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# Young in University-Work Transition: The Views of Undergraduates in Southern Italy

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## Abstract

In the last few years, economic and social changes have made the path from university to work long and twisted, in particular in Southern Italy, an area with the highest rate of unemployment. This contribution aims to exploring the experiences of university-work transition of undergraduates. Using an open-ended interview, the authors obtained narrative data from 150 undergraduates from Southern Italy. Textual Analysis and Text Network Analysis were carried out to identify the thematic clusters and obtain the network pattern of lemmas in order to understand process of meaning construction of students. The analysis shows four clusters: "Awareness of one's own image in the past," "Change perception," "Experimentation and planning of objectives," "Prospects towards work." In the uncertainty of contemporary society where each individual is called upon to build one's own working career, university may represent for students a protective factor allowing them to define and re-define themselves in view of the acquisition of future roles and the preparation for the world of work.

## Keywords

University-Work Transition, Young Adult, Textual Analysis, Network Text Analysis

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# Young in University-Work Transition:
# The Views of Undergraduates in Southern Italy

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*In the last few years, economic and social changes have made the path from university to work long and twisted, in particular in Southern Italy, an area with the highest rate of unemployment. This contribution aims to exploring the experiences of university-work transition of undergraduates. Using an open-ended interview, the authors obtained narrative data from 150 undergraduates from Southern Italy. Textual Analysis and Text Network Analysis were carried out to identify the thematic clusters and obtain the network pattern of lemmas in order to understand process of meaning construction of students. The analysis shows four clusters: "Awareness of one's own image in the past," "Change perception," "Experimentation and planning of objectives," "Prospects towards work." In the uncertainty of contemporary society where each individual is called upon to build one's own working career, university may represent for students a protective factor allowing them to define and re-define themselves in view of the acquisition of future roles and the preparation for the world of work. Keywords: University-Work Transition, Young Adult, Textual Analysis, Network Text Analysis*

This transition to work takes place in the interaction between a developing individual and the variable physical, social and cultural context in which the individual is inserted (Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). In the modern Western industrialized society characterised by uncertainly, instability of job market and fluid organizations (de-jobbing, Savickas, 2012), work-transition has become increasingly hard. Finding a job, once finished education, is the main young's challenge of XXVI century (Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2014). In fact, young are required to face the challenges posed by society and to be involved actively in the construction of their own career paths than it was in the past (Duarte, 2004). Young people need to acquire problem solving e coping capabilities (Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, & Platt, 2010) and, along with this, to strengthen career meta-competencies of adaptability (Savickas, 2012) and identity (Guichard, 2004, 2005).

The transition from university to work is the first major work adjustment young adults have to make in their careers (Ng & Feldman, 2007). This transition can be view as a turning point of young's life, a critical juncture with long-term significance (Lifshitz, 2017), especially as regards careers of them (Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 2013; Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Sparkes, 2013; Vuolo, Staff, & Mortimer, 2012; Zeng, 2012).

In this century, being young is more dangerous than it was in previous generations (Scabini & Rossi, 2006). The difficulties in accessing work (Bynner, 2012; Bynner & Parson, 2002), the instability and the precariousness of the job market (Cortini, Tanucci, & Morin, 2011), as well as the discontinuity of the income (Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Ranci, 2010), make young people vulnerable and exposed to financial difficulties and poverty (Albertini & Kohli,

2013). These conditions may also be verified in the Italian context, which is characterized by a particularly difficult job market for young people. The Italian context is conceived as a prototype of the countries of Southern Europe where the chances of young people to develop coherent and satisfying future careers (Leccardi, 2006) and life plans are influenced by the current socio-economic difficulty (Parola & Donsì, 2018). Most of young Italians, once finished education, go through periods of strong instability and uncertainty (Berton, Richiardi, & Sardi 2009; Boeri & Galasso, 2007; Iezzi & Mastrobuoni, 2010) associated with a profound lack of confidence in the institutions (Pharr & Putnam, 2000). In fact, the highest unemployment rate in Italy was registered between young (15-29 aged), more than twice workforce in 2016 (28% respect to 12%); this precarious condition is more highly in the Southern Italy where the unemployment rate reached 43% compared to 19% in Northern (Istat, 2017). It implicates a hard, adaptive transition of young to the world of work which contributes to the increase of the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) phenomenon. Indeed, the latest available data show how this phenomenon is increasing and show also that Italy (particularly the Southern) is the first European country with the highest percentage of NEET (29.5 %, Eurostat, 2018).

Furthermore, also graduates show difficulties to enter the labour market and the finding gainful employment takes much longer for them who reside in Southern Italy, women particularly, because the workforce is significantly smaller than in the North (Almalaurea, 2017); for this reason, these young prefer to continue their education and give up looking for a job (Piumatti et al., 2014). Along with this, hard transition to work has led also an increase by Neet phenomenon among young 15-29 aged where in the South it is twice the North (34% compared to 17%; Istat, 2017).

All these factors had important consequences on the education of young people, making their integration into the world of work increasingly difficult and less consistent (Capecchi & Caputo, 2016). Traditional markers of the transition to adulthood, including stable job, marriage and parenthood, have become increasingly elusive for many young adults (Arnett, Žukauskienė, & Sugimura, 2014). Indeed, it is more and more rare to move directly to a permanent job after graduation, and this happens ever more frequently with atypical works, thus slowing down the transition from school to work. In addition, all this has negatively affected career paths and developments, significantly influencing also events characterising the transition to adult life, such as leaving the nuclear family and starting one's own family. An increase in the residence time in the parents' house continues, indeed, during the period of education, but also during the early years of work: young people definitively leave their family only after their marriage. This condition postpones a series of fundamental stages for the transition to adulthood in Italy more specifically, entailing the impossibility to take on new roles and new social responsibilities (Schizzerotto, 2002). Therefore, "people finish their studies late, find a job late, get married late, leave their original family late, bring a child into the world late" (Buzzi, 2002, p. 20), but the sequence of the transitions through the various stages is becoming more and more unsteady and unpredictable (some stages are skipped, others are anticipated or postponed; Scabini & Cigoli 2000; Cuconato, 2011). These facts have reduced youth to a state of "waiting for an unpredictable result," as Cavalli (1980, p. 524) already maintained. Young people lose the reference points which their ancestors had followed, and they are not able to enter society with full rights as people with responsibility and rights. They find themselves in a sort of limbo, an uncertain situation which does not allow them to think about and project their behaviours to the future (Bettin Lattes, 2001). As a consequence, nowadays people think about a real "delay syndrome" (Livi Bacci, 2008), specific to the Italian context; more specifically, the difficulties in finding work and the "delays" in transition to adulthood characterise especially the South of the Italy (Piumatti et al. 2014). What a person wants in terms of expectations and plans for one's own life (micro level) and the opportunities

of the context in which the person is involved (macro level) are closely interlinked. In this respect, the biographical trajectories of people could be led back to the institutionalised trajectories over their lifetime within each single context (Walther, 2006). Seen in this light, the weakness of youth labour market becomes even-more problematic and affects articulated life stages. Indeed, young people often live a combination of simultaneous – and, in some cases, reversible – transition experiences (Kovachera & Pohl, 2007), which lead to the destandardisation of young transitions (Brückner & Mayer, 2005). As to the Italian case, regimes of welfare and the educational system, long-term institutional elements, cultural and economic aspects (Nerli Ballati, 2014), along with occupational uncertainty and precariousness of the working careers (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011) would play a relevant part in the distance from the acquisition of adult roles.

## University-to-Work Transition

For a young graduate, the search for one's own place in the world of work is a consequence of a choice which is strongly influenced by the knowledge and the competences acquired during education on the one hand, and by desires, predispositions and reasons linked to one's personal sphere, on the other hand. In this choice, the young person must necessarily take into consideration also one's own social and economic context. Young people must inevitably balance their plans and intentions with the actual possibilities in that context. The literature focuses on how socioeconomic origins, adolescent ambitions (Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Kerckhoff, 2003), kind of education and competences of the young (Benedetto et al., 2018; Mortimer et al., 2008; Schoon, 2006, 2008) play a relevant role to distinguish the most adaptive models of transition. The university period, especially in the first years, implies experiences requiring students' adaption (Sica et al., 2017; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000) and lead them to acquire the psychosocial competences which contribute, together with individual agency, to the creation of that capital of identity necessary to move into employment (Côté, 2000; Montgomery & Côté, 2003), which, because of recession, becomes increasingly difficult (Aronson, Callahan, & Davis, 2015). University studies have become less connected to the destinations of the employment system (Heinz, 2003) enough to create a high risk of social exclusion and difficulties in the development of identity because of the weakening of agency and the firm belief that single efforts are useless (Johnson, Sage, & Mortimer, 2012). Being aware of the skill gap in the school-to-work transition (Pastore, 2014) and being aware that in Italy the mismatch between employment and education is among the highest in Europe (Caroleo & Pastore, 2013; McGuinness & Sloane, 2010), could therefore influence one's own university studies and life plans. On this subject, Aina et al. (2011) highlight that the time spent until graduation depends not only on the ability and the experience of students, but also on the external conditions of the job market, which affect motivation. The problem of recession could indeed affect the planning for future aims and have a negative impact on the psychological functioning in terms of feelings of instability and powerlessness (Di Blasi et al., 2015; Fusco, Parola, & Sica, 2019; Parola, 2020; Parola & Donsì, 2019). University, for its part, should provide students with useful instruments to increase their chances for accessing to the labour market. Universities work individually and in partnership to enable students to advance in their degree courses trying to combine their previous education with their future ambitions, on the one hand, and contribute to extend studies in order to respond to the increasing request for a high level of education by an ever more competitive job market, on the other hand (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012).

An adaptive transition from university to work has been defined by job satisfaction and occupational choice congruence (Blustein et al., 1997), coherent vocational identity (Way & Rossmann, 1996) and individual criteria. For example, drivers of an adaptive transition to the

world of work can be the maintenance of high aspirations, the crystallisation of career objectives and the intensive approach to job search (Vuolo, Staff, & Mortimer, 2012). Dedication and targeting represent a cyclic series of actions focusing on the achievement of positive results (Shulman & Nurmi, 2010), and the prolonged school-to-work transition allows ambitious young people a long period of educational and professional exploration (Arnett, 2004). Thus, aspirations and their maintenance, even when facing failure (Uno, Mortimer, Kim, & Vuolo, 2010), can represent useful abilities of young workers to weather economic storms (Kerckhoff, 2003) and, therefore, preconditions to the achievement of their professional objective (Vuolo, Staff, & Mortimer, 2012).

In this study we aim at knowing the factors that participate to the preparation of the post-university years to gain access to employment through the perspective of those individuals who imminently face the transition-university students. According to Phillips, Blustein, Jobin-Davis and White' transition study model (2002) we used naturalistic, discovery-oriented, hypothesis-generating qualitative methods and data analytic strategies, drawing on the perspectives of Lincoln and Guba (1985), Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997), and Strauss and Corbin (1990) to provide the basic framework for this study. More specifically, we studied how young adults who attend university in Naples, in the Southern Italian region of Campania. We chose to conduct the research in Naples because young students who reside in this area, as it seen, have lower chances than their peers of the North to find a suitable job which takes account of their expectations, making harder the transition from university to work. For these reasons, Neapolitan students could be a lens privileged through which to observe this transition.

## Researchers in Context

C.F. is an Assistant Professor of Sociology of cultural and communication, and A.P. is a Clinical Psychologist and PhD in Mind, Gender and Language. The first author is a member of Young Observatory of University of Naples and focuses his own research mainly on young conditions (school drop-out, political and social participation, religiosity, gender gap). The second author studies difficulties in the transitions from one school system to another and in the school-to-work transitions. Her PhD dissertation concerned the NEET phenomenon (Young not engaged in education employment or training) and the potential health risk factor. In the last years, the authors have worked together on young conditions in Italy, specifically in Southern, with the intent to link a sociological and psychological perspective to flesh out the understanding of the phenomenon. Along with this, authors know well the context because they live and work in Campania, a region of Southern Italy strongly affected by instability and precariousness of labour market.

## Methods

### Participants

Our research involved 150 undergraduates (Mage= 23, SDage= 2.65). Consistent with the purposive sampling that is used in qualitative research, we sought to obtain narration of the impending transition from young who would be reasonably likely to be moving into jobs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To recruit participants who fit the profile of work-bound students, we asked to guidance counselors and mentors of thesis of University of Naples Federico II. All students were Neapolitan, unmarried and lived at parental home in which at least one parent was employed at the time of the data collection. Students were contacted face to face asking all of them if wanted to take part the research and specifying all data collected will not be published or released in a form that would permit the actual or potential identification of any

of the respondent in order to guarantee their anonymity[1]. The respondents did not receive payment for their participation.

**Measures**

For this study, we have adapted the protocol proposed by Phillips, Blustein, Jobin-Davis, and White (2002):

a) Each participant met with an interviewer, one member of a team of graduate students and psychologists who had some theoretical background in career development and the school-to-work transition.
b) Review of the informed consent materials.
c) Narrative prompt was administered following the interview protocol (i.e., "We would like you to tell us, in your own words, about your plans after university. If you were to write a story about the next few years of your life, what would this story be?" "What has made it difficult for you to do what you want in school and in preparing for work? What has been helpful?").
d) The length of the interview was approximately 35 min.
e) Interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed for analysis.

According to Phillips, Blustein, Jobin-Davis, and White (2002) interview protocol would elicit a broad view of the experiences of work-bound universitity students, internal and external resources and barriers, approaches to decision making and exploration tasks, degree or perceptions of self-confidence, and self-perceived level of preparedness.

Narrative based-approach was suited better to our objectives because it enabled to study narratives produced by students and, in particular, processes of signification (the representation or conveying of meaning) of the experiences (Pasupathi, Wainryb, & Twali, 2012); it allowed also the understanding of the meaning given of students taking in account their socio-cultural context. The narrators in fact are socially positioned in telling stories under the influence of prevailing social context and cultural conventions surrounding storytelling (Rosaldo, 1989).

**Data analysis procedures**

Prior to the data collection process, the study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychological Research of University of Naples Federico II to ensure the protection of participants. The purpose of the informed consent form was to provide confidentiality and anonymity for the participants involved in the study.

In order to analyse the narrations, we have performed a textual analysis of the interviews (Lebart & Salem, 1994; Lebart, Salem & Berry, 1998) using T-Lab software and then we have analysed them from a network perspective by means of the Gephi software. Using jointly the two methods is possible not only to explore the content of narrations, but, starting from the words and concepts with higher semantic strength, also to identify the processes of signification (Felaco & Parola, 2018; Parola & Felaco, 2020). This approach allowed us to analyse the processes of signification of the experiences and for properly understanding the subjects for discussion of young people. In other worlds, this analysis aims to find and measure what Reinert (1987) terms "lexical worlds" in the speaker's discourse: "the speaker, during his speech, is investing successive different worlds and these worlds, by imposing their properties, thereby impose a specific vocabulary. Therefore, the statistical study of the distribution of this

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[1] We used IRBs procedures to ensure safety and protection of the participants.

vocabulary should be able to trace these 'mental rooms' that the speaker has successively inhabited; traces perceptible in terms of 'lexical worlds'" (Reinert, 1987 as cited in Schonhardt-Bailey, 2013, p. 1). The software isolates set of words that go together in the discourse and allows to analyse the statistical distribution of words in the corpus; in this way, these sets of words can be interpreted as a trace of some "lexical world" (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2013).

We have previously handled documents through by customizing the dictionary through two phases: the lemmatization and disambiguation of words with the same graphic form but different meanings, and the creation of uniform strings, which were recognizable by the T-Lab software, for some meaningful expressions. Given the semantic richness of the narrations, we performed a thematic analysis of elementary contexts: the text was partitioned into "elementary context units" (e.c.u.), each being approximately the length of a sentence. Then, we classified the units according to the distributions of their words in terms of co-occurrences. More specifically, we carried out a cluster analysis using an unsupervised ascendant hierarchical method (Bisecting K-means algorithm)[2], characterised by the co-occurrence of semantic features[3]: each cluster consisted in a set of keywords, which were ranked according to the decreasing value of chi-square, and a label was assigned to each of them. Analysis results could be considered as an isotopy map of the clusters composed by the co-occurrences of semantic traits. Furthermore, we considered the gender variable as a supplementary variable associated with clusters. Through a cluster analysis, it was possible to construct and explore the contents of the narrations (Lancia, 2004, 2008). In more detail, the thematic analysis allows to map the specific discussion topics of these young people. In this light, analysing narrations can facilitate the meaning dimension of thought streams in relation to the importance of university and it can highlight how the latter might serve as a springboard for entering the job market. The interpretation of the position of the clusters in factorial space and the interpretation of the words which characterise the clusters have permitted us to identify implicit relations which organise the subjects thought allowing to understand the narrator's point of view with regard to the event narrated (Reinert, 1987). The latter includes also a series of evaluative factors, thoughts, meanings, value judgments and emotional projections. According to Martino and colleagues (2019), the projection of clusters on the factorial plane allows one to observe relationships between the themes emerged by interpreting the axes that bind them together.

After having grasped the discussion themes, a specific analysis on lemmas followed[4]. We used the tools of the Social Network Analysis (Scott, 1991; Wasserman & Faust, 1994; Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013) in order to analyse the general structure of relations between the single lemmas. In this way, it was possible to spatially visualise these relations by means of a graph, whose points (or nodes) represent the single lemmas, whereas the lines (or edges) represent the ties (that is, the co-occurrences) which link them together[5]. This approach, labelled as Network Text Analysis (Popping, 2000, 2003), starts from the assumption that the structure of relations between the words of a text may correspond to the mental map and the cognitive connections put into action by the authors of the text (Carley, 1997; Hunter, 2014). So, starting with the words and concepts with higher semantic strength, it is possible to identify the process of signification (Paranyushkin, 2011). We imported the lexical corpus in Gephi software that allowed to make a matrix 1-mode (lemmas*lemmas) and, then, to analyse the

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[2] The cluster number is determined by an algorithm which uses the relationship between intercluster variance and total variance and it takes as optimal partition the one in which this relationship exceeds the threshold of 50%.

[3] The occurrence threshold for the analyses was set at 4, ruling out all the lemmas which appeared less than 4 times in the corpus.

[4] Lemma contains the labels (or tags) used for grouping and classifying the lexical units. In our case, lemma refers to the result of the lemmatization process.

[5] In this specific case, we talk about *arch*, since the ties are directed.

relations between the words and to track down those words with greater semantic weight. We used several graph visualisation techniques, as well as measures based on centrality (degree and betweenness), to identify the different contexts of meaning.

## Results

### Textual Analysis

The lexical corpus constitutes of 150 elementary contexts, 4306 occurrences (tokens), 1224 types, 821 lemmas. The indexes of lexical richness show that 54% of the textual corpus comprises the women's accounts and 46% consists of the men's narrations, indicating thus a certain degree of homogeneity with regard to the amount of the text produced by both genders.

The thematic analysis of elementary contexts produced four clusters (Figure 1; Table 1). Each cluster refers to a set of elementary contexts characterized by the same patterns of key-words and is described through lexical units most characteristic of the context units from which is composed. Key-words that fall out in each cluster allow to identify the specific theme and to label the cluster. We named clusters as: "Awareness of one's own image in the past" (30.8%), "Change perception" (19.7%), "Experimentation and planning of objectives" (11.0%), "Prospects towards work" (38.5%).

*Figure 1. Cluster Analysis*
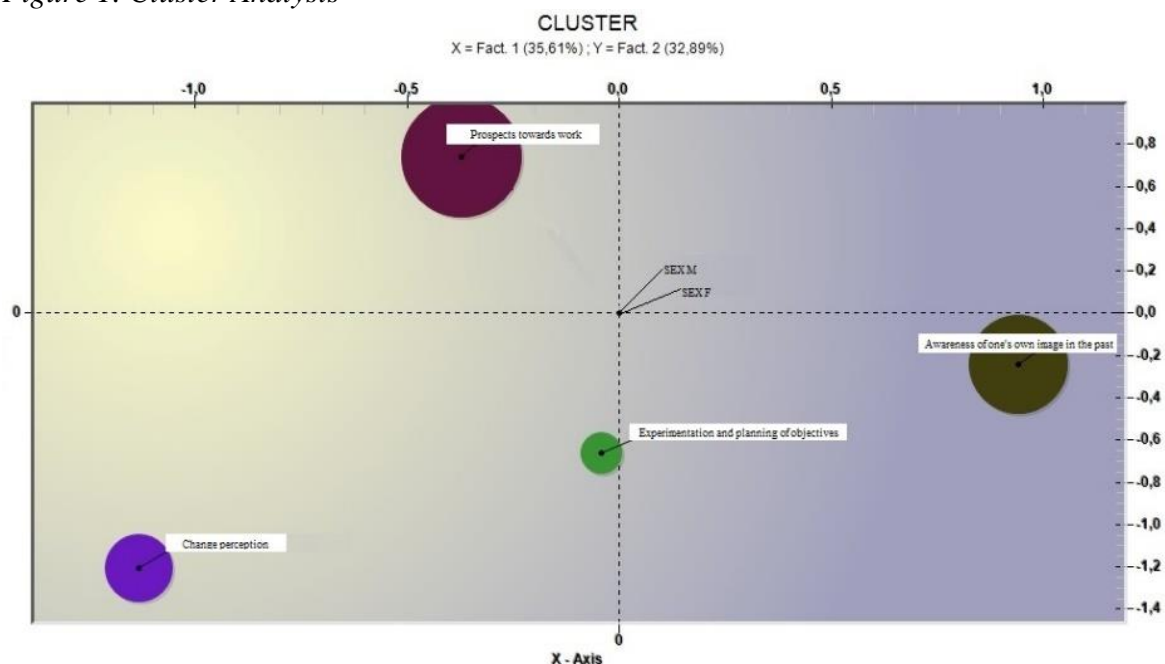


CL1 (right bottom quarter) *Awareness of one's own image in the past*; CL2 (left bottom quarter) *Experimentation and planning of objectives*; CL3 (left bottom quarter) *Change perception*; CL4 (left upper quarter) *Prospects towards work*.

*Tab.1. Clusters, associated lemmas and $\chi^2$ values*

| Clusters | Lemmas | $\chi^2$ |
|---|---|---|
| Cluster 1 | to see | 25.4 |
| Awareness of one's | to see oneself | 9.7 |
| own image in the past | to know | 7.8 |
| (30.8%; 28 e.c.) | in the past | 7.2 |

|  |  |  |
|---|---|---|
|  | high school | 5.8 |
|  | my life | 3.9 |
| Cluster 2 Change perception (19.7%; 18 e.c.) | responsible | 42.3 |
|  | choice | 30.6 |
|  | department | 24.6 |
|  | to decide | 13.9 |
|  | to evaluate | 12.4 |
|  | much more | 11.3 |
|  | to feel | 8.3 |
|  | to grow up | 4.8 |
| Cluster 3 Experimentation and planning of objectives (11.0%; 10 e.c.) | limit | 38.5 |
|  | aim | 29.2 |
|  | to achieve | 23.1 |
|  | to help | 7.7 |
|  | to gain experience | 7.0 |
|  | awareness | 5.3 |
|  | sure | 4.1 |
| Cluster 4 Prospects towards work (38.5%; 35 e.c.) | in the future | 11.3 |
|  | university | 6.3 |
|  | to understand | 5.4 |
|  | dedication | 5.4 |
|  | to begin | 5.4 |
|  | employment | 5.4 |
|  | path | 5.4 |
|  | to choose | 5.4 |

The first cluster refers to the past image of the young university students, that is, the high school period. These young people, referring to "how they were" in the past, describe how much university has contributed to their change. The cluster refers to an actual awareness of one's own image in the past described by typical characteristics of the adolescent phase (e.g., *Over time I've tried to lay the basis for a greater confidence in me and in my abilities, also thanks to the good results achieved in the university domain. In high school, I was a little girl more worried about life and the future*. Score: 27.3).

The second cluster brings out the self-image that these young people have in the present, highlighting the component of change. These youths feel grown-up, more responsible and invested with decision-making powers: the choice of the university is the first moment in which they are asked to decide and it represents a first experience of independence (e.g., *I feel more grown and mature. A significantly important event was the choice of the university*. Score:14.6).

The third cluster describes how university entrance and course of study allow them to test themselves in new contexts, gaining experience and becoming increasingly aware of themselves and their abilities, also thanks to the "toolbox" provided by university. They tell how that period represents the one in which they plan actions for the achievement of future goals (e.g., *I'm a person who aims at achieving objectives, independent sustenance and professional fulfilment. I'm very ambitious and this leads me to frantically pursue new opportunities, prospects and realities which may contribute to improve myself*. Score: 25.7).

The fourth cluster, finally, shows the interest towards the job offer, clarifying the tendency of young people to be committed to specific disciplines in order to acquire those skills which can offer more opportunities in the job market (e.g., *It was definitely difficult to choose the university to attend. An evaluation in relation to future working experiences must always be done. What does the world of work offer us nowadays?* Score: 28.5).

The clusters position on the Cartesian axes conveys the movement dimension inherent in the students' accounts: there is, indeed, a transition from past in the first cluster to present in clusters two and three, until future in cluster four. The right bottom quarter represents the dimension of past, whereas the left bottom quarter indicates the present condition and the left upper quarter the future prospect. From the point of view of interpretation, the bottom of space represents a more certain and aware dimension, in other words the stock of previous and current skills of the youth, whereas the top of space represents what these young are prone to in terms of future goals. The lower sub-space is, indeed, the real and actual stock of skills of the youth, whereas the upper sub-space refers to the future, which is still distant and uncertain.
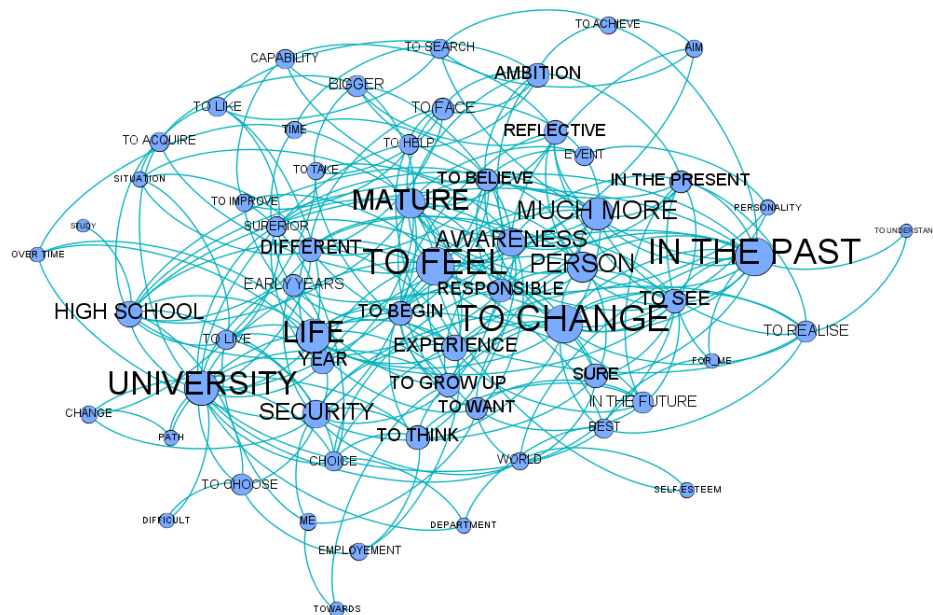
## Network Text Analysis

In addition to the cluster analysis, it is interesting to note the relations between the single lemmas. For this purpose, the use of the SNA, together with the content analysis, allows to understand how these lemmas are connected to each other and which of them have an important position in different sets or in the whole network, shedding some light on the importance of the words in the young students' accounts. A first in-depth visualisation form of the relations structure[6] between the various lemmas shows the highest degree centrality that indicate those words used with greater frequency in relation to other words in the accounts and the various contexts of meaning: in this case, the conversations of the young students focus on few keywords. *To change* represents the lemma with the greatest weight, referring thus to the perception of a difference between the current self-image and the past one. Another key lemma is *university*: the young people, in their status of students, attribute an important contribution of their change to university. The following lemmas, always according to the consistency criterion, clarify the quality of the change: *awareness*, *mature*, *life*, *experience*, *responsible*, *to grow up*. It is noteworthy that these youth explicitly express also a quantity of the change, resorting to adverbs such as *much more*, *most*, just to indicate how the features which belonged to the past self have been strengthened: the youth describe themselves as much more mature, more responsible, more open towards other people than before and improved from the point of view of their competences. Moreover, as shown also in the thematic analysis, the students emphasise the temporal dimension by using multiwords such as *in the past*, *in the present*, *in the future*, *over time*, *early years*.

In more detail, the incidence for each node can be expressed both as in-degree, that is, the number of edges incoming in a node (identifying in this way the so-called "predecessors" of each lexical unit) and as out-degree, that is, the number of edges outgoing from the node (showing in this case the so-called "successors"). The relation between predecessors and successors within the textual network is interesting because it helps to understand the semantic variety produced by the nodes. By observing Figure 2, the lemmas with the highest out-degree centrality are *mature* and then *university* and *to see*. These lemmas represent the fulcrum from which narration shifts towards other words: the students speak about how they feel more mature than before and how differently they can perceive reality from the past, in particular from their high school period (these nodes are indeed linked to the lemmas *in the past*, *to realise*, *to change*, *high school*. In this view, the choice of the university has a role in the growing-up

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[6] The network obtained presents 61 nodes and 250 lines.

process, by giving such young people a greater awareness and confidence in their own abilities in the present: *university* is linked, indeed, to the nodes, *to feel*, *to grow up*, *to help* and *to acquire* (Figure 3). Among these, it is above all *mature* which presents itself as a starting point of the various narrations: indeed, it presents itself as "source" node, that is, it has more outgoing edges than incoming edges compared to the other nodes.

*Figure 2. Network of lemmas according to out-degree centrality (YifanHu Layout)*



*Figure 3. Neighbors of "University" (predecessors in green and successors in red).*



On the other hand, *to change*, *in the past* and *to feel* show the highest in-degree centrality and, in addition, they are "absorbent" nodes, presenting in this case more incoming edges than outgoing edges compared to all the other nodes (Figure 4). These lemmas represent the final part of a sentence or account and express a development if compared to the past.

*Figure 4. Network of lemmas according to in-degree centrality (YifanHu Layout).*



The students refer with greater frequency to that process of change which has allowed them to become aware of their current condition, "to realise" their self-image, acquiring more "awareness" than before of their competences and abilities and finally reaching greater maturity. The discussions revolve around the topic of university which, as has been said, represents indeed a crucial moment in the development of the young students. Moreover, words not only can be simply linked to many other words, which in turn produce further ties, but they can also have a "transition" function. The nodes carrying out this role present the highest *betweenness centrality* (Freeman, 1979), allowing the link between two or more network sets and being thus in a strategic position of the network. In particular, *university* and then *to change* and *mature* are the lemmas with the highest betweenness centrality, in other words they produce a significant semantic work in the text (Figure 5).

*Figure 5. Network of lemmas according to Betweenness Centrality (YifanHu Layout).*
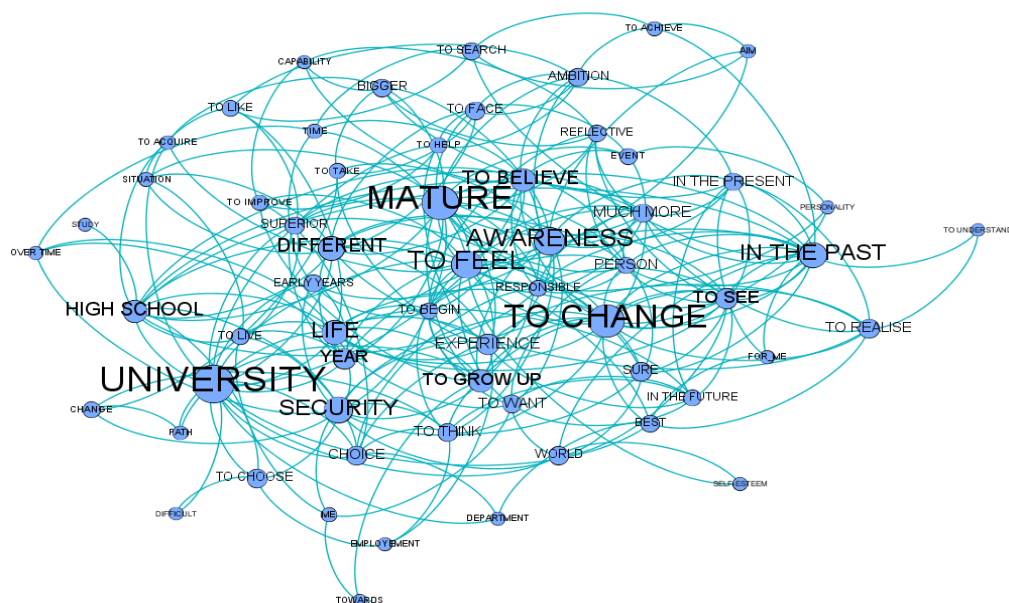
These lemmas play a central role in relation to the flow of meanings in the network, defining in this way the semantic variety of the accounts. In this view, specific paths of meaning stem from the main intersection represented by the lemma *university*: for instance, the lemmas *different* and *to believe* manage to come into contact with *to grow up* and *to feel* only through *university*, just to indicate that the process of change of these young people (compared to how they were in high school) and, in addition, their awareness must involve the experience of university, which stimulates their personal and professional growth. University, therefore, plays a bridging role which foster the connection with different semantic set of the network: it allows to leave high school, to test oneself in different roles, enough to represent a push for change, and later it encourages the orientation towards new goals until one reaches the world of work.

## Discussion

Our analysis of university-work transition revealed four main themes. The first theme deals with description of the adolescent phase. This phase is crucial in terms of career decision, and this aspect show from the narratives of young people. According to the literature, career development takes place during adolescence. Adolescents begin to clarify their career identity (Erikson, 1963), develop an awareness of vocational interests and realities, and undertake career-related tasks, such as career planning and career exploration (Rogers & Creed, 2011). The beginning of this process in adolescence continues during the university, where young people intensify their thoughts on future careers. In the second cluster the theme of change emerges, above all compared to what we can define as career maturity. The high school years were conceptualised as a time when students would be gathering information about themselves and the world of work through a process of effective exploration, while the years immediately following in order to crystallize and specify a "wise" career choice and embark on the appropriate preparation for it. The need for planning, to set and pursue goals, next to the need to take contingency factors (i.e., context) into account, were specified as key aspects as well as the actual undertaking of activities to explore the world of work. From the third theme we observe the career decision-making. This process plays a central role in university-work transition. Transitions like this can, in fact, promote indecision (Patton & Creed, 2001). Career indecisions refer to the issues that subjects encounter before or during a career decision-making process (Gati, Kraus & Osipow, 1996). Moreover, choices regarding future require the ability to gather information, to search for help and support, to stave off intrusiveness and pressures, and to communicate one's decisions (Nota & Soresi, 2011). In the fourth cluster the evaluation of the context emerges. Consideration of the context in the career decision-making process is important in terms of career adaptability. According to Savickas (2005), Young behaviors are function of the environment, personal disposition, and of the ability to take into account these sources of strengths and constraints. In the new challenges of the global economy, adaptability refers to the individual's internal capabilities and resources towards vocational development tasks and professional transitions, allows individuals to employ self-concepts in occupational roles. Compared to the clusters dimension, Prospects towards work is the first in order of consistency, showing the largest number of elementary contexts and a greater thematic occurrence compared to the other clusters. This means that in the narrative flow a large part of these young subjects referred to the future working prospect.

What is important, above all from a psychological point of view, is that the future is present in their mind, so it is accessible, and it can be referred to in narrations. Going through these dimensions, the topics covered develop, producing a shared narration and so a shared process of signification of the experiences. This young show awareness of their image in the past (how "they were"). They tell about an actual change in terms of identity and describe

themselves in the present as subjects active in the achievement of goals, being prone to future prospects towards the world of work. The students tell of feeling different and therefore changed compared to their high school period and prone to the establishment of future goals. The change is expressed in terms of increase of self-esteem, which seems to be central in defining the self-image: the crucial moments during the transition from high school to university, such as facing university entrance exams, attending lessons during the early weeks and passing the first exam, give more confidence in one's own abilities. The experiences of academic life, however tough, are appreciated by the students themselves, who describe them as means to continuously test themselves. University allows them to explore new roles and try different activities aimed at understanding what they are actually able to do. University becomes a place of experimentation and exploration of the self, where the subjects begin to gain more knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses.

For the new generations, the transition to the world of work does not present itself anymore as a direct and linear transition. The transformations from the economic point of view have involved a decrease of employment and an increase of precarious work which have affected above all the younger population. This postpones the entry for young people to the labour market and, more generally, to social life as bearers of responsibility and assignments specific to adulthood. These changes not only affect young people from the social point of view, involving an extension of the transition period from school to work, but they affect them also from a psychological point of view, slowing down the transition to adulthood.

Even though an extension of the training courses may increase the developmental risks attributed to adolescence – until the involvement of subsequent years relative to the identity shaping – the university years are perceived by young people as a moment of self-discovery. The analysis of the accounts has come to light that these university students feel themselves different compared to high school period and the transition to university marks that passage, which is necessary for the young person in terms of self-definition. The change perceived moves towards greater self-esteem which affects the description the students give of themselves. It is in the present that they feel more mature, responsible and called upon to plan objectives and take decisions about future choices in a more independent way. The students' accounts reflect the temporal evolution of their awareness: in the imagination of these youth, the definition of their own knowledge and abilities produces a clearer image of them in the past (an image of how "they were") and a less blurry projection to the future (how "they will be"). By relying on their image in the present, which includes features of the self as well as competences acquired at university, and on the experiences achieved during the academic studies, these youths seem to be more confident in relation to their position in society. They begin to project themselves towards the world of work, focusing their attention on the most requested competences and, therefore, on those which can offer more opportunities on the market. These youths tell they have already experienced a "very early transition" from high school to university, which represents the first independent choice in the majority of the accounts, and they see university as a bridge in view of a new transition. Therefore, if it is true that the transition to adulthood is slower and more problematic for the youth who continue their studies, it is equally true that the youth themselves mark the centrality of university in the accounts, giving it an important position among the life's experiences which contribute to the definition of the self. Indeed, at the centre of the students' accounts we find the word university, which affects the orientation of the semantic flow and the formation of the meanings which circulate in the network, in relation to both personal and working process of growth. In this light, university would encourage young students to plan strategies to find job and it can be view as a "capital" enough to be suitable in period of economic crisis and instability (Habibov, Afandi, & Cheung, 2017). An of possible evidence of importance of the university for young is the willingness of the 76% of Italian students to continue the training after got bachelor's

degree and 58% of them after got a master degree level in order to find a suitable job (Almalaurea, 2017).

In conclusion, university would indiscriminately allow students to define and re-define themselves in view of the acquisition of future roles and the preparation for the world of work. Along with this, university is experienced as a training ground to test one's own competences. Indeed, in the accounts there is no image concerning the uselessness of the academic studies in view of the transition to the world of work. Therefore, in the uncertainty of contemporary society where each individual is called upon to build one's own working career, university may represent for students a protective factor. University may contribute, in particular, to the crystallisation of the competences and, more generally, to the creation of the personal and professional identity, providing the equipment necessary to face, at the end of the studies, the difficult access to the world of work and, more generally, the transition to adulthood.

The present study shows a number of limitations: above all the participation rate in the present study was rather low and the survey is restricted to a territorial scope. Indeed, future research should investigate similar research questions using a larger and more representative sample providing more evidence and considering specificity of the Italian context characterized by enormous difficulties in finding work and the strong the gap between Northern and Southern regions. However, our research may represent a first step to deeply understand the dynamics at the heart of the subject of study in order to consider the phenomenon's investigation on a national scale. From a methodological point of view, the narrative tool allows to deeply understand only some of the dimensions of the phenomenon. It is a shortcoming could be overcome by using quantitative instruments from a perspective of a mixed methods approach which allows to understand the phenomenon in its complexity. Combining textual analysis and network text analysis has allowed not only to explore the content of narrations, but also to identify the processes of signification; nevertheless, this method is still very recent in the literature. And ultimately, we would hope to pursue the longitudinal questions of whether students deemed ready at this stage do, indeed, experience a more adaptive work transition.

The agentic quality of the participants is a good starting point for thinking about possible interventions that can make easier the transition. It is important, in our opinion, to highlight therefore the link between research and clinical intervention: the support interventions have to move towards improving of their own capabilities (Savickas, 2005) and develop those social and emotional abilities that are indispensable in the decisional process (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2011, 2015). Along this direction go the interventions of life-designing (Savickas, 2012) that are a support to reflective capacities through narration. This work in fact is a first attempt to re-think possible interventions to support an adaptive transition, leveraging the benefits offered and emerging needs by narrations of young in transition.

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