LIFE TRANSITIONS: OVERSEAS STUDY, WORK AND CAREER FOR YOUNG SINGAPOREANS

Aramiha Harwood

ABSTRACT

The author explores the study, work and career pathways of Singaporean students, coming to Australia to complete a tertiary qualification and returning to Singapore to pursue work and careers. Within these pathways, an attempt is made to understand the complexity of influences which shape their life choices and decisions. The background of Singapore, its social and economic development, and its Asian and western cultural foundations, is placed in the context of young Singaporeans studying in Australia. In relation to youth pathways research, particular dimensions of structure and agency are applied to the experiences of these students. Family and culture, education, (Singapore) state, the workforce economy and globalisation are all identified as structural influences. At the agentic level, role conflict and negotiation, reflexivity risk-analysis and identity are identified. Twenty-four participants in Singapore, self-identified as Singaporean and having studied in an Australian university, took part in a semi-structured interview and were asked to reflect on their life stories as study to work pathways. Twelve of the parents of the participants were interviewed, to provide perspectives on their children's pathways. It was found that there is a complex interaction of structure and agency throughout the participants' life stories, taking place on an everyday basis. Attempting to understand this interaction requires an understanding of fundamental concerns in participants' lives at critical junctures of transition from study to work. The concept of identity provides insight into the 'ultimate concerns' of participants, allowing for changes and developments, through the changing affiliations and relationships experienced at different stages of their life stories. The roles and affiliations linked to a changing identity, in the case of these participants moving between countries, cultures and institutions, provides the basis for understanding the relative effects of structure and agency in their study to work transition.

INTRODUCTION

Youth research in the field of study to work transitions has focused on the relative importance of the concepts, structure and agency, when trying to explain the choices and decisions of young people as they finish study and

enter work and/or career pathways. Rudd and Evans (1998) explain that, even though primary importance is attached to individual choices and agency in modernised society, structure may still limit and/or accentuate young peoples' lives in ways that are not always recognised by young people and adults alike.

Structure as a concept is seen to reflect the macro-social institutions and social organisations which produce and reproduce social order. Agency, in contrast, promotes individual choice and action as primary determinants in any social phenomena.

Additionally, Dwyer et al. (1998; 1999; 2001) argue that a linear representation of youth pathways into adulthood – of study into directly related work into a long-term career – while certainly true for many young people, is not necessarily as valid as it is represented in youth policy and research. Thus, there is a complexity of pathways for young people through study and work, representative of multiple influences in their lives, both structural and agentic.

It is in this context that qualitative research was conducted on the study to work transitions of 24 young Singaporeans who studied at an Australian university and returned to Singapore to work. It is argued that much of the quantitative and qualitative research conducted in international education in Australia has involved enrolment statistics and on-campus experiences of international students (AEI 2005, 2006, 2007). Exploration of student's life outside of the university, as well as experiences upon returning to country of origin have been largely missed. As Rizvi (2005) argue, there was a focus on learning-based outcomes in international education research, and there was a need for a wider scope of both individual and societal influences in the lives of those studying in international education:

> Part of the problem with much of this research on international student experiences lies in the fact that it is located within a narrow social psychological framework that focuses largely on learning processes within formal settings, which effectively sidelines broader political and historical issues concerned with the contemporary consumerist production of mobile identities in and through international education. Also missing in this research is any notion of how student cultures are dynamic, and how their identities are subject to change as a result of their transnational experiences (Rizvi 2005: 2).

Therefore, it is the intention of this study to explore the multiple dimensions of the 24 participants' life stories to try to garner some understanding of their study, work and life choices, starting from their time before university up until their initial entry into work and careers, and of their motivations and intentions when making choices in study and work.

Twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted over a period of one to two hours in Singapore, whereby the participants were asked to both reflect and comment on different elements of their lives in their study to work transition: study, work, career family, peer-relationships, personal-relationships, independence and adulthood. The advantage of this qualitative approach was the provision of feedback from participants, of influences and experiences in their lives, which may have occurred outside of typical educational considerations.

This article will outline some of the primary, common elements of both structure and agency in the participant life stories, as a means of exploring their relative importance to the participants. From this it is posited that there was a complex interaction of both structural and agentic considerations in these young peoples' lives, indicated in their subsequent choices and actions. A means of understanding the choices and motivations of these young Singaporeans' study to work transitions, it is argued, could be better understood in the context of their transition into adulthood – and with that, their contingent personal negotiation of roles, expectations and identity. Thus, particular affiliations to an array of roles or identities – obedient child, international student, career worker, a good friend, eastern tradition or western/global modernity – determine relative importance of both structural and agentic influences in the participants' lives in their study, work and life transitions.

On the basis of the respective backgrounds and theoretical dialectic presented, this research focused on particular 'spheres of influence'. Specifically, the research focused on five structural, macro-sociological elements influencing participant study and work pathways: family, the workforce economy, the state, education, and globalisation. Workforce economy in terms of structure attempts to encompass the rational choices of these respondents in the context of 'investment' in study and qualifications leading to long-term work and career goals. The concept of workforce economy is based, largely on Human Capital Theory (Becker 1964) whereby individuals make choices of investment in education and work based on rational benefits and gains. Inherent to this was the understanding that social, economic and technological change affects these rational choices.

Family, as defined structurally, is a major domestic unit integral to the reproduction of social values and attitudes. In the context of this study, culture looks at particular confucian attitudes and expectations in Singapore as a modern, Asian society. Parental pressure serves to focus attention on the influence and expectations they have for their children. Gender outlines particular expectations of the respondents based on their roles as sons and daughters, incorporating both study choices as well as subsequent work and career pathways in relation to their particular filial duties and expectations arising from these.

Education is conceptualised as a key component in the reproduction and inculcation of social values and norms. In looking at the participants' life stories, academic streaming, experiences of tertiary education in Australia, and relevance of qualifications were investigated.

The state encompasses the civil, legal and administrative institutions which have the underlying premise of promoting national interests through law, policy and administrative process. For Singapore, it is recognised that the state and its agencies have directly influenced developments in other social institutions – family, education, economy and employment.

Finally globalisation is a conceptual approach to understand the relationship between societies, political and social organisations, and individuals, on a structural level, in the context of developing technologies and practices which facilitate financial/cultural/personal interaction on a global level.

Using agency as a conceptual approach, analysis focuses on the dialectical/cognitive process involved in the life-biographies of the respondents. Reflexivity is used to outline the internal dialectical process (Archer 2003) posits, and allows the analysis to draw on major goals or 'things of ultimate concern' which may motivate choices, decisions and alterations in the subjects' lives. Within this ongoing reflexivity is a negotiation of expectations and roles over the participants' life stories, with the recognition that subsequent choices and decisions – social action – are characterised by a succession of conflicts, accommodations and assimilations (Carter 2002: 11). Risk as outlined by Beck (1992) allowed the analysis to map out what the respondents see as risks, advantages, security and opportunity in their study, work and lives, and how these perceptions of risk/danger and security/opportunity affected their choices. Finally the individual characteristics put forward by Rudd and Evans (1998) – self-confidence, independence, responsibility and resilience – was used as reference points for what participants saw as inherent abilities or talents as having had an important impact in their life-biographies.

Each of these factors were examined over three important stages in their lives: from pre-study in Australia, to study in an Australian university and to return to Singapore. It is argued that, in this context, it becomes possible to outline the changes of these influences in their lives over time. For example, participants' sense of family influence experienced profound changes as they experienced a growing sense of autonomy both in Australia and upon returning to Singapore.

WORKFORCE ECONOMY

In the context of work and employment, the participants identified several key factors as important in their decision to pursue a university qualification in Australia: The importance of qualifications for employment, the relative status of Australian universities and/or courses, expectations of prospective employers and the changes in respective industries encompassing further study and promotion. The research of Tan Ern Ser (200: 94) supports this when looking at Singaporean emigration, whereby the costs of moving overseas, away from family and community, is weighed up against the benefits of career promotion.

Investigation of participant responses revealed the importance of a qualification in pursuit of particular career pathways. As one participant explained, the degree provided an entry into the 'corporate ladder' of his career choice: "Look, it's a corporate ladder here. You have the degree and you start a little bit higher, lower, who knows? When it comes time for moving up that ladder, that's when your degree matters, yeah? Cause if you don't have that degree, that's it for you, there's nowhere else for you to go". Another recognised the importance of a degree qualification when her father tried to get her a job in the hospitality industry: "He found out that you need to have a degree now, you can't just bring someone in for the job, you have to be qualified. So he knew that I need to have a degree, you know. So he sent me overseas to get the degree". A participant simplified it into an equation of having the particular qualification relating to career outcomes: "To me at the time it was just going to get a paper, in terms of qualification-wise. I feel that the industry experience is more important (but) I just needed that extra paper degree so that I could sort of upgrade my status in terms of work".

Related to possible work and career outcomes, the 'status' of the qualification was of major importance as well. By this, status could mean the status of the qualification itself in the prospective workforce. For example, having a CPA qualification meant a greater chance of gaining

wanted employment: "I needed something that would put me in good stead with employers...at that time there were many local graduates in accounting, not so many with their CPA. When I finished at KL (Kuala Lumpur), I decided to go for my CPA at Australian university. I knew that if I had my CPA the opportunities for jobs in the market would be fantastic". In turn, status of the university itself was seen as important: "Okay the reason we pick up this foundation is um this college was affiliated to Australian university and it was considered a more privileged university. And, as usual, at that point in time we have no clue what is good and what is bad. So we go by the so-called usual standard which is called, you know 'What is the better brand name in university?'"

An inherent part of both the importance of qualifications and the status of courses and universities, is the recognition of prospective employer expectations: "I know this because this is what has come from my interviews for jobs, my interviewers bring up the university I went to, what I learnt there, that sort of thing". Participants also pointed to employers' preferences in relation to degrees: "The reputation of these schools isn't just about marks and the teaching, it's about the reputation that university has amongst business here in Singapore... Employers will mainly know about what uni's are good through what they read and hear in the newspapers and from other companies".

Having gained a qualification at an Australian university, participants had negotiated their own way into work and careers. This adult stage of life required secure employment as a long-term provider of income because: "Long-term future is hard to think about when you don't have a fulltime income". It was argued, that there was a need to gain work and financial security before other life plans could be engaged: "At the moment career is the most important thing, you need to have money first before you can buy a house and have a family". The argument was made as this was an important part of the Chinese heritage in Singapore: "There is a focus on money and wealth in Asian culture, you're focused on working hard, saving money and getting security for yourself".

In relation to industries, there was some recognition of the relatively complicated developments in respective sectors where participants were working. By this, some participants were organising their own careers to fit into these industry developments. For example, a participant saw that there was only little room for the construction industry in Singapore's economy, therefore making contingency plans for moving elsewhere: "The industry itself is definitely a lot tighter now than it was say 10 years ago, the days of huge shopping complexes and hotels on Orchard Road are definitely over. There's just no room anymore, there's no space. I think the industry will just

keep getting tighter and tighter. Doesn't mind me, I'll be working somewhere else by then". Another participant developed a set of contingency career plans in relation to developments in foreign markets for car manufacturers and marketing: "It depends on whether there is going to be any development in the Chinese market in the next ten years or so. Well that means there is a need to develop market information in the region, and there may be a call for someone with international qualifications, someone who has a grasp of the language and culture in China". For these participants, there is not only a developed understanding of the complexities of the industries they work in, their comments also reflect the ability to adapt and change to the demands of changing workforce, economies and markets – nationally, regionally and globally.

EDUCATION

For participants, the role of education in their lives encompassed a large part of their life stories. As a structural factor in participants lives, education could be seen to influence the choices and decisions of participants throughout their study to work pathways.

The streaming in primary and secondary education in Singapore of participants into particular academic choices had a major effect on their subsequent choices and experiences. As one participant noted, "I guess it's just like any Singaporean, you have to go through the system, you have the primary school, you have the streaming, they stream you from a very young age. Eight years old, ten years old, you know?" For this participant, this would not only affect materially what a person could study, it would also affect how a young Singaporean would place themselves in the context of family, community and society: "In like the average student can go in the express, they call it normal and which is the slower, so there is a stigma. And those two streaming process where child will be labelled as weak academically. I think psychologically they will be affected, because the parents will be affected. And they will say 'Look, why can't you be like that kid?' So the kid will be affected, and they'll probably be questioning themselves 'Am I not good enough?'"

Studying at a university in Australia required adjustment from participants regarding the overall educational culture and teaching style, as well as the links it provided to projected employment and career outcomes. A participant related her own understanding of education at an Australian university, and the adjustment required from her to be able to attain successful grades: "Someone tell me it's about being an independent thinker.

In Australian university, students are made to think on their own, study the question, read the material and come to their own conclusion. I think this is lazy! You could see it in the students. Most of the Australian students never came to class! My dissertation was on small business models in Malaysia. I had major trouble with it. More of this are independent learning. I had to go to other departments to get their help, as I wasn't get much from (supervisor)". For another participant there was a contrast in learning styles, from his previous Asian-based experiences, to what was expected of him in an Australian university. This required him to adjust his own learning style to match the expectations made of him at university: "The way we were taught (in Singapore) it does not work in that kind of context, in the university context. So we have to find our way, I think we actually adjust ourself. In terms of learning curve, how to learn about things, learning to learn basically".

Participants felt that 'learning to learn' in an Australian university was of vast importance to them when entering work and career pathways: "It's the experience we were given, we gained from studying in Australia that benefit us the most". It was acknowledged by some that, although they felt the theoretical components of their study in university were useless at the time, on reflection when working in Singapore, it was of central importance when developing a career pathway: "Most of my study at uni was stuff like economic theory and science history and I was thinking to myself at the time 'what does this have to do with my life?' So I didn't really respect what I was learning. Of course, now I have had a bit of time in the workforce, I come to realise, you know, some of that stuff made real sense". "But you learn to think about things. You're critically rationalising what's happening in your life".

FAMILY

As Vaughan (2005: 173) found, parents believed that they served to provide support for their children: "For many parents, the most important thing they believe they will do for their children is to offer them, or make them aware of, as many choices and options in life as possible". The participants, themselves, had a different perspective on this. Several of them felt that their parents pressured them into making career choices which they may not have had made on their own.

The influence of family, in the Singaporean context, can be particularly seen in the pre-study stage of the participants' lives. As a primary source of social reference, the decisions and advice of parents were

held in an important light by the participants. In turn, financial and emotional support given by parents served to reinforce the importance of familial input on participant study to work pathways. As participants moved out of the home, to Australia to study and live, the role of parents in their lives diminished by dislocation. Upon returning to Singapore, however, participants still found that parents attempted to influence their lives through pressure and showed of approval or disapproval. Reasons for this high level of input from parents could be seen in the Confucian cultural background of both parents and participants alike – where there is an expectation for parents to be the determinants of their childrens' fate, and for the children themselves to obey the wishes of their parents. This is shown, in particular, by the perceived differences from some participants in expectations of them as sons or daughters, respectively – reflecting the patriarchal/patrilineal nature of their Chinese heritage. Finally, the influence of family could also be seen in the historical backgrounds of both parents and participants. Where parents had lived through a period of social and political upheaval and change, the participants were living in a time of economic depression and large unemployment in the workforce. Both parents and participants felt that the experiences of their respective generations made them more aware of, and receptive to, the demands and pressures from the other generation.

STATE

Several of the respondents were able to place the pathways of their early lives in the context of the historical, social and political structures of Singapore. The state, from the comments of the participants, could be seen to influence the choices and decisions of participants in two major ways. Participants felt that sometimes they were pressured into making decisions through media and social pressure – aligning themselves with work and living values and expectations as citizens of Singapore:

> So for us, yeah, we have built up a certain career path but basically still trying to balance our life between work and family and things like that. And unfortunately in Singapore it is sometimes hard to establish a fair balance between, lah. Pretty often you have to skew to one side or the other.

Some participants also felt that the government provided help and support when making work and life decisions – through family and housing support, or relaxed provision of citizenship for those born overseas. There

was an understanding of the reasons for the greater powers the state held in Singapore, given its historical and geographical background. Nevertheless, several of the participants, perhaps as a result of their stay in Australia, expressed some difficulty or ambivalence in identifying themselves primarily as citizen-workers of the Singapore nation-state and reflected on this as 'outsiders' looking in on the nation:

> I develop a lot of theory, a lot of philosophy when I walk around a lot. Australia is where it has opened me up and given this ability. I see now, the Singapore nation encourages a lot of people to use the material world to fill in that space, to be happy. They try to fill the intangible with tangible things. Yet, after that action is taken, the void is still there. So that goes into a big spiral of consumerism. Which big corporation is promoting more all the time. "Yeah! Go and buy happiness! It make you feel good", even the religious institution are selling that as well. They are one of the richest organisations. Because everyone is trying to buy luck or things to get.

GLOBALISATION

The diversity of experiences and backgrounds of the participants, resulted in a major proportion of the sample having experienced at least some of their lives overseas, prior to their university study in Australia. Accordingly, both parents and interviewees commented on the particular requirements of studying in a global market and culture.

As recognised by some of the participants, Singapore is seen as a regional and global hub of work, manufacturing and financial activity. Globalisation as an influence meant participants sought an international degree, along with its contingent understanding of international business practice and improvement in English, to align to the demands of globalised business in Singapore. Evans and Treganza (2001: 3), in the context of Chinese learners in Hong Kong, note the importance of English in a globalised workforce: "Whilst Cantonese is the dominant language of Hong Kong, English is widely (if not strongly) used. English remains the official language of government and is the medium of instruction in most university courses". In addition, Pakir (1998: 65) argues that Singapore as a nation is dependent on English as a common language, not only as a means of common identification amongst ethnic groups but as reflective of sociolinguistic trends across the globe.

The experience of study and life in Australia, however, has meant that some of the participants have taken on aspects of western understandings and perspectives outside of global work and economic concerns. In turn, when some of the participants have returned, their qualifications and experiences overseas have resulted in them seeking on-migration to other countries – within the South East Asia region, in Australia, and around the world. The influence of globalisation cannot only be seen in the choices and decisions related to the linear pathway of study in Australia and work in Singapore, it is also perceived in the further travel and work overseas by participants beyond Singapore as members of a global workforce.

REFLEXIVITY

The point made by Lehmann (2004: 380) that young people in modernised society need to engage reflexively with their social environment in order to make sense of the increased range of choices and decisions they faced. Underpinning this reflexivity is the understanding that, with the goals of social mobility and security, there were also adjoining risks. That is, with greater individualised pathways from study into work, there were also a greater degree of fragmentation, uncertainty and insecurity for those undertaking the pathway.

In trying to define reflexivity and its function in individual choices, Archer (2003) argues that people make their choices on 'things of ultimate concern' to them. From the participants' life stories there are a variety of these 'things of ultimate concern' which are reflected on in relation to their study to work to career transitions. Some of these 'things' encompassed the structural influences the participants felt both constrained and pushed by. Fundamentally, wealth and security are an important goal for participants to attain at some point in their lives, as it is seen as 'success' in relation to others, and it provides options for other goals such as owning a home, getting married, having children of one's own. Related to this was the focus on work and career goals, looking for: long-term employment; a well-regarded and/or paid career or industry; and the prospect of a long-term future in the industry. In turn, related to work outcomes, educational pathways were of concern to participants on the basis of what it offered in subsequent work and career, the social cache of the qualification, and the reputation of the institution one studied in. Family was also of ultimate concern to participants, focusing on the approval or disapproval of their parents.

As their life stories attest, reflexivity on the participants' behalf involved a complexity of primary interests and goals, both structural and individual. A common factor amongst many of these participant reflections is that much of it was quite considered and engaged a multitude of these primary concerns.

While many of the things that were of ultimate concern to the participants reflected structural influences, there were individual considerations as well. 'Happiness' was listed as very important to both participants and parents alike. By this, happiness could be related to other things besides work and wealth.

As a participant related in his feelings of dissatisfaction with life:

> I've been thinking a lot about what I want to do next. It's like, I worked hard and I did all the right things, studied hard, planned well, got into the right job, had the right girl in the same career, and everything still went wrong. So I'm re-evaluating it. What is it I want from life?

RISK

Beck (1992) argues that in the individualised lives of modern society, people's concerns centre on the prevention or elimination of risks which may hamper successfully attaining social mobility and other goals. Thus:

> Living in the risk society means living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of (social) action, positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence (Beck 1992: 28).

In terms of the participants and their study to work transition, the choices they made and the contingent risks attached to them, involved several major considerations. Given their highly evolved understanding of the complex structural influences in their lives, much of their calculation involved structural factors in their own choices and decisions.

The educational choices participants made, particularly the decision to study in Australia, contained a variety of risks for participants. To study in Australia required a major investment of money both to pay course fees as well as living expenses. To complete a degree required three years of the participants' lives. There was also risk in terms of the relevance a particular

qualification held in relation to work and career outcomes. That is, were the degrees participants seeking to study in relevant and useful in their respective career choices? The decision to study in Australia, in itself, was a risk in terms of the participants moving away from their homes to study and live in a foreign environment.

Work and career choices were also reflected upon in relation to their risks and possible gains. Participants questioned the long-term future of their work, if they would enjoy it, and whether it held prospects of job development and career improvement. Additionally, the industry the participants had chosen to study and work towards was looked at in relation to the long-term future it offered for participants. Looking at these work-related risks, some participants chose to alter and adjust their work and career pathways, judging that the risks of their choices were outweighed by the possibility of improved work and career outcomes.

With these risks and gains involving study and work, participants incorporated elements of individual goals and aspirations. For some, the long-term interest in owning a home and having a family, meant that financial security and success were important to them when looking at making the choice. Long-term aspirations for participants were also being calculated in their reflections on work and career, some participants feeling that there needed to be enough work and financial security for them to engage these aspirations.

ROLE RESISTANCE AND NEGOTIATION

Reflecting these aspects of reflexivity and risk calculation, resisting and/or negotiating particular expectations and obligations placed on participants was commented on throughout the stages of their study to work transition. The identification of conflicts in their lives and responding through negotiation were indication of this reflexivity along with the weighing up of the inherent risks in the diversity of their choices and decisions.

A small number of participants provided feelings of dissatisfaction with roles of the lawful Singaporean citizen as well as the obedient son or daughter. One participant felt that he didn't fit in with the expectations of the typical Singaporean worker: "And the [Singapore] environment is not entirely spurring, it doesn't spur your thoughts or your intelligence. After awhile, if you sink into it, it become like '1984'? The grey environment? Go back to your house. Go back to your pay cheque. I would say I had a lot of angst with the system." Another felt that he didn't want to follow the previous study pathways of his older brothers: "The expectation was that I

go into NUS (National University of Singapore) as well. I think I just couldn't buy into it, you know? I mean that I thought there were more important things to worry about, like family and girlfriends and stuff".

As a means of resolving this role conflict, these same participants had a variety of ways of negotiating their problems with family and social expectations. For many of the participants, negotiation for them was to follow what was expected of them – as one participant commented: "Just go with the flow". This meant for some having to readjust their study pathway due to marks or parental pressure. This meant rationalising their study or course choice by work or career outcomes. One participant had wanted to study archaeology in Mayan or Babylonian civilisation, but her marks weren't good enough for this and her parents wanted her to do a business or law degree. She rationalised her choice of a business law course in the context of better career outcomes: "Arts is a loser's degree".

In the course of their time in Australia, several participants noted the negotiation required of their role as students, prospective workers and filial sons and daughters. A participant felt that she had to hide her course choice from her parents as she felt they wouldn't approve of it. Another felt that she was getting pressure from her parents because they wanted her to finish her study as quickly as possible. She managed to convince them that her post-graduate study would enhance her career prospects significantly, and thus she needed to stay in Australia for another year.

Having finished their study in Australia and returned to Singapore to work and live, participants still contemplated the negotiation of multiple roles expected of them in their work and personal lives. In terms of family influence and pressure, a participant felt that she had to hide her personal relationships from her parents as they wouldn't approve. For her, as a young modern woman, she felt that this was acceptable, but still felt that her parents wouldn't understand: "I've had several boyfriends last year or so, but nothing serious. It's okay in today's world, as long as my parents don't know, but that's what's good about them being in Hong Kong and me in Singapore". Another felt that her parents wanted her to stay close to home, to help her parents in their business and lives. She, however, wanted to experience some independence, and came to the compromise of working in Singapore and living only 30–45 minutes drive away from her parents. Two participants had expectations placed on them as the eldest sons to return home to take over the family business, but wanted to live and work in Singapore on their own. They had managed to defer their parents' expectations indefinitely as they pursued career and life-goals in Singapore, independent of their parents. Several participants felt the burden of expectations placed upon them by their parents in relation to establishing

'serious' relationships, with the expectation of marriage and family further down the line.

In relation to work and career pathways, several participants attempted to balance expectations of secure, full-time employment with their own vocational goals and aspirations. For some, this required negotiating a variety of short, part-time jobs and readjustment of work expectations: "If desperate I'll do any job I can find, go back to working a shop. I'll try for one and a half or two months looking for particular jobs in my area of interest, if nothing come I'll start going to recruiting agencies". Others adjusted career goals to fit in with the flows of work and career in respective industries at the time.

As seen in the choices and decisions made by participants, the reflexivity and risk calculation made by them is utilised in their subsequent actions. By this we can see that the 'roles' expected of them are not always aligned to their own personal expectations. In turn, there may be a conflict in multiple roles at critical junctures in their lives. The role of international student may not fit in with parental expectations and the role of the worker in the workforce economy may not fit with traditional expectations of pursuit of a home, marriage and family. In weighing up the gains and ramifications of each of these 'roles', and the conflict and negotiation required from the participants, we can see 'agency' in action in that the participants still make their choices and decisions, re-aligning and adjusting other roles that may not fit.

INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

An important component of the participants' reflexivity on their choices and decisions was the notion that their own abilities and personality contributed directly to their increase or lack of study and work pathway choices.

Individual talents and abilities were cited by some participants as being important in their study. Some regarded their relative background and subsequent abilities in a vocation as central to their course choice. One participant linked her artistic ability to her study choice in graphic design: "I was always interested in drawing art creating things, art and craft... I always dreamed that one day I wanted to be an artist or a designer". Another felt that her musical ability gave her the chance to pursue piano studies in Australia. Several participants felt that their subsequent discipline and focus while studying in Australia provided them with the ability to successfully complete the academic requirements of their course of study in Australia.

While participants regarded their own characteristics as important in successfully attaining study, work and career goals, for those who saw some failure in their transition from study to work, there was also blame attributed to personal failings. Two participants blamed their pre-tertiary academic failings on their socialising with the 'wrong' type of friends. A particular participant's failure to gain a qualification in Australia was directly attributed to his failure to align his own interests and lifestyle with the requirements of his study – he blamed himself for failing his course at university because he felt that he wasn't focused enough in his study and was distracted by other things happening in his life. Another participant regarded her troubled study experiences in Australia as a result of her own difficulty to adjust to the emotional strain of losing her father at the time.

The views of the participants regarding their own internal strengths and failings tend to reflect the attitude that, despite many of the structural influences happening in their lives and study to work transition, much of what they experienced in terms of 'success' or 'failure' was dependent on the individuals themselves. While this is taken into account in terms of their reflexivity and risks, it is also indicative of the agency the participants felt they had in their life-stories. That is, much of what happened in their life-stories, their choices and decisions, was attributable to individual characteristics both good and bad.

IDENTITY

Structure and agency have traditionally operated as mutually exclusive theoretical approaches to understanding social action – one focuses on macro-level influence while the other focuses on the individual. Musolf (2003: 6), however, argues that both conceptual approaches need to be utilised to garner a greater understanding of the social interactions and actions of everyday life:

Structure and agency are inextricably intertwined in a nonquanti-fiable dialectic constituting constraint and emergence as two salient features of everyday life. This ongoing interdependent process explains why culture, institutions and the values, norms and beliefs and behaviours of humans change reciprocally, they co-evolved (Musolf 2003: 6).

An argument is presented for the amalgamation of both structure and agency as theoretical approaches to understanding social action, presented through the developed understandings of the individual.

Deutsch (2004), in looking at the study and work decisions of her young Chinese subjects, argues that the circumstances of her sample

required an attempt to ratify both structural and agentic elements of their lives:

> Individualism and collectivism may not represent ends of a bipolar continuum, but instead may represent two different continua that apply in different aspects of peoples lives (Deutsch 2004: 416).

For her, the young Chinese of her study are a generation experiencing rapid political and social change with an expanding range of transitions opening up before them. Deutsch (2004: 416–417) argues that, rather than a simple binary of structure or agency operating within their lives – whereby they may either reject family or cultural values/pressures or accept them – these young Chinese adapt and encompass new attitudes, choices and decisions in light of their changing social contexts, even on a day to day basis. It is argued that an understanding of young international students requires a similar approach.

It is posited that identity as a social-theoretical construct can help us to understand the undertaking of roles, and the interaction of agency and structure in the participants' lives. Mead (in Collins & Makowsky 1989: 180–181) attempts to understand and explain the social world through the individual's conception of self – as a social self consisting of elements of inner, subjective meanings as well as the outward, social presentation of self. This social self, or identity, is constructed according to Mead, in a process of everyday interactions with other peoples' social selves. Additionally, these social selves, while formed and affected by the process of everyday social interaction, also undergo elements of growth and flux over the lives of the individual: depending on the physical, temporal and geographical circumstances in which the individual may find themselves (Scabini et al. 2006: 7–8). As Rizvi (2005) argues, in looking at the change in identity for international students in their time spent studying in Australia, reflecting the change in identity for students in transnational education can provide a better understanding of their subsequent study and career pathways:

> In this way, we are interested in developing a better understanding of the broader values, perceptions and aspirations of the students, and how these change as a result of their experiences in Australia (Rizvi 2005: 2).

Relating this to both the experiences and the reflections of the young people in this study, it is argued that the choices and decisions they have

made have been a reflection of where they have 'been' at the time. 'Being' can incorporate their living circumstances and daily interactions of the time. It could also relate to the growth of these participants in their transition into adulthood. By recognising both of these components of the self – how self-identity is composed of both everyday interactions as well as life-change and development – it is possible to recognise the change and flux in attachment to particular roles, expectations and values in the participants' transition. From this it is possible to better identify and understand the relative importance of both structure and agency in their life transitions into young adulthood.

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