

**Youth Transitions of Tertiary Education Students in Malta.**

**A Narrative Inquiry**

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at the University of Malta for the degree of Ph.D.

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L-Università  
ta' Malta

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## Declaration

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis is my original work, and has not been presented in fulfilment of other course requirements to the University of Malta or any other University.

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DATE

## Abstract

This study is an empirical investigation of negotiation of youth transitions of tertiary education students in Malta. It starts with an articulation of the changing concepts and metaphors used to explore how, in the last decades, the journey to adulthood has become extended, less sequential, delayed or postponed. While extensive literature on school-to-work transitions and on young people who are not in employment, education or training exist, research regarding young people in tertiary education has been neglected. The study aims to fill this lacuna and addresses how transitions of Maltese young people in tertiary education extend from the past to the present and into the future; how the personal and the social interact in the negotiation of these transitions; and how transitions are situated in the Maltese context. Taking a qualitative longitudinal approach, the research uses narrative inquiry to examine the stories of eight young men and eight young women who were interviewed three times over a period of four years. Three main themes emerged: continuity and change; the construction of identities through relationships; and the landscape of transitions of the Maltese islands. The study proposes a typology of young people transitioning through tertiary education in Malta: ‘traditionalists’; ‘pioneers’; ‘opportunists’; and ‘radicals’. The findings show that these four ideal-types are not static. The study thus makes a contribution to the evolving theory on youth transitions in Malta and beyond and concludes with some recommendations for further research.

*Keywords:* youth transitions, Malta, tertiary education, narrative, typology

*To my parents*

*My dearest mother, Giorgia*

*whose wise words will accompany me forever*

*My dearest father, Carmelo*

*who taught me how to love life and live it to the full*

*It is the running itself which is exhilarating, and, however tiring it may be, the track is a more enjoyable place than the finishing line. ... The arrival, the definite end to all choice, seems much more dull and considerably more frightening...*

*Bauman, 2000, p. 88*

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **Preamble**

Within the field of youth studies, the topic of youth transitions has consistently been regarded as a central focus in social research. Youth is a critical juncture in the life span, a phase that traditionally was seen as “preparation for adulthood, that is as a moment of transition in which individuals are meant to acquire, practice, and master the social capacities that are commonly associated with the adult status: maturity, responsibility, and independence” (Pitti, 2022, p. 2). Age is a significant factor in structuring the social situation of youth because it does not refer merely to how old a person is (Murdock and McCron, 1976). The concept of age, particularly childhood and youth, is a social construct that has changed across different historical periods and cultures. The modern understanding of childhood and youth as distinct phases of life emerged during the early modern period. This shift was influenced by changes in family structure, educational practices and societal attitudes. Such evolution reflects how societal attitudes and structures shape our perceptions and treatment of different age groups. The recognition and delineation of life stages are not inherent biological truths but rather the result of cultural and historical developments. Our current perceptions of age and the stages of life are constructed through social norms, practices and historical contexts, rather than being fixed, universal categories and these vary across time and space.

Social theorists, like Furlong and Cartmel (2007), proposed that in the last decades the transitional journey of young people from adolescence to adulthood has changed; while it was previously a linear and a homogeneous status passage, it progressively became an elongated and complex one. Transitions in late modernity are described as delayed, fragmented, reversible and extended (Biggart et al., 2008). The global economic crisis in 2008 experienced across Europe intensified the destandardization, uncertainty and risk in the journey of young people towards adulthood (Cairns et al., 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic further impacted the lives of young people. Krzaklewska et al. (2023) claimed that the pandemic was:

not just an external condition that shapes the lives, opportunities and choices of youth, but also as a liveable experience of young people, which may possibly be redefined as a generational one. It involves and shapes their practices, values, relationships, future plans, resilience and dissent.  
(p. 13)

The process of reaching adulthood has become more complex, uncertain and less stable.

There is extensive literature on youth transitions within the social sciences. However, research about transitions of Maltese young people in tertiary education is rather limited. Visanich (2017, 2020) carried out research with tertiary education students analysing the sociological implications of personal anxiety highlighting the educational journey, prospects in the labour market and the debt of students. She also researched the process of individualisation in the everyday life of Southern European millennials in higher education institutions. Cauchi and De Giovanni (2015) conducted a quantitative study about the

wellbeing of Maltese university students. Other studies carried out are those by Spiteri and De Giovanni (2010) which engage in research on young people in vocational education and training, Bradford and Clark (2011) and Clark (2012) focus on LGBT transitions and stigma, Pisani and Farrugia (2022) focus on asylum seekers and Mayo et al. (2022) study on education in Southern Europe. Even though there are studies discussing young people, the transitional journey of Maltese young people in tertiary education is not sufficiently researched and theorised.

Beyond the shores of the Maltese archipelago, the literature places the spotlight mainly on school-to-work transitions and focuses on young people portrayed as NEET, not in education, employment and training. Yet, the school-to-work transition is another transition; one of the many transitions that are typically experienced during youth. A wide range of transitions are involved in this significant life stage, including those related to family, relationships, peers, housing, the labour market, identity, and citizenship. Moreover, far too little attention has been given to the investigation of transitions of young people in tertiary education giving the impression that young people, once they embark on the tertiary education journey, have reached their goals and aspirations and have everything in place and under control, “the dominant narrative of university as necessary for the ‘good life’” (Jaremus et al., 2023, p. 11).

In this study, the transitions of a particular cohort were analysed: Maltese young people in tertiary education. Taking a qualitative longitudinal approach, I investigated the different types of youth transitions, the strategies employed and pathways travelled by these young people to negotiate their journey towards adulthood. I explored how social changes and transformations in Maltese society

shape the present and the future aspirations of young people. This chapter provides an introduction to this research where I discussed the background and the context of youth transitions. I presented the theoretical framework, the philosophical underpinnings of the chosen methodology, the research aims and questions, and finally my positionality.

### **Youth Transitions**

Youth is described as the best time of one's life (Abrams, 1959); a time of profound change, identity exploration, new possibilities and also, a time of instability (Arnett, 2000). Young people play a leading role in shaping their future and that of society around them. In this research, I considered the transitional journey of Maltese young people in tertiary education and investigated the impact and the influence of the family, culture and tradition, relationships among others. The background for my research was the process of social change in society, keeping in view Beck's (1992) description as 'risk society', Ransome's (2005) emphasis that affluence played a significant role in the changes happening in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the argument of Irwin (2005) and Castells (2010) that transformation is occurring in most spheres of social life. Constantly emerging information technologies are forging ground-breaking developments which are revolutionizing the way we live, family life, employment, relationships, leisure, religion, norms and values. The shift from Keynesian to neoliberal inspired economic policies has been marked by ongoing debates over the appropriate balance between state intervention and free-market mechanisms in addressing economic challenges. This has compelled young people "to decide, plan and negotiate their own life course transitions instead of following a traditional chronological order" (Visanich, 2020, p. 4). Neoliberalism has generated a liquid

society which according to Bauman (2000) has led to a constant state of change and uncertainty.

These societal changes and transformations have left their impact on youth transitions and are reflected in the metaphors used to describe the “social phenomena that mark the transitions towards adulthood” (Cuzzocrea, 2020, p. 62). Various metaphors of youth transitions have been developed, as recorded by Evans and Furlong (1997), which reflect the changing processes of youth transitions to adulthood, mapping the transitional journey of young people and tracing changing perspectives. In the 1960s, most young people were leaving compulsory education at the age of 16 and were either furthering their studies, or finding employment which provided training, like an apprenticeship, or getting semi or unskilled jobs. This is what Ashton and Field (1976) defined as extended careers, short-term careers and careerless occupations. The metaphor mostly in use especially in the area of labour market was *filling niches* (short transitions), “underpinned primarily by psychological assumptions, focusing on the development of vocational identity and how young people (or really young men) found their occupational ‘niches’” (Furlong et al., 2011, p. 358). People were either fitting into the gaps or predicting the gaps of the labour market. In the 1970s, the rise of unemployment gave way to complex transitions and therefore, the metaphors ‘*bridges*’, ‘*routes*’ and ‘*pathways*’ emerged to better explain the reality of youth transitions at the time. Unemployment continued to rise and the transitional journey in the 1980s became more complicated and elongated giving birth to a new way of thinking which focused on opportunity structures (Roberts, 1975). This situation yielded the metaphor ‘*trajectory*’. Factors like social class and cultural capital influenced the transitional journey. In the 1990s, the rise of

reflexive and post-structuralist perspectives brought more changes and young people became represented as increasingly proactive and agentic. The new metaphor revolving around the changes was '*navigation*', implying that young people are actively navigating their own journey. Notwithstanding the societal transformations and the changes in the metaphors used, Furlong and Cartmel (2007) argued that there are also "powerful continuities" (p. 10). The traditional institutions of the family, education and employment may look different but as also depicted in this study, are still very present and impact significantly the transitions of a number of participants.

In this thesis, the term 'negotiation' is used to capture the individualized dynamics involved in the transitional processes of young people. The concept of negotiation suggests the participation of two or more parties, capturing the complexity of the transitional journey. This reflects the interplay between young people and their interactions with parents, romantic partners, peers, student organizations, and others, emphasizing their role in managing various challenges. The term negotiation moves beyond the idea of simply fitting into gaps, following routes or pathways and navigating a pre-established path. It suggests instead an ongoing process, a fragmented and reversible journey. This perspective aligns closely with Dewey's theory of experience which emphasises two core principles: interaction and continuity. These concepts highlight how experiences are shaped by ongoing interactions with the social environment, forming a continuous and evolving journey rather than a fixed route.

Coles' (1995) three traditional inter-related transitions: the transition from education to employment; the housing transition and the domestic transition went through a process of change as a result of the societal transformations. Roberts

(1995) used a metaphor taken from the mode of transportation to describe Cole's youth transitions. He used the 'train' model claiming that transitions happen in a linear way, describing the route as usually predictable and the destination contingent on societal structures. However, the rapid changes and transformations happening in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have impacted the economic, social and political landscape in a way which have remodelled the journey of young people to adulthood. The transitional journey has become more individualised and more complex. Young people are staying longer in post-compulsory education, in training or apprenticeship schemes. They are provided with a number of different opportunities leading them to 'choice' biographies (Biggart et al., 2008). These changes are illustrated by Furlong and Cartmel (2007) through the modification of the journey, from a train journey to a private car journey, with the claim that many young people are no longer travelling in a group, depending on their class, gender, and ethnicity. Along the years, young people have acquired more autonomy and freedom. Taking decisions has become an individualised task depicting choice of route and destination as if in total control of young people. Instead of travelling with others, young people may choose to travel on their own, keeping contact virtually. However, one has to keep in mind that not all young people are using the same type of car: some are travelling in second hand cheap cars while others are travelling in luxurious and expensive cars; some own the car, others are borrowing their parents' car or the car was bought for them by their parents. Therefore, even though young people are on the same journey, their reality is different. The increase in choice and the various opportunities presented to young people makes the transitional journey look different, disrupted or maybe delayed; no longer a single-step transition.

In contemporary societies researchers speak about five transitions, referred to as the “‘milestones of adulthood: school completion, assumption of work roles, leaving the parental home, partnership or marriage, and having children” (Willimson and Côté, 2022, p. 68). The new ways of the processes of transition have been described by Walther (2006) as ‘yo-yo’ transitions. Young people move between employment and training, change jobs in accordance with their preferences, combining education with employment and employment with training. Transitions are no longer just diversified and prolonged; they are reversible and fragmented with uncertain outcomes. Young people move back and forth from being in education to joining the labour market; from moving away to moving back to their parental home, from dependence to independence. To this end, Cuzzocrea (2020) coined the term ‘pinball youth’ describing the young person bouncing with no point of arrival or completion; a metaphor which captures the “uncertainty experienced by young people in the construction of their biographies ... captures these intensifying patterns of mobility and precarity in youth labour markets” (Guerrero Puerta, 2023, p. 9).

### **Research Objectives**

The overarching purpose of this qualitative longitudinal study is to explore how Maltese young people in tertiary education negotiate their transitional journey to adulthood. The focus is on the narratives constructed by the research participants. Patterns of continuity and change, critical moments and turning points emerged from the stories of these Maltese young people depict their transitional journey. One of the aims of this study is to explore the various ways in which the young participants navigated their transition to adulthood.

It also addresses the research gap in the existing literature with regards to youth transitions in the Maltese context and in tertiary education more specifically. This research examines youth transitions in view of the changes occurring within the family structure, in education and within the labour market against the backdrop of a small island state, Malta, with its traditions and culture.

### **Research Agenda and Approach**

This study is guided by three research questions:

- How do transitions of Maltese young people in tertiary education extend from the past to the present and into the future highlighting both continuity and change?
- How do the personal and the social interact in the negotiation of youth transitions to adulthood of Maltese young people in tertiary education?
- How are these stories of youth transitions to adulthood situated in a Maltese context?

Narrative inquiry was the methodology chosen to investigate these research questions. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that narrative inquiry is an umbrella term that captures personal and human dimensions of experience over time, and takes account of the relationship between individual experiences and cultural context. Narrative inquiry analyses individual experiences regarding a particular phenomenon; in this study, the phenomenon was the negotiation of transitions of sixteen Maltese young people in tertiary education on their way to adulthood.

Grounded in the belief that reality is socially constructed, the constructivist paradigm is appropriate for this study as the focus is to understand

and interpret lived experiences. Gardner et al. (2007) argued that “this particular approach facilitates a researcher’s understanding of how people negotiate and manipulate social structures; how a shared reality is created and how meaning is developed through the social interactions with others within defined contexts” (p. 67). This paradigm employs qualitative research methods such as interviews which give researchers the opportunity to engage closely with participants and co-create their stories. Research participants construct their own realities through storytelling and the stories in turn become objects of study and interpretation. The focus is on how young people make sense of events and actions in their lives. The ontological approach adopted in this research is relativist; multiple realities are constructed as the research participants narrate their experiences. The epistemological underpinning is social constructionism, where meaning is not discovered but constructed: “different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon” (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). The relativist ontology and the social constructionist epistemology are compatible and sit well with the chosen methodology, narrative inquiry.

The narratives of the research participants were investigated through the three-dimensional space narrative structure framework. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) developed Dewey’s (1938) theory of experience which is based on two concepts: continuity and interaction. They broadened his theory and identified three different dimensions: the temporal dimension, which draws attention to the relationship between past, present and future life events; the personal and social dimension, which emphasizes the relational aspect; and the place and space dimension, which highlights “the specific concrete, physical and topological

boundaries of place where the inquiry and events take place” (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006, p. 480).

This research relied on data collected through a qualitative longitudinal approach. Longitudinal studies are useful to investigate in real time the interplay of the different methods employed by the participants to negotiate their transitional journey. Three cycle interviews were conducted with the same participants over a span of four years. Sixteen young people, eight males and eight females, took part in this study. To be eligible, participants had to be Maltese citizens and registered as freshers, that is, in their first year of studies, at the University of Malta during the first cycle interview. The qualitative longitudinal approach gave me the opportunity,

to track the same people, recording what they hope for, what they value and the nature of the circumstances they face continuously across their lives. The narratives they build gives us insights into how they make sense of the circumstances, how they see the future for themselves, their families and our society and the strategies they use to make their lives. (Wyn, 2020, p. 3)

This gave me the opportunity to walk part of the journey alongside the participants. I was close enough to observe and note their decisions and choices as they moved through their transitional journey towards adulthood.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing the participants to construct their own story. The analysis followed Polkinghorne (1995), who made an important distinction between narrative analysis and analysis of narratives, claiming that the two approaches could be used separately or in combination. I chose both and started with narrative analysis. Taking the

narrative cognition method, I restoried the experiences narrated to me into one story for each participant, incorporating the three dimensions: temporality, sociality and place and presented sixteen stories.

Following the restorying process, taking the paradigmatic approach, I engaged in the analysis of the narratives to identify emergent themes.

Both approaches, the narrative cognition and the paradigmatic led me to identify a typology and to classify four different ideal-types of the different ways Maltese young people in tertiary education negotiate their transitional journey.

### **Significance of the Study**

Despite the rapid societal changes and their influence on the life course of contemporary young people, the emergent themes in this research demonstrate the significant role played by family and tradition, bringing together change and continuity. The narratives constructed by the participants were explored and investigated against the backdrop of the micro-state dynamics of Maltese society, a small island state, strategically situated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, immersed in tradition, influenced by the Catholic Church and with strong family-oriented principles and values (Azzopardi, 2017; Mitchell, 2002). What is distinct about this study is the fact that the transitional journey under investigation is that of Maltese young people in tertiary education, a cohort which is not sufficiently researched both locally and internationally. The participants shared their experiences and gave unprecedented insight into the transitional journey of Maltese young people in tertiary education and their destination, thus shedding light on the theoretical conceptualisation of different types of youth transitions. The creation of a model on how Maltese young people negotiate their transitional

journey while in tertiary education provides a theoretical contribution as this model may be applicable to youth transitions beyond the shores of Malta.

Another contribution of this research is the fact that data has been collected through storytelling, which is a “powerful means by which to connect with our social, scientific, and public audiences” (Tilleczek, 2014, p. 20). Through the use of narrative inquiry, this research focused on getting to know the stories of the young participants which indeed led me, as the researcher of the study, to get to know the individuals, their experiences and their everyday lives. Through storytelling, the participants depicted how they negotiated the tension of continuity and change, between living the past, the present and their aspirations for the future, between who they are today and who they are becoming. This longitudinal qualitative research went beyond a single interview with each participant but, over a period of four years, engaged in the powerful use of narratives, which are the best approach to interpret “lived time” (Bruner, 2004, p. 692). Narrative inquiry thus provided the opportunity not only to get to know the participants but it also afforded an “insight into the social world that influences individual lives” (Tilleczek, 2014, p. 19). The construction of the stories of the participants, through narrative analysis let the “social actors interpret the world, and their place within it” (Lawler, 2002, p. 242). The narrative approach led me to discover how Maltese young people in tertiary education negotiated their journey towards adulthood.

Narrative analysis could influence future research, especially research in the field of youth studies because it holds the experiences of the young people without letting them disintegrate. The feasibility of the use of storytelling in future research in youth studies lies in the fact that “it opens the field to deeper

description of the abundance of experience and identity processes by providing ways to speak with young people who express experiences and voices” (Tilleczek, 2014, p. 20).

### **Positionality: My Story**

The personal interest in the transitional journey of Maltese young people undoubtedly draws from the many years I have spent working with young people and my current employment at the University of Malta as Deputy Registrar responsible for Student Support Services. Being with young people, sharing their joys and misfortunes, attempting to support them in deciphering and unravelling their journey, has always been a priority for me. Finding myself working at the University of Malta, in the area of support services which are offered to students, helped me become more cognizant of the reality of students pursuing studies at tertiary level and motivated me to focus my efforts on young people in their tertiary education journey. Registering for a course of studies at the university does not mean that one’s life is in order and everything is in place. A number of young people registered at the university need to be assisted, guided and supported academically and also holistically. The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a critical moment for many people. It played a significant role in uncovering the hidden reality of so many students.

Today, I apprehend more and more that my journey to adulthood was a significant phase in my life course; a time when, like all young people my age, I was faced with major decisions. My transitional journey was not a linear one. When I completed compulsory education, I joined the labour market and transitioned from one job to the other. After a couple of years, I went back into

education, and for some time I was studying while in employment. I remember clearly that when at crossroads, during critical moments, I was accompanied by a number of role models whose mentorship saw me through this transitional phase. These role models left a strong impact on me and my life course, instilling in me a constant desire to work with young people. Even before I reached adulthood, to this very day, most of my time has been spent accompanying young people in different environments and situations. I am privileged that when I joined the labour market, I found myself working with tertiary students. The landscape had shifted but I remained surrounded by young people. Therefore, when I took the decision to further my studies, the choice of the research area was very easy to determine: young people and their transitional journey.

### **Organisation of the Thesis**

In Chapter One, the Introduction, an overview of the entire thesis is given. The existing literature regarding young people and their transitional journey is reviewed and discussed in Chapter Two. Since the study was undertaken in Malta, in Chapter Three, the literature continues to be reviewed but I delve deeper into the aspects and characteristics of Maltese society and how this may have influenced the transitional journey of Maltese young people in tertiary education. The methodology is discussed in Chapter Four, where I present the method used to collect data, the data analysis strategy, the theoretical framework and ethical considerations. In Chapter Five, I restory all the narratives constructed by the research participants during the three cycle interviews, presenting the stories of sixteen research participants. Chapter Six focuses on the findings and the discussion of the various categories, patterns and themes that emerged from

the narratives of the participants. In the final chapter, Chapter 7, I propose a typology of youth transitions of tertiary education students in Malta, the implications for research on youth transitions, the limitations and strengths of the study and future recommendations.

## **Conclusion**

This study focuses on the transitional journey to adulthood of Maltese young people in tertiary education. Within this research, the journey is tightly framed: the context is the archipelago of the Maltese islands and the specific cohort of participants are young people in tertiary education. Therefore, the distinctive contribution of this study is to the knowledge on youth transitions, in that its focus is on young people going through tertiary education in the small island context of Malta.

Consequently, in the following two chapters I investigate the existing literature on youth transitions. While in Chapter Two I explore the main theories and the debates in the field of youth studies, focusing especially on youth transitions, in Chapter Three I delve deeply into particular aspects of Maltese society and its influence on youth transitions.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to map out the transitions of Maltese young people in tertiary education and to investigate how they negotiated their transitional journey to adulthood. The passage from youth to adulthood is considered as a landmark in the life course of young people; it is about the attainment of independence, adult status and “the possibility to be recognized as mature, autonomous, responsible, and complete subjects by the communities we belong to” (Pitti, 2022, p. 2). Research has highlighted the various structural shifts in institutions such as the family, education and the labour market young people face in late modernity (Bynner, 2005; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). France (2007) argued about the “broadening of the simple notion of the ‘school-to-work transition’ to one of ‘transitions to adulthood’” emphasising the impact of social change.

This chapter contextualises and delves into the main theories of youth transitions. It engages with debates and developments in the area of youth studies generally and more specifically in the area of youth transitions. Existing literature was explored investigating social changes that produce unprecedented opportunities, but also heighten risks, differentially distributed across social groups. In recent years, the life course of youth has become fragmented and more complex. Today young people no longer follow a predetermined linear pattern after they finish compulsory education. They are presented with a number of choices that at times generate anxiety and uncertainty. The increase in

choice has led to changing patterns in the biographies of young people which result in the increase of risk taking (Beck, 1992).

There is a plethora of research that deals mainly with school-to-work transitions, focusing on young people depicted as NEET, not in education, employment or training. However, this set of transitions is just one of many other youth transitions in different areas like family, relationships, friendships, housing and the labour market. Moreover, there is a relatively small amount of literature on tertiary education transitions despite the large volume of literature on youth transitions in general. This chapter will address the literature on youth transitions and where possible consider the literature debate around youth transitions in tertiary education.

In this chapter I therefore discuss the concepts of youth and youth transitions and their evolution along the years as a result of societal changes and transformations. I also analyse shifts within the family structure, in education and in the labour market and explore the impact, among others of the digital revolution, the 2008 economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Such changes present a rethinking of youth transitions and the different ways young people negotiate their transitional journey to adulthood.

### ***Literature Search***

In preparation for this study, I researched and read extensively through relevant studies and literature relating to youth and youth transitions. The field of youth studies has been thoroughly researched. I started off by consulting the resources through the online facilities at the University of Malta. Then I moved on to search engines and databases accessed through the University, mainly Hydi, JSTOR, Sage, EBSCO. Hydi provides simple, one-stop searches for books

and e-books, articles and digital media. I also accessed ResearchGate, Google Scholar and Open Access to international dissertations. *The Journal of Youth Studies* was one of the journals that accompanied me throughout my research. Through manual search of bibliographies and reference lists I retrieved articles, books and sources that were of great benefit during my research. Within the Maltese context, my search was mainly done at the Melitensia Special Collections at the University of Malta. I also consulted articles published in daily newspapers.

### **The Concept of Youth**

The concept of youth is anchored within multiple definitions and perspectives, displaying ambivalence and complexity. Youth is a social construct with different connotations in different eras and spaces. It cannot be tied to specific age ranges, is broader than adolescence and covers a more protracted time span (Furlong, 2013). Historians referred to the period between 1890-1920 as the age of adolescence and during this time “lawmakers enacted a great deal of compulsory legislation” (Santrock, 2016, p. 7) aimed at young people especially in America. Economic development flourished and the number of adolescents receiving education increased.

Adolescence is defined differently in different places. Whereas in some parts of the world an eighteen-year-old is considered an adolescent, still living at home and dependent on parents, young people of the same age in other countries have different duties and responsibilities. White et al. (2017, p. 10) described youth as a “relational concept, ... as a state of becoming”. Cultural, social and political processes influence the development of the young person (Williamson,

2002). In a number of countries, youth is a period of semi-dependence where young people are no longer fully dependent but not yet independent. Jones and Wallace (1992, p. 154) coined the term ‘quasi-citizenship’ and contended that “if young people are to gain any sense of the obligations of citizenship in our society, they must be treated as citizens and granted rights as citizens”.

### ***Changing Youth: History and Development***

Debate surrounding the nature of youth has been going on since early history. Both Plato and Aristotle commented about young people claiming that reasoning is not found in children but emerges in youth. Young people have always been considered to have the ability to choose and their self-determination is seen as their hallmark of maturity. Talburt and Lesco (2012) identified three historical movements that had an impact on the conceptualisation of young people in society: Pastoral Power (1880-1890), the time when Stanley Hall’s (1904) metaphor of youth portrayed adolescence as a time of storm and stress; Teenage Markets (1950-1960), the time when youth was described as the best years of a person’s life (Abrams, 1959); and Youth Sub-Cultures (1970-1980), the time when youth were described as disruptive. The latter continued to evolve and change leaving their impact on the conceptualisation of youth and identity formation. Societal transformations and subcultures intersected and at a certain point “subcultures came to be strongly related to digital media” (Johansson, 2017, p. 517). The arrival of the internet and the digital revolution caused a major change in youth subcultures. Young people started spending most of their time behind a screen surfing the net.

Stanley Hall (1904) built on Darwin’s theory of evolution and described the adolescence period as a time of ‘storm and stress’. Even though his

ideological position is not given too much credit nowadays, his arguments about the psychological and emotional transition to adulthood were strongly anchored within the discourse on youth (France, 2000). Stanley Hall's perception of adolescence was that of a chaotic time charged with conflict and mood swings, pessimism and despondency. This was to a lesser extent reflected in the psychosocial development theory of Erikson (1968) where he argued that teenagers and young adults have to negotiate between identity vs role confusion and at a later stage between intimacy vs isolation where the importance of close relationships is emphasised. Erikson's psychological discourse, as opposed to Stanley Hall, gave a more positive view of adolescence. The discipline of psychology has been very central to the creation of a negative discourse about adolescence. Risk behaviour was explained as a consequence of immature prefrontal cortex and connectivity. By doing this, psychology located certain characteristics of youth, such as risk, lying within the nature of the developmental changes (Steinberg, 2008).

Santrock (2016), like Ariés (1960), claimed that the construct of youth did not exist before the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The effects of industrialisation and urbanisation led to major changes. Gillis, (1981) defined modernisation "as a uniform process of change from agrarian to industrial society" (p. 214) which brought with it changes in the experience of the life-cycle. As a result, the "distinct state of life between childhood and adulthood" (Gillis, 1981, p. 214) was created. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Arnett (2000, p. 469) proposed a theory of development and spoke about a new, universal life stage, where "emerging adulthood exists only in cultures that allow young people a prolonged period of independent role exploration during the late teens and twenties". He coined the term 'emerging adulthood', arguing for a

new stage in the life of young people, a phase where young people are no longer adolescents, but are not yet adults. Arnett (2006) spoke about demographic changes, new opportunities for young people to work, travel and study, postponement of commitments and described work as identity based rather than a way to earn money. Both Gillis (1981) and Arnett (2004) described this stage as a distinct developmental period. Young people going through this liminal stage of 'emerging adulthood' release themselves from childhood dependency and start seeking and exploring new opportunities. At this stage, young people do not see themselves as adults, yet start feeling confident to take decisions and long-term commitments. This time is characterized by exploration and uncertainty.

A number of researchers (Hendry and Kloep, 2010; Côté, 2014) have challenged the understanding of youth as a distinct developmental stage as claimed by Arnett (2004). Hendry and Kloep (2010) argued that Arnett (2004) failed to clarify what this stage is really about, where it starts and where it finishes. A developmental stage can only be termed as such if it is confirmed that "everyone in a given society experiences a given set of circumstances" (Côté, 2014, p. 181). Côté's claim was somewhat extreme. It is impossible for *everyone* to experience the same set of circumstances. Arnett and Tanner (2011) maintained that it is sufficient that so many young people in several different countries experience and go through the same developmental stages for adolescence to be designated as a distinct phase between childhood and adulthood. This does not mean that the same experiences impact young people in the same way. It is a different journey for every young person, with various low and high points, diverse fateful moments (Giddens, 1991) and turning points. They go through profound adjustments and are surrounded with contrasting

realities, various perspectives and different priorities. At this stage, young individuals are at a crossroads in their existence. Heinz (2009) argued that it is impossible to clearly identify the youth period. Across and even within the European Union, the interpretation of youth varies considerably. Different ages of different responsibilities in different countries creates mixed conceptions about youth and their obligations (Williamson, 2002).

Allen (1968, p. 321) claimed that “it is not the relations between ages that create change or stability in society, but change in society which explains relations between different ages”. As discussed previously, the choices and opportunities young people are faced with are not determined solely by age but by the context of time and place as well as structural variables like class, gender and ethnicity. The micro environment, such as the family and the neighbourhood, and the macro, such as the individual’s land of birth and residence, play a pivotal role in the journey of young people.

### **Youth Transitions**

Given the challenges with legal, chronological and psychological definitions of adolescence and youth, the concept of transition provides a useful conceptualisation of this status. ‘Youth as transition’ is a concept that views youth as a significant phase of change and development, bridging childhood and adulthood. This period of transition is marked by developmental changes, social roles shifts, identity construction and transformation, increased autonomy, educational and career decisions and changing societal expectations. Human beings, throughout their lives, go through various transitions. The term transition implies transformation and movement, a shift from one stage of life to another, or

a change from one status to another. Such shifts imply 'leaving' and 'arrival', a sense of becoming and a sense of destination, from being young to becoming older. Transitions are like a piece of mosaic: different colours, different shapes, different sizes; not all smooth and linear, some are unpredictable, elongated and fragmented. They are not one-off events, may consist of a series of events and do not necessarily happen in a chronological order. In one's life course, there are a number of transitions happening at the same time but in different sectors: education, labour market, family, housing, relationships among others. Transitions are described as "long-term *processes* that result in a qualitative re-organization of both inner life and external behaviour" (Cowan, 1991, p. 5).

The area of youth transitions has been extensively researched and disputed and it is a "core subject-matter for analysis" (Roberts, 2003, p. 486). Considerable significance has been attributed to the processes of youth transitions, as they are regarded as pivotal junctures in the life course. Youth is a time of accentuated change, when young people are going through a very important stage in their lives because they are in the process of becoming (Allatt, 1997). The transitional journey is characterized by a number of choices, links and destinations, all interwoven into different life domains, among others: committing to an intimate relationship, joining the labour market, completing a course of studies and starting a family.

According to Vickerstaff (2001), early authors argued that transitions in the 1950s and in the 1960s were 'single-step'; a single-step transition directly from school to work. Once young people joined the labour market, their aim was then to "leave home, achieve some state of financial independence, marry and have children in a relatively short period of time" (Goodwin and O'Connor,

2007). An important factor was the vibrancy of the labour market which made unemployment a relatively uncommon experience. It was unusual for young people to take a career break, change direction, move between jobs or to return to education once in employment. Notwithstanding this, Vickerstaff (2001) argued that transitions in the 1950s and the 1960s were not always straightforward and unproblematic and she suggested that:

the range of choices may have been different, leading to a greater homogenisation of possible pathways and individuals may have had less expectation of being able to design their own trail but the individuals still had to negotiate and manage their own trajectory, whether it was of their own choosing or not. (p. 3)

Coles (1995) focused on three different types of ‘traditional transitions’: the school to work transitions, when an individual completes compulsory education and secures full-time paid employment; family transitions, the move from the family of origin to the family of destination, and housing transitions, from dependent to independent living. Transitions were mainly associated with a predicted linear progression (Wyn, Lantz, and Harris, 2012; Cuervo and Wyn, 2014) and described as smooth. Two decades ago, Roberts (1995) viewed the journey of youth transitions through the metaphor of a train journey. He argued that young individuals join train journeys bound to various occupational destinations which are largely determined by educational attainment, social class and gender. The journey was predictable and linear and once it started, the opportunities to change destination were narrow. The time of departure, the route and the arrival of a train journey were pre-planned and determined by others. The

only opportunity afforded the passenger was to join the already planned route. One could upgrade the class of the ticket before the commencement of the journey or one could get off the train before reaching its destination but this is not always easy or possible.

The following section discusses the processes associated with social and economic modernisation and how these changes impacted the life course of young people and transformed their transitional journey to adulthood. Metaphorically speaking, the railway journey (Roberts, 1995) which offered very limited or no opportunity to switch destinations has been replaced by a vehicle. The car journey (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) gives more freedom to the driver replacing the standard biography with an individualised ‘choice biography’.

### **Societal Changes and Transformations**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, according to Ransome (2005), affluence was one of the key facilitators that heralded incredible progress and innovation. These social changes “transformed the way we think, we produce, we consume, we trade, we manage, we communicate, we live, we die, we make war and we make love” (Castells, 2010, p. 1). People are living in a society that is continuously being transformed. Changes happen in family structures, in relationships, in religion, in norms and values. In the last twenty years, across most spheres of social life, the world witnessed “important changes in patterns of fertility, increasing childlessness, significant increases in divorce, a growing proportion of single parent households, cohabiting partnerships and independent living ... increase in women’s employment” (Irwin, 2005, p. 14). The institutions of welfare, employment and family went through a variety of structural shifts. Contemporary

society moved away from the industrial society as depicted by early sociologists such as Marx, Weber and Durkheim. The latter (1895) argued that these structural changes affected the relationship between society and individuals. Change became “the most important fact of life today” (Nolan and Lenski 2011, p. xiii) and the only constant thing. Bauman (2000) argued that “change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty” (p. viii).

While social change is universal, its nature and speed differ from one society to the other. Social change is often characterized by a chain-reaction sequence; changes that lead to other changes which may influence the lifestyle of people and society as a whole. Outlining these changes highlights the process of modernisation and its impact on the transitional journey of young people.

### ***The Process of Change***

The process of social change shapes and conditions social action and the experiences of human beings around the world and one cannot research youth transitions divorced from the transformations happening around us. The shift from Keynesian to neoliberal inspired policies reflects a move from government-centred economic management to a market-oriented approach, significantly influencing global economic structures and policies. This brought about liberalization trends not only in the West (Harvey, 2005), but also in other continents. The market liberalisation has contributed to the relaxation of barriers to international investment, the free flow of capital between nations through the reduction of policies such as tariffs and trade laws and the attraction of foreign investors. Neoliberalism with its political and economic philosophy that emphasizes the efficiency of free markets, minimal government intervention, and the importance of individual liberty and entrepreneurship has “informed and

become embedded in the various transformations occurring in contemporary youth labour market” (Burrows, 2013, p. 4). The growth of international links and networks, the intensification of communication, the scientific and technological innovations led to a decrease in global distance and merged societies and economies. The impact of the process of globalization has not only been felt in the domain of economics with the expansion of free trade and competition in the global market, but also on an individual level. We are witnessing an “overall social change whereby the local and the global are mutually implicated” (Vandenberghe, 2015, p. 130). What happens locally is shaped and influenced by what is happening many miles away (Giddens, 1990). Localisation of the global and the globalisation of the local can be described as “the twin processes of macro-localisation and micro-globalisation. Macro-localisation involves expanding the boundaries as well as making some local ideas, practices and institutions global ... Micro-globalisation involves incorporating certain global processes into the local setting” (Khondker, 2005, p. 186).

Globalization has influenced contemporary young people: shaping their experiences and impacting their transitional journey. New opportunities especially in education and in the labour market diversified their career paths. However, it also offered challenges and heightened risk, threatening traditional norms and values. Contemporary young people, as they continue negotiating their transitional journey, need to adapt to the rapidly changing social and economic environment.

### ***Changes: Stepping Stones or Stumbling Blocks***

The last twenty years have witnessed an ongoing wave of digital transformation which developed and evolved at a staggering pace, leaving its

impact on neoliberal economies. The information revolution, referred to as the digital revolution, left a huge societal impact and affected most aspects of life and work. It led to major developments in technical innovation and in the technology of Artificial Intelligence (AI) which poses both opportunities and challenges within different domains: government and public sector, business and management, and science and technology. The recent advancements in AI, cloud integration, cybersecurity and augmented reality marked an exceptional leap in technology.

Information Technology and AI have become today's new reality and an indispensable tool of a rapidly changing world, especially with the generation born at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the so-called Generation Z. This generation does not know a time without the internet or an electronic device. Youth born in this era are called digital natives and are the most connected generation ever (Prensky, 2001). The digital revolution offers multiple benefits to young people. The various social media platforms, like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, X, YouTube, WeChat make it possible for young people to create, exchange information and reach out to others virtually, especially when they find it difficult to do so in real life. Sometimes it is easier to talk behind a screen; participation in the virtual world requires less effort than in the real one. Virtual reality serves as an encouragement to young persons to retreat from their normal life and live virtually instead. It is the generation of virtual assistants; one only has to utter 'Hey Siri' or 'Alexa' to have the air conditioner switched on and to listen to their favourite artist singing the latest melody. Gen Z do not need to learn and adjust to this new reality since they have been born into it. Hromada (2019) argued that the focus is on what

young people can do and what their role should be “in helping society to come to terms, adjust, master and benefit from the opportunities provided by AI” (p. 102). Communication technology devices became essential for them and this transformed the patterns of their daily lives. Balardini (2008) called this generation neither technophile nor technophobe, but technoculture. Most things are readily available on the World Wide Web. Technological communication devices, such as mobile phones and laptops, proved to be useful especially because they provide access to information easily and more efficiently. Technology equips young people with a tool to study, work, communicate or spend time in leisure. It helps to disseminate information, talk with friends and plan meeting points, read e-zines, play games, check the time, use the alarm clock, the organizer and an address book, publish photos, watch the latest movie or download the latest music, listen to the radio, do online shopping, chat with friends or ‘meet’ new people and find a partner. This can be done not only from a computer or a smart phone but also, now, a smart watch. Almost everything is only a click away.

The revolution in digitalisation brought with it developments and innovations which are reshaping the future world of work. There is an increase in automation of the production process like robotics and smart production systems. This has an impact on the process of work itself and thus on the level of employment. It plays a significant role in the transformation of jobs and in the quantity and quality of work available. The restructuring of companies and institutions, stimulated by information technology and global competition, adds to the changes in the nature of work (OECD, 2019). A new system of employment requires a new labour force (European Commission, 2018). Castells (2009, p.

282) contends that “the new social and economic organization based on information technologies aims at decentralizing management, individualising work, and customizing markets, thereby segmenting work and fragmenting societies”. Restructuring the area of employment brings unique challenges and opportunities for young individuals and for the future of work. It also leads to a pronounced instability and insecurity for those joining the labour market (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Due to the labour market liberalisation and the increase of competitive pressure there is “a substantial increase in precarious and non-standard employment among young people entering the labour market” (Stuth and Jahn, 2020, p. 702). Besides, contemporary young people are faced with different patterns of employment structures and job stability; “the place of employment feels like a camping site which one visits for just a few days” (Bauman, 2000, p. 149). The introduction of remote working has allowed employees to move outside the boundaries of an office, making it possible to work from home and indeed, anywhere else around the world. It enhanced flexibility at work but also blurred the boundaries between work and life (Palumbo et al., 2022). Young people no longer search for a job or a career that will see them through their life course till retirement age. According to Bauman (2000) work lost its “centrality... no longer offer the secure axis around which to fix self-definitions, identities and life-projects” (p. 139). Contemporary young people are more interested in flexibility, having contracts which are short-term, or rolling contracts or no contracts at all. Beck (2000) argues that this ‘nomadic multi-activity’ and the birth of non-standard employment are characteristics of the risk society and associated with the process of individualisation.

An important factor in this process of change was the global financial crisis of 2008 which led the world into the Great Recession. The resulting economic weakness had and still has a pervasive impact on the world economy, particularly because of the elevated levels of the long-term unemployment rate across almost the whole world. Member states of the European Union have been impacted differently. For instance, the bearing of this financial crisis on young people of the European Union can be seen especially in Southern Europe where the crisis slowed growth and reduced tax revenues and consequently increased the Government debt. Statistics show that the level of unemployment, due to this financial crisis has weakened the economy (Eurostat, 2014). The divide between rich and poor countries continues to grow. In rich countries, especially in Northern Europe, salaries are higher and taxes are lower. Consequently, there is less debt, lower unemployment, and more competitiveness (Esposito, 2014). Economies suffer as a result of a plethora of factors, ranging from reduced tax income on account of people saving rather than spending, to the pension costs arising from ageing populations, all of which produces and reinforces a spirit of pessimism (European Commission, 2019).

A moment of crisis in these last years was the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic which shook the political, social, economic and financial structures all over the world. Lockdown and self-isolation to contain the virus placed restrictions on businesses, a number of which had to close down because they were unable to pay their employees (Eurostat, 2020a). Sectors, such as tourism and travel-related industries, hotels, restaurants, and transportation were affected more directly than others (OECD, 2020). It is envisaged that the effects of the pandemic in the economy will continue for a number of years to come

(Menickella, 2020). Significant interruptions in the lives of young people, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic increased the atmosphere of uncertainty and unpredictability (Fua et al., 2020). The disruption in the education system and the shift to online platforms, even though young people are generally very connected digitally, created an atmosphere of frustration, which was compounded because a number of young people may not have a regular and affordable internet connection (UNFPA, 2020). The uncertainty surrounding examinations and the obtaining of qualifications and the decrease in the possibilities of finding jobs because of the impact of the pandemic on the economy added to the anxiety of young people. These anxieties, frustrations and uncertainties created as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to make the journey of young people more elongated and fragmented and difficult to negotiate,

The Covid-19 pandemic has become an embedded feature of their youth experience, with mostly negative consequences in: the quality of education; labour market precarity; worsened mental health; the quality and bonding of personal relationships; the grinding to a halt of personal and sometimes social mobility; the occurrence of violence behind closed doors; and diminished democratic participation and representation.

(Krzaklewska et al., 2023, p. 13)

Unemployment remains one of the major concerns across Europe. Following the financial crisis in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic, the rate of unemployment increased in all EU member states and young people were severely hit. The rate of youth unemployment peaked at 24.4% in 2013 (Eurostat, 2020a) and this made the transition into the labour market more difficult for young people. During the COVID-19 pandemic, employment statistics showed a

decline in employment of 2.2% for men and 1.5% for women (Botelho and Neves, 2021). To fight unemployment, governments are, among other initiatives, creating programmes to stimulate small businesses. This makes it possible for a number of young people to exercise agency, by bringing out their entrepreneurial qualities and converting the available resources into new prospects.

Significant shifts in contemporary social and cultural structures left profound implications on family formation (Azzopardi, 2014; Abela, 2011). The traditional model of the family prioritise long-term marital commitment and gender roles (males as the providers and females as the caregivers). However, contemporary family structures have become increasingly prevalent in modern times. These include single-parent families, blended parents where step-parents and step-siblings play central roles, and same-sex parent families, all reflecting the global trends that challenge traditional norms of family formation (Vella and Cassar, 2022). Esping-Andersen (2009) described these changes as a ‘revolution’ in social life, highlighting new patterns of family formation. These changes are having an impact on society, personal and public lives, domestic arrangements and work places. Gerson (2010) claimed that the new generation is forging new patterns of family life. At the same time, the fact that young people are choosing to remain at the parental house for longer is putting the family back on the agenda and “family support, resources and contact, which have arguably always been important, are now more important than ever” (Wyn, Lantz and Harris, 2012, p. 4).

The changes in family structure and family life are intertwined with the transformation of the status of women in society. The market liberalisation and various neoliberal policies contributed to women’s empowerment, increasing the

participation of women in furthering their studies (Dalingwater, 2018) and having their own career. Alongside this, there is an evident change in attitude to gender roles and the domestic division of labour (Crompton, 2002). In most industrialised countries, women are considered as equal to men and entitled to equal rights. On a political level, in Northern European countries like Finland and Norway, female leadership is being increasingly encouraged and accepted. According to the gender index by the EU's centre on gender equality (Gender Equality Index, 2020) parliaments in Sweden, Finland, Belgium, Spain, Portugal and Austria have reached gender balance and are made up of at least 40% of male and female gender. On the other hand, parliaments in Croatia, Malta and Hungary have less than 20% female members. This shows that in a number of Southern European countries women still lag behind in gender equality. In fact, the term 'horizontal segregation' has been coined to show that even though female participation has increased, male participation is still higher. In Northern European countries, women are gaining legal parity also at the place of work; they are being offered jobs that require initiative, skill and education. Paid work for women has changed their role and their power within the structure of the family. They became more independent and started the journey of individualisation. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) capture the female reality accurately when stating that:

Individualisation means that men and women are released from the gender roles prescribed by industrial society for life in the nuclear family. At the same time, and this aggravates the situation, they find themselves forced, under pain of material disadvantage, to build up a life of their own by way

of the labour market, training and mobility, and if need be to pursue this life at the cost of their commitment to family, friends and relatives. (p.6)

This new reality puts a lot of pressure on young women because most of the daily family burdens and chores are still carried out by them especially when it comes to child rearing and the responsibilities of the household (Hochschild and Machung, 2003). This results in gender underrepresentation in the labour market and in social and political life. The availability of childcare facilities is one of the key factors that determines whether women continue working after maternity leave. Stereotypical gender roles, especially in the Southern part of Europe, are blatant. As mentioned above, gender inequality prevails in a number of European countries (European Commission, 2011). Unfortunately, problems of discrimination, oppression, abuse of women and domestic violence remain. The situation of women is complex and paradoxical: they have various opportunities and thus more choice but they are also experiencing more uncertainty and anxiety. A recent study conducted by Delgado-Herrera, Aceves-Go´mez and Reyes-Aguilar (2024) argued that the pressure on women “can be overwhelming, ...[and] women may still face adverse mental health effects, including stress, anxiety, and reduced self-efficacy” (p. 26).

Exploring these societal changes and transformations leads to a better understanding of the interplay between the changes in society and the formation of youth. This accentuates the impact such changes have on the lives of young people.

### **Youth in Late Modernity**

The late modern era as argued by various sociologists, is characterized by rapid social and economic changes (Giddens, 1990) and risk (Beck, 1992). Bauman (2000) described this time as the time of “‘interregnum’ – where the old ways of doing things no longer work, the old learned or inherited modes of life are no longer suitable for the current *condition humana*” (p. vii). Contemporary young people, across Europe, are growing up against this backdrop of enormous changes in policies, in the labour market, in education, in technology and digitalization, in the secularization of morality, in politics and in other areas. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) claimed that exploring the lives of young people is an ideal opportunity to attempt to understand societal changes and transformations and whether these have brought about a deconstruction and a reconstruction of the concept of youth.

The significance of the term youth became more fluid and no longer attached to a specific stage in life or defined by age. Young people are reaching adulthood in various areas of life at different times (Evans, 1998). The concept of a ‘new adulthood’ was first proposed by Dwyer and Wyn in 2001. They claimed that “the transformations occurring on a global scale can no longer be seen as mere ‘life-cycle transitions’ that can be neatly incorporated into the traditional interpretations of the experience of youth” (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001, p. 2). Societal transformations and changes may compel us to reshape what we understand by being young and what the transitional journey is all about. Leccardi, in an interview in 2018, argued that times are currently different and “from this new point of view, youth can be considered, instead of a specific stage of life, a metaphor – a metaphor dealing with social change in a time of uncertainty” (Leccardi et al., 2018, p. 21).

On account of these differences, there has been an increasing sense of the individualisation of youth and their trajectories towards adulthood, a point made emphatically by Furlong and Cartmel (2007) in their seminal text *Young People and Social Change* and its important subtitle: *Individualisation and risk in late modernity*. The negotiation of individualised trajectories is putting more responsibility on young people who are no longer constrained by gender, class or ethnicity. As they take decisions and devise their own lives, they carry the consequences of their decisions which sometimes lead to pressure and anxiety. The process of individualisation offers freedom to young people, but it also offers new structures of dependence. Due to the number of opportunities, young people choose to stay longer in education and delay getting a secure job; but this means prolonging dependence, delaying moving out of the parents' home and delaying family formation (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005).

Through this process of choices and decisions, young "individuals are continuously revising and re-interpreting their biographical projects" (Furlong, 2013, p. 10). The normal standard biography is, for many contemporary young people, being replaced by a choice biography. Individual decisions and choices have taken "centre stage" (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005, p. 416). Young people make choices and take decisions which will affect them throughout life. Du Bois-Reymond (1998) spoke about choice biographies as not "purely based on freedom and own choice, but are determined by a paradox ... It is the *tension between option/freedom and legitimation/coercion* which marks 'choice biographies'" (p. 65, original italics). The freedom to choose may present constraints to young people; they may feel unprepared to make choices or are prevented from doing so. Choice biographies lead to and accelerate the process of individualisation.

Late modernity is dominated by this process of individualisation “whereby risk permeates all aspects of life” (Furlong, 2013, p. 10). The freedom to choose especially when one is not yet prepared for it, puts pressure on the individual, creating duress.

‘Choice’ and ‘opportunity’ are linked to the process of individualisation and the neoliberal agenda creating a sense of false reality for young people. They start believing that they are in control and completely responsible for their choices and for the way they negotiate their pathway through their life course. Oblivious of the existing structural conditions, contemporary young people try to “resolve collective problems through individualisation” (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007, p. 114). When they fail, they hold themselves responsible for their unavoidable failure. According to Furlong and Cartmel (2007) life in late modernity revolves around an epistemological fallacy. The paradox of late modernity is that young people depend less on the collective foundations of social life. Yet, social structures continue to provide powerful frameworks which constrain the experiences and life chances of young people. Changes promote individual responsibilities and weaken collectivist traditions. Young people are taking greater individual responsibility both in their educational journey and at their place of work. Negotiation of risk and uncertainty by these young people on an individual level is impacting their daily lives and their daily decisions. When something does not succeed, they end up blaming themselves, believing they are failures. France and Haddon (2014) challenged the epistemological fallacy claiming that “neo liberal principles exist not only objectively in terms of agencies, rules and policies, but have also become subjectively embedded within individuals” (p. 317). Contemporary young people are perfectly aware of the

structural forces at work within their lives and are not oblivious of the choices and opportunities they are surrounded with.

### *Agency and Structure*

Thus, it is important to observe that a significant aspect in the transitional journey of young people to adulthood is the influence of both structure and agency,

many in the younger generation are becoming increasingly pro-active in the face of risk and uncertainty of outcomes, and are making pragmatic choices for themselves which enable them to maintain their aspirations despite the persistence of structural influences in their lives. (Wyn and Dwyer, 1999, p. 5)

Individualisation implies the dominance of agency over structure, but recent debates re-asserted “the importance of ‘structure’ in understanding the shaping of young people’s lives” (France and Haddon, 2014, p. 306). Structural factors shape and influence the processes faced by young people as they move from one status to the next, including the family, education, the labour market, religion, culture, youth organizations and peers. These influence the choices and decisions taken by young people. Some structural factors may assist or restrict the young person. Family, for instance, may assist young people as they are looking for employment. However, the family’s influence may restrict their choice since some parents may put pressure on the young person to choose the career they think is best for their child. Then again, a number of young people take decisions about their careers and their future as they try to break free, not always successfully, from constraints of family, culture, religion and peers. Young people exercise a degree of agency when acting independently and autonomously.

This dialectical relationship between structure and agency is crucial for understanding the complexities of social life and societal change.

It is not always helpful to separate the influence of structure and agency. Giddens (1979) argued that structure and agency are a duality that cannot exist apart from each other, both are dependent on each other. Giddens's structuration theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how social order is produced and reproduced through the actions of individuals in shaping and reshaping the social world. The theory rejects the dichotomy between agency, individual action, and structure, social context. Instead, it argues that agency and structure are interrelated and cannot be understood in isolation. Individuals, through their actions, reproduce and transform social structures. The concept of 'bounded agency' introduced by Evans (2007) acknowledged that 'individual choice' is limited by structural location and position. Agency is socially influenced by structures.


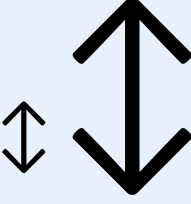


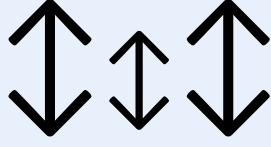
The focus of bounded agency shifts "from structured individualisation onto individuals as actors, without losing the perspective of structuration" (Evans, 2007, p. 93). One has to investigate what are the specific strategies developed by young people to be better equipped to exercise agency. Notwithstanding these strategies, as we explore and investigate the transitional journey of contemporary young people, one has to keep in the picture their background and their current situation, their biographical experiences, their socio-economic status and the opportunities or lack of them.

### **Rethinking Youth Transitions**

The impact and the influence of socio-economic changes transformed the transitional journey of contemporary young people; the traverse has become more

individualised, permeated with risk and uncertainty. Existing literature on modern youth transitions “attempted to explain the way in which young people react to and shape the structural factors that have an impact on their lives” (Hamilton and Adamson, 2013, p. 102). Recent debates have challenged the traditional model of the transitional journey. The linear transition and the traditional model of dependency, through the process of individualisation and the progress of modernisation, transformed the transitional journey into one which is fragmented, reversible and yo-yo-like (Walther, 2006), as shown in Figure 1. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) who came up with the vehicle model claimed that while on a train (Roberts, 1995) there were carriages reserved for different groups of people, such as white middle class male, children of professionals, working class men, women, each group having a designated stop, the car journey (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007) is distinct and diverse. Unlike trains, cars are allowed diversions, alternative routes, and even if the destination has been already fixed, vehicles may change it. Also, in a car, determined by class, people can decide to journey on their own, away from family and peers. The car metaphor highlights the fact that young people negotiate their life journey independently, without reliable maps. They travel in their own personal vehicle and not collectively on a train. The car journey may be risky and the driver lost and confused.

**Figure 1***The 'yo-yo-ization' of transitions between youth and adulthood*

	Transitions as a linear and homogeneous status passage	Transition as a life phase composed of prolonged and diversified status passages	Reversible and fragmented yo-yo transitions with uncertain perspectives
35	Adulthood	Adulthood	Adulthood
25			
18			
15			
Age	Youth	Youth	Youth

*Note.* Walther et al., 2000, p.15

However, not all drivers are lost and confused: several young people feel empowered to choose and/or change their destination, to get there at their own pace, to travel individually or with friends. They have the opportunity to explore different paths and arrive at a destination that is not predetermined by someone else (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Young people are empowered to take decisions that affect their lives and the lives of the people around them. They are described as “always agentic... play active roles in constructing their own adult lives ... reproduce existing social patterns or practices, or bring about changes in a society’s institutions” (Roberts, 2007, p. 267). Most young people choose their destination and their destiny but the influence of structural forces is still present even though different in various situations. Their destination is still influenced, even if in hidden ways, by parents, family background, class, ethnicity, gender, educational structure or the labour market, resulting in “young people ... having the impression that they determine their own paths, through their own means” (Cuzzocrea, 2020, p. 62).

A key feature of the transitional experience of young people today, is that in late modernity, contemporary transitions have become lengthier, prolonged and are no longer a single-step. This is heavily influenced by socio-economic changes in the employment sector (Ashton and Lowe, 1991; Roberts 1995, 1997), an increase in youth unemployment (Furlong 1993; Roberts 1997); prolonged post-compulsory education (Furlong 1993; Roberts 1997); the introduction of training programmes for young people, changes in social welfare legislations and the heightened intricacies and risk of choice (Nagel and Wallace 1997; Lawy 2002). The traditional structured transition, a process which was linear and predictable,

has now become complex, fragmented and individualised. Yet, it is still influenced by family, class and gender. Extended transitions compel contemporary young people to prolong their studies after they finish compulsory education, enter the workforce later and stay longer at their parental home. A number of young people study and work part-time concurrently. As mentioned above, family dependence is extended and housing transitions and family

The structural shifts in the family, education and the labour market has reshaped all aspects of life. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) maintained that changes experienced by young people today are “significant enough to merit a reconceptualisation of youth transitions” (p. 8). Evans and Furlong (1997) revisited transitional metaphors and traced changing perspectives. They argued that metaphors “evolved in ways which reflect the dominant theoretical perspectives of the time ... analysing and understanding the young person’s interaction with his or her social milieu and typical sequences of events” (Evans and Furlong, 1997, p. 17). The experiences of youth were now shaped with new economic and social conditions, which brought about different metaphors such as structured individualisation and rationalised individualisation (Nagel and Wallace, 1997; Furlong et al., 2002).

Contemporary young people come across a number of opportunities, and they navigate their own journey rather than follow predetermined patterns. They negotiate their choices and their decisions and are compelled to see themselves in command of their own biographies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This is mirrored in the education to employment transition where young people are faced with various opportunities: staying longer in education or training, joining the labour market, or doing both on part-time basis. The ‘job for life’ concept no

longer prevails. There are also significant changes and delays in housing and domestic transitions (Williamson and Côté, 2022,). A number of young adults “find themselves moving back and forth into a variety of living arrangements over their life course, invariably linked to the creation and dissolution of household forms based on intimate relationships with parents, friends and partners” (Heath and Cleaver, 2003, p. 2). This creates extended periods of dependence.

Throughout their transitional journey, young people are faced with fears, dilemmas, anxieties and uncertainties. They take individual initiatives in an individualised culture that promotes self-reliance. Young people are expected to act in an agentic way but, as previously discussed, this can create a sense of anxiety and uncertainty. In a number of occasions, they may be faced with decisions which they have to take on their own, with no advice.

Cuzzocrea (2018) speaks about two contrasting demands, relevant in a special way to Southern European youth that are evident throughout this transitional journey, amidst the rapid social transformations. Contemporary young people find themselves negotiating between: social acceleration that creates in young people a sense of need to settle in employment and the need to decelerate in order to have time to experiment with the construction of their identities and their sense of purpose. Côté (2000, p. 1) conceptualised this period of youth as ‘arrested adulthood’, where young people are described as “‘growing up’ but not in the traditional sense of the word”. This stage in the life course of young people is often referred to as ‘youth-hood’ (Heath and Cleaver, 2003), a time of ‘in-between’ (Bradford and Clark, 2011) or ‘waithood’ (Honwana, 2014), a phase “during which one just waits for something to happen” (Cuzzocrea, 2018, p. 569).

The term 'waithood' implies emptiness, complacency and lack of energy and vision. There is a sense of disengagement where young people are not doing their best to keep abreast with the rapid changes occurring around them. Longo (2015) debates whether such young people in 'waithood' "consider themselves incapable of making decisions in a world that is overwhelming and are paralysed by the possibilities and limits beyond their control" (p. 16). While in some societies young people gain independence at an early age, in other societies they remain dependant beyond their twenties and thirties. Heinz (2009, p. 6) claimed that in modern societies institutional arrangements differ depending on "life transitions: education and training provisions, labour market regulations, exclusion mechanisms, social assistance rules, and the extent to which there is an explicit youth policy".

The aspects of de-standardized youth transitions are described as yo-yo transitions, signifying the potentially protracted length of time that young people spend shifting between youth and adulthood (EGRIS, 2001). Yo-yo transitions evolve either "from individual choice or are imposed as a result of failing to enter a standard biography" (Walther, 2006, p. 3). This leads to the endurance of 'old' inequalities dictated by education, ethnicity, gender, religion and social background, and beneath these 'new' transitions' structures (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Walther (2000) affirms that the driving factors of the yo-yo-isation of transitions are "the socio-economic restructuring of labour societies and the socio-cultural and socio structural process of individualisation" (p. 3).

A recent metaphor added to the existing literature in the field of youth studies is the pinball metaphor introduced by Cuzzocrea (2020) taken from the

pinball game which “involves stopping and starting, just as in the employment sphere, as well as being representative of reaching goals and overcoming obstacles and boundaries” (p. 70). The pinball metaphor (Cuzzocrea, 2020) highlights the different employment and training statuses, the starting and the stopping. In this way, contemporary young people do not see employment as their final destination or point of arrival. Bauman (2000) argued that contemporary young people live in liquid modern conditions and they find “the running itself which is exhilarating, and however tiring it may be, the track is a more enjoyable place than the finishing line. ... The arrival, the definite end to all choice, seems more dull” (p. 88). Guerrero Puerto (2023) claimed that Cuzzocrea, through the pinball metaphor, captures “the intensifying patterns of mobility and precarity in youth labour markets” (p. 11). Pinball youth (Cuzzocrea, 2020) acquire training and skills but not all of them manage to reach out their aspirations, highlighting that a number of contemporary young people lack control over their career path. However, for a number of them, even though the path to adulthood becomes riskier, Côté (2010) claimed that they develop a stronger sense of self, where personal autonomy and responsibility become a priority. The pinball youth, sometimes take the same path of the ball in the pinball game, travelling at exhilarating speed and making haphazard short-term landings in different areas of the game, which are all much more enticing and fulfilling than the actual final destination.

### **Tertiary Education Transitions Leading to the Labour Market**

The deep changes that have taken place in the last decades in our society have brought an extensive transformation in the transitional journey of contemporary young people, both shaping and changing young people’s

transitions. This has impacted both the education sector and the labour market. Since the focus of this research is on transitions of young people in tertiary education this aspect is very relevant for this study.

Universities are now regarded as important forces behind the knowledge economy. This has increased the pressure to educate the growing number of students to a degree level so they can compete in the global labour market. Education plays a crucial role in the shaping of the transitional journey of young people. Barnett (1990) argued that “higher education is essentially a matter of the development of the mind of the individual student ... when the student is carried on to levels of reasoning which make possible critical reflection on his or her experiences” (p. 202). He also claimed that the aim of higher education is “to set the student off on the right path, and hopes to see the student being successful” (Barnett, 1988, p. 248). The ability to think critically and intellectual development are two of the aims of formal education. Together with the family, the church and the state, higher education continues to play a significant role in “identity and value formation processes” (Desjardins, 2015, p. 2).

Various theorists debate whether transitions from education to employment are a simple process, linear and predictable, or a complex experience which presents various difficulties of adjustment. The rapidly changing environment, the effects of the 2008 economic recession and the COVID-19 pandemic have brought huge challenges and changes both in the education sector and in the labour market and therefore in “the institutional infrastructure for transition” (Higgins and Nairn, 2006 p. 208). These changes make this pathway from school to employment even more unpredictable and uncertain. The available job opportunities at the end of compulsory education have diversified, the number

of routes to choose from have increased, making the journey more alluring but also more hazardous and fragmented. Contemporary young people reach adulthood at different times: they may be supporting a family while still pursuing a course of studies at university and living on a bursary or a scholarship. Alternatively, they may hold responsible positions at work while still living with their family of origin, that is, still looked upon as a child in the household and fully supported by the parents. These role conflicts are inherent in the developmental process during this period, and require young people to develop strategies to manage the complexities of their evolving roles and identities.

Thus, the role of education has also changed. Young people choose to prolong their stay in education not only to be better qualified for employment or to develop skills and capabilities but because pursuing a course of study successfully gives personal satisfaction. Wyn (2008) speaks about the “emergence of some distinctive attitudes towards the idea of career” which give new meaning to the word ‘career’. Contemporary young people are letting go of the traditional idea that career is about the same full-time employment or a hierarchical progression within the same company. The judgement of contemporary young people is more subjective, describing career as “a state of mind” (Wyn, 2008 p. 79). A career is more about opportunities to take time out for personal and professional development; a journey that leads to self-fulfilment (Childs, 2019). However, even though this looks very attractive and alluring for young people, it is only possible in countries where the unemployment rate is low and where job opportunities are many and varied.

Students’ transition to university, even though is an aspiration of many young people, offers also a number of challenges. One of the major setbacks is

when freshers realize that there is a mismatch between the chosen course of studies and their aspirations for the future (Tranter, 2003; Smith and Hopkins, 2005). Usually this happens during the first year of the tertiary academic journey. Another key factor during this stage is the intersection between the academic and social situations of students and the institutional systems that should support them. Freshers have to adapt to new educational settings and to new social environments and this may not be a smooth transition. The building of new relationships and getting involved in the campus life, serve as good opportunities to get used to university life. Students' organizations are instrumental in facilitating the transition to university and along the tertiary education journey. Organizations play a role in helping young people develop social competences, among other useful abilities.

In these last years, a number of young people have chosen to prolong their educational experience, holding on to new opportunities like skills-employability, training seminars and post-compulsory education. Evans (1998) argued that "education has become the norm for the average attainer" (p. 69). A rapid expansion in the post-compulsory education was witnessed where educational routes increased and this presented more choice to young people. More emphasis is put on educational credentials to negotiate better their pathway into the labour market (Calleja, 2014). The longer young people stay in education, the longer they spend in a period of a semi-dependency state (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). A number of young people choose to embark on various exchange programmes which widen their world views and horizon and make them prolong their educational journey.

However, not all young people can ride the wave of the new opportunities of staying longer in education, especially in tertiary institutions, since free education is not offered in all countries and scholarships are available in very few countries. Not all families can support their children by paying tuition fees. Forsyth and Furlong (2000) claimed that even though “there has been an increase in participation in higher education across all social groups, in relative terms the gap between disadvantaged young people and their more advantaged peers has remained” (p. 3). This depicted a new reality, “the popular appeal of neoliberalism... is similarly [to individualisation] experienced as liberating, albeit that this is somewhat illusory; for everyone, freedom of choice and opportunity to make it on your own” (McGuigan, 2010, pp. 110-111). As a result, the mix of work and study for prolonged periods is on the increase, effecting the age when young people settle down and start a family.

The growth in precarious and non-standard employment and the increase in the levels of youth unemployment in Europe, especially in the Southern part of Europe (Eurostat, 2020a) is of great concern. This reality compels young people to prolong their studies after completing compulsory education. Gaining skills and obtaining educational qualifications have become an important element in the lives of young people, “now more than ever, education is of critical importance in equipping young people to make something of their life and to ‘become somebody’ in a world in which labour markets are unpredictable and uncertain” (Wyn, 2008, p. 81). Contemporary young people extend their educational trajectories in order to be better equipped for the labour market and to be able to compete for the best job. Côté (2006) stresses that the delay of adult roles is not done voluntarily. Since young people are either finding

it difficult to find a job or are being forced out of work, they have no choice but to join the higher educational system so as to improve their employability.

Employers have started requiring a university degree in job postings. This leaves out those young people who have the necessary experience but not the academic qualifications.

In 2018 the European Commission published a document about the impact of technological developments, taking into special consideration the current and future challenges in the labour market and the effects on youth. In 2020 the OECD envisioned significant uncertainties and variations between educational programs, occupations, and sectors which would strongly affect the transition from higher education to the labour market. 'Digital natives' transitioning into the employment sector have the opportunity to take advantage of their digital competencies and this makes their transition smoother (Osgerby, 2020). Currently there are continuous demands on young people to develop competencies and skills to adapt to the rapid changing society. For those who respond positively to these demands there is a plethora of opportunities.

Bauman (2000, p. 81) argued that in the labour market, contemporary young people seem to be on the run, "trying to find an escape from the agony called insecurity". They move from one job to the other, missing on opportunities to develop their skills or to move to different sections within the same career path. Employment has become precarious and short-term; the amount of part-time working and non-standard employment have increased. Changes in the patterns of work lead young people to encounter uncertainty and increased risk in their lives (Beck, 1992, 2000). Flexibility is seen as more important than predictability.

Amid these social transformations and social acceleration, as contemporary young people negotiate their transitions between the boundaries of family, education and employment, they attempt to construct and develop their multiple identities. The negotiating of their life course in the fragmentary conditions of social change leads young people to develop “identity narratives that draw on subjectivities that in part are well suited to late modernity and the current neoliberal economic agenda where young people embrace choice and accept responsibility for building their own futures” (Stokes, 2012, p. 78). The experiences of contemporary young people and the structures around them are of significant importance when exploring the formation of identities. (Pollock, 2002). In late modernity, the identities of young people are not pre-existent established on gender, class, or family. Traditions and structures have changed and therefore the sense of self-identity has to be created and recreated (Giddens, 1991). This process has become similar to a reflexive project (Giddens, 1991) where contemporary young people are responsible for the construction of their own identities.

### **Research Questions**

Within this framework, the following three research questions will be investigated, attempting to explore how a specific subgroup of Maltese young people in tertiary education move through the ‘status’ of youth to that of adulthood:

- How do transitions of Maltese young people in tertiary education extend from the past to the present and into the future highlighting both continuity and change?
- How do the personal and the social interact in the negotiation of youth transitions to adulthood of Maltese young people in tertiary education?

- How are these stories of youth transitions to adulthood situated in a Maltese context?

## **Conclusion**

This study attempts to understand and interpret the experiences of Maltese young people as they transition towards adulthood: their aspirations, success, disappointments and frustrations. In the current chapter, the theme of change has been emphasised. Societal changes have influenced the stories of the participants. However, Griffin (2001) rightly argues not to get lost in the newness of youth but to reflect on continuities, some of which are very important. Through qualitative inquiry, this research illuminates the transitions of young people in tertiary education and its understanding in the specific context of Malta.

Therefore, in the next chapter, the focus is on Maltese young people pursuing studies at the University of Malta and their journey towards adulthood. The differences offered by this small island state, part of Southern Europe, with a strong Catholic influence, where the family still plays a significant role, education is free and students get a stipend, are thoroughly explored. Large scale survey data on youth transitions has been collected, however, youth transitions have been largely neglected in qualitative studies. Hence, this is the reason why this became one of the main objectives of this research study.

## Chapter Three

### The Maltese Landscape

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the societal changes and transformations of relevance to the processes of youth transitions within the Maltese context keeping in mind the social and cultural contingencies of Maltese society. These include the size of the island, its history of colonisation, its strategic location in the Mediterranean Sea between Southern Italy and the North African coast, its Catholic tradition and the once strong religious and familial values. It explores key institutions like the family, education, employment and religion and discusses dominant societal values. It analyses how social institutions may influence and shape the expectations, and choices of Maltese young people, including their educational trajectories. As discussed in previous chapters Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) underscore how the social and economic transformations in the last decades have led to a process of individualisation, slowly eroding a number of traditions and roles played by key institutions. A number of theorists, including Beck (1992), claim that the elements of tradition, culture and religion are fading away in late modern societies. Many young people feel liberated from the traditional controls and regulations of the institutions. The focus is thus no longer on the collective but on the individual. This sense of autonomy gives birth to more freedom and more self-determination but also heightened risk, creating an atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty, as discussed above.

Thirty years ago, Giddens (1994) described Malta as in the midst of a “tangled web of tradition and modernity” (p. xxviii). Twenty years later,

Briguglio and Brown (2016, p. 11) argued that this “contradiction is still in place, yet various modernising forces have gained the upper hand in areas ranging from civil liberties to family life and from economic restructuring to privatisation of religious belief”. The accelerated modernisation occurring in the Maltese islands during the last decade, as partially elaborated in Table 1, transformed traditions, from established and strong traditions to greater fluidity and increased choice. Malta is the first country in the European Union to legalise cannabis for adult-use and in 2014 the legislation of same-sex union and the right for adoption by same sex couples were introduced. Notwithstanding these changes, Malta is the only country in the European Union where abortion remains illegal in all circumstances except for severe threat to the woman’s life, where issues of women’s reproductive rights are rarely discussed and where people still choose to elect the government through blatant political partisanship. This highlights the inherent contradictions in Maltese society.

Throughout this research, I examined the interplay between traditional forces and modern influences shaping the transition to adulthood for Maltese young people. I explored how traditional pushes and contemporary pulls impact their choices and life trajectories. Traditional pushes encompass cultural and familial expectations that steer young people toward established paths, such as starting a family, joining a family business, or pursuing a predefined career, all rooted in long-standing societal norms and values. Contemporary pulls offer new opportunities stimulated by modernisation, globalisation, and technological advancements. The digital revolution has opened up diverse job markets, and an evolving educational system that provides flexible learning pathways (Haleem, Javaid, Qadri, and Suman, 2022). These modern influences encourage young

people to explore alternative life choices and embrace newfound freedoms. As a result, Maltese young people negotiate their transitional journey within a dynamic landscape, between traditional expectations and modern aspirations, ultimately redefining what adulthood means in a changing society.

### **Malta's Micro and Island State Status**

The Maltese archipelago, a sovereign state, consists of Malta, Gozo, Comino and two uninhabited islands. Since these islands are found at the crossroads of Southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, this makes their strategic position an ideal launching pad for trading and the economic markets across all three locations: north, south and east. The Maltese archipelago serves as a “cosmopolitan hub in (and to) its dynamic coastal neighborhood; a vocation enhanced by its excellent (and therefore attractive) sheltered Grand Harbour” (Baldacchino, 2016, p. 6). Malta has no natural resources, except for the sun, the sea and the honey-coloured limestone, which the Maltese builders use to construct their houses. Water is scarce and therefore a number of desalination plants are installed around the island.

**Table 1***Timeline of some of the Key Events in Malta's History*

1964 – Malta granted Independence
1971 – Maltese students at university exempted from paying tuition fees
1974 – Malta becomes a Republic
Establishment of children's allowance
1979 – Last British services leave Malta
1987 – Victory of the Nationalist Party, a move towards European integration
The introduction of a stipend grant for all students in Higher Education
1990 – Malta applies to join the European Union
Cellular connectivity (1G)
1997 – 2G connectivity
2004 – Malta joins the European Union
2008 – Malta joins the Eurozone
2011 – The legalisation of divorce
2013 – Labour Party elected, unseating the Nationalist Party which had been in power since 1987
Introduction of co-education in all secondary schools
2014 – The legalisation of same-sex union, resulting in the enactment of the Civil Union Act
2015 – 'X' non-binary gender marker on ID cards and passports
2016 – Malta's first child adopted by a gay couple
The introduction of the morning-after pill
2017 – Transposition of the Fourth Anti-Money Laundering Directive into national law
Approval of Marriage Equality Bill
2018 - Malta became the second European Union country to grant 16-year-olds the right to vote
2019 – COVID-19 Pandemic
2020 – First case of COVID-19 pandemic in Malta
Mandatory Lockdown
2021 – Malta became the first country in the European Union to legalize cannabis for adult-use
2022 – Roberta Metsola, the youngest-ever European Parliament President. She achieved the most important role occupied by a Maltese person on an international level.
2023 - Parliament approved the revised abortion bill, allowing doctors to terminate a pregnancy in limited circumstances

*Note.* Adapted from various sources

The total land area of the Maltese archipelago is 320 km<sup>2</sup>. The small size of the islands and their limited resources are significant factors which dictate the experiences of its inhabitants. The size of the island contributes to a number of characteristics and particular challenges (Baldacchino, 2003). Extensive literature (Buttigieg, 2004; Armstrong and Read, 2003; Witter et al., 2002) highlights various disadvantages associated with small size. Such disadvantages may hinder diversification and economic growth. Challenges typically faced by small islands listed by Barbier and Sathirathai (2004) include limited local markets, dependence on outside trade and limited natural resources. Small islands states are defined by Taylor (2012, p. 1) “in terms of their vulnerability and fragility”. Their economy usually depends heavily on tourism (Hall, 2010). Besides the tourism sector which is an essential contributor to the Maltese economy, Malta relies also on foreign trade, financial services, the gaming industry and the manufacture of electronics and pharmaceuticals amongst others.

According to Connell (2012), common components found on small islands states are tight-knit communities and distinctive cultural identities. These present challenges associated with population growth, skilled individual emigration, and limited social and educational opportunities (Baldacchino, 2006). In the last decade, the resident population in Malta grew by 28.6%, that is from 421,464 in 2012 to 542,051 in 2022 (National Statistics Office, 2024). This substantial growth led to a growth in population density, rising from 1,337 residents per km<sup>2</sup> in 2012 to 1,721 per km<sup>2</sup> in 2022. Such escalation is attributed mainly to the increase in the number of foreign individuals living in Malta. This influx of foreigners drastically changed the way of life in Malta but in a special way had an impact on the workforce. In the last years Maltese workers started

moving away from jobs in the construction and manufacturing industries choosing white-collar professions or office jobs while foreign workers stepped in to fill the occupational gaps. While the small size of the Maltese archipelago already had an impact on the social characteristics of the island, such a rapid upsurge in the number of resident population accentuated this even more.

Another major change which could be easily seen in the landscape of the Maltese islands is the overdevelopment and lack of urban planning. During the last decade, houses of character, farmhouses and townhouses, until recently were the pride of the Maltese people, are being replaced by concrete blocks of small apartments. The limited open and green spaces are being taken over by prominent property developers and transformed into more apartments and hotels.

Social visibility is one of the results of Malta's small geographical size. Most of the people either know each other or else are in one way or other related. There is hardly any anonymity and "if your behaviour deviates from the norm, you cannot move to another part of the community and start again". (O'Reilly Mizzi, 1994, p. 375). Residential mobility is very limited due to the size of the island and it is very probable that when inhabitants move to another town or village, their reputation will follow them since the move involves only a couple of miles. The dense population in most of the towns and villages, together with the physical layout of the streets and houses enables neighbours to watch and become familiar with each other's routine. This provides the perfect environment for gossip which is "one of the most widespread and effective means of social control within local Maltese communities" (O'Reilly Mizzi, 1994, p. 369). Farrugia Sciberras (2005) concurs, suggesting that such environment "facilitate(s) friendships and sustain the flourish of gossip" (p. 84). In recent years, gossip as a

means of social control has become less common in the narrow roads and more popular on social media. The code of honour and shame (Cassar, 2003; Schneider, 1971) are key social regulators of Mediterranean societies, particularly in shaping social, economic, and political structures. Malina (1993) describes the concepts of honour and shame as pivotal values, which according to Cassar (2003) can dictate social behaviour and community expectations. The honour/shame syndrome makes part of the cultural phenomenon among Maltese people and hold value to this day (Mitchell, 2002). The interplay between social control and the dynamics of shame are discussed by Bradford and Clark (2011) who explain how societal structures, particularly those influenced by religious traditions, continue to shape notions of honour and shame. Despite the progress of secularisation and legal changes, such as the legalization of divorce and same-sex marriage, the internalized impacts of shame often remain. This indicates that shame is deeply embedded in the culture, influencing personal identity and social behaviour even when external norms evolve.

### **Class and Social Status in Maltese Society**

For a number of years, two main sociological approaches, the Marxist and the Weberian, shaped the discussion on class in Malta. While Marx believed that society was becoming more and more split between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, Weber based social stratification on three factors: economical order, political order, and social order (Bottero, 2005). Vassallo (1989, p. 39) who advocated for the Weberian approach argued that in Malta “the concept of class in the Marxist sense is fast becoming irrelevant”. However, this ignored “the reproduction of class differentiated by education or how power holders also possess high levels of economic resources” (Brown and Formosa, 2014, p. 136).

Social stratification plays a crucial role in the life course of young people and impacts their transitional journey. The concept of social class is a fundamental determinant of life opportunities or lack of them. Late modernity brought with it societal changes and transformations. The individualisation thesis suggests that social structures no longer provide full support and protection. Young people, irrespective of class, are experiencing greater personal freedom, choosing individualised paths and identities. As a result, contemporary young people are becoming more anxious. Uncertainty permeated society and the “choices that young people make, the resources that they have at their disposal, where they live, where they go to school and what they do for their leisure” (White et al., 2017, p. 14). Yet, notwithstanding this, social background continues to influence the way young people negotiate their choices and in certain circumstances they move back and forth from dependence to independence back to dependence.

Despite the small size of the Maltese islands, linguistic differences, according to Sciriha (1994) “have become powerful indicators of class and status” (p. 117). Although the majority of Maltese people speak Maltese as their mother tongue, some claim that English or a combination of Maltese and English is their first language. In a number of villages there is the use of dialect. Notwithstanding the short distances from one place to the other, in some areas there are phonological differences in speech. The choice of language for everyday communication speaks about social class in Malta and according to Caruana (2020), “most regular users of English in Malta are normally of high socio-economic status, thereby creating a situation in which social difference can be manifest through language choice” (p. 1). Camilleri Grima (2013) mentioned

two broad social groups in Malta: those with a primary orientation to English and those with a primary orientation to Maltese. She claimed that this is rooted both in the parents' use of the language at home and the region they come from.

Maltese people who choose to speak English are labelled as 'tal-pepe' (snobs).

Another two factors that distinguish class, according to Boswell (1994), are residential area and patterns of consumption. Data yielded from Boswell's research (1982) conducted in four urban localities in Malta, namely, Attard, Fgura, Senglea and Sliema showed that "the particularities of locality are often fitted within a more general defined framework of social prestige which is locality-based" (Boswell, 1994, p. 134). For instance, there were strong distinctions or different characteristics between the people on the Sliema side and the people living in the three cities: Cospicua, Senglea and Vittoriosa, creating the 'us' and 'them' mentality, impacting their social behaviour. On Saturday evenings, Sliema people used to keep to the 'Chalet' area while those from the three cities used to stay within their confines. This has changed drastically in the last decades. The three cities are now referred to as the cradle of Maltese history and great effort and investment has been made to preserve the historical sights and their history. The town of Sliema has become very consumeristic, attracting a lot of tourists.

Over the years amidst evolving global trends, the world-wide trend of consumerism has increased in Malta and the significant shifts on Maltese consumer behaviour have been noted (Theobald and Borg Urso, 2024). Zammit's research (1984) showed that the Maltese understanding of class has been influenced by the different patterns of consumerism and therefore, consumption became the gauge to detect the differences between different social groups. In

2019, Georgakopoulos, aiming to address the literature gap about the distribution of wealth and income in Malta carried out a study where it is mentioned that “income and wealth inequality evolved in a period during which the Maltese economy experienced strong macroeconomic growth” (p. 58). Recent statistics (NSO, 2023) showed that the gap in wages continued to increase and this in turn further widened the gap between the rich and the poor in Malta. People in the higher categories continued doing well while others were finding it hard to keep up. This continued highlighting the inequality among the poor and the rich. In the last years the divide between the rich and the poor people started to grow at a fast rate and Malta saw the first homeless people on the streets. In 2023 (NSO, 2023) the number of at-risk-of-poverty persons living in private households was estimated at 16.6% of the target population; the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE) stood at 19.8%. The Church felt the need to open a number of soup kitchens around the island to try and ease the difficult situation of homeless people. Recent data collected by Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) depicted the situation in Malta, uncovering the reality of such situation, those from more socially economic mobile classes are now also increasingly at risk of slipping through Malta’s social safety net. While financial precariousness once constituted the main risk factor for homelessness, nowadays, a complex confluence of personal and institutional factors can lead to the loss of housing such as rising housing costs, one’s mental and physical health, gender, nationality, domestic violence, or unstable employment. In other words, the intricate intersection of individual issues and changing broader socio-economic

conditions appear to be contributing to the rise of homelessness in Malta. (YMCA, 2022, p. 12)

Malta has continued to go through different phases of change, thus becoming more diverse. The digital revolution, globalisation and demographic changes played a crucial role in the transformation of Maltese society, which led to different changes in the various structures of society. A very important reality in the sociological exposition of the Maltese society is the accelerated modernisation and the effects of the rapid socio-economic and cultural changes.

### **Continuity and Change**

The socio-economic changes occurring globally in the last decades also left an impact on the particularities of Maltese society. A number of scholars (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Goodwin and O'Connor, 2007) emphasised the role of continuity in the midst of all the changes. The situation in the Maltese archipelago is not too different: “the past is visibly intertwined in the present; ... the global is tightly enmeshed in the local” (Baldacchino, 2016, p. 4). The elements of change did not do away with past traditions, but rather provided the inhabitants a journey of continuity in the midst of all the changes they are faced with.

In 1964, when Malta achieved its independence, it was still considered as a developing country. Prior to independence, Malta depended on the military budget of the United Kingdom. The United Nations had then recommended that the only solution for Malta to ease the constraints of unemployment and the lack of economic growth was mass emigration. During this time “Malta’s population declined by 7% as emigration outnumbered natural growth” (Ministry for Foreign

Affairs and Trade Promotion, 2018, p. 11). Against all odds, Malta embarked on a journey which transformed not only its economy but also led to other huge changes and reforms in financial services, investment, infrastructure, employment and education.

This journey of change continued and in 1990 Malta formally applied to become member of the European Union. The first progress report issued by the European Commission in 1993 bid Malta to carry out “many changes in traditional patterns of behaviour that what is effectively involved is a root and branch overhaul of the entire regulatory and operational framework of the Maltese economy” (European Commission Opinion, 1993, para. 34). Malta pursued its journey of extraordinary and significant changes and its accession to the European Union occurred in 2004. The Maltese archipelago went through deep economic changes and was granted the status of a developed country. In 2013, the Eurobarometer, when measuring how open a particular Member State is to the rest of the EU and the outside world, ranked Malta in the second place in its International Openness Index. Malta scored 44% when compared to other EU member states whose average was 14% (Standard Eurobarometer, 2013). Malta's accession to the European Union in 2004 marked a significant shift, broadening its national identity to incorporate a European dimension. However, this ‘modernisation’ and ‘Europeanisation’ are often perceived as threats to traditional values, despite their promise of economic stability and prosperity (Mitchell, 2002, p. i). Europeanisation extends beyond the political sphere, influencing societal norms and institutions and reshaping Malta's identity within the EU context (Cachia, 2024). Vassallo (2015) observes that the Maltese have embraced their “‘European vocation’ more fully, adopting a positive and supportive stance

toward the EU” (p. 28). This ongoing dynamic between tradition and modernity—linking morality with tradition and progress with modernity—continues to shape Maltese society. In recent decades, Malta has experienced profound changes in various social domains, including religion, family structures, the labour market, and education, reflecting this complex interplay.

Religion always played an important role in Malta’s history and for a number of centuries, Catholicism, gave “island life and identity a definite character” (Vassallo, 2016). In recent years, the church in Malta has begun to lose its cultural supremacy. Today it is no longer the principal and most powerful institution which exercises influence and controls those important sectors such as the education, family, and social life. The Catholic Church, which used to give identity to the Maltese people, has largely lost its grip and has now been replaced by the civil state (Aquilina, 2018). The practices and activities of the Church are at times taking a more folkloristic stance. Even though the Constitution of Malta officially declares that the religion of Malta is the Apostolic Roman Catholic Religion, recent surveys show that the Maltese who define themselves as practising the faith are in significant decline. It is as if the church in Malta, in the midst of rapid social change, went through a silent metamorphosis (Vassallo, 2016) leading the country into a process of secularisation. According to Tabone (1987), secularization implies individualisation and differentiation which results in the fragmentation of the general value system. However, even though it seems as if religion is no longer providing a general value system, with its role being shared, almost overshadowed, by the State, recent happenings show otherwise. During the referendum on divorce held in 2011 and the recent street protests against the decriminalisation of abortion, one could see that the influence of the

Church may have changed but it still continues to penetrate and influence societal contexts.

Similar to other countries in the south of the Mediterranean, in Malta there has always been a strong bond between the Roman Catholic Church and the Maltese family. Boissevain (2006) argues that both the family and the Catholic Church are the basic units of the Maltese society. The family was depicted as being under the rule of the church,

the Catholic Church has had a dominant role in the way families were organized, spouses were expected to create large families, while the role of the father was to provide for his family, and the role of the mother was to be at home and take care of the family. (Azzopardi, 2017, p. 70)

The changes along the last two decades left an impact on Maltese society in general, transforming the traditional family model. The characteristics of the Southern European family model as formulated by Guerrero and Naldini (1997) were applicable to the Maltese family model: the importance of the extended family and the rapport between generations, the prominence of marriage with low divorce rates and few births outside wedlock and the insignificant number of people who cohabit instead of marry. However, at a very slow pace, the contemporary Maltese family based on marriage gradually changed in form and function. Young people started asserting a fear of the life commitment required in marriage, because this would jeopardize their autonomy and independence (Mizzi and Vella, 2006). Instead, the idea of cohabitation started creeping in. These subtle changes did not present an immediate threat to the close-knit family but mirrored the changes in society.

Although leaving the parental home is considered an important rite of passage in the life course of young people, this is not a common trend in Malta until marriage, since family attachments are still strong and solid and also because of the small size of the island. In fact, young people pursuing studies at the only public University on the island do not need to leave their parental home since they do not need to travel long distances to reach university or their place of work. Statistics published by Eurostat show that young Maltese people leave home at an average age of 30 or 31 (Eurostat, 2020). The institution of the family is still a strong fulcrum and most parents are not in a hurry to see their sons and daughters leave home; “most young people are content to remain living at home until their late twenties, and parents appear happy to accommodate them” (Ciorbaru et al., 2005, p. 8). The situation is slightly different on the sister island, Gozo, “more Gozitans are likely to leave their parental home and live in Malta” (Kunsill Nazzjonali taż-Żgħażaġh, 2021). Since the university and most of the job opportunities are in Malta, Gozitans either have to travel every day, that is, catch a thirty-minute ferry and another thirty or forty minutes to get to university or their place of work, or else rent a flat and live in Malta.

Gender roles in the family, the redistribution of power between males and females, the introduction of divorce and civil partnership, the rise in the age of marriage, the decline in fertility and the increase in the number of children born outside marriage, all added to the increasing diversity of the Maltese family. These continuous changes and developments stirred up a “silent revolution ... particularly for women” (Abela, 2016). Gender re-shifting brought about changes in the family and in society as a whole. Notwithstanding these changes, Borg

(2006) argues that research still shows that “women and men are still strongly influenced by invisible pressure to act appropriately according to their gender” (p. 191). The number of married women who chose to remain in employment after marriage has increased (Abela, 2016). While in 2003 only 25% of married women used to work part-time and 13% worked full-time, in 2015 the employment rate of married women was 44.1% (National Statistics Office, 2019). The number of women in employment between the ages of 20 to 64 increased from 43.8% in 2011 to 65.8% in 2019 (Eurostat, 2021). Nonetheless, Malta still lags behind since the average in the European Union is of 73.2%. The presence and the role of women at the place of work grew significantly. The implications of these changes have a huge impact on the family. The husband is no longer the sole bread winner. However, a survey carried out in Malta in 2004 showed that “married men spend an average of 2.1 hours on housework and family care during weekdays, compared to the 6.3 hours for married women” (Borg, 2006, p. 187).

The Maltese family has become more “secularised, more permissive of diversified family lifestyles” (Cefai and Cooper, 2006, p. 22). To the nuclear family, there has been added blended families, extended families, families with more than two parents, single-parent families and same sex parents. The fertility rate in Malta fell by 30.4% between 1990 and 2014. Live births decreased by two thirds. The mean age of women at childbirth in Malta has risen to 30.1 (European Commission, 2016). Furthermore, the number of women who choose to continue their educational journey is on the increase. During the year 2023, out of 3,566 graduates, 2,157 were females (University of Malta, 2023). The experiences and expectations of young women continued to change as they aspired to further their

studies or join the labour market striving to build a successful career. However, even though some of the choices made by women released them from ties to the traditional family model, yet they still carried a heavier load than their male partners with regards to childcare and household chores. Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) argued that when it comes to house chores women are doing a lot more than men, sometimes twice or three times the amount and thus equality at home remains elusive. Women are continuously being faced with the choice between their career and their family. Notwithstanding this, the changes within the labour market and the introduction of new welfare policies led to an unprecedented growth of employment particularly among the female population. New welfare policies such as the increase of maternity leave and measures that include free childcare services for children of pre-school age and after-school hours service for children aged 3-16, spurred women to enter or re-enter the labour market or to return to education. In 2017, Malta committed itself to promoting gender-balanced representations in the labour market, ensuring that “boards within major entities are composed of a minimum of 40% of the least represented sex” (Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion, 2018, p. 35). Moreover, in the same year the Guidelines for Increasing and Retaining Women in ICT were launched, together with various gender initiatives to increase and retain women in ICT. In the academic year 2023-24, the number of students on the various courses offered by the Faculty of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), was 464, out of which only 97 were females. However, despite the effort to increase female participation the latter statistics have remained the same for the preceding five years (University of Malta, 2024).

Accelerated modernisation has shaped and brought about major changes also in the labour market. The size of the Maltese archipelago, the lack of natural resources and the 164 years as a British colony left its impact on the Maltese labour market. In the last decades the Maltese economy went through a restructuring phase where reforms in work practices and the employment sector happened at a very rapid pace and led to several “diversified routes into the labour market” (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007, p. 40). The situation in Malta is different from other parts of Europe or anywhere else in the world since statistics show that the employment situation in Malta is very stable and the labour market is very tight. A report by Eurostat (2020) shows that Malta had the highest employment rate for recent graduates in the European Union in 2020, with a rate of 95%. In March 2021, the monthly unemployment rate was 4.1% (National Statistics Office, 2021). Employees are currently looking less at the traditional, nine to five, job for life and concentrating more on short-term-contracts, rolling contracts or no contracts. Such non-traditional employment gives more weight to the skills and the performance of employees. Looking at the current trend, there are a number of occupations in Malta that are either in shortage or in surplus. The National Skills Council is aiming to address these skills gaps and mismatches through better education policies.

In the past, nearly every job in Malta was unionised, with collective agreements serving as a clear framework for employer-employee relations. However, in recent years, the employment landscape has shifted. Young people who are searching for employment tend to prioritise short-term contracts and approach negotiations with greater flexibility. This shift has had a significant impact on unionisation, especially in the context of evolving trade union

structures. Baldacchino (2021) notes that Maltese young people often view unions as outdated or disconnected from their current work experiences and therefore argues that in order to stay relevant to the younger workforce, unions must adapt their strategies to better align with the evolving demands and expectations of these workers.

The digital revolution and advancement in AI continue to foster innovation and major transformation in the labour market throughout Europe and beyond (Nosratabadi, Thabit and Szilárd, 2023). Malta made and is still making great efforts to meet the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Great progress has been registered in connectivity and digital public services with the aim to elevate the quality of customers' experience. The government is fully aware that despite the advantages, the digital revolution presents various challenges. Therefore, digital training for all individuals, in whatever employment sector, has become a priority. This will help in narrowing the digital divide and will be of great benefit for those people who already joined or are about to join the labour market (Talmage-Rostron, 2024).

The advancement in technology also impacted the structure of the education system which needs to move away from the traditional ways of teaching to digital technologies. Digitally-enabled practices, like mobile devices, social media, eBooks, digital storytelling, and digital literacy are effecting cultural changes. The younger generation are more technologically proficient. In Malta, priority is being given to digital education to sustain a strong digital economy. Statistics (NSO, 2024) show that in Malta during the year 2023, 92.1% of persons aged between 16 and 74 years used the internet. Generative Artificial Intelligence plays a significant role in higher education and in the academic

sphere. It generates opportunities in “improving writing performance, facilitating personalised learning experiences, advancing research capabilities, enhancing accessible learning opportunities, and optimizing grading, scheduling, and enrolment processes” (Mannuru et al., 2023, p. 6).

The cliché that “change is the only constant” is very appropriate also for the Maltese archipelago. Even though there are instances where the Maltese society continues to hold on to tradition, Malta cannot be described as static or a backward society. Economic prosperity continues to grow. Malta enjoys a relatively stable economic climate with a strong public sector (Grech, 2015) and unemployment which stands just above 5%. In the last years Maltese society became more consumeristic, people changed their lifestyle and started living beyond their means,

Higher spending power, greater mobility, and a considerable increase in privately owned cars coupled with a need for a good time and relaxation of the formerly more restrictive religious morality have all had an impact on the new leisure patterns and lifestyles in Malta. (Azzopardi and Clark, 2005, p. 162)

In the first quarter of 2020 the number of newly licensed motor vehicles amounted to an average of 60 per day (National Statistics Office, 2023). Travelling, eating out, branded fashion clothes and accessories have become very common for the Maltese people. Such lifestyle is putting greater pressure on the family to bring together their relationship, family obligations and work commitments. It is estimated that, based on the income year 2022, the percentage of Maltese people at risk of poverty was 16.7%, a decrease of 0.2 percentage points when compared with 2021 (National Statistics Office, 2023). Having a job

is not a guarantee against poverty; the minimum wage is not enough to cope. A number of families on the minimum wage are struggling to make ends meet, the so called the working poor (McKnight, 2002). Such families find themselves living in government apartments and housing estates and this grouping of people with social problems heightens social exclusion. Not all students attending tertiary institutions manage financially to navigate through their educational journey even though they receive a stipend. A number of them opt for part-time or temporary jobs. Results of the Malta Eurostudent survey held in 2016 showed that close to 53% of all Maltese students work and study simultaneously (Scholz Fenech and Raykov, 2018). It is important to observe that academic achievement is not usually impacted by the fact that students work and study. However, this depends on the number of hours and the characteristics and the intensity of the job.

### **The Educational Path within the Transitional Journey**

An important milestone in the Maltese educational system was the setting up of the first University by the Jesuits in 1592 which saw the birth of tertiary education in the Maltese islands. At the beginning of the 19th century, Malta was taken over by the British and became one of the colonies of the Empire. The British era saw the setting up of primary schools at a national level and also the launch of the first Education Department responsible for all public schools in Malta. Schools were opened in each town and village and were free of charge. The Compulsory Attendance Act was enacted in 1924, while the Compulsory Education Ordinance passed through parliament in 1946 made school attendance obligatory up to the age of 14. In 1970, Malta introduced obligatory secondary education for all and then the Education Act in 1974 reviewed the school leaving

age. A further review took place in 1988 which made education compulsory from the age of 5, established a national minimum curriculum for all schools in Malta and set up of the Education Division which managed and directed all State schools. Education policy and provision remained highly centralized (Cutajar, 2007).

In 1999 the National Minimum Curriculum for all schools, both public and private, was introduced. With the vision of decentralization, the millennium witnessed a plethora of new amendments which heralded the re-structuring of state primary and secondary schools into ten colleges that ensured continuity of education, the transformation of an 11+ examination into a benchmark system and the evolution of the Education Division into two Directorates; Directorate for Educational Services and Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education.

The educational system in Malta is a tripartite one: State, Church and Independent. The Independent sector includes pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary education and is made up of fee-pay schools, usually led by a Board of Governors. Church schools are free and parents are encouraged to pay a donation. These schools are subsidised by the Government. Free education is provided by the State at kindergarten, primary, secondary and tertiary level. Primary and secondary school attendance is obligatory. Even though kindergarten attendance is not obligatory, Malta has over 92% of 3- and 4-year-olds attending kindergarten school (European Commission, 2021) placing it in the top echelon of European Member States. The islands also have faith-based schools, mainly Catholic and one Muslim school and a growing number of privately-owned schools, primarily parent foundation schools (Cutajar, 2007).

In the tertiary sector, the University of Malta remains Malta's main provider, however, the setting up of the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) in 2001 saw the expansion and diversification of this sector. Tertiary education, while funded by Government remains largely autonomous in nature and self-governing. Since accession to the European Union, the University of Malta has formed part of the Bologna Process. The importance given to higher education in Malta is manifested in the legal setting up of the National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE) in 2006, which was later developed into the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) in 2012. The revised legislation in 2012 establishes that the NCFHE was set up "to foster the development and achievement of excellence in further and higher education in Malta through research, effective licensing, accreditation, quality assurance and recognition of qualifications established under the Malta Qualifications Framework" (p. 6).

Education plays a crucial role in constructing a fair and equitable society for all (OECD, 2008). It also attempts to link education to job creation and economic growth (Gupta and Vengelin, 2016). Quality education is important because it impacts the cohesiveness of societies. Following the European Union's recommendations (EU 2020), Malta continued to strive in "raising awareness on the importance of education and training for all citizens" (Camilleri and Camilleri, 2020, p. 2). It is also putting much effort in offering life-long learning opportunities. Malta is also committed to reducing the number of early school leavers and to this effect in 2013, the Ministry for Education and Employment launched an 'Early School Leaving Strategy'. Malta intensified its efforts to increase the number of young people pursuing studies in higher education

institutions. Although the figures of students in higher education institutions have risen in the past years, Malta is still below the EU average (EU, 2018). Such figures show the need for both ongoing career guidance for all students and also support to people in employment to progress in their career through furthering of their studies.

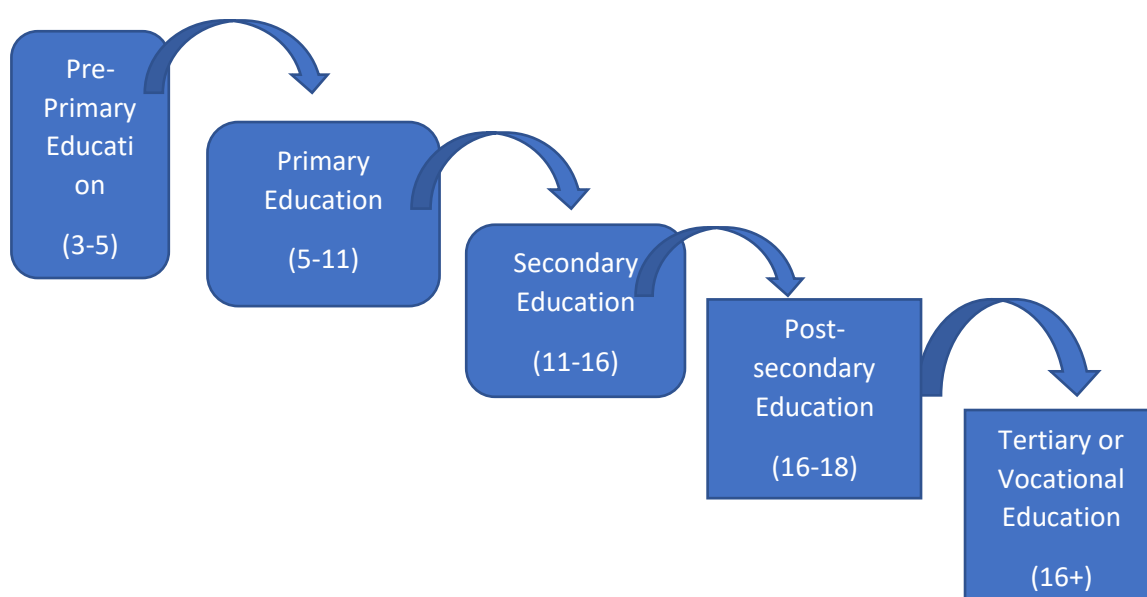
Through a number of policies introduced in recent years, the Government of Malta is also seeking to address skill gaps and employment mismatches. Among the targets set for 2014 (EU 2014), Malta committed itself to create more job opportunities in order to mitigate social exclusion and poverty. However, the large influx of foreigners is presenting a huge challenge to the Maltese Government and to the locals, including in the provision of services especially in the sectors of education, infrastructure, health and employment, among others.

The University of Malta, which is the oldest higher education institution on the Maltese archipelago and the main provider of tertiary education, plays a significant role in easing the transitional journey of young people. The fact that tertiary education is free for full-time courses and the fact that full-time students enrolled at university receive a stipend are good incentives to encourage young people to register for a course of study at the university. Once students are enrolled, the university must do its utmost to retain the students by offering both academic and social support. Student-centred teaching and services are instrumental for young people to complete successfully their tertiary journey. Adequate attention needs to be given to the quality of education in order to increase education outcomes effectively, which “translate into better job matching prospects and improved chances in the labour market” (Camilleri and Camilleri, 2020, p. 7).

An overview of the educational journey in Malta, as shown in Figure 2, and the main developments in the educational sector over the years were discussed and linked to the transitional journey of Maltese young people on their way to adulthood. The Maltese Archipelago is adorned with a complexity of changing elements in many spheres including education, while still having at its core stable, consistent values that are laced in its everyday life and culture.

**Figure 2**

*The Educational Journey in Malta*



### **The Impact of Social Change on Youth Transitions in Malta**

This research explores the way young Maltese people pursuing studies at the University, navigate and negotiate transitions, taking into consideration the societal changes of the last two decades. It also investigates the number of opportunities and risks these young people encounter. This section focuses on the intersection of changing social structures and the transitional journey of young Maltese people towards adulthood. It investigates the influence and impact of the process of individualisation and the introduction of neo-liberal practices on the

traditional trajectories of these young people. The access to the European Union in 2004 and the improved communication technology with the introduction of AI play a pivotal role in the acceleration of globalization in Malta. The increase in mobility, individualism, consumption, computer and internet usage, the new harsh reality of debt in the midst of the new phenomenon of credit cards and plastic money, the “dot.com generation” (Visanich, 2009, p. 200) and other changes have “an impact on the new leisure patterns and lifestyles in Malta” (Azzopardi and Clark, 2005, p. 162). In recent years the discourse about work-life balance, the notion of wellbeing and the quality of life are being given huge importance, so greater emphasis is being put on leisure in the everyday life. Such changes lead to the second demographic transition which brings about new social challenges, “including those with further aging, integration of immigrants and other cultures, less stability of households and high levels of poverty or exclusion among certain household types” (Lesthaeghe, 2014, p. 1).

The social and cultural structures in Malta, once rooted in the traditions of Catholicism and family-oriented principles went through several changes which impact and shape the life trajectories and experiences of Maltese young people. They are moving away from the traditional life course, taking more individualised decisions and choosing their own biographies. However, these traditional structures provide some limitations but give a sense of security. Being able to design and construct their own lives, young people maybe embarking on a journey marked by new opportunities but also with an amount of anxiety and pressure to make the right choices.

Even though students pursuing studies in a tertiary education represent a minority, only 33% of Maltese young people are in tertiary education compared

to the EU average of 64%, this research focuses on young people pursuing studies in a tertiary institution. In contrast, most of the young people who are not pursuing studies in a higher institution transition directly into employment. Their transitional journey is characterized by earlier entry into the workforce, where they gain practical experience and may benefit from entrepreneurial or skilled labour opportunities. The diverse transitional journeys of those in tertiary education and those who are not offer valuable insights into the broader dynamics of Maltese young people. Both groups negotiate societal expectations and structures, but they employ different strategies: one emphasizing immediate practical engagement and financial self-sufficiency, and the other focusing on academic growth and long-term career preparation. Together, these varied experiences illuminate the complex landscape of youth transitions in Malta.

In this thesis, Maltese young people pursuing studies in a tertiary education institution are given priority. The trend seems to be credential inflation because degrees and qualifications serve as a good guarantee when it comes to job hunting. The employment rate of recent tertiary graduates remains high in Malta, 95% v 85% at EU level in 2019 (European Commission, 2020). Demands for upskilling and reskilling courses are being made from low-qualified adults. Tertiary education, both academic and vocational, has become an asset in the transition into the labour market. This great demand for more qualifications has prolonged and extended the transition into the labour market because young people are choosing to stay longer in education to be better equipped when joining the competitive employment sector. Moreover, institutional changes in the Maltese society have transformed young people in becoming more critical about jobs and they do not accept the first offer that comes along. They look beyond the

salary; they look out for work which is personally satisfying (Evans, 1998).

Flexible work conditions, the opportunities to go from one job to the other or the possibility to juggle between education and employment have become more attractive. It is estimated that young Americans with a moderate level of education change jobs at least eleven times during their working life. In Malta the trend of changing jobs is slowly catching up. The Employment and Training Corporation (2006, p. 48) argued that “the tendency for more mobility appears to be greater for young persons with specific training and academic background”.

Knoppe (2018, p. 4) in his report about Malta, claimed that the “20-34 age bracket is the most mobile, while the private sector is more mobile than the public sector”. The one job for life concept which was a milestone in the previous generations is no longer on the agenda of contemporary Maltese young people. They feel freer than their previous generations to choose their life course and shape their biographies, constructing their own lives on the individualisation model, juggling between opportunities and risk.

## **Conclusion**

The significance of this chapter is the element of continuity and change, common to modern and developed social contexts and distinctions. The strategic position of the Maltese archipelago emphasises the global dimension that connect these islands with Europe and the world. The local dimension, mentioned specifically in this chapter give these islands a unique, almost ‘parochial’ character. It is in this very specific context that Maltese young people negotiate their path to the future. As they move on this transitional journey, they are constrained or assisted by particular traditions, such as the family or the Church, or particular conditions, like the size of the island, limited economic sectors, or perhaps liberated

by having become Europeans and the revolution in technology. The local matters. Aspirations and achievements evolved and keep on evolving within this distinctive context.

In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology and methods employed to collect the relevant data, analysed it and used it to answer the research questions.

## Chapter Four

### Methodology and Methods

#### Introduction

In this chapter I outline the methodology and methods I adopted for this research. I discuss the best approach to explore the transitional journey undertaken by a specific subgroup of young Maltese people - those in tertiary education - as they moved through the status of youth to that of adulthood.

The chapter starts with a presentation of the research and a discussion of the different research paradigms and the various approaches that can be used to address the research agenda, aligning with a worldview that best suits the aims of the research project. I then discuss in detail the chosen methodology, that is narrative inquiry, which is “a storytelling methodology through which we study narratives and stories of experiences” (Kim, 2016, p. 118). The relativist ontological position adopted in this study is one that sits well with the chosen methodology, while the epistemological underpinning is social constructionism. I argue that there are multiple realities and these multiple realities are not there to be discovered but are co-constructed as young people are narrating their stories together with the researcher. Then I move on to explain the theoretical perspective, that is, the three-dimensional space narrative structure approach to narratives and experiences. This framework is embedded in Dewey’s theory of experience (1938) which was subsequently developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) who identified three different dimensions to the experiences of the storyteller and the narration of those experiences: the *temporal* dimension, the *personal and social* dimension and the *place and space*.

This is followed by a discussion on the selection and recruitment of the research participants, the research tool, the process of data collection and analysis, ethical considerations and reflexivity. The chapter also engages with methods of verification to ensure rigour and trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Research Questions**

To be able to understand how Maltese young people negotiated their journey towards adulthood, the research was guided by these research questions:

- How do transitions of Maltese young people in tertiary education extend from the past to the present and into the future highlighting both continuity and change?
- How do the personal and the social interact in the negotiation of youth transitions to adulthood of Maltese young people in tertiary education?
- How are these stories of youth transitions to adulthood situated in a Maltese context?

### **Qualitative Approach**

Qualitative research focuses on understanding and interpreting the meaning, context, and subjective experiences of individuals or groups and is therefore appropriate to investigate the transitional journey of Maltese young people in tertiary education and these research questions. This approach is fitting in developing an in-depth understanding of the narratives of the participants (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research attempts:

to provide a holistic understanding of research participants' views and actions in the context of their lives overall ... those practicing qualitative research have tended to place emphasis and value on the human,

interpretative aspects of knowing about the social world and the significance of the investigators' own interpretations and understanding of the phenomenon being studied. (Snape and Spencer, 2003, p. 7)

One of the primary strengths of the qualitative approach is its ability to capture the depth and diversity of human experiences. Data is usually collected through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observations. Researchers can obtain in-depth understanding of participants' attitudes, ideas, and behaviours. This enables the exploration of topics that may be difficult to quantify, such as personal experiences, social processes, and cultural practices. The use of unstructured or semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions allow participants to express themselves freely. There is no space for preconceived ideas and data can lead to the discovery of unpredictable patterns and themes.

A challenge in qualitative research is that it is very time-consuming. Also, the data collected through this approach can be overwhelming at times. Therefore, the use of qualitative research requires good time management and organization.

Despite these challenges, qualitative research contributes to the understanding of the experiences of the participants. It is a powerful tool to gain insight into complex phenomena.

### **Research Paradigm and the Philosophical Underpinnings**

A research paradigm is a collection of common beliefs and viewpoints among scientists regarding the proper understanding of issues and how these issues should be addressed (Kuhn, 1962). In this chapter a number of different paradigms were reviewed and the study was positioned within a particular worldview (Creswell, 2009) which informed the research questions. The selected paradigm chosen for this study is constructivism which guided me in the

philosophical assumptions of the research, in the choice of participants and in the choice of tools and methods used in the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

Table 2 includes a number of research paradigms as classified by various authors. The four paradigms or worldviews that are widely discussed in literature and which according to Guba and Lincoln (1994) are contesting “for acceptance as the paradigm of choice in informing and guiding inquiry, especially qualitative inquiry” (p. 105) are critical theory, positivism, postpositivism, and constructivism. Lather (2006) adds poststructuralism and Willis (2007) includes postmodernism and feminism. As I examined the different research paradigms as shown in Table 3, I sought to choose an appropriate worldview for the study of transitions to adulthood of Maltese young people pursuing studies in tertiary education.

Critical theory focuses on the examination of power, inequality and social change. Its aim goes beyond, understanding society to changing it (Patton, 2002). Positivism is guided by the principles of objectivity, knowability and deductive logic and the research is scientific. Positivists believe in one single reality which can be measured and known. Postpositivism, which emerged from positivism, confronts the traditional approach that truth is absolute. (Phillips and Burbules, 2000).

**Table 2***Research Paradigms according to various authors*

	<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Post positivism</b>	<b>Constructivism</b>	<b>Critical Theory</b>	<b>Post modernism</b>	<b>Feminism</b>	<b>Transformative</b>	<b>Pragmatism</b>	<b>Post structuralism</b>
Crotty (1998)	X	X	X	X					
Guba & Lincoln (2005)	X	X	X	X					
Ponterotto (2005)	X	X	X	X					
Willis (2005)	X	X	X	X	X	X			
Lather (2006)	X	X	X	X					X
Creswell & Creswell (2018)	X	X	X				X	X	

*Note.* Adapted from various sources

In contrast to the objectivist positivist approach, constructivism emphasises that “reality is socially constructed through shared meanings and interpretations” (William, 2024, p. 2). Constructivism acknowledges the existence of multiple realities where different groups or individuals may have versions of truth and knowledge based on their social contexts. Constructivist researchers are interested in how the realities of individuals are constructed and believe that reality is socially constructed. Therefore, they explore the narratives, within a particular context to understand how individuals’ experiences are constructed within that context. Researchers using constructivism, practice reflexivity throughout the research process to eliminate any assumptions or biases. This is beneficial for the researcher to gain deeper insight from the data collected.

Table 3

## Major Paradigms

Paradigm	Positivism	Postpositivism	Constructivism	Critical Theory	Pragmatism
<b>Ontology</b> <i>What is reality?</i>	One single truth Objectivist Realism	Modified objectivist	Multiple truths and realities Relativism	Realities are socially constructed entities	Reality is constantly being renegotiated
<b>Epistemology</b> <i>How can I know reality?</i>	Reality can be measured	Reality is never fully apprehended	Reality is constructed and needs to be interpreted to discover the underlying meaning of events  Social constructionist	Reality and knowledge are both socially constructed and influenced by power relations	The best method is one that solves problems. Change is the underlying aim.
<b>Theoretical Perspective</b> <i>What approach do I use to know this reality?</i>	Postpositivism	Pragmatism	Interpretivism Three-Dimensional Space Narrative Structure Critical Inquiry	Marxism Queer Theory Feminism	Deweyan Pragmatism
<b>Methodology</b> <i>How do you go about finding out?</i>	Experimental research Survey research	Experimental with threats to validity	Ethnography Grounded Theory Narrative Inquiry Phenomenological research	Critical discourse analysis Critical ethnography	Mixed methods Action research
<b>Method</b> <i>What are the techniques used to find out?</i>	Quantitative: Focus group Interview  Questionnaire Sampling measurement and scaling Statistical analysis	Usually Quantitative	Qualitative:  Case Study Life history Narrative Observation  Qualitative Interview	Focus groups Open-ended interviews Open-ended observations Open-ended questionnaires	Combination of quantitative and qualitative methods

Note. Adapted from various sources

Guba and Lincoln (1994) asserted that the experience of reality is different from one person to the other. Meaning is constantly being constructed and revised by the young people in this study in the context of their interactions. As they narrate their stories they construct their own world in a unique way, depending on the temporal context, the spatial context and the context of other people. The focus of this study is not on the ‘facts’ of what happened to the young people narrating their stories but the focus is on the recollection of these stories. The existence of facts is not denied but it is not of paramount importance for this research. Rather, the young person’s interpretation of them is. The research is not about the experience *per se* but about the manner in which young people make sense of their experience by encoding it into narrative. The subject of exploration is ‘the story’ and this is very relative since the same story is narrated differently by different individuals. A relativist ontological position is therefore adopted.

The ontological perspective of relativism views reality and objects as inextricably intertwined with human consciousness. The strategies employed through this time of transitioning to adulthood are various. Meaning is furnished by young people in their own unique way. The ontological claim of reality as ‘truth’ is challenged in this research because reality is seen as multiple, co-constructed by young people in accordance to their world views. The epistemological perspective of this study is social constructionist. Discourse or conversation build knowledge and reality and the focus is on what takes place when people join together to construct realities. Guterman (2006) argued that social constructionists place “knowledge in the domain of social interchange” (p. 13).

The study adopts an idiographic approach. Through this approach I gained in-depth and unique insights about these young people and their experiences. Taking the idiographic approach I could uncover the meaning of young people's actions, their choices and their attitudes, and understanding their point of view (Schwandt, 1994). Through their narratives, research participants spoke about their choices and what lead them to take these decisions, they spoke about their aspirations and the 'who' and 'what' influenced their decisions.

Creswell (2007) argued that "good research requires making these assumptions, paradigms and frameworks explicit in the writing of a study" (p. 15).

Table 4 shows the philosophical positioning of this study.

**Table 4**

*Philosophical Positioning*

<b>Paradigm</b>	<b>Ontology</b>	<b>Epistemology</b>	<b>Theoretical Perspective</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Methods</b>
Constructivism	Relativist	Social Constructionist	The three-dimensional space narrative structure	Narrative Inquiry	Biographical Narrative Interviews

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Multiple research traditions exist within the qualitative approach. Creswell (2007) pondered on five approaches: Narrative, Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, Ethnography and Case Studies. The general process of research and the data collection processes are very similar. The phenomenological approach focuses on understanding the essence of the experience and the approach of grounded theory aims at developing a theory rooted in data from field. Narrative, ethnography and case study differ in how data is collected and analysed. The

focus of narrative research is on stories narrated by individuals and these stories are then arranged in a chronological order. In ethnography, the individuals' stories are set within the context of culture. In case studies the researcher compiles a detailed description to illustrate an issue. In response to the research questions of this study, a suitable methodology is narrative inquiry.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 19) argued that the best approach to represent and understand stories is “narrative inquiry which is a form of narrative experience”. The narrative mode of thinking guides the researcher into the understanding of human experiences, human actions and life events (Bruner, 1986). Moreover, narrative provides the right tools for individuals to construct a meaningful story about their lives which includes a “beginning, middle, end – a past, present and future” (McApline, 2016, p. 33). It is constituted of movements and gestures and is present in short stories, tragedies, comedies, myths, legends, fables, tales, novellas, epics, history, and drama. Narrative is also found in paintings, photos, images, stained glass windows (Barthes, 1977; Clandinin, 2007) and messages penned on social media. Narratives may be:

oral or written and may be elicited or heard during fieldwork, an interview, or a naturally occurring conversation. In any of these situations, a narrative may be (a) a short topical story about a particular event and specific characters such as an encounter with a friend, boss or doctor; (b) an extended story about a significant aspect of one's life such as schooling, work, marriage, divorce, childbirth, an illness, a trauma, or participation in a war or social movement; or (c) a narrative of one's entire life, from birth to the present. (Chase, 2005, p. 652)

Research participants are allowed to speak for themselves as they construct their narrative. Time, processes and activity are important components of the story line. They are the authors of their stories and not just objects of research. They weave their chain of experiences into narratives, making meaning of their own truths. Research participants are empowered to value their own creation of knowledge and to share their interpretations freely (Tuli, 2011). The researchers or the narrative inquirers play a significant role during this process. They, together with the participants, co-construct the story. Kim (2016) during her own narrative inquiry, described herself as a ‘midwife’, trying to “carefully deliver a story of my protagonist’s while maintain[ing] fidelity, the bond between the protagonist and myself” (p. 119) The ‘midwife’, like the researcher, has to work with “‘what is in the womb’ and collaborate with the informants in delivering ‘healthy, trustworthy stories’” (Kim, 2005, p. 57).

Narrative research seeks to analyse individual experiences and stories of the research participants regarding a particular phenomenon; in this research, the negotiation of transitions of Maltese young people who are in tertiary education on their journey to adulthood. This approach investigated the personal and social interactions of the individual narrating the story, through the passage of time and within a social, cultural and historical context. Thus, as research participants narrated their stories, they introduced the reader to their family, their peers, their partners, their situation at home, at university and at work. Listening to their stories and experiences, the researcher became familiar with the participants and also with the other characters and events that make part of their stories. Narrative inquiry develops an account of the experiences narrated, taking into consideration the sequence of events, the actors, plot and storyline. During the interviews,

participants tell their stories and jump from one experience to the other.

Restorying is part of the process of the analysis in narrative inquiry, where the stories narrated by the research participants are retold in a chronological order and in relation to the emergent patterns, always with the research questions in mind. In narrative inquiry, there is a collaboration between the participants narrating their stories, that is, the storytellers and the researchers, who will also become storytellers.

Along the years the interest in narrative has continued to grow and Mitchell (1981, p. x) describes narrative as “a knowledge which is embedded not just in the stories we tell our children or to while away our leisure but in the orders by which we live our lives”. MacIntyre (2007, p. 54) asserted that social life is a narrative, emphasising that “there is no way to give an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories”. The study of narratives was taken to new heights by Labov and Waletzky (1997) who gave birth to the notion that narratives are no longer only about written and literary narratives, folklore or full-fledged life histories. This major shift changed narrative from a piece of writing to “a mode of thought” (Bruner, 1997, p. 64). Labov and Waletzky (1997) introduced the idea that it is worth researching the oral narratives of everyday experiences of ordinary people. This study focused on the day-to-day life experiences of Maltese young people and their decisions as they move on in life: which course of study to pursue, which career path to choose, whether to terminate a romantic relationship, whether to go on a European student exchange, obtaining a car license, joining a youth organization, all experiences that can be described as milestones along the journey towards adulthood.

### *The Genres of Narrative Inquiry*

Narrative inquiry has different genres and these are important elements of the research design process. Barthes (1966) describes narrative as a “prodigious variety of genre” (p. 79) which does not have one explanation or interpretation, nor a conceptual consensus. The choice of the right genre is an arduous task and Kim (2016) emphasizes this by comparing the role of the narrative inquirer to that of a midwife, as alluded above. Researchers deliver stories conceived by research participants. The task of the researcher is to evaluate the “stories into being, grounded in ontological, epistemological and methodological understandings” (Kim, 2016, p.119). It is also necessary to choose the right narrative genre since this guides the researcher into collecting the right type of narrative data. Kim (2016, p. 121) divides narrative inquiry genres into three areas:

*Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry*: Autobiography and Autoethnography where the subjects of the study are the researchers themselves and their stories. This genre gives importance to the ‘I’, the ‘self’ and thus the document is in the first person. Autoethnography blends the aspects of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). This genre leads to critical self-study or to an analysis of the experience of the self (Hughes et al., 2012). Autoethnography is founded on the fact that the prerequisite to understand others is understanding the self.

*Arts-Based Narrative Inquiry*: Literary-Based and Visual-Based where the perspective of qualitative research in the whole area of narrative research changes. This genre can be “emotionally and politically evocative” (Leavy, 2009, p. 12) and may appeal to a larger audience. It is a “process that uses expressive qualities of form to convey meaning” (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p. xii). In this

genre, art is used together with narratives to help the reader understand the meanings of stories.

*Biographical Narrative Inquiry: Bildungsroman; Oral History; Life Story/History*, an increasingly popular genre which tells stories about others and explores lived experiences. It focuses on personal narratives and includes the past, the present and the future. Biographical research attempts to understand how “the participants construct and interpret their life experience” Kim, 2016, p. 126. Certain experiences can be traumatic and for a number of research participants this is like a re-enactment of an experience they had lived. Researchers should be well prepared and very careful about such “unintended consequences” (Juswick, 2010, p. 377).

This research took the biographical narrative approach. The different experiences narrated by young participants, where the focus is on personal narratives, were investigated. Personal narratives are like a doorway to examine lived experiences in relation to the historical, social and cultural contexts (Chase, 2005). Biographical narrative research explores the perspectives these young people have of their daily lives, focusing on how they make sense of the meanings they give to the stories they narrate (Denzin, 1989). Throughout the process people and their humanity are placed at the core of social and human research. As participants narrate their story, they are not merely reporting what happened, they are constructing and actively interpreting their own lives and their experiences, “biographical narrative research underscores how individuals’ lives are constructed in combination with their interpretations of the social environments where their experiences are embedded” (Kim, 2016, p. 126).

Combining the biographical narrative research with a qualitative longitudinal approach, where three cycle interviews were conducted with the same participant over a period of four years enriched the data collected and provided an insightful understanding of the transitional journey of young people.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***From the Theory of Experience to the Three-dimensional Space Narrative***

#### ***Structure***

As I attempted to understand the processes of transition of Maltese young people and find meaning in the experiences narrated, I was guided by Dewey's theory of experience (1938). Dewey contended that in the nature of experience there is a combination of an active and a passive element, "we do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return" (Dewey, 1916/2011, p. 78). This backward and forward connection is a combination which provides the experience. Dewey (1938) spoke about two principles that are fundamental in the making of an experience: continuity and interaction. The continuity of experience, also known as experiential continuum (Dewey, 1938), implied that every experience builds on previous experiences and the experiences that follow are then modified. Hence, meaning is not static but reconstructed by the new experiences. The other principle, the interaction of experience, shows the interaction going on between an individual and other individuals and/or objects. According to Dewey (1938), experience is both personal and social. Individuals are "always in relation, always in a social context" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 2). Dewey theorized the terms personal, social, temporal and situation to portray the various aspects of an experience and to interpret it. This approach is central to Dewey's philosophy of experience. He proposed that to understand

individuals, one needs to explore their interactions with other people. As young people are building their story, various characters are introduced in their narrative: parents, siblings, extended family, boyfriends and/or girlfriends, peers as well as various events like choosing the right course, giving up a hobby in order to study, the financial situation, moving out of home or staying at home, or choosing between full-time or part-time employment, among others. Researchers are not just introduced to these people and events but can witness the effect and the influence these have on the participants. Experiences are situated within a location and the place where the events happen leave an impact on these young people. These criteria were used to investigate the experiences of the research participants which according to Dewey (1934, p. 290) made the “tangled scenes of life more intelligible”.

Clandinin and Rosiek (2007, p. 39) worked with Dewey’s theory of experience, the concept of “a changing stream that is characterized by continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social and material environment”. Narrative research was developed into three dimensions by Clandinin and Connelly (2000): the past, present and future (continuity); the personal and social (interaction); and the place and space (situation). They argued that the experiences narrated are located in these three dimensions, that is, experiences happen over time, in a relationship within oneself or with others and in a specific context. Using this framework, I analysed the experiences narrated by the research participants. Human experience is central in narrative inquiry. I explored the personal stories of these young people, their feelings, beliefs, hopes and desires, and their interactions and connections with family, peers and people in authority. This provided me with an insight into their personal lives and their

social experiences. I also investigated their experiences in relation to their past and their present and their aspirations for the future. These narratives were explored keeping in mind the larger social narratives, like the digital revolution, the 2008 global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Maltese context.

This three-dimensional narrative inquiry space framework, as shown in Table 5, fitted well with my research questions as I attempted to explore how a specific subgroup of Maltese young people move from one status to another. The research questions situated within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space structure enabled me to better understand this phenomenon of youth transitions. As the research participants narrated their stories, describing their journey in relation to this time of transition, I attempted to understand the complexities of storied life (Bruner, 1986). The experiences and stories narrated provided me with a source to investigate, through the three-dimensional narrative space approach the perspectives, the turning points and epiphanies of the life course of these young people during this time of transition.

**Table 5***The three-dimensional space narrative structure framework*

Interaction		Continuity			Situation
Personal	Social	Past	Present	Future	
Look inward to internal conditions, feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions	Look outward to existential conditions in the environment with other people and their intentions, purposes, assumptions, and points of view	Look backward to remembered experiences, feelings, and stories from earlier times	Look at current experiences, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event	Look forward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines	Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters' intentions, purposes, and different points of view

*Note.* Clandinin and Connelly, 2000.

### **Research Design**

The research design chosen to address the research questions and to guide the research process is qualitative and longitudinal approach. Traditionally, longitudinal research has been used more in quantitative studies but over the last decade the qualitative longitudinal research methods have been increasingly used. Thomson (2007) compared longitudinal data to wine which deepens “in flavour and character over time” (p. 573).

The focus of qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) regards subjective experiences of time or change using qualitative data materials, like interviews, observations and/or text documents. Data is collected across a time span with the same participants and/or in the same environment (Calman et al., 2013; Solomon et al., 2020). Since individual experiences are distinct and change over time, repeated interviews could be instrumental in the collection of data. Also,

experiences unfold over time. The passage and the experience of time play a pivotal role in QLR. However, not all research is focused on time, the focus may be on practices, perceptions and orientations of individuals, how these change or remain the same; their relationship with events or situations; and/or possibilities of change in the circumstances. Researchers may be interested to know how patients deal with a disease or a particular treatment prescribed to them, or how people deal with a change in a policy. They would want to know the impact and effect on the lives of these individuals. QLR is useful in helping researchers understand how individuals deal with different situations through the passage of time. It is also appropriate to investigate how people look at their past, their present and their future; plans, expectations and aspirations which change along the years. During the QLR study researchers can compare and contrast the different ways people face change or lack of it in the lived experiences of the participants. Researches have the opportunity to explore how,

experiences accumulate over time, and how they might affect later orientations and actions ('shadow of the past') as well as how an individual's anticipation of the future, including expectations, specific time horizons and planning perspectives shape current actions and decision-making ('shadow of the future'), also accounting for non-linear forms of causality. (Hollstein, 2021, p. 9)

The QLR was used in this study. The participants taking part in this research were interviewed three times over a period of four years. I chose my sample from among first year students at the University of Malta. Since most of the courses at university are three years long, this gave me the opportunity to interview them at the start of their enrolment (first cycle interview) and mid-way

through their academic experience (second cycle interview). During the third cycle interviews the participants were at different stages in their academic journey. Two participants were still mid-way since they had changed the course of studies, a number of them were at the end of their course of studies and a few others were either furthering their studies by joining a postgraduate course or about to join the labour market. Through this study I embarked on a journey with the research participants and explored their experiences and trajectories through the lens of time. I attempted to grasp “temporal changes in beliefs, attitudes and experiences at different points of the life trajectory” (Winiarska, 2017, p. 6) of the participants. This gave me the opportunity to “trace the impact of social change in real time ... and analysing the longer-term impact of social conditions” (Wyn, 2020, p. 1).

### **Selection of Participants and Recruitment**

The selection of research participants was a very important task since their stories shaped this study. When recruiting participants, researchers must be able to justify and be transparent about their choice, not choosing on the level of which stories they like best or which participants they sympathise with.

Research participants eligible for this study had to meet a set of preestablished criteria, that is, they were required to be Maltese citizens and at the time of the first cycle interview, were pursuing studies in the first year of an undergraduate degree course at the University of Malta. In recent years the number of private universities and higher education institutes in Malta have increased. The University of Malta however remains the only public university in the Maltese archipelago. My sample for this study is taken from the University of Malta mainly because tertiary education in Malta is offered predominantly by the

University, “which provides services for 97% of the total tertiary level student population” (Further and Higher Education Strategy, 2009, p. 12). Even though tertiary education provided by the public and the private sector has been emerging over the past few years, as yet, the University of Malta is the main provider.

An important component of qualitative research design is the sampling. Robinson (2013) used a four-point approach to sampling: “(1) setting a sample universe, (2) selecting a sample size, (3) devising a sample strategy and (4) sample sourcing” (p. 25).

Defining a sample universe was not a very difficult task. I knew I wanted to conduct the research with young people, focusing on students in higher education. In the early days of this study, I decided to research students at the University of Malta.

Deciding on the sample size took me slightly longer. I researched various literature to guide me in establishing the number of participants. Subedi (2021) argued that:

The number of participants is guided by different methodological approaches of qualitative inquiry. For instance, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, and case study accept small samples, i.e., from a single case to 20, whereas ethnography, grounded theory, and generic qualitative research utilise larger samples. In this way, it could be 10-50 or more participants depending upon the nature of the study and the information to be collected.

(p. 11)

Guided by Subedi (2021) and also by the fact that it was a qualitative longitudinal study I decided on an approximate number of participants between 15 to 20. A very important factor that a researcher must consider in a longitudinal study, is

attrition. It is very common for participants to drop out due to various reasons. Therefore, the size of 15 to 20 participants would limit the detrimental impacts of attrition (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004) if any participants decide to leave the study after the first or second cycle of interviews.

The next step was selecting the sample strategy. I chose the convenience sampling which is the most common form of qualitative sampling. This occurs when people are invited to participate in the study because they are “conveniently (opportunistically) available with regard to access, location, time and willingness” (Lopez and Whitehead, 2013, p. 124). The main limitation of the convenience sample is that it would be unlikely to be representative of the population being studied (Creswell, 2007). However, this is not always of significance in qualitative studies. In this study, the participants came not only from different faculties but also from different areas of studies.

Following the acceptance from the Ethics Boards of the Faculty and of University (Appendix A), I requested permission from the Registrar, to send an email which I had prepared, through the office of the Registrar, to all first-year Maltese students inviting them to participate in the study (Appendix B).

I recruited seventeen participants for this study; nine males and eight females. Three of the participants live in the sister island, Gozo. One of the Gozitan male students quit the study just after the first cycle interview. By the end of the study, I had sixteen participants: eight males and eight females. Two of the participants were from Gozo, a male and a female.

## **Data Collection Strategy**

### ***Research Tool***

Research tools, which can be categorized in various types, include surveys, interviews, focus groups and observations. These tools are essential instruments in collecting accurate and reliable data. The selection of an appropriate research tool is critical as it directly impacts the quality and validity of the data collected, influencing the overall success of the research study.

In this study I used narrative interviews which served as an “invitation to narrate” (Narayan and George, 2012, p. 514) to the participants, to construct their narratives. Schütze (2008) developed the ‘narrative interview’. The role of the researcher is mainly to listen and prompt if needed and the “interviewees are narrators with stories to tell and voices of their own” (Chase, 2005, p. 660). The role of the researcher is very important to collect rich and reliable data,

Being a good interviewer for stories involves not just asking the right questions but sympathetically listening and holding questions back so that the person being interviewed can shape stories in his or her own way. Equally, being a good interviewer may involve responding to questions from an interviewee and so entering into a reciprocal exchange. (Narayan and George, 2012, p. 522)

There are two phases in narrative interviews: the narration phase and the conversation phase (Kim, 2016). During the narration phase it is up to the participants to do the talking and the researchers thus restrict their interventions to the minimum but listen and observe effectively. The conversation phase is the

time when researchers ask for clarifications about issues mentioned during the narration phase.

In qualitative research, interviews are the tool frequently used for data collection because this method provides particular cognizance into the lives of individuals. It also allows individuals to construct stories that reflect their experiences. The role of the interviewer is to seek knowledge, to listen attentively, and to be sensitive and responsive to the research participants. The interviewee possesses all the knowledge. This approach is well captured by Spradley (1979):

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand? (p. 34)

The Biographic Narrative Interview is a genre concerned with people's stories and experiences of everyday life. Narrative interviews are based on semi-structured interviews, with an open-ended format, "carrying out an in-depth study of an individual life as a whole" (Kim, 2016, p. 166). During such interviews, research participants narrate their stories with no or very little interruption from the researcher. They are in control during the interview and are free to speak about anything, at the pace they want, giving the details they want. They express themselves freely and decide at which point to start their story and on what chapter of their life course they wish to dwell. They are the central actors but the researchers cannot be portrayed as passive listeners. Researchers must be attentive so that they ask for clarification at the right time without creating any intrusion that could change the narrative. They must be "flexible and ready to follow the

unexpected paths” (Narayan and George, 2012, p. 515) because this can lead to the emergence of unforeseen data. For successful narrative interviews, researchers have to be well prepared, making sure that the research questions of the study are being answered through the data generated. Questions cannot be the yes-no type of questions but must be open-ended. Morrissey (1987) an oral historian, gives this solid advice:

phrase questions in open-ended language, avoid jargon, pursue in detail, ask for examples, defer sensitive questions until rapport is solid, let the interviewee set the pace of the interview and speak whatever explanations are foremost in the volunteered version of what occurred. (p. 44)

During this study, research participants were invited to narrate their own stories and construct their own narratives. To elicit narration or story-telling I used an adaptation of the Biographical Narrative Interviews Method (BNIM) of Wengraf (2001). When using the BNIM method, interviews begin with one open question called SQUIN (Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative). The most important thing is that participants build their narrative with very little or no interruptions. There are instances where participants would need some probing to continue narrating their life story. When research participants are ready from narrating their stories, the narration phase, the conversation will start. At this stage, researchers ask questions taking cues from the stories narrated, asking for further clarifications about themes raised during the first part of the interview.

For the first cycle interview I prepared an interview guide (Appendix C) to be communicated with the participant at the beginning of the interview.

Throughout the whole session with the participant, I kept in mind the two distinct phases of narrative interviews: the narration and the conversation (Kim, 2016).

During the narration phase, my interventions were kept to a minimum, letting the participants construct their own stories. My role during this phase was that of a listener, what Spence (1982) described as ‘active listening’ and an observer, attentive at the way the participant talked, the use of body language, emotional expressions, feelings and pauses. After the narration phase, we entered the conversation phase where semi-structured interviews and in-depth questioning were used. The interviewer asks more questions when in need of further clarification on themes mentioned during the narration phase.

### ***Fieldwork and Procedure***

Each interview lasted approximately between forty-five minutes to sixty minutes. I always asked the participants if they had any preference where to meet but since all of them were students at university, they found it easier to meet on campus. I met with the participants in a small office at the University campus, away from the usual noise, distractions and interruptions. The interviews conducted during the mandatory lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic were held online via zoom. Permission to this effect was sought and granted from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC).

The first cycle interview started with an introduction about myself and some practical information about the study. We went through the invitation letter (Appendix B), asked them to sign the consent form (Appendix D) and made sure everything was in order. Then, I asked them for demographic information and information about their course of studies. This gave me and the participant time to settle down. I believe that the first five minutes of the interview are crucial in

establishing the success or otherwise of the interview. Following this, we were ready to start with the interview and so I gave the participant a copy of the Interview Guide, prepared specifically for the first cycle interview (Appendix C) and went through it together. I explained again, this time in more detail, about narrative interviews and what was expected from them.

The second and third cycle interviews were guided by the previous interviews (Appendix E - Sample). I reminded them what they had said in the previous interview/s. Following this I asked the participants to continue constructing their story. During the first part, the narration phase, I let them talk; during the conversation phase I asked them questions about themes that were mentioned during the narration phase.

Before the commencement of each interview, research participants were once again reminded about the letter of invitation sent through the Registrar's office, which included important details, like that the interview was being recorded and that data will be anonymized soon after the session.

During the narration phase (Kim, 2016) I took a step back and listened attentively to the stories narrated by the research participants. They chose the experiences they wished to talk about. Most of the participants found it easy to talk about different themes, jumping from one experience to the other. During the interviews there were a couple of participants who had some moments of silence during which, at times I waited and at other times I prompted gently, generally by repeating a few phrases they had just said. Participants talked and moved from one theme to the other without much interruption. In the second part of the interview, the conversation phase (Kim, 2016), I asked for

clarifications or any additional information which could enrich the data. The questions asked during this phase are the type of questions that could elicit further narration and more stories about the experiences narrated by the research participants. During this phase my role as the researcher changes into that of a co-constructor and this leads into establishing a “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

My experience during the second and third cycle interviews showed that the interviewees felt more at ease and more willing to speak about themes which they were hesitant to speak about during the first cycle interview. It could be that since they had already met with me, they felt they knew me and could trust me more. This is one of the advantages of qualitative longitudinal studies, where research participants feel more comfortable with the researcher after the first meeting. In narrative studies, it is very common that a relationship is developed between the researcher and the research participant. This is not predicted at the beginning of the studies, it is “an open-ended relationship” (Josselson, 2007, p. 545) which is established over the research project.

### **Data Analysis Strategy**

In the analysis of the data collected I engaged with Polkinghorne (1995) who distinguished between narrative analysis and analysis of narratives, based on Bruner’s (1985) two modes of thought: narrative cognition and paradigmatic cognition. Narrative cognition refers to the human ability to understand and interpret experiences in the form of stories. It involves structuring information in a sequential, cause-and-effect manner that typically includes characters, settings, plots, and events. Paradigmatic cognition, also known as logical or scientific

cognition, refers to understanding the world through abstract, systematic, and rule-based thinking. It involves categorizing information, identifying patterns, and applying logical reasoning.

Following the interviews, I transcribed all the narratives constructed by the participants. Fully aware that in qualitative research the amount of data usually makes researchers feel overwhelmed, I had started working on the transcriptions while I was collecting the data. Therefore, as I completed one cycle interview, I started immediately working on the transcription of that specific interview. As I transcribed the interviews, I found myself reflecting upon the data collected.

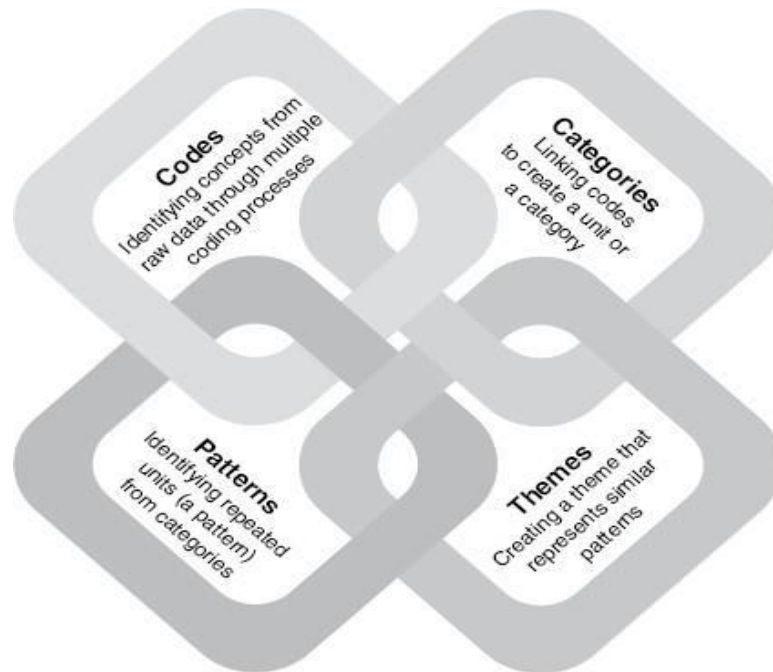
### *Narrative Analysis*

Once all the data was collected and all the transcriptions were done, I concentrated on narrative analysis or the narrative mode of analysis, based on “narrative cognition that attends to the particular and special characteristics of human action that takes place in particular setting” (Kim, 2016, p. 197). First, I started organizing my “field texts into research texts through the process of data analysis and interpretation” (Kim, 2016, p. 187). At this stage, researchers flirt with the data collected through the exploitation of the idea of surprise and curiosity, not knowing what is going to evolve from the data; they put aside what they already know and what is familiar to embrace “another story, one we haven’t necessarily bargained for” (Phillips, 1994, p. xxv). Through the analysis and interpretation of the data collected, I weaved into significant and coherent stories the experiences narrated by the participants. This is called the restorying process, where the three set of interviews of each participant were put into one story, in a more organized manner and in chronological order. Thus, the experiences of each participant were linked into one story. Throughout the restorying phase I was

guided by the three-dimensional space narrative structure of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), observing the way research participants narrated their stories and how the underpinnings of temporality, sociality and place provided support to narratives.

### *Analysis of the Narratives*

The purpose of narrative analysis is to help “the reader understands why and how things happened in the way they did, and why and how participants acted in the way they did” (Kim, 2016, p. 197). Once the sixteen stories were ready, I commenced the analysis of the narratives using paradigmatic cognition, which is a thinking skill, where one understands the world through abstract, systematic, and rule-based thinking. Moreover, the paradigmatic approach involves categorizing information, identifying patterns, and applying logical reasoning. Polkinghorne (1995, p. 10) argues that paradigmatic cognition “produces cognitive networks of concepts that allow people to construct experiences as familiar by emphasizing the common elements that appear over and over”. In the analysis of narratives, the first step is to try and find similar words, phrases or experiences in the narratives of the participants, using the coding and recoding processes. In narrative inquiry, coding is not only about words but large segments of the transcripts may be coded. Similar codes were then linked to create categories. From the categories, repeated units were identified and thus common patterns emerged from the data which resulted in the identification of themes, as shown in Figure 3 and Appendix F.

**Figure 3***Basic Elements of Qualitative Data Analysis**Notes.* Kim, 2016, p. 189.**Ideal-Types**

In examining both the reconstructed stories and the emergent themes I could identify different but common ways Maltese young people negotiated their transitional journey. This led me to the construction of a typology of young people in transition to adulthood. A typology is “an ordered set of categories that can be used to organize and understand objects and people according to their similarities and differences” (Hill and Knox, 2021, p. 3). According to Sharp et al. (2018) the development of a typology can follow from conducting narrative analysis. In this study, following analysis I took the ideal-type approach and grouped the participants in accordance with the different and similar characteristics in their

transitional journey which led me to further explore how these four different ideal-types negotiated their transitions.

The ideal-type approach, as noted in Chapter Four, originated from one of the ‘founding fathers’ Max Weber (1904). He developed ideal-types to serve as a “‘methodological tool’ or a ‘yardstick’ to measure similarities and differences between phenomena, processes and events across time, periods and place” (Hill and Knox, 2021, p. 5). Ideal-types are constructed in relation to a particular phenomenon; in this study the particular phenomenon is the transitional journey. Gerhard (1994) extended Weber’s original work and attempted to connect the individual case to the patterns elicited from qualitative data analysis.

Ideal-types fit well with the constructivist epistemological perspective. In the ideal-type scenario data is co-constructed between the participant and the researcher. Sharp et al. (2018) mentioned the parallels that can be drawn between the case reconstruction process in ideal-type analysis and the restorying concept in narrative analysis. Following this process and the analysis of the emergent themes a typology to better understand the processes of transition of Maltese young people in tertiary education as they reach adulthood was developed.

The ideal-type was not meant to be an accurate description of a particular phenomenon. The word ‘ideal’ in ideal-type context does not mean perfect. It refers to an idea in the philosophical sense (Werbart et al., 2016) or “something that exists only in the mind” (Philips et al., 2007, p. 217). According to Hill and Knox (2021) ideal-types are a “mental representation that will never be entirely identical with social reality but that helps to make such reality understandable” (p. 6). An ideal-type description is prepared but not all cases will fit or reflect every

aspect of the description. An ideal-type will represent the individual case to a greater or lesser extent (Kühlein, 1999) and not all cases fit exactly in an ideal-type. I decided to make use of the Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping approach (Kosko, 1986), which provides a framework for incorporating uncertainty and varying degrees of influence, making it applicable across various domains. Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping accounts for variability. Therefore, I created a continuum, presented in the following chapter (Figure 4), and put the participants within ideal-types but at different points on the continuum.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Narrative inquiry is relational (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2006) where the participant, that is the storyteller, and the researcher, that is the story listener, are in a dynamic relationship and together they produce a “collaborative document, a mutually constructed story created out of the lives of both researcher and participant” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 12). Through the narratives told by the participants and my restorying of their experiences, the readers are informed about how young people in tertiary education negotiate their transitional journey as they move on towards adulthood. Themes and patterns emerged from these narratives which guided us to the understanding of the processes of transition.

Being a relational venture, in narrative inquiry “relationship is the key to what it is that narrative inquirers do” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 189). It involves obtaining information about people’s experiences and reflecting upon the data collected. Researchers are ethically responsible to safeguard the dignity and the privacy of research participants (Josselson, 2013). The principles of ethical practice and ethical codes are the “free consent of participants to participate, guarding the confidentiality of the material, and protecting participants from any

harm that may ensue from their participation” (Kvale, 1996; Sieber, 1992; Smythe and Murray, 2000; Stark, 1998). Researchers, while honouring and protecting the participants, should also “maintain standards for responsible scholarship” (Josselson, 2013).

In order to pursue a path that leads to good ethical behaviour, approval to conduct this research was sought and granted from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) and University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) (Appendix A). Moreover, throughout my research and especially during the interview sessions, I constantly kept in mind the following principles: avoidance of conflict of interest; avoidance of deception; free and informed consent; privacy and confidentiality; protection from harm; and providing information and debriefing.

It is very important that the risks and benefits involved in the study are well explained to the research participants. The ethical process does not stop once the consent form has been signed. Researchers should be aware of the risks of breaching confidentiality throughout the whole journey of this study and not just at the beginning when consent is being sought. Consent is part of the relational process, determined from ethics founded on care and not on rights (Gilligan, 1982). Balance between fully understanding the ramifications associated with the participation in the research on the one hand and avoiding superfluous over formalization of the consent procedure on the other (Wiles et al., 2008) is important. Research participants are informed, before the commencement of the interviews, what is expected out of them. Even though all information has been sent to all students in the letter of invitation, they are reminded of the core information regarding this research: the purpose, process and procedure of the

study, the duration and the methods of research. Research participants were told again that the sessions are recorded and that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time they wish, even after the first cycle or second cycle interviews have been held and that this will not in any way affect their studies within their respective faculties. It is important that research participants are informed that once the study is ready, all data will be destroyed.

Qualitative longitudinal research “enables researchers and research participants to build up more of a relationship than would be likely to be established in a cross-sectional survey” (Elliott, 2005, p. 138). Privacy, confidentiality and data protection are of utmost importance in such research (Kent, 2000). Research participants were informed that soon after the interview a pseudonym will be given and even when the interview is being transcribed the pseudonym will be used and not the participants’ actual names. They were reassured that no one, not even the supervisory team, would know who the interviewee is. Any identifying features would either be deleted from the transcript or the researcher would alternatively use strategies to fictionalize and blur identities and places. One has to be careful to avoid changing the original meaning conveyed by the research participants. The procedure to anonymise the transcripts is complex because researchers have to “balance two competing priorities: maximising protection of participants’ identities and maintain the value and integrity of the data” (Saunders et al., 2015, p. 617).

Throughout the research, I was extremely careful not to cause any inadvertent harm to the research participants themselves, the institution, that is, the University of Malta and society in general. I did my best to act in a just and fair way by giving all the research participants their due without discriminating

against anyone, ensuring that I did not expose them to undue risks. These ethical principles are of utmost importance to me also because of my dual role at the University of Malta, being the field from where research participants come: my role as a Deputy Registrar and my role as the researcher of this study. Therefore, before I started this project, this was discussed at length both with my supervisor and co-supervisor and my immediate superior at work the Registrar of University. They gave me sound advice on how I can proceed with the research without mixing my role as a researcher with that of a senior administrator at the university. With a population of more than 11,000 students, I managed to keep my research apart from my work. If a student who is a participant in my research required the services of a Deputy Registrar, one of my colleagues agreed to stand in for me. This helped me to keep my roles separate and also not to create unethical situations with the students.

My study deals mainly with life experiences and the aspirations of young people, their “personal memories and experiences may be recounted in full, rich, emotional detail and their significance elaborated” (Josselson, 2007, p. 545). I was aware that as young people narrated their story this could pose an amount of risk because it might entail the re-enactment of traumatic experiences and critical moments. Even though, during the years that I spent working with young people I have acquired a number of skills of how to deal with these situations, I also recognize my limitations since I am not a trained counsellor or psychologist. Therefore, I had at my disposal a referral system and familiarized myself with the services available. I consulted both the supervisor of this research, Professor Marilyn Clark, who is a psychologist and the co-supervisor Professor Howard Williamson, who has been his Faculty Ethics Champion and a member of the

University of South Wales Ethics Committee since 2005. Before conducting the interviews, I discussed with them different scenarios I may encounter, such as if a participant becomes emotional and starts crying, or gets very angry when remembering a situation that had occurred years ago. I made sure that support mechanisms were in place and that an environment existed where the interviewee could relax and enjoy a level of self-disclosure that leads to growth (Corbin and Morse, 2003). The challenge is that the interviewer “maintains equilibrium, go on listening and contain the emotional experiences being recounted or expressed” (Josselson, 2007, p. 100).

The relationship between the narrative inquirer and the research participant is at the core of narrative research. Kim (2016) speaks about the evolution of this relationship: from a ‘spy’ researcher to a ‘friend’ researcher. Knowledge about a phenomenon is generated depending on the openness, trust and generosity of the sharing of the interviewee. This plays a pivotal role in longitudinal interviews and it is crucial that a relationship built on trust is established between the researcher and the research participants. Cornwell’s (1984) research demonstrates how the accounts or stories related in the first interview differ from what is narrated in the second and third interview. As I conducted the second and third cycle interviews, the participants were more willing to disclose the experiences they were not ready to speak about in the first cycle interview. However, one has to be careful that the relationship between the researcher and the research participant is not too close because this would create bias in the interview and would fail to generate rigour in data. My role as the researcher is to listen to the experiences and the stories and not to act as a therapist or an interrogator. I had to be careful also about what I shared with the

research participants in order not to create bias. It is important that research participants are respected, “treated with dignity and respect” (Shea, 2000, p. 28) throughout the whole study, no matter what their story is.

Once all the data was collected, good stewardship was important so that resources were used efficiently and justly. Researchers must be guided by ethical behaviour both during their research process and also when it comes to publishing. The researcher should refrain from publishing anything that could be of harm to any of the participants, to the institution or to society. Adhering to ethical principles and procedures is a “stance that involves thinking through these matters and deciding how best to honour and protect those who participate in one’s studies while still maintain standards for responsible scholarship” (Josselson, 2013).

### **Reflexivity**

Reinharz (1997, p. 3) claimed that researchers do not only “*bring* the self to the field ... [but] *create* the self in the field”. Reflexivity is a skill, an ability of the researchers to be aware of their own responses to the world around them, people and events. It is the moment when researchers locate themselves in the story that is being narrated and follow the process of interaction within and between the researchers and the participants and the data that informs decisions, actions and interpretations at all stages (Etherington, 2004). It is like having an ongoing conversation about experiences while living the moment (Hertz, 1997). Reflexivity is not only about transcribing stories, it is also “a process of discovery: discovery of the subject (and sometimes of the problem itself) and discovery of the self” (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 124). The task of reflexive researchers is not to

report facts or truths but to construct and interpret the experiences and stories narrated to them (Hertz, 1997).

During the interviews, I found myself engaging in reflexivity. As I listened and transcribed the experiences of these young people there were many instances when I asked myself whether this journey had also become my journey and whether my own experiences affected the outcome of this research. These thoughts made me realize how important it is to remove any biases and concentrate on the rigour of the data being generated. In my role as the researcher and the interviewer of this study I never interfered with the interviewing process. As I embarked on this journey with these young people, I was extremely careful not to put “the personal self so deeply into the text that it completely dominates” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 578). In conducting these interviews and as I was analysing the data collected, I was constantly aware of my positionality within the framework of this study. Researchers seek to find new knowledge and not try to find knowledge that fits into what they already know. They listen to the research participants in a deconstructive way, starting with a not-knowing attitude (Combs and Freedman, 2002). As I already mentioned, it was imperative that my roles as a Deputy Registrar at the University of Malta and as the researcher of this study remained apart throughout. The task of the researcher is to analyse the experiences,

to make choices regarding what is significant, what is trivial, what to include what to exclude. We do not simply chronicle what happened next, but place the next in meaningful context. By doing so we craft narratives; we write lives. (Richardson, 1990, p. 10)

Keeping a journal throughout this study was essential for me as the researcher of this study. It was an effective tool to document experiences, values, biases, and the emotional state of the researcher. Also, one may need to look at these notes later on through this study so it is important to record dilemmas, concerns, ethical questions and breakthroughs. In the journal the researcher may take an analytical approach, dwelling on why things happened or why people reacted in a certain way rather than just describing an event. Writing down notes in a journal is effective for researchers to fully understand their own process.

Reflexivity focuses on self-awareness. Researchers must be careful that the study is not transformed into a form of “navel-gazing” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21) or a narcissistic self-preoccupation. The study cannot give privileges to the researchers over the research participants. Finding the right balance between an over-subjective text and giving away your role as the researcher to the participants is very important (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

### **Trustworthiness and Rigour**

Qualitative research is a methodological approach which places a constant emphasis on accuracy and rigour while exploring the intricate details of human behaviour, attitudes, and experiences (Cypress, 2017). It is crucial to ensure trustworthiness in establishing the credibility and reliability of qualitative findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed the application of a set of specifically developed evaluation criteria to replace the quantitative assessment criteria of reliability and validity. They established a criterion to safeguard the concept of trustworthiness and rigour in qualitative research comprising of four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

### ***Credibility***

Researchers develop credibility through the engagement of adequate time in the field, building a rapport with the participants to understand their perspective. This enables researchers to acquire comprehensive insights (Adler, 2022). Close observation involves recognizing personal biases, preconceptions and the practice of reflexivity throughout the entire research process. During this research I made sure to bracket my biases and remained objective during the whole process of data collection, data analysis and interpretation. This was instrumental to keep to the minimum any potential distortion in the findings. To enhance the credibility of the interpretation of the stories narrated by the participants and to reduce the impact of any potential bias, the stories were sent to and endorsed by the participants before I presented them in Chapter Five.

Taking a qualitative longitudinal approach gave me the opportunity to build a safe rapport with the participants and to gain more insight into their narratives and stories. Moreover, it helped me capture data that is not usually captured through surveys or short interviews.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability pertains to the extent to which research findings derived from a study can be applicable and relevant to alternative contexts and situations. In qualitative research, transferability is distinct from the concept of generalisability associated with quantitative research. In quantitative research transferability is associated with quantitative research. In qualitative research transferability highlights the richness of the data capturing human experiences within a particular context. It is very important that transferability is not considered in isolation but together with the other aspects: credibility,

dependability and confirmability. In Chapter Seven I gave my recommendations for the applicability of the research findings to contexts outside the study situation and how this study on youth transitions in Malta and the development of the four ideal-types have relevance for understanding youth transitions more widely.

### ***Dependability***

Throughout this study and particularly in this chapter, every step of the research process was thoroughly documented ensuring transparency. Recording decisions taken during the study, including changes in methodologies and methods, and changes in the strategy analysis facilitates transparency. An audit trail is instrumental in establishing the dependability of the research and traceability. This allows other researchers to replicate the study or assess the dependability of the findings by following the same procedures and understanding the rationale behind decisions made.

### ***Confirmability***

I have already mentioned that following the restorying process and before including the stories of the participants in Chapter Five I involved the participants in the verification process to ensure that their narratives are accurately represented. This strengthens the confirmability of the findings by providing an opportunity to the participants to validate or offer corrections to their stories.

The reflexive journal was of great help throughout the research process, by keeping track of evolving thoughts, biases, and reflections. This approach enhances transparency and provides insights into the subjectivity of the researchers, contributing to the confirmability of the findings.

These four concepts, all together strengthen the trustworthiness of the research, ensuring robust qualitative rigour.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I highlighted the rationale behind the choice of the research methodology and method. I discussed a number of issues in connection with the approach to this study, including the philosophical underpinnings and the different paradigms. Narrative inquiry, the chosen methodology, served as a guide to understand human experiences. This was done through the three-dimensional space narrative structure, where experiences and stories are seen as happening in relation to oneself and others, over time and in a place. This chapter also presented the processes of collecting and analysing data, where following thematic analysis, I developed a typology and introduced the ideal-types. Ethical considerations, reflexivity, trustworthiness and rigour were also considered in this chapter.

In the following chapter I will present sixteen narrative accounts which will include common categories and similar patterns and the themes that emerged from the stories of these young people.

## Chapter Five

### Restorying the Transitional Journeys

*If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am.  
And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life,  
then I too must come to know my own story*  
(McAdams, 1993, p. 11).

#### Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discover and “experience the experience(s)” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 86) of the Maltese young people participating in this study, as they negotiated transitions during their tertiary education journey. This was achieved through the restorying of the experiences narrated by the sixteen participants. The restorying process distinguishes narrative inquiry from other qualitative methodologies. The research participants crafted their stories and facilitated my task to better understand their experiences because “it is through story that we may come to know, through the story of others” (Lewis, 2011, p. 506). Narratives attempt to gain access to the life experiences of the participants and engage in a process of storytelling (Leavy, 2009). In this chapter, based upon the experiences narrated by the participants, the non-paradigmatic narrative analytic interpretive stories were introduced.

Three cycle interviews were conducted with each of the sixteen participants over a span of four years. The longitudinal qualitative approach enabled me as researcher to document experiences through the lens of time. This provided the reader with a movie rather than a snapshot of the life story and of the tertiary education journey of the participants (Berthoud, 2000). The longitudinal approach is an efficacious tool “for analysing the dynamic lives of young people

and tracing the intersections of individual biographies with societal processes across time” (Cuervo and Cook, 2020, p. 13).

During the third and final cycle interviews I could see various patterns weaved in the life course of the research participants. A number of them mentioned that this study gave them the opportunity to track their journey and identify the changes they went through during the time spent at university. Giselle realized that she “was locked in a relationship” and whatever she did was done through that relationship. Both Mario and Stefano were enthusiastic to attend the third interview. Mario insisted that “xtaqt niġi għal dawn il-meetings” [“I wished to attend these meetings”] because these interviews helped him see “kif evolvejt” [“how I evolved”]. Ramona said that these interviews helped her remember what she had to go through and looking back, she was “very satisfied” with what she managed to achieve.

My journey as researcher was not too different. Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 81) defined narrative inquirers not “as disembodied recorders of someone else’s experience. They too are having an experience, the experience of the inquiry that entails the experience they set out to explore”. Some of the shared stories echoed my own narrative. Reflexivity made me reflect on my own life course (Jenkins, 1992). This gaze upon myself, as I listened to the participants, transcribed their narratives and read their stories, is what Foley (2002) called “mirroring of the self” (p. 473), and what Merleau-Ponty (1962/2007, p. 263) described as “an attitude of curiosity and observation”. The advantage of reflexivity in qualitative research is the attainment of rigour and integrity. Engaging in reflexivity in research keeps “subjectivity in check” (Kim, 2016, p.

250) and this led me to consider and re-consider rigorously my own influence and my interpretation of the stories presented in this chapter.

### **Restorying**

Restorying is “the process of gathering stories, analysing them for key elements of the story and then rewriting the story to place it within a chronological sequence” (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002, p. 332). The criterion I used to recraft the stories and to understand how young people negotiated their transitions during their tertiary education journey was the Three-Dimensional Narrative Space Structure framework, developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), namely, temporality, sociality and place. This framework has been discussed in detail in Chapter Four, Methodology and Methods (Table 4). The three dimensions, which in narrative inquiry need to be investigated concurrently, helped me unravel the stories of the participants.

Narrative inquiry gave me the opportunity to delve into the lived experiences of the participants and investigate their negotiation of the journey leading to adulthood and autonomy during their tertiary education trajectory. This methodological approach allowed me to explore how young people negotiate complex social, cultural and personal challenges. Through their stories, young people articulate their transitional journeys, highlighting the negotiation between societal expectations and personal aspirations. The narratives highlight different dimensions, including education, employment, relationships, and identity formation, demonstrating how these areas intersect and influence their pathways. By capturing these stories, narrative inquiry underscores how young people exercise agency within structural constraints, balancing traditional values with modern opportunities. The concept of negotiation is particularly helpful in

understanding young people's experiences in these contexts, as it reflects the active process of managing various influences and making decisions. These personal accounts revealed the dynamic interplay between external influences and internal development, illustrating how young people construct their identities, make crucial decisions, and adapt to the evolving demands of adulthood. Ultimately, the narratives underscore the interactive and adaptive nature of their transitions, reflecting both the negotiation of social relationships and the continuous process of personal growth.

As I reconstructed the stories of the participants, I kept in mind the size of the island and the fact that almost everyone in Malta is either related or knows each other as was recounted in Chapter Three. To keep the anonymity of the participants, some of the details narrated to me by them have not been included in the restorying process. Another important aspect in the presentation of the stories and the experiences of the participants is language. When I quoted directly from the transcripts, one could observe that most of the participants are bilingual and during the interviews some of them were switching between Maltese and English. When they spoke Maltese, the Maltese version has been translated into English and both versions have been presented. Thake Vassallo (2009) considered bilingualism as part of the heritage of Malta. Vella (2013, p. 548) observed that “speakers seem to have a high awareness of which language or language variety it is appropriate to use in different domains”.

In my analysis of the data collected I engaged with Polkinghorne's (1995) distinction between narrative analysis and analysis of narratives based on Bruner's (1986) two modes of thought: narrative cognition and paradigmatic cognition. In this chapter, taking a narrative cognition approach, data is

configured into a story and thus I present sixteen stories. In the following chapter, using paradigmatic cognition, I present the findings and discuss the themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews and which were common in the collected stories (Polkinghorne, 1995).

### **Temporality, Sociality and Place**

The stories of the participants were structured and analysed through the three-dimensional space narrative framework (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) using three dimensions: temporality, sociality and place.

The first dimension, temporality, enabled me to engage with the experiences narrated by the participants, moving backward and forward, pointing to the past, present and future (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). This dimension dealt directly with the first research question:

- How do transitions of Maltese young people in tertiary education extend from the past to the present and into the future highlighting both continuity and change?

Research participants spoke about their current experiences at university and beyond, remembering past stories, at times reliving the same emotions and feelings, and designing their future aspirations. Pondering on their past, they negotiated their present and looked forward to future aspirations and possible experiences and plot lines; “there is a past from which it has grown and a future toward which it inevitably must move. The present stage of its life is connected intrinsically with both its past and its future” (Mozur, 1991, p. 322). The significance of this dimension in narrative inquiry was rooted in the philosophical perspectives of experience where young people were portrayed as composing autobiographies which were constantly revised (Carr, 1986).

The second dimension, sociality, enabled me to engage inward and outward, towards the internal conditions of the research participants: their feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions; and their external relationships with other people: their intentions, purposes, assumptions, and points of view (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). This dimension dealt directly with the second research question:

- How do the personal and the social interact in the negotiation of youth transitions to adulthood of Maltese young people in tertiary education?

The research participants spoke about their internal journey, many times a journey of growth and development. As they narrated their stories, I was introduced to their parents, their siblings, their extended family, their peers, their boyfriends, girlfriends and partners, people in authority, among others. They depicted and described fateful moments, barriers and incentives, enablers and hindrances throughout their journey to adulthood. As I listened to their stories and as I reread their transcripts, I observed their personal and social interactions and tried to understand these Maltese young people as they negotiated their transitions during their tertiary education journey.

The third dimension enabled me to engage with the place, the situation, the context, the time and the landscape of these narratives and experiences. This dimension dealt directly with the third research question:

- How are these stories of youth transitions to adulthood situated in a social, cultural, economic and historically contingent context?

My attention was drawn to “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of the place where the inquiry and the events take place” (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). This involved the landscape of the young people

narrating their experiences. The identity of narrative inquirers is linked to the stories that happened in a particular place or places. The location where the experiences and the events happened is crucial, since “place may change as the inquiry delves into temporality” (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006, p. 481). The task of the narrative inquirer is to “think through the impact of each place on the experience” (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 44).

### **The Four Types**

Delving into the stories narrated by the participants, I investigated the impact of temporality, sociality and place on these Maltese young people. As I analysed the narratives, I constructed a typology of young people in transition to better organise and understand the processes of youth transitions in the life course of Maltese young people in tertiary education.

One of the early pioneers in the field of sociology, Max Weber (1904) gave birth to the ideal-type approach as a methodological instrument to comprehend intricate social phenomena. Ideal-types are not exact representations of reality; rather they capture essential characteristics of a social phenomenon. These constructs are beneficial to understand complex social realities and to compare real-world cases, identifying patterns and understanding key differences. Weber (1904) emphasises the importance of understanding the meaning behind each individual’s action and ideal-types provide a structure for the analysis of these actions. Ideal-types are approximation and therefore do not perfectly reflect reality but provide a means to understand variations. Weber’s ideal-types are abstract, theoretical constructs designed to highlight essential characteristics of social phenomena. They are purposefully exaggerated to clarify complex social

realities providing a lens through which societal structures and behaviours can be analysed.

Ideal-types offer valuable tools for sociological analysis, enhancing our understanding of the interplay between individual agency and societal structures. They help illustrate how social forces shape behaviour and how individuals, in turn, influence society by interpreting, conforming to, or challenging these expectations. This dynamic relationship between structure and agency underscores the complexity of social life. The narratives explored in this chapter demonstrate how participants navigate tensions between societal constraints and personal autonomy, reflecting the broader negotiation between tradition and modernity in shaping identity and behaviour.

Gerhardt (1994) broadened Weber's approach "to bridge the gap between a focus on the individual case and focus on the patterns arising across cases in qualitative data analysis while ensuring methodological rigor" (Hill and Knox, 2021, p. 7). In the analysis of qualitative data, there are a number of researchers (Kettunen et al., 2018; Gisslevik et al., 2019) who used the ideal-type analysis in the second stage of their research following thematic analysis.

Cross-cutting themes identified in the narratives of sixteen tertiary education students guided me to the discovery of the different and similar characteristics in their trajectories which led me to explore how these four different types negotiated their transitions. As I analysed the data collected, I grouped the participants according to differences and similarities in their transitional pathways, "in such a way that the wholeness of the people is retained" (Mandara, 2003, p. 132). The four types, identified from their narratives, reflect

different attitudes, behaviours, and approaches toward societal structures and transformations. The types are:

The **'traditionalists'** choose to follow the linear path, conform to the old ways of doing things, uphold established customs, values, and social norms. They seek stability and continuity with the past, often resisting change that threatens their worldview. 'Traditionalists' are not ready to make changes or take risks. They maintain a strong attachment to community values and institution, like religion and family structures. The participants categorised as 'traditionalists' enrolled at university, most of them choosing a traditional course of studies that leads to an established profession. On completion of their undergraduate studies, they move straight into the labour market. Their aspiration for the future is to find secure employment with a good salary in order to be able to save enough money to buy an apartment, settle down with their partner and start a family.

The **'opportunists'** are also embedded in tradition; they are fundamentally 'traditionalists'. They settled for a life that has largely been mapped out for them on account of culture and tradition. They are passive and do not look out for opportunities. However, if an opportunity comes their way, they seize it. A sudden experience or a situation could change their settled position and launch them towards a different future.

The term opportunism is often colloquially perceived negatively in that it conveys a sense of self-interest and even self-indulgence. The 'opportunists' in this study were those who seized unexpected opportunities that, with hindsight, had altered the direction of their lives, not just for selfish reasons.

The '**pioneers**' are those who have skilfully connected tradition and change. They have not broken ties with family and church but have absorbed the new possibilities in a changed Malta and mapped their route accordingly. They are ready to explore new possibilities, are active decision-making players and agentic. Without challenging the norms, they combined tradition and modernity. Their journey was thought through and planned.

The '**radicals**' are those who dramatically decided to break free and change course in one way or another, either through rejecting traditional pushes or embracing contemporary pulls. They are ready to change career aspirations even if it means putting their future at risk or starting afresh away from Malta. The '**radicals**' are not afraid to cut ties with their families and religion.

Participants in the same type negotiated their transitions in a similar manner but not identically. Not everyone fitted neatly into a single category, primarily because the notion of ideal-types serves more as an approximation to a general standard rather than an exact representation of young people in transition. The four-type paradigm provides a good starting point to better understand the transitional journey of young people. However, diverse transitions and individualized trajectories reflect the fluidity and complexity of late modernity. The complexities of contemporary youth transitions involve negotiating multiple, often overlapping pathways, influenced by factors such as globalization, technological advancement, and shifting socio-cultural norms. These fluid trajectories capture the diverse experiences of young people, including how they negotiate personal aspirations with external pressures, adapt to rapidly changing labour markets, and redefine traditional milestones such as education, career, and family formation. For example, Ramona is identified as a '**pioneer**' but she is

inclined to be a ‘traditionalist’ in family values. Once she establishes her career, she plans to explore her father's business to ensure his hard work and efforts are preserved. Stefano who fundamentally is a ‘traditionalist’ took the opportunity that crossed his path while at university and went on an Erasmus exchange.

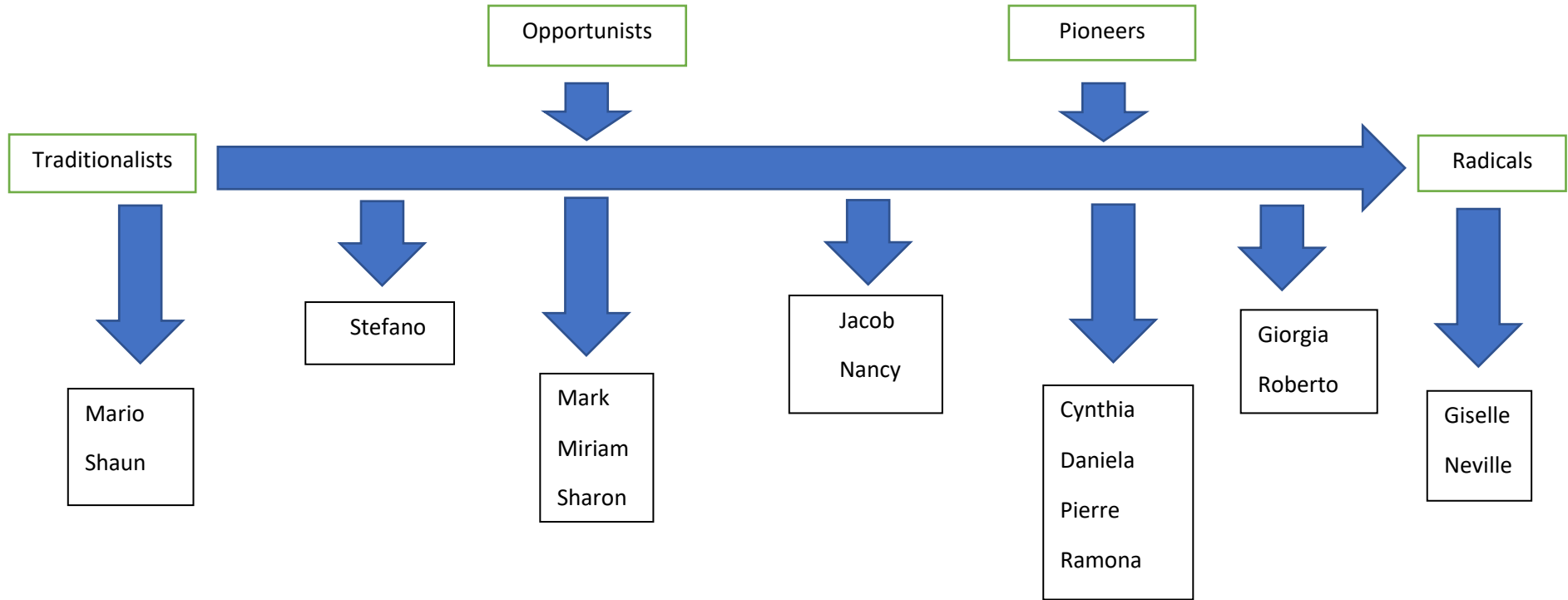
While the ‘traditionalists’ and the ‘radicals’ are clearly distinct from each other, the boundaries of the ‘opportunists’ and the ‘pioneers’ are somewhat unclear. This led me to the fuzzy cognitive mapping (Kosko, 1986) approach, an approach that spreads out the different types along a continuum, to simplify what is complex and uncertain. The fuzzy approach is an “approach that embraces rather than erases the variability of our world (PECUS Erasmus+, 2022, 1.49). This approach made the conceptualisation of the transitional journey of Maltese young people in tertiary education more understandable. On the continuum, as shown in Figure 4, the ‘traditionalists’ and the ‘radicals’ are at the farthest ends; the ‘pioneers’ and the ‘opportunists’ are the different possibilities in between. Some of the participants, during their journey towards adulthood, chose to negotiate their journey without looking out for opportunities or taking risks; they chose to remain in the same spot. Other participants moved along the continuum, from one type to the other at different speed and not necessarily all the way to the farthest end. Also, the same types may be found in different spots along the continuum, for example, some of the ‘opportunists’ may be closer to the ‘traditionalists’ while others may be closer to the ‘pioneers’. This confirmed that not all participants fitted exactly in an ideal-type group.

This study shows that the ‘traditionalists’ are largely shaped by structure, while the ‘radicals’ are more agentic. The ‘opportunists’ have agency thrust upon

them through sudden and unexpected structural circumstances. The ‘pioneers’ exercise agency through the changed structural and cultural circumstances of Malta. This is well depicted in the restoried experiences which are presented in the following section and discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

**Figure 4**

*Different ideal-types along the continuum*



### **The ‘Traditionalists’ – Mario, Shaun, Stefano**

These three participants are identified as ‘traditionalists’ because of the methods employed to negotiate their transitional journey. Even though to different extents, a main focus of the stories of Mario, Shaun and Stefano was the linearity and predictability of their journey. Their goal was to finish successfully their course of studies and move on to the labour market, the next stage in their life course.

#### ***Mario, a dedicated and diligent young man***

Mario comes from a very traditional family who chose to conform to the established way of doing things and remained a ‘traditionalist’. His transitional journey is linear, although extended slightly because he had missed a year to attain the special course requirements and join his preferred course at university. Throughout the three cycle interviews Mario came across as a very hard-working young man, striving to perform any task assigned to him to the best of his ability. At university he focused mainly on his course and did not get involved in any student organizations. Mario mentioned how during his second year of studies,

kont qisni ntlift, tlift naqra l-prijorità tal-iskola u ntfajt ħafna fuq fitness u gym. U it is not a regret, kont fit u hekk imma batew il-marki, so I am not proud of my marks għax ħadtha bi żbrixx. Imbagħad ħadtha ħafna aktar bis-serjetà third year, fourth year u fifth għax imbagħad C’s għall-A’s u B’s. Imbagħad qisek tkun taf xi trid; tgħid ħa tagħmel moħħok hemm u ssir iktar focused [I was like lost, lost the priority of education and concentrated more on fitness and the gym. I don’t regret this, I was fit but

my grades went down, so I am not proud of my marks because I hardly passed. Then I took third year more seriously, and fourth year and fifth year, because then from C's my grades went up to A's and B's. Then like you know what you want, you tell yourself to put your mind to it and become more focused].

Mario spoke about his family describing his relationship with his parents “m’ommi normali, ma’ missieri normali” [“with my mother normal, with my father normal”]. Mario is very grateful for the support in the educational journey provided by his father; “Missieri mhux ta’ xi ħafna skola, però dejjem tana opportunitajiet ... jigiġifieri dejjem għinna” [“My father is not into education, but he always gave us all the opportunities, ... he always helped us”]. However, Mario narrated that the support of his parents goes beyond the basic needs. He spoke about the tradition in their household that “il-first car hekk, jixtruha l-parents” [“the first car is bought by the parents”]. Since Mario wanted a luxury car, he had to fork out an amount of money himself, “il-karozza ovvjament biex giġbtha kienu għenuni naqra mhux ħażin, imbagħad żidt ammont jiena...” [“To get the car, obviously they helped me financially, and I added an amount....”]. He considers himself “lucky, ikkumparat ma’ nies oħra u hekk, inhossni lucky” [“lucky, compared with other people, I feel I’m lucky”].

Mario spoke about his grandfather and described his passing away as a time of great sadness, a critical moment in his life. His grandfather passed away some time before the first cycle interview and in the third cycle interview, he spoke about it as if this happened just a couple of weeks before. Mario narrated that he had just bought a Play-station and every time his mother used to tell him to join her in visiting the grandparents, “Il-ħin kollu nilgħab u dan. Imbagħad

kont għamilt qisu xi two weeks mingħajr ma' narah lin-nannu u vera ddispajċieni li qgħadt nilgħab din l-ostra Play-station flok ma mort nara lin-nannu u l-aħħar tislima u hekk” [“I used to play this game all the time. And I didn't visit my grandfather for about two weeks, and I'm really sorry that I stayed playing this bloody Play-station instead of visiting my grandfather for the last time”]. This left a huge impact on Mario and led him to take a drastic decision, he decided to “qlajtha u begħtha, ma ridtx naf aktar biha!” [“disconnected it and sold it and I don't want to see it ever again!”]. As he narrated this story, I could see that he was still mourning the loss of his grandfather and was extremely disappointed that at that stage he chose the Play-station over the visits to his grandfather, “vera ddispjaċieni kien, kont inħobbu ħafna lin-nannu! ... Aħjar sagħtejn man-nannu milli Play-station” [“I am so sorry, I used to love my grandfather very much! ... Better two hours with my grandfather than playing the Play-station”].

During the second and the third cycle interviews Mario spoke at length about his girlfriend, also a student at university. He described their relationship as “propja l-ewwel relazzjoni” [“first proper relationship”]. He looked very happy and made sure “ma nieħu xejn for granted ... li ngħidu ħa niżżewġu ... let it take its course ... tiżżewweġ 'il quddiem, jekk imur kollox sew ... why not? Ma nżomm xejn eskluż jiena” [“that I don't take anything for granted ... saying that we are getting married ... let it take its course ... will get married if all works out ... why not? I don't exclude anything”]. Mario gave his all in this relationship, to protect it and make it work. He navigated and planned his life and his aspirations for the future with the relationship constantly in mind, “x'jiġri jekk jiena nkun, pereżempju miżżewweġ 'il quddiem u rrid noqgħod nitlaq ġej u sejjer sitt xhur in u sitt xhur out, insiefer mingħajr ħadd mingħajr familja” [“what will happen if I,

for example get married and I have to keep travelling back and forth, like six months here and six months there, going abroad without the family, ”]. Mario narrated how difficult it was when he went on a nine-day holiday without his girlfriend, “kont vera ddejjaqt mingħajrha” [“I didn’t enjoy it without her”]. This relationship was becoming more and more important for Mario; he mentioned that he was ready to move out of his parents’ house not because he was unhappy living at home but he longed “li nimmuvja mat-tfajla” [“to move in with his girlfriend”].

During the third cycle interview, I could see that Mario was ready to progress on his linear journey, to join the labour market and “tibni l-karriera” [“builds his career”] in order to be prepared to start his own private practice, together with one of his friends or with someone else. He talked also about his dream job “mhux bħala wieħed mill-membri parlamentari ... bħala assistent ta’ xi hadd jew hekk, hija quite an honour biex tasal hemmhekk” [“not as one of the members of parliament, ... like an assistant to one of them, it is quite an honour to get there”]. Another aspiration Mario spoke about is his plan to buy a small flat to rent out so that he will be in a better position to buy a house where he could settle down with his girlfriend.

Mario was at a stage in his life where he was satisfied and happy with what he had achieved, “Inħossni tajjeb, qiegħed f’relazzjoni, għandi l-ħbieb ... karozza ok. Sapport tal-familja, l-iskola ... jigiġifieri tajjeb” [“I feel good, I am in a relationship, I have friends ... car ok. Family support, University. ... All is good”]. In his last cycle interview, he explained how his participation in this study helped him to take stock of his life and monitor his self-development, “Jien għalhekk xtaqt niġi wkoll dal-meeting ... għax interessanti ... evolution tiegħi

nnifsi and I look back. U mill-adolexxenza, kien hemm change” [“I wanted to come for this meeting. ... it is interesting ... seeing how I developed and I look back, and from the adolescence period there has been a change”].

Mario is ready to continue with his predictable journey to adulthood. The processes of transition during the tertiary education journey were smooth with very little experimentation. He felt fulfilled, ready to proceed in the traditional progression to adulthood: to find a secure job, continue investing in his romantic relationship, become engaged, marry, move out of the parental home and have his own residence together with his spouse.

*Shaun, a man for others*

Shaun comes from Gozo, Malta’s sister island. During our first cycle interview I met a confused young student, very uncertain about his choice of course at university and about his future. Throughout the three cycle interviews, I could see that Shaun was on a journey of exploration. He was not sure what he wanted or what his destination would be, but he knew he wanted “to become a man for others”, to be of service to those around him. Shaun changed his course of studies at university twice. Finally, he decided to go back to the first course he had registered for. Shaun loves Gozo, it is the place where he feels he belongs. He loves its traditions and commuting daily to Malta to study is a huge sacrifice, “iġib ċertu diskriminazzjoni dan is-sugġett. L-aktar aħna l-Għawdxin, għaliex aħna rridu ninfirdu minn mal-familja, inbiddu l-lifestyle tagħna u nitilgħu Malta” [“this subject creates discrimination. Especially for us Gozitans because we have to be away from our families, change our lifestyle, and come to Malta”].

Shaun comes from a very traditional family, where the father is the sole breadwinner. His mother stopped working to take care of the children first as infants, then by being present when they arrived home from school and driving them to all the extracurricular activities. Shaun and his sibling were involved in a lot of activities: choir practice, theatre rehearsals, dance and piano lessons. He spoke with great admiration about his mother, “Nammiraha lil ommi ħafna għal dik il-ħaġa. Konna niġu mill-iskola u nsibu ’l-mummy dejjem hemm. Għax vokazzjoni. Dik hija sfortuna wkoll. Għax ħajjitha waqqfitha. Ħajjitha tgħixha litteralment għalina” [“I admire my mother. When we arrived from school she was always there. This is a vocation but also unfortunate. She stopped her life. She literally lives for us”]. Even though very present, his mother never interfered or tried to influence Shaun’s decisions. He asserted that his parents instilled in him a number of values, “jekk ma tkunx ta’ servizz għal ħaddiehor, jien naħseb il-ħajja tkun bla skop. Kull persuna giet f’din id-dinja biex tagħmel differenza u dejjem nipprova nkun ta’ għajjnuna u servizz għall-oħrajn u anke parir ’l hawn u ’l hinn” [“if you are not there for others, our life is aimless. Every person is in the world to bring about change, I always try to help others, through giving sound advice here and there”]. He strongly believes that a person is moulded in childhood; upbringing plays a very important part and influences who the young person becomes. He claimed that he is who he is today, thanks to the upbringing and the values passed on to him from his parents.

When we met for the third cycle interview, I could see that Shaun was less perplexed and perturbed about his educational trajectory. He narrated how he negotiated his doubts and uncertainty and went back to the first course he had chosen, “illum il-ġurnata nista’ ngħid, li l-kors qiegħed jogħġobni ħafna. Ma

għadnix niddubita t-triq tiegħi. Kuntent fejn qiegħed” [“Now I can say that I like the course. I’m not doubting anymore which road should I take. I am happy where I am”]. Shaun’s transition from compulsory to tertiary education is elongated and protracted but following some months of indecisiveness, he took a decision and felt sure of his way forward, “issa li qbadt din it-triq, nispiċċa din it-triq. Niggradwa u nipprova nsib xogħol stabbli. Għalissa ħa niggradwaw” [“now that I am on this road, I wish to finish. I want to graduate and then try to find a stable job. First let me graduate”]. Shaun was still uncertain which career he wished to follow; he was sure that the course he was following would provide him with a number of good opportunities to fulfil his desire, that of being of service to others, “jien il-karriera li ridt nibni ridtha tkun waħda għas-servizz għal ħaddieħor, din kienet l-aim u għalhekk għażilt dan il-kors” [“the career path I want to follow is to be of service to others, this was my aim, that’s why I chose this course”]. This urge to be of service to others made Shaun consider the religious vocation and this created an internal conflict between dating and becoming a priest. Even though Shaun was still uncertain about his calling, he was certain that whatever path he took, his aspiration was to be of service for others,

Jien nemmen hi x’inhil r-relazzjoni xorta tista’ tkun ta’ servizz għall-oħrajn, kemm jekk tidhol is-seminarju, jekk ħa ssir qassis, int ħa tkun ta’ servizz għall-komunità tiegħek, għal kull persuna. Jekk ħa tidhol f’relazzjoni ma’ xi ħadd, ħa trabbi familja, inti servizz għal dik il-familja u tista’ tkun ta’ servizz ukoll għal aktar persuni. Tista’ tkun ta’ servizz imma jiddependi minnek [“I believe that whatever the relationship, one can still be of service to others whether you join the seminary and become a priest,

you can be of service to the community, to every member. If you decide to be in a relationship with someone, you will raise a family, and you are of service for that family and for others. You can be of service for those who depend on you”].

Another change Shaun spoke about is the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first cycle interview, he was almost grateful for the pandemic because all lectures were held online and he did not need to leave Gozo, his family, his friends, his familiar environment to embrace a new lifestyle. However, in the third cycle interview he mentioned that moving out of his comfort zone helped him grow and make new friends, “Kemmi qisni ilni li ħriġt mill-comfort zone tiegħi, għamilt dan il-pass, għamilt ħbieb ma’ Maltin ukoll u ħbieb ma’ Għawdxin ukoll li lanqas biss kont nafhom. U hekk twessa’ ċ-ċirku tiegħek” [“From the time I moved out of my comfort zone, I took this step, I have new Maltese friends, and also got to know Gozitans whom I didn’t know before. Like this I am widening my circles”]. He perceived this situation as discriminatory and suggested that the University of Malta should make better use of the Gozo campus.

Shaun spoke a lot about his friends and the many activities they do together. Their leisure is not just about going out for dinner or for a coffee; they are involved in parishes, putting up exhibitions, taking part in theatrical productions, preparing and decorating the Church for the different religious feasts and organizing fund raising activities which enable the parishes and small communities to thrive and flourish. Shaun had a couple of opportunities to be in a relationship but “nibqa’ lura jiena. Hassejtni guilty ħafna. Xi kultant ngħid forsi ma nafx xi rrid. Xi kultant tħossok qiegħed taqta’ qalbek ukoll. Jiena nħossni

għandi l-opportunitajiet kollha f'idejja u dejjem nitlifhom" ["I always keeps back and then I feel guilty. Sometimes I say that maybe I don't know what I want. I start getting discouraged. I feel many opportunities come my way but I miss them all"]. Looking back at one specific opportunity for a relationship which he missed, Shaun regretted that he kept back, "kienet tifla bil-għaqal. Kienet pakkett ... iddispjaċut ħafna, imma insomma ma hemmx x'tagħmel!" ["She was a good girl, had everything. ... I'm very sorry but there is nothing I can do now!"].

Throughout the three cycle interviews Shaun spoke about the changes he had to go through and how he tried to negotiate these changes. The decision to enrol at university brought with it a number of adjustments. Shaun had to embrace a new lifestyle when he started commuting daily to Malta, he had to change his friends. Through all this he described himself as a "persuna ta' karattru li niddejjaq nieħu sfida. U l-bidla naħseb tbezzagħni. ... Dik hija difett. U f'kollox. Dik li jigrili. Nitlef ħafna opportunitajiet fil-ħajja. Irrid nibda nagħmel xi ħaġa" ["person who avoids challenges in life. Change petrifies me. ... This is a defect. It happens to me. In everything. I miss out on so many opportunities in life. I need to do something about it"]. That was exactly how Shaun left the third cycle interview: determined to embrace new challenges, regarding them as opportunities of growth and development.

The way Shaun negotiated his transitional journey identified him as a 'traditionalist'. He dislikes change, and living in Malta away from what is familiar, offered a huge challenge to him. When he decided to change his course of studies, he felt very insecure and uncertain and decided to go back on his decision. Shaun finds it difficult to risk and he is disappointed in himself at having avoided the challenges he encountered during his life course.

*Stefano, embarking on a journey*

Inħossni indipendenti imma fl-istess hin dipendenti. Indipendenti fis-sens li kapaċi mmexxi l-affarijiet u nagħmel l-affarijiet tiegħi. Illum il-ġurnata iktar u iktar. ... Then again, niddependi fuq il-ġenituri ekonomikament u finanzjarjament. Kważi kważi bilfors inħossha, sakemm ma tridx taqla' dahrek bix-xogħol. [I feel independent but at the same time dependent. Independent, in the sense that I am able to accomplish things and do my own thing. Today, more and more. ... Then again, I depend on my parents economically and financially. It stands to reason that I feel like this, or else I have to work very hard.]

Throughout the three cycle interviews Stefano found it easy to speak about himself and effectively portrayed who he is. He reminisced about his beautiful childhood memories, describing this phase as a “positive” experience. He defined his family as “traditional ... my mum and dad have always lived together. ... They are always there and I appreciate that they are there for me”. Even though his father worked very long hours and therefore, arrived home late, Stefano declared that “I love them both”. His parents are very present in his life, “they’re always available for me to talk to. They are always there and I appreciate that they are there for me”. He recounted how much he enjoyed it when “on Saturdays, we bring takeout and spend time together”.

Stefano believed that being an only child made it difficult for him to mix and make friends. He narrated that “in junior school, I felt lonely, I used to be alone a lot also and it was maybe because I am an only child. I was never close with someone, like you say these are your friends, but I never had someone close. This

was difficult”. As he progressed to senior school, he managed to come out of his shell, “I started forming groups and being friends with others”.

The tertiary education trajectory was not easy to navigate for Stefano because of the COVID-19 pandemic. He narrated that he felt he went through this important stage in life on his own. It was a big challenge to choose his study-units while on lockdown. He was stressing out because he wanted to make the right choice. Then a friend told him that his choice of study-units would not determine his employment and that really helped him to destress, “u tghallimt li nagħmlu l-università ma’ jfissirx li dak li ħa tagħmel f’ħajtek” [“and I learnt that what we do at university does not mean that that is what you are going to do in life”].

As he continued narrating his story, Stefano spoke about one of his greatest fears, the fear of failure. On one hand, he felt that this fear is beneficial because he would always be very well prepared for any occasion but unfortunately it made Stefano anxious as a person. Whatever the event, “I used to worry that something grievous might happen during the show; always worrying that something wrong might happen”. Because of this,

I always have a plan B just in case something happens. For example, a plan if University doesn’t work out. I always have a plan just in case something goes wrong. Right now, I have a contract with ... (name of the company), I always worry that I am not good enough and they will fire me; it’s like a recurring thing.

Stefano explained that this feeling of not being good enough is present in different areas of his life. During “exams, I might think I got an E in an exam but then I get B or a C”. These persistent negative thoughts also influenced his relationships, “Even with the ladies, I always over-think that I might not have

impressed her enough or even in my choice of friends”. Stefano illustrated how during his tertiary education trajectory he managed to negotiate this fear of failure, “jekk ikun hemm eżami tqil ngħid ok, immidd idejja, ejja ħa nibdew. Sibt dik l-attitudni, taking things head on” [“if the exam is difficult, I say ok, let’s go for it, let’s start. Started with this attitude taking things head on”]. He explained that he was still trying to master his fear in the area of relationships and at this stage he confessed that, “Qed nipprova nitgħallem naqra aktar fuqha wkoll għax jgħiduli shabi, jgħiduli għalxiex u hekk u they dig in deep biex jgħinuni and I appreciate” [“I am trying to learn a bit more, also my friends give me advice, they tell me why and they dig deep to help me and I appreciate”]. His friends encouraged him to create an account on one of the dating sites but Stefano believes that “trid tkun minni li nkellimhom u noħroġ għaliha. Trid tiġi minni” [“I have to take the plunge and speak to them and go for it. I have to do it”].

Stefano enjoyed being involved in different activities, “I always want to do something; it’s boring always studying and staying at home not doing anything”. He has a number of hobbies and he also enjoys going out for what he calls a “xarba” [“drink”]. At university he was also an active member in one of the student organizations and affirmed that his involvement in this organization helped him develop various skills, “biddlitni l-fatt li kont parti minn student organisation. Tgħallimt ħafna time management u task management. Peress li events, kelli ħafna logistika. Il-ħin kollu trid tmexxi u tikkordina. U tiddilja ħafna man-nies, which helped me a lot” [“being part of a student organization helped me change, I learnt a lot about time management and task management. ... I had to deal with a lot of people, this helped me a lot ... changed me for the better”].

Stefano started the third and last cycle interview feeling slightly disappointed that this was the last interview because he was enjoying the sessions “meta nkun hawnhekk, qisni ngħid tgħid ok, x’kont qed nagħmel? ... ngħid ok naf x’gara,” [“when I am here, I say ok, what was I doing? ... I say ok I know what happened,”]. During the third cycle interview, Stefano looked less timid and more self-confident. As he narrated his experiences, he felt more in control of what was happening in his life, describing himself as “upbeat. Bħala karattru nħossni kbirt, inbdilt, kollox” [“upbeat. Character wise I feel I grew, changed, everything”].

The three young men, Mario, Shaun and Stefano, identified as ‘traditionalists’, are primarily influenced by structure and tradition. Family played a key role in their transitional journey and their focus was to successfully complete their educational journey and find a secure job. However, Stefano’s journey looked slightly different; he moved closer to becoming an ‘opportunist’ and if an opportunity crossed his path, he would surely consider taking advantage.

### **The Opportunists – Mark, Miriam, Sharon, Jacob, Nancy**

The ‘opportunists’ on the continuum find themselves closer to the ‘traditionalists’. In their transitional journey they do not exercise much agency and they seize an opportunity only if it comes their way. Such opportunity may change their life course.

#### ***Mark, enjoying life***

L-Erasmus biddlitni għax immaturajt hafna. F’daqqa wahda trid tfendi għal rasek, tara kull cent just in case li jinqala’ xi flus. Il-way of life ta’ kif kont ngħix ma nbidlitx, imma l-mindset inbidlet [Erasmus changed me because I matured a lot. All of a sudden, I need to be responsible,

checking every cent just in case something crops up. The change is not about the way of life, that didn't change, it is about the mindset].

Mark comes from a very small family; he is an only child. He gets on very well with his parents and claimed that as he was growing up, they were “protective, ... jipproteġu kull deċiżjoni illi nagħmel” [“protective, ... defending every decision I used to take”]. He remembered that when he was thirteen years old and started going out with his friends, “bdejt niġġebbed biex nieħu ffit ir-riedni tal-affarijiet tiegħi” [“I started discussing to take control of my own things”].

He spoke at length about his junior school and the positive impact it left on his upbringing and on who he became, “fil-primarja kienu jagħtu kas li jibnuk bħala persuna mhux edukazzjoni. Naħseb li kieku ma mortx dik l-iskola m'iniex dik il-persuna li jien illum” [“in the primary school they used to give importance to the person holistically not just education wise. I think that if I didn't attend that school, I am not the person who I am today”]. Mark also mentioned his journey at senior school which he described as tough at times, but on the whole it was a great opportunity for him to keep on learning and progressing in life. He narrated how some time before the third cycle interview, together with his friends, they were musing over their school days. They were discussing what they would have changed if they had had the opportunity to change an experience or an event that happened during those days at school. Mark's answer to his friends was,

Jiena naħseb li le. Għalkemm kien hemm żminijiet illi kont niddejjaq immur l-iskola, ... nemmen ċertu mumentu fformawni kif jien illum.

Nemmen li ċertu affarijiet kieku ma għamilthomx jew ma grawx, m'iniex

il-persuna li jiena llum [I think I don't. Even though there were days when I used to hate going to school, ... I believe that certain moments made me who I became at the end of the journey. I believe that if I didn't do certain things or certain things never happened, I am not who I am today].

Mark is aware that these experiences taught him a lot. A significant lesson was that “illi jekk ma naqbiżx għalija jiena, hadd mhu se jaqbeż għalija. Meta kont żgħir, kont għadni tifel, naïve” [“if I don't stand up for myself, nobody will stand up for me. When I was young, I was a child, naïve”]. At this stage Mark narrated his experience of when he was bullied, an experience which he had to endure for almost a year and a half, “gratli Form 1 u nofs Form 2” [“it happened while I was in Form 1 and halfway through Form 2”]. He explained how he negotiated this experience, the decision not to speak to his parents about these incidents and then how finally, one day he arrived at a stage in his life “għax imbagħad kont għedt jekk ha nħalliha għaddejja ha nispiċċa ndum sal-Form 5. Imbagħad spicċajt naqbeż għalija nnifsi” [“when I said if I am going to let this be I am going to end up like this till Form 5. And I decided to stand up for myself”]. Even though this was a negative experience, Mark is satisfied that he transformed it into a learning experience.

Mark explained the role of performing arts during such experiences, “jekk għaddejja xi haġa ħażina, kont immur hemm nieħu gost u nikkalma” [“if I am going through a bad patch, I used to go there, enjoy it and calm down”]. He was very grateful that his parents, when he was four years old, introduced him to performing art classes. Even though it was never his intention to pursue a career in performing arts, these classes served as his “safe haven”. It was the place where he could unwind when things got tough, the place where he could forget everything,

“Kont immur hemmhekk biex nieħu gost, nitgħallem. Litteralment kont ninsa kollox tal-ħajja normali“ [“I used to go there to enjoy myself, to learn. I used to literally forget about my normal life”].

During the third cycle interview, at the end of his tertiary education journey, Mark was very excited waiting for a reply to further his studies abroad, “Bħalissa qed nistenna. Il-gimgha d-dieħla għandi nirċievi risposta. ... Kelli l-eżami tal-Ingliż” [“at the moment I am waiting. I should get a reply by next week. ... I sat for the English exam”]. He mentioned the Erasmus exchange programme and described it as the highlight of his tertiary education trajectory. Mark described the lifestyle while he was on Erasmus as completely different, “kif kont ngħix ... kien differenti. Il-fatt li kont waħdi. ... Hemmhekk, it-timetable totalment inbidlitli. Ftit li xejn għamilt ħin id-dar” [“the way I used to live in ... it was different. The fact that I was on my own. ... There the timetable changed completely. I used to spend very little time in my apartment”]. Life was a lot easier and not so hectic as in Malta,

Forsi kien ikolli maximum ta’ four and a half hours f’gurnata. Lectures kienu jkunu maqsumin siegħa u tliet kwarti u kien ikollok kwarta break fin-nofs. So, ma tgħidx li ħa negħja bil-lectures [I used to have maybe four and half hours of lectures in one day. Each lecture lasts one hour and three quarters of an hour and we used to have fifteen minutes break between. So, I didn’t use to get so tired with the lectures].

While on Erasmus, Mark had the opportunity to work part-time and this eased his financial burden,

hemmhekk pagi vera għoljin. U dan delivery bir-rota kont naqla' aktar flus minn ċertu internships li kieku kont għamilt hawn Malta. ... Kont naħdem żewġ/tliet shifts fil-ġimgħa, so kelli income li kieku kont nixtri affarijiet għalija [there the wages are really high. I used to do deliveries with a bike and I used to earn much more than I earned through the internships I did in Malta. ... Used to work two/three shifts and I used to have enough income to buy personal things].

The exceptional experience he had while on Erasmus, influenced Mark's decision to further his studies abroad. Besides, he narrated that he is sure that, in his field of studies, there are more opportunities abroad and this experience will provide him with many job opportunities, "il-fatt li studjajt barra, jiftaħli l-bibien għal postijiet oħra" ["the fact that one studies abroad, presents more opportunities"]. He knew that leaving Malta to study abroad was going to be a difficult time for his parents, "meta mort Erasmus ukoll kienet kbira għalihom, aħseb u ara li se mmur sentejn" ["it was difficult for them when I went on Erasmus, let alone now that I am going to be away for two years"]. They are a small close-knit family but Mark is doing his best to calm them down. He was sure that "my parents, if I tell them I want to go there, they will not stop me. But they worry". ["il-ġenituri tiegħi, jekk jien ngħidilhom irrid immur hemmhekk, huma mhux se jwaqqfuni. Imma l-inkwiet ikun hemm"]. Mark confirmed that once he completed his studies abroad, he would return to Malta; "Issa qieghed f'relazżjoni, so għandi raġuni biex niġi lura" ["Now I am in a relationship, so I have a very good reason to come back"]. Even though they have just started going out together, "qed nippjanaw l-affarijiet, għax jekk ma jkunx hemm pjan

ma jirnexxux l-affarijiet” [“we are planning things, because if one does not plan, things will fail”].

Mark, being fundamentally a ‘traditionalist’, became an ‘opportunist’. He managed to seize the Erasmus opportunity and this became a milestone which left an impact on his tertiary education journey.

*Miriam, slowly moving away from the nest*

I am a bit dependent on my parents because I still live at home. Emotional support and everything. ... But I have become a very different person, I think. I’ve matured a lot. Even the decisions I take. The choices I make. I’ve become more independent which is always a good thing. I have changed since I was a fresher, I was more reliant on my parents.

Throughout the three cycle interviews, Miriam spoke a lot about her family, her educational trajectory and her career. Her maternal grandmother, who lived very close to Miriam and her family, featured a couple of times during the interviews.

During the first cycle interview, Miriam claimed that she is “happy at home, eventually I want to move out but now not my top priority, my priorities are saving up for a car, saving up for Erasmus and saving up to eventually go to do my Master’s abroad”. She gets on very well with both her parents even though she negotiates her relationship with them differently. Her father is very supportive; “hu n-number one fan tiegħi” [“he is my number one fan”]. During the examination period, “għadu sal-lum jiktibli good luck notes ... għadhom imwahħlin mad-desk” [“till this very day, he writes good luck notes for me ... I still have them stuck to my desk”]. During the third cycle interview, Miriam

narrated that she was planning to go abroad with her friends. When she spoke to her father about her plans, he did not say much but passed a couple of remarks to show his disagreement. Miriam realized that her father was still very protective over her. This understanding led her to negotiate her relationship with him with great caution to safeguard it.

She said that her relationship with her mother is different. Miriam associated her mother “more with studying ... Ommi kienet aktar the stricter one fuq studying” [“more with studying ... My mother was always the stricter when it comes to studying”]. When Miriam was young, her mother used to sit down near her and study with her. Miriam’s mother played a significant role in the educational trajectory of her daughter; “ommi dejjem għallmitni li education comes first. Dik inżommha vera f’ qalbi jien. U anke meta kont żgħira, l-ewwel nistudjaw, imbagħad jibqa’ ħin għal kollox” [“my mother always taught me that education comes first. I hold this very close to my heart. Even when I was young, first I study and then afterwards there will be time for everything”]. Miriam always did her best to study and asserted that “ħafna influwenzatni ommi u kont nibża’ minnha għax kienet tgħajjat” [“my mother influenced me a lot and I used to be afraid of her because she used to shout”].

Miriam mentioned her maternal grandmother a number of times during the three cycle interviews. She cherished her relationship with her grandmother, “Niġġieldu imma vera mmur tajjeb magħha” [“we fight but I really get on well with her”]. Her grandmother played a pivotal role “into my education life and she prays a lot for me”. She felt she had to do well in her examinations also not to disappoint her grandmother. Miriam narrated how happy her grandmother was when she successfully passed the car licence examination, “kont naf li ħa

tgħaddili mill-ewwel għax l-aħħar waħda u best for last” [“I knew you were going to pass from the first attempt, you are my youngest granddaughter, the best for last”].

Miriam described her days at university as beautiful, saying that she was having the time of her life, “probabilment nispiċċa f’nofs ħajti nagħmel kors gdid għax I want to always learn” [“I probably end up starting a new course in the middle of my life because I always want to learn”]. Her course of studies leads to a degree in one of the health care professions. During the interviews, Miriam demonstrated that she is very passionate about her studies and “very excited for my career”, knowing that this was going to present her with a lot of different opportunities and “l-ikbar inkwiet hu x’ha nagħmel. Liema area ha nidhol? Tant kemm hawn, ma nafx liema area” [“my greatest worry is what I am going to do. Which area I am going to join? There are so many areas that I don’t know which area I am going to choose”]. Miriam must negotiate this time of uncertainty and finally has to take a decision. She spoke about the fact that nowadays a job is no longer for life and she could always change and take a different route.

For a number of years Miriam was heavily involved in one of the most renowned youth organizations in Malta, “joining this youth organization, I think, it was one of the best choices I have ever made. I got so much experience that I never dreamed of”. Her experiences within this organization served as a “stepping stone ... actually me learning about myself ... growing ... using the skills I had gained to a full potential. I got to learn what responsibility is all about”. Miriam narrated how her involvement in this organisation helped her face a bad experience in her childhood, describing it as “vera perjodu ikrah f’ħajti meta kont iżgħar kont bullied ... dik tellfitli l-kunfidenza fija nnifsi” [“truly an ugly period

in my life when I was younger, I was bullied ... I had lost all self-confidence”]. Through her involvement in this youth organization, “I came out of my shell ... I was growing and I kept on growing with it and it kept on giving me confidence”. Notwithstanding these positive experiences within this youth organization, during the third cycle interview, Miriam felt that,

because I’m going on Erasmus, and it would have been too overwhelming for me, I’ve decided to resign last July. So, I’ve had the summer off. Even though I miss being active and all that, I’m more chill. As well, I don’t always have to think about my commitment with ... (the youth organization). I can put myself first. And as well, it would have been way too much if I had to go on Erasmus and have ... (the youth organization) as well.

Her role and her responsibilities within this organization were not small and her decision to resign was not an easy one. Miriam negotiated this change in a mature way and claimed that even though she was no longer a member of the organization, she would always remain an activist, “spending all those years being active and all that, I still have the traits of being an activist. I still argue for things, for my things, my rights. I still enjoy debating. These traits will never leave you”.

Miriam moved along the continuum from being a ‘traditionalist’ to an ‘opportunist’. She seized the opportunities that came her way. Even though very close to her family Miriam did not miss out on the Erasmus experience and, even if for a short while, to be involved in a youth organization. Both experiences left a

huge positive impact upon Miriam especially as she negotiated her journey towards the labour market and adulthood.

*Sharon, busy and passionate*

Ġraw ħafna affarijiet. Tlift u għamilt ħbieb godda. ... Il-fatt li biddilt il-kors, għenitni ħafna, tatni aktar kunfidenza. Anke għalija l-fatt li qed inqum u li qed nagħmel xi ħaġa li nħobb u nieħu gost għenitni ħafna [So many things happened. I lost and made new friends. ... The fact that I changed my course helped me a lot, made me more confident. Personally, the fact that I wake up and I am doing something I love, it helped me a lot].

As soon as we started our first cycle interview, I could see that Sharon is a very active person, always on the go, from one meeting or event to the other. She started the interview with the words, “I love student activism. I am very much involved in different organizations” and portrayed the different students’ organizations she was or still is involved in and her different roles within these organizations. Sharon believed that university life could be very boring for those students who came to campus just for lectures. While on campus, there was always a meeting she had to attend, either before a lecture or straight after. In the evenings, Sharon’s time was taken by her involvement in a voluntary religious organization. She spoke highly of the organizations because they were instrumental in her development as a student and as a young person. She narrated that she was a very shy and timid person but her involvement in these organizations built her self-confidence and equipped her with a number of skills which are of utmost benefit in her life course. Sharon spoke also about the

importance to manage her time well since primarily she was a student and therefore, needed to have enough time to study.

When we met for the second cycle interview, Sharon mentioned that she was going through a time of change in her academic journey at university. As she narrated her experience, something she had said during the first cycle interview came to my mind, “I am a bit sceptical whether this is the right course for me”. Sharon failed her first year of studies. During the repeat year, she pondered and reflected deeply trying to understand whether she was in the right course. She narrated that while she was going through this time of uncertainty and doubt, during one of the activities of the organization in which she was involved, she observed that Jimmy, a young child who was going through a tough time, started opening up with her and was appreciative of the time she spent listening to him,

Kien hemm tifel partikolari kien jghix go dar residenzjali. U kien jiftah qalbu hafna mieghi, fuq il-problemi tieghu. He was a troubled kid però kien ifittixni hafna lili. Kien isib wens fija, kien isib ma' min jitkellem. Fl-ahhar tas-summer school gie jirrigrazzjani, allura qisni dak il-hin kont vera overwhelmed u ghedt xi haga hekk irrid naghmel f'hajti [There was this particular child who lives in care. He used to share things with me about his problems. He was a troubled kid but he used to seek me out a lot. He used to find comfort in me, he used to find someone he could talk to. At the end of the activity, he came up to me to thank me, and at that moment I was overwhelmed and I said to myself, this is what I want to do].

This experience helped Sharon understand her calling and what she was really passionate about. She finally understood that she wanted to make a difference in the life of children, to ease their pain and support them. After some more thought, she decided to change her course of studies and joined a course in the social sciences area. During the third cycle interview, I could see that she was extremely settled and happy in the new career path.

During the three cycle interviews Sharon spoke about her relationships, mainly her relationship with her parents, her friends and her boyfriend. She depicted her relationship with her parents and her siblings as good. Sharon was grateful that her parents gave her one of their cars because this eased her financial burden, “I’m still learning to drive. I already have a car because I am taking the one of my parents. So, I didn’t need to save money for the car”. Sharon was aware that her activism did not leave her with much time to spend with her family. When she got home, she had to study and therefore, locked herself into her room, “ħafna mill-ħin kemm-il darba ma nkunx id-dar. ... Ħafna mill-ħin kont inqattgħu fil-kamra tiegħi, anke llum il-gurnata” [“most of the time, many times I am not at home. ... I used to spend most of my time in my room, even to this day”]. Sharon longed to move out of her parental home. She felt ready for such a move but financially she did not afford it, “kieku kelli l-flus for sure I would move out ... inħossni indipendenti, u nħossni wasalt għaliha. Anke biex immur ngħix waħdi, kieku naffordja, kieku iva” [“if I had the money for sure I would move out ... I feel independent and ready for it. Even to live on my own, if I afford it, yes I would do it”].

Her relationship with her friends became complex especially since she had changed her course of studies. The new course was a general degree serviced by two faculties and different students attend different study-units,

ma hemmx daw k il-grupp ta' nies li dejjem magħhom. Nies il-ħin kollu jinbidlu. Għadni sal-lum il-ġurnata m'għandix daw k il-grupp ta' ħbieb tal-kors kif kont qabel, nistgħu naqbd u nistudjaw kollha f'daqqa. ... Kulhadd differenti. Allura diffiċli [there isn't that group of people always together. People change all the time. Till to-day I do not have those friends of the course like in the other course, we used to study together. All the students are different so it is difficult].

It was not easy for Sharon to establish new friendships but she was doing well in the course and getting good grades. This served as an encouragement to keep on focusing. She had no friends at university but had a group of friends who were members of the voluntary organization she was involved in, "My klikka ["group of close friends"] then is from ... (the organization) because we plan to go out during the weekends".

Her boyfriend, Ian, was also involved in the voluntary religious organization. During the first cycle interview, Sharon narrated that she had just broken up with her boyfriend, saying that, "the timing of the relationship was wrong. I think we are still young, we met early, if we met in our twenties, it would have been different". Little did Sharon know that during the third cycle interview, she would be saying, "Now I am going out with someone, the same person I mentioned in the first interview". Since both of them were now more

mature, they were navigating the relationship differently and the two of them were happy, offering constant support to each other.

Sharon put a lot of effort in negotiating her feelings and aspirations during her tertiary trajectory. Being an ‘opportunist’, Sharon seized the new opportunity that came her way when she failed her course of studies. This new course brought with it two major changes: a change in career and a change in friends. However, Sharon did not get discouraged, she took a chance and proceeded with her transitional journey towards adulthood.

***Jacob, on a protracted journey***

Jacob is an only child, coming from a very small family. His parents separated when Jacob was 14 years old, “Jien ngħix mal-mummy u fil-weekends nitla’ ma’ missieri jew kif inħossni komdu jiena” [“I live with my mother and with my father during the weekends or how I feel comfortable.”]. Jacob recalled that he had to go through “a whole process of thinking” to decide whether to live with his mother or with his father. He remembered that “meta kont żgħir kont iktar inclined lejn ommi. ... Il-mamà kienet hemm għalija; il-papà kien ix-xogħol sa tard so kont inqatta’ iktar ħin m’ommi” [“growing up I was more inclined towards my mother. ... My mother was there for me; my father was at work till late so I used to spend more time with my mother”]. During this time of uncertainty when Jacob had to decide whether to live with his mother or with his father, he had discussed the matter with his father,

Iktar meta mort inkellem ’il missieri fuqha għedtlu m’hemmx differenza bejk u bejn ommi imma m’ommi jaqbilli iktar għax kienet twassalni ommi l-iskola u missieri kien idum ix-xogħol. Xorta kont immur għandu kull

weekend u għadni mmur għandu five years later. It's all about respect fil-verità [When I went to speak to my father regarding this, I told him that there is no difference between you and my mother, but living with my mother would be better since she drives me to school every day and you stay late at work. I used to go to my father every weekend and today, five years later, I still go. It is all about respect].

Jacob could not remember how his parents handled their separation but he considers himself lucky that they, even though living in different households and both have a partner, still have a good relationship, “jiena vera lucky li minn ħafna każijiet li smajt, anke ta’ ħbieb tiegħi, li ikollhom ommhom u missierhom separati, dejjem jibqgħu qishom jilletikaw bejn xulxin” [“I am very lucky because many other cases I know about, also of my friends, whose mother and father are separated, they are always fighting”]. He feels very much loved and cared for by both his parents. Jacob holds his mother in very high regard, “hi importanti ħafna f’ħajti u tatni ħafna lessons tajbin. ... ’L omni naraha idolu tiegħi f’ħajti, għalkemm mhix tal-ogħla skola” [“she is very important in my life and taught me many good lessons ... I see my mother as my idol in my life even though her level of education is not very high”].

Growing up, Jacob was very reserved and found it difficult to interact with others. Most of his summers were spent at home. However, at the end of the compulsory education journey, he joined a youth group and this helped him make friends. Jacob got involved in one of the student organizations at university. He asserted that:

This particular organisation, it helped me a lot in life. Għallmitni kif niltaqa' man-nies, nagħmel hbieb, tatni kuntatti fil-ħajja u mingħajrha I would still be the reserved child I was in secondary [this particular organisation, it helped me a lot in life. It taught me how to meet people, how to make friends, provided me with contacts in life and without this organization I would still be the reserved child I was in secondary].

This made Jacob realize that friends are a very important aspect of life, they “were of huge support to move on to the next stage in my life”.

Jacob is slightly older than the other participants in this study because he delayed joining University by two years. He describes himself as a “logical person ... very goal oriented”. Joining university was not a smooth transition. However, he looked at this time as a “grace period”, a crucial time which was beneficial for him to choose the right path in life, “Għażilt ir-rotta t-tajba. Naħseb li kieku ma għamiltx dawk is-sentejn ta' qabel ma dħalt l-Università, kont nispiċċa f'kors li forsi kont imdejjaq” [“I chose the right path. I think if it weren't for those two years before I joined University, I would have ended up in a course where I would be unhappy”]. Delaying entry to university worked in his favour. Those two years were decisive for Jacob and gave him the opportunity to consider other options,

In a span of two years, biddilt il-mentalità tiegħi minn kors għal ieħor. ... Iktar kemm tikber, iktar you're exposed to different things. Issa persuna differenti minn kif kont JC<sup>1</sup>. Mentalità differenti, ideologija differenti,

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<sup>1</sup> Junior College (JC) is a post-secondary institution in Malta, which prepares students for the Matriculation Certificate, a pre-requisite for university.

affarijiet li nixtieq nagħmel differenti wkoll. It is a progression. ... I am still learning new things [in a span of two years, I changed my mentality from one course to the other. ... The more you grow the more you are exposed to different things. I am a different person today from when I was at JC. A different mentality, different ideology, what I want to do is different. It is a progression. ... I am still learning new things].

During the three cycle interviews, Jacob mentioned the fact that nowadays, people do not remain in the same job forever, they change jobs and investigate different work prospects. He is aware of the various choices leading to different courses, “Jekk ma jogħgobnix photography, illum, u nidhol software developing għada, nerġa’ nidhol Uni u nistudja. People aren’t sticking to their job kif kienu qabel, fl-opinjoni tiegħi” [“If I am no longer happy doing photography, I can re-join University and do software developing. In my opinion people aren’t sticking to their job as they used to do before”]. Jacob believes that such opportunities are what construct new experiences and are of great significance in the life course of young people.

Jacob affirmed that his experiences at the Junior College and his involvement in youth organizations helped him meet more people, make new friends and it is where he met his girlfriend. Jacob has been in this relationship for the last five years, a relationship he described as stable,

kif qegħdin, qegħdin kuntenti. Jiena ma’ ommi u hi ma’ missierha. As in bħala kif qegħdin ngħixu bħalissa, it-tnejn għandna x-xogħol tagħna, it-tnejn għandna qisu l-flus deħlin imma qisu m’ahniex committed li nsibu post għalissa. It is sort of something in the future” [“we are happy at the

moment. I live with my mother and she with her father. The way we are living now, both of us are working and both of us have a wage but we are not committed to find a place for the time being. It is sort of something for the future”].

Notwithstanding this, they think and talk about moving in together, but are very much aware that “il-križi tal-housing f’Malta hija vera” [“the crisis in the housing sector in Malta is very real”]. Jacob is cognisant of the fact that “li tixtri dar u timmuvja naraha bhall-isteppeing stone ta’ maturità” [“buying a house and moving in is like a stepping stone to maturity”].

Jacob’s entry to university was protracted and this gave him the opportunity to reconsider his course of studies. This delayed transition to university also introduced him to a youth organization which proved to be instrumental in his life course because he enlarged his group of friends. On the continuum, Jacob is identified as an ‘opportunist’ but he is closer to the ‘pioneers’. The fact that he had to delay his transition to university became an opportunity for Jacob to change his plans and join a different course of studies.

### ***Nancy, on a journey of discovery and self-development***

Throughout the three cycle interviews, Nancy spoke about herself and her family. She described her character as “vera partikolari. Jien jekk għandi xi ħaġa hawn ħa ngħidhielek, jekk dejjaqtni ħa ngħidhielek” [“very particular. If I have to tell you something I will say it to you, if you get on my nerves, I will tell you”]. She specified that her relationship “mal-ġenituri u mal-familja dejjem kienet hekk extra close” [“with her parents and her family has always been extra close”]. Nancy is the youngest of three siblings and there is an age gap between

her siblings and herself. This gap in age made her siblings “overprotective fuqi. Qisni għandi four parents” [“overprotective of me. It’s as if I have four parents”]. She illustrated this through the narration of one of her experiences. It was raining and Nancy was going out with her car. All of them, the parents and the siblings, sent her a number of separate messages imploring her to drive carefully since it was raining. She lists all the messages she received, “‘suq bil-mod’, ‘ara tiskiddja’, ‘jekk tiskiddja ċempel’, ‘ibqa’ hemm titlaqx’, ‘ixgħel id-dawl’” [“Drive slowly’, ‘be careful not to skid with the car’, ‘if you skid call me’, ‘stay there do not move’, ‘put on the lights’”]. Nancy laughed as she narrated this experience. This episode led her to create a family chat group and “biex nibagħtilhom kollha f’daqqa, biex, like wisq hassle biex nibgħat wieħed wieħed!” [“I send one message to all of them, too much hassle to send messages one by one!”]. Notwithstanding this, Nancy reiterates that she loves her family and loves spending time with them. A typical family moment, which is rare, is when they are having dinner all together,

Togħgobni li nkunu flimkien, hafna anzi ... huwa mument ta’ skiet, imma magħna le, ... “X’gara illum ix-xogħol?”, “ija ija”, “fejn mort?”, “x’qalulek it-tfal?”, “ija?” ... mhux normali, ... dik l-unika post li nistgħu nkunu eccentric [I love it when we are together, a lot. This is a calm moment, but not at home, ... ‘What happened today at work?’ ‘Yes yes’, ‘Where did you go?’, ‘What did the kids tell you?’ ‘yes?’ ... it’s not normal ... this is the only place where we can be eccentric].

Such moments brought a lot of joy to Nancy’s heart and she spoke about how she would be looking forward to spend time with all her family.

Nancy also mentioned her grandmother who had to move in with her family soon after her husband passed away. Her grandmother used to live only about two minutes away from Nancy's family but following the death of her husband she was afraid to live on her own. Nancy narrated that there was not enough space at home to provide a room for her grandmother and therefore, "I had to give up my room biex in-nanna torqod hemm, jien kelli nitla' norqod m'ohti, sakemm għamluli sodda go kamra" ["I had to give up my room so that my grandmother sleeps there, I had to sleep with my sister till they made a new bedroom for me"]. Nancy explained that as a family they were not prepared for this experience and "kienet strain, tipo wara l-quddies kienet tiġi fis-sebġha d-dar u ma thallina mmorru mkien, għax kienet tibza' waħedha, il-mamà ma tistax toħroġ" ["it was a strain, after mass, at 7pm she comes home u we could not go out because she is afraid to be on her own, my mother can never go out"].

During the first cycle interview she brought up the issue that even though she is eighteen years old, and therefore "legally, bħala standpoint ta' liġi nista' nagħmel li rrid u kollox jiġi fuqi, as in, il-konsegwenzi ... ma nħossnix daqshekk indipendenti peress li għadni ngħix mal-familja!" ["legally, when it comes to the law, I can do whatever I want and I am responsible for what I do, that is, the consequences fall on me ... I don't feel independent since I still live with my family"]. She narrated the story of her seventeen-year-old British friend who lives with her boyfriend and will soon get married. Nancy expressed feelings of fear and uncertainty when she tried to put herself in her friend's shoes. She felt that she still depended on her mother and needed her approval and her reassurance. She narrated the episode when she hit the car and damaged the side slightly, "bħala re-assurance, ċempilt 'il mamà" ["to reassure myself, I called my

mother”]. During the second cycle interview, Nancy felt different from the first cycle interview, “inħoss li għandi outlook differenti tal-ħajja, as in, inħossni mmaturajt, ara ta’ eighteen jien kont ngħid matura, imma llum inħossni li aktar immaturajt” [“I feel that I have a different outlook towards life, as in, I feel I matured, when I was eighteen, I used to say I am mature, but today I feel more mature”]. She felt that she is now no longer “wrapped up in my own bubble” but prepared to embrace new experiences.

Nancy attributed these changes to her involvement in one of the student organizations at university. During her first year of studies at University, Nancy was very timid and did not feel ready and competent for such involvement. However, once she accepted, she could see a big change in her, especially in the way she acted and reacted in different circumstances. During the second and the third cycle interviews, Nancy illustrated the various roles and responsibilities, “nattendi meetings ma organizzazzjonijiet oħra, u minn dawn il-meetings tibda titkellem, tibda tara li mhux int biss taħseb hekk” [“attending meetings with other organizations, and from these meetings I started to share my ideas, and you realize that others think like you”]. Nancy portrayed the impact such experiences had on her journey towards adulthood, “Jien kont vera persuna timid, nibża’ nitkellem, very introvert” [“I used to be a very timid person, afraid to talk, very introvert”]. Through her involvement in this student organization, together with the team, “ktibna l-ewwel social policy paper, xi ħaġa li qatt ma ħsibt fuqha, qatt li jien kapaçi nagħmel, eem, ehe so I’m quite thankful li dħalt f’din l-organisation” [“we wrote the first social policy paper, something I never thought about, something I am not capable of doing, eem, ehe so I’m quite thankful that I joined this organization”].

During the third and final cycle interview, Nancy depicted herself as going through a very good stage in her life; she felt more self-confident. Nancy moved on the continuum from being an ‘opportunist’ closer to becoming a ‘pioneer’. She took advantage of the opportunities that crossed her path but she also slowly learnt how to exercise agency and became more active especially at university and in student organizations.

The ‘opportunists’, like the ‘traditionalists’, are influenced by structure and tradition, moving on a linear journey, forever ready to conform without taking risks. However, the ‘opportunists’ are ready to change if an opportunity comes their way even if this means a change in their future.

### **The ‘Pioneers’ – Cynthia, Daniela, Pierre, Ramona, Giorgia, Roberto**

The ‘pioneers’, on the continuum are seen as having moved away from the ‘traditionalists’ and are closer to the ‘radicals’. In their negotiation towards their journey to adulthood, ‘pioneers’ were subordinate to old controls and directions but were not afraid to branch out, rebalancing the new freedoms presented to them. They challenged family expectations but without causing conflict.

#### ***Cynthia, satisfied with life***

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the first cycle interview with Cynthia was held online. Being a longitudinal study, this research gave me the opportunity to meet with Cynthia face-to-face for the second and third cycle interviews.

Immediately, from the first cycle interview I could see that Cynthia was a very forthcoming person and found it easy to communicate. Cynthia described herself as a very independent person and considered her transition from

compulsory education to university as very smooth, “I was always an independent person. Work hard and go along. And this helped me at uni. I put my 100% in anything”. At university she did not know anyone but “had to go out of my comfort zone and we are a group of female friends and we get on”. She came for the third cycle interview extremely excited because she had just received the final results and the good news that she got a first-class in her honours degree.

Cynthia narrated that as she was growing up, her father went through a major change in his employment and from a salesman he became an entrepreneur. This transformation brought major changes within the family that impacted their lifestyle. The financial situation of the family improved exceptionally and this left its mark upon the upbringing of the children.

Two significant changes that happened while Cynthia was growing up were the move of the family to the northern region from the southern region of Malta and her enrolment in one of the independent schools<sup>2</sup>, where the language of instruction is English. Born and bred in a village in the southern region of Malta and coming from a “Maltese speaking family”, whose “parents don’t know how to speak English”, and whose “father is illiterate”, Cynthia described her first two years at her new school as very tough to navigate. She did not understand the English language and therefore could not comprehend what the teacher was saying. Also, she had no friends because her peers did not understand or speak Maltese. Her cousins used to call Cynthia “tal-pepè”, a word used by Maltese

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<sup>2</sup> In Malta there are three types of schools: State, Church and Independent. The independent schools are fee-paying schools and are usually run by a Board of Governors. Most of the children registered in independent schools come from English speaking families. The rivalry between the Maltese and the English languages goes back a number of years and the “perception is that Maltese is the language of those who are less well educated in Maltese society and English is the language of those who are highly educated” (Camilleri, 1996, p. 223).

people to define those who speak primarily in English and usually live in the central part of Malta. The conflict with the cousins was resolved when finally, “I realized that I could speak in English at school and in Maltese with my cousins and never mention school”.

The family setup is very traditional. Cynthia mentioned that her mother had stopped working to raise the children. She described the relationship with her parents as “good, but I don’t discuss things with them”. Cynthia spoke at length about her parents and their willingness to provide everything for her and her sibling. However, she believed that the foundation of love and healthy relationships is not found in material things. During one of the conversations about her parents, at one point, Cynthia slowed down and started talking about her father. She described him as “a very stereotypical man. He has the idea that men are tough and cannot cry”. Cynthia knew her father loved the family but she found it hard to negotiate her relationship with him, “He loves us but we never talk, I don’t share my emotions with him. He is work, work, work. We never had quality time with him, I don’t know how to talk to him”. Cynthia started sobbing and continued, “I know he loves us. Sorry I am crying but this bothers me...”

After a short pause, she continued, “Wish my father to be more present in my life. I know that he loves us, the way of showing it is different. He does not understand it because his dad used to tell him that he needs to work. He loves us and he is always there for us”. Cynthia desired to be part of her father’s life but he was taken up with work. When speaking about her parents, Cynthia mentioned that “my parents aren’t happy together and it’s obvious. They are together because of us”. This situation made her very anxious and made her want to leave home. During such difficult moments, her comfort is Daniel, her boyfriend.

Cynthia wanted to learn from the mistakes of her parents and strove to invest in her relationship with Daniel, who is,

not very fond about talking about the future and that really annoys me. That really annoys me. I know he has intentions of moving in together. He's very comfortable with his parents and they're very welcoming ... comes from an English-speaking family and he doesn't know how to speak Maltese.

Cynthia feels she can relate more with Daniel's parents than her parents because "they are more likely to speak about my job or uni, they would understand because they went to uni. My family, none of them went to uni so I can't share my experiences with them".

Cynthia's family live close to the extended family, a bit too close, "next to us there is the aunt and next to the aunt there is the grandma and so on and so forth. It is very annoying". The paternal grandparents encourage Cynthia to work in the family business,

my grandmother is all the time telling me to work with my father and the same goes for my grandfather. They don't understand that I'm getting a degree and there are so many places I can branch out to. Having a business is stressful and I don't want to become like my dad. I don't want to live a life which consists of going to work, facing problems, not being able to laugh and have a break, spend time with the family. I'd rather be employed by someone and I know I have a pay check, and I am living my life, even if I am not rich.

In the third cycle interview, she shares that her father was ready to appoint both children as shareholders of the company. All the necessary documents have been prepared for Cynthia to sign in order to transfer a number of companies in her name, “I feel lucky that I have a job already available” but “I don’t want to work in that environment it’s so sexist and shit like, why do I want to work with my dad if he doesn’t want to hear my opinions”. She manages to discuss further with her father and ended up having it her way, that is, not signing for the transfer of the companies but without creating any conflicts within the family.

Cynthia is very satisfied with the way she managed to negotiate her educational trajectory. Arriving at the university campus as a fresher, with no friends and then going into lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic did not make the tertiary trajectory an easy one. However, she managed to navigate and negotiate her journey at university quite well. As she embarked to join the labour market, Cynthia felt satisfied that she did not give in to family control and directions; she did not accept the opportunity to work within the family business. Instead, she started working in a job related to her studies and was planning to further her education, “once I am settled and I like the job, I want to do my Master’s but I am still not sure what I want to do”.

Being a ‘pioneer’ Cynthia embraced the changes around her and actively managed social mobility. She was not afraid to refuse the future possibilities offered by her father. Instead, she engaged in successfully completing her studies and joined the labour market in an area related to her studies.

*Daniela, a student and a mother*

Sirt omm żgħira u anke the label li sirt omm żgħira żżomm il-weight tagħha. ... Tinbidel u timmatura f'dak l-aspett u tapprezza n-nies ta' madwarek. Bħala challenges li mentalment draining, hafna fuqjex taħseb. Apparti tfal, edukazzjoni, karrera, il-partner, it's very draining. It's overwhelming. [I became a mother at a young age and the label of being a mother at a young age carries its weight. ... You change and you mature and you appreciate the people around you. The challenges drain you mentally, there is a lot to think about. Besides the children, there is the educational journey, the career, the partner. It is very draining, it is overwhelming].

I still remember the first cycle interview with Daniela; she entered my office with a huge smile on her face. Daniela was a fresher but also a mother of a one-year-old, doing her best to raise her child and at the same time continued with her tertiary education journey. She immediately started talking about her life course and told me that she had already commenced the same course of studies but decided to withdraw when she discovered that she was pregnant. During her education journey Daniela had to negotiate her role as a student and her unexpected transition to motherhood. Dealing with her feelings and managing her life during those days was not easy,

I was very confused, even though I always wanted to be a young mother. I never expected that it would happen that fast. I was still getting to know my partner, so I was asking ... will he leave me and I will end up on my own? We have known each other for some time because we used to work together but only a few months in a relationship. So, I had these thoughts. I was afraid, thinking he will leave me. ... he immediately told me that

we will walk this journey together. He was supportive from day one. So that feeling of being abandoned left me.

As she was negotiating these feelings of uncertainty and doubt, she had to face the next challenge: breaking the news to her parents. Daniela described her mother as “the man of the house, ... the voice of the family”, the one that takes care of everything, even though she never had the opportunity to advance in her studies and was never in employment. Daniela spoke at length about the great influence her mother has on all the siblings, especially in their educational trajectory, “we are brainwashed that we need good education to be able to move forward in life. ... She has no level of education so she used to push us even more. She managed to pass on to me her love for education. She used to support us by sitting near us as we study ...”. Daniela admitted that her mother was one of the reasons she did not give up studying when things got tough, “My mother is my backbone, my support. She was always there for me; she will always remain there”. Her father, who also did not have the opportunity to study, was very present, but rather silent. He did not say much, when he had something to say he would relay the message to the mother and she would pass it on to Daniela. It was as if the father lived in the shadow of the mother.

Daniela narrated how she tried to hide her pregnancy from her parents, always with the excuse that she was feeling unwell. In fact, during her first months of pregnancy Daniela had spoken only to her partner and two very close friends and this made her feel isolated at a time when she needed support, especially from her mother. When she could not hide her pregnancy any longer, she broke the news to her mother. The latter, first went silent for two whole days; then started passing remarks like, “fottejt hajtek” [“you ruined your life”] and

“issa mhux ser tispic ca l-universit ” [“now you cannot finish university”]. Daniela reassured her mother that she intended finishing her studies. After a couple of weeks, there was a change in the attitude from Daniela’s mother. Daniela’s partner and her mother had a long conversation and following this, Daniela’s partner moved into their house. Daniela’s mother offered her daughter all the support she needed. Daniela was fully aware that she completed her studies successfully at university due to the huge support of her partner and her mother. Following a couple of months, Daniela was pregnant again. She still found it difficult to break the news to her mother. However, this time Daniela decided not to suspend her studies but made the necessary arrangements and sacrifices to complete the course successfully. She relied on the help offered by the immediate family, especially her partner and her mother. She narrated that the most difficult period was during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her partner, because of work, did not use to come home, not even to sleep, so his input was no longer present. During these months, “kif jorqdu, ridt inqum nagħmel assignments. Ġieli anke għamilt sas-sagħtejn għaddejja u fis-sitta jerggħu jqumu” [“as soon as they sleep, I had to wake up to do the assignments. Sometimes I stayed till two o’clock in the morning and at six they used to wake up”].

During the three cycle interviews, Daniela spoke also about her active role in a religious voluntary organization. She had joined this organization when she was fifteen years old. Daniela believed that her involvement in this organization prepared her to face life and instilled in her values which she still carried to this day. She had different roles within this organization and at times she found herself responsible for people older than her. The lived experiences in this organization were cherished by Daniela who narrated how, “my leisure time was

usually spent at this place, doing voluntary work”. However, even though Daniela was deeply rooted in this religious organization, she did not feel comfortable sharing the news about her pregnancy especially since pregnancy out of wedlock is still not widely accepted in the Maltese culture, “getting pregnant before marriage is a bit of an ohhh especially in a religious environment”. She was afraid of being rejected. Even though children born out of wedlock are legally accepted in Malta, her experience caused a stir within her family and beyond. In fact, she believed that the attitude of a number of members of the voluntary organization towards her changed when they got to know that she was pregnant. This was not an easy time for Daniela. She experienced shame, loneliness and disappointment. Daniela claimed that these young people did not act in accordance with the values they preached. There was a lot of gossip and this hurt her deeply, “It is a big hurt that I had to leave the organization. The peers did not accept me and my situation. They stopped talking to me and I felt isolated”. Only one friend stood by her. However, Daniela was pleasantly surprised when the “the leaders, even though a priest and a nun, always made me feel welcome, even after they got to know that I was pregnant”. The priest’s words that the doors of the organization are always open for her and her family, were very soothing and encouraging during this difficult time.

Daniela was very grateful for the support shown by Raisa, the friend who stood by her throughout, “A university friend helped me a lot and supported me. ... I knew her because she attends the same organization. ... We started like university buddies and now we are best friends. My children call her aunty”. As Daniela moved out of the organization, together with her partner, she made new friends, “Now we have a group of friends and we all are going through the same

situation. So that helps. We are the couple who were first in doing the things yet we are the youngest”. Within her group of friends, Daniela is the youngest, but notwithstanding this she was the first one to become a mother and the owner of a property. In fact, she described her partner and herself as “Il-kbar u ż-żgħar. Kbar li għamilna l-affarijiet l-ewwel imma mbağħad l-iżgħar. Imma I don’t regret it li qbiżtha l-istep” [“the eldest and the youngest. The eldest because we were the first to accomplish some things but then we are the youngest. But I don’t regret jumping a step”].

During the third cycle interview, Daniela informed me that she has just successfully completed her studies at university and joined the labour market, fully aware that “l-undergrad qisni ma wasaltx fl-aħħar destinazzjoni li wasalt, it’s a stepping stone għax jien dħalt bit-tir li xi darba nilħaq ... (karriera professjonali)” “with the undergrad I have not yet arrived at the final destination, it’s a stepping stone because my aim is to become a ... (a professional)”. This was just the first step leading on to the professional career she always dreamt of: to start her own private practice. She also told me that together with her partner and their two children, they had just moved to their new home.

Daniela’s journey was a yo-yo one, extended and not linear but she was always supported by a good network. Being a ‘pioneer’, she was not afraid to reach out to new freedoms without causing conflict within her family, who is the traditional type. Exercising agency, Daniela managed to skilfully combine tradition with modernity.

*Pierre, from a dreamer to a realist*

Pierre started his tertiary education trajectory carrying traditional baggage; he comes from a traditional family and from a fourteen-year educational journey in a church school, a school that encourages students to integrate the intellectual, the social and the spiritual. He narrated that this school instilled in him the desire to achieve, to dream big and to always be there for others. In fact, Pierre used to aspire to get involved in politics. However, as time went by, he became very disappointed with both political parties in Malta and lost all motivation. This kept him away from entering the political arena<sup>3</sup>.

Both Pierre's parents and his siblings completed tertiary education. Pierre reminisced about the long conversations he used to have with his father where the latter used to speak to him about everything, even though Pierre was far too young to understand. Pierre believed that such moments helped him grow and mature earlier than his peers. His parents were always of great support and therefore Pierre did not need to find a part-time job while at university. This made it easier for him to be heavily involved in student organizations and in many different activities, "definitely the financial support of my parents is very beneficial. There were times when financially I was in a bad shape". However, Pierre feels that sometimes, his parents were somewhat too present in his life and occasionally their influence was overpowering: "if I stay out late, I'll get a call at four in the morning, where are you?" This created role conflict for Pierre because

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<sup>3</sup> Malta has preserved a two-party system that gives substantial leverage to the two main parties, the Partit Nazzjonalista and Partit Laburista, which almost share the entire spoils between them. A third party, the Alternattiva Demokratika, formed in 1992, has been unable to go beyond 1.8% of the national consensus (its best ever result in 2013 with 5,506 votes). ... Reactions on most issues in the country often spill over into politics, with respective territories guarded fervidly, assisted (and enabled) by party media (the two main parties own their own newspaper, TV and radio station) (Vital Zammit, 2018, p.1).

he felt that at home he was not treated as an adult. His friends “are completely independent. If they go out, they can stay until 5 in the morning and no-one will tell them anything”. On the contrary, at university other students looked up to Pierre also because of his significant role in the student organization he was involved in. Pierre was not happy with this situation and because of this he desired to move out of his parental home. However, he knew he was not yet prepared for such a big move, especially financially.

Pierre narrated that one of the major changes in his life happened while at university. During the first cycle interview, still a fresher, he narrated that “nasal ngħid li kont kwazi nibža’ minn ċertu nies. [I can say that I was almost afraid of certain people”]. However, the years spent at university transformed Pierre. He depicted the first few months as a fresher as a very unhappy experience, it was all about “lectures, home, lectures, home”. This pattern changed once he joined one of the student organizations, and described it as “a big game changer”. His involvement in student societies and activism on campus impacted his identity and his social network immensely. His student life changed drastically. The many diverse experiences he participated in, which were organized on campus and beyond, provided Pierre with a number of possibilities and opportunities. These opened different pathways to his career,

...(the student organization) and university helped in the decisions I need to take in life in terms of work and how much time I dedicate to uni. As time goes by, I invested more time at Uni and in ... (the student organization), I managed to come up with what I want to do. This year especially because of ... (the student organization), I learnt a lot about people in general and about myself. Personally, the level of respect I have

for certain people, how I deal with certain people, this definitely helped me to mature.

This positive tertiary education trajectory presented a couple of sacrifices as well. Being heavily involved in the organization and trying not to fall behind in his studies did not leave Pierre much time for other experiences and he had to miss out on the Erasmus exchange experience and to put on hold the idea of a relationship. Pierre's tertiary journey introduced him to huge responsibilities attached to the roles he had while being part of the student organizations. He had the opportunity to build a corporate image and invested in a good social network. This led Pierre to widen his horizon and provided him with different work alternatives. Although all this is positive, Pierre described how the many new opportunities that crossed his pathway, at times caused more stress and uncertainty. He was very keen on choosing the right career path, but unfortunately, he was unsure of his next step. During the third cycle interview Pierre was anxious about the fact that he was new in the labour market but had already changed a number of jobs. He was concerned that this did not look good on his CV,

I had a plan of what I wanted to do, where to go, ... (the student organization) taught me a lot about this, moving on from one thing to the other. But after two years involved in ... (student organization), strangely enough I know less what I want to do and I have more options. And the fact that I have more options, on one hand I got mixed up but at the same time I am happy that I have more options. I know quadruple the amount of people I knew last year. It's like ... (the student organization) gave me the

direction of what I want to do, so many doors opened, so many opportunities.

The tertiary education journey and the many opportunities Pierre came across made him exercise agency, taking risks and negotiating the new freedoms available in Malta. His arrival in the labour market was very similar to the pinball metaphor (Cuzzocrea, 2020) where he was changing jobs at a very fast speed. He realized that this transitional journey was not as smooth as he thought it would be. Pierre's dream of waking up early, feeling motivated and whistling his way to work was not happening. Being classified as a 'pioneer' Pierre tried to look into the various opportunities which he was surrounded with, trying to find a job where he would be happy.

### ***Ramona, moving on steadily***

During the first cycle interview, Ramona immediately started talking about her educational journey. She narrated how advancing in her studies has always been on the agenda, "As I was growing up, education always played a very important role in my life. I never imagined that I would study only until compulsory education, that is, until I'm sixteen. I always aspired to continue studying". However, Ramona was very indecisive whether to follow a course leading to the business sector or a course that leads to the social sciences sector. When the moment arrived for her to apply for a course at university, she decided to pursue studies that lead to a career in the social sciences. During the first years she was not convinced that she was in the right course even though she was happy and completed her assessments successfully. The fact that her father is one of the top entrepreneurs in the Maltese islands presented Ramona with a number of opportunities and different career paths,

My father is a businessman and I can work with him if I decide not to work ... (in the social science profession). I can still earn a wage. I feel I am very lucky to have these different roads in front of me. Even though I chose this course of studies I still have other roads I can choose from.

Despite the fact that Ramona could put her mind at rest because she had a job lined up for her, she did not take a step back and became complacent. During her journey at university, she worked hard to achieve her goal and managed to complete her studies successfully.

Ramona is from Gozo, the second largest island of the Maltese Archipelago. Both her parents were born in Malta and even though they lived in Gozo, her mother used to cross over to Malta quite frequently to visit her extended family. Therefore, leaving Gozo to study in Malta did not present a huge challenge to Ramona. She believed that this transition from living in Gozo with her family to a shared flat in Malta helped her and other Gozitan students get out of their “comfort zone”. Through this experience, Ramon claimed that,

ħa nimmaturaw aktar malajr għax, inti differenti filli toqgħod m’ommok, issajjarlek, taħsillek il-ħwejjeġ, f’daqqa waħda inti qed toqgħod go flat, jista’ jkun mikri, jista’ jkun tiegħek personali, toqgħod ma’ nies oħra ġeneralment, emm, u trid tieħu ħsieb tiegħek innifsek, jġigifieri apparti li għandek l-Università fejn forsi, mhux qed ngħid li l-Maltin għandhom inqas responsabilità, imma forsi l-Maltin jaħsbu biss fl-iskola, pereżempju jien wara lecture rrid immur naħsel il-ħwejjeġ tiegħi [we mature earlier, it’s different when, at one stage you are living with your mother, she cooks for you, does the laundry and all of a sudden you are living in a flat, maybe rented or yours, sharing accommodation with other students and

you have to take care of yourself, and then there is the University course. I am not saying that those living in Malta have less responsibilities, but the latter think only about school while for example I, after the lecture, have to go and do the laundry].

Ramona believed that living in Malta gave her the opportunity to meet new people, to be exposed to a new reality and was instrumental to build her character, especially her self-confidence. Since her parents had a flat in Malta, Ramona was spared the hassle of having to look for accommodation. She was very much aware of the hardship her Gozitan friends went through trying to find accommodation in Malta at a reasonable price. The money her Gozitan peers used for rent, she spent on going abroad because “I don’t have to pay rent. The flat is mine. So those 500 euros are mine. I have an account and if I decide to go abroad, I don’t have to depend on my parents”. However, in the third cycle interview, Ramona narrated that she had to rent a flat with her friends since they were building on the top of the flat which belonged to her parents and she could not stay in it. Ramona negotiated this change very well; she was happy for this opportunity to live with her Gozitan friends. Her only complaint was the lack of space since they were four girls living together.

Ramona gets on very well with her parents and her siblings. Both parents are very supportive. The economic situation at home was stable and they could afford to travel as a family. She narrated that when they went abroad, “immorru biex inqattgħu ftit ħin għalina, nikru farmhouse, nagħmlu barbeques nixtru kollox aħna u nagħmlu naqra sightseeing ... darba f’sena dejjem nagħmluha” [“we go to spend time together as a family, we rent a farmhouse, we

have barbeques together, we buy everything ourselves and do some sightseeing ... we do this once a year”].

During the first cycle interview Ramona mentioned her mother a number of times, “Mum is always there if not in person on the phone. She comes a lot to Malta, once a week and she helps in cleaning the flat”. She spoke at length about her relationship with her mother, which is built on honesty and truth,

I’m not the type that I lie to my mother, I won’t tell her that I’m staying in and then I go out. I always tell her when I’m going out. I tell her that the day before I stayed out till 4 am. I won’t lie to her.

Occasionally Ramona oversleeps and misses lectures, but when this used to happen, “I tell my mother. ... She is not happy with this situation”. Ramona narrated quite a few entertaining stories about her relationship with her mother. When Ramona was younger and she was still living at home, she used to miss school especially when, “I did not feel like going to school but was not sick I used to miss school. I didn’t do this a lot of times but when I had that test and was not prepared for it, I used to stay in bed. My mother used to shout at me but I would manage to have it my way”. Ramona narrated how once while her mother was abroad, she decided to miss school, “but a message was sent to her from school and she called me shouting”. She also recounted that once she went abroad with her boyfriend, “my mother was not happy at all, but we did it anyway. She asked me why we were going abroad on our own. But I did it”. These stories illustrated the type of rapport Ramona has with her mother and how she managed to negotiate this relationship.

During the second cycle interview, Ramona spoke at length about her father. The way she spoke about him is close to a eulogy. She described him as a very hard-working person, who “beda minn xejn kwaži, u llum il-ġurnata vera stabbilit” [“started from almost nothing but today he is well established”]. She admired him a lot and considered him as her role model; she desired to be like him, “jew hopefully, emm, jiġifieri nkun stabbilita bħalu, inkun komda bħalu, naħdem bħalu, ikolli l-valuri tiegħu fuq kollox, minkejja li jaħdem ħafna, xorta l-valuri tiegħu hemm għadhom” [“or hopefully will be established like him, living a comfortable life, work like him, having the same values, even though he works hard his values are still there”]. Ramona was so proud of her father especially when people went up to her to tell her, “missierek vera għandu valuri sodi, missierek vera jaħdem ... aktar ngħid kemm irrid inkun bħalu” [“your father has strong values; your father is a hard-working man ... even more I say that I want to be like him”].

Ramona spoke also about her relationship with Clive, her boyfriend, “who is also my friend”. They had been together since she was fourteen years old and he is also a registered student at the University. She believed that they are still together because their relationship is not “the type of relationship where we stay in, as if we are a married couple already. I think this is the secret ingredient why we remain together”. Clive helped her in becoming more confident because “Jien kont veru self-conscious u hu dejjem jgħallimni kif ma nagħtix kas” [“I am very self-conscious and he teaches me how not to care about these things”]. She is very content that “qiegħda ma’ persuna li thobb, li jħobbok lura” [“she is in a relationship with a person that she loves and he loves her back”].

Ramona missed living in Gozo, but since “most of my friends are at University” this helped her to better navigate her transition from Gozo to Malta. In fact, she still meets up with “my Gozitan sixth form friends. Even when I am in Malta, I still go out with them. On Wednesdays the Gozitan group meets up, we are very close. I love meeting with the Gozitans”.

At the end of our interviews, Ramona was very grateful that she participated in this study because these three meetings served as a good opportunity for her to evaluate her journey. Ramona is proactive and not afraid of change and therefore she is classified as a ‘pioneer’. Now that she completed her studies successfully and joined the labour market, her next goal is “nibda ninteressa ruħi billi nsaqsi x’inhu jġgri, x’inhu għaddej fix-xogħol ta’ missieri. Hadem ħafna u ma nixtieqx li ilu daqshekk jaħdem għalih jisfaxxa fix-xejn” [“to start getting to know by asking questions about what is happening in my father’s business. He worked so hard and I do not wish his business to crumble into nothing”].

### ***Giorgia, chasing her dreams***

Giorgia lives in the northern rural region of Malta in a very big house. Her family owns fields and she enjoys working and spending time in the open air, “jien m’iniex it-tip ta’ persuna li nintefagħlek fuq is-sodda u naralek is-series ... għandna l-għelieqi, jġgifieri kont ngħin ’il missieri ... jien irrid noħroġ fix-xemx ... Issa daqt jibda l-olive season” [“I am not the type to stay in bed watching series ... we have fields, I go and help my father ... I need to be out in the sun ... Soon the olive season starts”]. Throughout the three cycle interviews, Giorgia spoke a lot about her family and her extended family. She felt close not just to her

immediate family but also to her grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. They are like one big family, all living in the same village, quite close to each other.

Giorgia described her relationship with her mother as excellent, “Omni qisha l-best friend tiegħi” [“My mother is like my best friend”]. Giorgia, who is a twin, felt closer to her mother than to her twin, “immorru tajjeb ħafna flimkien, imma mhux ħa noqgħod niftaħ qalbi daqskemm noqgħod niftaħ qalbi m’ommi” [“we get on well together, but I am not going to open up with ... (her twin) like I open up with mum”]. She claimed that her mother taught her how to take advantage of the new freedoms available in Malta, especially in the area of gender roles; how to be strong and tough in life, “il-mummy darritna nkunu naqra ribellużi, u speċjalment jiena, as in biex ma noqogħdux għal kollox. As in jekk xi ħadd jgħidilna xi ħaġa u ma tkunx tagħmel sens ... ” [“my mother brought us up a bit rebellious, especially me. As in, not to accept everything. As in if someone tells us something and it doesn’t make sense ...”].

Giorgia narrated that she gets on quite well with her father, but “Ma’ missieri mhux daqshekk close” [“with my father I am not so close”]. With a huge smile on her face, Giorgia described her father, as the one who,

jahseb li he is the strongest at home he he he he ... In-nannu, he was the right hand of the family ... kif tgħidha? Missieru hu naqra, mhux dittatur, imma, li jgħid hu jsir fil-familja. My father doesn’t know better, għax kulma ra f’ħajtu hekk [thinks he is the strongest at home he he he ... My grandfather, he was the right hand of the family ... how do you say it? His father is a bit, not a dictator but what he says goes in the family. My father doesn’t know better, that is how he grew up].

Giorgia felt that her father treated her differently than the way he treated her brother. He does not expect her brother to help in the house chores, “lil ħija ma jgħidlux biex jagħmel l-affarijiet. Ghax tifel naħseb ...” [“he doesn’t ask my brother to do these things. Because he is a male I think, ...”].

Speaking about her father’s attitude led Giorgia to express her thoughts and feelings about gender inequality. She narrated her experiences of gender disparity with her class mates at university and her colleagues at the work place. The course of studies she was following led to a profession in infrastructure; “il-kors jagħmilni femminista” [“the course makes me a feminist”]. She described both her course of studies and her profession as the place where there is a lot of “sexism”. Giorgia portrayed this through experiences lived at university. The number of females registered on this course of studies was very low and when they were divided into small groups she always ended up in a group where she was the only female. Most of the times she found herself leading the group,

peress li jien kont leader kull meta nibdew il-meeting kont nitkellem jiena. ... U kien hemm dan it-tali persuna li hu sessist ħafna u jien naħseb ma jaħmilx li mara tkun fuq kolloxx [because I am the leader, every time we start the meeting, I end up talking. ... And there is this person who is very much a sexist and I think he hates that a woman is on the top of everything].

During group work, males used to address each other, ignoring Giorgia. This irritated her because she felt left out, “u flok jitkellem magħna t-tnejn ... iħares lejn it-tifel l-ieħor, u jgħidlu, ‘Tajba?’... X’taħseb? Għalfejn ma ssaqsix lit-tnejn li aħna mhux ... idejjaqni kumment hekk” [“instead of speaking to both of us ...

he looks at the other male, and asks him, ‘Is it good? What do you think?’ ... why is he not asking both of us ... such comments bother me”].

Giorgia worked part-time while she was studying and her experience at work was not so different. A male in a managerial role told her that “in-nisa mhux kapaçi u n-nisa tajbin għal teachers” [“women are not capable and women are good to become teachers”]. During the second cycle interview she depicted how she negotiated such situations,

naf li jien għandi strong character inkellmu lura bil-kliem it-tajba tipu imma mhux ha noqgħod ngħajru jew hekk imma nkellmu bis-sewwa. ... This is the reality u jien ħa nsibha ħafna fix-xogħol tiegħi, sfortunatament ... Jew ħa noqgħod nibki u ma nagħmel xejn biha jew naqbadha u nagħmel xi ħaġa biha [I know I have a strong character; I speak back to him in the right way, not shouting but I will speak to him calmly. ... This is the reality I find at my place of work ... I can cry and do nothing about it or I get hold of the situation and do something].

She narrated the story when in a specific place of work, the manager of the company used to approach her asking her, “trid nagħmillek blind date? Il-manager! ... Kont nagħmel triq shiħa għad-dar nibki. U ħa nibki issa wkoll ...” [“Do you want me to arrange a blind date for you? The manager! ... I used to spend all the way home crying. And I am going to start crying now ...”]. Notwithstanding this, she was happy at work because she was aware that there were other types of people, those who appreciated her efforts and her input. In fact, during one of the meetings with the Human Resources Department there was the suggestion to create a student group and Giorgia was nominated to be the President. Giorgia explained that during

such meetings, she shared ideas and plans for the future and because of this she was known as their “top student”.

Giorgia spoke also about what she had already achieved in life and narrated her experiences outside university and work. She was happy she had the opportunity to take part in a beauty contest. This experience proved to be difficult at times, especially financially. This contest exposed her to voluntary work. Following this experience, Giorgia aspired to do missionary work in Asia or South America. She spoke also about one of her greatest dreams, her “Nithajjar issa mmur pilot” [“desire to become a pilot”]. However, she was aware that such a dream entailed a number of hardships: another four years of study away from Malta and a huge financial burden. She was not yet sure she was prepared for the sacrifices this dream entailed.

Being a ‘pioneer’ Giorgia was not afraid to take on new challenges and go against the grain. The influence of her mother helped Giorgia become more agentic, embracing modernity and all the opportunities this offered.

***Roberto, a determined young man***

Roberto comes from a traditional family. The very first sentence during the first cycle interview, portrayed his great desire to break free from the mould of the parents, from their way of doing things, “Bħalissa, qisni qiegħed f’ dik il-faži fejn, hekk, qed nipprova, qed jirnexxili imma xi kultant xorta nemmen li għadni lura, li nikkonvinċi lill-ġenituri li tipo, tistgħu bil-mod il-mod tibdew tieħdu l-passi lura fuq ċerti deċiżjonijiet” [“at the moment, I am in that phase where, I am trying, I succeed sometimes but sometimes I believe I am still far back, to convince my parents that, they can slowly take a few steps back from

certain decisions”]. He narrated that his parents treat him like a child; there is no trust in their relationship. During moments of discord, his mother tells him that, “in-nanniet, qatt ma kienu jafdawna lilna sal-ġurnata taż-żwieġ” [“our grandparents never used to trust us till our wedding day”]. Roberto still lives with his parents but claimed that “ma tantx inħossni komdu għax il-fatt li nidhol hemm ġew u rrid noqgħod, għal dak li jgħiduli ... li jkolli curfew, ma tagħmilx sens għalija, li għandi, ħa nagħlaq għoxrin sena daqt jigifieri, naraha naqra hekk, naqra redikola l-biċċa” [“I don’t feel very comfortable. Going home and I have to submit to all that they say! ... having a curfew does not make sense for me, I am soon going to be twenty, it is a bit ridiculous”]. He feels more comfortable with his friends because their friendships are built on respect. Roberto mentioned that his parents try to influence his life course, “politikament ukoll, I’m trying to make them understand li issa fejn tidhol politika u hekk, għandi nieħu d-deċiżjoni tiegħi jien, mhux abbażi ta’ x’jaħsbu l-ġenituri tiegħi jew il-familja tiegħi minn xiex ġejja” [“politically as well, I’m trying to make them understand that in the political sphere, I take decisions not based on what they think and their background”].

Roberto spoke about his relationship with his mother which he found slightly more difficult to navigate when compared to his relationship with his father. He believed that there were instances when his father was on his side but was not ready to argue with his wife to stand up for Roberto, “narah li qisu jkun irid li jaqbeż għalija, imma ma jarahiex worth it, li jispiċċa jillettika m’ommi ħabba f’hekk! Allura he just takes her side!” [“I notice he wants to defend me but it is not worth it, because he ends up fighting with my mother! So, he just takes her side”]. Whenever Roberto decided to take part in any activity that was not

directly related to his studies, his mother put up a lot of resistance, “tiħux sehem, tiħux sehem, tippretendi li nifhimha ... nipprova niddiskuti!” [“do not take part, do not take part, expecting me to understand her reasoning ... I try to discuss!"]. Roberto loves doing new things and exploring new initiatives and he tried to negotiate his tertiary journey through the inclusion of various activities that are not academic. However, his mother wanted him to focus only on his studies. She consistently told Roberto, “you are going to repeat a year, you are going to waste a year!” Roberto’s insistence that this was really not the case and that he knew what he was doing fell on deaf ears.

During the second and third cycle interviews, Roberto narrated how over the last months he negotiated his relationship with his parents and with a sense of satisfaction confirmed that he could see an improvement from the first cycle interview, “jien it-tip ta’ karattru li jekk hemm xi ħaġa nemmen fija ħa nigġieled għaliha. Kieku m’għandix dak it-tip ta’ karattru, għadni lura f’dak ir-rigward li jibdew jafdawni aktar u jħalluni aktar waħdi u liberu” [“I am the type of person if there is something I believe in I am going to fight for it. If I didn’t have this strong character, I would still be far behind in how much they trust me and let me live my life freely”]. Since this was a longitudinal study, I could observe the way Roberto negotiated his relationship with his parents and the achieved improvement, “I am quite ok with them. L-unika ħaġa li nħoss naqra hekk, li forsi they always push me, hemm aktar tendenza li academic achievements, I get congratulated for them. Those are ok u affarijiet oħra mhux importanti” [“I am quite ok with them. The only thing is that they keep on pushing me, but only for academic achievements, those I get congratulated for them. Those are ok but other things are not important”].

During the three cycle interviews, Roberto spoke also about how he was negotiating his journey following the break-up with his first girlfriend, “l-ewwel imħabba kienet tiegħi” [“my first love”]. He described the way the break up happened: everything was done calmly with no fights. The termination of this relationship left a huge impact on Roberto and to a certain extent on his academic journey. Even though they remained friends, Roberto found this journey quite tough to navigate. Following this experience, Roberto started investing his time and energy in various hobbies, some of them new, and this brought about a most welcome change in his life, it brought new beginnings, “il-break-up kienet low point. Kienet low point imma it changed into a high point!” [“the break-up was a low point. It was a low point but it changed into a high point”]. At that stage, Roberto mentioned his current girlfriend, Angele, describing her as “tal-blih, ... she’s very loving, very supportive and naħseb għallmitni nerga’ nħobb bil-mod il-mod” [“out of this world, ... she’s very loving, very supportive and I think she taught me how to slowly slowly love again”]. He looked very pleased and grateful that he met Angele and felt overwhelmed every time he thought about her.

Roberto spoke at length about his career claiming that even though his studies led to a specific profession, he was uncertain what he wished to do once he completed his studies and was ready to join the labour market. He asserted that the course he was following “is not exactly the career I imagined it to be”. Through his years at university, he did some part-time work not related to his studies. The aim of these different experiences was to equip him with various skills which would be of great benefit once he joins the labour market. During the third cycle interview, he spoke about those students following professional

courses which required a warrant. Once they completed their studies, these students started working immediately in their field to log in the necessary number of hours and obtain the warrant. Roberto narrated that he was using a different strategy; he decided to delay the warrant to be able to accomplish something he was passionate about. This would serve as a good opportunity for him to improve his skills, “jogħgobni l-business ukoll, is-sales aspect. U naħseb knowing how to sell and being good at it is very important. U ma għandix għaġla biex ingib il-warrant” [“I like business, the sales aspect. I believe knowing how to sell and being good at it is very important. I am in no hurry to get the warrant”]. Roberto’s plans for the future were that, “il quddiem, inkun ftaħt għal rasi u jkolli l-klijenti tiegħi, so iktar inkun nista’ nikkontrolla l-ħin tiegħi. Matul il-ġurnata l-karriera u filgħaxija l-passatemp, il-part-time” [“in the coming years I would have my own business with my own clients and I will be able to manage my time better. During the day it will be about my career and in the evenings, it will be about my hobby, part-time”]. Roberto’s transition into the labour market was prolonged. He decided to put aside his profession to be able to explore the different opportunities set before him.

During the third cycle interview, I could observe the way Roberto was budding into a young man, not only through the achievement of a degree that led to a professional career but mainly through the way he negotiated his life and his relationships. He was not afraid to risk and tried to combine tradition and change, without causing conflict within the family and thus, he is classified as a ‘pioneer’, Roberto is happy constructing “il-baži għall-futur, the starting point of my career” [“the foundation of his future, the starting point of my career”], embracing the new freedoms available in Malta.

The ‘pioneers’, through the exercise of agency are more proactive in their journey and keep moving on towards the attainment of independence. Without cutting ties with the family and religion, they explore the new opportunities available in Malta, trying to combine tradition and modernity.

### **The Radicals – Giselle, Neville**

Out of the sixteen participants, only two are placed at the furthest end of the continuum, away from the ‘traditionalists’. These are categorised as the ‘radicals’. As they negotiated their journey to adulthood, the ‘radicals’ rejected traditional pushes and embraced new contemporary pulls. They were not afraid to risk and to cut ties with tradition, even if this includes the family.

#### ***Giselle, breaking free***

Giselle’s parents are the least traditional when compared with the parents of the other participants. Even though her maternal grandmother tried to influence her decisions, Giselle chose to reject traditional pushes and embraced contemporary pulls. She felt Malta is too small and needed to get away,

I really am not fond of being, you know a big fish in a small pond kind of  
I would hope that I could sort of excel further than Malta, you know ...  
and work with bigger things than there are here, I hope ... I guess I just  
felt a bit like in Malta, I hit a ceiling pretty quickly, you know, you don't  
have that sort of space to grow.

Giselle was the first participant I met during this study. After the introduction, Giselle, a fresher at university, started talking about herself, slowing down every now and then but making sure to share with me all the details. In our first cycle interview I met a young, nervous, almost shy fresher. In our third cycle interview

I had in front of me a self-confident young lady advocating for women's and reproductive rights, ready to venture and explore life beyond the shores of Malta.

During our first cycle interview, Giselle spoke about her life course, describing her childhood as a very happy experience with both parents very present. Then, she continued narrating the story of her parents who separated when Giselle was fifteen years old. While her parents were going through separation, Giselle started going out with John, and started a relationship that lasted almost ten years. Over the years Giselle grew, matured and started to understand what she wanted in life and what she wanted from this relationship. The exposure gained through the Erasmus exchange programme played a significant role in Giselle's self-development. During the second cycle interview, she narrated that her experience on the Erasmus programme,

helped me become more independent and I confirmed that I can live alone. I was there without my boyfriend. This experience helped me put things into perspective, like I don't need to be with my boyfriend but I want to be with him which is quite a relief since I have been with him for eight years.

The separation of her parents did not change Giselle's relationship with them, "Mum had a very significant role in my childhood. When my parents separated, I became close with both parents". Giselle described the separation of her parents as a turning point in her life "especially because of the unique situation that it was, since ... (one of the parents) is gay". Following their separation, her relationship with her parents changed because Giselle found herself looking after them, "juggling demands to be there for both of them". This

parentification, where Giselle was emotionally taking care of her parents' needs, was an experience that,

changed my perspective a lot as I grew up ... because of my parents' transition, instead of my parents taking care of me I had to do a lot of taking care of them, emotionally being there when they need to talk, I think that experience taught me a lot, in it made me see my parents as friends and people rather than just as caregivers as I did when I was younger.

However, as her parents moved on with their lives, their support for Giselle remained constant. They supported her in her educational trajectory, "when it comes to my education, they are always ready to help. So that way if I think if I had to say I don't want to work they will be fine with it and will support me".

During the first two cycle interviews Giselle mentioned that she felt comfortable living with her parents. Nonetheless, following her breakup with John she needed space and was not ready to go and live with her parents, "I didn't really feel like I was in a position to go back with my parents" and one of her parents offered for Giselle to stay in one of their flats.

A character that featured during our three cycle interviews was Giselle's grandmother whom she describes as a very dominant woman, "very socially inclined, ... very witty, she is in every social media, ... she literally goes into every aspect of your life, she is very intrusive". She tried to control Giselle's decisions, opinions and career. When Giselle was flirting with the idea of commencing her studies at university in a social science area, her grandmother "told literally everyone, when I say everyone in Malta knew". Then, when Giselle

changed her mind and chose to follow a different course of studies, she found herself in a bit of an awkward position, “the amount of people I had to say when they ask how is the course getting on and explain ... so every time I say I’m enjoying my course she says you would have been a better ...”. Along the years, Giselle and her grandmother learnt how to navigate their relationship and,

maintained our mutual agreement to sort of not to overstep with each other and she minds her own business. As I think I've probably said in the previous interview, she kind of lost interest in my career path as soon as I wasn't pursuing .... So, I guess that works in my favour to a certain extent, because she’s off my back.

In contrast to her relationship with her grandmother, Giselle spoke about her beautiful relationship with the rest of the extended family; mentioning the way they “influenced me very much in academics, culture and books”. Giselle believed in academia and one of her aspirations was to pursue studies abroad and join the academic body. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic her plan to study abroad was delayed. She felt trapped in Malta, but she looked beyond her feelings and investigated other options. It was during this time that Giselle got heavily involved in an NGO whose agenda is women’s reproductive rights, “I have always been passionate about the pro-choice movement since I was about 14 years old”. Her active role in this NGO spurred her to be an agent of social change and led her to register for a postgraduate degree in a social science area.

During the third cycle interview, I could observe a very different Giselle. She had terminated her ten-year relationship as she realized that her life was being lived “hiding behind this relationship”. She felt free and ready to venture

beyond the Maltese archipelago. The changes in structure and culture in Malta led Giselle to exercise agency, deciding on what choices to make in her daily life. Being a ‘radical’ she became increasingly independent and detached herself from conforming to tradition and religion.

***Neville and the three pillars in his life: family, work and friends***

When I called Neville for the third cycle interview, he immediately told me that he did not finish his course and is no longer at university, “I don’t think you are interested in my story now that I am no longer at university”. I told him that this change made his story even more pertinent for this study and I was looking forward to hear about this time of change, what made him come to this decision and what were his future aspirations.

During the three cycle interviews, Neville spoke continuously about the three pillars in life: “family, friends and work. Work I have uni and the arts, friends I have my friends and the arts, you know, and then family I have this entire pie chart which is almost missing”. Neville narrated how he negotiated his educational trajectory and his transition to adulthood with a family who is present but yet he describes it as missing. He is an only child and his parents “got separated like mid-COVID”. Even though the parents’ separation was no big surprise for him because “it was like one of those things which you feel coming, like I felt it coming since like from three secondary, not that they were going to separate but ... this pillar was always missing”.

Neville described his mother as “very controlling, so I grew up looking for things to control. And what I found to control is the arts”. During our first cycle interview Neville’s mother was working and also pursuing studies at Master’s level, in an area connected to media and entertainment, a topic that has

nothing to do with her work but which she was passionate about. Following the separation of his parents, his father moved out and Neville believed that this helped to ameliorate the father-son relationship. His father was very involved in the music industry. Both parents were settled in their jobs but they were also involved in activities and work which they were passionate about. This was reflected in Neville's journey, who while pursuing studies at university was also heavily involved in performing arts. Even though Neville says that his parents were missing from the "pie chart", he also mentioned that he was very grateful that his parents, even though separated, fully supported his passion, "luckily my parents are supportive of this, and we had like the finance to facilitate it and now I'm trying to build up my own savings to facilitate it in the future".

Another "pillar" in Neville's life course was work. He included within this concept both university and the arts. Neville narrated that his father and his grandfather used to work in the same science stream and therefore, his choice of the course of studies, "was like the natural progression. ... I will have resources available to me such that I can succeed in the job". However, "as soon as I started the course, I realised that it is not what I wanted to do". Neville realized that he was looking at this course,

more of a stepping stone, like it was more a step along the path that, along a path that could get me to where I want to go. This step was not as easy as I thought it would be or as I thought it should be.

Reading for this degree made him know himself better and helped him understand which career he wished to pursue. During the first two cycle interviews he used phrases like "if I do graduate, ... or when I graduate ... Should I continue with it the course?" which clearly uncovered his uncertainty about his educational

journey. Neville delved into these feelings of doubt and could foresee an unhappy future, “I don't see myself being fully satisfied in the job that would result out of this course”. Therefore, Neville was not afraid to be ‘radical’, to be different from his father and his grandfather. He decided to take the plunge and explored other options. He did not stop to analyse and investigate what went wrong. Instead, Neville seized this opportunity and started looking for different paths without changing the destination, “I've still found my way into doing what I want to do”. His aim was to do something related to performing arts. To reach his aspiration, Neville renegotiated his educational trajectory. He was not afraid to take bold decisions and embrace contemporary pulls.

As Neville kept on constructing his story, he started talking about his involvement in the area of performing arts, telling me that he attended classes since he was a toddler. These classes were “there to educate you, ... to give you a love for the arts”. Neville described his passion for the arts as “half my career. And so, yeah, attending these classes initially was a passion thing. And then towards the later years, it was more of a networking thing”. Such networking led Neville to a number of auditions, performances, theatre directions and scriptwriting courses. It opened for him a whole new world where “I have a contact of a contact who might be able to help me to get work in the industry I want to enter or in something related”. What started as leisure, Neville invested in, fully aware that this might become his career, “It was leisure. It is not purely leisure now but obviously you have to work at it. It was something which I invested work into it there and then, and if I pay full attention, I would do well”. His involvement in the arts sector introduced him to his girlfriend, Mathilda. She was the person with whom Neville shared his heart, “I would say I am an

introvert. But I had to extrovert myself. Most things I would keep to myself but when I have to share, I will share with my girlfriend”. Neville and Mathilda, not only shared their passion for the arts but they also dreamt together. During the first cycle interview, Neville shared this story, which at a point he called ‘fantasy’:

My girlfriend and I fantasise like, not fantasise but, eventually, we want to. Ehhh, it is a fantasy because I don't think it will happen, you know, just because of economy, and because of like this plan I have like for myself, you know, this plan means that I don't stay in Malta. But, emm, like we have this fantasy of essentially like getting as much money as we can, putting it into a location or putting it into property. Having X amount of rooms, that we can rent out to our friends for possibly like a reduced price or a price that means we can pay off the mortgage and you know, like, and then just like living together with our friends, essentially, those close to us. And like, that's our life like just surrounded by what we love ... create our own family from those we have around us, like. So, and moving outwards facilitate that. I think that's what we have stuck in our head.

During our second cycle interview, this story, this fantasy, is mentioned again and Neville defined it as a sentiment, “That story of the house is not a fantasy, that sentiment is shared by a lot of people close to me, around me, my girlfriend as well. We want to pack up, move somewhere else and do whatever we want”. Furthermore, he added that “I mentioned the house because the idea of a place, a house to call home is very much what my mind have grown attached to”. Neville continued expressing his thoughts and echoing his heart, describing home as:

where all the things occur. Where I do most of the work I care about ...

That feeling, the need to take that home and attribute it to the people around me, as opposed to physical space. I hope I will be able to do it one day.

At the end of the third cycle interview, Neville was getting ready to take off, to go abroad and start this new adventure and reach his aspirations. "I don't necessarily regret being in the course", but "it was never really in my alley". The journey to reach his destination is extended and looking slightly longer; there "is a bit of a deviation from what I thought would happen, but it is rather than a deviation it's like what I knew I wanted to do anyways". Being a 'radical' Neville was happy to risk and ready to face all the challenges this new adventure would bring with it.

One may observe that the upbringing of Giselle and Neville was different from the upbringing of the other participants and may be the reason why the way they negotiated their transitions was different and thus identified as 'radicals'. One of Giselle's parents came out as gay and Giselle describes this experience as a turning point in her life. Neville's parents were very busy being involved in activities of performing arts. Even though the 'radicals' are ready to cut any ties with the family, the impact of the family remains. The way the 'radicals' negotiated their journey, to a certain extent, also shows the influence of the parents on their children.

## **Conclusion**

The three-dimensional space narrative framework allowed me as the researcher of the study to delve deeper into the stories of the participants to better understand the phenomenon of youth transitions of Maltese young people. I used narrative inquiry, highlighting temporality, sociality and place, to frame the narratives of the sixteen participants. This approach gave the participants the opportunity to speak about themselves in a personal and open manner: their past, present and future, their interaction with various social circles and the different settings and their individual spaces. I restoried their narratives focusing on the retelling of their lived experiences. In this chapter I analysed the content and meaning of the narratives by examining the plot, characters, and other elements of the stories with the final outcome of the four types of groups and a typology to better understand the transitional journey of Maltese young people in tertiary education on their way to adulthood.

From narrative analysis, I moved to the analysis of narratives in the following chapter. The analysis of narratives focused on the emergent themes that served as an explanatory framework for how the different types negotiated the processes of transitions to adulthood. The next chapter which engaged with the findings from the analysis of narrative explored the broader research questions and made linkages to theory. This approach treated narratives as sources of data that could provide insights into young people's experiences of transition, identities, and social contexts. In analysis of narrative, I focused on identifying commonalities or differences across multiple narratives, examining how narratives were used to construct or negotiate social identities and how they reflected broader cultural discourses. This approach involved coding, categorising

and identifying patterns in the data to culminate in a set of themes that addressed the research questions.

## Chapter Six

### Presentation and Discussion of Themes

#### Introduction

In this chapter the attention shifts from the restoried biographical narrative accounts of transitions through tertiary education to an in-depth discussion of findings from the coding process that resulted in a number of emergent categories, patterns and themes. This analysis gave meaning to the narratives constructed by the participants who were pursuing studies in tertiary education, unravelling how they negotiated their transitions, whether they chose to conform and remain predominately 'traditionalists' or reject the traditional 'pushes' and embrace new contemporary 'pulls'. The stories narrated by these different types of young people were explored from various angles and perspectives. The themes, patterns and categories that were gleaned from the narratives of the participants were presented and linkages with the existing literature established. The coding process included the identification and coding of narrative blocks, which represents sections taken from the narratives of the participants. These sections or stories provided the opportunity to look closer at the experiences narrated by the participants.

The relationships between similar identified codes were explored and combined into categories. Similar patterns emerged from the different categories which were grouped together to elicit different themes (Appendix F). This allowed for a conceptually dense investigation to emerge, a paradigmatic analysis and discussion drawing on the experiences of the participants. Throughout this

process I kept in mind the research questions which mainly dealt with the transitional journey of Maltese young people in tertiary education across time - the past, the present and the future, through relationships which play a crucial role in shaping one's identity and in the Maltese context.

This chapter analysed the data from the interviews against the backdrop of the impact of changes in family, culture and relationships among others in Maltese society and the transformations of the traditional markers in the passage to adulthood. Temporality, sociality and place affect various individuals in different ways but ultimately with similar consequences. The chapter focused on how young people, whether they are classified as 'traditionalists', 'opportunists', 'pioneers' or 'radicals', negotiated their transitional journey through tertiary education to adulthood. The qualitative longitudinal approach made it possible to record the data through the lens of time, facilitating the documentation of,

the hopes, aspirations and dreams of young people at significant stages in their lives, (such as starting post-secondary study; graduating from post-secondary study and seeking to employ their qualifications in the labour market), to document what happened to them and how they made sense of challenges and disappointments. (Wyn, 2020, pp. 5-6)

The longitudinal approach accentuates the evolution of the journey of the participants while in tertiary education.

The emergent themes in this study are:

1. Continuity and change
2. The construction of identities through relationships
3. The landscape of transitions of the Maltese islands

The identified themes emphasize the various methods employed by young people to negotiate similar situations, shedding light on the conceptualization of youth, agency and structure, as well as the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity.

### **Theme One – Continuity and Change**

<b>Patterns</b>	<b>Categories</b>
The influence the parents	Financial support, future aspirations, matriarchal influence
The educational journey	Compulsory and tertiary education experiences
Critical moments/Turning points	Change in role, car licence, COVID-19 pandemic

Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 2) claimed that:

experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum - the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future – each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future.

As the participants moved towards adulthood they grappled with a number of ‘pushes and pulls’. In this section, I explore how they negotiated the changes and transformations they experienced and also analyse the various turning points and critical moments encountered along their transitional journey. I evaluate how the different types, characterised as ‘traditionalists’, ‘opportunists’, ‘pioneers’ and ‘radicals’ dealt with similar experiences in different ways. Moreover, I examine the implied and possible future experiences of the participants as they completed their tertiary education and moved on to the labour market.

In Theme One, Continuity and Change, common patterns identified from the stories narrated by the participants included: the influence of parents; the educational journey and critical moments and turning points. These patterns are explored keeping in mind the various shifts and transformations occurring in the last two centuries in Malta: the welfare system; the labour market, most notably job security and the increased participation of women in employment; family patterns and the transformation of the nuclear family; gender roles; and the emphasis on choice and individualisation. The neoliberal approach to economic policy, highlighting free-market capitalism, limited government intervention, and the promotion of individual freedoms has generated a more liquid society where change is the only permanence and uncertainty the only certainty (Bauman, 2000). These changes led to the reconstruction of the “transition infrastructure” (Higgins and Nairn, 2006, p. 208) and the transformation of the transitional journey to adulthood into a more individualised one especially for those predominantly classified as ‘pioneers’ and ‘radicals’. Success or failure became the responsibility of young individuals and the significance of institutions decreased. Delving deeper into the changes and transformations brought about through the rapidly changing society helps us understand better how these different ideal-types negotiated the impact of these changes on their lifestyle, relationships, educational decisions, career paths and future aspirations. Also, one can observe their movement on the continuum, from being ‘traditionalists’ to becoming ‘radicals’, or settled somewhere in between.

### ***The Influence of the Family***

One of the common patterns identified from the narratives of the participants is the strong influence of the family, in the life course of young

people in Malta. The backing of parents which is portrayed in emotional, economic and practical support, is crucial even if these young people are pursuing studies at a tertiary level institution. The tertiary journey is vital for young people to achieve social advantages and secure job prospects yet along the transitional journey the support of the parents remains fundamental.

The model of the Maltese family is similar to the model of the Southern European family (Guerrero and Naldini, 1997) characterised by strong family networks and the respect for the institution of marriage (Visanich, 2020). When discussing key trends, Filandri et al. (2018, p. 289) concluded that the “parents’ ability to invest in their children’s success not only remains salient but also becomes even more important in determining life chances and sustaining inequalities”. The transitional journey of young people has become more individualised but the influence of the family continues to be vital. Ferrera (2010) defined the family as “the cornerstone of the Southern European societies, functioning as an effective ‘social shock absorber’” (p. 622).

Similarly to the findings of a research study held recently regarding young people living in the Metropolitan area of Naples (Carbone et al., 2022), the current study with Maltese young people underscored the family of origin as a dependable source of support. Familial support surely facilitates the transitional journey of young people. Neville’s parents, even though separated, “are helping me through paying for the driving lessons” which is a significant expense in Malta and not all young people manage to finance it without the support of the parents or part-time employment. Mario and Nancy feel privileged that their parents supported them in buying their first car. The former, who is passionate about cars, wanted to buy a luxury brand car and his parents helped him buy the

car of his dreams. He narrated that this is like a tradition “fil-familja tagħna, il-first car hekk, jixtruha l-parents” [in our family, the first car is bought by the parents’]. Nancy describes a disagreement she had with her father because she did not want him to drive her car, “ħalliha li ħallasli nofsha” [“even though he paid half of it”]. At times, the help and support received from the parents and accepted by young individuals may lead to more dependence on parents and in certain instances may give the parents the perceived right to control the choices of their children. As a result, the transitional journey towards adulthood is further prolonged. Most of the parents of the participants responded positively to the prolonged transition by providing financial support to the young people at a very important stage in their life course, at a time when they are negotiating their transition to adulthood. The present study findings support the contention by Swartz et al. (2011) who argued that in many circumstances, the “parents act as ‘scaffolding systems to help young people reach their goals and as safety nets to catch them before they fell too far” (pp. 414, 427).

Maltese young people taking part in this study spoke about different functions of the family. For those classified as ‘traditionalists’ and ‘opportunists’ the role of the family is very central and significant; for those classified as ‘pioneers’ and ‘radicals’ the family is still present but takes a backstage position. This depends also on the way the different types decided to respond to their family’s support to manage their transitions. A number of participants spoke about the huge pressure from their families always ready to give advice and recommend a way forward. Roberto’s parents, especially his mother, tried to interfere various times when he had to take any decisions. However, Roberto, fundamentally a ‘pioneer’ remained very proactive in his approach and even

though it was not easy, did not let his parents influence any of his decisions.

Those classified as ‘traditionalists’, who are moulded and shaped by structure and are less active in their decision-making processes, accepted the help and support from the parents more easily. This led to the prolongation of the transitional journey and more dependence on the parents. In such situations, the parents may feel that it is their right to control the choices of their children. Therefore, instead of serving as “scaffolding systems” some of the parents may stifle the dreams and opportunities of young people.

Dagkouli–Kyriakoglou (2018, p. 41) spoke about the major role played by the family during the financial crisis in Greece and claimed that “acceptance of support presupposes the acceptance of control”. A number of studies (Brummelman et al., 2013; Vuyts et al., 2015) claimed that parents sometimes “may transfer their own unfulfilled ambitions onto their child” (Brummelman et al., 2013, p. 2) especially in situations when parents see their children as part of themselves. Brummelman et al. (2013, p. 1), in their short article, suggested that parents look at their children as those who can “redeem their broken dreams”. This is clearly depicted in the stories narrated by both Cynthia and Daniela (see Chapter Five) whose parents were described as being ready to do anything to see their daughters excel academically. Being fundamentally ‘pioneers’ Cynthia and Daniela challenged the decisions and choices made by their parents. The latter, maybe unknowingly, tried to interfere in the lives of their children with the aim of redeeming their own unfulfilled dreams.

Another reason why parents and the extended family usually interfere in the lives of their children, is to put their mind at rest that the family business will be taken care of. This is an important phenomenon since in Malta there are many

small enterprises run by family members. Cynthia's father put a lot of pressure on her. However, not all parents expect their children to take over the family business as in the case of Ramona. Both Cynthia and Ramona, being predominantly 'pioneers' rejected the traditional pushes and took advantage of the transformations and shifts happening in the last decades which brought about an increase of female participation in the labour market. They did not choose the easier option; they were proactive and were ready to risk in order to achieve their goal. They pushed beyond their comfort zone. They could have chosen the linear career path, predetermined by their parents but instead, following the successful completion of the course at university they were happy with a job related to their area of studies away from the family business. Fundamentally 'pioneers' they challenged family expectations but without causing conflict.

In the last decades there were a number of socio-economic shifts and transformations which led contemporary young people to embark on a more individualised journey with no predetermined destination but with various opportunities and choices. This research indicated that the family still play a key role in the transitional journey of young Maltese people. The support of the parents to their children was significant in this study and portrayed as very beneficial in the life course of young people. During a crisis or in difficult times, the family steps in to help and support.

This study showed that young people classified in different ideal-type groups could find themselves in similar situations but would respond differently. Pierre, classified as a 'pioneer', and Giselle, as a 'radical', were confident of their parents' financial support during their tertiary education journey. Pierre took advantage of the situation and involved himself in student activism at university,

knowing that his parents were ready to support him financially and therefore he did not need to work, not even on a part-time basis. Giselle took a different approach and decided not to rely on her parents for support. However, she knew she could count on them. This reassurance makes life easier and less burdensome. Neville, also classified as 'radical', took a different approach and insisted on getting a job to "build his own savings to facilitate" his transitional journey. Even though both classified as 'radicals', Giselle and Neville negotiated their passage to adulthood differently.

A number of participants in this study highlighted the matriarchal influence and the role of their mothers during such a decisive phase in their life course. In recent years, Maltese society has made meaningful strides in gender re-shifting and the increase of women's participation in the labour market. However, "the crucial role of the mother's presence and care" (Saraceno, 2000, p. 140) within the family is still very significant. As Daniela crafts her story, she attributes most of her success to her mother and her constant support. She narrates how since she was a young child "my mother brainwashed me that I need to achieve an award to make it in life". Even though Daniela's mother never studied and never joined the labour market, she offers great support and guidance to Daniela and her siblings. While at University, Daniela gives birth to two children. Daniela's mother is not happy with this situation and she encourages Daniela "to put your life in order and marry". Daniela did not give in to her mother's comments who nonetheless continues supporting her. Daniela manages to complete her undergraduate studies, follow a higher diploma course and join the labour market. Nancy argues that during critical moments in her life, she yearns for her mother's presence. She narrates the story of when she had a car accident

and slightly damaged her car. The need to speak to her mother at that point in time was overwhelming. Jacob, whose parents are separated, speaks highly of his mother and acknowledges the important role she plays in his life. He narrates that he sees his mother as “l-idolu tiegħi f’ħajti, għalkemm mhix tal-oghla skola” [“my idol even though she did not study”]. Throughout her transitional journey, Ramona, classified as a ‘pioneer’ continues challenging her family’s expectations without causing conflict but also without drowning her ambitions and dreams.

While a number of participants hold their mothers in high esteem, a couple of others, like Miriam and Roberto defined their mothers as dominant. Miriam, predominantly an ‘opportunist’, offered no resistance to her mother’s pressure, especially in the educational journey, and fell in line, trying to adhere to her mother’s ways of doing things. On the contrary, Roberto, classified as more a ‘pioneer’, was not ready to give in to his mother’s demands and found it difficult to navigate his relationship with her: while at university he was the popular guy with students looking up to him and asking for advice, at home he felt like the little boy who had to adhere to his mother’s practices.

Notwithstanding this, familial support remains vital and significant in the transitional journey of young people in Malta. The analysis of the data collected showed that even though the Maltese family has changed in form and function, it still remains nuclear oriented, where strong kinship ties shape and impact the trajectories of young Maltese people (Visanich, 2020).

### ***The Educational Journey***

Another pattern that emerged from the narratives is the various educational pathways that led these young people to enter university. The

participants spoke about a continuous educational trajectory, starting from their primary education to their current tertiary journey. They argued that the way they negotiated their journey towards adulthood and their aspirations for the future were rooted in their past experiences; experiences which moulded the present orientations towards future prospects. The participants of this study are all students at the University of Malta, therefore, no matter what challenges they had to face they managed to succeed and make it to university. Again, this study shows that familial support is instrumental throughout the educational journey. Giselle, essentially a 'radical', had failed a year during secondary school and for some time her educational journey had been disrupted. However, this challenge became an opportunity for her. Her family stood by her and she overcame that challenging moment in her life to the extent that her future goal is currently to become a member of the academia. Past experiences serve as a good foundation for the current journey and also for future aspirations and possibilities.

The focus of this study is not just youth transitions but the transitions of a select group of young people in tertiary education. A common pattern identified through this research is the negotiation of the participants' initial transition to university. Jackson et al. (2000, p. 2100) observed and questioned why "some students seem to blossom in university, developing personally as well as academically, whereas others become alienated, or struggle to cope with the changes in lifestyle and work-load?" In Malta there is only one public university. Students who enrol at this university come from one of the three types of pre-tertiary schooling offered in Malta: State; Church or Independent, as recounted in Chapter Three where I discussed the Maltese context. Usually, the transition of students coming from Junior College, the state pre-tertiary school, is quite smooth

since the college forms part of university and therefore the system is very similar. The data collected for this study showed that students joining university from either an independent school or a church school found it harder to negotiate their way through. The university campus is huge and the student population numbers approximately eleven thousand, about one thousand students being foreigners. The transition to university may offer a big challenge to freshers because they feel lost and need to adjust to new social customs. Most of the participants spoke about the differences they noted when they started their tertiary education journey: different classroom structures, bigger lecture rooms and more students, more self-directed learning, no reports lodged if students miss lectures, and spending less time in lectures and therefore on campus. The ideal-type groups handled this transition differently. Shaun and Stefano, both characterised as 'traditionalists' found the change quite difficult to handle. It took Shaun a long time to settle and it was only in the third and final interview that he appeared to be in control of the situation. Pierre and Cynthia also found the first months at university very difficult to navigate. Being predominately 'pioneers' they reacted positively, even though differently, to this transition and in a few months' time their tertiary education journey was transformed into a more interesting one. While Pierre, as he narrated in his story, got heavily involved in student activism, Cynthia spent most of her time, getting to know other students and making new friends.

This transitional journey from compulsory education to tertiary education may offer multiple challenges to young people. In this section, I highlighted the most salient ones. This time of separation from what is familiar and secure to the take-off of a new adventure is defined in three stages by Van Gennep (1960):

separation, transition and inclusion. The academic transition, which is a shift from one phase of life to the next, offers a number of opportunities to young people to achieve their future aspirations. However, this academic transition is not always easy to negotiate and rather confusing at times. As soon as freshers start attending lectures, trying to fit into a completely new system of education, a few of them discover that they might not be in the right course of studies and start looking into alternatives. Three of the participants taking part in this study, Shaun, Sharon and Neville, narrated their experiences as they decided to change their course of studies. Coming from three different ideal-type of groups they managed their situation differently. All their plans which a while ago looked perfect, became complicated, “necessitating the re-negotiation of transition in the face of false starts, setbacks and disappointed aspirations” (Higgins and Nairn, 2006, p. 208). Decisions and choices of the past do not always offer a smooth transition to present and future aspirations. Shaun, Sharon and Neville speak about re-navigating and re-negotiating their tertiary educational journey; yo-yoing backward and forward to find the right course that leads them to their future aspirations. Taking the longitudinal approach, gave me the opportunity to examine the choice process of the participants especially choices directly related to their educational journey which eventually impact their career path.

Shaun, fundamentally a ‘traditionalist’ is risk averse, not very willing to go through changes and not ready to get off the linear track. During the second cycle interview, Shaun tells me that he is still a fresher because he changed his course of studies. However, he still sounds very confused and not sure he made the right decision, “Xi kultant ngħid dak iż-żmien ħadt deċiżjoni ta’ malajr u żbaljajt, u fil-mument ma kontx sew” [“Sometimes I say that I made a quick

decision and I was mistaken, I was not well during that time”]. He reached out and sought the necessary help but he knew that this was finally only his responsibility (Higgins and Nairn, 2006). A change in the original course of studies brings with it much anxiety and stress; and choices are costly and involve an element of risk (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This can create feelings of uncertainty and indecisiveness. Such a change may impact the academic journey, and surely, it will prolong it. When I met Shaun again for the third and final cycle interview, he narrates how he finally decided to go back to the first course of studies. He looked happier and almost sure he made the right decision. The fact that the list of courses available at university has in the last years increased drastically, is putting more responsibility on the students, causing them more stress and anxiety due to the fact that they seek to make the right decision.

Sharon, classified as an ‘opportunist’ grabbed the opportunity that came her way once she failed her first year of studies. During this time of great uncertainty, her involvement in a voluntary organization helped her understand what she really wants in life and what her future aspirations are. Voluntary work “is widely believed to be beneficial not only for the community but for the individuals who perform it” (Thoits and Hewitt, 2001, p. 115). It is also seen as that which can give a sense of meaning and purpose in life, enhancing well-being (Thoits, 1992). While a number of students give up when faced with academic difficulties, such as failing a year, there are those who manage to seize the opportunity that crosses their path and find themselves in a new situation heading on towards a different future.

Neville found out that the course of studies he was following at the University of Malta could never lead to his future aspirations. His “original plan”

did not work out. Characterised as a ‘radical’ he was not afraid to risk, to break free in an almost dramatic way from the traditional push and renegotiate his choices. He changed university and started studying abroad. Since joining the EU, mobility for work and study has become more common in Malta among young people. Statistics published by the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (2014) show that 46% of students consider enrolling for a Bachelor’s course abroad while 21% of students consider enrolling for a Master’s course abroad. A study carried out in 2011 by Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ shows that 15% of 15- to 29-year-olds were ready to travel abroad to study.

A significant aspect about the tertiary education journey in Malta is the fact that education is free for Maltese and EU students registered on full-time undergraduate courses. Moreover, registered students receive a stipend, which is a fixed monthly sum of money. Freshers also receive a one-time allowance. This makes their stories and their experiences unique, distinct and different from other European countries where students have to pay tuition fees. Free tuition and the stipend are not only for low-income families but for every student eligible to register for an undergraduate course at the University of Malta. This exhibits the economic progress and societal developments that incentivise young people coming from different socio-economic backgrounds to remain in education longer and eventually graduate at tertiary level.

Maltese students argue that the stipend and the allowance are not enough to cover their expenses and does not help them become financially independent. Nancy claims that “l-istipendju nonfqu petrol biss ... so. Tixtri naqra hwejjeg, toħroġ ’l hemm u ’l hawn u tixtri imbarazz online. Jew immur nieħu drink ma’ šħabi” [“I spend the stipend on fuel, so you buy some clothes, you go out, you

buy extra things online. Or you go out with you friends for a drink”]. Many Maltese young people in tertiary education choose to work part-time alongside their studies. Sanchez-Glebart et al. (2017) argued that the transition of students who work alongside their studies is quite smooth. Being able to combine work with studies and progressing on their journey to the labour market and to adulthood successfully depicts the self-efficacy of the young person. Getting gainful employment, even if on a part-time basis, aids young people to become more independent, “gain people skills and work skills ... personal attributes such as responsibility, commitment, reliability, discipline, motivation and life skills” (Muldoon, 2009, p. 242). Sharon claimed that being autonomous is important to grow, “One cannot keep on depending on someone else. ... I started working part-time because I don’t want to depend completely on my parents. Nothing special but it gives me an income”.

During this journey of continuity and change, the longitudinal approach gave me the opportunity to examine and explore the choice processes of the participants. Most of the choices were directly related to the educational journey and these eventually impacted the career path of these young people. While a number of participants decided to take few risks, others took advantage of the various new opportunities, mainly the new courses on offer and the Erasmus exchange.

### ***Critical Moments and Turning Points***

As I pursued investigating patterns of continuity and change and exploring the stories narrated by the participants, I could identify moments that could be described as turning points. These turning points went beyond temporary changes or a change in behaviour. I engaged with the notion of ‘fateful moments’

(Giddens, 1991) embedded in the biographical narratives of the participants within the context of late modernity to locate critical moments and investigate the biographical choices made by these young people when at crossroads, during their transitional journey. This highlights the uniqueness and complexities of youth transitions. In Giddens' terms (1991) 'fateful moments' "are times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroad in his existence" (p. 113). The notion of 'fateful moments' contributed to the better understanding of the experiences of these participants as they moved on towards adulthood. I explored how such moments emerged and unfolded, and the impact they left on the identity construction process in the lives of young people. Such particular moments are usually accompanied by a profound change in the identity of youth, and such changes will prepare them to face other forthcoming 'fateful moments' and turning points.

One such event is the transition to motherhood (Thomson et al., 2002). Motherhood is considered a major life change. Having a child, and in the case of Daniela, having two children, forced her to grow up and made her acquire traits of maturity and independence rather quickly (Mehta et al., 2020). Classified as a 'pioneer' Daniela was proactive and agentic. She had a good support system from her fiancé and from both families and this evoked a "sense of security and protection. Also, the support and help which [the father] provides to the woman - mother reassures her that she can rely on him and does not need to raise children on her own" (Gežová, 2015, p. 48). Nielsen et al. (2012) claimed that despite the father's involvement, becoming a parent remains a largely gendered phenomenon with more substantial consequences for women. In fact, even though Daniela had a lot of support, her accelerated transition to motherhood prolonged her tertiary

education journey. Laub and Sampson (2003) contended that the concept of turning points may coincide with life transitions, strengthening, weakening or interrupting career paths. Any unexpected transition put young people at crossroads in their lives and pressure them to negotiate decisions earlier than expected.

A number of the participants in this study described the moment when they got their driving licence as a turning point in their life course, a rite of passage towards adulthood (Masclat, 2002; Tilleczek, 2004). It is considered as a coming-of-age experience, a continuation in this journey, an experience that leads youth one step closer to maturity. Ortar et al. (2018, p. 177) maintained that “the driving licence represents a mobility tool. ... a means of escape from dependence”.

Min mindu ġibt il-liċenzja qed inħossni vera indipendenti fuqi nnifsi.

Qabel vera kont, I used to rely on my mummy, my papa, tipo jwassluni

kullimkien 'l hemm u 'l hawn, tal-linja ... però, naħseb ma nafx, jista'

jkun taraha bla sens, imma mal-karozza naħseb ġiet ħafna responsabilità u

nħossni aktar matura tad-deċiżjoni li ħa nibda nsuq. [from when I got the

license I feel really independent. Before I used to rely on my mummy, my

father, they used to drive me anywhere, here and there, ... But I don't

know, maybe it doesn't make sense for you, but I believe that the car

brings with it a great responsibility and I feel more mature about the

decision to start driving.] Nancy

Sirt ħafna aktar indipendenti. L-ewwel nett, meta ġibt il-liċenzja, iktar

ħassejtni nieħu lili postijiet, allura aktar nieħu responsabilità tiegħi nnifsi”.

[“I became more independent. First, when I got the license, I could take myself to different places, so I take my own responsibility”.] Miriam

In recent years the number of cars on the roads of this small island increased drastically. Statistics (NSO, 2023) show that the average of newly licensed motor vehicles in Malta amounts to approximately 82 vehicles per day. This, together with the size of the island, pose risk and great danger on the roads. Fully aware of this reality, the tension and anxiety of parents as they see their children taking off along the roads of Malta, increase immensely. Some of the participants described the achievement of the license as an opportunity to become more autonomous and independent in life, but within limits and boundaries set by the parents. However, not all young people are ready to accept the confines set by parents. Roberto claimed that this achievement made him lose his independence,

Għax meta kelli 16, 17, tipo kienu jhalluni noħroġ orrajt u daqshekk ma jċemplulix, imma kif ġibt il-liċenzja qishom, reġġhu bdew iċempluli, “Ma’ min ħiereġ, fejn qiegħed, xrobt jew le?” ... Qisni ksibt dik l-indipendenza kollha u rġajt tlietha kollha għax just ġibt il-liċenzja!

[Because when I was 16, 17, they used to let me go out and never used to call to check on me, but as soon as I got the licence, they started again, calling me, asking with whom am I going out, where am I, if I am drinking or not? ... I was independent and I lost everything because I got the license].

This argument continued highlighting the crucial role of the family in the transitional journey of young people. Some Maltese parents, because their children still live at home, feel they can control or influence their decisions. This continues to prolong the dependence of Maltese young people on their parents.

Giddens (1984, p. 61) used the term ‘critical situations’ in conditions when anxiety could not be restrained. Such situations pertain to “circumstances of radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind ... situations that threaten or destroy the certitudes of institutionalized routines”. The COVID-19 pandemic was a huge critical moment and a turning point in the lives of these young people since it interrupted and changed the nature of their studies and also their way of living, especially during the lockdown periods. I started conducting the interviews in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic became an unavoidable theme for a number of participants taking part in this research. Almost all the participants in this study had at least one cycle interview conducted during the pandemic and these interviews were conducted online. The qualitative longitudinal approach gave me the opportunity to explore and compare the biographical narratives over a span of four years. I examined the narratives, before, during and after the pandemic. Consequently, I explored the sociological implications on this journey of continuity and change, particularly in the area of youth transitions of Maltese young people in tertiary education.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt across the globe and it affected crucial aspects of social, cultural, educational and economic life. Miranda and Alfredo (2022, p. 242) observed that “the crisis unleashed by COVID-19 has had a great impact on young people, exacerbating the problems associated with the labour market and access to housing”. The pandemic made the transitional journey to adulthood even more precarious, accelerating disruption and “added to the mounting economic and social pressures young people already faced in the first two decades of the twenty-first century” (MacDonald et al., 2023, p. 13).

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were also felt in higher education institutions where the educational journey had to proceed in a different way in this exceptional situation; it “undoubtedly had a direct, and often negative, impact on students in higher education, jeopardising their studies and disrupting their anticipated transitions to ‘qualified futures’” (Gyurovicsova and Williamson, 2023, p. 194). Most of the participants agreed that there was a huge change in the way the courses were delivered during the pandemic and the different ideal-types discussed how they navigated their journey through their course of studies during this time of unexpected change. The sudden migration to online lectures and examinations had its toll on all the students and to a certain extent, disrupted their academic experience. The abrupt modification of daily routines shaped the life course of youth during this time, adding on to the existing challenges. Most of the students at the University of Malta, including the different types participating in this study, found this journey very difficult to navigate; “a large proportion of student participants from the University of Malta have a significant degree of fear regarding COVID-19” (Bonnici et al., 2020, p. 11). All the different ideal-types spoke about the impact of the pandemic. Stefano, identified as a ‘traditionalist’, narrated that his academic journey became quite complex, “because of COVID, I don’t know where I’m heading with University”. Neville, identified as a ‘radical’ found the situation very tiring, where “you want to drop everything and sleep”. Jacob, who is an ‘opportunist’, described it as: “It’s like night and day, like, online, it’s the equivalent of, I don’t know, trying to write an English essay with your hands behind your back. That’s how it felt”. The experiences of the participants confirmed the results of the survey conducted by Kedraka and

Kaltsidis (2020) which showed that students lacked the experience of online teaching and therefore, felt more at ease in a face-to-face environment.

Anxiety and concern increased as the assessment period approached. Fernández-Castillo (2021, p. 7) argued that “anxiety seems more intense during the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic and also afterward”. The participants expressed their worries because in the circumstances the methods of assessment had to be adjusted and were different. They were very aware that this could impact their academic achievements. The change in the method of examinations made Ramona, who is identified as a ‘pioneer’ and usually active and not afraid of change, very anxious. However, her determination saw her through the academic journey. A study carried out by Aristovnik et al. (2020) about the impact of the pandemic on students pursuing studies in higher education institutions mentions Malta as one of the countries where the adaptation to online learning at the University of Malta is described as satisfactory.

Some of the participants in this study had to delay their transitions or had to miss opportunities and this transformed their tertiary educational journey into a more complex one. Stankovska et al. (2022, p. 185) claimed that the “COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of the education system in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and on all continents”. Normal life was violently disrupted throughout the world because of the COVID-19 pandemic. People were doing their best to live a normal life but the restrictions imposed to stop the spread of the virus presented major setbacks and robbed young people from a number of enriching experiences. Since the ‘traditionalists’ focused more on completing their linear transitional journey, they were not really interested in the Erasmus experience. The other types, like Jacob,

Sharon and Ramona spoke about their disappointment at not being able to take advantage of the new opportunities and go on an Erasmus exchange. Giselle postponed her postgraduate studies abroad but her resilience and flexibility helped her negotiate this delayed transition through the development of her identity as an activist. She became heavily involved in an NGO focussed on women's reproductive rights. Through such a moment of crisis, Giselle classified as a 'radical' embraced contemporary 'pulls', rejected ties with religion and tradition and negotiated her way through the pandemic.

A number of research participants commented on how during the COVID-19 pandemic they lost their daily routine and reduced their social and physical contact with others; they felt "the lack of live communication with friends which led to issues of deprivation of socialization" (Diamanti and Nikolaou, 2021, p. 30). Even though the University of Malta provided distance learning in an interesting and adequate way, nothing could replace the experience of social interaction with other students, lecturers and friends. Jacob depicts this situation as,

a bit strange għax qas immur l-Unversità fil-verità. I am a student but all of my lectures are from home. Allora it's strange because I don't feel like I am uni student inhossni qas qiegħed l-iskola fil-verità. Għandi l-istudju u hekk and it is very difficult. It is different and a new experience. I was very excited for it; ili sentjen nistinka biex nipprova nidhol. Issa li dħalt is disappointing għax ma nistax immur uni physically. [a bit strange because in reality I don't go to university. I am a student but all of my lectures are from home. So, it's strange because I don't feel like I am uni student, in reality I feel I am not in a school. I have what to study etc and it is very

difficult. It is different and a new experience. I was very excited for it I have been working hard to join. Now that I made it, it is disappointing that I cannot go to uni physically].

This segregation put students at higher risk of social isolation and presented a number of difficulties in the life course of young people. Bonnici et al. (2020, p. 2) claimed that “the absence of a campus experience may also increase the experience of isolation among the student population” and an increase in loneliness and negative emotions has been reported. Miriam believes that the pandemic was an enormous challenge for all the people but,

inhoss li ħa nkun biased, imma żgħażaġh l-aktar li ġew affettwati for sure. Il-ħajja soċjali waqfet tagħhom, uni waqfet għal sena u nofs. ... Aħna kollox waqaf, uni waqfet, ħajja soċjali waqfet, studenti jaħdmu batew għax they were first out ħabba li jaħdmu ftit sigħat. Żgħażaġh kienu l-aktar li ġew affettwati, anke attivizmu bata għax tilfu sens ta' motivazzjoni. [I feel I am biased, but the young people were the most effected for sure. Their social life stopped. Uni stopped for a year and a half. ... For us everything stopped. Uni stopped, social life stopped, it was difficult for students who were in employment because they were the first out since they work very few hours. Youth were the most effected, even activism suffered because they lost their motivation].

Another effect of the COVID-19 pandemic which had a direct impact on young people was the change in life style and patterns of behaviour in a number of domains, including leisure. Leisure activities enhance human development (Anderson, 2020). In a study carried out by Liu et al. (2021) results showed the

negative impact on adults' leisure participation where there was "a significant decrease in all leisure activity participation between pre- and amid the pandemic" (p. 78). This supported the experiences narrated by the participants. Mario narrates how he got bored doing everything from home. He, who usually is very careful in leading a healthy lifestyle during the lockdown gained seven kilos. Giorgia, very much involved in one of the student organizations on campus, felt very discouraged, "COVID qed taffettwani ħafna għax intlaqt waħda. Qabel kont dejjem għaddejja 'l hemm u 'l hawn u nara x'ha ndaħħal f'ħajti mentri issa xi kultant ngħid m'għandix aptit noħroġ. Qabel qatt ma kont ngħidha dik". ["COVID is affecting me a lot because I feel unmotivated. Before I was here, there and everywhere, getting involved in everything, now sometimes I say I don't feel like going out. I never used to speak like this"]. Giorgia fees that the pandemic isolated her, keeping her away from meeting people. Roberto, like Giorgia, was involved in a lot of activities and putting everything on hold was just "horrible". The 'pioneer' types who were always involved in a number of activities, felt bored, discouraged and isolated. The mandatory lockdown of shops, bars, restaurants and gyms had its toll on the economy of Malta and also on the lifestyle of the people.

However, the COVID-19 "pandemic provided an opportunity for the cultivation of positive qualities" (Evans et al., 2020, p. 9). A number of young people seized the moment to demonstrate their resilience and met this time of great adversity with courage, transforming challenges into opportunities. Those classified as 'pioneers' sailed through this exceptional time. Pierre took the opportunity to rest from all student activism and concentrated on his final examinations, which gave him very satisfying results,

third year is the hardest for ... (the course) to say the least, coz of COVID-19 I did well. Got second class upper. Academically I sorted myself. I wanted to do well in ... (one of the subjects) and got an average of 75 or 76. I don't usually give a lot of importance to the course but it's still nice to do well in subjects.

Sharon, who was very much involved in the voluntary sector, also considered the lockdown a break from all the activism, and an opportunity to "focus on myself" by doing physical workouts and study.

Giorgia narrated how the lockdown, gave her the opportunity to spend more time with her family and her large extended family confirming the argument of Evans et al. (2020) that "not all families were negatively impacted by the restrictions, with some families reporting positive benefits and meaning, including opportunities for strengthening relationships, finding new hobbies, and developing positive characteristics such as appreciation, gratitude, and tolerance" (p. 1).

As we have seen, the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a truly critical moment and a turning point in the life course of Maltese young people in tertiary education. Therefore, it merited special attention in this study. The impact of the pandemic was felt, to different extents, by everyone. The different ideal-types handled this crisis at times similarly. However, exercising agency, being proactive and independent, not risk averse and ready for any change, aspects found mostly in those who are essentially 'pioneers' and 'radicals', made the transitional journey, if not easier, slightly less strenuous and difficult.

Looking at the patterns along this theme of continuity and change, the stories of the participants provided evidence that this phase during their transitional journey is,

dense and rich in turning points that are capable of converting ‘normal’ into ‘choice’ biographies and vice versa, or re-directing a person’s life in unsuspected or unplanned directions, or of having discrete, accumulated or immediate effects throughout his/her life course. (Nico, 2016, p. 5)

The personal and social interaction of the participants are explored in theme two. This second theme investigates how young people, while navigating and negotiating their journey of continuity and change through fateful moments and turning points, construct their identities linking their individual experiences to structural influences.

### **Theme Two - The Construction of Identities through Relationships**

<b>Patterns</b>	<b>Categories</b>
Professional and romantic identities	Study abroad, career path, romantic relationships
Cultural and religious identities	Different lifestyle, values, leisure
Gender and identity	Role of women, traditional family, employment, course of studies

Of great significance in the stories narrated by the participants were the patterns of interaction which highlighted the relational aspect in narrative inquiry.

I investigated the participants’ personal stories: their beliefs, desires, feelings, hopes and their social interactions with family, peers, boyfriends, girlfriends and partners. As they spoke about their selves, they introduced me, the researcher, and the readers to social actors involved in their journey towards adulthood.

Narratives, “not only those of self, but of place and time” (Rattansi and Phoenix, 2005, pg. 105) play a significant role in the construction of identities; “tying identities to territories and memories, landmarks and histories” (Rattansi and Phoenix, 2005, pg. 105). Phoenix (2022) claimed that stories are central in people’s identities because when narrating a story people select events and experiences that are important to them.

Youth is depicted as a significant time in the forging of identities. White and Wyn (2004, p. 196) claimed that “identity formation is never fixed; it is always a work in progress”. Furthermore, it is not only about a unitary self but about a range of plural identities. Phoenix (2022) argued that identities are formed over the life course and are different in various contexts. Therefore, identities are relational. In this section I analyse how the different types of participants in this study negotiated their various identities in the process of their transition to adulthood. I attempt to uncover the contribution of agency and structure along this transitional journey, linking structural influences and individual experiences. Negotiating transitions and constructing identities, given the fragmentation of old structures such as the family and the state, in a risk-society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) may be a truly complex process.

### ***Professional and Romantic Identities***

The construction of professional and romantic identities is crucial in the transitional journey of young people. Social transformations leave an impact on the construction of identities. Contemporary researchers, such as Furlong (2013, p. 124), argued that identities in the late modern era “lack a stable grounding”. Postmodernists speak more about uncertainty and fluidity (Rattansi and Phoenix, 1997; Bauman, 2000). Young people are living at a stage where the

life course journey has become unpredictable and the process of individualisation is replacing the collective. Côté (2009, p. 377) asserted that young people need to learn how to construct their identities within “a community of strangers”. All this, happening in a liquid postmodern era, rendered the construction and the maintenance of stable identities rather difficult; where “the identity tasks to be completed are immensely challenging and fraught with risk and young people are forced to make crucial choices in situations where previous norms no longer apply” (Furlong, 2013, p. 126). The approach of other contemporary researchers, like Du Bois-Reymond (1998, 2009) and Arnett (2004), are more positive and optimistic. They claim that social transformations provide young people with the freedom to pursue different ways of living and try out different study and job opportunities. Giselle, classified as a ‘radical’, wanted to break free from tradition and to leave the island, since in Malta “you don't have that sort of space to grow”. She knew exactly how she wished to develop her professional identity.

Arnett (2000, p. 479) described emerging adulthood as that period in life full of opportunities for identity explorations, depicting it as “the age of possibilities, a period in which many different potential futures remain possible and personal freedom and exploration are higher for most people than at any other time”. Bauman (2004) argued that identities, in the age of liquid modernity, are going through a process of repeated transformations and therefore becoming precarious. The participants, as they grappled with uncertainty and insecurity experienced in our contemporary, liquid modern age, sought to complete their tertiary studies successfully and develop their professional identity. However, deciding on a particular career instead of another is no easy task and this process is usually influenced by many factors (Havighurst, 1972). Neville decides to

follow the footsteps of his father and his grandfather. Cynthia is sure that she is not ready to take up her father's business. Ramona follows her sister's footsteps but never completely rules out taking on the business of her father; she does not wish that, "ilu daqshekk jaħdem għalih jisfaxxa fix-xejn" ["he has been working so hard and then everything is lost"]. Pierre, who has so many different opportunities to choose from, feels lost and gets very anxious at the idea that he has to choose his career path. Universities play a very significant role in the formation of professionals before they join the labour market and therefore, Barbarà-i-Molinero et al. (2016) suggests to higher education institutions "to continue developing new measures to support identity development at university" (p. 191).

While on the doorstep of the labour market, young people are faced with huge challenges. Those classified as 'traditionalists' tended to feel the weight more because their focus remained on finding a secure job, if possible one that continues till retiring age. The other types understood and embraced the contemporary understanding of employment, that employment is no longer for life, that there are so many occupational opportunities with different types of contracts. However, a number of young people, still look for the traditional way of doing things, trying to find an employment that offers at least some sort of security.

Some of the young participants have the added pressure of the families. A number of young people are sometimes expected to follow in the footsteps of their previous generation, the reason being to take over the business of the family. Most of those classified as 'radicals' do not usually comply with the demands of the family and decide against falling in line with the expected standards of their

family. Following the completion of their studies, they are excited to explore new possibilities and experiment with the many opportunities that come their way. However, it is possible that following this time of exploration and experimentation, some, like Ramona, may contemplate returning to the family business. Those classified as ‘pioneers’ are usually ready to combine modernity with tradition.

Erikson (1978) discussed eight psychosocial stages in the life cycle of any individual and depicted phase six as the time when young people established intimacy and relationship with others. Nico (2016) explored the effects of romantic turning points in the comprehensive understanding of this transitional journey to adulthood. During this time of exploration most young people, instead of regarding their parents as their primary attachment figures, prefer to make space for the opinions and the support of their peers. Studies conducted by Hazan and Zeifman (1994, 1999) and Fraley and Davis’s (1997) argued that peers have become a safe haven for young people but could never replace the security offered by the parents, especially the mother. This concurred with the findings of this study which yielded that both the influence of the family and the matriarchal influence are common patterns in the life course of young people.

Romantic relationships continue to be an important landmark in the transitional journey of young people. Three of the research participants spoke about their current romantic relationship and its impact on their life course and decisions. The three of them narrated that being in a relationship made them take the decision to stay in Malta and not venture beyond. The focus of Mario, fundamentally a ‘traditionalist’, is to hold on to a very linear transition to adulthood: graduation, job and family. With this in mind he puts away his desire

to work abroad, even if for short periods, claiming that “Anke għal holiday 9 days kont vera ddejjaqt mingħajrha u hekk” [“Even for a 9-day holiday I really got sad without her”]. Mario’s desire, fundamentally a ‘traditionalist’ is to be near his family.

Jacob and Mark, both characterised as ‘opportunists’ are ready to seize the opportunity that comes their way, but the sole aim at the back of their mind is settling down in Malta. During the third and final interview Mark is about to start a postgraduate degree abroad, but he already knew that as soon as he finishes his studies he will be returning to Malta because as he says, “Issa qieghed f’relazzjoni, so għandi raguni biex niġi lura ... l-interest qieghed Malta” [“now I am in a relationship, so I have a reason to return ... my interest is here in Malta”].

Those essentially ‘radicals’ are not afraid to break ties with tradition and take any risk to pursue their aspirations. Neville went abroad to follow his dreams but made the necessary arrangements to safeguard the relationship. The experiences of contemporary young people show that even in a society which is becoming more individualistic and independent, romantic relationships remain significant events in the life course of young people and may influence their decisions and their aspirations for the future.

The tertiary education journey is an important stage in the life course of young people. The experiences they go through, together with the expectations of the family, society and culture play a crucial role in the construction of their identities. The choices they make and the decisions they take are very significant in defining who they become as they reach adulthood.

### *Cultural and Religious Identities*

Young people construct different identities; identities come to the fore at different settings and in different circumstances. Daniela's accelerated transition to motherhood made her navigate her transitional journey between two different identities: a student, pursuing a career and motherhood, raising two children. When she became pregnant, Daniela had to negotiate her cultural and religious identities. Born in a predominantly Catholic Island, engrossed in tradition, holding on to strong family-oriented principles and values, forming part of a voluntary religious organization, Daniela had some tough decisions to negotiate. She had to decide whether to keep the baby or terminate the pregnancy, whether to marry her partner, in Church, through civil marriage, or to move in together. Being classified as a 'pioneer' Daniela was not afraid of change and was ready to risk. She decided to keep the child and not to marry her partner but to live together.

According to Maltese society, such a story presents us with a no-win situation. In similar circumstances honour, described by Malina (1993) as a 'pivotal value' of the Mediterranean cultures, is rebuffed by the community. Contemporary young people, classified as 'pioneers' are not afraid to challenge the norms but do so without causing conflict within the family. Daniela did not give in to the traditional 'push' to get married in a church as advised by her mother. Instead, she distanced herself from the traditional ways of doing things; she did not get married and instead cohabitated with her partner. Rooted in tradition and religion, Daniela's mother insisted that her daughter marries. Even though Daniela went against her mother's wishes, the mother proved to be an efficacious "shock absorber" (Ferrera, 2010) giving Daniela all the necessary

support, helping her to navigate her way through tertiary education successfully, “She used to support us by sitting near us as we study or later on by taking care of my kids so that I will manage to finish my assignments and to complete my studies”.

Identity is “strongly intertwined with socio-cultural factors” (Szabo and Ward, 2015, p. 13) especially in the case of those living between two cultures or two societies. This could also be applied in this study especially when referring to the participants coming from Gozo. Both Ramona and Shaun came to Malta to study since there is only one public university in the Maltese archipelago and the course they enrolled for is not offered at the Gozo campus. Coming to study or work in Malta from Gozo is not an easy journey for the Gozitans. They have to leave the family and all that is familiar behind; sometimes even parts of their personal stories. Shaun mentions how difficult it is to be away from his parents and his sister. He speaks at length about the fact being away from Gozo means not being involved in the activities held by the youth organization where he is a member and not being able to do his part and get the preparations done for the religious festivities. In some instances, this leads to emotional and psychological sacrifice causing a loss of experiences that are integral to their identity, impacting their sense of belonging. A number of Gozitans own property in Malta and that facilitates the transition. Those who do not, have to go through the ordeal of looking for accommodation, which has to be affordable and preferably close to university. Settling down in Malta while reading for a degree at the university has proved to be a difficult endeavour for a number of Gozitan students, as described by Shaun, “iġib ċertu diskriminazzjoni dan is-suġġett. L-aktar aħna l-Għawdxin, għaliex aħna rridu aħna ninfirdu minn mal-familja, inbiddu l-lifestyle tagħna u

nitilgħu Malta” [“this subject brings about the idea of discrimination. Especially for us the Gozitans because we have to be separated from the family, change our lifestyle and come to Malta”]. They feel they are discriminated against because they had to live away from their family, from their friends and from any activities they are involved in.

One observes that even though the Maltese archipelago is very small, most of the Gozitans lead a different lifestyle to those living in Malta. Shaun fundamentally a ‘traditionalist’ claimed that Malta, when compared to Gozo, was no longer driven by sound values and more by politicians whose aim is to hold on to power.

### ***Identity and Gender***

In these last years a “silent revolution” (Abela, 2016, p. 22) in gender re-shifting, particularly for women, has been taking place in Malta. The pace of this revolution is very slow. When I delved deeper into the stories narrated by the participants in this study, I observed that most of the families of the participants are built on the “traditional model of the family, having the female as the homemaker dependent on the male breadwinner” (Visanich, 2018, p. 5). It shows that a number of mothers in Maltese families used to give up their career or put it on hold to raise their children. Some of the mothers of the participants, like the mothers of Cynthia, Ramona and Shaun gave up their jobs to be more available for their children. Shaun has a lot of admiration for his mother and calls this “vokazzjoni” [“a vocation”].

This has changed in these last years. Women who are choosing to remain in employment is always on the increase. The Government has recently added new initiatives to support mothers who wish to continue working after the birth of

their children. The National Action Plan for a Child Guarantee, 2022-2030 proposed breakfast clubs where parents who work can drop off their children who are attending State pre-primary and primary school early before the school starts. Another initiative is Klabb 3-16 which is an after-school care service, the aim being to bridge the gap between school hours and the working hours of parents in employment.

It is against this backdrop of gender reshifting that Giorgia tried to negotiate her identity at home, through her course of studies at university and at her place of work. She described herself as rebellious, a trait inherited from her mother. In Chapter Five, I document how she navigated her relationship with her father who considered himself as the dominant figure at home. Giorgia, characterised as a ‘pioneer’, tried to challenge this gender inequality without causing serious conflict within the family. It was her relationship with her mother, whom she considers as her best friend, that saw Giorgia through such situations. Giorgia explains how she negotiates and navigates these gender differences at university and at her place of work. She is enrolled in a course of studies that usually appeals to male students. In fact, the number of females registered on the course is low and when they are divided into small groups she usually ends up in a group of all males. In her work as an apprentice Giorgia’s journey was not an easy one. There were instances when because of sexist comments passed by the colleagues, she felt humiliated and broken. There were times when Giorgia ended up crying, “Kont nagħmel triq sħiħa nibki ... u ħa nibki issa wkoll” [“Used to spend all the way crying ... And I am going to start crying again”]. Being a ‘pioneer’ Giorgia was not afraid to go against the grain and make difficult choices, choices that her father, her male friends at university and male

colleagues were not happy with, “This is the reality u jien ha nsibha hafna fix-xogħol tiegħi sfortunatament ... Jew ha noqgħod nibki u ma nagħmel xejn biha jew naqbadha u nagħmel xi haġa biha” [“This reality is very present in my work unfortunately. ... Either I do nothing about it and end up crying or else I try to do something about it”].

Late modernity brought with it social transformations which led to the “erosion of older and more settled collective identities and the development of new ones” (Rattansi and Pheonix, 2005, p. 100). The weakening of the stereotyped forms of masculinity and femininity and the increase of the participation of women in the labour market effected changes in gendered identities but the transformation occurred and that still continues to occur in Malta is happening very slowly. Young people, especially those who are essentially ‘pioneers’, continue to strive to be different, navigating their gendered identity in the processes of their transition to adulthood.

In this section I analysed patterns of social and personal interaction and how these led to the construction of different identities. One could observe that the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity plays a significant role also in the forging of identities,

the emotional transmission and reproduction of an inherited national identity is driven by people’s attachment to the Church and religion, party politics, local and social solidarity, traditionalism and materialism. ... the reshaping of a national identity in a new social context is moved by individualised values, the importance of leisure, and a concern with global solidarity (Abela, 2016, p.25).

In the next section I analysed the situated context and the landscape within which the patterns of continuation from the past to the present to the future and the patterns of personal and social interaction evolved.

### **Theme Three - The Landscape of Transitions of the Maltese Islands**

<b>Patterns</b>	<b>Categories</b>
The size of the island	Happy/Dissatisfied living in Malta, limited opportunities
Leaving the nest	Familial support, financial support, housing
Tradition	Religion, family, stigma

In this section I explore how the participants in this study negotiated their transitional journey to adulthood within the context of the Maltese archipelago, with its particular culture, traditions and socio-economic developments. As the participants crafted and narrated their own stories, patterns common to the Maltese context, like the size of the island, leaving the nest and tradition, emerged. The micro state dynamics of Maltese society, a small island state, strategically found in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, once predominantly Catholic, with strong family-oriented principles and values and immersed in tradition provided a particular situated context for the negotiation of youth transitions. The trajectories of the participants were observed and explored through multiple lenses like family, culture, relationships, activities and the changes occurring in Malta and across Europe in the last two decades. While the study is located in Malta, the results may have significance to the understanding of youth transitions beyond its shores. In addition, analysis could not be carried out as if Malta is detached from the rest of Europe,

as though it were an isolated unit. It is part of a wider global society and the influence of the wider global order appears almost everywhere ... unless the analysis of Maltese society is situated in the context of these debates, it will be impossible to understand its own distinct characteristics (Giddens, 1994, p. xxix).

### ***The Size of the Island***

The small size of the Maltese islands is one of the defining factors which dictates the experiences of the natives. Some participants emphasised being happy living in Malta; others chose to dwell on the implications and challenges offered by such a small island state. Briguglio (1995a) claimed that Malta has its particular vulnerabilities and constraints. Notwithstanding this, Malta's entry into the European Union in 2004, brought about developments and changes in the Maltese social landscape,

Despite the challenges, Malta's EU membership has brought numerous benefits. The country has experienced steady economic growth, with its GDP per capita increasing from 77% of the EU average in 2004 to 95% in 2023. Malta has also become a hub for various industries, including financial services, gaming, and medical technology, attracting foreign investment and creating jobs. (European Studies Organisation, 2024)

According to Eurostat (2019) young people in the age bracket of 16 to 24 years of age, living in Europe, tend to report high levels of life satisfaction. Approximately about 9.5 % of the respondents in this age group reported of being extremely unsatisfied with their lives, 34.5 % reported being extremely content. Following the COVID-19 pandemic there was a slight decrease on the overall life

satisfaction (Eurostat 2022): EU citizens were slightly less satisfied with their lives when compared to 2018. Statistics (State of the Nation, June 2023) showed that Maltese people enjoyed a high level of life satisfaction. In the context of this research, Nancy claims, “I’m okay living in Malta. M’għandix xi ħajra mmur ngħix barra minn Malta. Okay, I go on trips, emm, but my home is in Malta ... ma nixtieqx ngħix barra minn Malta” [“I’m ok living in Malta. I don’t wish to live abroad. Okay, I go on trips, emm, but my home is Malta, ... I don’t wish to live away from Malta”]. Shaun, a ‘traditionalist’ holds on to the established customs and is not ready for a change. He asserts in a strong way that he is not prepared to leave the island to work abroad, “żgur li le” [“certainly not”]. During one of the interviews, Shaun narrates how difficult it is for him to live away from his family and the community of friends in Gozo. Sharon speaks along similar lines, and claims that, “Il-fatt li kollx viċin, il-familja kollha Malta, it keeps me back from going abroad. Ili ngħid żmien li kieku nista’, nistudja Ingilterra, ilni ngħid żmien twil. Il-fatt li għandi familja hawn Malta, mhux daqshekk faċli” [“The fact that everything is so close, all the family is in Malta, it keeps me from going abroad. I have been saying that if it is possible, I will study in the UK, I have been saying this for a long time. The fact that I have my family here in Malta, does not make it easy”]. Those fundamentally ‘traditionalists’ are not ready for a change; they want to hold on to the established customs. Working or living abroad is not enticing for the ‘traditionalist’ types. Some of those classified as ‘opportunists’ are also not ready to take the chance and venture beyond the shores of Malta. They seem quite satisfied with the type of life they are living and want to continue negotiating their journey towards adulthood in Malta.

However, not all participants taking part in this study expressed that they were happy living in Malta. A number of them spoke about their dissatisfaction with living on this island and few of the participants characterised as ‘pioneers’ mentioned the political situation in Malta in these last years. Research on youth political participation in Europe showed “a decline in institutional political involvement and the emergence of other forms of participation” (Soler-i-Martí and Ferrer-Fons, 2015, p. 92). Recent studies argued that youth political attitudes and political participation at individual level have been influenced by the destandardisation and prolongation of youth transitions (Garcia-Albacete, 2014; Benedicto, 2013). Stanton (2024, p. 3) in his recent publication about democracy in Malta argued that,

whilst the formal features of the Maltese system portray a liberal constitutional democracy, the more informal features undermine this perception. Excessive government power, allegations of corruption and assassination, and weak opportunity for legal and political accountability conspire to present Malta as an imperfect democracy.

Similar to Stanton (2024), a number of participants in this study referred to recent happenings in Malta like the Panama Papers leaks, allegations of extensive corruption and of cronyism and clientelism, the assassination of a journalist, and described these events as one of the reasons why young people are dissatisfied living in Malta and do not wish to participate in the political arena. Even though until sometime before the interviews a couple of them were directly involved in politics, seeing the way things were happening in Malta, they decided to distance themselves. One of the common factors is the lack of trust in politics on various issues, “it is no longer controversial to observe the decline of trust in

politicians, political institutions ...” (Lenard, 2005, p. 363). Giorgia narrates that, “Il-politika inħobbha hafna imma tbezzagħni fl-istess hin ... Qabel kienet tinteressani, għadha tinteressani u importanti għax il-politika tipo it shapes the country imma m’għadnix daqshekk intiża kif kont qabel ... iktar għax l-affarijiet li qed nara bħalissa” [“I love politics but at the same time I am afraid of it ... Before I was interested in politics and I still am because politics shape the country but I am less interested now ... mostly because of what is happening now”]. Miriam calls herself a youth activist and confirms she is interested in participating in politics. She describes the political situation in Malta as one where “mostly people associate politics with corruption, with people trying to gain power”. She criticizes the Maltese mentality because she claims that every issue is politicized “even COVID has become political, and it shouldn't be because one it's really not a political situation, it's really a health crisis”.

Politics in Malta is a two-party system dominated by two major political parties. Partisanship and polarisation play key roles in the Maltese political system. The political symbols, red for the Labour and blue for the Nationalists display yet another dialectical situation in Malta, like tradition and modernity, in politics we have the reds and the blues. One observes that the level of polarisation in Maltese politics is so acute that it infiltrated higher education institutions,

the country’s youth are raised to compete in this dualistic political environment. Student organisations including the Christian Democratic organisation SDM and the Social Democratic Students Organisation Pulse are active in Malta’s post-secondary colleges, Malta College of Arts and Sciences (MCAST), and University and are seen as a reflection of the two-party mentality which thrives in the country. (Cachia, 2023, p. 72)

Roberto classified as a ‘pioneer’ fought this mentality and defied the transmission of political orientations of the family. He did not contest the elections at university with the party his family are loyal to, claiming that his aim was not to represent one of the political parties but to genuinely bring about a positive change for the students. Giselle, identified as a ‘radical’, also claims that she is not happy living in Malta. The issues she mentions that lead to her dissatisfaction in living in Malta, are corruption and the construction boom; claiming that “the construction in Malta is making our island hard on the eyes”. Giselle was ready to leave Malta but the COVID-19 pandemic delayed her transition to further her studies abroad. Once the situation got back to normality, Giselle had everything prepared to pursue her dream abroad. Roberto also argues about the dissatisfaction caused by the construction industry. He finds it hard to understand how decisions are taken, “Ejja ħa nibnu blokka flats, bumm għandek fejn toqgħod” [“Let’s build a block of flats, boom you have where to live”]. Roberto delves deeper into the construction boom and adds that the major problem, besides the many construction sites, is the fact that “ħafna nies jaħsbuha bħali imma joqogħdu siekta u joqogħdu kwieti għax jafu li ftit li xejn ħa jagħmlu differenza wehidhom” [“many people think like me but they remain silent and do nothing because they know that, on their own, they will not make any difference”]. Roberto describes this as a very sad situation. He contends that Maltese people are very careful whom to disagree with since almost everyone knows each other or is in one way or another related and this provides an intense social visibility. In their seminal work, *Maltese society: A sociological inquiry*, Sultana and Baldacchino (1994, p. 17) argue that “the Maltese become thus adept at muting hostility, containing disagreement and avoiding disputes, a

sophisticated mode of accommodation. Is this why the Maltese ask so few questions?”

A common pattern identified in the data is the limited opportunities offered by Malta. In a recent survey (EY Generate Survey, 2022), 72% of the respondents replied that they would prefer to live and work outside of Malta. The top three reasons listed were (i) better employment and salaries; (ii) new experiences; and (iii) Malta is too small. Two of the participants taking part in this study, Cynthia and Daniela, speak about the difficulties they are facing to join the labour market in an area directly related to their studies. Nancy and Mario argue that the labour market in Malta is very limited. However, they are not ready to avail themselves of the new opportunities beyond Malta, even though they are fully aware that if they had to emigrate to one of the European countries they would have more and better job opportunities. Both choose not to take advantage of the new opportunities available and decide to remain in Malta. Those classified as ‘pioneers’ are more proactive and do not wait for an opportunity to come their way. However, the types described the difficulties they had to face in order to join the labour market because they were looking for a job in an area directly related to their studies. The Maltese proverb, “Għal kull għadma hawn mitt kelb” [“for every bone there are a hundred dogs”], defines the situation in Malta.

Giselle comments about the lack of discussion and policies to strengthen civil rights. When compared to other European countries, “the current situation in Malta regarding reproductive rights has seen less progress than most other countries in the European Union” (Rosati, 2017, p. 28). This may be due to the influence of a patriarchal society, where the role of the woman is still primarily

identified as a mother. Also, the role of the Catholic Church in Malta is significant and its influence, even if indirectly, impacts the behaviour and the decisions of the Maltese people. This was witnessed in 2022 when thousands of people gathered in Malta's capital city, Valletta, to protest against the government's bill, proposing an amendment to Malta's strict anti-abortion laws. Giselle, being a 'radical' observes that Malta is still trapped in tradition and while she puts a lot of effort in fighting the system, she decides to leave Malta and further her studies abroad.

A number of participants discussed the area of performing arts within the category of limited opportunities. In Malta, theatre, like the other disciplines in performing arts, is "either amateur or at best, semi-professional ... it is difficult for theatre-makers and actors to earn their living through merely appearing on or working for the stage" (Cremona and Galea, 2020, p. 197). Most of the professionals in performing arts had to leave the island to advance with their career. Nancy fully understands this and knows that performing arts "is not a long-term plan" for her and therefore decides to stay away from it. Neville, as narrated in Chapter Five, was heavily involved in performing arts. Neville speaks about his efforts trying to fit his dream in Malta, but this "was not as easy as I thought it would be or as I thought it should be". However, to progress in his career he decided to reject the traditional pulls and took the risk of moving abroad. Classified as a 'radical', Neville decided to look beyond Malta and discovered other opportunities in universities abroad, opportunities that would lead to his aspirations. Roberto, identified a 'pioneer', strives to negotiate between his studies and his involvement in performing arts. He challenges his

family's expectations but without causing a huge conflict. Roberto claims that performing arts in Malta is looked at as a hobby and not a career,

il-kultura għad m'għandhiex dik l-istatus Malta, u allura inti l-fatt li għandek kantanti, għandek bands, għandek artisti lokali li jsiefru barra minn Malta biex in-nies isiru jafu bihom, biex isibu xogħol tipo turi, turi turi li Malta għadna lura f'dan ir-rigward u għad għandna x'naqdfu!

[culture does not have any status in Malta, so there are singers, bands, local artists who go abroad, away from Malta, to get exposure and earn a living, this shows, shows, shows, how backwards Malta is in this regard and there is a long way to go].

A very important fact that should be mentioned when discussing the size of Malta is the fact that in the last years the number of people living in Malta grew at a very fast rate. As alluded earlier in this study, currently the population amounts to 535,064 people, living on 246 square kilometres. The population density in Malta is one of the highest in Europe, at 1672 per Km<sup>2</sup> (4,331 people per mi<sup>2</sup>). This situation is leading young people to look beyond and take the opportunity to reach out further than the the shores of Malta. A small number of the participants showed they were not afraid to break free, change their life course direction and seek a better future, even if this meant cutting ties with family and tradition.

### ***Leaving the Nest***

Buchholz et al. (2009) and Nilsen et al. (2012) claimed that families in Southern Europe offer greater support to their children than families in Northern European countries. In fact, in Malta the close-knit family environment at times shelters young adults from worry, anxiety and a number of preoccupations. Parents

tend to find ways to “ensure a sense of protection, care and emotional sharing” (Carbone et al., 2022, p. 1066). This affects the permanence of young adults in the home of origin, delaying full independence and family formation. Holdsworth (2005) argued that this delay in housing transition happens because of the parents, who,

not only endorse *not* leaving home, but may also continue to provide economic support to children ... Parental endorsement is not only applicable to young people wanting to leave home, but also to young people who have left, as parents continue to provide both economic and emotional support outside of the parental home. (p. 563)

This study suggested that young people with familial support postpone leaving their parental home and seek to live independently at a later stage. However, one has to keep in mind that there are young people in Malta who lack familial support. The truth is that there are a number of dysfunctional families in Malta, characterised by neglect and abuse. Most of the participants in this study have a good support system, and because of this support they could delay their housing transition, buffering themselves from stress and financial insecurity.

Almost all the sixteen participants spoke about their aspiration to move out of the house of origin but only Giselle and the two Gozitan participants, Ramona and Shaun, had actually moved out of their home. Giselle, characterised as a ‘radical’, wanted to break free from tradition and was ready to move on, thus embracing modernity. Following the termination of her ten-year relationship, Giselle’s decision to go and live on her own points to what Nico (2016, p. 3) describes as “heart breaks and breakups and the speeding-up of residential

autonomy”. The support of her parents made this transition very easy for Giselle. Still, it is not very common for Maltese youngsters to leave the family of origin and go to live on their own. Statistics (Eurostat, 2022) show that Maltese young people, like the Italians, leave their home at the age of 30.2. Croatian youth stay home the longest, till they are 32 years old, followed by Slovakia where youths stay home until the age of 30, followed by Malta and Italy. In parts of Northern Europe, in countries like Sweden, Luxemburg and Denmark, young people leave their family at the age of 17.5, 19.8 and 21.2 respectively. Malta’s geographic size has a direct bearing on the relatively late age at which young people leave their home. Malta’s size makes distances on the island very short and therefore young people do not need to go and live close to university or their place of work. Also, accommodation prices have rocketed sky-high and most Maltese young people find it very difficult to rent or buy property. Briguglio and Spiteri (2022, p. 11) claimed that “housing, be it rental or purchase, is unlikely to be a realistic prospect for young people in Malta”. Mario completed his studies at university but because of financial constraints, could not move out from his parents’ house. This is a common trend; the domestic transition has become complex and elongated both in Malta and across the globe; “access to family assets in young adulthood is of increasing importance for navigating contemporary insecurities and accessing opportunities” (Woodman, 2022, p. 56). However, this support prolongs the journey of these young people towards complete independence.

To this day, Maltese young people living in the sister island Gozo face a different reality, even though Gozo is part of the Maltese archipelago but its, relative isolation and peripherality always kept it farther away than Malta from the mainstreams of human activities and influences ... Gozitans had

always had to face harder adversities and a fiercer struggle for survival which discovered in them the virtues of hard work and of intimate attachment to their family and land. These quantitative and qualitative natural disadvantages have moulded in Gozitans a different life-style and different characteristics. They have given Gozo a distinct culture.

(Briguglio, 1995b, p. 157)

Most of the job opportunities are found in Malta. In 1992, the University of Malta, inaugurated the Gozo campus, with the aim of assisting in the logistical aspects of the degree courses offered in Gozo. However, most of the courses on offer at the Gozo campus are short-term ones. Therefore, Gozitans have either to travel every day, that is, catch a thirty-minute ferry and another thirty or forty minutes to get to university or their place of work, or else rent a flat and live in Malta, as considered above. This reality changed their lifestyle and Gozitan young people found themselves living on their own or with friends, away from the comfort of their family. This in no way lessens the influence of the family in the transitional journey of young Gozitans to adulthood. The ties with their families usually remain strong and some parents pay frequent visits to their children living in Malta. Both Ramona and Shaun had to negotiate this change in their life. The fact that Ramona's parents are Maltese and therefore her extended family is in Malta made her journey easier, "il-fatt li pereżempju missieri sħabu Maltin, ommi għandha hbiebha Maltin u l-familja tagħha Maltija, so dik il-ħaġa qisha għenitni lili wkoll forsi aktar minn Għawdxin oħrajn" ["the fact that for example my father's friends are Maltese, my mother has Maltese friends and her family is Maltese, so that thing helped me more than other Gozitans"]. However, the ties with her family are strong and Ramona speaks about the frequent visits of

her parents to the flat in Malta, especially by her mother, “Mum is always there if not in person on the phone”. Shaun’s experience in Malta proved to be more challenging than Romona’s. However, tough experiences have the potential to become a positive story. Shaun, fundamentally a ‘traditionalist’, claimed that this transition to Malta helped him to start the transition from complete dependence on the parents to a semi-independence as a young person.

Mestres Domènech and Morron Salmeron (2019, p. 32) argued that because of the 2008 economic recession, young people began taking their first big decisions as adults “at the most turbulent economic time in recent decades”.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Maltese economy, like the rest of Europe, experienced a dip as a result of the restrictions imposed on tourism. However, the economy in Malta is recovering well and when compared to 2020 one notes an increase of 11.3% in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) while economic growth increased by 9.4% (Eurydice, 2023). A difficulty which is having a direct impact on young people especially as they move on to adulthood is the fact that the housing market in Malta has become increasingly unaffordable (NSO, 2023), as pointed out above. This results in delayed transitions to homeownership.

Eurofound (2024) notes that this decline is happening across Europe and young adults are left locked out of the market. This situation is making it rather impossible for young people to buy their own house to be able to leave their parental home and move on towards adulthood. Almost all the participants spoke about their desire to move out of home for various reasons; some because they believed the time had come, others wanted to move in with their partner. This continues to emphasise the fact that leaving the parental home is a key transition for young adults. However, the prolongation of the educational journey and

joining the labour market at a later stage continued to add to the diversification of youth transitions. Sharon believes she is ready to move out of her parental home but the financial situation does not make it easy for her, “kieu kelli l-flus for sure I would move out ... inħossni indipendenti, u nħossni wasalt ġħaliha. Anke biex immur waħdi, kieku naffordja, kieku ija” [“If I had the money, I would move out ... I feel independent, and I feel I arrived at that stage in my life. Even to go and live on my own, if I afforded it, I would”]. During the second cycle interview, Roberto engages with the idea of renting but believes that in the long run this does not make sense, since he is still half way through his course,

Li naħdem u nsib post ġħal renta ... mhux just ir-renta hux, l-ikel, elettriku u kollox u it’s quite expensive u meta naħsibha mbagħad ngħid aħjar dawn l-erba’ snin daww il-flus ninvestihom u ’l quddiem meta niggradwa jkolli l-flus lesti biex actually imbagħad nibda nipprepara ħalli nixtri l-post tiegħi, milli just nonfoqhom renta u ma jkolli xejn tiegħi! [“I start working and rent out ... but it’s not just the rent: the food, electricity and everything and it’s quite expensive and when I think about it I say better these four years I invest that money and then when I graduate I have enough money to actually I start preparing to buy my own place, instead of spending money on rent and I end up owing nothing!”]

He adds that the housing has become unaffordable. Jacob is in agreement with Roberto. He thinks that “biex tixtri post, ta’ 25, it is becoming difficult ... nixtieq by 25 ikolli d-dar tiegħi, imma kemm hi realistika ma nafx” [“buying a place when you are 25 years old, it is becoming difficult ... I wish that by 25 I get my own place, but not sure how realistic that is”]. Jacob is in a relationship and both he and his girlfriend are ready to move in together, “Nixtiequ li nimmuvjaw

flimkien. Il-kriżi tal-housing f'Malta hija vera" [We wish to move in together. The housing crisis in Malta is real"]. [We wish to move in together. The housing crisis in Malta is real"]. The increasingly unaffordable housing market is prolonging the stay of young adults at their parental home.

Maltese young people are delaying leaving the nest not only because they want to choose the easier track and continue depending on their parents. The increasingly unaffordable housing market is playing a significant role in this and is prolonging the stay of young adults at their parental home.

### ***Tradition***

Another common pattern in the situated context is tradition. Tevey, in the musical "Fiddler on the Roof", sings out, "Tradition! Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof". The phrase emphasizes the importance of tradition as a stabilizing force in the face of uncertainty and upheaval. It suggests that adherence to cultural and religious traditions provides a sense of continuity and stability in people's lives, even when faced with external challenges. The emergent patterns indicate the tension between tradition and change, and how individuals and communities navigate the shifting dynamics of their world.

Anttonen (2005) argued that tradition is not always "conceptualised as being in opposition to modernity" (p. 35). When trying to place Maltese society on the European model of development, Abela (1991) heralded the birth of neo-traditionality, where the traditional came to terms with modernity. Giddens in the foreword to the book *Maltese Society: A Sociological Inquiry*, edited by Sultana and Baldacchino (1994, p. xxviii), described Maltese society as "a tangled web of tradition and modernity". Tradition corresponds to religion, catholic morality and

the family. The younger Maltese generation associates tradition with “a ‘backward’ and increasingly anachronistic orientation to the world, that bore the hallmarks of Church hegemony” and modernity “with education, material wealth and progress ... the erosion of ‘traditional’ morality” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 16).

This dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity, “is still in place, yet various modernising forces have gained the upper-hand in areas ranging from civil liberties to family life and from economic restructuring to privatisation of religious belief” (Briguglio and Brown, 2016, p. 11). The introduction of civil unions, same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by same-sex couples marked pivotal policy and legislative advancements (Agius and Dalli, 2016). The interplay between tradition and modernity has significantly shaped also Malta's economic landscape, particularly in terms of labour market transformations. Rizzo (2021) explores the effects of socio-economic changes, analysing how shifts in values and expectations are driven by the transition from traditional systems to modern European influences. He investigates how transformations in the labour market reflect broader societal changes, highlighting the tension and negotiation between maintaining cultural traditions and embracing new economic realities shaped by European integration and globalization. Religion continues to be present in contemporary Malta. Many Maltese people still cherish the Church, but their relationship with it is becoming detached from traditional practices. Vassallo (2016) argues that instead of being a deeply ingrained part of their daily lives, religion has become a more flexible and personal experience, influenced by broader global trends towards secularism.

The interaction between tradition and modernity is reshaping Maltese society, particularly through the lens of economic development, identity, and

social values. It is against this landscape, this ongoing dynamic between the forces and ideals of tradition and modernity that contemporary Maltese young people have negotiated their journey towards adulthood. The data collected for this study portrayed that despite the waves of change, the persistence of tradition in a Catholic country with strong religious values and family-oriented standards, still impacted and influenced the life trajectories of Maltese young people.

Religion always played a meaningful role in Malta and its history. The scientific research conducted by the State of the Nation (2023) confirmed that the majority of the Maltese people (88.5%) still claim that they believe in God. 6.6% stated that they do not believe in God while 4.9% stated that they do not know. It is relevant for this research to note that one quarter of those who stated that they do not believe in God are in the age bracket between 16 and 25 years old.

Throughout the interviews, topics like God, religion, mass attendance and lack of it and getting married in a church were mentioned. All the participants claimed that they had a religious upbringing and a number of them agreed that this upbringing still affected the decisions they were faced with.

Most families in Malta, like other Southern European countries, are anchored in religion and parents play a pivotal role in instilling religious values in their children. The schools, especially Church schools, and religious organizations also share their catholic views with their students and members. Shaun is a classic example. Throughout the narration of his story, he speaks continuously about sound values, the spiritual aspect in his life and his discernment as to whether to become a priest or date a girl. Shaun was fundamentally ‘traditionalist’ and remained so. Pierre was a ‘traditionalist’ when he was younger, but when we met for the first cycle interview, I classified him as

a 'pioneer'. He moved away from the established norms and values. Pierre took a chance on new opportunities, was ready to explore new paths and change the way of doing things. Sharon followed in her parents' footsteps and involved herself in the same religious voluntary organization; "my parents used to attend when they were still young. They used to encourage us to attend". When she felt insecure and uncertain about her course of studies, her experiences with this religious organization helped her negotiate her educational journey.

Giselle's experience is noted to be different, possibly also because, as she narrates in her story, her upbringing was different. Her parents are not the traditional type. She looks at tradition as a means of resistance towards change. In the last thirty years Malta experienced an accelerated modernisation. Maltese society embarked on a journey away from strong, established traditions to greater fluidity and choices. However, very little progress was made in areas such as women's reproductive rights in Malta. Until 2023, abortion was illegal without exception and only recently has the law been amended to legalise abortion in cases where the life of the pregnant woman is at risk. Giselle, characterised as a 'radical', wanted to facilitate social change, to question the status quo and to give a voice to the vulnerable. Notwithstanding her active role in one of the pro-choice NGO organizations, Giselle decided to leave Malta to continue with her educational journey abroad.

An emergent concept from the stories narrated by the participants in this study is stigma. The term stigma, *stizein*, "in Greek society was a mark placed on slaves to identify their position in the social structure and to indicate that they were of less value" (Arboleda-Flórez, 2002, p. 25). It is a distinctive mark of social disgrace "attached to others in order to identify and to devalue them"

(Arboleda-Flórez, 2002, p. 25). In this section I draw on Goffman's (1963) seminal work, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, to explore the impact of this social dimension on the transitional journey of the young participants in this study. Both O'Reilly Mizzi (1994) and Clark (2012) mentioned a number of characteristics of the Maltese islands, common to other Mediterranean cultures, such as the size and density and the churning of rumour mills, investigated through aspects of modernity as opposed to tradition. Even though the transitional journey of young people is portrayed as more individualised, this social dimension still plays a significant role in their life course. A number of young people chose to walk away from the 'traditional' aspect and defied the established norms. Having a child out of wedlock is not the norm in Maltese society, even though the numbers of children born outside marriage is on the increase. Therefore, Daniela was carrying this guilt accentuated by being a leader in a religious voluntary organization. Dealing with all these issues was not an easy task for Daniela. Drawing on Goffman's idea of "spoiled identities" (1963), Daniela's pregnancy did spoil her identity at least in the beginning, until she took hold of the situation. Moving on from being classified as a 'traditionalist' to a 'pioneer', Daniela prepared to face her situation and to take the necessary decisions. Daniela did not consider terminating the pregnancy. When she broke the news to her partner, he was in agreement to keep the baby and promised her his full and continuous support. His reaction brought some light into this situation. Clark's (2012, p. 5) argument that "a person whose honour is rebuffed by the community is humiliated, ... treated with disdain" described Daniela and her situation.

Daniela portrayed how she negotiated her journey in a society still immersed in tradition, where religious beliefs, despite the processes of secularization, are still strong. Boissevain (1993), in his study about a small village in Malta, observed that the religious and the secular are so interwoven that it is difficult to disentangle.

The stigma of mental health was also mentioned during the interviews. In 2001 the World Health Organization (WHO) claimed that only one third of individuals with a known mental health illness seeks professional help. Goffman argued that those who are afraid of being discredited, of spoiling their identity, choose to withhold and conceal the information. In Malta mental illness is still to a certain extent perceived as a taboo subject. People tend to shy away from it and do not discuss this issue. Grech (2019, p. 83) claimed that “locals take an average of 6.25 years to seek professional help” for mental health. Nancy, moving slowly to becoming a ‘pioneer’ was not afraid to take the opportunity and reached out seeking the necessary help.

Another common characteristic of a collective society like Malta is the gossip network, with the consequent fear of becoming the talk of the town, challenging the honour of the family. The size of the island creates a strong sense of communitarianism, face-to-face communities (Clark, 2012) where people know each other by name and know each other’s personal details. Goffman (1963) used the term “courtesy stigma” (p. 30) to emphasize the effects of stigma not just on the stigma bearers but also on those connected to them.

In these last years, changes in the Maltese social and demographic trends have been witnessed, “driven by the post-materialistic system of values reflected in self-realisation, satisfaction of personal preferences, and in an increased

freedom from traditional authorities” (Miljanic Brinkworth, 2016, p. 107). While some people chose to remain trapped in tradition, others are ready to embrace freedom, accepting the new laws and policies introduced in Malta. Giselle, characterised as a ‘radical’, described her parents’ relationship as a “unique situation” with one of her parents being gay. However, she never brought the topic up again in any of the interviews. She talked at length about her parents and her relationship with them, highlighting the great support they gave her, especially to be able to continue negotiating her educational journey. Both Giselle and her parents moved away from the traditional push of the Maltese archipelago and embraced the contemporary pulls and the new freedoms available on the island.

The relationship between tradition and modernity is truly dialectical and Malta finds itself between ‘modern’ Europe and the ‘traditional’ Mediterranean societies (Mitchell, 2002). The old bonds of tradition have not lost their significance in Malta yet this small island state is on a journey of change. It is against this landscape that young Maltese people in tertiary education continue negotiating their journey towards adulthood, integrating these diverse influences to form a cohesive and personally meaningful worldview.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I presented and discussed the themes that emerged from the stories narrated by the participants. The analysis of these themes highlighted a typology to better understand the processes of transition in the life course of Maltese young people in tertiary education as they reach adulthood. The four ideal-types: the ‘traditionalists’, the ‘opportunists’, the ‘pioneers’ and the ‘radicals’, even though not a perfect fit for all the participants, depicted the

various ways Maltese young people negotiate their transitional journey to adulthood in the midst of the changes and transformations in the last decades.

In the following chapter, the stories, the themes and their analysis will be woven together to present the implications of this study into the wider theoretical understanding of youth transitions in the modern world. The study contributes to the developing theory on youth transitions in Malta. A number of recommendations for future research will also be presented.

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

The focus of this study is the transitional journey of young Maltese people in tertiary education. The changing concepts and metaphors used to describe young people and their transitional journey towards adulthood and autonomy as a result of the societal transformations in the last decades, inform this study. The concept of transition has served to examine the process of change that Maltese young people in tertiary education experience as they progress towards adulthood. Individual experiences interact with broader social and cultural contexts to influence these transitions. Research regarding youth transitions has shown how the passage to adulthood has become extended and less sequential with transitions being either delayed or postponed.

Taking a longitudinal qualitative approach, this research follows the journey of sixteen Maltese young people in tertiary education over a span of four years. The point of departure is a first cycle interview held while the participants were freshers at the University of Malta. This was then followed by a further two interviews over a span of four years. During the second cycle interview most of them were halfway through their course of studies. During the third cycle interviews, most of the participants were either at the end of their chosen course, about to further their studies or about to join the labour market.

The research is anchored in an empirical study at a particular time, late modernity, with a selected group of young people, university students, and in a particular place, Malta. The narratives are explored through several societal

changes happening in the last decades. The participants grew up during the global financial economic crisis and lived through a pandemic. Moreover, they experienced a number of social transformations and changes: the digital revolution which brought about major changes in the labour market, the changing structure of the Maltese family and the changing role of women in society, amongst others.

### **Summary of Main Emergent Findings**

The stories narrated illustrate how Maltese young people in tertiary education negotiate their journey to adulthood. The study is informed by three main themes:

1. Continuity and change
2. The construction of identities through relationships
3. The landscape of transitions of the Maltese islands

These themes highlight the three dimensions of temporality, interaction, and place (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The findings reveal that along their journey towards adulthood, the participants are influenced by their past experiences and their future aspirations, the traditional pushes, and the contemporary pulls. The new freedoms available in Malta also leave an impact on Maltese young people as they negotiate their journey towards adulthood. The transitions occur in the midst of a number of relationships with families, peers, and partners which impact their identities. These relationships, at times enable and at other times hinder their transitional journey towards adulthood. The context, Malta, with all its characteristics of a small island state and the ongoing tension between traditional values, practices and ways of life and the forces of

modernisation, innovation, and change impact the decisions and choices made by young Maltese people in tertiary education.

### *Continuity and Change*

The theme of continuity and change is built primarily on three main patterns: the influence of the family, the educational trajectory and the experience of critical moments and turning points.

The influence of the family plays a prominent role in this thesis, with its presence most pronounced in the first theme, yet recurrent throughout the entire study. Several participants emphasised the pivotal role of the matriarchal influence in their transitional experiences. The role of the family in the life course of young people is shown to be crucial and significant, in varying degrees, across the four ideal-types. While those characterised as ‘traditionalists’ tend to rely extensively on familial support, the ‘radicals’ will reach out only in a moment of crisis. However, irrespective of belonging to different ideal-types, young people living in Malta recognize that the family, a traditional structure, is consistently available and accessible.

Familial support may extend the dependence of children on their parents. Along the transitional journey this support is at times subtly tantamount to control. Parents, especially when young people still reside at home, feel it is their duty to manipulate the decisions taken by their children, especially those regarding their education. Sometimes, this results in the stifling of dreams and future aspirations of their children. This influence can originate from parents’ attempt to live vicariously through their children. In these circumstances, the four ideal-types negotiate their relationship with their parents differently. Those

characterised as ‘traditionalists’ and ‘opportunists’ are very willing to follow the linear route and embark on a train journey. Most of the time the destination has been influenced by the parents. Those characterised as ‘pioneers’ are more proactive in their approach and would not let the parents control their transitional journey. However, unlike the ‘radicals’ who are ready to break away from tradition and the constraints of the family, the ‘pioneers’ try to achieve their goals without causing major conflicts with the family members.

The educational trajectory is depicted as a blend of past experiences, present challenges, and future aspirations. Negotiating their transition into a higher education institution was not an easy task for some of the participants. The four ideal-types dealt with this change differently. Unlike the ‘traditionalists’ and the ‘opportunists’, the ‘pioneers’ and the ‘radicals’ explored the new opportunities such a change brought with it. This transformed their tertiary education journey into a stimulating one, not only on the academic level but also on the social level. The focus of those classified as ‘traditionalists’ remained mostly to successfully finish the course of studies and be able to proceed into the labour market, finding a secure job directly related to their studies. The ‘opportunists’ even though not on the lookout for a change in direction, do take advantage of any opportunities that cross their educational paths.

Critical moments and turning points along this journey, for example motherhood, often compel young people to modify or adjust their trajectory. Accelerated or unexpected transitions may become critical moments in the life course of young people. However, familial support once again plays a significant role not to disrupt the transitional journey, which may be prolonged, and

commitments may be postponed but young people will be in a position to proceed and successfully finish their education journey.

Most of the participants spoke about an important rite of passage: getting their driver's licence. The driving licence gives young people more freedom which, at times, is overshadowed by the parents, who may feel that they are losing control of their children and therefore introduce a curfew and start calling them on the hour to make sure everything is all right. This creates a lot of frustration and highlights the role strain experienced by young people who are treated as adults at university, work and among their peers but at home, are treated as young and dependent children.

A commonly emergent pattern was the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted their educational journey and added to the uncertainty and anxiety of the participants. The pandemic deprived participants from socialising. The participants could not attend university due to the mandatory lockdown and even though this generation is tech savvy, having their lectures remotely proved to be a difficult and a distressing experience. Some of the students missed out on the Erasmus exchange mobility programme and others had to delay or postpone furthering their studies abroad. Those characterized as 'pioneers' utilized this period, during which activism was paused, to focus on their studies and take time to rest.

As indicated in Theme one, despite the numerous changes in Maltese society, strong continuities with past traditions, particularly the prominence and influence of the family, persist. This accentuates the dialectical relationship between continuity and change.

### ***The Construction of Identities through Relationships***

In the second theme, the significance of identities and the role of social interaction in the forging of identities are demonstrated through the narratives of the participants. Several sociologists (Bettie, 2003; Goffman, 1959, 1961; West and Fenstermaker, 2002) have argued that identities are formed in social interaction.

Along their transitional journey young people are in a continuous state of 'becoming'. Societal transformations and the experiences young people go through influence the process of identity construction. Living in an age of constant mobility and change, deciding on a career path leading to a secure job for life is no longer viable. Those characterised as 'traditionalists' often choose to follow a linear path and when possible, opting for careers chosen by their family predecessors to be in a position to take up the family business. Those classified as 'pioneers' prefer to join the labour market in sectors directly related to their area of studies, refusing the opportunity to take up the family business.

Romantic relationships are important markers in the shaping of identities. Furthermore, having a romantic partner usually significantly impacts one's self esteem and self-confidence. Once they are in a romantic relationship, young people tend to take any decisions, whether these decisions are important or not, keeping the relationship in mind. The participants characterised as 'traditionalists' chose not to work or proceed with their studies abroad to remain close to their partners. Heartbreaks have strong implications on the transitional journey of young people. Some of the participants who have been through a break-up felt compelled to discuss these relationships even if these were no longer part of their lives.

Maltese young people construct their identities within the religious and cultural contexts of this island. In these last years, the revolution in gender re-shifting started happening slowly in Malta. The 'pioneers' and the 'radicals' are ready to risk and go against the grain. While the former tries to combine tradition with modernity, without creating any conflicts with the family, the latter are ready to break away from tradition and the attachment to Church and religion. Social media plays a significant role in shaping cultural norms and identities. It introduces new forms of creativity and self-expression. Young people fully aware that many people are viewing their online profile create an ideal self, at times blurring what is true and what is false.

The second theme, through the stories of the participants, portrays the process of identity formation, a process which is constantly negotiated and constructed.

### ***The Landscape of Transitions of the Maltese Islands***

The third theme illustrates the fact that locality matters. The local context impacts not necessarily the type of transitions but also how Maltese young people negotiate these transitions. Three characteristics of Malta are hereby highlighted: its size, young people's choice to continue living at their parental home and tradition.

Malta is a small island state with a population increase of 0.31% over the past year. Some of the participants claim that they are happy living in Malta attributing their satisfaction to the island's small size, proximity to family and short distances. Those characterised as 'traditionalists' seem to be satisfied with the type of life they are leading on this small island. They are not ready to risk

and step outside the linear path. Other participants find Malta small and with very limited opportunities. A number of participants mentioned various issues why they are dissatisfied with living in Malta, some of which are: the recent political developments, the construction boom, the lack of discussion and policies to strengthen civil rights and the amateur approach to performing arts.

Those categorised as ‘radicals’ claim that Malta is still too entrenched in tradition with religion playing a dominant role. The dialectical relationships between tradition and modernity continues in Malta. In recent years there has been a shift towards a more secularized society. Yet, some of the narratives of the participants demonstrate how young people still continue to negotiate their transitional journey, between tradition, religious beliefs and secularization.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This research on youth transitions in Malta has uncovered significant findings that are not only specific to the local context but also potentially applicable to other settings. This small-scale study can contribute meaningfully to the field of youth studies more broadly and youth transitions theory in particular.

### ***Conceptualisation of Youth***

The changes and adjustments taking place in societal structures are reflected in youth studies. In a society that has become more fluid, it may be more accurate to view youth as not strictly age-related. Rapid social changes occurring in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have left a profound impact on the lives of young people, who are faced with both challenges and opportunities. Considering these changes, including globalization, shifts in family structure and the labour market, the digital revolution (discussed in Chapter Two), and their impact on young people,

Wyn and Dwyer (1999) proposed rethinking youth. The findings of this thesis support this reconceptualisation and also the notion that the way age is perceived and categorised, is influenced by cultural, geographic, social and historical contexts, rather than based on biological factors.

According to a recent Eurostat study (2023), Maltese individuals are some of the last in Europe to leave their family homes, with young men doing so slightly later than young women. In 2023, the average Maltese person moved out at just over 30 years old, compared to the European average of 26. Because of the size of the island, it is not necessary for Maltese young people to leave their parental home to live closer to university or their place of work. The family offers a good support system to young people, and it remains a “vital national resource and a socially protective factor” (Ciorbaru et al., 2005, p. 7). Along the years researchers may have argued that young people are depending more on their peers and technology, and less on their parents. However, dependency on parents continues to be identified in youth research (Seavers and Hutton, 2003). Family attachment is still strong in Malta, and it is acceptable for young people not to move out of their parental home. Even in those cases where the parents are separated, the children still live with one of the parents. Cheal (2002) delves deeply into the multifaceted nature of family life, emphasizing that it is not a fixed or homogeneous experience but rather a dynamic process shaped by a multitude of social, economic, and cultural forces. He underscores how families evolve over time, adapting to shifting societal norms, economic pressures, and cultural expectations. These factors create diverse experiences and challenges, influencing everything from daily interactions to long-term aspirations and family roles. Cheal (2002) highlights the fluidity and complexity of family structures,

pointing out that traditional models are continuously being redefined as families navigate changing contexts and demands.

This study empirically illustrates that family norms still exist in Maltese society and play a significant role in shaping young people's lives. The findings confirm that the parents, whether at the forefront or somewhere very well hidden, are still present in the life course of contemporary young people.

A number of young people delay the transition to move out of their parental home because of financial constraints. Rental and purchase property prices in Malta have become unaffordable. Statistics show that also in Europe, most of the countries are, to varying degrees from one country to the other, are being faced with a housing crisis. Between 2015 and 2021 house prices rose by an average of almost 40% (Kálmán, 2022). This continues to prevent young people from leaving their parental house and therefore taking longer to reach independence and autonomy.

The findings in this thesis show that extending the educational journey is also another contributing factor to having young people postponing domestic transitions. Contemporary young people, while being supported by the family, take advantage to explore the various opportunities they are faced with, like going on an Erasmus exchange programme or getting involved in student activism. Such enriching and attractive experiences may lead young people to postpone responsibilities and commitments to enjoy staying 'young' for longer. They are joining the labour market later, delaying family formation and postponing marriage or partnership. These delays are experienced in what used to be known as the markers of adulthood. Dwyer and Wyn (2001) on realizing that the

transitions to adulthood no longer matched the traditional markers came up with the term ‘new adulthood’. My findings show that young people, especially those in tertiary education, but not those who transition straight into the labour market, are taking longer to reach their destination. With the exception of those classified as ‘traditionalists’, a secure job for life is no longer the aim of their journey. The findings seem to suggest that the journey and the destination of young people in tertiary education has become intertwined. It has been extended and prolonged to the extent that it has become almost part of the destination. The prolongation of the journey begs us to reconsider the meaning of being young. Leccardi et al. (2018) discussed whether being young needs to be reshaped and suggested that youth should be considered as a metaphor which changes during uncertain times, without being attached to a specific phase in life.

The social context, rather than chronological age, heavily influences the definition of the life stage. Youth is not solely determined by age but rather by the assumption of adult roles.

### ***Youth Transitions***

Throughout this thesis, I engaged with metaphors and models, youth researchers have developed to describe the transition processes.

The metaphors *filling niches*, *bridges/routes/pathways* and *trajectory* have been used to analyse and describe young people’s interaction with and their transition into the labour market. Since the participants in this study were going through their tertiary education journey and had not yet joined the labour market, this thesis did not throw much light on the utility of these metaphors. Of greater significance to this thesis is the metaphor *navigation* since it reflects the

negotiation of the transitional journey amid manufactured uncertainty. This metaphor reflects the negotiation of the transitional journey of young people encompassed by societal change and transformations.

This thesis engages at length with Coles' (1995) traditional transitions: school-to-work, domestic and economic; and the transportation models used by Roberts (1995) and Furlong and Cartmel (1997). It further elucidates the usefulness of the construct of the yo-yo-isation (Walther, 2000) of transitions to adulthood. The transportation models and the yo-yo-isation depicts the transitional journey of the four ideal-types. In the transportation model, those categorised as 'traditionalists' embark on the train, most of them heading to a destination dictated by their parents. This is a predictable journey, where certain categories of people, grouped by gender, class and ethnicity, catch the train together and disembark at designated stops. Those classified as 'opportunists', 'pioneers' and 'radicals' navigate their journey in private vehicles, inherited or borrowed from their parents or else bought especially for them by 'modernists' parents. Different types of participants are driving different car brands: some of the vehicles have the latest features and make the drive comfortable and exceptional; other vehicles are small cheap cars with faulty engines, which may transform the journey into a long and rough one. The car journey metaphor depicts a plethora of choices and different opportunities for young people, "like a buffet table set with mouth-watering dishes, too numerous for the keenest of eaters to hope to taste them all" (Bauman, 2000, p. 63).

The findings in this thesis support the idea that youth transitions have been transformed from linear, homogenous, and predictable to reversible and fragmented, hence the term yo-yo transitions (Walther, 2000), as shown in Figure

1. The yo-yo metaphor used the idea of a swinging pendulum between for example, education and employment, living with parents and living alone, dependence and independence. This thesis underscores that traditional youth transitions have changed to diversified transitions, processes loaded with risk and uncertainty.

Cuzzocrea (2020), drawing on the elements of risk and uncertainty experienced by contemporary young people as they moved on to the labour market, came up with the concept of ‘pinball youth’. Since this thesis focuses on young people in tertiary education I could not engage with this concept as it is more about contemporary young people who frequently move between different employment and training statuses, stopping and starting, where there is no clear point of arrival and completion, and the direction is unpredictable. The pinball metaphor grasps the precarity in employment and patterns of mobility. However, during the last cycle interview with one of the participants, classified as a ‘pioneer’, I observed that he fitted the pinball metaphor perfectly. He had various different opportunities to choose from and like a ‘pinball’ bounced up and down, moving from one opportunity to the other. This made him feel lost and anxious because he could see no point of arrival or any direction.

### ***Agency and Structure***

In the processes of transitions, the role of agency and structure remains an important consideration and play out in different ways across various social types. The ambivalence of structure and agency highlights how social types are not just products of their environments but are also active participants in shaping their social realities. Societal expectations may influence the roles individuals adopt but these individuals may challenge and redefine those roles through their actions

and interactions. This is portrayed through the four ideal-types presented in this research. The participants classified as ‘traditionalists’ and ‘opportunists’ are considerably influenced by structure. Individual agency is more present in the other two types: ‘pioneers’ and ‘radicals’. However, as Giddens (1979) said, structure and agency cannot exist apart. This research illustrates that both structure and agency are present, with their different emphasis, in the tertiary transitional journey of Maltese young people. When young people in tertiary education choose a pathway or take any decision, this may be described as human agency, however these choices and decisions are not made outside social structures. Therefore, one cannot say that those classified as ‘traditionalists’ never exercise agency. Those classified as ‘radicals’ are enabled and constrained by structures. Both those classified as ‘pioneers’ and the ‘radicals’ relied on their parents when they needed accommodation. Therefore, both agency and structure play a pivotal role in the transitional journey of Maltese young people but to a varying extent.

Structuration theory suggests that social systems are not static but are constantly being produced and reproduced through the actions of individuals. Young people feel the need to raise awareness about social issues, advocating for change and putting pressure on authorities to address significant difficulties. The findings seem to suggest that Maltese young people involve themselves less in the political arena but are exploring other avenues to effect change in Maltese society. Student and youth organizations are instrumental in contributing to equipping young people with the right skills to bring about social change.

The process of individualization provides contemporary young people with more choice and innumerable opportunities. Youth transitions have become

more varied, complicated on an individual level, complex, and with no 'normal' sequence. Contemporary young people have acquired more freedom and autonomy. The linear journey towards adulthood has been transformed into one associated with the process of individualisation and risk, a process which eroded the traditional context and where transitions are either delayed or postponed. Students pursuing studies at the University of Malta have the possibility to choose from many different and interesting courses. Also, they have countless opportunities to be involved in activities directly or indirectly related to their studies both locally and abroad. However, as the findings of this thesis show, this array of choice, at times makes young people feel anxious and uncertain.

The participants, especially those classified as 'pioneers' and 'radicals' spoke about gender reshifting and redistribution of power between males and females in Malta. They commented about the fact that in Malta, although the situation has slightly improved in the last years, the issue of gender inequality remains. Females are still constrained in their choices and therefore, the car model does not really depict the role of women in Maltese society. The findings in this thesis show that when the participants spoke about the matriarchal dominance, this related mainly to the domestic sphere. Even though in the last years, efforts have been made to encourage women to stay or re-join the labour market and new childcare facilities were introduced, not enough is being done to support women. Females remain to be predominantly responsible for the children and the household chores. The findings, therefore, lead us to ask whether females are free to choose or whether they are still constrained by gender.

### *Tradition and Modernity*

The interaction between tradition and modernity is a key aspect in the processes of transition in Malta. From the stories narrated, it is illustrated that not all contemporary young people shy away from traditional practices, beliefs and values. The decisions and career pathways of a number of Maltese young people continue to be affected by collective ways of living and traditional patterns and beliefs. Yet, Maltese young people are also open to new ways of thinking, which has led to a different society to that the previous generation lived in. The current generation is less bound by traditional norms and values and more by uncertainty and anxiety, living in a risk society (Beck, 1992). The normal or constrained biography has been transformed into choice biography or a “do-it-yourself biography” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 3), where young people are shaping their own transitional journey towards adulthood.

The different ideal-types in this research negotiated the traditional pushes and the contemporary pulls differently. They dealt with structural influences through their personal agency. As shown in Figure 4, the ‘traditionalists’ and the ‘radicals’ who identify with tradition and modernity respectively, are at the far ends of the continuum. Those categorised as ‘opportunists’ were initially identified as ‘traditionalists’ but an opportunity came along and they took advantage of it. However, this can be described as a fleeting departure from being a ‘traditionalist’ to which they reverted. Others moved to a more ‘pioneering’ identity, though they were often not ready to embrace that fully, given the depth and strength of the ties that bound them to family and other traditions. The ‘pioneers’ were keen to attempt weaving together tradition and modernity. Those classified as ‘radicals’ engaged more with the new freedoms that emerged

because of rapid social changes occurring in Maltese society. The fact that only two participants were classified as ‘radicals’ indicates that the traditional pushes still are very strong in Malta.

### **Implications for Further Research**

The overall findings of this research generate deep insights about the contingencies that shape the transitions of contemporary Maltese young people in tertiary education. The empirical data is evaluated against broader theories of youth transitions. The distinctive contribution to knowledge of this study is that it looks at a tightly framed context, the Maltese archipelago and Maltese young people registered in a tertiary institution. However, the findings in this study could be applied to similar situations, people, and settings to enhance the potential for broader understanding and practical utility.

The exploration of the journey towards adulthood shows that it is built on continuity and change, constructed on various experiences of the past, the present and the future. An important aspect of this journey is interaction: both personal and social which leads to the construction of the identities of contemporary young people. The social and the cultural landscape of these transitions play a significant role in this expedition towards adulthood and autonomy. These themes, together with the typology of the four different ideal-types, allowed for further investigation into how contemporary Maltese young people confront and negotiate this important phase in their life in the midst of the rapid changing social context.

### **Limitations and Strengths of the Study**

Like other works, this study is subject to a few limitations that should be acknowledged. These potential constraints have been thoroughly identified and discussed.

In this study, qualitative research which also has its limitations, is used to gain insight into the lived experiences of Maltese young people in tertiary education as they negotiate their transitional journey towards adulthood. In qualitative research, findings are based on the narration of the participants rather than on experiments and results. Narrative inquiry, the research design used for this study, proved to be a very effective tool to record the experiences of Maltese young people. However, the process is time-consuming, and the amount of data collected is overwhelming. Therefore, to ease the process, after each interview I would immediately start the transcription of that specific interview. I also made sure to maintain excellent organisation throughout the entire study. A particular limitation is that participants may alter their narratives knowing they are the subject of a study. However, this did not influence the findings since biographical narrative research goes beyond than just reporting what happened. The focus is on the participants as they construct their story and interpret their experiences.

In these last years the number of private universities in Malta has increased. Thus, another limitation of this study is the fact that data has been collected only from University of Malta students. Even though it is the highest-ranking university in Malta with the largest number of registered students, the findings would have been broader had I interviewed students attending other higher education institutions in Malta.

The convenience sample which is a non-probability sampling method was used for this study. All students registered in their first year of studies at the University of Malta were invited to participate in this research. Only those who were interested joined the study. This might have left out students who would have enriched the data even more. The sample size in narrative inquiry is usually between ten to twenty participants. One of the limitations of this study is that the participants do not represent all the faculties at the University of Malta. Another limitation is that none of the participants who took part in this study identified as gender X, non-binary or trans or have any disability. This shows that the study is not a representation of all the students at the University of Malta.

Unstructured interviews require a skilled interviewer. This type of interview provides rich data which is very time-consuming to analyse. I admit my inexperience in conducting unstructured interviews, but the supervisory team was continuously being informed about my progression and they supported and guided me through their constant advice as I was conducting the interviews. When I started transcribing the first interviews, I used the NVIVO programme which allows researchers to import, organize and explore data faster. However, after the first couple of interviews, I decided to do the process manually. This became a very laborious task and a very gradual process but helped me become more familiar with the data collected.

Another practical implication which affected for a while the timing of the process of the study is the mandatory lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, interviews were shifted remotely. Conducting the interviews during a time where most of the people, including myself, were undergoing an unusual time of stress, made the task lengthier and more strenuous.

Throughout the entire process I made every effort to minimise the impact of these limitations on the outcomes and conclusions of the thesis. The findings of this study depend mainly on the narration of the experiences of the participants and the co-construction of these experiences into stories. The participants were asked to verify the stories presented in Chapter Five in order to ensure that the findings are reliable and trustworthy. All the participants agreed to the stories as presented. This confirmed the interpretation of the data as accurate and reliable.

This study also boasts a number of notable strengths. As mentioned in Chapter One, the Introduction to this study, the area of young people in tertiary education is under researched both locally and abroad. Thus, one of the strengths of this empirical research is that through storytelling it filled a specific void and provided new insights and perspectives of the transitional journey of contemporary young people.

The use of the qualitative approach to research specifically this selected group of people portrayed underlying values and assumptions, and allowed the participants to talk about issues that are pertinent to them. Unstructured interviews with broad and open-ended questions does not have a predetermined list of themes to discuss. Another strength in this study is the use of the qualitative longitudinal research approach. Meeting the participants a multiple of times created a rapport between the participants and myself which gave them the liberty to narrate their stories without hesitation. This made a huge difference in the data collected because the participants, during the second and third cycle interviews, felt as if they knew me and therefore found it easier to narrate their experiences.

While earlier on I stated that the study could have been broader, another strength that needs to be noted is that this study captured the depth of the

transitional journey of Maltese young people in tertiary education. This was a result of the strong focus on the details of the experiences of these young people as presented through their stories. The lived experiences of the participants were thoroughly explored: investigating their past and their current experiences and their future aspirations. Aiming for depth provided this study with invaluable insight into the complex transitional journey of contemporary young people as they negotiated between tradition and modernity, structural forces and personal agency, and normal biography and choice biography.

Another important factor that enabled me to capture the depth of the lived experiences of the participants is the fact that I transcribed the narratives of the participants manually instead of using a qualitative data analysis software. This laborious task gave me the opportunity to become more acquainted with the participants and their stories. Thus, being familiar with their experiences put me in a better position during the data analysis process which was divided into two distinct approaches: the narrative analysis and the analysis of the narratives. Engaging with the data in a thorough manner, I co-constructed the stories of the participants and uncovered common categories, patterns and themes developing a typology of the four ideal-types. This deep immersion in data allows the researcher to maintain a high level of analytical rigour and in this study, it was crucial in identifying richer and more insightful conclusions.

### **Recommendations**

In view of the limitations and strengths mentioned above, this study contributes to the existing body of literature in youth studies and youth transitions. Several recommendations for further research emerge.

This study focused on Maltese young people in tertiary education and the sample was taken from the University of Malta. I recommend that for future research, similar studies are held with students registered in other higher education institutions in Malta. I also recommend that similar studies are held with other selected groups both locally and abroad. An interesting cohort would be Maltese young people who are working abroad or foreign young people working in Malta. Since the number of migrants and asylum seekers continues to increase in the Maltese archipelago it would be appropriate to investigate how they negotiate their transitional journey towards adulthood in a country which is not their own.

Another recommendation to the fields of youth studies and youth transitions is the method used to collect data. Through the research tool of qualitative narrative interviews, data has been collected through storytelling. The focus was on the participants and the construction of their stories. Their narratives illustrated the ways the participants negotiated their transitional journey. Through the use of narrative inquiry participants were given the opportunity to become storytellers and to construct their own story. As a result of this, they gave deep insights from their lived experiences which contributed greatly to this empirical study.

This study contributed to me personally in my role working with young people. It provided me with insight on how different types of Maltese young people negotiate their transitional journey. During the third and final cycle interview, the participants gave very positive feedback about the interviews. Moreover, when I contacted them again recently to verify their stories, most of them showed great enthusiasm to update me with their stories: the new challenges and opportunities they are facing. Their eagerness and an inspiration I got from the longitudinal

ethnography of the Milltown Boys (Williamson, 2021) I aspire that in a few years' time I revisit the participants of this study and explore the continuation of their transitional journey. It would be interesting to know how their story unfolded.

The final recommendation deals mainly with future research about Maltese young people and social issues, such as family, education, employment, housing, wellbeing, that were discussed by the participants in this study. The findings in this study show the importance to document the experiences of young people growing up in late modernity and the different ways in which they negotiate their journey in a rapid changing world. I recommend a mixed-method longitudinal study, involving a number of researchers and stakeholders. This research will document the experiences of young people over time and will provide longitudinal and holistic understanding of the different ways in which young people negotiate their journey in a rapid changing world. The study can start, taking a quantitative approach, in secondary schools or through the local councils in Malta. This will be then followed up by qualitative research, looking into various issues of direct relevance for young people. The narratives will surely provide context and greater meaning to the experiences narrated by the young people. Such studies have been ongoing in various countries, like *Inventing Adulthood in the United Kingdom* and *Life Patterns in Australia* and are yielding significant results relevant for the fields in youth studies and youth transitions.

### **Final Note**

This thesis has been a modest study of a small group of Maltese young people pursuing studies in the only public university on this small island. A creative

methodological approach which is more penetrating, profound and four years long has been used to study how youth transitions unfold and evolve over time. It gave me the opportunity to develop a typology and analyse the different ways Maltese young people negotiate their transitional journey.

This study also has something to say to the wider world about the different types of young people making transitions both within a higher education institution and beyond. It also contributes to the different kind of transitions that are possible in various geographical contexts.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the fields of youth studies and youth transitions through the understanding of the multiple transitions young people must negotiate and the destination they are heading to.

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## Appendix A

### FREC Approval

SWB FREC <research-ethics.fsw@um.edu.mt>

Thu, 21 Dec 2017,  
15:35

to me, Marilyn, howard.williamson

Reply

Reference Number: SWB 264/2017

Dear Ms Carmen Mangion,

Following **FREC's** meeting held on Thursday 7 December, your ethics proposal with regards to your research entitled *Youth Transitions within and beyond Tertiary Institutions in Malta. A Biographical Narrative Approach* was **accepted**.

Since now FRECs are authorised to review and approve research ethics applications on behalf of the University, your ethics proposal **will not be sent to UREC**. Hence, you may now **start your research**.

You are kindly requested to **pick up your ethics proposal from our office** between 08:00-12:15 and 13:30-16:45 (up to Friday 22 December 2017 and after the Christmas Recess as from Thursday 4 January 2018).

Regards,  
Charmaine

Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC)  
Faculty for Social Wellbeing  
Room 113  
Humanities A Building (Laws & Theology)  
University of Malta  
Msida MSD 2080

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#### **Students' hours:**

Monday-Friday  
08:00-12:15 and 13:30-16:45 (1 October-15 June)  
07:30-13:00 (16 June-30 September)

## Appendix B

### Letter of Invitation to participate in a research project on Youth Transitions

#### Youth transitions of tertiary education students in Malta. A narrative inquiry

Dear Student

My name is Carmen Mangion and currently I am reading for a PhD at the University of Malta in the Faculty for Social Wellbeing under the supervision of Professor Marilyn Clark and Professor Howard Williamson. My study will focus on youth transitions.

You are receiving this e-mail because you are a first-year student at the University of Malta, a Maltese national and not registered as a student under the maturity clause. This is a longitudinal study and therefore, I am inviting you to participate in three interviews, over the span of three and half years. Each interview will take about 1 hour.

This study will follow you whether you continue and finish your studies and also if you decide to find a job. Therefore, whilst this research starts off with participants who are students, it will not focus only on educational transitions but will explore also a host of related transitions occurring in relation to education, employment, leisure, family and relationships, social media and spirituality. The purpose of this study is to explore in depth the process and navigation of youth transitions and to document the experiences, feelings and aspirations through the narratives of young Maltese people on their journey towards adulthood.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time, even after the first or second interview has been held, and this will in no way affect their studies. Each participant who agrees to take part in this study will be asked to sign a consent form to ensure that each participant has full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the procedures.

Data is collected through narration or story-telling using the Single Question Aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUIN) design. I will ask only one broad based question. Then it is up to you to narrate your own story and to build your own narrative. Following this session, I will ask for more narratives about themes raised in the first session.

The interview will be held at a time and place of your convenience and it will last about 1 hour. There are no right or wrong answers. What I am interested in is your story.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions about this study either before participating or during the time you are participating. With your permission, the interview will be

recorded because this will be of great help to me as I am collecting information. The interview will then be transcribed. I would be more than happy to share the findings of my study with you once the research is completed. However, please note that your identity will be kept confidential and it will be known only by me as the researcher of this study. All the data collected will be anonymized and the data provided will not be in any way linked to you as a participant to this study. Only I will have access to the data collected and this will be retained until I finish my PhD studies. All documents and recordings will be destroyed soon after.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and ethics clearance from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee has been received. Therefore, if you wish to participate in this study, please read and sign the attached consent form. A signed copy of the consent form will be given to you to keep.

I can be contacted on [mangioncar@gmail.com](mailto:mangioncar@gmail.com)

I look forward to meet you and speak with you about this research. I thank you in advance for your participation in this research.

Yours sincerely

Carmen Mangion

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## Appendiċi B

### Ittra ta' Stedina biex tipparteċipa fi proġett ta' riċerka fuq it-Tranzizzjoni taż-Żgħażaġh

#### It-tranzizzjonijiet taż-żgħażaġh ta' studenti li qeghdin fl-edukazzjoni terzjarja f'Malta. Stharriġ Narrattiv

Għażiż Student/a

Jisimni Carmen Mangion u bħalissa qiegħda nwettaq dottorat fl-Università ta' Malta fil-Fakultà għat-Tiŝhih tas-Socjetà taht is-superviżjoni tal-Professor Marilyn Clark u l-Professor Howard Williamson. L-istudju tiegħi se jiffoka fuq it-tranzizzjonijiet taż-żgħażaġh.

Inti qed tirċievi din l-ittra għaliex inti student/a tal-ewwel sena fl-Università ta' Malta, Malti/ja u m'intix reġistrat/a bħala student/a taht il-klawzola tal-maturità. Dan huwa studju longitudinali u għalhekk, qiegħda nistiednek biex tipparteċipa fi tliet intervisti fuq medda ta' tliet snin u nofs. Kull intervista għandha tieħu madwar siegħa.

Dan l-istudju jibqa' jsegwik kemm jekk inti tkompli u tlesti l-istudji tiegħek kif ukoll jekk inti tieqaf mill-istudji tiegħek u ssib xogħol. Għalhekk, filwaqt li din ir-riċerka tibda b'parteċipanti li huma studenti, mhix se tiffoka biss fuq it-tranzizzjonijiet edukattivi iżda se tesplora wkoll ġemgħa ta' tranzizzjonijiet li jsehħu f'rabta mal-edukazzjoni, l-impjieg, id-divertiment, il-familja u r-relazzjonijiet, il-mezzi soċjali u l-ispirtwalità. L-għan ta' dan l-istudju huwa li jesplora fil-fond il-proċess u n-navigazzjoni tat-tranzizzjoni taż-żgħażaġh u biex jiddokumenta l-esperjenzi, is-sentimenti u l-aspirazzjonijiet permezz tar-rakkonti taż-żgħażaġh Maltin fil-vjaġġ tagħhom lejn l-istat ta' adult.

Il-parteeipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju hija volontarja. Il-parteeipanti huma liberi li jiddeċiedu li ma jeħdux sehem jew li jirtiraw f'kull waqt, saħansitra wara li tkun twettqet l-ewwel jew it-tieni intervista, u dan bl-ebda mod ma jeffettwa l-istudji tagħhom. Kull parteeipant li jaqbel li jieħu sehem f'dan l-istudju se jintalab jiffirma formola ta' kunsens biex ikun żgurat li kull parteeipant ikollu għarfien sħiħ tan-natura u l-għan tal-proċeduri.

Id-data tingabar permezz tan-narrazzjoni jew tar-rakkonti bl-użu tad-disinn hekk imsejjaħ, *Single Question Aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUIN)*. Jien se nistaqsi biss mistoqsija waħda vasta u bażika. Imbagħad inħalli f'idejk biex tirrakkonta l-istorja tiegħek u tibni r-rakkont personali tiegħek.

Wara din is-sessjoni, jien se nitolbok aktar rakkonti dwar temi mqajma fl-ewwel sessjoni.

L-intervista ssir fi kwalunkwe ħin u post komdi għalik u din tieħu madwar siegħa. Ma hemm l-ebda tweġiba tajba jew hażina. Dak li jien interessata fih huwa l-istorja tiegħek.

Tiddejjaq xejn tagħmel kwalunkwe mistoqsija dwar dan l-istudju kemm qabel kif ukoll wara li tipparteċipa. Bil-permess tiegħek, l-intervista se tkun irrekordjata għaliex din tkun ta' għajjnuna kbira għaliya filwaqt li nkun qiegħda niġbor l-informazzjoni. L-intervista mbagħad tiġi traskritta. Ikun ta' pjaċir għaliya li naqsam miegħek is-sejbiet tal-istudju tiegħi għaladarba r-riċerka tkun imwettqa. Madankollu, kun af li l-identità tiegħek se tinżamm b'kunfidenzjalità u nkun naf biha jien biss bħala r-riċerkatriċi ta' dan l-istudju. Id-data kollha miġbura se tiġi anonimizzata u d-data miksuba bl-ebda mod ma tkun marbuta miegħek bħala parteċipanta ta' dan l-istudju. Jiena biss ikolli aċċess għad-data miġbura u din tibqa' tinżamm sakemm intemm l-istudji dottorali tiegħi. Id-dokumenti kollha u r-registrazzjonijiet jinqerdu kemxejn wara.

Nixtieq nassigurak li dan l-istudju ġie rivedut u li l-permess etiku nkiseb mill-Kumitat għall-Etika tar-Riċerka tal-Fakultà. Għalhekk, jekk tixtieq tipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju, nitolbok taqra u tiffirma l-formola ta' kunsens meħmuża. Se tingħatalek kopja tal-formola ta' kunsens iffirmata biex iżzommha għalik.

Inkun nista' niġi kkuntattjata fuq [mangioncarm@gmail.com](mailto:mangioncarm@gmail.com)

Herqana biex niltaqa' u nitkellem miegħek dwar din ir-riċerka. Nirringrazzjak bil-quddiem għall-parteeipazzjoni tiegħek f'din ir-riċerka.

Dejjem tiegħek

Carmen Mangion

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## **Appendix C**

### **First Cycle Interview**

#### **First Part of the Interview - Narration Phase**

##### **Introduction**

##### **Demographic Data**

Maltese/Gozitan

Age

Male/Female/Other

Course

##### **Interview Guide**

I am interested in learning about transitions and changes young people in tertiary education go through in their life, as they journey through the status of youth to adulthood, the growth and development you had to go through, how you negotiate transitions and the strategies you employ.

I am particularly interested in transitions and changes which occurred within these three aspects: experiences happen in a relationship within oneself and with others, experiences happen over time: the past, the present and the future and experiences are located in a place or a situation. Also, these experiences happen in different areas, including education; employment; leisure; family and relationships; social media; and spirituality.

I would like to invite you to tell me your story; start from whatever you think it is important to talk about. Tell me about decisions, strategies employed and experiences that hindered or helped you on this journey to adulthood. I will listen to you and I will not interrupt you. Take your time to speak. As you are speaking, I will take notes just in case I wish to ask you any questions later. I am interested in your story.

### **Second Part of the Interview - Conversation Phase**

The researcher asks for clarification or any questions about themes mentioned during the narration phase of the interview.

## Appendiċi Ċ

### L-Ewwel Ċiklu tal-Intervista

#### L-Ewwel Parti tal-Intervista – Il-Fażi tar-Rakkont

##### Introduzzjoni

##### **Id-Data Demografika**

Malti/ja / Għawdxi/ja

L-Età

Raġel/Mara/Ieħor

Il-Kors

##### **Il-Gwida għall-Intervista**

Jiena interessata nkun naf dwar it-tranzizzjonijiet u l-bidliet li jgħaddu minnhom f'ħajjithom iż-żgħażaġħ li qegħdin fl-edukazzjoni terzjarja hekk kif dawn iterrqu mill-istat taż-żgħożija sa dak ta' adult, il-kobor u l-iżvilupp li kellek tgħaddi minnhom, kif tħabbatha mat-tranzizzjonijiet u l-istrateġiji li tuża.

Jiena interessata partikolarment fit-tranzizzjonijiet u l-bidliet li seħħu f' dawn it-tliet aspetti: l-esperjenzi jseħħu f' relazzjoni mal-persuna nnifisha u ma' oħrajn, l-esperjenzi jseħħu maż-żmien: il-passat, il-preżent u l-futur u l-esperjenzi jinsabu f' post jew f' sitwazzjoni. Barra minn hekk, dawn l-esperjenzi jseħħu fi nħawi differenti li jinkludu l-edukazzjoni; l-impjieg; id-divertiment; il-familja u r-relazzjonijiet; il-mezzi soċjali; u l-ispiritwalità.

Nixtieq nistiednek biex tgħidli l-istorja tiegħek; ibda minn xiex taħseb li huwa importanti titkellem dwaru. Ghidli dwar id-deċiżjonijiet, l-istrategiji użati u l-esperjenzi li xekkluk jew għenuk f'dan il-vjaġġ għall-istat ta' adult. Se nisimgħek u ma ninterrompikx. Hū l-ħin tiegħek biex titkellem. Sakemm tkun qed titkellem se nkun qiegħda nieħu n-noti f'każ li nkun nixtieq nagħmillek xi mistoqsijiet iktar tard. Jiena interessata fl-istorja tiegħek.

### **It-Tieni Parti tal-Intervista – Il-Fażi tal-Konverżazzjoni**

Ir-riċerkatriċi titlob għal xi ċarezza jew tagħmel xi mistoqsijiet dwar it-temi msemmija matul il-fażi tar-rakkont tal-intervista.

## Appendix D

### Consent Form

I have read the information presented in the letter of invitation to participate in a research project about youth transitions conducted by Carmen Mangion, at the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions and any additional details I wanted.

I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses. A copy of the transcript of the interview will be sent to me to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any details.

I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the dissertation and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymized. The data collected will be retained by the researcher until she finishes her PhD studies. All documents and recordings will be destroyed soon after.

I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time, even after the interviews have taken place, and this will in no way affect my studies.

This research has received ethics clearance through the Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to:

- participate in this study;
- have my interview recorded;
- use anonymous quotations in this thesis or any publication that comes from this research.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name & Surname

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Name & Surname

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Supervisor's Name & Surname

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Co-Supervisor's Name & Surname

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendiċi D

### IL-FORMOLA TA' KUNSENS

Jien qrajt l-informazzjoni pprezentata fl-ittra ta' stedina biex nipparteċipa fi proġett ta' riċerka dwar it-tranzizzjonijiet taż-żgħażaġħ imwettaq minn Carmen Mangion fil-Fakultà għat-Tishih tas-Socjeta fl-Universita ta' Malta. Kelli l-opportunita nagħmel kwalunkwe mistoqsija b'rabta ma' dan l-istudju biex nirċievi tweġibiet sodisfacenti għall-mistoqsijiet tiegħi u kwalunkwe dettalji oħra li xtaqt.

Jien konxju/a li għandi l-għażla li nippermetti li l-intervista tiegħi tiġi rrekordjata biex niżgura reġistrazzjoni preċiża tat-tweġibiet tiegħi. Se tintbagħatli kopja traskritta tal-intervista tiegħi biex nikkonferma l-preċiżjoni tal-konverżazzjoni tagħna u biex inżid jew niċċara xi dettalji.

Jien konxju/a wkoll li xi siltiet mill-intervista jistgħu jiġu inklużi fid-dissertazzjoni u/jew fil-pubblikazzjonijiet li johorġu minn din ir-riċerka, bl-għarfien li l-kwotazzjonijiet ikunu anonimizżati. Id-data miġbura tibqa' tinżamm mir-riċerkatriċi sakemm ittemm l-istudji dottorali tagħha. Id-dokumenti u r-reġistrazzjonijiet kollha jinqerdu kemxejn wara.

Jien ġejt infurmat/a li nista' nirtira l-kunsens tiegħi f'kull waqt, saħansitra wara li jkunu twettqu l-intervisti, u li dan bl-ebda mod ma jeffettwa l-istudji tiegħi.

Din ir-riċerka ngħatat il-permess etiku permezz tal-Kumitat għall-Etika tar-Riċerka tal-Fakultà.

B'għarfien shih ta' dan kollu preċedenti, jien naqbel, bil-libertà personali tiegħi, li:

- nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju;
- ikolli l-intervista tiegħi rrekordjata;
- ikunu użati kwotazzjonijiet anonimi f'din it-teżi jew kwalunke publikazzjoni li toħroġ minn din ir-riċerka.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Isem u Kunjom il-Parteċipant/a

\_\_\_\_\_  
Firma

\_\_\_\_\_  
Isem u Kunsjom ir-Riċerkatriċi

\_\_\_\_\_  
Firma

\_\_\_\_\_  
Isem u Kunjom is-Supervizur

\_\_\_\_\_  
Firma

\_\_\_\_\_  
Isem u Kunjom il-Kosupervizur

\_\_\_\_\_  
Firma

## **Appendix E**

### **Second and Third Cycle Interviews**

#### *Sample*

##### **First Part of the Interview - Narration Phase**

###### **Introduction**

The researcher shares salient points from the previous interview/s and ask the participant for an update or anything else the participant wishes to talk about.

During this phase the researcher keeps the comment to a minimum.

##### **Second Part of the Interview - Conversation Phase**

The researcher asks for clarification or any questions about themes mentioned during the narration phase of the interview.

## Appendix F

### Themes, Patterns, Categories

#### **Theme 1: Continuity and change**

##### **PATTERNS**

##### **CATEGORIES**

The Influence of the Family:

Financial support, future aspirations,  
matriarchal influence

The Educational Trajectory

Compulsory and tertiary experiences

Critical Moments/Turning Points

Change in role, car licence, COVID-19  
pandemic

#### **Theme 2: The construction of identities through relationships**

##### **PATTERNS**

##### **CATEGORIES**

Professional and romantic identities

Study abroad, career path, romantic  
relationships

Cultural and religious identities

Different lifestyle, values, leisure

Gender and identity

Role of women, traditional family,  
employment, course of studies

#### **Theme 3: The landscape of transitions of the Maltese islands**

**PATTERNS**

The size of the island

Leaving the nest

Tradition

**CATEGORIES**

Happy/Dissatisfied living in Malta,  
limited opportunities

Familial support, financial support,  
housing

Religion, family, stigma