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

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Introduction

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

The Portuguese higher education system made some progresses regarding the diversity of its student body, as the evolution of the data in the Eurostudent survey illustrate. If the 2005 data showed that only 10% individuals coming from a low schooled family background had an higher education degree, against an European average of 16% (Eurostudent, 2009) in 2011 data reveal that 45% of the student body comes from a low educated family (Orr et al., 2011). More recent figures show that the probability of a low-schooled background student attending higher education is of 54%, the highest in European context, reflecting the huge efforts in expanding the recruitment base promoted by the country (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). There is then reason to believe that in Portugal, similarly to what happens in the U.S. colleges (Jenkins, 2012), these students, formerly called "untraditional", are the new majority. Nevertheless, these figures only refer to what is called "equitable participation", and not to the effective achievement of a degree of these participants. Also, they portray the period before the " troika programme", which according to the press and student unions led to the silent abandonment of many undergraduates. This paper is based on the analysis of 25 biographical narratives of first generation students (in and out of the system) collected in one public university campus between 2011 and 2012, focusing their personal and academic experience. First generation students are still an internationally underrepresented population in higher education (Jehangir, 2010; Thomas, Quinn, Society for Research into Higher Education, 2007), prone to drop out

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for reasons that range from unfamiliarity with the institutional procedures, to feelings of mismatch or economic barriers. By examining their stories and current policy developments, I shed light on the student experience of this new majority, confronted with challenging historical circumstances that can make higher education a formal but not a de facto opportunity for them. In order to do so, I first provide an overview of the Portuguese economic and welfare context, followed by an historical perspective of access and equity policies in Portuguese higher education. After that, I introduce the social justice framework that informs my analysis, with the contributes of Fraser (2007), Fineman (2008) and Sen (1999). The capability approach was the basic framework used to design the interview guide of the interview. Four core capabilities for first generation students' experience were selected, in order to better grasp areas of agency and vulnerability. Finally, I move to the analysis of selected cases, matching the individual voices with the collective setting.

1 The economic crisis and its effects upon the Portuguese society

Portugal is currently going through a period of economic contraction that is the consequence of not only the austerity programme measures promoted by the "troika" (the IMF, the European Commission and the Central European Bank) and the government, but also of the structural problems that obstruct its recuperation, such as its education deficit. Low levels of qualification (according to the last Census in 2001[2], 45% of the Portuguese population has at most 4 years of education and the early school leaving rate is 23%, well above the EU average) allied to low GDP growth and productivity since the joining the Euro currency (Menéndez, 2012) do not forecast a fast recovery. Before 2012, when the effects of the contention programme started to reveal its major damages, the rate of at risk poverty was already above the European average (18% in 2011, against 16,4% in the EU in 2010), as well as the rate of working poor (10,3% in 2011, against an European average of 8.4 %). The crisis began with the downgrading of a rating agency in 2010, leading to the fall of the Socialist government in April 2011, and to the election of the current Democrat executive, whose task has been to implement the troika austerity programme, following a economic strategy of "front loading", that is, going beyond what was agreed in the memorandum and applying violent resources cuts in the beginning, expecting a fast recovery that did not occur.

The austerity measures taken since 2009 (first under the Socialist government, after with the right wing colligation under the IMF intervention) include cuts in civil servants' salaries, increase of VAT tax to 23%, increase of tax over individual income and reduction of unemployment assistance, as well as family benefits and minimum living income. Such measures were taken under the fragile support of the weak Portuguese welfare state, which still is a quasi welfare state, where family plays the role of major individual protection and where social expenses and services are perceived as a favor rather than a right-based claim, resulting in welfare inefficiency. Despite the initial acceptance of such measures, the figures soon declared their failure. From 2010 to 2012 the Gini coefficient rose from 33.7 to 34.5 (Eurostat, 2014a) and the unemployment rate reached the record of 17,5%, in 2013, being currently of 15,4 %, with 34.8 % of youth unemployment (Eurostat, 2014b). Also, emigration numbers have risen 85% in 2011 if compared to the previous year (Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, 2012a), a wave only comparable to the 60's one under the dictatorship period. In a recent paper about how inequality affects economic growth (International Monetary Fund, 2014), the IMF recognises the need to conciliate redistribution measures with fiscal consolidation policies, namely by improving the access of lower income groups to higher

[2] (Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, 2011)

education. However, the registration numbers for higher education are falling since 2011, from 73.468 to 59.012 in 2013 (PORDATA, 2014), in a country where austerity measures were applied in a regressive way, cutting more on the poorest groups rather than those of high income (Callan et al., 2011) and where non governmental organisations report an "alarming increase in people seeking their help" (Caritas Europa, 2013, p. 47). Recent data from the EU-SILC survey point out that in 2012 18,7 % of the Portuguese population was at poverty risk, a rate that would reach 46,9 % if one considers only income from salaries, capital and private transfers (Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, 2014). Nevertheless, and despite the debate to whether austerity is the best policy to fight deficit unbalance and public debt (Herndon, Ash, Pollin, 2013), the government has applied the troika programme beyond its limits, constructing what seems to be a "state of exception" (Agamben, 2005), a state where the normal jurisdiction is suspended, giving rise to governance often against the people's will. Such determination has been legitimated by recent economic indicators that show the decrease of unemployment and a timid growth on exports, that have lead the IMF to consider the Portuguese case a success. However, such figures must be read with caution, since the Portuguese debt is currently of 123% of the GDP, against 94% in 2010 (Caritas Europa, 2014), illustrating the perverse result of the policies implemented. The privatisation of the gains and the socialisation of the losses have held citizens responsible for the banks' negligent conduct, and the difference of income between rich and poor is growing since 2009 (Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, 2014), making it obvious that a privileged minority is profiting from the crisis. To sum up, it is certain that effects of "expansionist austerity" are to be felt long after the external intervention is over (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014).

2 Access and participation policies and the funding of higher education

Regarding cost-sharing, funding and social support, the Portuguese higher education system has suffered several changes since 2010. From an historical perspective, fees have been introduced in 1992 (Cerdeira et al. 2013). Until 2009, and following Amaral and Magalhães (2009) theorisation regarding access and participation policies, Portugal undergone 3 different moments. The first moment, designated as "more is better" comprises 20 years after 1974 to 1997, and it is generally characterised by policies that aimed at enlarging access and expanding the system, with the creation of a polytechnic sector and the implementation of a private higher education system, what allied to facilitated entry requirements, led to 1996/1997 an enrollment increase of 178%, if compared to 1981. Such prosperous period was followed by a decade designated as "more is a problem", between 1996 to 2004, where the explosive growth of the system (which in 1997 counted 40% of enrollment in 20-24 age cohort), brought the necessity of controlling the enrollments through securing degree quality, policies that combined with a declining birth rate resulted in a downturn of enrollments. Finally, from 2006 on, the Socialist government entailed the period designated as "more is different", where the focus was the equity of the student body, since according the Eurostudent survey from 2005 the Portuguese system presented the underrepresented to a very high degree students coming from low schooled backgrounds (Tavares, Tavares, Justino, Amaral, 2008). Efforts done in this area through second chance programs and diversification of entry routes bared its fruit (mainly due to the entry of mature students), with recent results attesting the balanced and diverse composition of the Portuguese higher student body (Eurostudent, 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). Unfortunately, due the economic crisis and the political changes that led to the election of the current parliamentary majority in 2011 (a right wing colligation between the Social Democrat party and the Popular Party), the efforts that were previously done may be about to fall,

Financial cuts to higher education institutions in 2011 and 2012 constitute less 20% on institutional budgets (Varghese, 2012), which led to rising fees since universities depend more on the students' payments to survive. Further more, the investment in education was in 2011 of 3,8% of the GDP (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012), a level bellow the one of 1995 (4,9% of the GDP) and far away from the OECD average of 6,2 %. Because such developments are very recent, I will briefly provide an overview of the current state of affairs regarding fees and social support, mostly based on newspapers and statistical data available online, since the research literature requires more time to produce sound data from this period.

3 Fees and social support

Until 2010 fees for students students in public higher education were of 1000 euros per year for an undergraduate course (Licenciatura), about 1250 Euros per year for a Master degree, and around 3000 euros per year of enrolment on a PhD course (Fonseca, 2011). In 2012 the fees for a Licenciatura degree were raised to 1037 euros.[3] Although this amount may not seem high, when considering that the minimum wage in 2012 was 485€ and that the average net salary was of 805 € (Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, 2012b), the weight of such fees gains other expression. In 2012, Portugal was already among the top 10 European countries with the highest fees (European Comission, EACEA, Eurydice, 2012). Also according to the same study, 26% of the students in Portugal receive social support that ranges between 987 and 6018 € per year, but the average amount of this support only covers 25% of the student's costs on a total of 6624 € per year (Cerdeira, Cabrito, Patrocinio, Brites, Machado, 2012). A loan system was established in 2007, with low spreads (1%) and state sponsorship, and students who come from lower socio-economic background and who are older are more likely to take a loan (Cerdeira et al., 2012) and most students only recur to them as alternative or complement for social scholarships (Firmino da Costa, Caetano, Martins, Mauritti, 2009). Regarding social support scholarships, there have been cuts both in tax relief linked to participation in education and in study grants (European Comission, EACEA, Eurydice, 2013). The instability in the eligibility rules for such support has left several students outside higher education, as I should further report. In 2010, the state established that the scholarships would be granted according to a formula and not to a progressive bracket system (Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, 2010). This measure while apparently more just (because the amount of the scholarship would be calculated specifically for each family and would not favour or hinder those families in the extremes of the distribution), was accompanied by the increase of the number of ECTS necessary to be eligible from 40% to 50%, which made several students ineligible for support.[4] In 2011, a new scholarship regime established that students whose parents have debts either to social security or to taxes are not untitled to have a scholarship (Ministry of Education and Science, 2011). This policy of "blaming the victim" is extremely harsh for those students who are in worst economic situations, who end up paying for their families' mistakes. Along with this change, other rent sources such as bank deposits begun to be considered in the overall familiar income and there was a new increase of the minimum number of credits the student must fulfil from 50% to 60% ECTS. The press counted more than 40.000 students being denied scholarship (45% of the applications), with

[3] Fees were introduced in 1940's with a symbolic value of 1,200 Escudos (6,5 Euros). They were raised in 1993/1994 to a maximum of 399 €, in 1994/95 to a maximum of 419 €, and in 1995/1996 to 439 €. In 2003 the value of fees was established in a minimum of 1,3 the national minimum wage and a maximum amount that shouldn't exceed 1000 euros, approximately (Cerdeira, Cabrito, & Patrocínio, 2013)

[4] 19% of the applications were overruled because of insufficient academic achievement (Jornal I, 2011).

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less 15% supported students that in 2010/2011 (Público, 2012a). A national query from several student unions revealed that almost half of the students were experiencing financial difficulties, and nearly a third feared having to give up their degree (Público, 2012b). In 2012 the new law for social support (Ministry of Education and Science, 2012) maintains that debts from household element can determine the refusal of the scholarship application but allows the student to reapply to a needs scholarship in case a debt payment plan is presented. After the evident decrease in higher education enrolments and recommendations of legal bodies, the government has just changed the scholarship regime, withdrawing the impossibility of students whose parents have debts to be eligible for a scholarship (Ministry of Education and Science, 2014).

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

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

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

When mapping injustice in people's lives, the feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser (Fraser, Honneth, 2003) detects two clusters of problems: problems resulting from misdistribution, that is, from an unfair and uneven distribution of material resources, and problems resulting from misrecognition, that is, from a denial of respect that should be granted to a person or group, a consequence from cultural patterns that are institutionalised and refuse further questioning. Parting from the deconstruction of the recognition concept (interpreting misrecognition as a case of uneven institutional status thus avoiding identity essencialisation), Fraser's proposal is to extend the notion of justice through the norm of parity of participation, which requires two conditions. First, that all material inequalities, be it of income or leisure time, are eradicated, in order to permit fair interaction between peers. Second, that institutions balance their individual perceptions in order to adjust any unjustified differential treatment or any blindness to evident distinctiveness. In Fraser's most recent version of the parity of participation concept, representation obstacles (social exclusion from networks that are in power to make claims and decisions in public processes of contestation) join redistribution and recognition and form a threefold theory of justice (Fraser, 2007). For the purpose of this research, it is particularly relevant that redistribution, recognition and representation are achieved together, because in cases like class based discrimination, recognition alone won't do much (Sayer, 2007), as class is not a natural difference to be recognised, but an unbalance on the distribution of wealth that needs to be corrected.

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

Similarly, Sen's capability approach highlights the role of conversion factors in the fostering of capabilities. The capability approach (henceforth, designated as CA) is an heuristic framework that is the basis of the quality of life index of the United Nations, and that seeks to place freedom at the core of evaluations about individual well being, as an alternative to approaches that privilege the measurement of resources (for instance GDP) to assess how well off a person is (Alkire, Deneulin, 2009). Although the CA also acknowledges the role of commodities such as money, the freedom metric unit of this approach is the capability, which Sen (1999) defines as the set of real opportunities an individual has to choose from in order to achieve a life she has reason to value. Other important concepts in this approach are functionings and conversion factors. While capabilities can be placed in the potential realm, since they constitute a set of valid options, functionings are the achievement or the materialisation of some of those options, that can be as diverse as states of being or acquired skills, such as reading, for instance. For the CA, what matters is not how much resources one has, but what can one do with them, which is mediated by conversion factors that interfere with the person's ability to function. Conversion factors are determinants that are generally outside the control of the individual and that affect (by improving or constraining) her ability to make use of opportunities. These conversion factors can be personal (mental talent or physical robustness), social (cultural norms, laws, power structures and public policies) and environmental (infrastructures or climate), and is through the conversion factors that the CA accounts for human diversity (Robeyns, 2005). For example, a student that works part-time will have less same time to study than another who studies full time, which can affect her performance. Given this she needs more resources (more time or more money to stop working) to perform on an even level when compared with her full-time peers, and furthermore, to fully profit from her education experience beyond the simple attainment of certain outcomes. Conversion factors are then what mediates a commodity and allow it to become a real opportunity. Given the heterogeneity of conversion factors among people and their contexts, Sen considers that different individuals will have different needs, and therefore refuses to define a list of universal capabilities or entitlements that should be aimed by all human beings, unlike Nussbaum (2000), who through a list of selected capabilities seeks to implement the CA as minimum threshold for social justice. For Sen, the CA is concerned fundamentally with how free people are to determine their lives, and it is a tool for evaluating

public policy. Such position maintains the flexibility of the approach, though some critics point to its individuality as one of the barriers to its implementation in terms of policy, since it ignores the interdependency of human beings and the exploitative nature of capitalism (Dean, 2009). Attending to these critiques, and to the need for a more consistent theory of justice, matching the CA with Fraser's and Fineman's contribution seemed to provide a balanced theoretical outline, while maintaining the emphasis on processes and individual differences that the capability approach entails.

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

- Resilience and vulnerability observed in certain individuals is due not to innate personal characteristics but to the existence or absence of institutional support.
- First generation students due to social conversion factors such as low socio-economic origin and austerity measures need extra and targeted resources to overcome difficult times.
- Low economic status is a "corrosive disadvantage"[5] that prevents students from being recognised as full social actors and of being heard, that is, without redistribution, recognition and representation are not possible.
- In the event of state failure, informal alternative protection systems are activated based on interdependency networks, further entrenching vulnerability to the private sector.

5 Methodology and Analysis

A mixed methods approach was adopted during field work, combining both biographical interviews as defined by (Schutze, 2007) and problem centred interviews (Witzel, Reiter, 2012) a method that combines both features of deductive and inductive reasoning, suited for researching specific topics. The method of open questioning of biographical interviews was employed for gathering information about path and private life of the subject, sensitive areas where I have opted to give freedom to the student to select what is of most relevance to them, and also to understand their particular context. The subjects were selected through snowball sampling, using their parents schooling level as a proxy for socio-economic background (both parents would have to have at most 9 years of education). For the purpose of this research, institutions can be considered the state, the family, non-governmental organisations, friends and partners. When developing the interview guide, and after maturated literature review, questions were structured around 4 selected capabilities considered structuring for the higher education student development: the capability for autonomy (choice and motivation), capability for voice (participation on academic activities), capability for resilience (critical consciences and bounds) and the capability to aspire (self-projection and expected outcomes of HE). The selection of these four areas of inquiry was based on other lists of capabilities, such as the one developed by Walker, (2006) for higher education and the one developed by Nussbaum (2000) as a minimum threshold for social justice. Regarding the quotations used in this article, pseudonyms were adopted in order to preserve the student's privacy, and the translation into English language is the author's responsibility.

[5] "disadvantage the presence of which yields other disadvantages" (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007, p. 10).

6 Vulnerability, parentalisation and precarity

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

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

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

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

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

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

> "Well, now that you are not studying and your grandmother will stop receiving the allowance you need to work (…) I was disappointed when I heard that, and revolted,

[6] For an overview of the parentification concept please view (Hooper, 2008; Jankowski, Hooper, Sandage, & Hannah, 2013).

> because I was kind of depressed and she was asking me to do what she never asked from my brother, because he finished the 9th grade and is unemployed to this day".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7 Resistance, networks and dreams

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

[7] Decree of Law nº. 11/2008, 17 January. For further information on the changes of the legal regime for foster families, see (Delgado, 2010).

[8] An annual academic celebration including concerts, parades and several group events. In this occasion students generally wear the academic suit.

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> "My mother read on the newspaper that a church institution paid the fees for some students. She was desperate and went to talk with the priest, who was very moved. Then I was integrated into a solidarity fund that pays my fees, and this year they directed me to the Rotary Foundation support that also covers the fees of few students".

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

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

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

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

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

For those students who are still in the university, other forms of resistance come together with the participation in student union activities and other communitarian engagement, whether because they do not identify with the current individualist/ entrepreneurial values that are being infused in society, whether because they really wish to "make a difference". Gabriel states:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8 Conclusion

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

unveils how material scarcity translates both in cultural positioning and in the political fights entailed by first generation students for a fairer recognition and representation for their own group, who nevertheless reveals some collective agency, more evident in the university arena than in their precarious professional contexts.

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

The contrast between capabilities as "positive" opportunities or freedoms (determined by the subject) and the vulnerabilities exposed by the harsh economic circumstances of the examined period reveals that institutions play a decisive role in enhancing or restricting the opportunities for this group of students. To this respect it is worth noticing the role that fees, private debt and defective social support play in excluding these students from the system. Till 2011, the insufficient and delayed response of social support structures to scholarships application made it unreasonable to count on that assistance to survive, forcing the students to seek viable alternatives for their subsistence, and sometimes entering into illegal schemes such as accumulating work and state transfers, persistently tricking the system. But from 2011 on, the policy that prevented students coming from indebt families to receive state support narrowed even further their chances to escape the poverty trap. The few students who can overcome their economic deprivation count on the assistance of private institutions, such as non-governmental organisations, family and friends. Fineman's insight on resilience being a product of external support and not of superior individual ability is then consistent with the findings of this research.

It is too soon to tell if the recent changes in economy will positively affect higher education participation. To this point, it is the traditional civil society and informal networks that have been covering the failure of the welfare state under the crisis. Most of these students have

managed to endure through others and their comfort, showing that care provides sustainability even in hard times. Still these resources do not reach all and are also unevenly distributed, either on a first come basis or through privileged access for those who know or have where to look. It is the general rule to ask more state protection under a crisis setting. Yet when the response of that state is not only ineffective but also offensive, one should also wonder whether it is a state of welfare or warfare we are talking about.

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