



Young People's Perceptions of Transitioning from School to Higher Education: A Cross-National Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Education can provide individuals access to work and career possibilities. It may also contribute to greater societal equality, facilitating social mobility. The transition from secondary school (SEC) to higher education (HE) (and beyond) is particularly important, impacting both on individuals' lives and on society more widely (e.g., by supplying labor markets with required qualifications). Taking an interdisciplinary, cross-national perspective, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 young people from Germany, Argentina, and Chile, aiming to enhance understanding of individuals' perceptions of barriers and facilitators of transitioning from SEC to HE, in the context of their personal/family situations, social structures and cultural environments. Thematic data analysis pointed to commonality in terms of what young people from the three countries consider as facilitators (e.g., personal ambition; support from family/friends) and barriers (e.g., high expectations of oneself/family/friends; lack of interest in study subject). Unsurprisingly, given the three countries' distinct educational systems, societal structures, cultural values etc., the findings also revealed some differences across the three cases, such as role models acting as an important facilitator much more in Germany compared to Chile and Argentina. We conclude that many contextual and personal factors can both facilitate and hinder young people from accessing to and thriving in HE, most of which are relevant to individuals regardless of their country of origin. Further research could expand our qualitative study, for instance, through a large-scale, quantitative study across a wider range of countries.

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People's life cycles have been understood as transitions between life domains (Walther et al., 2022). For example, most societies in history have defined events acknowledging an individual's transition from childhood to adulthood such as coming-of-age ceremonies when children reach puberty (Fenton et al., 2022). Contemporary societies present two distinctive aspects regarding such transitions: firstly, transitions are increasingly institutionalized and mediated by institutions and organizations related to education and employment (e.g., schools, universities, companies, public agencies), and the institutions that in turn regulate those organizations (Perrow, 1992). Secondly, today's world provides opportunities for dynamic, and often elective transitions (Beck, 1992). Although for many people worldwide, the choice between access to education and work is still foreclosed, modern societies believe that the specific avenues of one person's transitions should not be predetermined. Rather, all individuals should be able to pursue their desired educational trajectories, family status or specific work activities, given certain conditions (Eliason et al., 2015).

The transition from secondary school (SEC) to Higher Education (HE) and beyond seems particularly relevant, constituting a pivotal moment in young people's lives (Deil-Amen & Lopez, 2007; Gale & Parker, 2014). It is key regarding access to certain types of jobs and subsequent lifestyles (McDonald, 2011), to achieving status within society, and to developing personal interests (Milesi, 2010). Yet, this transition is challenging both to individuals (e.g., eliciting feelings of uncertainty) and institutions expected to support young people in their moves beyond SEC (Packer & Thomas, 2021).

To understand the issue of transitions beyond school, two elements are crucial: how trajectories are embedded in specific institutional settings and how trajectories relate to subjectivity and personal decisions (Eliason et al., 2015). Comparative and cross-national research enables studying the significant role played by institutional environments regarding how young people imagine, expect, and decide what to do once they finish compulsory education (Bol & van de Werfhorst, 2013; Möhring, 2016). This relates to welfare and educational systems, education-work linkages, funding availabilities, admission systems, and other policies or regulations via which states and countries organize access and conditions to opportunities both in tertiary or HE and labor markets (Kariya & Rosenbaum, 2003). Our paper contributes to the extant discourse by drawing on qualitative data from three substantially different countries, namely Germany, Chile, and Argentina, to examine young people's transition from SEC to HE. Germany is a case of a highly developed welfare system, where HE is mostly publicly provided, and characterized by clearly defined educational tracks and a strong connection between education and work. Chile, in contrast, is a case of a market-based system in one of the most unequal societies worldwide, with paid, often privately owned and for-profit HE providers; only recently did a reform introduce free education for individuals from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Argentina is an "intermediate" case, where a strong public non-selective HE coexists with elite-oriented private universities, while public and intermediary institutions (e.g., trade unions, cooperatives, political movements) are still relevant for social welfare.

Within any given national and institutional context, people face different realities regarding their personal experiences, their specific access to resources and information, how they assess their own skills, and other individual characteristics, such as personal motivation, resilience, etc. (Perna, 2006). Hence, subjectivity not only relates to "how things work" for individuals, but to their unique experiences. Adolescents, in particular, experience processes of education and socialization in a way in which agents and structures produce themselves reciprocally, generating constraints but also opportunities for individuals and sources of identity and self (Dubet & Martuccelli, 1998). Accordingly, transitions have been studied from several perspectives. Whilst a first wave of studies understood transitions from a mechanistic or stylized perspective, current research is highlighting transitions as complex and dynamic processes (Walther et al., 2022). This applies to transitions from compulsory to non-compulsory education (Packer & Thomas, 2021), from undergraduate to postgraduate studies (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013) and from school to work (Alves & Korhonen, 2016). Thus, the complexity of transitions needs to be addressed both theoretically and empirically, involving institutional, economic, cultural, and motivational aspects.

A relevant approach to making sense of individuals' trajectories relates to the multiple factors that may facilitate or hinder young people in successfully transitioning from SEC to HE.

Therefore, this article seeks to address the following questions: *How do young people experience the transition between SEC and HE?* and *What are barriers and facilitators to a successful transition from SEC to tertiary (higher) education?* To elicit relevant information regarding the trajectories of young people who accomplished the transition from secondary to tertiary education, we used qualitative interviews with university students from the three country contexts. We frame the analysis of our results by drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (2009) Ecological Systems Theory (EST), which considers individuals' transitions in light of systemic elements at micro, meso and exo levels. Thus, the article will provide insight into how young people's transitions are influenced by their specific experiences as well as the structural differences found in our three national cases.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Transitions research is an interdisciplinary field, and transitions have mostly been understood from three different viewpoints: firstly, a structural or objective approach, characterizing transitions as individuals moving from one role to the next, and secondly, a subjective one, whereby individuals understand their life domains and roles from their own perspectives and experiences (Eliason et al., 2015). A third, interactionist, perspective posits that educational transitions are neither structural nor subjective, but the outcome of interpersonal exchanges between young people and other relevant actors in education (Cuconato & Walther, 2015). Two different strategies enable further detailed examination of individuals' transitions: i) focalized studies, which research a specific group of people (Betthäuser et al., 2020) or institutional context (Denny, 2021); and ii) comparative studies, which focus on comparisons between groups, institutional contexts, etc. (Alves & Korhonen, 2016; Bol & van de Werfhorst, 2013; Möhring, 2016).

Acknowledging the complex, multidimensional nature of transitions phenomena, and specifically regarding the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education, there is a trend towards integrative studies and models (Packer et al., 2022). Perna's (2006) model considers both access to and choice of college within the United States context, examining the role played by personal interests, parental education and involvement, peers, ethnic and class origins along with more organizational and institutional elements (e.g., funding, support, admission). She highlights the interplay of different levels and domains of human experience when young people pursue a HE degree, adopting a holistic approach that considers motivational, alongside socio-economic and institutional aspects. Similarly, Archer et al., (2003) propose an understanding of the issue of inclusion and exclusion to HE based on aspects such as finance, identity, cultural capital and path-dependency. Schoon and Heckhausen (2019), instead, seek to overcome the duality of structural and agency determinants of transitions, proposing a socio-ecological developmental approach to the transition between education and work, taking account of the tensions between structural-institutional and individual elements and events, with the possibility to integrate them from the perspective of concrete life trajectories.

Within education, the aforementioned EST (Bronfenbrenner, 2009) has been highly influential (e.g., Takriti et al., 2022; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013). EST postulates that individuals' trajectories are embedded in multiple exogenous environments, playing a significant role in young people's progress or development. Five ecological systems impact on a young person's development, with the individual at the center: the "microsystem", which pertains to the "immediate setting" a specific individual is embedded within (Bronfenbrenner, 2009, p. 7); the "mesosystem", comprising "linkages" between different microsystems (*ibid.*, p. 7); the "exosystem", which is made up of individuals and their environments; the "macrosystem", which refers to the wider social, economic, cultural and political environment; and the "chronosystem", relating to how changes occurring during a specific life course affect an individual. Originally focused on children, EST can also be applied to adolescents and young adults (e.g., Olson, 2016). Loh et al., (2021), for instance, drew on the theory to examine undergraduate students' academic experiences moving from their foundational to second year of studies. EST has also been employed for studies investigating individuals transitioning from SEC to HE, such as by Packer and Thomas (2021), who used the framework to understand the complexity of transitions from school to non-compulsory education based on the interactions of diverse stakeholders. Thanks to its holistic view, Bronfenbrenner's EST provides a useful analytical tool, enabling to distinguish the plethora of drivers facilitating or hindering the SEC-to-HE transition. Therefore, we follow the lead of extant research that relied on this theoretical framework to examine the transition from SEC to higher/further education (Loh et al., 2021; Mocca et al., 2019; Olson, 2016; Packer & Thomas, 2021; Packer et al., 2022).

To examine how young people perceive the SEC-to-HE transition, we adopted a qualitative approach, this enabling detailed descriptions as well as rich, in-depth explanations of the phenomenon or process being investigated (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Silverman, 2013). Specifically, we sought a closer understanding of how young people experience the transition – before, during and after – given their individual backgrounds, that is their personal and family situations, social structures, and cultural environments. We further wished to explore those factors that can aid individuals’ transition (facilitators), and those that can hinder it (barriers). Drawing on Silverman (2013) whereby “[m]any interview studies seek to find out how a particular group of people perceive things” and “interviews can give direct access to ‘experience’” (p. 201), we employed semi-structured interviews to collect data (N = 23).

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were recruited i) by contacting HE institutions across Chile, Argentina and Germany and asking for an invite to be circulated to current students; ii) by getting in touch with personal contacts at HE institutions in the three countries and asking them to forward interview invites to their own contacts; iii) through snowballing, by asking (potential) interviewees to recommend possible further participants. Interviews were arranged and carried out with 23 individuals – 8 in Chile, 7 in Argentina and 8 in Germany. To satisfy the chosen theoretical and purposive sampling strategy (e.g., Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and for individuals to qualify for participation, they had to fulfill the criterion of being currently enrolled as a HE student in one of the three countries of interest. We sought to recruit both students that had recently started HE and those that had been studying for several semesters or were nearing study completion.

Participants were enrolled in many different study subjects (e.g., mathematics, business, English, theology). Most participants (n = 14) were female. Participants’ age ranged between 18 and 34 years. Aside from studying, nine participants worked in part-time paid employment, two were doing an internship and two further were volunteering (Table 1).

	IDENTIFIER ¹	GENDER	AGE (YEARS)	STUDY SUBJECT	STUDY SEMESTER/YEAR
1	Arg1	M	21	Law	Final year
2	Arg2	M	31	Mathematics	Final semester
3	Arg3	F	18	Environmental engineering	First semester
4	Arg4	F	34	Public accounting	Second semester
5	Arg5	M	20	Music therapy	Second semester
6	Arg6	M	23	Sociology	Sixth semester
7	Arg7	F	22	English	Final semester
8	Chl1	F	21	Social work	First semester
9	Chl2	F	28	Business administration	Final year
10	Chl3	F	23	Nutrition and dietetics	Third year
11	Chl4	F	19	Dentistry	First year
12	Chl5	F	21	Sociology	First year
13	Chl6	F	25	Commercial engineering	Fifth year
14	Chl7	F	20	Speech therapy	Second year
15	Chl8	F	23	Public administration	Fifth year
16	Deu1	F	27	Mathematics	Third semester
17	Deu2	M	25	Computer sciences	First semester
18	Deu3	M	20	Business	First semester
19	Deu4	M	28	Informatics	Final semester
20	Deu5	M	23	Economics	Second semester
21	Deu6	F	20	Theology	First year
22	Deu7	F	22	Mathematics	Seventh semester
23	Deu8	M	20	Engineering with Business Studies	First year

Table 1 Demographic information of participants (N = 23).

N.B. ¹ An identifier starting in “Arg” designates participants from Argentina; accordingly, “Chl” is for Chilean and “Deu” for German participants respectively.

Interviews were conducted in the interviewees' native language, face-to-face or via telephone, using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 1). Following a short introduction, interviewees were asked to elaborate on their experiences growing up, including any formative experiences. We then enquired about their current study experience and intentions following graduation. Questions about interviewees' general goals in life followed. We then turned to interviewees' experiences of transitioning from SEC to HE, including any difficulties faced, or any factors facilitating the transition. Next came a section exploring interviewees' anticipated transition experience from HE to the workplace or elsewhere. Finally, interviewees were asked to elaborate on the role of education (to success) in life. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed using the verbatim transcription method (Poland, 1995). All interviews were translated into English prior to starting the analysis process.

Ethics

A favorable ethical opinion was obtained from the authors' academic institutions. Ethical considerations were an integral part of the study's design. These were informed by the authors' respective institutions' ethics policies as well as by the [British Psychological Society's](#) Code of Ethics and Conduct including its Code of Human Research Ethics (2021). Participants were provided with an information sheet about the nature of the project, and this was further explained verbally. Furthermore, participants' informed consent was sought prior to data collection, assuring them that they are under no obligation to respond to any presented questions and could withdraw their participation at any time. They were also given the opportunity to discuss any issues raised during or after the data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants' personal data were ensured, in line with the UK's Data Protection Act 1998. Any sensitive issues brought up by interviewees were dealt with by the interviewers in a sympathetic and sensitive manner. Any data obtained from participants were held in confidence and used solely for the purposes of this research including any resulting publications, in anonymized format; here, we use identifiers (e.g., Arg1, Deu3, Chl7) when referring to interviewees.

DATA ANALYSIS

To facilitate data analysis, we loosely drew on Bronfenbrenner's EST (2009). This contributed to an understanding of students' transition experiences, and perceived barriers and facilitators, at an individual level (e.g., individual abilities or motivation), and at microsystem (i.e., interactions between students and their family and friends), mesosystem (e.g., interactions between students and former teachers), and exosystem (i.e., structural factors such as governmental policies) levels. Furthermore, from an international perspective, we were interested in differences and similarities of perceived transition experiences between Argentina, Chile and Germany.

We conducted thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) on the interview transcripts. Thematic analysis provides an adaptive, flexible method for capturing the meaning of interview data and facilitates eliciting important themes around thoughts, feelings, and expectations. The approach has also been used by other researchers (e.g., [Packer et al., 2022](#); [Takriti et al., 2022](#)) seeking to explore experiences of individuals transitioning into education. We applied the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006), using the online whiteboard Miro to visually assist our analysis. We started by forming and revising codes within the interview transcripts across multiple cycles (for examples see Appendix 2), additionally extracting exemplary quotes. There were substantially more facilitator codes (220) than barrier codes (97). Next, the three countries' codes were compared and distinctive features were noted. The analysis was conducted by one author and cross-checked independently by a second author who analyzed one interview per country; codes were then compared for consistency in the analyzing scheme (95% consistency; any disagreements were discussed within the author team). Next, four overarching themes and 24 sub-themes pertaining to young people's transition experiences were derived and discussed within the author team: i) individual factors, ii) institutional and iii) structural influences as well as iv) the impact of family and friends/peers.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the four overarching themes and 24 sub-themes explained in the following.

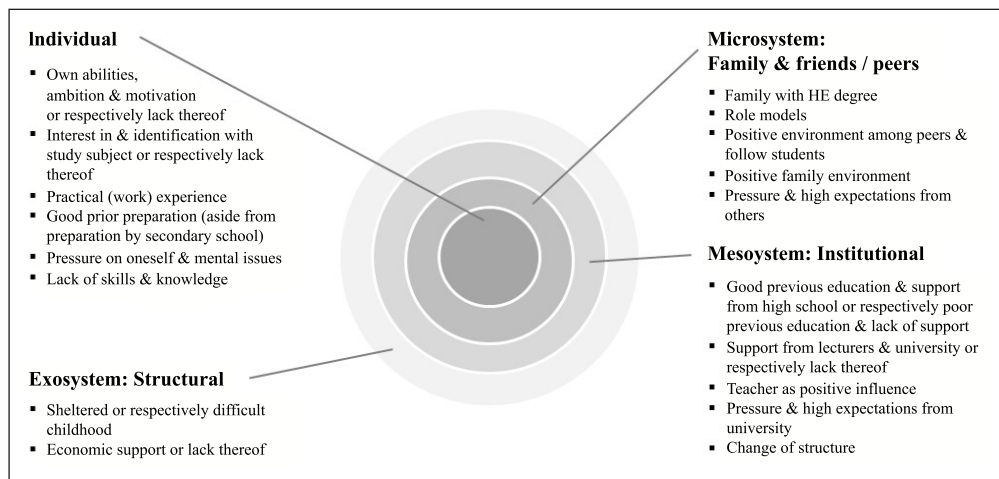


Figure 1 Overview of themes and subthemes in the context of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2009).

THEME 1 – INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

More individual-level codes could be extracted compared to the other three levels. This is, perhaps, unsurprising given that we were specifically interested in young people's *individual* transition experiences. Thus, the first theme refers to individual-level factors perceived as facilitators or barriers in the SEC-to-HE transition. The theme is defined through six sub-themes, the two sub-themes *own abilities, ambition and motivation* and *interest in and identification with the field of study*, respectively, being the most frequently mentioned, across all three countries. In Argentina and Germany in particular, these two individual-level sub-themes seem to be the most important facilitators in the SEC-to-HE transition, exceeded only by a *positive environment among peers & fellow students* (sub-theme within Theme 2).

Students' own abilities, such as being organized and being able to adapt to the new (study) environment, served as an important facilitator to a successful transition. *Motivation* was equally important in facilitating a smooth transition; students were motivated to take up and persist in studying by various aspects, including, specific expectations in oneself or the importance of the studies and the prospect of a promising career following graduation:

"[...] My own motivation also. I am aware that this is important. I will regret it if I take things too easy now." (Interviewee Deu3)

Interest in the subject of study was often mentioned as a factor that made starting one's studies, and persisting, easier. *Identification with the study subject* was perceived as a further facilitator, particularly when choosing a specific subject in the first place:

"When I signed up for a sociology degree, I did not do it with any kind of work projection at all but for a very personal interest." (Interviewee Arg6)

Conversely, *lack of identification with one's study subject* was also mentioned several times as a reason for changing the course of study, for example, or to account for difficulties experienced initially.

In the case of Germany in particular, *practical (work) experience*, either before taking up or in parallel to studying (e.g., working part-time), was perceived as important by students to facilitate a successful transition:

"I have already completed an apprenticeship during which I already got introduced to certain subjects on a basic level which now are also part of the studies. It's more in depth now, but this made it easier for me personally." (Interviewee Deu2)

Practical (work) experience enabled students to think more carefully about their choice of subject and to develop knowledge that might be useful in their studies, thus facilitating a successful transition. That said, students who had gained work experience prior to taking up studying, perceived this "break" between SEC and HE to have made it more difficult to adjust to the daily routine and mindset required for studying:

"It was particularly hard for me to get back into a school-like mindset since I had been working in a job before going to university." (Interviewee Deu2)

Some students believed that *being well prepared* for university constituted an advantage for them. Such preparations go above and beyond regular completion of SEC and include, for example, pre-university programs and private classes.

In contrast to the previously mentioned facilitators, *pressure on oneself and mental issues* was identified as a barrier. This sub-theme relates to students having such high expectations of themselves that they are unable to live up to them:

"I think I even have anxiety crises because I am so afraid of failing that I think it affects me more than anything else." (Interviewee Chl1)

"I am a person who demands a lot from myself academically, but more than anything else spiritually, [...] I am always a person who seeks to achieve my own goals and when one sets very high standards, it is very easy to get frustrated" (Interviewee Arg3)

Lack of skills and knowledge was identified as a further barrier for students at the individual level, most frequently being mentioned by Chilean students:

"I don't have the habit of studying. I still haven't managed to form it, and I don't think I have because I think that's the base." (Interviewee Chl1)

THEME 2 – IMPACT OF FAMILY & FRIENDS/PEERS (MICROSYSTEM LEVEL [Bronfenbrenner, 2009])

This theme refers to the most immediate environmental influence on students, namely their family, friends, and peers within and outside HE, and is divided into five sub-themes. Amongst these, a *positive social environment* was the most important factor facilitating a successful transition, in all three countries.

One facilitator mentioned several times by students is *family members having studied*. Some interviewees perceived this as an encouragement to equally pursue a degree whilst others indicated that it helped them decide on a particular study subject and/or made it easier for them to begin their studies:

"Since my parents had both studied business administration, I didn't really have any other choice, so to speak." (Interviewee Deu3)

In other cases, students mentioned their parents (or other close family members) not being university educated and therefore being particularly encouraging of their offspring attending university, this equally acting as a powerful facilitator in the transition.

The positive influence of *role models*, such as older friends, was also among facilitators mentioned by interviewees in Argentina and Germany; the influence of role models was not referred to by Chilean students.

Of all aspects perceived to facilitate a successful SEC-to-HE transition, a *positive environment among peers and fellow students* was the most frequently mentioned, in all three countries. In almost all interviews, students explained feeling greatly supported by their friends and fellow students, for example through study groups, helping each other with study content or through mental support:

"With my classmates at the university [...] the atmosphere was so nice, it was like everything happened together, we studied together, did everything together, [...] and it was never hard for me at the university." (Interviewee Chl2)

"Social circles help you a lot to keep you going when you are falling, because they are in the same situation as you, they study the same things as you, they have the same problems as you." (Interviewee Arg1)

A *positive family environment* was also frequently mentioned as beneficial in the SEC-to-HE transition. Many students reported that their parents had supported them throughout their school years and in their studies, for example mentally or financially. This support made students feel secure and stable in their pursuit of (higher) education:

“The support of my parents is my main pillar.” (Interviewee Chl8)

“[M]y family will always support me, but also because they have supported me in all my studies, primary and secondary.” (Interviewee Arg3)

Whilst for many students, family was perceived as a source of support, some interviewees indicated that their parents put pressure on them, which acted as a barrier. *Pressure to perform/succeed and high expectations* from individuals and entities other than one's own family members, such as acquaintances or society, were also mentioned as negative influences:

“[A]t that time I was still under the aegis of my parents, who were always [...] very attentive and very supportive, especially at that age, I think that gave me a little room to make certain decisions too independently.” (Interviewee Arg2)

THEME 3 – INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCE (MESOSYSTEM LEVEL [Bronfenbrenner, 2009])

The third theme comprises five facilitating and hindering factors related to the integration of different systems and entities such as high school and university, former teachers and university lecturers, or the change in educational and life structures. In Germany and Chile in particular, barriers were found to relate mostly to a poor educational background and/or a change of structures.

Lack of or inadequate prior education and support from high school resulted in some students not being able to keep up with the lecture content. Moreover, these students perceived examinations as being more difficult to them compared to their fellow students who had graduated from other SECs. In Chile, the difference in quality between private and public high schools was particularly emphasized, as a factor that may lead to unequal study conditions for young people:

“I wished that school had prepared me better for university, for how things are there.” (Interviewee Deu3)

Support from lecturers and university – or lack of support – was equally understood as an important factor in the SEC-to-HE transition. For most interviewees, this factor was considered positively, as a facilitator:

“She kind of motivated me to continue because at the beginning I still wanted to give up.” (Interviewee Chl5)

Yet, some students reported that a lack of personal contact with lecturers and anonymity within the institution had been problematic. That said, for most students the anonymity and lack of personal contact ceased being an issue in later semesters as they had smaller courses which provided them with more individual and personal support. Unlike in German and Chilean interviews, lack of support from the university was not mentioned as a barrier by Argentinian students.

Several students explained having been *positively influenced by their former SEC teachers* – partly because they acted as a role model and inspiration to them, but also because of mental support and individual guidance being provided:

“I had a teacher, [...] I loved how she explained everything, because I understood her very well. So, I think she was like a motivator for what I was going to study later in HE.” (Interviewee Chl2)

“I could tell you about 4 or 5 teachers who made a mark in my life, who told me things that motivated me the most.” (Interviewee Chl5)

A further barrier was perceived *pressure and high expectations set by the university*. A high quantity of (difficult) examinations in the first semesters, for instance, constituted an obstacle for many interviewees, which not all of them were able to overcome, as a result changing their study subject.

A change in living and learning structures, that is from an everyday life organized by parents and SEC to the great degree of freedom and independence afforded by a university context – without the obligation to attend lectures and an opportunity to choose study subjects oneself – presented a challenge for students in their transition:

“[Moving] from school to studying I have noticed that a lot needs to be organized myself, because before we had our parents, they did everything and now we have to organize everything ourselves and work out ourselves how to do it.” (Interviewee Deu8)

THEME 4 – STRUCTURAL INFLUENCE (EXOSYSTEM LEVEL [Bronfenbrenner, 2009])

This theme refers to factors outside of students’ control impacting on their SEC-to-HE transition, including household financial stability (or lack thereof) or a sheltered (or respectively difficult) childhood.

In Chile in particular, *economic support* in terms of access to scholarships and funding from the government or other institutions seems to be a crucial factor for students for a successful transition and for being able to pursue a HE degree:

“Without benefits you can’t study, at least I couldn’t study [...] there are a lot of people who are not studying because of the same thing.” (Interviewee Chl1)

In contrast, this factor was not perceived as a barrier in Germany whilst in Argentina it was mentioned less frequently than in Chile.

In more than half of the interviews, a *sheltered childhood* was identified as a facilitator to a successful SEC-to-HE transition – above all in Germany, followed by Argentina:

“What I remember from my childhood is that I [...] never had any needs or worries, no, I always had the security that my parents were going to cover my needs, yes, well, they were going to take care of me in every aspect.” (Interviewee Arg5)

The positive aspect of a *sheltered childhood* was reported only once by Chilean participants, a *difficult childhood* instead being mentioned much more frequently as a barrier:

“My example of family was not good in many areas, of affection, of peace in a home, it was not good.” (Interviewee Chl4)

In summary, in all three countries, factors at the individual level such as *own abilities, ambition and motivation* and *interest in & identification with study subject* were most frequently perceived as facilitating a successful SEC-to-HE transition. In Argentina and Germany in particular, these two individual-level subthemes were the most frequently mentioned facilitators, surpassed only by the microsystem-level sub-theme *positive environment among peers and fellow students*. In Chile, the exosystem-level factor *economic support*, in terms of access to scholarships and funding, seems crucial to a successful transition, while this factor was identified only infrequently in Argentina. Similarly, in Argentina as in Chile, a *sheltered childhood*, equally an exosystem-level factor, was only rarely mentioned in a facilitative capacity. In Chile, the facilitator *practical (work) experience* (individual-level) was identified in only one interview, whilst *role models* (microsystem) were not mentioned as being conducive to a successful transition at all. In contrast, in Germany, the importance of *role models* and *practical (work) experience* were named as facilitators in several interviews.

In Germany and Chile, barriers experienced by interviewees often related to institutional factors, such as *poor previous education* or *change of structure*. In contrast to the other two countries, structural factors at the exosystem level such as *lack of economic support* and *difficult childhood* were not mentioned in the German interviews. In the case of Argentina, it was not possible to identify one specific (type of) barrier as being particularly relevant to individuals and their transition experiences.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

There is no one “recipe for success” or “best practice” approach that can generally be applied to individuals’ SEC-to-HE transitions. Rather, young people experience the transition idiosyncratically – they understand their life domains and roles from a subjective viewpoint, based on their unique range of perspectives and experiences (Eliason et al., 2015). Each young person perceives their transition experience, and the extent to which this was effortless or difficult, differently. This resonates with Gale and Parker’s (2014) notion of “transition as

becoming”, where the transition is understood as a subjective experience, as the lived, complex reality of the individual (cf. [Perna, 2006](#)).

Despite SEC-to-HE transitions being idiosyncratic experiences, a variety of factors are commonly perceived as facilitators or barriers to a successful transition. The findings suggest that transitions occur within an *ecology* of factors, and we propose that a (prospective) student’s ecosystem consists of four levels: individual “system”, microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem.

The “individual system” pertains to personal factors intrinsic to the individual such as own knowledge, skills and abilities, interests, motivation, and prior experience that may influence students’ academic performance. This system is crucially important in terms of facilitating the transition to HE since the factors it consists of can be considered prerequisites to success in young people’s studies, as was also observed previously (e.g., [Loh et al., 2021](#); [Mocca et al., 2019](#)).

The microsystem is made up of people and settings a young person/student has direct contact with such as their parents and immediate family, but also their wider family, friends, peers/fellow students, university lecturers and other individuals that may impact on them. This level, pertaining to the most immediate and oftentimes largest environmental influences on a (prospective) student (e.g., role models, provision of support or encouragement (cf. [Deil-Amen & Lopez, 2007](#))) is highly important in facilitating a successful transition. Moreover, as noted by Loh et al., ([2021](#)), a positive experience at the microsystem level facilitates students’ *persistence* within HE beyond the first year.

The mesosystem relates to the impact of institutions on individuals’ transition experiences, most notably the impact of (aspects within) the life domain being left, i.e., SEC, and (aspects within) the life domain being moved to, i.e., HE. Schoolteachers and university professors are especially important here, concerning the positive influence they can exert on individuals (e.g., providing individual guidance) and the support they can provide (e.g., information about study subjects, motivational feedback) (cf. [Deil-Amen & Lopez, 2007](#); [Packer et al., 2022](#)). Yet, influences within the mesosystem can easily act in a hindering capacity in the SEC-to-HE transition, students reporting feeling pressurized by their university’s (professors’) high expectations, for instance (cf. [Mocca et al., 2019](#)).

The exosystem consists of factors impacting on (prospective) students both directly and indirectly. Within this context, young people’s childhood experiences are important insofar as a sheltered childhood acts as a transition facilitator (e.g., a happy childhood within a healthy social environment enabling an effortless move to other life domains) whilst the opposite holds true for a difficult childhood (characterized, for example, by not having a permanent home, or frequently missing kindergarten). This finding is supported by Deil-Amen and Lopez’ ([2007](#)) review of the transition to college literature, which suggested that growing up in a disadvantaged neighborhood is detrimental to students’ academic achievements, this, in turn, negatively affecting their studying experience. Economic support was a further aspect within the exosystem level. Young people need to be assured of being able to afford HE studies to i) attempt a transition to this life domain in the first place and ii) stand a chance of pursuing (and successfully terminating) their studies without worrying about their finances, having to work part-time, etc. The financial costs of studying were also highlighted by Hutchings (in [Archer et al., 2003](#)) as one of the greatest barriers to access to and persistence within HE by individuals, particularly those from lower income families.

Having discussed findings within an ecological framework, we now return more specifically to the three countries investigated here. Our study is unique in the sense that we examined three very different countries, using qualitative data. Previous cross-national research investigating similar questions has often been quantitative (e.g., [Bol & van de Werfhorst, 2013](#)) and/or has compared countries solely within one geographical region, such as Europe (e.g., [Möhring, 2016](#)). Overall, we found few marked differences between Chile, Argentina and Germany regarding young people’s perceptions of barriers and facilitators in the SEC-to-HE transition. Yet, looking beyond the issue of barriers and facilitators, we note some general differences between the countries, which relate to their different social and political systems, and which impact on young people’s transition experiences.

Compared to Chilean and German students, many Argentinian students seemed to have non-linear study trajectories, in the sense that it was not unusual for individuals to drop out of university, enter the labor market, and, later, return to studying. Such fluid movements

between HE and the labor market are likely facilitated by the Argentinian educational system where, at least for public universities, there are no admission tests nor are there university fees. This suggests that it is relatively easy and, perhaps, more “normal” or socially acceptable for students to abandon their studies and possibly return to them later. Consequently, Argentinian young people may feel a less pronounced sense of failure compared to individuals from Germany or Chile if they decide to cease studying.

Chilean and German students had comparatively much more linear study trajectories – once they had begun their studies, they would usually follow through until graduation, a small minority, perhaps, changing subject or abandoning their studies altogether, for one reason or another. In Germany, many young people hold part-time jobs whilst studying, to be less dependent on their parents’ financial goodwill or to gain work experience, and thus a potential competitive advantage in the labor market. Naturally, as was reflected in some of the German interviews, studying and working simultaneously can be rather challenging, possibly leading to higher stress levels and, consequently, a more strained transition. In Chile, most interviewees focused solely on their studies; no individual worked part-time although two students were doing an internship alongside studying. This might suggest that Chilean students prefer to focus on one life domain at a time, such as their studies, before moving on to the next, such as the labor market.

Though Chile and Argentina are both Latin American countries, and speak the same language, they differ in many other aspects. In particular, the institutional backgrounds (i.e., educational, social, and political systems) within which young people’s lives take place are very different, this accounting for some of the between-country differences observed in individuals’ study and life trajectories, as well as for their subjective experiences and feelings regarding these trajectories.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We interviewed young people who had completed the transition from SEC to HE and were at different stages in their studies. Some participants had changed their study subjects and/or had stopped studying temporarily and started again later. To supplement our research, we suggest comparing and contrasting our findings to findings from interviews with young people who have *not* done the transition – either because they failed in the transition (and terminated their studies prematurely) or because they did not attempt to move from SEC to HE, for whatever reason that may be.

Moreover, further studies could recruit different, more diverse, and larger samples. In particular, it was not possible in our study to comprehensively capture differences *within* countries. Most notably, in the federal countries Germany and Argentina, federated states may display significant differences regarding educational policies and thus young people may experience the SEC-to-HE transition differently from one state to another. Furthermore, a comparison of our results to results from countries with entirely different social settings (e.g., Asian or African countries) would contribute to enabling wider generalizability and applicability of conclusions. Our study’s reach could also be extended by conducting quantitative research with larger samples.

Cross-national, particularly qualitative, research, is inherently challenging in terms of ensuring consistency in the research process. Here, we used several interviewers in the different research locales, each with their own unique interviewing style. Although all interviewers were thoroughly briefed to facilitate consistency, we noticed differences in the interviews concerning length, interviewees getting off topic, etc. Some of these differences may be culture-specific, for example German interviews being shorter and more to the point ([Hofstede Insights \[n.d.\]](#) note that Germans appreciate a direct communication style) compared to Argentinian and Chilean interviews. Other differences, however, are likely to have been caused by employing different interviewers. We recognize this as a study limitation. Yet, we believe that using native interviewers was “the right thing to do” since they were likely to understand the specific social settings better and, as a result, be able to engage more with interviewees than non-native interviewers.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Support, particularly emotional support provided by family members, friends, and fellow students, was perceived as crucially important by young people. Emotional support aside, students did not feel sufficiently supported regarding how to organize their (student) lives: A frequently mentioned barrier pertains to the change of structure young people experience when moving

from SEC, where they typically live with their family, to HE, where they often move to a new city and into their first flat. Such a move puts (new) students in a situation they have no experience with; moreover, they need to adapt to student life – which is rather different to school life –, requiring high levels of independence. Adapting to such a major life change can be facilitated by support regarding prior preparation; for example, increasing understanding and perhaps even practicing living by oneself, making one’s own decisions, planning one’s own schedule, etc. Cage et al., (2021) highlighted that relationships between schools and HE institutions need to be enhanced through more induction events and trial courses. Furthermore, HE institutions could provide more detailed information about student life (e.g., what to expect when starting the first semester) and support students through a well-planned transition phase, especially in the first months of their studies (Leese, 2010). Although many such efforts are likely already being undertaken by family, friends, and institutions alike, *change of structure* was frequently mentioned by interviewees, suggesting that more needs to be done to adequately prepare young people for – and support them in – the SEC-to-HE transition, particularly by institutions.

Moreover, students believed that having the required set of abilities, being ambitious and motivated to pursue their studies to be highly conducive to a successful transition, just as much as being interested in and able to identify with a chosen study subject. Thus, it is important for young people nearing the end of their SEC career to develop a good understanding of their own strengths, and interests, so that they can make informed decisions about a study subject they might both enjoy and succeed at. Such knowledge about oneself can be gained through (guided) personal reflection, and through, for instance, conversations with study counsellors or taking psychological ability, personal strengths, or interests’ assessments. It is also important that academic advisors are adequately prepared to explain how specific courses and studies can contribute to each student’s individual goals (Guertin, 2015). Whilst such measures may already be available to some prospective students, they need to be accessible much more widely, and at no or very low cost. The same goes for information material about the available range of study subjects (e.g., contents taught, career prospects) which should be distributed widely and relatively early on in young people’s SEC careers to enable them to make informed decisions.

Besides, economic support was a frequently mentioned factor by students, acting as a facilitator if individuals were able to readily “pay their bills” and as a barrier if their financial situation was unstable. It is therefore important, from a policy viewpoint, to provide sufficient scholarships and other financial aids, particularly to individuals from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. In Germany, for example, students from lower-income families are eligible for substantial financial support provided by the government, as detailed in the *Bundesausbildungsförderungsgesetz*. We welcome such (long-standing) measures, though believe that they are not sufficiently far-reaching and that more needs to be done to enable young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, financially untroubled access to HE (cf. Mocca et al., 2019).

Having discussed implications for some of the most important barriers and facilitators, we further wish to re-iterate the point made by Perna (2006) and others (e.g., Packer & Thomas 2021) that transitions should be considered *holistically*. Thus, any policies aiming at facilitating a successful transition should take into account that the different hindering and helping factors – and indeed the different levels (themes) we explained in the context of Bronfenbrenner’s EST (2009) –, are interrelated and should therefore not be considered in isolation.

Moving from SEC to HE is a challenging and oftentimes stressful experience for young people. We have shown here that there is a wide range of facilitators and barriers impacting on students’ transitions. Despite commonality across the three countries examined regarding important facilitating and hindering factors, we conclude that transitions are experienced subjectively differently in different contexts; this depends, for instance, on where and how someone grew up and currently lives. In this way, we have enhanced academic understanding of young people’s experiences following SEC, shedding further light on how educational organizations relate to social structures. From a practical and policy perspective, our study’s findings can inform suggestions for improving individuals’ access to – and success within – HE institutions.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendices.** Appendix 1 and 2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijelt.53.s1>

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Interview transcripts are not made accessible for this publication as participants were not specifically asked to give consent for their data to be made widely available. Themes derived in the qualitative analysis of interview data can be found in Appendix 2.

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ETHICS AND CONSENT

The research study was approved by the University of Edinburgh Business School and Catholic University of Temuco Ethics Committees. Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from all participants. Any data obtained from participants were anonymized.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1 served as the PI on the project, led the research including conceptualization, design, data analysis and manuscript preparation.

Author 2 served as the co-PI on the project, co-led the research including conceptualization and design and made a considerable contribution to the manuscript, most notably to its introduction and conceptual framework sections.

Author 3 was responsible, with Author 1, for data analysis and preparation of the manuscript's data analysis and results sections.


Author 4 was involved in conceptualization, design and data collection of the study, and contributed to revising the manuscript.


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