and were exposed to work market's realities. This seemed to have expanded their capabilities to aspire for trajectories alternative to TE/HE and which they had reason to value (Hart, 2013). This finding is also indicative of how in a neo-market model of skill formation such as the Chilean case (Valiente *et al.*, 2020), the lack of articulation among educational levels and the decentralization of educational governance shift the responsibility on teachers for creating connections and opportunities for vocational students. Teachers of Administration and Logistics seemed to be quite proactive in this respect.

This appreciation of hands-on compared to in-class learning reflects the classed and gendered 'head/hands' division informing TVET students orientation to waged labour found in other studies (Lahelma, 2009; Lappalainen *et al.*, 2013; Avis & Atkins, 2017) and seems relevant to understand work aspirers and tertiary TVET aspirers' orientations and disposition. However, it does not explain university aspirers' ambition to embark in an academic path. In this respect, the study of Lehmann (2009) seems more relevant in understanding the vocational value that working-class Canadian students in his study attributed to university. Indeed, similarly to them university aspirers often aimed at practical, hands-on careers (e.g. teaching, dancing, working in performing arts). Differently from Lehmann's students, Chilean students were less concerned with the economic returns of their investment in university and more with the intrinsic value associated to their aspired profession.

Evidence has indicated that across the three groups, the discontinuity between vocational specialisations in secondary education and subsequent educational or professional choices were better explained by strong personal interests for different subjects and for future careers in other fields, an overall disillusionment with the vocational track (mainly due to a lack of

practical learning in school), and gendered occupational choices. The relationship with teachers emerged as important in encouraging and discouraging students' aspirations and in informing (dis)continuity of field of studies. In the case of tertiary TVET aspirers, evidence suggests that teachers' encouragement, support and engagement in their profession was positively correlated to students' willingness to continue studying their vocational track in tertiary vocational institutes. However, findings show that overall positive learning experiences outweighed negative relationships with teachers in informing continuity in fields of study. For university aspirers, the relationship with teachers was a determining factor in different and unexpected ways. On the one hand, having had good relationships, feeling motivated by them to further their studies in the same area of specialisation and even supported in the choice of going to university contributed to students' confidence in succeeding in university (aspirers *for* university). This resonates strongly with empirical evidence on the relationships between students' educational performances and future aspirations and teachers' support, guidance, encouragement (Bok, 2010; Mutekwe *et al.*, 2011; Lappalainen *et al.*, 2013; Grant, 2017; Wang & Doyle, 2020). On the other hand, having had disengaged and unmotivated teachers and having felt unappreciated by them contributed to inform the aspirations to become good educators that a few aspirers *through* university expressed. These messages sent by educators reinforce the roles of teachers in shaping students' aspirations, although here they acted as anti-role models rather than reinforcers of the societal *doxa* on the value of HE.

The study also explored the relationship between upper-secondary education choices (type of school, type of education and vocational track) and aspirations. This was based on the policy assumption on continuity between the vocational field of studies in upper-secondary TVET and the field of studies chosen in TE or the economic sector on the labour market (Arroyo, 2018). As similarly in other studies on the relationship between class position and educational choices in the field of TVET (Powell & McGrath, 2019b), families' socioeconomic background played a major role in the choice of upper-secondary education, more than students' vocations or abilities. As described in Chapter 5, this included multidimensional poverty experienced by the great majority of students interviewed (see also Chapter 4), many of them raised in single mother families, living in poor neighbours and some experiencing problems of parents' alcoholism and deprivation at home. Findings make it arguable whether students had really been able to choose their upper-secondary education which, in turn, heavily conditions post-school opportunities and the capability to transform aspirations into achievements.

In contrast, upper-secondary education choices did not generally seem to inform university aspirers and tertiary vocational education aspirers' future ambitions but were motivated by the need to complete their secondary education with a profession in their hands. In the case of work aspirers, choosing a vocational school seemed also related to their long-held intention to work after compulsory schooling. Although in some cases gendered considerations and interest in specific vocational fields offered by the school had informed students' choices of vocational track, for the majority this was not based on a vocational interest nor on long-term plans. This does not come with surprise given the young age in which these students have to make such choices and the poor career counselling and support they receive. This finding has policy implications and resonates with studies that question the traditional role that TVET education has in Chile as direct route to specific sectors of the labour market (linked to the specialism chosen in upper-secondary education). The findings in this thesis shows that this role is not so relevant anymore considering the changes in the global economy and in society, such as the expansion of TE from the demand-side, even among low class, vocational students, and in routes not necessarily linked to vocational specialism chosen in upper-secondary education (Sepúlveda, 2016).

Evidence indicates a strong presence of class-based reflections on the sense of otherness, 'them/us', when referring to students from academic schools and the awareness that vocational education was for poor people. However, the Chilean case shows again that the neoliberal, meritocratic ethos on individualisation of failures and successes outweighed the uncondusive environment of upper-secondary public vocational education to develop their capability to aspire high (Hart, 2013; Mkwanzani, 2019). In other words, evidence demonstrates that upper-secondary education choices did not (necessarily) represent a straitjacket. In fact, students (especially aspirers *through* university and tertiary TVET aspirers in discontinuity) would not passively accept the constraints on post-school transitions that their upper-secondary seemed to pose and did, in fact, subjectively define their aspirations and projects (Archer, 2003). This does not mean necessarily that their aspirations were realisable or that they would know how to link aspirations (their freedom to choose for their well-being) with the capabilities to achieve these (their freedom to achieve well-being) (DeJaeghere, 2018; Mkwanzani, 2019). An example of this was the inability some students manifested to understand the bureaucracy behind enrolment process for which they needed the support of schools' counsellors. However, it provides evidence of the need

to delve into vocational students' aspirations to reimagine TVET beyond mere and narrow productivist assumptions.

Concerning **institutional factors**, evidence available indicates that the recently introduced *Gratuidad* scheme (Chapter 3) was a major factor that made TE (especially university institutions) as feasible in the imaginary of university aspirers and tertiary TVET aspirers. There is not enough evidence that supports the push or obligation to aspire 'high' (aiming to TE) that such mechanism can generate in disadvantaged students. However, the acknowledgement made by few students that *Gratuidad* was a great opportunity that their generation was offered (compared to previous generations), that they must not waste and that now making it to TE/HE was all a matter of individual commitment and motivation seemed to point at this direction.

PACE programme was another institutional form of support that contributed to a lesser extent to inform aspirations for those who aimed to university. However, while *Gratuidad* powerfully predominated the narratives of students for its more 'universal' approach considering the category of students interviewed (most of them belonging to the lowest quintile of income), few university aspirers mentioned *PACE* probably for the academic selectivity and requirements needed to receive the full advantages of the programme. Differently from *Gratuidad* scheme, *PACE* seemed to be further the discourse on individual merit, self-determination and proactivity that neoliberal ideologies extensively use to compensate for the absence of equitable institutional support and forms of social securities (Leyton, 2020). Although evidence is thin, it seems to suggest that being a *PACE* beneficiary came with the responsibility of having to aspire 'high' and take advantage of the benefits given by the programme. Firstly, and most important, the fact that *PACE* students were granted places in *PACE*-affiliated university without the need for the *PSU*. Secondly, the possibility to receive the psycho-social and professional support to make informed and reflected transition decisions, which is not provided for most students. Lastly, the academic and psycho-social support they would receive during their first year of university. Further discussion on these programmes/policies will be provided under policy implications. This programme seemed to largely influence the university aspirations of the two *PACE* beneficiaries in this group. Contrarily, and unexpectedly, participating in *PACE* activities contributed to reinforce some students' perceptions of 'doxic fit' with TVET rather than with universities.

For work aspirers, the lack of clarity, and a seemingly lack of interest in finding out more about financial aids/application processes/eligibility criteria could be related to the lack of capability to navigate the information system young people are provided with (Appadurai, 2004). Along with this, the mistrust towards institutions that these group felt was indicative of an individualised way of responding to opportunity structures. This individualisation of risks shows students' agency in the making of their own project (Bryant & Ellard, 2015) which they reflexively consider against their circumstances (Archer, 2003).

In line with Araujo and Martuccelli (2012) analysis of the important role that **family** plays in Chile given the absence of other forms of institutional support, this thesis has revealed the centrality that families had in young people's lives. Concerning the role of family in shaping young people's aspirations, some authors have suggested a relationship between higher parental educational expectations/higher family's social status and better material support for their children and higher educational aspirations (Schoon *et al.*, 2007; McCulloch, 2017). Likewise, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) sustain that differentiated processes of socialisation and opportunities that families from different socioeconomic backgrounds can offer to their children impact on their children's aspirations and attainment in adulthood. However, this doctoral thesis resonates more with studies that have found a positive relationship between parental aspirations and children's aspirations despite social class factors and socioeconomic disadvantage (Schoon *et al.*, 2004). With minor difference across groups, young people felt emotionally supported by their families in their post-school choices. In only few cases this support seemed to extend to possibilities of material/economic support. In some cases, this clearly implied family's disposition to go into debts to support children's education. Although many parents seemed to have aspirations for TE for their children, from students' narratives parents came across as supportive of any choice they would make. Their aspiration was to see their children having a better life than they did and which betrayed a seemingly personal redemption that they would experience through their children's achievements (Rondini, 2016). In a context where meritocratic ideologies, social inequalities and stratified mechanisms of social mobility coexist, the preference, not expectations, parents had for TE can be understood if linked to the pervasive Chilean policy and cultural discourse on the fundamental role of education for upward social mobility.

Findings indicate that students had internalised the life goal of 'doing better than their parents' and succeed in life (Canales *et al.*, 2016). However, parental hope or preferences seemed less related to the development of university aspirations than to the reinforcement of

tertiary TVET aspirations and work aspirations. As evidence suggests, this might be because overall parents did not own educational and cultural capitals to understand, guide and support their children in their post-school transition choices, what was particularly evident in the case of university aspirations (Schoon *et al.*, 2004). For university aspirers it can be inferred that neoliberal ideologies and forms of socialisation outside families may have mediated family's economic hardship and lack of proper guidance. Although with exceptions, it seemed that less parental involvement in children's life, attitudes of compliance with any choice that would allow their children to have a decent life and family economic hardship had contributed to the formation of 'lower' short-term ambitions as for work aspirers. Likewise, a higher degree of parental involvement and higher expectations, which were found in families (a small minority) where older siblings or other family members had gone to TE, seemed to be correlated to TVETE/HE aspirations in ways that at times were felt as an obligation and at times as a motivating factor.

The findings in this thesis on the role of the structuring influence of the family in generating specific reflexivities partly contradict and partly contribute to Archer's (2003, 2012) modes of reflexivity (see Chapter 2). Briefly, in Archer's study (2012), subjects experiencing contextual continuity, i.e. whose upbringing was "in a close, harmonious and geo-locally stable family" (*ibid.*, p. 16), and recipient of "high relational goods" (*ibid.*, p. 99) (e.g. mutual trust and concern for some family members who are their interlocutors and guides to action) were associated with communicative reflexivity. Communicative reflexives identified with their natal context which they aimed to replicate in their own adult life. By contrast, those experiencing contextual discontinuity and absence of relational goods emergent from the nature of familial backgrounds (e.g. disruptive familial backgrounds) were more likely to develop autonomous reflexivity. This mode was generated by having to independently identify and shape their own way through the world, often also having to support for their parents, for which they had assumed personal responsibility.

This thesis has shown that many of the young people had experienced a combination of the above familial situations, which Archer defines as being in antithesis and generating one or the other mode of reflexivity. Despite the disruptive familial environment that many of the students had grown up in (for which they experienced contextual discontinuity, often resulted in growing up in single-mother families), these young people were still recipient of familial relational goods (i.e. love, caring, reliance, support) especially from their mothers with whom they lived. They showed strong bonds, which they wanted to preserve, with some

members of their families and with their natal community, what are conditions for engendering communicative reflexivities. Indeed, in different ways and to different degrees, families were an important support in their decision-making process. Yet, ultimately these young people would take their decisions autonomously. Differently from Archer's view of how familial situations affect reflexivity, in this study the predominance of autonomous reflexivity was generated by the *doxic* order of neoliberalism legitimising individual independence, rather than being consequence of undermining conditions for the maintenance of communicative reflexivities, such as the decrease amount of familial relational goods in late modernity. Indeed, including in those few cases where contextual continuity was found, young people seemed to have nonetheless developed a predominant mode of autonomous reflexivity alongside some (minor) forms of communicative reflexivity.

In other words, and in addition to the above, across types of aspirers, despite family was largely designated as the ultimate concern of the great majority of them (i.e. 'becoming somebody' as means to redeem their families), which in Archer's theorisation (2012) would engender the communicative mode of reflexivity, the hegemony of the neoliberal *doxa* on individualism and self-sufficiency predominated. This resulted in strengthened "enforced independence [which] play[ed] a very significant role in the making of an autonomous reflexive" (*ibid.*, 174). This seems to explain the overall secondary role that parental expectations had on the formation of aspirations compared to the predominant role of the neoliberal "enterprise culture" (Rudd & Evans, 1998, p. 57)

The relationship between **friends** and aspirations was also interesting. Differently to other studies (Willis, 1977; Fuller, 2009; MacLeod, 2009; Hart, 2013) where to maintain a sense of companionship and affiliation to a group, or to avoid being ostracised by peers, working-class young people would conceal or adapt their high aspirations, here having peers/friends with lower aspirations contributed to boost students' willingness to aspire higher than them and go to tertiary TVET institutes or universities. Likewise, a sense of affiliation, reinforcement and emulation was felt by some TVET aspirers and work aspirers with school peers and friends sharing similar aspirations and future perspectives. In analysing the relationship between friendship and aspirations, although evidence was thin, disjunctures and negotiations seemed apparent between the working-class *habitus* of these young people and their peers, reproduced by the school's institutional *habitus*, and the tendencies to *habitus* transformation manifested by students with high educational aspirations (Mills, 2008).

Concerning the role that the **labour market** had in informing aspirations, findings show that that the perception of the fast-growing sectors of Administration and Logistics together with confidence in the value of their upper-secondary qualification in finding a job contributed to inform aspirations to work. Likewise, reflections on labour market opportunities seemed to be important in the formation of aspirations of TVET aspirers, mainly for those who intended to continue in the same field of study. In both cases, the experiences gained in school and the work-placement that some of them were already doing had given these students the exposure to the labour market related to their sector. This, combined with other individual, institutional and structural factors, enhanced their aspirations to work or continue studying in their vocational sector. Similar rational considerations on possible gender discrimination in some TVET economic sector were apparent among female students who wanted to change vocational specialism through HE or TVET.

By contrast, students who had the intention to leave behind the linear (and less risky) achievement of a professional life through TVET to explore what they valued and fulfilled them did not tend to consider labour market's conditions and requirements of their dreamed occupations in their reflection on aspirations. This was particularly evident for aspirers *through* university as they would embark in completely unknown fields without any relevant guidance, support or role models to follow. The fact that many constructed their aspirations mainly on the belief that acquiring university credentials would grant them a corresponding position in the labour market rather than on information on labour market requirements echoes studies that challenge the market-model's assumption that the majority of Chilean secondary TVET graduates make their transition choices based on instrumental rationality and thorough information (Valiente *et al.*, 2020). Similarly to other studies (Walker, 2007) this finding also revealed an 'instrumental' value attributed to tertiary education which reflects the predominant neoliberal and human capital ideology approaches towards education that predominate in Chile and which lead disadvantaged young people to trust that investing in a university degree would open up to them the corresponding professional opportunities. The risk is that in the current qualification inflation that Chile experiences and the mushrooming of low/questionable quality tertiary education institutions (Chapter 3), students who aspired to change field *through* university may overvalue such institutions and may consequently fail to 'play the system' (*ibid.*) because they do not have the appropriate forms of capital to 'survive' it (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Although young people are deemed responsible for their choices, not all of them have the means and capability to be choosers (Bauman, 1998). These findings provide evidence that shows the limits of Rational Choice Theories and contradict studies on the ability and predisposition of young people to make rational decisions assuming their realistic understandings of educational and labour market opportunities (Polesel *et al.*, 2018). Thus, the rationale underpinning educational or work aspirations cannot be confined to utilitarian goals. This supports empirical studies that have shown the importance of non-utilitarian goals, driven by socially and culturally embedded values, moral or ‘non-rational’ beliefs (Hatcher, 1998; Frye, 2012; Glaesser & Cooper, 2014; Powell & McGrath, 2019b) and of considering aspirations as assertion of morally worthy future selves (Frye, 2012).

RQ3: How do TVET graduates plan to achieve their aspirations?

Discussions on young people’s plans to achieve aspirations exposed their approaches to transitions and the courses of action they envisaged as feasible. Evans’ (2007) notion of “transition behaviours” (p. 86) to opportunity structures and Archer’s (Archer, 2003) concept of “stances” (p. 165) to indicate individuals’ orientation to sociocultural constraints or enablements resulted useful for the analysis of the findings. In this study, Evan’s terminology for transition behaviours was used to convey the degree of agency that young people manifested before their transition. Overall, students across the three groups were identified as ‘taking chances’, ‘step by step’ and ‘wait and see’ in a scale from a more agentic to a less agentic behaviour.

Overall, approaches to achieving aspirations, the intention to persevere in pursuing these or the possibility to opt for alternative paths, a situation that concerned mostly aspirers *through* university given their wider aspirations gap (Ray 2006), depended on young people’s agential responses (i.e. their degree of motivation and believe in hard work and individual effort, proactivity or fatalism/serendipity (Atkins, 2017), (non)-goal-directed attitude (Webb, 2007), to structural/institutional factors (i.e. *PSU*, *Gratuidad*, work-placement and labour market systems, family’s economic hardship, caring responsibilities at home).

In aspirers *for* university, the interplay structures/agency appeared to be mediated by more realistic and contextually bounded rational reflexive processes (e.g. they would continue in their linear, less riskier and more familiar, vocational trajectory from upper-secondary education to university and were more likely to be receiving psycho-social and academic

support in their transitions such as from the *PACE* programme). They were defined as ‘**chance takers**’ and reminded the strategic stance of Archer’s autonomous reflexives (2003) as they tended to take advantage of resources and enablements and use it strategically to achieve their goals. Among tertiary TVET aspirers, the ‘taking chance’ approach was associated to having clear ideas on what to study and where, being goal-directed, and often, but not necessarily, to continuity of vocational field of studies between secondary and tertiary education. They had taken the opportunity to apply for Gratuidad, which was considered a great benefit but also a risk as they would be accountable for paying fees for each course they would not pass and for each extra year of education they might need to complete their cycle. Findings suggest that the economic uncertainty and precarity fostered a strategic and goal-directed approach in, for example, aiming to find a good place where to do their work-placement, often mobilising their social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), hoping to be employed afterwards and be able to self-fund their studies. The importance and mobilisation of social capital was found also among work aspirers, although coexisting with less agentic tendencies in the work-placement and job seeking process. Differently from Evans, this more agentic attitude of chance takers was not encouraged by institutionally or structurally supportive contexts that functioned as a sort of safety net for the transitions to adulthood. In fact, in this study it was a result of structural and institutional circumstances that strongly fostered risk taking and individual accountability for failures and successes.

Within more agentic behaviours, tertiary TVET aspirers who intended to continue in the same field of study and progressively become professional by starting with the more achievable goal of getting the title of higher-level technician were defined ‘**step by step**’. Evans’ (2007) associates this transition behaviour to both a less agentic approach encouraged in weaker institutional contexts and more unpredictable opportunities (as in England), but also to highly structured systems providing differentiated opportunities in the long run (as in Germany). In the Chilean case of TVET aspirers, it is used for its figurative meaning relevant to describe the approach by steps that tertiary TVET system allows (in theory) students to take by first undertaking a technical degree and then moving on to a professional degree (Chapter 3)⁴³. Findings indicate that this cautious approach to aspirations reflected a goal-motivated approach grounded in reflexive and contextually bounded rational considerations of their aspirations gap. Ray (2006) explains that the dimension of the gap between where a person is and where s/he wants to go can be a deterrent or an incentive to turn aspirations

⁴³ In the Chilean literature, this ‘step by step’ approach that the TVET system allows is precisely identified as *estrategia escalonada* (*escalón* = step).

into actions. Setting too high or too low aspirations leads to limited actions because they are perceived as unattainable or not worth the effort. In the case of these tertiary TVET aspirers, setting a lower, more feasible goal (getting the technical degree) to reach a higher (aspired) goal (getting the professional degree) upon the accumulation of educational capital as well as ‘psycho-social capital’ (e.g. confidence) seemed more likely to prevent the ‘too high-too low aspirations/lower effort’ trap that could lead to discouragement and eventually aspirations failure (*ibid.*). In other words, tertiary TVET aspirers seemed to be the ones taking the more reasonable strategy. As for the previous group, reflections on *Gratuidad* also emerged as informing the ‘step by step’ approach. Findings suggest a very neoliberal response to structural constraints, whereby uncertainties and precarity (worsened by the way *Gratuidad* scheme worked) fostered reflexive thinking rationally bounded in their circumstances.

By contrast, less agentic approaches were mainly found among students who intended to change field of studies. These were identified as ‘**wait and see**’ as showed tendencies to rely on serendipity and fate to mediate institutional factors (e.g. *PSU* and *Gratuidad*). In Evans' (2007), the wait-and-see behaviour was associated to more prolonged transitions to the labour market justified by a strong cultural and social legitimisation of staying in education after compulsory school as in the German system, highly discouraged in the English liberalised context which, on the contrary, praised individual independence, especially for working-class young people. The Chilean case contradicts this. Despite the similarities between Chile and the UK in terms of neoliberal ethos, the prolonged transitions (likely to be riskier and discontinuous) that were likely to follow the wait-and-see students seemed to be consequence of its extreme market-led system which supported lifelong learning by letting young people free to choose what to learn, how and when and their lifepaths assuming their ability to make informed decisions based on their instrumental rationality (Valiente *et al.*, 2020), assumption this thesis has argued against.

Indeed, in this study aspirers *through* university, who mostly had a wait-and-see stance to transition, were more idealist and had the least clear links between their aspirations and the capabilities to achieve these. Within this group, it appeared that strategies to overcome *doxic* discontinuities between previous and intended fields of study had yet to be finalised (Aldinucci *et al.*, 2021). Although there is evidence of meta-reflexivity behind their aspirations, the achievement these was left more to fate and serendipity than to a more agentic or subversive approach (as for Archer’s meta-reflexives). For example, findings have

shown that they had not prepared for the *PSU* and would go to the exam with what they knew. Having alternative plans, more grounded in rational and contextually bounded reflections ('choosing' tertiary vocational education if they would not make it for university), seemed to be their way of evading institutional barriers which, however, and similarly to Archer's communicative reflexives (Archer, 2003), resulted in missing the opportunities to achieve their aspirations. Across the three groups, it is the aspirers *through* university that appeared most at risk of disappointment. Differently from working-class vocational students in Atkins' (2017) study that left transition decisions to serendipity and were more prone to accept their 'horizon for actions' (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) rather than engaging with possible ways of transforming it, these findings resonate well with empirical research showing that while youth from disadvantaged backgrounds have the capability and tendency to 'hope' for better futures and a 'good life', not all of them are able or are willing to make plans (Devadason, 2008; Howard et al., 2010; Bryant and Ellard, 2015).

Similarly to aspirers *through* university, in tertiary TVET aspirers the 'wait and see' approach was mainly found among the students who would not continue in the same field of study and who were more undecided on what to study and in which institute. This lack of clarity was experienced with a seemingly low agentic attitude. Transition outcomes would be left to serendipity and fatalism rather than to a proactive and goal-oriented attitude, what could jeopardise their aspiration to get a tertiary vocational qualification. As for work aspirers, findings suggest that a wait-and-see attitude coexisted with a more proactive one in the search for a work-placement. However, their risk of aspirations failure (Ray, 2006) seemed lower than for aspirers *through* university as their aspirations gap was narrower (being TVET institutions non-selective, allowing more study options and more flexibility in combining work and study and their costs were lower than university institutions).

Interestingly, the lack of clarity of what to study and where, the lack of capability to connect aspirations to ways to achieve these in education or the labour market, a seemingly impossibility to count on financial aids, and the lack of knowledge of, or exposure to, the aspired path led some aspirers *through* university and work aspirers have a '**step by step**' approach. In this case, this concept explains an approach that was short-term focused and somehow rational as it implied to put aspirations on hold for a year to better prepare the transitions (for university aspirers) and to adjust actions and plans according to the outcomes of short-term actions and choices (e.g. waiting after the work-placement to plan the next step for both work aspirers and university aspirers). In this sense, the study resonates with Evans'

(2007) in considering this approach as encouraged in weaker institutional contexts and more unpredictable opportunities especially for working-class young people. What the Chilean case adds to this is the high level of neoliberal-induced precarity and uncertainty that vocational graduates faced and within which these young people had to negotiate their transitions to adulthood.

Interestingly, while in Evans (2007) transition behaviours were strongly influenced by individuals' structural and institutional systems, in this thesis more approaches were found within the same system and across young people with similar socioeconomic characteristics. Likewise, the study has not found the same correspondence between modes of reflexivity and stance to opportunity structures as suggested by Archer (2003, 2012), but rather modes of reflexivities (predominantly autonomous) which were associated to different (and more than one) stances or approaches to transition. This claims for a more fluid and broader understanding of these in line with other studies (Dyke *et al.*, 2012)

An important finding has been that despite the highly uncertain scenario these young people were dealing with, they appeared optimistic about their futures and confident in their motivation to work hard and in their ability to be in control of their life and muddle through difficulties. Findings suggest that this positive forward-looking behaviour was mainly due to an individual disposition to take risks and adapt to changes and contingent events (and consequently adapting aspirations and plans). This disposition can be understood if considered against the backdrop of their highly neoliberal context which strongly encouraged self-sufficiency, self-determinism, an entrepreneurial attitude, the individualisation of risks and the promise of meritocratic equality of opportunities for everyone who works hard enough, which pushes individuals to take risks and responsibilities of their failures and successes. A highly decentralised TE admission process for which each institution had in place its own system of eligibility criteria and a financial aid system that worked in ways that contributed to put vulnerable students in situation of uncertainties constituted the space within which these young people developed their aspirations and courses of action. This finding resonates powerfully with Rudd and Evans' (1998) study on working-class youth's school-to work transitions in the UK which associates young people's optimism with having been socialised into a belief in choice, meritocracy and the opportunity ladders based on individual efforts regardless of their social positioning. It also associates optimism with the lack of first-hand experience of the realities of the labour market and predicts a readjustment of aspirations once experienced the harsh reality of the waged labour.

Lastly, it explains optimism as a “psychological make-up associated with this age group” (p. 58). Similar to what Zipin *et al.* (2015) sustain, being optimist and having high aspirations is the right thing to do considering the age and the aspirational context of these young people.

To conclude this section on aspirations before transition, Archer (1995, 2003) understands human agency as the internal powers held by individuals to reflexively identify their concerns, elaborate their life projects accordingly and evaluate which course of actions to take given their circumstances. This study has provided empirical evidence that TVET graduates had aspirations informed by reflexive considerations which were to different extent rationally bounded in their circumstances. The different degrees of capability young people had to link aspirations with ways to achieve these corroborate the importance of differentiating between the freedom to aspire (capability) and the functioning of aspiring (the act of voicing or deliberating aspirations) (Hart, 2013) which reflects the capabilities/functionings distinction with which the CA is concerned. While TVET graduates were more capable to voice their aspirations, they were also more constrained on their capability to function than they were aware of. As seen in Chapter 2, this allows to see the inequalities beneath the aspirations voiced by the students and to uncover traces of structures that shape disadvantaged young people’s lives but that fall beyond immediate understanding because hidden by their optimism and meritocratic beliefs (Neilson, 2015).

Post-school trajectories

The findings on post-school trajectories show the diverseness of transition outcomes of vocational graduates after completion of their upper-secondary vocational school. Given that students were from a relatively homogeneous group in terms of socioeconomic background, this thesis provides empirical evidence that responds to the need to look the interplay of structural constraints as well as the role of individual factors for a better understanding of the complexities behind youth transitions to adulthood (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016, 2017) and the role of aspirations in the making of transitions.

RQ4: Have TVET graduates managed to achieve their aspirations six months after completing their upper-secondary vocational education and how? If not, why?

Findings in Chapter 6 have shown that the transitions from vocational school to tertiary TVET/HE or work were shaped by a complex interplay between institutional enablers and

constraints, structural factors, and agential factors overcoming structural and institutional constraints where forms of reflexive mediation largely operated in individualised and, thus, unpredictable ways. This made it difficult to envisage the effects of institutional/structural enablers or constraints on choices and on transition outcomes. Archer's (2003, 2007) emergentist view of structure and agency is useful to understand these findings. Indeed, she contends that in pursuing their aspirations (or life projects), individuals activate causal powers of structural, social and cultural properties (constraints and enablers). To these causal powers there is no single or universal answer or motivation and, thus, there cannot be predictable outcomes as they emerge in relation to individual's unique projects and are differently mediated through individual reflexivities. From a CA perspective, these differences can be assessed by looking at how young people's ability and freedom to use resources, services or commodities to identify valuable opportunities and convert opportunities (capabilities) into achievements (functionings) they have reason to value were mediated by unequal capabilities (Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2006). In other words, the relationship between aspirations and achievements was determined by causal mechanisms constantly intersecting between them generating fair or unfair unequal results, where the fairness of transition outcomes was about the mechanisms themselves leading to them.

For example, findings indicate that *Gratuidad* (receiving it or not and how the scheme worked in terms of timing in releasing information on *Gratuidad*), *PSU* (score and timing in releasing information on the results), to a lesser extent, *PACE* were crucial institutional factors that would enable or constraint the capability to achieve university or tertiary TVET aspirations. Specifically, being beneficiary of *Gratuidad* enabled students who had got a good enough score at the *PSU* or who had been selected as *PACE* beneficiary to enrol in university institutions. Unfair mechanisms of economic requirements to access TE were partially mitigated by fair mechanisms of financial aids through *Gratuidad*. Having *Gratuidad* but not having met the academic requirement to access university hindered university aspirers' capability to achieve. Likewise, vocational education's unfair mechanisms of poorer academic preparation for *PSU* exams were partially mitigated by fair mechanism of additional support and quotas through *PACE* for best performing students (only two students). For TVET achievers, being granted *Gratuidad* made it possible to enrol in TVET institutions immediately after the completion of their upper-secondary education instead of postponing it to the following year. In one case, it contributed to enhance the capability to aspire as one student opted for enrolling in the professional degree (4-year-programme) directly without going for the 'step by step' approach.

As mentioned above, in some cases these factors interacted with other institutional and individual factors leading to unique and unpredictable outcomes. For example, being offered a job at the end of the work-placement counteracted the (fair) mechanism of having been granted *Gratuidad*. In these cases (a minority of) TVET aspirers had entered the labour market instead of enrolling in TVET institutes. In CR's terms, the causal powers of the labour market's institutional structures were activated (thus, 'emerged') by individuals' projects (continuing to study or going to work) assessed against new circumstances and priorities (Archer 2003, 2007). In other cases, as for work aspirers, mechanisms of gender inequalities (e.g. discrimination in the workplace and patriarchal structures) intersected with labour market mechanisms (e.g. the experience required for entry positions in the work market, the underestimation of how difficult the process of finding a job would be) hampering the transformation of aspirations into achievements.

Concerning the individual factors interplaying with institutional factors, evidence indicates that individual determination and proactivity; positive dispositions; the ability "to play the system" (Ecclestone, 2004, p. 31), understand information, navigate their bureaucratic system to access education, and to take up opportunities; motivation; preferences; dispositions; self-perceptions were agential (conversion) factors key to take advantage of institutional factors and transform aspirations into achievements. As Powell and McGrath's (2019b) say, "interpersonal variations in conversion are themselves resultant from a combination of individual and structural factors [which] affect an individual's ability to convert their preferences (or 'antecedent valued functionings') into capabilities (meaningful opportunities)" (p. 28). Findings suggest a positive relationship between more agentic and proactive approaches to post-school transitions ('taking chances' and 'step by step') (Chapter 5) and the achievement of aspirations. Where these psycho-social and cultural resources were lacking or not developed enough (as in 'wait and see' approaches), the achievement of aspirations was left to serendipity and to the mobilisation of social connections that emerged as crucial "invisible social factor" (Evans *et al.*, 2001, p. 12) which affected the success of aspiration achievement. Those with less agentic approaches and ability to mobilise resources seemed to be more likely to have longer and more complex transitions and to have their aspirations jeopardised (Evans, 2007).

The analysis of the students' accounts revealed the complexity of the highly unequal and disarticulated Chilean education system that requires youth to own the cultural capital to be

able to identify, understand and select viable options among the plenty of offers on the supply side (Zancajo & Valiente, 2019), blind to the limits posed by structural constraints on disadvantaged students' potential for agency. Santiago (aspirer *through* university) gave a good example of this as in his case it was very clear that without the intervention of the school counsellor, he would have missed the opportunity to enrol in a university. Appadurai (2004) sustains that the capacity to aspire necessitates the ability to read "a map of a journey into the future" (p. 78) that is the capacity to navigate information on future desired trajectories available to individuals and to make congruent choices to pursue these. Findings indicate that overall these young people did not own the appropriate cultural and social capitals (Bourdieu, 1986) to understand how to read and use the information they needed to transform aspirations into functionings. Receiving the support from their schoolteachers and counsellors (social capital) even during their post-school transitions resulted crucial to the achievement of aspirations. This resonates with the literature on the type of cultural knowledge and resources that are needed to successfully achieve educational aspirations especially when these entail embarking on completely new and unfamiliar routes (Ecclestone, 2004; Walker, 2007; Bradley & Ingram, 2013). This was particularly the case of those attempting HE pathways and pathways in discontinuity with their secondary vocational field of studies.

A further explanation as to how or why TVET graduates achieved what they aspired to has to do with the opportunity costs of aspirations. Archer (2003) maintains that "the differential life-chances allocated to those differently situated in society are influential because they assign different opportunity costs to the same course of action" (p. 5) and that "the 'same' project (such as undertaking a university degree) involves a higher outlay from some agents than from others. Such pricing is again subjective and failure to allow for it can simply derail strategic action" (p. 136). In this study going to university or to tertiary TVET implied making other choices, such as giving up or not taking the opportunity to accept job offers. Young people's different responses to these situations were informed by contingent circumstances, family economic hardship and costs and benefits analysis of short-term gains (of taking the job offers, such as in TVET aspirers who were in the labour market) against long-term returns to education (such as those university and TVET aspirers who had decided to turn down job offers to be able to study).

As already mentioned above, choosing education over work betrayed an instrumental approach to Tertiary Education (especially through university) seen as means to other ends

(Walker, 2008). Yet, although instrumental rationality was apparent, economic advancement was not the only concern behind their decisions and, in capabilities terms, economic advancement was a way out of precarity and poverty and a means to enhance future possibilities, expand their wellbeing freedom to choose, achieve higher social status and social respect and do or become what they valued and mattered to them (Powell & McGrath 2019b). Evidence suggests that these choices were actively reflected upon in ways that were similar to Archer's autonomous reflexives and, to a lesser extent, to communicative reflexives.

To conclude, Chapter 6 indicates that the ability to achieve aspirations was mediated by unequal capabilities resulting from the intersectionality between different causal mechanisms which in turn resulted in cumulative (dis)advantages (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017), making transition experiences unique and hard to predict. Overall, aspiring in ways that were more rationally bounded, which reflected structural constraints as well as individual dispositions (Bonal & Zancajo, 2018), as it was for tertiary TVET aspirers who wanted to continue in their vocational specialism had augmented the possibilities students had to achieve aspirations. As predicted in Chapter 5, it was particularly the aspirers *through* university, and to a lesser extent those who wanted to leave behind the linear achievement of a professional life through the vocational sector, who before transition appeared most at risk of disappointment as they seemed to be the least clear on how to connect their aspirations with the capabilities to achieve these.

However, it was work aspirers that were seemingly the most disappointed after the transition as they had aspired to get a job in their sector and none of them was employed. This was a surprising finding considering TVET's role as quick insertion in the labour market the alignment of their aspirations with the assumed linearity of school-to-work transitions in TVET policy discourses (Sevilla *et al.*, 2014; MINEDUC, 2016; CEM, 2020). An explanation can be given by the daunting realities of waged and highly liberalised labour market awaiting secondary vocational students in Chile and the poor coordination between vocational education and labour market (Sepúlveda, 2016; OECD, 2017a; Zancajo & Valiente, 2019). For CA, public policies, for example those targeting youth transitions, should be evaluated in terms of their role in expanding or constraining young people's freedom to choose what they want to be or do and have reason to value, which affect individual's well-being (Powell & McGrath, 2019b). From this perspective, these findings suggest TVET policies failed TVET graduates' aspirations and expectations to find a job in

their vocational sector immediately after school, thus constraining their capabilities and freedom to choose.

RQ5: How do TVET graduates experience their proximal post-transition situations and the match/mismatch between aspirations and achievements?

The concept of capabilities is deeply connected to the concepts of wellbeing and human flourishing (see Chapters 2 and 4). From a capability perspective, human flourishing emphasises the quality of life and the substantive freedoms individuals have over concerns related to income and economic wealth (Sen, 1999b). Nussbaum (2002) states that from this perspective the question to ask on wellbeing is “not whether an individual is satisfied or not with their current situation. Rather we should ask what they are actually able to do and be” (p. 123). Differently from Sen and Nussbaum, Archer’s (2017) emphasises the connection between human flourishing with reflexivity and, thus, with life projects. She states individual’s satisfaction and dissatisfaction with [their] current way of life result from reflexive assessments of their concerns against their context (Archer, 2007).

In this study, findings seem to suggest that wellbeing and illbeing with current situations were associated to the perception TVET graduates had of having exercised their freedom to choose during their transitions. Achieving what they wanted to do by means of doing what they had initially aspired to, or their second-best option or the option they thought they would ‘fit in’ better given the contingent circumstances during transition, contributed to develop positive sense of self and trust in their abilities to handle circumstances, and to reinforce the belief in equality of opportunities for all based on personal effort. Evans *et al.* (2001) sustain that these subjective feelings within the broader concepts of agency and choice boil down to the feeling of being in control with their lives, often underestimated in youth transition literature (Reay, 2001; Furlong, 2009). In other words, achieving aspirations was associated to a greater sense of self-confidence which seemed to expand young people’s perceptions of what they were actually able to do, be and become in the future. Achieving was also related to wellbeing (Nussbaum, 2002) and personal satisfaction (Archer, 2007), associated to a sense of progression with their life, personal growth, and learning they felt as a result of being engaged in something meaningful or instrumental to their future freedom to choose, and from the perception of ‘fitting in’ with what they were doing.

However, together with enhanced wellbeing and satisfaction, some of the achievers were also experiencing feelings of inadequacy and preoccupation concerning their educational ability to transform the opportunities they had been given (e.g. being in a university or in a TVET institution) into achievements (completing the degree and getting the qualification as opposed to dropping out). This was found even among students who had chosen continuity of field of studies between secondary and tertiary education, for example Renata, precisely to avoid such feelings and to augment their chances of success and of ‘*doxic fit*’ in TE. These findings provide empirical evidence of the poor coordination between secondary and tertiary TVET institutions in Chile (Sevilla *et al.*, 2014) and suggest that this lack of articulation in the supply of TVET can result in risky and incoherent trajectories among TVET graduates (Valiente *et al.*, 2020) who may drop out from TE institutions because unable to keep up with the pace of such institutions. This resonates with other studies (Sepúlveda, 2011; *ibid.*) maintaining that this poor coordination between the different education levels reflects the ambiguity of TVET in Chile which, among other consequences, does not value skills and knowledge TVET graduates acquire before transitioning to tertiary vocational institutes or does not prepare them for TE.

By contrast, lack of fulfilment, enjoyment and sense of control were expressed by the students whose post-school transition were the result of ill-being freedom to choose (Powell and McGrath, 2019b). As seen in RQ4, this was the result of a complex interplay between structural, institutional and individual factors. Evidence suggests a growing awareness TVET graduates had of a narrower (classed and gendered) opportunity structure and limited freedom to choose for the ‘like of them’ (Atkins, 2010; Bradley & Ingram, 2013). However, there seemed to persist a general buy-in to, or acceptance of, the neoliberal rhetoric around the individualisation of failures and successes (Atkins, 2010). The pervasiveness of such ideology reflected in the belief (hegemonic rationality) that TVET graduates unemployed and still in transition had in the accumulation of educational credentials as their only means to escape unemployment, the prospect of low-skills, low-pay, highly discriminatory work market and endless experiences of social marginalisation that were awaiting them and that they had started to experience.

Archer (1995) sustains that new generations have to confront with structural and cultural circumstances not of their choice which inevitably and contingently influence young people’s decisions, constellations of concerns and life projects. Yet, she defends that people are not passively shaped or defined by structural constraints and cultural norms. Findings in

this thesis serve Archer's argument as they show that these TVET graduates instead of passively accepting the reality, were engaged in reflexive considerations of alternative plans to overcome structural/institutional constraints and reconstitute their course of actions to achieve their initial or alternative goals. This was seen for example in participants who tried to circumvent gender discrimination in the labour market and structural barriers in finding a job by opening an online shop or by becoming street vendors while looking for other jobs, while others would mobilise social connections to find a job while (all) mulling over on options in TE for the following year.

Disadvantaged youth's optimism even in front of very few realistic opportunities has been at the centre of attention of youth studies across different contexts and has been associated to lack of contextual realism (Biggart *et al.*, 2015) or explained as assertion of a morally worthy self (Frye, 2012) or as suggestive of echoing policy rhetoric mediated by parents, teachers and media (Atkins & Flint, 2015). In their study on school-to-work transition in the UK, Rudd and Evans (1998) found a pervasive optimism across their participants whether they were living in a depressed labour market or in a more buoyant one (see RQ3). One of the explanations the authors gave to such optimism was linked to a "time lag" (p. 57) which called for the need of a longitudinal study to assess whether in a few years, life experiences would readjust aspirations and optimism into more concrete expectations. Although the time lag in this thesis was only six months, evidence has shown that despite transition experiences TVET graduates had lived, they responded to constraints and inequalities by assuming the responsibility for what they could have done and for the success of their future endeavours (e.g. learning to study as opposite to learning to labour, preparing themselves better for transitioning to TE, setting up small business to avoid discrimination of the waged labour). In other words, despite the (raising) awareness of classed and gendered structural constraints which affected their freedom to choose (neglected capabilities) (Powell & McGrath, 2019a), there still was an overall belief in the fact that their successes (or failures) depended on their (in)abilities. Lastly, the believe in meritocracy was reinforced by having achieved their secondary vocational qualification which made them believe that they were advancing in their life and that they would have a better life than their parents'.

RQ6: How has the transition process conditioned/transformed TVET graduates' initial aspirations and why?

One of the main contributions of this study is intrinsic to the longitudinal (qualitative) design that allowed to problematize how social inequalities shaped fair/unfair transformation/maintenance of aspirations over time by looking at individuals' recollection of what happened in between the two moments analysed. One of the main findings is that, overall, despite the different transition experiences TVET graduates had gone through, successful and unsuccessful alike, they had maintained relatively high educational and professional aspirations, although in some cases these were reflexively negotiated into versions more grounded in their circumstances. This contradicts literature on how positive experiences' outcomes may reinforce high aspirations whereas negative outcomes may lead to downwardly adapting aspirations (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013; Dalton *et al.*, 2014; Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020; Siddique & Durr-e-Nayab, 2020). Appadurai (2004) and Ray (2006) sustain that aspirations are socially determined and combine individuals' perception of what is available to them, the expectations formed, and the constraints acknowledge through their own experience and influenced by others within the same community. In Chapter 2, we have seen that people assess their aspirations against their level of achievement (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013) and adapt these if they realise they no longer are able to pursue them given contextual or internal constraints. This adaptation can occur at a more unconscious level (Elster, 2007) or as a more rationalised (Hart, 2013) or reflexive process (Archer, 2007).

In this study, the causal mechanisms informing transition experiences had reinforced the belief that tertiary education was the only means to, firstly, expand capabilities to empowerment and, secondly, to enhance freedom to choose (Sen, 1999b; Nussbaum, 2002). In other words, regardless of whether TVET graduates had achieved what they wanted (a minority) or if, on the contrary, they had achieved their second-best option considering their circumstances or whether they had not achieved their aspirations, nor their best alternative option (most of them), the transition process had not drastically affected their disposition to aspire high, except for very few exceptions. In this sense, unlike Willis' (1977) lads that reinforced their sense of identity and their working-class *habitus* through the rejection of educational institutions, the young people in this study still believed that more education and more knowledge would lead to 'becoming someone'. The findings indicate that the renewed value attributed to education was instrumental to raise self-esteem, feel valued in the society, be engaged in something meaningful, gain respect, build a future void of poverty, abuses and discrimination, live a dignified life, be able to provide for their families, and "be resolved" as some participants put it. Again, even after the post-school transitions, whilst

instrumental rationality was apparent, their aspirations and life projects, what they valued in life and would made them feel successful was beyond both HCT and purely structural considerations.

The findings show that the positive intersection between agency and structures (causal mechanism) leading to the achievement of university and TVET aspirations explained the maintenance and upward transformation/expansion of initial aspirations. Indeed, achievers aspired to first get the educational degree/qualification they were working towards because achieving had reinforced their belief that this was the best route that would satisfy their personal plans (which can be interpreted as fair maintenance in capability terms). They further aspired to either get another degree (university achievers) or the professional qualification (TVET achievers) as these would lead to more and more desirable occupations (fair transformation). Professionally, they maintained high aspirations which often were reflected in their ambition to become entrepreneurs. As findings indicate, their capability to aspire, to imagine and voice their aspirations and to link these to ways of achieving them was enhanced by the realisation of the previous aspirations (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013). Findings suggest that the confidence gained for having achieved their aspirations had reinforced their belief in the 'ladder of opportunity' and in meritocracy which, in turn, as in Rudd and Evans (1998), had augmented their optimism and sense of control over their lives.

Evidence has also indicated that while in the first round of interviews no difference seemed to emerge between aspirations and expectations, when interviewed the second time, some achievers' high aspirations concealed lower expectations (not necessarily bounded in rational thought processes). This differentiation between aspirations and expectations emerged regardless of whether participants were feeling successful in their current educational/work transitions and in control of their lives. For example, Matías and Carlos, who had ended up studying and working respectively in their vocational sector, were considering the possibility of establishing themselves in the unknown and competitive sector of gastronomy and opening their own business (e.g. small pizzeria) in case they would fail in making their vocational careers (Electricity and Telecommunication). The lower expectations that emerged from some of the narratives in the second round of interviews (Chapter 6) seemed to be generated by the experiences of class and gender discrimination, hardship in finding a job or in measuring up with faster pace and higher demands in TE institutions or workplaces that participants were undergoing in the process of becoming adults (Heifetz & Minelli, 2015). A possible explanation as to why students could not see

the difference between future desires and real possibilities before embarking in their post-school trajectories could be related to the meritocratic culture these young people have been socialised into and the consequent perception that everything they wanted to do was possible if they had worked hard to achieve it. In other words, it seems that before confronting the world outside school, participants still believed in the rhetoric of opportunities for all, and that for some the transition experiences had started to unveil the deception behind this rhetoric, which Atkins (2010) refers to as “merely smoke and mirrors” (p. 253).

Unexpectedly, evidence indicates that, although motivated by different reasons, overall the transition process had maintained, reinforced or expanded educational aspirations of ‘non-achievers’. These were aspirers *through* university who were not in TE nor in labour market and a minority of tertiary TVET aspirers who, due to the intersectionality of different causal mechanisms, had ended up in temporary and precarious employments in discontinuity with their TVET sector. Mkwanaenzi (2019) defined as persistent those aspirations that were unrelentingly pursued despite the limited social and structural opportunities. In this study, unfair mechanisms (e.g. gender and class inequalities experienced in job-seeking and workplaces/work placements and prospects of unemployment, poor academic preparation for PSU, delays in receiving *Gratuidad* and consequent loss of seat in the aspired programme/institution) intersecting with the individualisation of structural disadvantages (when the lack of attainment was assumed as personal responsibility for ‘not trying hard enough’ or for having put aspirations on-hold) explained the reinforcement of educational aspirations for these TVET graduates who had put their aspirations ‘on hold’ and were convinced that only through TE/HE credentials they would fulfil their goal of establishing themselves in their dreamed professions in discontinuity with their vocational sector and, also, escape injustices (fair maintenance). In other words, fair maintenance was encouraged by unfair mechanisms of neoliberal ideologies that deem young people responsible for their inner transformation into flexible, agile and capable-to-aspire individuals who want and take charge of their social mobility (Spohrer *et al.*, 2018).

Continuing with ‘non-achievers’, findings reveal that transition experiences had transformed the aspirations of work aspirers, making them reconsider more concretely TE for their short-term future. The choice of these TVET graduates of reconsidering TE can be interpreted as an agential response to a situation of deprivation to their capacity to aspire that they were experiencing in their job-seeking which might have proved the dominant *doxa* on education as means to their wellbeing and development (unfair transformation). Appadurai (2004)

argues that the capability to aspire, as every capacity, is dynamic and it can increase or decrease if people are given the opportunity to capacitate their agency to imagine, articulate and activate to achieve alternative/aspired futures. In this study, evidence suggests that the dynamicity of aspirations was not necessarily or solely spurred by opportunities or fair transition outcomes, but also from a situation of ‘capability deprivation’ (Powell & McGrath, 2019a). The reflections these young people made upon these structural constraints seemingly fostered the maintenance of/ transformation into ‘high’ aspirations which were actually rational considering the cultural framework of neoliberal ideology these young adults confronted and within which they formed their identity and imaginary of the person they wanted to be. Again, the Chilean case provides empirical evidence in support of a new form of ‘hegemonic’ rationality.

Findings have shown that for a small minority of ‘non-achievers’ the transition process had led to a scaled-down version of their initial high aspirations, which were now more grounded in contextually bounded rational reflections (Bernard *et al.*, 2011; Bonal & Zancajo, 2018). Rafael is an emblematic example of this transformation of aspirations from dreaming of opening an art gallery to getting a professional qualification in his vocational sector and opening a vintage car repair shop. In his case, low level of individual agency (e.g. weak links between aspirations and valued (real) opportunities to achieve these), too large aspirations gaps (from being a TVET graduate in Mechanics to studying architecture or opening an art gallery) (Ray, 2006), and negative structural conditions (including lack of career guidance and supportive counselling system) intersected and did not motivate actions to change and achieve (*habitus* transformation). Furthermore, mechanisms of class inequalities he experienced in job-seeking seemed to have contributed to a more grounded belief that only through TE he would possibly become somebody and escape discrimination and abuses. This, in turn, led him to develop more realistic, achievable and seemingly more desirable aspirations (fair transformation although generated by capability deprivation).

Processes of aspirations’ transformation were found in students who had landed in alternative paths, negotiating a scaled-down version of their original aspirations. For example, Julián, Enrique and Francisco were in TVET institutions instead of being in university. As seen in Chapter 2, Hart (2016) maintains that adapting aspirations implies not converting aspirations into capabilities and, thus, renouncing to the functionings that people had reason to value. However, Archer (2007) and DeJaeghere (2018) give a more agential explanation of adaptation. Archer sustains that individuals strategically shift life projects and

adjust their actions to accomplish their concerns against their reflexively-enhanced understanding of their structural contexts (and sense of self), which increases with the accumulation of discouraging or encouraging experiences. Due to the fallibility of human understanding, this process is constantly in flux. Transformation or adaptation by scaling down initial aspirations depended on the degree of freedom to choose students had (well-being freedom to choose or ill-being freedom to choose). This thesis has provided empirical evidence of both transformation and adaptation, however cases of transformation during transition outnumbered those of adaptation. For example, Francisco had to adapt his aspirations to become teacher of history due to unfair mechanisms intersecting among them. Indeed, he did not score well enough at the *PSU* to be able to enrol in a university institution; he found the exam itself to be extremely unequal and unfair and did not want to go through it again the next year; he had not finished the work-placement due to issues he had with the employer and, consequently, he would not receive the Middle-Level Technician Certificate. Therefore, he decided to study in a TVET institution in continuity with his vocational track merely because it was the only way he had to become somebody, provide for his family and cultivate his interests (making music). By contrast, Julián for example had transformed his aspiration to become a teacher and was now aspiring to become a technician in Administration for a long-held subject interest he had for that sector, more confidence on probability of succeed in this new path, and more awareness of the *doxic* discontinuity he would have experienced if he had chosen pedagogy at university. Such cases corroborate Archer's argument that adapting aspirations does not mean necessarily downplaying them but reconsidering them in the light of new knowledge and skills gained which enhance learners' capacity to aspire. Thus, these cases of aspirations' transformation can be interpreted as fair transformations, motivated by more desirable pathways.

Lastly, findings have shown that the transition process had not changed the high professional aspirations TVET graduates had initially expressed. This means that they still aspired to become professionals through university degrees or professional TVET qualifications. What seemed to emerge more powerfully across the participants was the ambition to become manager or entrepreneur. As seen in Chapter 5, entrepreneurship seemed to reflect a desire to escape from vulnerability, discrimination and precarity that exist in waged labour as consequence of highly competitive and neoliberal systems that often these students had experienced by observing their parents. In Chapter 6, entrepreneurial aspirations seemed to be better explained by the willingness to become a more just and fairer manager/employer, who cared about their employees and would not discriminate against them on the basis of

classed assumptions. This was a very interesting finding suggestive of an acquired meta-reflexivity (Archer, 2012) that they developed most likely as a result of discriminatory experiences directly or indirectly lived in the work-placement or in workplaces throughout their transition process.

Key arguments and theoretical contributions

This thesis has argued that in neoliberal, capitalist contexts, such as Chile, aspirations must be understood against the backdrop of highly unequal societies resulting from highly liberalised labour market and education systems, and the enduring neoliberal tenet of meritocracy. In this context, the poor job prospects awaiting secondary TVET graduates, alongside the meritocratic hegemony of endless opportunities through (Higher) education, tend to inflate the educational aspirations of a sizeable number of TVET students. As already denounced in previous studies (Bradley & Ingram 2012; Ingram & Gamsu, 2022), high aspirations and risky choices have been strongly encouraged by governments' neo-liberal policy rhetoric and reforms, such as Chile, which have promoted the 'higher aspirations-higher education-higher chances to meritocratic upward social mobility' discourse. As findings have shown, on the one hand, the system pushes young people, regardless of their structural disadvantages, to aspire 'high' to 'become somebody'. On the other, by stressing the rhetoric of 'equal opportunities for all' rather than focusing on the equity to access these opportunities and on fairer outcomes, it hinders vulnerable young people's capability to aspire (and to transform their aspirations into achievements), deeming them responsible for their structural disadvantages and social immobility.

When TVET graduates reflect upon these neoliberal assumptions, which enforce self-independence and self-determination in identifying and shaping individuals' own way through the world (Archer, 2012), they develop 'high' aspirations which are rational regarding the rhetoric that young people face, but which may not be realisable. In other words, the thesis has argued that it is precisely, and paradoxically, the high social inequalities that push young people to have 'high' aspirations (Aldinucci *et al.*, 2021). These were associated with their intention to accumulate academic credentials (Fuller, 2009) and to attain professional jobs (Campbell & McKendrick, 2017), strongly linked to the (forcedly) independent construction of individual self-worth ("to become somebody") and of ways to escape poverty and live a life with dignity, as considered by the CA (Powell & McGrath, 2019b). This is a critical point of the thesis and a key theoretical contribution to the

understanding of aspirations in neoliberal contexts in relation to Archer's modes of reflexivity.

In her book *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity*, Archer (2012) attributes to late modern capitalist societies the responsibility to generate conditions, the "situational logic of opportunity" (*ibid.*, p. 41) that lead to the disappearance of communicative reflexive in favour of autonomous and meta-reflexivities. She states that "it [has become] imperative [for young people] to deliberate about themselves" (*ibid.*, p. 42) to independently make use of these open opportunities for all and find their way through the world where pathways or guidelines are no more well-defined. In particular, and relevant for discussing my findings, Archer states:

it becomes imperative to deliberate about themselves in relation to the open opportunities they now confront. But in what terms can their deliberations be sensibly conducted? The response is 'in relation to their concerns'. This preserves the active agent without him or her degenerating into the wanton gambler (*ibid.*).

According to Archer, given the increasing contextual discontinuity in our late modern capitalist societies, it is individual's concerns that have become more important than ever in guiding sensible reflexive processes and conclusions (2012). This process of carving out by themselves their futures starting from their aspirations generates autonomous and meta-reflexivities. However, it can also intensify the contextual discontinuity with family and community. This reduction, or loss, of contextual congruity with family and community together with the epistemological disadvantage some of them may encounter in linking aspirations to courses of actions, exposes young people to their own fallibility. In turn, according to Archer, this increasingly generates fractured reflexivities, "those who get it wrong and, in their fracturedness, simply cannot work out how to put it right" (Archer, 2012, p. 46).

In relation and contributing to the above, this study corroborates Archer's statement on the importance of aspirations (personal concerns) in guiding internal deliberations and actions. However, it questions the fact that individual's reflexive process is sensibly conducted in relation to their concerns and that it is precisely this relationship between reflexive process and concerns that "preserves the active agent without him or her degenerating into the wanton gambler" (Archer, 2012, p. 42). In fact, the Chilean case has demonstrated that the interplay between the hegemony of the neoliberal *doxa* of meritocracy, institutional and structural factors, and individual factors (a strong sense of agency, sense of control over life

and belief in choices) generates a complex and fascinating mode of reflexivity, emerging alongside with autonomous and meta-reflexivities. I defined this as ‘hegemonic’ or ‘aspirational’ for its being more grounded in the hegemony of meritocracy and aspirational society than on the assessment of individuals’ circumstances. In front of the deeply ingrained *doxic* order of neoliberalism and due to the high social inequalities it generates, young people have to aspire ‘high’ as this is their only way to make it through the world and achieve a dignified life. These ‘high’ aspirations were actively reflected upon, however their context meant these reflections were not necessarily reasonable nor fair on themselves.

Importantly, although a longer period of time after post-school transitions should be observed to identify changes in modes of reflexivity, in this context, ‘failed’ outcomes of transitions did not lead to fractured reflexivity. In fact, across types of aspirers, these, overall, seemingly reinforced a hegemonic logic for actions. This was apparent, for example, in TVET graduates still in transition, not in Tertiary Educational (TE) institutes nor in employment, who had maintained relatively high aspirations for their medium- and long-term future. Indeed, they would enrol in TE, and preferably university, the following year (despite their objective structural disadvantages in accessing these institutions) and aimed to become professionals or entrepreneurs in their long-term perspectives. Likewise, rather than surrender to their failures, incapable to ‘work out how to put it right’, for their immediate future they were considering alternatives to formal employment. For instance, being street vendor or using online apps for selling products temporary solution to unfair mechanisms of the liberalised waged labour and of patriarchal structures causing their unemployment.

As far as the structuring influence of the family on modes of reflexivity, despite the disruptive familial environment that many of the students had grown up in, they were still recipient of familial relational goods and strong bonds with some members of their families and with their natal community, which they wanted to preserve. Indeed, family was largely designated as the ultimate concern of the great majority of them (i.e. ‘becoming somebody’ as means to redeem their families). Yet, even though families, in different ways and to different degrees, were an important support in their decision-making process (what should be condition for engendering communicative reflexivities), ultimately these young people would take their decisions autonomously legitimised by the hegemony of neoliberalism. Differently from Archer, in this study the context praises enforced independence and individualism engendering hegemonic reflexivity more than undermining conditions for the maintenance of communicative reflexivities (e.g. decrease amount of familial relational

goods, contextual discontinuity with family and community). This explains why family's expectations, despite being a crucial institution in the life of these young people, play a secondary role on the formation of aspirations compared to the predominant role of the neoliberal "enterprise culture" (Rudd & Evans, 1998, p. 57)

At the theoretical level, this study has powerfully demonstrated the need to depart from drawing exclusively on traditional structuralist or instrumental rational choice analysis, and to engage in more dynamic understandings of the interplay between agential and structural factors at the roots of differential aspiration development. The findings have shown that the rationale behind TVET students' aspirations and decision-making is informed by reflections that include, but also go beyond, instrumental thinking and structurally determined aspirations. Indeed, these entailed some forms of habituated class dispositions and *doxa* but also hope for better futures, redemption narratives. While economic returns were important to these young people and although instrumentally drives in the rationale behind aspirations was apparent, these were functional "to be able to lead a life with dignity". Indeed, TVET graduates did not necessarily or solely seek to maximise the monetary returns of education but considered other benefits associated to their development and flourishing, to social recognition and to the kind of persons they wanted to become. This was even more so after experiencing the discriminatory and harsh reality awaiting them outside the protective environment of the school (Rudd & Evans, 1998).

The thesis has also argued that forms of mediation between structures and agency largely operated in individualised and, thus, unpredictable ways making it difficult to envisage the effects of institutional/structural enablers or constraints on aspirations' (trans)formation, decision-making processes, choices and on transition outcomes. This has provided a response to the "little understanding of the mechanisms linking agency to variations in transition experiences" (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017, p. 30). The combination of Archer's (2003, 2007, 2012) work on reflexivity with the concepts of bounded rationality (Ben-Porath, 2009; Bonal & Zancajo, 2018), *habitus* and *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977) have offered an innovative and holistic framework for such analysis.

If it is undeniable that 'becoming somebody' was a collective aspiration, culturally and socially embedded (Appadurai, 2004), in this context vocational students' responses to their opportunity structures were reflexively mediated at individual's level in ways that made the interplay between structural, cultural and individual factors unpredictable. 'Becoming

somebody' was indeed envisaged through the development of different aspirations, which in this doctoral research were classified into three categories, namely 1) university education; 2) tertiary vocational education; and 3) work. Following the definition adopted in this thesis (Chapters 2 and 4), these were identified according to students' highest and most desired educational or work trajectory they perceived available to them and that they hoped or aimed to achieve within a year after completing upper-secondary education.

Given that the great majority of vocational students interviewed wanted to continue with their studies in tertiary education institutions and that this number grew during the transition experiences, this study has provided further evidence that challenges the traditional role of secondary TVET education as a direct route to the labour-market for underprivileged students in Chile and the linearity of school-to-work and school-to-further education transitions assumed in the TVET sector (Sevilla *et al.*, 2014; Agencia de la Calidad de la Educación, 2016; MINEDUC, 2016; Sepúlveda & Valdebenito, 2019; CEM, 2020). It also supports what stated by Dávila, Ghiardo and Medrano (2008, p. 23) that "it is now common sense that 'to be someone in life' [in Chile] you have to study, and that the possession of a degree is the best guarantee of a more secure future".

Despite the central role that education had in vocational graduates' life projects, evidence also indicates the gendered nature of educational and professional aspirations as horizontal gender inequalities were reflected in female students showing marginally lower educational and professional aspirations compared to their male peers and choosing feminine career paths (Hadjar & Aeschlimann, 2015). The thesis has argued that this was associated to the strong gender segregation in labour market resulting from a deeply ingrained patriarchal system to which participants responded idiosyncratically. The study has thus contributed to the body of literature on gender differences in the formation of aspirations contradicting studies on higher educational or career aspirations of young women compared to young men (Schoon *et al.*, 2007; Grant, 2017; Meschi *et al.*, 2019).

Before transitions, it was the aspirers *through* university, that seemed to have the least clear links between their aspirations and the capabilities to achieve these. Within this group, it appeared that strategies to overcome *doxic* discontinuities between previous and intended fields of study had yet to be finalised. Whilst these students were still clearly reflexive, their thinking was not quite grounded in a bounded consideration of their structural constraints. In other groups, however, different aspirations were grounded in reflexive and seemingly

contextually bounded rational thought processes (for example the aspirers *for* university were more likely to be receiving support from the *PACE* programme). It is the aspirers *through* university that appeared most at risk of disappointment. After transitions, it was work aspirers who seemed the most disappointed because their aspiration to find a job in their sector was not fulfilled (they were all unemployed and in search for jobs). Precisely because their initial aspirations aligned better with the assumed linearity of school-to-work transitions that is pervasive in TVET policy discourses (compared to aspirations of other groups) (Sevilla *et al.*, 2014; MINEDUC, 2016; CEM, 2020) they were experiencing such disappointment. Notably, as discussed above, such situations of capability deprivations spurred a hegemonic logic for future actions rather than generating fracturedness. These findings show the need to understand aspirations as resulting from dynamic processes of formation, transformation, negotiation, maintenance which can lead to unexpected results as the Chilean case demonstrates.

Final observations concern the contribute that Capability Approach (CA) has had in my thesis and how it has complemented Critical Realism (CR) in understanding aspirations in post-school transition processes. Concerning the usefulness and appropriateness of engaging with CA to explore aspirations and choices, this thesis agrees with scholars (Hart, 2013; Robeyns, 2017; Powell and McGrath, 2019b; Dejaeghere, 2020; McGrath *et al.* 2020) claiming for the need to use this approach in combination with theories that can explain power dynamics (causal mechanisms) creating and reproducing inequalities and how they manifest in specific contexts. In this study, CR has allowed to take into account and explain the complex relationship between intersecting causal mechanisms and individual responses to these, which shape aspirations and well-being, and which are differently mediated through individual reflexivities in relation to individual's unique projects. In this sense, CR has represented the ontological assumptions informing the use of CA (Dejaeghere, 2020). By stressing the importance of looking at processes (more than at outcomes), CA has allowed to assess to what extent the ability to achieve certain goals has been mediated by unequal capabilities. In other words, through capability lenses I could reflect on how inequalities played out in TVET graduates' ability and freedom to actually do what they wanted to and had reason to value (more than being concerned exclusively with what they achieved or held), whereby the fairness (or unfairness) of unequal transition outcomes was not about the results themselves but about the mechanisms leading to them. Similarly, this approach has allowed to consider the difference that emerged from this study between the freedom to aspire (capability) and the functioning of aspiring (the act of voicing or deliberating

aspirations), uncovering inequalities that affect disadvantaged young people's lives but that fall beyond immediate understanding as hidden by their optimism and meritocratic beliefs. Ultimately, using CA together with CR has allowed this thesis to be concerned with what matters for disadvantaged young people and with the dynamic relationships between their aspirations and social injustices and inequalities. This is reflected in my ethics principle of placing the voices of young people at the centre of my study.

While these normative and moral grounds intrinsic in CA are important in development studies, they are absent in social sciences, and this is why it is important to include capabilities in this study. Indeed, this capability analysis is the first step that can lead, through appropriate policies or practices, to the disruption, or decrease, of inequalities such those identified in this study by means of longitudinal analysis, and to achieving fairer social systems and greater equality. These are key concerns for many Capability scholars working in education (Dejaeghere, 2020). Thus, despite being an approach that needs to be combined with other theoretical or conceptual frameworks to enhance its relevance from a policy and practice perspective, CA pushes researchers and development practitioners that use it to question from a moral perspective social, economic, political, cultural power dynamics generating inequalities and how these affect individual's well-being and freedom to choose.

Policy implications

Alongside theoretical contributions, the findings of this thesis also have important policy implications. The thesis has demonstrated that investigating how aspirations of TVET students are formed is key to develop new approaches that go beyond rational instrumentality and narrow employability perspectives. These findings respond to the need for looking at TVET from a human development approach to inform new international TVET agendas as claimed in recent studies (McGrath *et al.*, 2020). This study also echoes studies which claim for the need to reimagine TVET's roles and identity in the light of human flourishing, and not just as easy access to the labour market after compulsory education (Powell, 2012; Powell & McGrath, 2019b). Given that students attributed their development and flourishing to different outcomes, this has implications for the design of educational objective and pathways as well as for providing effective careers guidance.

A dominant theme in the TVET policy narrative in Chile is the linear transitions from the school to employment or more recently, especially with the *Gratuidad* scheme, to tertiary

TVET institutions (MINEDUC, 2016; CEM, 2020). By contrast, studies have argued for a growing breach between the labour market and TVET schools (Sevilla, Farías and Weintraub, 2014; Sepúlveda, 2016; Sepúlveda & Valdebenito, 2019; Valiente *et al.*, 2020). The findings of this study corroborate this rupture and the lack of coordination between educational and labour market institutions. The transitions that students in this research aspired to envisioned extended trajectories for which they would take individual responsibility. Yet, the findings have suggested that for the majority the upper-secondary vocational education they received had narrowed, rather than expanded, the possibilities of its students to continue their studies at tertiary level. It failed to endow students with skills and competencies necessary to succeed in tertiary education, but it did not even prepare them to make their transitions to the labour market.

Students indeed showed a tendency to carve out by themselves, without necessarily being able to, their own post-school paths within existing opportunities in the TE sector and in the labour market, which included different possible course of action and non-linear trajectories to achieve aspirations. As already denounced in previous studies (Atkins, 2010; Bradley & Ingram, 2013), these high aspirations and risky choices have been strongly encouraged by governments' neo-liberal policy rhetoric and reforms which have promoted the 'higher aspirations/higher education/higher chances to meritocratic upward social mobility' discourse. In the case of Chile, I have argued that it was precisely, and paradoxically, the high social inequalities that push young people to have 'high' aspirations. On the one hand, the system pushed young people, regardless of their structural disadvantages, to aspire high. On the other, it hindered their capability to aspire (and to transform their aspirations into achievements). From a capability perspective, the sociocultural conditions that have allowed 'hegemonic rationalities' and 'unreasonable' aspirations to emerge should not be treated as legitimate and supported by policy, but assessed and tackled through proper career guidance and orientation. This raises important policy reflections on the role of school counsellors and of schools in general which have to fill up the gaps left by the policies and caused by the absence of proper forms of institutional support.

In this respect, the study has indeed shown a dearth of mechanisms in place to understand TVET graduates' aspirations and, particularly, to support them in their post-school transitions towards the achievement of these. From a capability perspective, this calls for the need to create conducive environments to help young people develop and exert their capability to aspire (Appadurai, 2004; Conradie & Robeyns, 2013; Hart, 2013). This need

for guidance and orientation came out during some interviews when some participant said that the interview had been the only occasion they had had to sit and reflect on what they wanted to do, how they thought to achieve their aspirations, what mattered to them and why. This is particularly compelling if we consider that the choices of upper-secondary education seemed to be powerfully constrained by structural barriers which limited young people's capacity to be free choosers and strongly affected their transition to adulthood. The fact that school selection happens at early age reproducing inequalities through educational segregation is a matter that should deserve further policy attention (Mocetti, 2012).

The extreme levels of privatisation, decentralisation and lack of articulation among institutions exacerbates social inequalities making it even more difficult to navigate the system for vulnerable young people who lack appropriate social and cultural capital and skills. As I have sustained (Aldinucci *et al.*, 2021), new policy agendas in TVET cannot then be blind to systemic structural barriers that limit post-secondary educational and labour market opportunities for socially disadvantaged students. In contexts of high social inequalities with scarce quality job opportunities, education policies will not be able to single-handedly address these structural problems, but they also face an issue in instilling high aspirations within some TVET students that they may not be able to fulfil, despite the façade of meritocracy.

The *PACE* programme and to a lesser extent *Gratuidad* scheme seems to support this façade of meritocracy which push young people from low socioeconomic background to aspire higher, because they 'do not have any excuse now to not aspire to TE', than they would be able to afford. Although they work differently and the mechanisms to access their benefits are different (*PACE* is based on merit while *Gratuidad* is more universal as it is initially based on income), they both assume an "equal distribution of talents" (Leyton, 2020, p. 2) regardless of the effects that cumulative disadvantage as experienced by young people at the bottom quintile of income population has on risk taking. If these programme, especially *Gratuidad*, effectively allowed transitions to TE institutions, they were also experienced both as a great opportunity and as a source of anxiety for the academic requirements students needed to have to maintain *Gratuidad* and do honour to the opportunity they were given to continue studying. This should deserve greater space in policy debates.

Work-placement emerged as fundamental for successful transitions to labour market. As the findings have shown, and in line with relevant literature on school-to-work transitions in

Chile (Sepúlveda & Valdebenito, 2019), for vocational graduates who want to continue to work after completing their secondary education, being employed after the work-placement is the best option they have to get a job in their vocational specialism and, thus, the best option to a skilled, qualified, safer job. What seems to be silenced in the literature is the daunting reality and the prospects of unskilled, precarious jobs or unemployment awaiting young graduates if they are not employed after their work-placement. The experience of work aspirers corroborates the literature and provides evidence of the harsh realities of their liberal, flexible, precarious and unregulated labour market vocational graduates confront with for the first time outside the protective school environment. The whole process of work-placement reflects the need for better articulating the world of upper-secondary vocational education with the work market and should be matter of policy interventions.

Lastly, better articulation seems to be needed also between upper-secondary vocational education and tertiary vocational education. This study has indeed shown the existence of a mismatch between students' expectations and reality in some of those TVET graduates who decided to continue their tertiary studies in continuity of vocational specialism confident that the subject knowledge already acquired would help them in their school-to-tertiary education transitions. As Chapter 6 suggests, this lack of articulation can hamper the seemingly already scarce possibilities that upper-secondary vocational students have to successfully complete their TE. This has social and economic implications at the micro- and macro-level in terms of human flourishing and economic returns. Addressing this lack of coordination should be part of a broader political interventions that should stop being blind to vocational young people's aspirations, choices, wellbeing and lives and start place these at the centre of TVET debates. Understanding aspirations, as I have argued throughout this thesis, is key to reimagine TVET's roles and purposes at individual, institutional and national levels, towards fairer opportunities for human development.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research

This thesis presents some limitations. First of all, it observes only a short period of the post-school transition to TE or employment of TVET graduates. As mentioned in Chapter 4, this study should have consisted of three rounds of data collection. The third round should have taken place after a year from the beginning of the fieldwork (October-November 2019). This last round was meant to understand how well TVET graduates were doing with their life in

relation to their initial aspirations one year after the completion of upper-secondary vocational education. Specifically, it would have aimed to understand young people's perception of what had determined their successful or unsuccessful completion of the first year of TE, or their successful or unsuccessful trajectories in the labour market. It would also have aimed to explore how their initial aspirations and life projects had changed in a year time and whether their aspirations had gone through processes of adaptation. The third round could have captured changes in transitions at a later time point which are very likely to happen as dropouts after the first year increase and, likewise, enrolments in TE can occur within 5 years from completion of compulsory education (OECD, 2019a; SIES, 2019).

However, the ambitious plan of conducting a third round was made it unfeasible due to the social unrest which broke out in Santiago de Chile, and soon escalated nationwide, in October 2019 where over a million people took to the streets of the capital to protest against social inequality. These protests the consequent social and political disruptions and the risks and difficulties these could pose to the interviewees and myself in trying to arrange interviews made it impossible to travel when initially planned and also the extension in time of such unrests (which were halted only in March 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic) created delays in my decision-making that made the timeline of my thesis incompatible with a third round of data collection, analysis and writing. Furthermore, these exceptional events created significant disruptions at micro- and macro-level, altering the context within which aspirations were negotiated. Additional funding for a third round of data collection would be ideal for postdoctoral research or impact project.

Given the good amount of data collected in the first two rounds of interviews, I could still address the scope of the research which was only adjusted to 'cover' aspirations (trans)formation in the shorter period of post-school transition. Furthermore, this doctoral thesis focuses on a critical period in the lives of vocational students as it captures the first months of transitions into adulthood, when young people take, for the first time autonomously, the major decisions about which trajectory to follow. As these findings are very contextually-bounded and reflect Chilean extreme neoliberal, market-led system, further studies should observe changes in transitions later in time and identify main trends that could be compared with other contexts where different socioeconomic circumstances create different transition regimes.

A few limitations concern methods of data collection. One limitation has to do with the assumptions included within views on TVET which have been predominant in the first round of interviews. These are reflected in prompted questions on structural constraints that vocational education would pose to individual agency's choices and aspirations (e.g. on the difficulties vocational students have to access TE's institutions). As mentioned in Chapter 4, this limitation was acknowledged in time to be addressed in the analysis of the data, in the conduction of the second round of interviews and in writing up the findings.

Furthermore, while listening to the audio-recordings, I realised that at times I asked double-barrelled questions (asking more than one point at a time) (Lewis, 2017). As a consequence of that, some questions were not answered which caused a slight loss of information. Similarly, due to language misunderstandings, on a few occasions I repeated the same questions formulated in different ways and in different moments of the interview because I did not get the answer in the first place, missing the occasion to follow up on interesting answers that I understood only when listening to the audio-recordings.

A further limitation relates to the recruitment of participants. In particular, I managed to get the Ethics approval at the beginning of October 2018. Thus, my first fieldwork started exactly when the academic year was coming to an end in Chile. As described in Chapter 4, I managed to recruit the students in the last few days of school, when the number of students attending classes is usually lower. Indeed, the day when the questionnaire was distributed, 70 students were present out of a total of 148 of students enrolled in the last year in that school. This may have impacted on the gender profile of the participants which was biased towards male participants (53%) compared to female participants (40%). Related to this, further studies should develop further the role of vocational track of studies and gender, which showed highly significant associations with transition experiences, and how these affect transitions over a longer period of time. Regarding the choice of the municipality and of school where participants were recruited, this was functional to the recruitment of the study population and ideal given the aims of the study. This choice was motivated by a number of factors including access, safety as well as socioeconomic and educational characteristics. I do not consider this choice as a limitation, nor do I pretend to generalise the experiences of few TVET graduates of a public TVET school in Santiago to the whole reality of TVET students in Chile or internationally. Similar to other studies in the same field (Powell & McGrath, 2019b), the overarching aim of this study was to challenge orthodox views of TVET graduates and offer an alternative perspective by drawing on theoretical

frameworks and adopting methodologies that allow to place at the centre of the analysis the realities of secondary TVET students and what matters to them. This was possible thanks to using a qualitative longitudinal approach and by focusing on a small number of participants.

Lastly, this study does not provide systematic evidence on the role of *PACE* and *Gratuidad* in developing ‘high’ aspirations and on whether these programmes are beneficial or detrimental if considered over a longer period of time. Rather, these emerged from the data as important mechanisms. Given the importance that these programmes have in mediating structural disadvantages but also their potential role in exacerbating meritocratic discourses, further studies could explore further their relationship with aspirations and post-school transitions.

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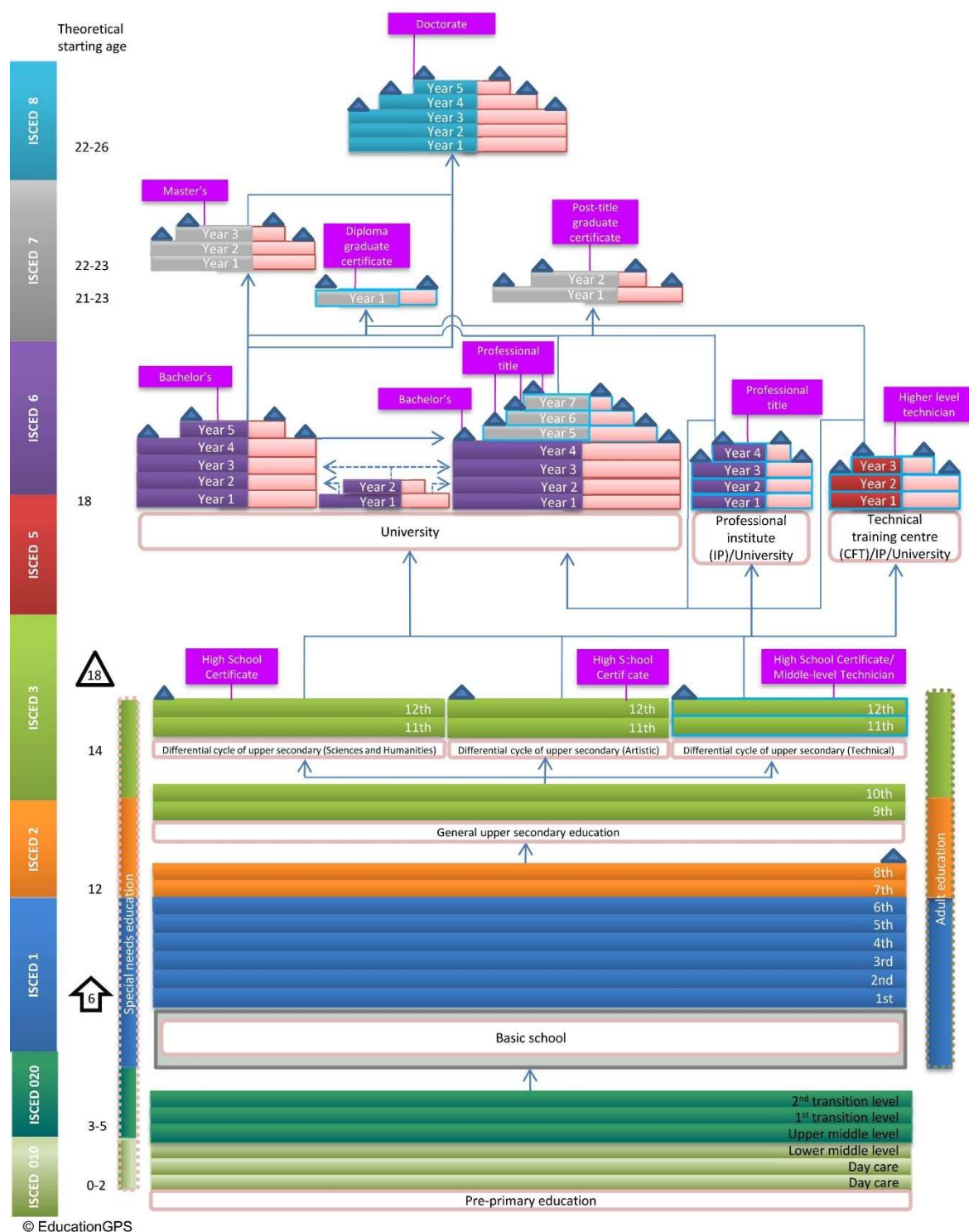
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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Chilean Education System

Chile

2020



Appendix 2 - Authorization from the Head of the school in Chile to conduct the research

05/11/2018

Santiago de Chile

Estimados Miembros de la Comisión Ética de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad de Glasgow:



Yo, María Soledad Robredo Donoso, directora del colegio municipal Mariano Egaña, ubicado en la Comuna de Peñalolén (Región Metropolitana de Santiago), doy mi consentimiento para que Alice Aldinucci, estudiante de doctorado de la Universidad de Glasgow (UK), haga su investigación de campo en este colegio entrevistando a profesores, estudiantes de cuarto medio, orientadores y la directora para su tesis sobre la toma de decisiones y la construcción de aspiraciones de los jóvenes en transición desde su educación secundaria técnico profesional a trayectorias de vida después de la educación secundaria.

Cordialmente,

Appendix 3 - Information Sheet for students



College of Social
Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title: Am I becoming who I want to be? A journey into choices and aspirations of young people in transition from their upper secondary Technical and Vocational Education to post-secondary life trajectories: a preliminary study in Santiago the Chile.

Researcher details

Alice Aldinucci

PhD Student

Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change

School of Education

College of Social Sciences

University of Glasgow

a.aldinucci.1@research.gla.ac.uk

2340687a@student.gla.ac.uk

Invitation Paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of this study?

This research will investigate young adults' life trajectories and transitions to adulthood from the last year of their vocational upper secondary education studies to one year after the completion of these studies in Santiago de Chile. Through your narratives, the research seeks to explore 1) how you make your decisions on what educational or professional path

to take after your secondary TVET studies, 2) how you cope with the outcomes of your choices, 3) your perspectives on, and experiences of, technical and vocational upper secondary education in relation to the construction of your life aspirations. The ultimate outcome of this research is to contribute to connect the macro-level (policy) to the micro-level (youth) and, thus, inform policy-makers, educational and other relevant stakeholders to make political decisions that better support young people to make conscious decisions about their educational and labour trajectories in Chile.

What does my participation to this study imply?

As a young adult in transition from a vocational upper secondary education to a post-TVET life trajectory, you represent a key informant for my research. However, your participation is entirely voluntary, this means that you are completely free to decide whether to take part. Participating will involve:

Meeting me for individual interviews which will take place three times: one between October and December 2018; one between March and May 2019; one between August and November 2019.

Each interview may last between 1 to 2 hours approximately. In the Consent Form I will ask you if you give me your permission to audio-record the interview. Interviews will take place in a safe environment where you will feel comfortable (I will let you decide and it could be, for example, cafes, libraries, universities' premises).

You will be asked about your life, past, present and future (accounts and reflections). The focus will be on the important transition you are living from compulsory education to post-compulsory life paths, particularly on the decisions you make, on the outcomes of such decisions and on your life projects and aspirations. Your reflections on your TVET education will be central, but I will also ask you more personal questions about you, your family, your interests, your studies, your peers, what you value in life, what you do in your free time. The first interview will ask more about yourself (biographical interview), while the second and the third will focus more on what has happened between the past interview we had and the present one we will be having.

Meeting me and other peers of yours, who have decided to participate to this study, when the first round of individual interviews is completed (early December 2018). This group discussion may last between 30 minutes to 1 hour and it aims to understand whether, from the second round of meetings, you are willing to use other ways to tell your story (i.e. narrative diaries, photos, drawings) together with the interviews.

You will be given a voucher for the value of 10.000 Chilean pesos for each meeting that we will have and travel reimbursement. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you and your family (if minor) will be asked to sign a consent form. For every round of data collection, I will ask you whether you still want to take part to the study and, if this is the case, I will ask you (and your family, in case you are still a minor) to sign the consent form. In case of changes to research design, you will be informed in advance, a new Information Sheet will be provided to you and you will be given time to decide on your participation.

What are the possible benefits and risks of taking part?

A personal benefit of taking part is the possibility of giving you a safe space where to reflect on your life choices and life projects. Articulating thoughts aloud with a person outside your immediate and influential network can trigger new insights and reflections which might help your self-understanding and improve your decision-making process. A broader, more collective benefit relates to the ultimate aim of this study which is to contribute to shed a light on the current TVET system in Chile and on what could be improved by giving voice to the students themselves, thus providing policy makers with a deep and rich understanding of youth's world (your needs, perceptions of constraints, opportunities and factors of vulnerability, the role of education for self-realisation), something which is often overlooked.

Possible risks could be related to emotional or personal distress triggered by/during the interviews.

Can I leave the research?

You can decide to interrupt an interview or to leave the research at any time without prejudice to your studies, job or well-being, and without providing a reason. In case you decide to withdraw, your data will be destroyed and/or removed from the study, until it is no longer practical to do so. This means that I will destroy identifiable data, if you request me to do so. However, I will not be able to remove the data that has been already used in papers that have been published or in the thesis once it has been completed. Once the transcripts or notes of the interviews are transcribed, I will make them available to you if you request to read them, check the content and decide whether you are happy with that or if there are parts you want to be cut.

Confidentiality and anonymity:

Your names as well as the names of schools, institutions, workplaces, etc. will be anonymised and replaced with pseudonyms in the thesis and in the papers that will be published.

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it possible, unless during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I might have to inform relevant agencies of this.

How will the researcher use the data collected?

Data collected will be used for my Doctoral Thesis in Education, College of Social Sciences of the University of Glasgow, journal articles, conference papers, submissions, written summary of results to all if requested.

Paper data and identifiers will be kept secure in locked room/facility/cabinet and electronic data will be stored in secure files protected by passwords. Access to these data will be

granted only to me, my research supervisors, research assistants and the examiners. The researcher is obliged to honour this agreement.

In line with the 5th Principle of the General Data Protection Regulation (2018), personal data will be kept in a form which permits identification of data subjects for no longer than is necessary for the purposes for which the personal data are processed. Once the research project is completed, personal data will be destroyed. Electronic files will be erased using secure removal software and paper documents containing personal data will be shredded. In line with the Principle 10.2 of the PGR Codes of Practice 2017, as required by the University, Research Data will be securely held for a period of ten years after the completion of a research project.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is funded by the Lord Kelvin Adams Smith Interdisciplinary Scholarship.

Who has reviewed the study?

The research has been considered and approved by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Contact for Further Information

Should you need any further information in the future, you can contact me:

Alice Aldinucci

Email: a.aldinucci.1@research.gla.ac.uk
2340687a@student.gla.ac.uk

Telephone number: +44 (0) 7535263412

If you have any concerns or complaints about the way in which the study has been conducted, please contact College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

Thank you for your time and your attention.

Date

Appendix 4 - Consent Form for students



College of Social
Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: Am I becoming who I want to be? A journey into choices and aspirations of young people in transition from their upper secondary Technical and Vocational Education to post-secondary life trajectories: a preliminary study in Santiago the Chile.

Name of Researcher: Alice Aldinucci

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Oscar Valiente

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to interviews being audio-recorded.

I acknowledge that copies of transcripts will be returned to participants for verification.

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my studies/employment arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

- All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- Personal Data will be destroyed once the project is complete.
- Research Data will be retained for ten years in secure storage for use in future academic research
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.
- I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

I agree to take part in this research study

☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Name of Parent/carer

Signature Date
.....

Name of Researcher.....

Signature

Date

..... **End of consent form**.....

Appendix 5 - Ethics Application Form

Staff & PGR: May 2018: V3



College of Social
Sciences

Staff and Postgraduate Research Application Form College Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

Before completing this form, you should refer to the guidance notes available at:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/#d.en.473063>

And

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/informationforapplicants/>

This application form should be typed and submitted electronically along with supporting documents via the Research Ethics System: <https://frontdoor.spa.gla.ac.uk/login/>

Applications should be submitted **at least 6 weeks in advance** of the intended start date for data collection to allow time for review and completion of any amendments that may be required.

Please note that applications that require PVG Clearance or permissions to access participants will not be approved until the applicant can provide evidence of this.

1 Applicant Details

Staff Research Project	<input type="checkbox"/>
Postgraduate Research Project	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Project Title	
Am I becoming who I want to be? A journey into choices and aspirations of young people in transition from their upper secondary Technical and Vocational Education to post-secondary life trajectories: a preliminary study in Santiago the Chile	
Name of Applicant	
Alice Aldinucci	
School/Subject/Cluster/RKT Group	
School of Education	
Student ID/Staff Number	
2340687A	
Programme Title (PGR Applications only)	
PhD in Education	

2 Ethical Risks

This section **must** be completed and signed (in some form) by the appropriate parties, commenting on the research ethics risks involved in this project. **The application will be returned if this section is not fully completed.**

Staff & PGR: May 2018: V3

PGR Applications – Supervisors must complete and sign this section, approving submission for ethical review.

Staff Applications – Applicant must complete and sign this section, confirming submission for ethical review.

It should be clear from the comments provided that the potential risks have been considered and information provided on what they are, with evidence of what is to be implemented to mitigate these. You are advised to refer to the Risk Guidance at:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/#d.en.473063>

This research involves a qualitative longitudinal study with young adults (+17) in the last year of their vocational upper secondary education in Chile. The researcher is knowledgeable of the Chilean context and has experience carrying out qualitative research with young people in Chile and in other developing countries. The size of the sample (20 young adults and about 10 adults), the variety of methods (interviews, focus groups, field notes) and the length of the longitudinal study (13 months) are reasonable for the objective of investigating young people trajectories after completing their secondary vocational education studies. For every round of data collection the researcher will record written consent from the participants and, in the case of underage informants, from their parents/guardians. All of them will be informed that their participation is entirely voluntary and that they can leave the longitudinal study at any point through a plain language statement in their native language (Spanish). Their names as well as the names of schools, institutions, workplaces, etc. will be anonymised and replaced with pseudonyms. The researcher will provide institutional permission from the vocational secondary school where informants will be recruited. The researcher will receive guidance and support from the supervisory team in Glasgow and from experienced research partners at the *Alberto Hurtado* University during the process of data collection.

Signed:



Dated: 16/08/2018

3 All Researcher(s) including research assistants and transcribers (where appropriate)

Title	First and Surname	Telephone	Email (<i>usually UoG</i>)
Miss	Alice Aldinucci	+4407535263412	2340687a@student.gla.ac.uk

All Supervisors, Principal first (where applicable)

Title	First and Surname	Telephone	Email (<i>usually UoG</i>)
Dr.	Oscar Valiente	+44 141 330 4538	oscar.valiente@glasgow.ac.uk
Dr.	Scott Hurrell		scott.hurrell@glasgow.ac.uk
Dr.	Queralt Capsada Munsech	07453250609	queralt.capsada-munsech@glasgow.ac.uk

4 External Funding Details

(NB: If this project is externally funded, please provide the name of the sponsor or funding body.)

Lord Kelvin Adam Smith (LKAS) Interdisciplinary PhD scholarship

4a Is this application being submitted to another Ethics Committee, or has it been previously submitted to another Ethics Committee?

Yes ☐

No ☒

(If yes: please provide name and location of the ethics committee and the result of the application.)

N/A

5 Project Details

Start Date for Data Collection: 15/10/2018

(NB: This refers to data collection for the research covered in this application. This should be at least 6 weeks from the date of application submission.)

Proposed End Date of Research Project: 30/09/2021

(NB: This date should be when you expect to have completed the full project and published the results e.g. date of award of PhD, journal article publication, end of funding period.)

This is the date of termination of the LKAS Scholarship.

6 Justification for the Research

Why is this research **significant** to the wider community? **What might be the impact** on your practice or on the practice of others? **Please outline the reasons** which lead you to be satisfied that the possible benefits to researchers, participants and others to be gained from the project justify any risks or discomfort involved.

My research will investigate youth adults' life trajectories and transitions to adulthood from the last year of their vocational upper secondary education studies to one year after the completion of these studies. The contribution of this study, its distinctiveness, relates to specific focus on the in-depth and prolonged over time exploration of the reasoning behind decision-making process and on the construction of secondary TVET students' aspirations considered in a holistic sense (including, but not limited to, educational and professional aspirations). The research will draw on the sociological debate about the structure/agency interplay and will use structure and agency as conceptual tools to understand how agency (individual level) shapes and is shaped by the structure and vice versa (context of opportunities and constraints).

Through the narratives of secondary TVET students' life stories and the intended use of multiple qualitative methods of data collection (see section on methods), the first aim of this research is to explore the process of decision-making as such behind the choices students have to take in one of the important transitions in their life (from compulsory education to different life projects) which determines the educational or professional path they take after their secondary TVET studies. Secondly, it will understand how students cope with the outcomes of their choices and how they perceive themselves as agents of their life and how they perceive the structure where they act as constraining or enabling their being agentic.

Furthermore, drawing on capabilities approach, the study will dig into the constructions of their aspirations, problematising the economic/productivist assumptions in policy discourses about the role of TVET. Indeed, through the voice of the students, it will enable to reflect on and understand their perspectives on, and experiences of,

technical and vocational education, why they chose it and how they value over time this education in relation to their self-realisation, to the construction of aspirations and of the capabilities they value important for the life they want to conduct. The educational environment of their secondary studies (TVET schools) will be an important analytical variable to analyse social inequalities related to the decision-making process and construction of aspirations. The in-depth inquiry into choices and aspirations of students coming from the same secondary TVET institution may also lead to understand what contexts of decision may allow one trajectory or another. Other dimensions considered in the analysis will be families, peers, neighbourhoods and other factors that will arise from students' account that contribute to shape their identity and social position.

The ultimate and ambitious outcome of this research is to finally contribute to the research gap about the connection of the macro-level (policy) with the micro-level (youth) and, thus, inform policy-makers, educational and relevant stakeholders to make political decisions that better support young people to make conscious decisions about their educational and labour trajectories. Through the exploration of young people's narratives of their life trajectories after their secondary TVET studies (their needs, their perceptions of constraints, opportunities and factors of vulnerability, the role of education for their self-realisation), the research seeks also to provide a deeper and more complex understanding of youth's world, something which is often overlooked by policy makers who deliver policies as if it was not important to be informed by the same people their policies are directed towards.

Although the main participants in this research are the students, to get a holistic perspective on how the system of transitions from secondary education to tertiary education and from secondary education to labour market works in Chile for TVET students, besides analysing secondary data, I will interview also key actors in the field of education and the labour market. These will be sampled considering their relevance to life transitions/trajectories of the young participants of this study (see sections below on research methods and on participants for more information on this). This triangulation of different sources will ensure rich, robust and more comprehensive perspectives on, and understanding of, the object of the study.

7 Research Methodology and Data Collection

7a. Method of data collection (Tick as many as apply)

Face to face or telephone interview (Provide a copy of interview themes. This does not need to be an exact list of questions but does need to provide sufficient detail to enable reviewers to form a clear view of the project and its ethical implications.)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Focus group (Provide details: themes or questions. This does not need to be an exact list of questions but does need to provide sufficient detail to enable reviewers to form a clear view of the project and its ethical implications.)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Audio or video-recording interviewees, focus groups or events (Ensure that permission is evidenced on the consent form. Details should be provided, either in theme/question information or separately.)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Questionnaire (Provide a copy of at least indicative questions, final questions must be submitted as an amendment if not provided in initial application)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Online questionnaire (Provide the web address/ or electronic copy if not yet available online)	<input type="checkbox"/>

Participant observation (Provide an observation proforma)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other methodology Field notes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

7b. Research Methods

Please explain the reason for the particular chosen method(s), the estimated time commitment required of participants and how the data will be analysed. Ensure that you include reference to methods of providing confidentiality as you indicate below in section 8a.

This will be a longitudinal qualitative study that will take place in three stages from October 2018 to November 2019 to generate data on choices and aspirations of young people in transition from their secondary Technical and Vocational Education to post-secondary life trajectories. This ethics proposal is accurate about information on the first stage of fieldwork, the pilot study (October-December). If after the first stage major changes will have to be done to improve aspects of the research design, or methods used, or to predict a more accurate sample size, I will instantly notify my supervisors and the Ethics Committee to get an amendment to the ethics approved.

A qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) will be conducted with 20 students who volunteer to take part to this study and it allows me to 1) explore structural processes/transitions over time; 2) analyse the macro-structures which represent their contexts of decisions and actions; 3) explore the micro-level of life histories from retrospective, current and perspective visions of participants on their life. QLR requires time from both participants and researcher because interviews are repeated over time. However, this is a method that has been extensively supported in the literature (see attachments) as effective and powerful in terms of the depth and richness of data generated in studying processes or changes happening over time, such as life transitions and trajectories.

To recruit the students (see section on recruitment below for more details on this) I will deliver to the two classes chosen a brief list of basic demographic questions (see attachment) which include short-term life projects after secondary TVET studies, availability for/interest in taking part to the study and personal contacts and which I will use as a tool to help me select the students so to have a representative sample in terms of gender, life projects and family background. With the students who will volunteer to take part to the study, in the first round of interviews, firstly, I will be focusing on their biographies/life histories as "analysing biographies is a main field of qualitative social research that studies individuals' sense-making in regard to transitions and life projects" (Heinz, 2016: 20) (attached to this proposal, see papers on the reason of chosen methods). This will aim at recollecting what has been important in their life up to the time of the interviews and that have influenced their choices. Secondly, the focus will be on their present life and on their future as they imagined that at that point. The second and third round of interviews will be a follow-up of the previous interview where the future as imagined will have become their past we will reflect on. Reflecting on past, present and future will give the opportunity to explore possible changes in students' positions, perceptions, dreams and concerns and will provide rich accounts of their transition to adulthood.

With stakeholders from education and labour market (the plan below and the section on participants provide further details on this sample), I will be conducting conventional, semi-structured interviews.

institutions, workplaces, etc. will be anonymised and replaced with pseudonyms. However, I will inform them that the confidentiality of information supplied by them cannot be guaranteed in the event of the disclosure of what I consider delicate and potentially harmful, for them or other people, information. In fact, in this case, I will have to share it with my supervisors, the Academics of the University *Alberto Hurtado*, adults that have worked with the students (such as the counsellor of their secondary school) to make the most sensitive decisions and take all the possible measures to deal with potential harmful situations in the best way possible for my participants and other parts involved. In any case, I will not take any delicate decision by myself and I will always take advice from experienced researchers.

For data analysis, interviews will be transcribed and fieldnotes typed up. Given the large qualitative database that is going to be generated in this study, I will use of NVivo Software to sort and catalogue data in an ordered, effective and safe way. Data will be transcribed and analysed as soon as collected and once transcribed, I will proceed with thematic and narrative analysis. Thematic analysis implies using a coding process: understanding the underlying meaning of interviews, segmenting data by listing and clustering the topics, abbreviating topics into codes, grouping related topics into main categories, reconnecting the segmented data with the context for the analysis. Codes and categories will change or will have to be recoded once the analysis proceeds with more entries. Narrative analysis (life course approach) will aim at constructing the participants' story focusing on the meaning that each participant attaches to events.

8 Confidentiality & Data Handling

8a. Will the Research Involve:

**You should select all options that apply to your (different) research methods (insert the name of the method in shaded box at top of each column, e.g. interview / questionnaire) and make clear in section 7b above how these will be applied.*

Degree of anonymity	Interviews	Focus group	Field notes
De-identified samples or data (i.e. a reversible process whereby identifiers are replaced by a code, to which the researcher retains the key, in a secure location?)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Anonymised samples or data (i.e. an irreversible process whereby identifiers are removed from data and replaced by a code, with no record retained of how the code relates to the identifiers. It is then impossible to identify the individual to whom the sample of information relates)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Complete anonymity of participants (i.e. researchers will not meet, or know the identity of participants, as participants are part of a random sample and are required to return responses with no form of personal identification)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Use of Names</i>			
Subject being referred to by pseudonym in any publication arising from the research?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Participants consent to being named?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Any other methods of protecting the privacy of participants? (e.g. use of direct quotes with specific, written permission only; use of real name with specific, written permission only): <i>provide details here:</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participants being made aware that confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee; for example in the event of disclosure of harm or danger to participants or others; or due to size of sample, particular locations etc.?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Participants being made aware that data may be shared/archived or re-used in accordance with Data Sharing Guidance provided on Participant Information Sheet?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

8b. Which of the following methods of assuring confidentiality of data will be implemented

(NB: The more ethically sensitive the data, the more secure will the conditions of storage be expected to be.)

Location of Storage	
Storage at University of Glasgow	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Stored at another site (During the field work in Chile, paper data will be securely stored in the place where I will be living)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Paper	
Data to be kept secure in locked room/facility/cabinet	<input type="checkbox"/>
Data and identifiers to be kept secure in locked room/facility/cabinet	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Electronic	
Access to computer files to be available by password only	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Other	
Any other method of securing confidentiality of data in storage: (Please provide details here)	<input type="checkbox"/>

8c. Access to DataAccess by named researchers and, where applicable, supervisors, examiners, research assistants, transcribers ☒Access by people **OTHER** than named researchers, supervisors, examiners, research assistants, transcribers ☐

If applicable: provide details of others who will have access; and if relevant, of data management and sharing policy or protocol

N/A

8d. Retention and Disposal of Personal Data *

Explain and as appropriate justify your proposals for retention and disposal of any PERSONAL data to be collected.

In line with the 5th Principle of the General Data Protection Regulation (2018), personal data will be kept in a form which permits identification of data subjects for no longer than is necessary for the purposes for which the personal data are processed. Once the research project is completed, personal data will be destroyed. Electronic files will be erased using secure removal software and paper documents containing personal data will be shredded.

“ ‘personal data’ means any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person (‘data subject’); an identifiable natural person is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of that natural person;” Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 Chapter 1, Article 4, Definitions*

The Data Protection Act 1998 is being replaced by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) on 25 May 2018. Further information on the GDPR is available on the webpages of the UofG Data Protection and Freedom of Information Office: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/dpfooffice/gdpr/#>

8e. Retention and Disposal of Research Data

Explain and as appropriate justify your proposals for retention and disposal of RESEARCH data to be collected. Please consult Data Management Support pages for guidance: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/datamanagement/>

In line with the Principle 10.2 of the PGR Codes of Practice, as required by the University, Research Data will be securely held for a period of ten years after the completion of a research project. Contacts have been made with the Research Data Management Team for advice on repositories.

For Postgraduate and Staff Research University of Glasgow Research Guidelines expect data to be retained for 10 years after completion of the project. Please see University Code of Good Practice in Research for guidance,

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/ourresearchenvironment/prs/pgrcodeofpractice/>

9 Dissemination of Results

9a. Results will be made available to participants as:

(NB: Intended method of dissemination ought normally to take account of the age, capacities and situation of participants.)

Written summary of results to all if requested	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Copy of final manuscript presented if requested (e.g. thesis, article)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Verbal presentation to all (e.g. information session, debriefing)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Presentation to representative participants (e.g. CEO, School Principal)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other or None of the Above <i>(please provide details here)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9b. Results will be made available to peers and/or colleagues as:

Dissertation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thesis (e.g. PhD)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Submission	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Journal Articles	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Book	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conference Papers	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Written summary of results to all if requested	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Other or None of the Above (please provide details here)	<input type="checkbox"/>

9c. Datasets suitable for future re-use will be:

Openly available via a data repository (eg. UKDA, Enlighten, Research Data)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Available via a data repository but with restricted access	<input type="checkbox"/>
Available from the researchers by personal request	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other or none of the above (please provide details here)	<input type="checkbox"/>
None of the data from this study will be suitable for future access and re-use	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

10 Participants**10a. Explain how you intend to recruit participants. Provide as much detail as you can, including what age/type of group will be used for each research activity involved (e.g. Interviews)**

I aim to recruit 20 students from the same secondary TVET school in the Municipality of Peñalolen using a purposeful method of recruitment. I am aware that during the months some of them may decide to withdraw. I aim to have from 8 to 10 students by the end of the QLR. I will have an initial introductory meeting with the students in the school premises and I will be accompanied by Academics from *Alberto Hurtado* University, the Director of the School and possibly the person in charge of TVET in the Municipality chosen for the study. The aim of this introductory meeting is to explain what the research is about, how I am thinking of conducting it and what are the aims of the study (starting by checking their knowledge of what research means and implies in itself). I will provide all the details I have at my disposal by that time and make the students aware that, if throughout the months something within the research design changes, I will inform them and ask for their consent (and the consent of their families if they are still minors) to keep participating to the research. Attention will be paid to gender-balance (gender will represent an important analytical dimension which intersect other dimensions relevant for the analysis of the findings). For this reason, I will choose participants (male and female) from both a masculine sector (i.e. mechanics, construction) and a feminine sector (administration accounting) offered by the TVET secondary school. I will deliver to the two classes chosen (one for each sector) a questionnaire (see attachment) with questions on basic demographic data, short-term life projects after secondary TVET studies, availability for/interest in taking part to the study. The questionnaire is not intended to be a research method in this study, but a tool that will help me select the students so to have a representative sample in terms of gender and life projects, taking into account their interest in participating in this particular research. With this group of participants, I will be using the QLR as explained above with life history/biographic

interviews, a focus group and follow-up interviews in two rounds. In the first stage of data collection, I will be also interviewing the Director and the vocational orientator of the Secondary TVET School in Peñalolen and Brenda Quiñe who is in charge of the area TVET in the Municipality of Peñalolen and who I met in April when I was in Chile for the TVETChile project. In the second stage I will be interviewing Rectors of Universities, CFTs, ITs where the students (my sample) will be enrolled and employers of industries/companies where they will be working.

10b. Target Participant Group

Students or Staff of the University	<input type="checkbox"/>
Adults (over 18 years old and competent to give consent)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Adults (over 18 years old who may not be competent to give consent)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Young people ages 16-17 years old	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Children under 16 years old	<input type="checkbox"/>

10c. Incentives

If payment or any other incentive (such as a gift or free services) will be made to any participants please **specify the source and the amount of** payment to be made and/or the source, nature and where applicable the approximate monetary value of the gift or free service to be used. **Please explain the justification for offering payment or other incentive.**

Payment is an accepted and used practice of conducting social research in Chile. In line with what I have witnessed in my field visits in Chile this year for the TVETChile project, I will give the young adults who decide to take part to the study a voucher for the value of 10.000 Chilean pesos, which is the equivalent of 12€, for each meeting we will have. The source of the payment will be my scholarship. The reason for the monetary incentive is that I will be asking students to give some of their time for my research throughout many months. For how much I will try to engage them in this research whose aim, ultimately, to contribute to shed a light on TVET system and on what could be improved by giving voice to the students themselves, this will remain my research, not their research. Their participation in my research is a voluntary matter and I intend to honour their good will by informing my research participants (both young adults and adults) of the results of the research providing a written summary.

10d. Number of Participants (if relevant give details of different age groups/activities involved)

This will be a preliminary qualitative study. The number of students I intend to involve is about 20 students (10 from one sector/programme and 10 from another sector of the same school) recruited from the same secondary school with attention posed to gender, class and ethnicity balance (although most of the students attending TVET schools comes from lower- to middle-class). I expect that some student would opt to leave the research over time, and I aim to have by the end of the QLR a final sample not inferior to 8/10 students. In the first/pilot stage of data collection, I will also interview the Director and the Vocational Orientator of the secondary TVET school where the students will be about to complete their secondary studies in the Municipality of Peñalolen, and the responsible of TVET in the Municipality of Peñalolen (for a total of 3 participants).

In the second and third stages of data collection I will conduct follow-up interviews with the students (the number may vary depending whether students will continue to participate or not). I will also interview Rectors of Universities, IPs and CFTs where the young participants will be enrolled and employers of companies or industries where

participants will be working after their secondary studies. The exact number of this sample will depend on the educational/working choices made by the young participants after their secondary studies and by the availability of these key actors. Once the number and the sample are accurate (after the pilot study), this will be communicated to the Ethics Committee.

10e. Dependent Relationship

Are any of the participants in a dependent relationship with any of the investigators, particularly those involved in recruiting for or conducting the project?

(For example, a school pupil is in a dependent relationship with their teacher. Other examples of a dependent relationship include student/lecturer; patient/doctor; employee/employer)

Yes ☐

No ☒

If Yes: Explain the relationship and the steps to be taken by the investigators to ensure that the subject's participation is purely voluntary and not influenced by the relationship in any way.

10f. Location of Research

University of Glasgow	<input type="checkbox"/>
Outside Location <i>This research will take place in Santiago the Chile. The searched site chosen (TVET secondary school) is in the Municipality of Peñalolen. This is an interesting Municipality which welcomes 3 secondary TVET schools and 3 institutions for adult education. It is a Municipality that has shown interest in investing in education. Prove of that is the fact that it won the opportunity to have one of the only 10 public Centres for Technical Education that will be built throughout the whole country. Furthermore, this Municipality offer pre-university courses as well as programmes for employability for free to young people in their secondary studies. However, despite this investment in education, the demand does not seem quite receptive of these offers. The drop-out rate in these free courses is very high and no studies have been conducted so far with young people in their transitions to understand possible causes of this apparent lack of motivation or interest. In terms of logistic, in April I had the opportunity to meet Brenda Quiñe in charge of the area TVET at the Dirección de Educación de la Corporación Municipal in Peñalolen. She seemed enthusiast about the idea of having me conducting my study there and expressed the opinion that exploring their students' transition into post-secondary education into depth is a research very much needed. She will be a key gatekeeper for me to access the school and the participants and she is a key contact of the Academics of Alberto Hurtado as well with whom the University of Glasgow has pre-existing relationship. Interviews with stakeholders from education and labour market will take place in their offices. Interviews with students, as it has been the case for the TVETChile project, will take place in places that are convenient for them (cafes, libraries, premises of the University Alberto Hurtado). Group could take place in the premises of the University Alberto Hurtado if this is convenient for the students, or in the premises of their TVET school if possible. These details will be planned with key local actors as I will need their access and help for the logistic.</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

11 Permission to Access Participants

11a. Permissions/Access

Permission is normally required to gain access to research participants within an organisation (e.g. Private Company; school; Local Authority; Voluntary Organisation; Overseas institution, Academic institution, including UofG.)

Is this type of permission applicable to this application?

Yes ☒

No ☐

If Yes: Is evidence of this permission provided with this application?

Yes ☐

No ☒

If evidence is not provided, please explain why. Note that it must be forwarded to the ethics administrator as soon as it is available.

In Chile, permission from the head of school is needed and I will provide the evidence of this permission in due time.
Academics of *Alberto Hurtado* University will support me in this.

11b. Does this application involve contacting University of Glasgow students directly (specifically either via email or within classes) for the purpose of your research?

Yes ☐

No ☒

If Yes: *Separate permission to survey students* needs to be obtained prior to any such survey being undertaken. Normally this permission should be sought from the appropriate authority after ethical approval has been granted.

See <https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/informationforapplicants/>

(NB: Once obtained, a copy of this permission must be forwarded to the Ethics Administrator.)

- **If applicable: list the students** that you intend to contact (e.g. 30 students from X course)

12 Informed Consent

The **Participant Information Sheet** is written information in plain language that you will provide to participants to explain the project and invite their participation.

12a. Have you attached your Participant Information Sheet (alternative name: Plain Language Statement) for participants?

Yes ☒

No ☐

If No: please explain:

N/A

12b. Please note that a copy of this information should be offered to the participant to keep unless there are specific reasons for not doing so. These must be clearly explained below.

A copy of Participant Information Sheet will be given to each participant and to their families/guardians if participants are young adults (17+). I will faithfully translate Information Sheet and Consent Form from English to Spanish and have it revise by my supervisor (whose mother tongue is Spanish) and by Academics of *Alberto Hurtado* University.

12c. Are any participants likely to require special consideration in the preparation of the Participant Information Sheet, (alternative name: Plain Language Statement) to ensure informed consent?

Yes ☐No ☒**If Yes: Provide details here:**

N/A

12d. How will informed consent by individual participants or guardians be evidenced?

(NB: In normal circumstances, it will be expected that written evidence of informed consent will be obtained and retained, and that a formal consent form will be used: a copy of which should be provided for review.)

Signed Consent Form	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Recorded Verbal Consent	<input type="checkbox"/>
Implied by Return of Survey	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please provide details here)	<input type="checkbox"/>

13 Monitoring

Describe how the project will be monitored to ensure that the research is being carried out as approved (e.g. give details of regular meetings/skype/email contact).

As it has been the case so far, I will have regular, monthly meetings with my supervisors via Skype as well as email exchanges when needed. In case of unforeseen circumstances disrupt/change/affect in any way the course of the research (data collection, data analysis), I will immediately contact my supervisors and agree with them the best course of actions to take. If the changes affect the ethics approval already received, I will change the necessary sections under the approval of my main supervisor and send the new ethics form to the Ethics Committee before carrying on any other field research/data collection.

14 Health and Safety

What are the potential issues of personal safety for you, other researchers or participants involved in the project and how will you manage them? (Other than lone field work – refer to Section 15 for this)

Possible issues could involve distress for participants (this could be the case more for young participants than for professionals who will take part in the study) and for me. With participants, if I notice that feelings of discomfort arise during the interview/activity, I will immediately interrupt the conversation and talk to the student with sensitivity, asking the reason for the feeling or asking what s/he wants or needs to do in that moment to feel better. I will follow up on them to check if they are doing okay the days later. Once the transcripts of the interviews are transcribed, I will make them available to the students who want to read them so that they can check the content and decide whether they are happy with that or if they want some part to be cut. I will remind students their right to withdrawal at any point and that this will imply that the recording of the interview as well as the transcript will be destroyed. Data of a withdrawn participant will not be used, unless the thesis/papers for publication have already been completed.

As far as my personal safety is concerned, as mentioned in other sections above, I will take care of any stress and discomfort that may rise. I have been in the field before for other projects and I am aware of how frustrating, stressful

consult local researchers and local actors I am in contact with before taking any decision and make it official to participants. Adult participants are less likely to suffer from possible distress because of the method used and questions posed (I will meet each one for 1 semi-structured and open-ended interview related to TVET system in Chile) and because of the role they have which makes them likely to entertain such conversations. However, as expressed in the Information Sheet, all participants will be made aware of their right to interrupt the interview and/or withdraw at any time without any consequences on their studies, jobs, well-being.

15c. What procedures are in place for the appropriate referral of a study participant who discloses an emotional, psychological, health, education or other issue during the course of the research or is identified by the researcher to have such a need?

The procedure in place is to inform the above-mentioned key local actors of the situation and also inform my supervisors. If any emotional, psychological, health, education or other issue is disclosed to me or I identify it, participants will already know (because it will be specified in the consent form and I will remind them if/when necessary) that this information/issue has to be reported to third parties who have the capacity and the position to deal with the situation in a professional way and for the benefit of the participants. I have been in similar situation while working as a Teaching Assistant in a comprehensive school in England with students of 11-16 years old. Some situations can be very difficult to address due to the content of what is disclosure or found out, but with the adequate sensitivity and the support of professionals, any negative consequence can be dealt with successfully or minimised.

15d. Does this research involve any sensitive topics or vulnerable groups? You should refer to the Risk Guidance at:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/#d.en.473063>

Yes ☐

No ☒

If Yes: Give details of arrangements to minimise risks pertaining to this

This research will involve participants of 17+ (see below, section 17). The topic in itself is not sensitive. However, recalling life stories with biographical interviews and the incentive to be reflexive during the whole field research might be source of distress. Besides what mentioned earlier, what I will work on from the very beginning with my young participants is building a rapport with them and do all I can to make them feel at ease with me and in a safe space. I will remind them all their rights in the study as well as limits to confidentiality and anonymity in case serious issues about their life comes up during the months (see above). There are no real pre-packed solutions to personal or emotional issues that may arise during a research, especially a qualitative research involving human beings. Being a good researcher does not mean only to be able to write an outstanding literature review or be an excellent academic multitasker. Being a good qualitative researcher means and involve having the empathy and sensitivity to be able to adapt to very different situations and environment, to understand situations and be able to read people as much as it is humanly possible (given that we cannot read people's mind yet). Qualitative field research is not only about being able to link abstract theories to empirical findings but being really aware that our participants are not a source of data we want to extract from them and that is it. They are humans, each one with their life and challenges and highs and downs as everybody else. Being attentive to these human beings that for many different reasons accept to give some of their time to allow us to conduct our research is the minimum if the sensitivity a researcher should have. This is how I will deal with them as I have always done in my previous research or work in schools or in general with young people: treating them for what they are, human beings who also are going through a delicate and important moment

and tiring it can be. There will be moments of enthusiasm and optimism and moments of tiredness and pessimism. It is likely that things will not go the way they are thought and planned, but this is all intrinsic to qualitative research and its emerging nature. I will make use of all the resources I have to face challenging and stressful moments and I will communicate any serious discomfort or difficulty with my supervisors. I already have my own resources in my daily life that help me keep myself healthy, mentally and physically, and I will make time to resort to them even when I am in the field. Finally, if any potential issue for me or my participants arise, I am not alone in the field. I have the total support of expert researchers of *Alberto Hurtado* University and I will also have the contact of the counsellor of the school where participants have done their secondary studies.

15 Risk

15a. Does the activity involve lone field work, lone working or travel to unfamiliar places? (E.g. Carrying out interviews alone and off-campus) *NB: This does not apply to working within an institution such as a school.*

(You should refer to the Risk Guidance at:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/#d.en.473063>

Yes ☐

No ☒

Give details of arrangements to minimise risks pertaining to this.

I will not be alone in the field as I have done already field visits in November 2017 and April 2018 for the TVETChile project and I have had the occasion to meet and work with the Academics of the *Alberto Hurtado* University (especially Dr. Leandro Sepúlveda and María José Valdebenito), building a personal rapport with them. Interviews will take place in public spaces (either the secondary TVET school in Peñalolen, or universities or cafes or libraries) as it has been the practice in the TVETChile project. I will inform my contacts in the University every time I have an interview with a participant and I will let them know the place and the time. They have my phone number and we will be in contact before and after each interview.

15b. How will you ensure that you minimise any possible distress caused to participants by the research process?

The risk of potential disruption or negative consequences to the participants may not be obvious and you should consider this carefully as distress could be emotional, social or economic.

As far as emotional and social distress is concerned, besides providing the support mentioned in sections above, before starting my research I will manage to have a meeting with the director of the secondary school and with the counsellor and with Brenda Quiñe who is in charge of the area TVET at the in the Municipality of Peñalolen and who I met in April. When I present my research to them, I will ask them advice as a preventive measure so that, in case of any negative consequence to my participants occurs during the months, I am prepared to handle it. I will constantly check with young adults who will participate in my research how they feel about their involvement in the study, their opinions on methods and questions posed and I will take their insights into considerations to improve the design and the implementation of the data collection and to address any issue that may rise throughout the study, including possible distress caused to participants. If the distress occurs and I consider necessary to seek help from them or from other key actors they had suggested me, then I will refer to the person/people for support. As far as the economic distress, I will make it clear to participants that costs for transports as well as the incentives will be provided in each interview. I will

of transition in their life. I will not force anything from them, I will talk to them and make myself available for any further clarification and explanation they might need. I will try to enter their world on tiptoes, with kindness, humbleness and with their permission and I will try to manage the power relations in research in a way that is not threatening for them but respectful for both parts.

16 Insurance

Does this research come under the exclusions to the University insurance cover for research?

Yes ☐
No ☒

If Yes: Explain and detail how you intend to cover the insurance needs for this research

N/A

The University insurance cover is restricted in certain, specific circumstances, e.g. the use of hazardous materials, work overseas, research into pregnancy and conception and numbers of participants in excess of 5000. Please refer to the Insurance and Indemnity advice on the website given below. Advice or authorisation given must be included with this application.

Information may be available at this link: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/finance/staffsections/insuranceandrisk/>
If you have a problem accessing this link, please try a different browser e.g. Firefox instead of Internet Explorer.)

17 Protection of Vulnerable Groups and Disclosure

Does this project require Protection of Vulnerable Groups (PVG) clearance?

Yes ☐
No ☒

If Yes: Evidence that this has been obtained **MUST** be provided with this application.

If PVG registration is held, provide details here:

As confirmed by the Academics of *Alberto Hurtado* University (see email attached and below the translation from the Academics of *Alberto Hurtado*), in Chile the procedure to work with minors is different: what is required from the researcher is a Consent Form signed by both the participants and their parents/carers. I will provide parents/carers the same Information Sheet given to students and parents/carers will be asked to sign the same Consent Form provided to students.

"Sí, seguramente te vas a encontrar con varios chicos de 17. Lo que se hace acá es enviar un consentimiento informado a los padres previo a la entrevista. Firma el chico y el apoderado. No se solicita permiso a la policía."

"Surely you will have to do with young adults of 17. What is done here is to send an informed consent to the parents prior to the interview, signed by the young adult and the parent/guardian. Permission from the police or other authority is not requested."

The Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 came into effect on 28 February 2011. This replaced the previous Disclosure Scotland checking system for individuals who work with children and/or protected adults. The University is a Registered Body under this legislation.

Please consult the University Protection of Vulnerable Groups Scheme webpages for guidance:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/humanresources/mgrs-admin/mgr-guidance/pvgscheme/>

Further guidance is available from:

<https://www.mygov.scot/disclosure-types/?via=http://www.disclosurescotland.co.uk/> (mygov.scot - Disclosure Scotland)

18 UK and Scottish Government Legislation

Have you made yourself familiar with the requirements of the:

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (May 2018) <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/dpfoioffice/gdpr/> this replaces the Data Protection Act (1998)

Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 <http://www.itspublicknowledge.info/Law/FOISA.aspx>

Yes ☒

No ☐

If No: Explain here:

N/A

See Application Guidance Notes available from:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/#d.en.473063>

for further information.

In addition visit: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/dpfoioffice/> for University guidance on Data Protection including GDPR

The **Freedom of Information Act 2002 (FOI)** provides a general right of access to most of the recorded information that is held by the University. The Act sets out a number of exemptions/exceptions to this right of access.

Declaration on next (last) page must be signed in some form and dated. The application will be returned if it is not.

19 Declarations by Researcher(s) and Supervisor(s)

The application will not be processed if this section is blank or incomplete.

- The information contained herein is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, accurate.
- I have read the University's current human ethics guidelines, and accept responsibility for the conduct of the procedures set out in the attached application in accordance with the guidelines, the University's Code of Conduct for Research and any other condition laid down by the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee and the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee.
NB: Full details of the University's ethics guidelines are available at: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/aims/ourpolicies/ethics/>
- I and my co-researcher(s) or supporting staff have the appropriate qualifications, experience and facilities to conduct the research set out in the attached application and to deal effectively with any emergencies and contingencies related to the research that may arise.
- I understand that **no** research work involving human participants or data collection can commence until I have been granted full ethical approval by the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

This section MUST be completed to confirm acceptance of Code of Conduct. If there is no scanned signature then please type the names (or use GUID) and date into the boxes below.

	Signature	Date
Researcher (All applicants)		10/08/2018
Principal Supervisor (Where applicable)		16/08/2018

For Supervisors – Please note that by submitting this application the supervisor confirms that:

- The student is aware of the College ethics requirements.
- The topic merits further research.
- The student has the relevant skills to begin research.
- If interviewing, the student has produced an appropriate information sheet for participants.
- The procedures for recruitment and obtaining informed consent are appropriate.

Appendix 6 - Ethics Approval



College of Social
Sciences

11/10/2018

Dear Alice Aldinucci

College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Project Title:

Am I becoming who I want to be? A journey into choices and aspirations of young people in transition from their upper secondary Technical and Vocational Education to post-secondary life trajectories: a preliminary study in Santiago the Chile

Application No: 400180020

The College Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

Permission from the head of the secondary school in Chile to interview students
Permission from IPs and CFTs to interview students
Permission from the employers to carry out interviews in the companies

- Start date of ethical approval: 11/10/18
- Project end date: 30/09/2021
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the CoSS Research Ethics Administrator before research commences. Permissions you must provide are shown in the *College Ethics Review Feedback* document that has been sent to you.
- The data should be held securely for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, or for longer if specified by the research funder or sponsor, in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research: (https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_490311_en.pdf) (Unless there is an agreed exemption to this, noted here).
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The *Request for Amendments to an Approved Application* form should be used: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/>

Yours sincerely,

Dr Muir Houston
College Ethics Officer

Muir Houston, Senior Lecturer
College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer

Social Justice, Place and Lifelong Education Research
University of Glasgow
School of Education, St Andrew's Building, 11 Eldon Street
Glasgow G3 6NH
0044+141-330-4699 Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

Appendix 7 - Participants' background information

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Secondary TVET track	Socioeconomic Tranche	Municipality ⁴⁴
Rafael	M	20	Mechanics	0%-40%	same
Emma	F	17	Administration	N/A	same
Leandro	M	18	Mechanics	0%-40%	same
María	F	17	Administration	0%-40%	same
Julián	M	17	Mechanics	0%-40%	same
Rafaela	F	18	Administration	41%-50%	same
Sol	F	18	Administration	41%-50%	same
Claudia	F	17	Electricity	41%-50%	same
Ricardo	M	18	Electricity	0%-40%	same
Paulina	F	19	Administration	51%-60%	same
Cristián	M	19	Electricity	0%-40%	same
Marcos	M	17	Telecommunication	0%-40%	same
Gabriela	F	17	Telecommunication	0%-40%	same
Natalia	F	17	Administration	0%-40%	same
Isabel	F	17	Administration	0%-40%	same
Marcelo	M	19	Telecommunication	61%-70%	same
Camila	F	18	Administration	41%-50%	different
Francisco	M	20	Telecommunication	0%-40%	different
Daniel	M	18	Administration	41%-50%	same
Juan	M	19	Administration	0%-40%	same
Pablo	M	17	Telecommunication	0%-40%	same
Mateo	M	17	Telecommunication	0%-40%	same
Marta	F	19	Electricity	0%-40%	same
Antonio	M	17	Administration	0%-40%	different
Renata	F	18	Administration	0%-40%	same
Santiago	M	18	Electricity	0%-40%	same
Jonas	M	18	Mechanics	0%-40%	same
Carlos	M	17	Telecommunication	0%-40%	different
Enrique	M	18	Electricity	0%-40%	same
Matías	M	18	Electricity	0%-40%	same

⁴⁴ Municipality where they live: same/different (the municipality where they live is the same/a different municipality where the school is located).

Appendix 8 - Interview guidelines (Fieldwork 1)

Introduction

Tell me your name, where do you live and who do you live with.

Last year of school

How was your last year of secondary school? (just finished) How did you experience it?

What expectations did you have at the beginning of the year? And by the end? Were your expectations met?

Positive and negative aspects of your school/of your last year

Did you go to pre-university (free extracurricular course)?

Choice of secondary schooling

Why did you enrol in a TVET school (and not in a Scientific-Humanistic school)?

Why did you enrol in that school?

Why did you choose that field of study?

What expectations did you have of that field of study?

Are you happy with the school you 'chose'? And with the field of study? Would you change something if you could?

Life projects and aspirations in the past, in the present and for the future

When you were 15, what life projects did you have? How did you see yourself in the future? (self-projection after secondary education)

How do you see yourself now? What plans do you have (in terms of life projects)?

Do you want to keep studying? If so, what and where? Where not? What not? Why?

Do you want to work? If so, where/where not? Doing what/not doing what? Why?

What are the steps you need to do to accomplish your plans?

How would a good year look like? And a bad one?

Do you know what your classmates will do now? How do you feel in relation to your classmates' projects? What were the main topics of discussion with them?

Are you doing your training? Why? Why not? Where? Who found it?

Family and school expectations

What expectations did the school have for the students?

What expectations does your family have?

Skills, knowledge and capabilities gained in school vs. needed to pursue life goals/project

What did you get from your education in that school? In terms of soft and hard skills, abilities gained?

What sort of abilities/skills/capabilities do you need to face the life after secondary school and reach your goals?

Role of education and concept of being successful

What do you think of the sentence ‘you need a higher education to become someone’?

What does it mean to learn/being educated? What is it for?

What does it mean to be successful in life? What does a young adult need in these days in this society to lead a successful life?

Reflections on life trajectories post-secondary schooling: opportunities and personal expectations

What opportunities do you have with a secondary TVET degree in the Chilean contemporary society?

How/where do you see yourself in a few years’ time? How do you think you will get there?

What would be a good trajectory? And a bad one?

Do you want to add anything of what you are feeling/experiencing in this moment of transitions? Are you experiencing it as a transition? From what? Towards what? What does it mean to be an adult?

Appendix 9 - Interview guidelines (Fieldwork 2)

The present

What are you doing in this moment of your life and why?

Are you doing what you wanted? If so, how did you manage to do so? If not, why?

What other opportunities did you have and how did you make your choice?

Are you happy with your choice/with what you are doing? Why? Why not?

Has something changed in your life projects? How? Why?

How do you value now your upper-secondary vocational education in relation to your future plans? Has your secondary education helped you understand what you want to become and how to pursue it? How is your vocational education enabling/constraining the achievement of what you want to do?

How do you value your experience at school? Would you do anything different now?

The past

What has it happened in your life since we met last time?

What did (not) go according to plans/to what you hoped for? Why?

How was the work-placement experience (if you did it)? How did you feel in your work-placement? Did it change your perspective on your vocational sector?

How was the experience of the PSU?

The future

What are your plans for the next 6 months?

Where do you see yourself in 5 years? And in 10 years?

What kind of life do you want for yourself? Why?

To achieve your goals and life projects, what have you already done and what do you still need to do?

What are your life priorities? Why?

What kind of jobs would you like to do?

What kind of jobs would you be employable for right now?

What concerns you the most in relation to your life projects and achievement of aspirations?

What is a 'good life' for you?

What does it mean for you to be successful? What do you need to be successful? What being successful means in your society? Does your society give opportunities to all to be successful?

Appendix 10 - Interview guidelines TVET stakeholders

Interview guidelines - Head of the school:

How many years working in that school? What was your background? Did you work in other schools before? What difference could you see between this school and the previous schools you worked in?

Who does this school attract in terms of school population?

Which field of study do you offer at upper secondary level? Why those?

Is students' transition to post-secondary education taking care of/dealt with? How?

Which factors contribute to determine decisions made by students after their secondary education in this school?

Do you have a counsellor service in the school? How does it work?

What could help the decision-making process of students?

What is the scope of TVET in Chile? What scope should it serve? Any difference between these two (what it is and what it should be for)? If so, why?

How has TVET discourse changed over decades?

Strengths and weaknesses of secondary TVET in Chile.

What is learning for TVET students? What do they want to get with their secondary TVET?

How can TVET facilitate or constraint students' ability to construct and pursue their life projects?

How choose TVET in Chile? What kind of reflections can we do about this 'choice'?

Interview guidelines - school's counsellors:

How many years have you worked in this school? In which role?

Which background do you have (education/work)?

How did you become counsellor?

What are your main duties as counsellor?

Do you have some framework/guidelines to follow to support students in their transitions/ decision-making process?

Which information do you provide? Which information do they ask for?

How do you determine when the counselling service is successful?

How does a student who has just finished his/her upper-secondary TVET education here take his/her decisions on what to do next?

What kind of mechanisms are in place to support/facilitate students' insertion into the labour market/higher education?

Why does this school have these 4 field of studies? How were they chosen?

Is there a continuity in terms of field between secondary TVET education and higher education/labour market?

What kind of opportunities does a TVET graduate have after secondary education?

Does this school prepare its students to work or to keep studying? How? Why?

Do you have any follow-up system in place to know what your former students' life trajectories are?

Interview guidelines - teachers

What do you teach? How long have you been teaching in this school? Has your role changed over time?

How and why did you become teacher of (Administration and Logistics; Mechanics; Telecommunication; Electricity)?

Why did you choose this school?

What teaching methods do you use to teach your specialism?

What is your role as teacher in charge of the specialism?

What guidance do you give to your students when they about to complete their upper-secondary education?

How is the labour market of your vocational economic sector?

What kind of work opportunities vocational graduates have with a vocational upper-secondary qualification?

How does the school help students transition to post-school trajectories?

What do your students want to do? What opportunities and challenges do they have to achieve what they want?

What advice do you give them?

How do you think they make their post-school decisions? Which factors influence their choices the most?

How easy or difficult it is for a teacher of vocational specialism to stay up-to-date with changes in the labour market?

Do you personally create connections with companies where students can do their work-placement? If so, how do you choose these companies? What kind of support do you receive from the school?

What does a young Chilean need to be part of the society and able to live a life with dignity?

Appendix 11 - Ethics Application Form - Approved Request for Amendments



College of Social
Sciences

College Research Ethics

Request for Amendments - Reviewer Feedback

Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

Application Details

Staff Research Ethics Application ☐

Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application ☒

Application Number: 400180020

Applicant's Name: Alice Aldinucci

Project Title: Am I becoming who I want to be? A journey into choices and aspirations of young people in transition from their upper secondary Technical and Vocational Education to post-secondary life trajectories: a preliminary study in Santiago the Chile

Original **Start** Date of Application Approval: 11/10/2018

Original **End** Date of Application Approval: 30/09/2021

Date of Amendments Approved: 15/03/2019

Outcome: **Amendments Approved**

Reviewer Comments

I approve the amendments and the additional documents.

Please retain this notification for future reference. If you have any enquiries, please email socsci-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk.

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College of Social Sciences
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The University of Glasgow, charity number SC004401

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