

**QUESTIONING NON-COMPLETION IN HIGHER EDUCATION:  
A STUDY WITHIN THE ARGENTINE SYSTEM**

CAROLINA JUNEMANN

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## **Abstract**

The rate of undergraduate non-completion at public universities in Argentina is high by international comparison. However, the understanding of its causes has been obscured by a polarized debate between the government and the university community on issues of efficiency and funding. In this context, the experiences non-completers have been neglected amid an oversimplification of the complex set of factors at play in non-completion.

This thesis examines the issues, factors and definition of non-completion within public universities in Argentina by exploring the lives of students and their decision-making processes. It draws primarily on qualitative data collected in a single case study institution through semi-structured interviews. Theoretical and methodological weaknesses in the dominant international approaches to non-completion are identified, particularly in relation to Tinto's well-known model of integration. A critical research tradition is employed to draw attention instead to wider social and cultural influences in non-completion, and over and against perspectives that focus on the student-as-the-problem which underplay the role of institutional practices.

Non-completion within the case study institution is neither simply a personal nor an institutional phenomenon and cannot be reduced to or explained solely in those terms and at those levels. Non-completion has to be understood as part of a decision-making process within a complex interplay of institutions, families, communities, social class and national (economic and political) factors both in relation to individual and institutional action. The findings also highlight the role of 'institutional habitus' (Reay et al., 2005) in underlining the significance of the types of capital differently available to, held by and embodied in the students; and therefore illustrate ways in which institutional practices and cultures can work, albeit unintentionally, to systematically advantage some students to the detriment of others within public universities.

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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**The international significance of non-completion**

There are several reasons that make undergraduate non-completion a topic of international significance. First and foremost, non-completion is a threat to the successful opening up of higher education to ‘non-traditional’ groups at a time when widening participation in higher education is a political priority of governments’ agendas across the globe.

The interest of governments in widening participation in higher education is underpinned by the idea that there are different sorts of benefits associated with higher education attainment; principally the assumption that a better-educated workforce is beneficial for the economy. Indeed, in the context of the globalisation of the ‘knowledge economy’ (Gibbons *et al*, 1994), the creation of a high-skilled workforce is regarded as having a crucial role in the capacity of a country to compete in the global economy. This has contributed to placing the widening of access to higher education at the centre of the political priorities of many governments: “As producers of innovation and new knowledge, higher education institutions are seen to be crucially important for the competitive capacities of nation states” (Brennan *et al*, 2008, p. 10). As Wolf (2002) points out, “beliefs about these links dominate current policy” despite the recent challenges to the human capital assumption underlying government policy that a high-skilled workforce boosts economic competitiveness<sup>1</sup> (see for example Brown *et al*, 2008; Teaching and Learning Research Programme, 2008) and Wolf’s own study showing that the links between them are “far less direct than our politicians suppose” (p. 14/15).

Widening participation is a political issue not just in developed economies but also across the developing world: “There is now widespread acknowledgement that access to quality higher education is essential for developing economies to escape their peripheral status in the world economy” (Naidoo, 2003, p. 251). Given the centrality attributed in government discourse to higher education in “meeting the skills needs of the economy” (TLRP, 2008), higher education non-completion can be seen as having the potential to jeopardize the competitiveness of a nation state in the global ‘knowledge economy/knowledge society’.

The policy interpretation of human capital theory also stresses the capacity of higher education to trigger individual and social benefits. On the one hand, a higher education degree is seen as enhancing individual life chances, principally, but not only, through higher earnings (what human capital economists call ‘private rate of return’ to higher education). For example, private rates of return to higher education have been calculated in the UK in the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education Report (1997), and, more recently, in the former Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) document that asserted that “Those who have been through higher education in the UK earn, on average, 50 per cent more than those who have not” (DIUS 2009). On the other hand, there is a claim of broader social and political benefits associated with higher education that range from social cohesion, civic engagement, community participation and faith in the political process to improved health and life expectancy (Bynner and Egerton, 2001).

However, the widening of access to higher education through the inclusion of historically excluded groups has not just been driven by ‘the economic imperatives created by global competition, technological change and the challenge of the knowledge economy’ (Osborne, 2003, p. 44) but also by ‘social justice’ concerns (Naidoo, 2000). Again, as Brown et al. in a



Teaching and Learning Research Programme commentary (2008) point out: “The creation of world-class skills is assumed to be a route to economic prosperity, reduced income inequalities and social cohesion” (TLRP, 2008, p. 4). Indeed, there are ambitious expectations for higher education which, through its capacity to up-skill the workforce, is presented as a policy magic bullet which can solve several crucial social problems at once. Hence high rates of non-completion might confound the ‘social justice’ aspirations of the widening participation agenda by replacing non-participation to become a new major source of social inequality.

Therefore, there are several ‘costs’ associated with non-completion although the economic ones are given most emphasis – that is the “financial cost on the taxpayer, the institution attended and [the individual] himself” (Johnes, 1997p. 344). As Peelo and Wareham (2002) argue, non-completion is problematic as it can be interpreted in terms of ‘economic waste’, as ‘anti-egalitarian’ and ‘discriminatory’.

However, it is also possible to situate the renewed research and policy interest in non-completion in a broader social and political context. Non-completion has had growing attention particularly in Western developed countries during the last few decades in the context of a redefinition of the relationships between higher education and the state (Neave and van Vught, 1991), which have encompassed changes in the financing of higher education and the rise of accountability mechanisms (Neave, 1996). As some commentators argue, the interest in the topic has intensified as an expression of a narrower emphasis on ‘value for money’ in higher education (Longden, 2002).

As Western states have increasingly come to assess their public funding from a ‘cost-benefit perspective’ (Zemsky and Wegner, 1997), the cost and performance of public higher education

have become of paramount interest (Yorke, 1999). Within this shift, old concerns and priorities have been redefined:

*Concerns about equity, accessibility, autonomy or the contribution of higher education to social transformation, which were prevalent during previous decades, have been overshadowed by concerns about excellence, efficiency, expenditures and rates of return (Torres and Schugurensky, 2002, p. 429).*

The rise of national quality assurance systems and the use of performance indicators across most Western countries during the 1990s are manifestations of this general political climate (Yorke and Thomas, 2003).

Governments in different parts of the world now look to performance indicators like non-completion rates to evaluate institutional effectiveness and decide on the allocation of funding (Yorke, 1998a, p. 45). Indeed, non-completion rates as performance indicators are an element of the new 'policy instruments' (Neave and van Vught, 1991) of market reformed education systems where forms of state "indirect steering, or steering at a distance [...] replaces intervention and prescription with target setting, accountability and comparison" (Ball, 2006a, p. 71).

Thus, another important basis to the interest in non-completion emerged out of this political context of rising preoccupation of the states with scrutinizing their expenses (Johnes and Taylor, 1990). In current higher education policy and funding practices, "failure to complete is taken as an unproblematic measure of inadequacy in course provision" (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001, p. 118). It is interpreted as the result of an inefficient use of public finances in

the landscape of heightened competition between universities (Yorke, 1999) albeit, as I discuss below, the use of non-completion statistics as a performance indicator has been criticized as reflecting particular interests (Harvey, 1998; Yorke, 1998a, p. 46). Furthermore, non-completion has become ever more relevant to governments because widening participation itself – or the participation of larger numbers of students with no tradition of going into university - has increased the chances of non-completion<sup>2</sup>. In the UK, for example, the rate of non-completion has risen from 14 per cent to 18 per cent between 1988 and 1998<sup>3</sup> (HEFCE 1999).

### **Non-completion in Argentina**

In line with the increase in higher education participation elsewhere in the world, higher education participation in Argentina shown considerable growth since the 1980s with public (national) universities enlarging their student population from around 300,000 students in 1980 to 1.2 million by 2001 (Becerra *et al*, 2003, p. 18). Indeed, the Argentine rate of higher education participation compares well with that of OECD countries at nearly 28 per cent of those aged 18-24 while, for example, the 18-to-24-years-old enrolment rate in the UK in 2001 was 22 per cent, 31 per cent in France and 36 per cent in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

Nonetheless, the rate of non-completion at Argentine universities is well above international figures. However, both the unavailability of data and the complexity of the system, as I describe in chapter 4, make it difficult to establish the real magnitude of undergraduate non-completion. This could also explain the contradictory results yielded by different studies. For example, among the studies of non-completion at the higher education system level<sup>4</sup>, in 2002

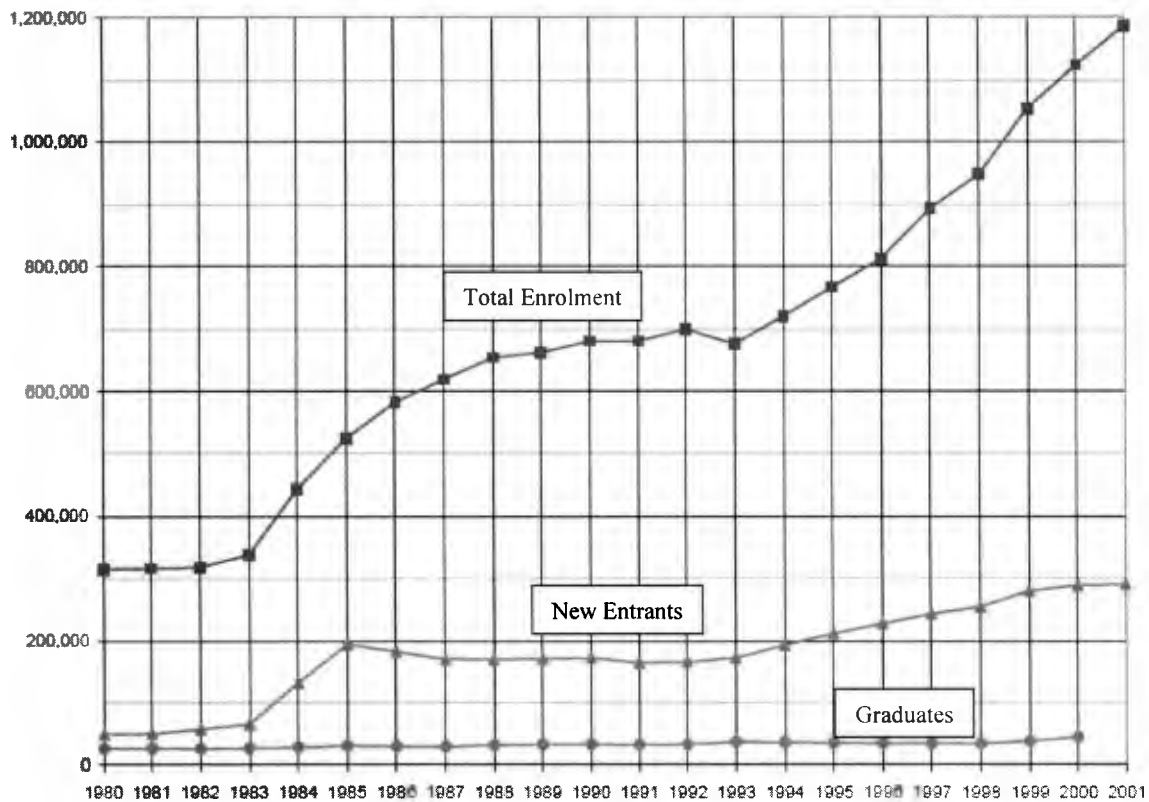
the Secretariat of University Policies of the Ministry of Education followed the 1990 student cohort for a number of different subject-areas of national universities<sup>5</sup> (not published but reviewed by Becerra et al., 2003) and concluded that “on average, only 11.3 % of students had graduated at the end of 1999, and required, on average, a period of 7.7 years to complete their studies” (Becerra *et al*, 2003, p. 18). In other words, “more than 85% of the students will not be able to complete their studies successfully” (p. 19).

However, another study (Landi and Giuliadori, 2001) reported a more favourable picture with a non-completion rate of 43 percent. This study draws on data from the *Encuesta Permanente de Hogares - EPH* (Permanent Household Survey) as opposed to that provided by the universities themselves, which according to the authors allowed them control of some factors that can distort the final figure. Among these factors the authors mention the capacity of the EPH to exclude from the final figure those students who enrolled but never attended (sometimes called *ghost students* and believed to comprise a significant proportion of student enrolment), those who enrolled in two parallel subjects or who switched programmes of study or university and those who interrupted studies temporarily. All these factors, which are common in the Argentine higher education system, further complicate the measurement of non-completion (I describe the higher education system in detail in Chapter 4).

Studies conducted at specific institutions, nonetheless, report much lower graduation rates similar to those provided by the Ministry of Education - between 13 per cent (Universidad Nacional del Sur) and 17 per cent (Universidad Nacional de Cuyo). In addition, the only available historical series of higher education enrolment and graduation since 1980<sup>6</sup> (Becerra *et al*, 2003, see Graph 1 below) which reportedly draws on data from the Secretariat of University Policies, although these are not publicly accessible, shows that graduation has not kept pace

with the increase in student enrolment and reinforces the increasing significance of non-completion within Argentine universities:

**Figure 1: Students and Graduates in Argentine Public Universities - 1980-2001**



Source: Becerra *et al*, 2003, p. 18.

There is an important contrast between these figures and the figures of non-completion in OECD countries where, according to figures provided by the OECD in 2008, the average undergraduate non-completion rate among these countries is 31 per cent (although there are variations between the highest rate of non-completion in Italy (55 per cent) and the lowest in Japan (10 per cent)) (only full-time students, OECD, 2008).

Over the last decade, non-completion made headlines in Argentinean national newspapers as one, if not the main, challenge facing higher education: “Ten get in, but eight do not complete”

(Young, Savoia and Calvo, 2005); “Sixty per cent of students drop out during the first year”; or the comment by the educationalist, Adriana Puiggros, that “The Argentine university today is a machine of producing dropouts” (again, in Young, Savoia and Calvo, 2005). Hence, Trombetta points out that “democratisation is not only that students get access to university but that they remain until graduation” (in Moreno, 2005).

Despite all of this, there has been a remarkable lack of enquiry about the reasons for non-completion, and more generally about what goes on within universities and the nature of the student experience. This is a research area of long-standing interest in other parts of the world (Tight, 2003) that in Argentina has been overlooked in favour of policy studies. However, as I show in the next section, it is possible to understand this predominance of research into macro issues if it is contextualised within historical and current developments in Argentine education policy and educational debates over the last fifteen years.

### **Setting up the scene**

I come back to a more detailed description of Argentine higher education and university politics in Chapter 4, but briefly, starting in the 1990s Argentine higher education has been subjected to a process of reform similar to changes taking place in other parts of the world (reform that came into practice with the sanctioning of the Higher Education Act (*Ley de Educacion Superior* 24,521) in 1995 (Ministerio de Cultura y Educacion, 1995). These changes have led to an alteration in the relationship between the state and higher education, mostly by decreasing the state financial commitment towards public universities, while at the same time increasing their accountability (Balán, 1998). As part of this shift, and resonating with international trends, non-completion rates have been given a role as performance indicators of

universities (Banco Mundial and Gobierno Argentino, 1990; Ministerio de Cultura y Educacion, 1997; World Bank, 1995).

Among other changes, and one of its most controversial aspects, the Higher Education Act of 1995 introduced a clause (N. 58) that allows public universities to charge fees. The Act also opened up the possibility of allocating state funding according to indicators of ‘efficiency, quality and equity’ (Balán, 1993) as opposed to the previous mechanism that based each university’s budget on the number of students enrolled and negotiation in the national Congress, as I describe in Chapter 4 (Finochiaro, 2003). Both changes were partly responses to the World Bank diagnoses of Argentine Higher Education (World Bank, 1994a; 1995)<sup>7</sup> in which the high rates of non-completion of public universities were directly linked to the open access and free-of-charge policies of national universities and regarded as manifestations of institutional inefficiency.

However, as Rodriguez Gomez and Alcantara argue, “global trends are promoted, resisted, and negotiated differently in each national context and in each individual institution” (2003, p. 41). Indeed, changes that have been successfully implemented in other contexts have, in Argentina, elicited antagonism from university rectors, students and staff who have construed the reform as running counter to deep-rooted traditions and idiosyncrasies that date back to the 1918 University Reform: such as free-of-charge tuition; open access; the state commitment to the exclusive financing of universities (Arocena and Sutz, 2005); ‘collegial forms of governance’ with representation from staff, students and graduates; and academic freedom (*libertad de cátedra*) (Finochiaro, 2003). As Rhoads and colleagues put it:

*Countries such as Argentina and Mexico have long-standing traditions and social contracts that have defined the relationship between the state and its citizens. Clearly, many of the values and beliefs associated with neoliberal versions of higher education are challenging fundamental elements of Argentine and Mexican culture (Rhoads, Torres and Brewster, 2006, p. 196).*

Therefore, when the higher education reform was launched in the mid-1990s, it consolidated a split between the main players in the higher education field into two antagonistic positions. The first was mainly represented by the government and the discourses of multilateral agencies, which Schugurensky (1994) called *marketventionists* for their promotion of market reforms in Latin America. The second was mainly represented by the local ‘university community’, university rectors, staff and students who criticised these reforms as tacitly “aimed at the privatization of public universities and the discursive recognition of the market as the source of ‘innovation and quality’” (Mollis, 2001a, p. 33). This latter group, which Schugurensky called *autonomists*, have particularly criticised the aspects of the higher education law that are portrayed as restricting university autonomy from government involvement in the setting of fees, access policies, regimes of enrolment and evaluation and accreditation<sup>8</sup>. As I will show, the confrontation between universities and government since the mid-1990s has been so intense that the University of Buenos Aires refused to be externally evaluated by the then newly created CONEAU (National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation) (Finochiaro, 2003).

So the Argentine higher education reform has been regarded by the university community as an exogenous imposition alien to the culture, ethos and traditional policy framework of Argentine universities, a sentiment that was reinforced by the fact that it was encouraged by the World



Bank<sup>9</sup> and put into practice in 1996 through a programme of reform co-financed between the World Bank and the Argentine government (165M World Bank loan) (Abeledo and Curcio, 2007). Indeed, the rejection of what were regarded as market-oriented reforms has been embedded in the spread of a broader anti-neoliberal sentiment that has become dominant across Argentine universities. As Rhoads et al. argue:

*... the North-South separation of power has created much consternation about economic and cultural impositions from international banking agencies and the United States and [...] reservations about the potential soundness of neoliberal economic policies are no longer limited to a relatively small range of intellectuals (2006, p. 195).*

Underlying this was a broader ideological struggle between two different views of higher education, as Salter and Tapper put it in relation to educational changes in the 1980s and 1990s in the UK: “an ideological struggle between an economic view of higher education and a traditional liberal idea of a university, in the context of a bureaucratic drive by the central state for control over higher education and the influential position of the ‘new right’ in educational policy” (Salter and Tapper, 1994, p. 45). In local terms, this struggle was expressed as a confrontation between ‘the democratic Reformist tradition indigenous to Argentina’ and ‘the global, universal and homogeneous diagnoses of the international agencies, designed to serve economic interests not committed to scholarship’ (Mollis, 2001a, p. 33).

Within all this, non-completion rates of public universities have been placed quite simplistically as either an indicator of the incompetence and inefficiency of the state, or as a reflection of the reduction in state funding of higher education associated with the government’s ‘economic view’ of higher education. In particular, with the inclusion in the

Higher Education Act of non-completion rates as potential indicators of efficiency to be used in the allocation of university funding<sup>10</sup>, the question of who defines these indicators and why, and the assumptions upon which the selection of particular indicators rest became highly contested terrain.

### **Non-completion within larger debates**

There have been several indications in the international literature that comparing non-completion rates across institutions is problematic. Johnes and Taylor (1990) point out that the variations found might be explained by factors in which the universities 'legitimately' differ such as differences in the entrant student population, in the 'subject-mix' of each university, in the degrees offered, and in the types of accommodation offered to students.

Comparisons across countries are even more problematic (Longden, 2002) due to the variations in the typical length of degree courses and the different 'definitions and measurements techniques' (National Audit Office, 2002, p. 8). For example, OECD statistics calculate graduation rates as 'the ratio of the number of students who graduate from an initial degree during the reference year to the number of new entrants in this degree  $n$  years before, with  $n$  being the number of years of full-time study required to complete the degree' (OECD, 2008, p. 97). In this sense, it is particularly difficult to compare Argentine non-completion rates, where degrees are structured in long curricula that require 5 to 6 years with no intermediate exit points, with non-completion rates of other countries that, as those in Europe for example, are converging toward 3 to 4 years undergraduate cycles (Bologna Declaration, 1999).

There is evidence from different countries, too, that producing data about part-time students is particularly difficult “due to the inherent flexibilities in the patterns of study” (National Audit Office, 2007). As I show in Chapter 4, there is a tradition of part-time studies among Argentine students at public universities where it is common for students to be in 20+ hours employment. For example, around 59 per cent of students within the University of Buenos Aires are in paid-work, while 50 per cent work more than 36 hours per week<sup>11</sup> (UBA, 2000).

Indeed, in Argentina, free-of-charge higher education puts little pressure on students to complete their degrees in the shortest possible time frame. This situation is reinforced by the very limited administrative restrictions on students regarding the pace at which they are required to complete their degrees. The Higher Education Act requires students to pass 2 courses per year out of a total of 6, on average (but varying according to different programmes of study) to be considered as good standing students. As a consequence, the average real duration of studies at public universities exceeds its official duration by 1.6 times (Coraggio and Vispo, 2001, p. 200) which means that, for example, a student would take on average 7 years to complete a degree (Landi and Giuliodori, 2001) with a significant number of students taking even longer (7.9 years to complete a degree in social communication, or 7.6 years to complete a degree in economics (Coraggio and Vispo, 2001, p. 242)). Since the part-time mode of study is associated in the international literature with higher chances of non-completion (McGivney, 1996; McInnis *et al*, 2000), this is not only likely to increase the likelihood of non-completion, but also to complicate its measurement because depending on where the limit is set to make the calculation, non-completion might be either over or under-estimated.

Writing about the Australian context but with relevance to Argentina, McInnis *et al*. (2000) point out that in increasingly flexible systems, where students are allowed to complete over a

long period of time, and where there are large numbers of part-time students and students transferring from one course to another or temporarily interrupting, make patterns of student attendance heterogeneous. This makes it difficult to set up a standard for all. Therefore, the answer to the seemingly simple question of ‘who is a non-completer?’ is not straightforward.

As noted, in an international context of increasing accountability demands on higher education, non-completion has been positioned in dominant government discourses as a signal of failure, a view that is also illustrated in the World Bank’s diagnosis of the ‘internal inefficiency’ of Argentine public universities. However, as noted already, the use of non-completion rates as performance indicators has been criticized for its simplistic assumptions. Non-completion is assumed to be influenced mainly by institutional action, even if findings from several studies about the way non-completion sometimes happens challenge “the assumptions of college, funding council and government that the main reason for undertaking a course is to complete it and get the badge” (in Hodkinson and Bloomer 2001, p. 135) when at times “dropping out was a logical solution to a deeper problem rather than a problem in itself” (p.135).

In the UK, Hodkinson and Bloomer (2001) point out that a student’s decision to withdraw from higher education is complex and multidimensional, and sometimes even fortuitous, thus challenging the dominant view underpinning current policy and funding practices that non-completion might sensibly work as a measure of quality and/or learning. If some of the factors behind non-completion lie beyond institutional control, then an assumed mechanistic connection between non-completion and institutional inadequacies is, at the least, suspect. The acknowledgment of complex and multifaceted causes of non-completion has also been reflected in a shift towards increasingly less negative views of non-completion (i.e., when personal aspirations and objectives might have been accomplished before graduation) in the

academic literature on the subject (see for example Laing and Robinson, 2003; McCormack, 2005; McGivney, 1996; Peelo and Wareham, 2002; Woodley, 2004).

All of this indicates that non-completion rates are socially located and embedded in wider perspectives concerning access to higher education – more precisely, in particular views about ‘who higher education is legitimately for’ (Williams, 1997). In the same vein, Tierney (2002) argues that non-completion is a cultural definition, to the extent that it is within a particular culture that a system exists where some complete and others do not. This suggests that the meanings of non-completion are liable to variation across different national/cultural settings, and between different social groups, a point that can be seen to lie at the heart of the resistance of Argentine researchers to view non-completion from the lens of ‘efficiency, productivity, expenditures and rates of return’ as opposed to concerns about equity, accessibility and autonomy (Torres and Schugurensky, 2002). Indeed, a recent statement that would differentiate the Argentine political climate from the current preoccupation with value for money, cost-effectiveness and performance (Schugurensky, 1999) in marketised and performance-driven higher education systems (Beck, 1999), comes from the new Secretary for University Policy, Alberto Dibbern, who commented:

*It is central [that the new higher education Act being currently drafted] declares higher education as a public good and establishes free access for university courses. Moreover, it must guarantee the autonomy of universities and establish, within this framework, the function and composition of the various stakeholders of co-governance of the universities (Mitchell, 2008, paragraph 5).*

Furthermore, in the UK, Naidoo makes the point that the use of ‘quantifiable outputs’ typical of policy frameworks across the industrialized West: “penalize institutions which admit students from the most disadvantaged sectors of society [because] such measures invariably do not have the methodology in place to differentiate between categories of students with regard to social disadvantage or prior educational achievement” (Naidoo, 2003, p. 252). Indeed, an issue that is not sufficiently stressed in the literature and that is of relevance to Argentine commentators is the link between non-completion rates and the characteristics of student intakes, which are, in turn, linked to admissions policies in different national contexts.

As shown by Rama Vitale (2007), graduation rates in higher education systems where access is more restrictive (via entry examinations for example, as in Chile, Costa Rica and Venezuela) are almost double those of systems where access is (relatively) open (Bolivia, Guatemala and Uruguay and Argentina although not included in Rama Vitale’s study<sup>12</sup>). In the US, the rate of non-completion is around five times as high at open admissions institutions than it is at highly selective ones (Policicchio 1996, cited in Longden 2002, p. 23). In the UK, “the highest drop-out rates are in universities with the most success at widening participation” (HEFCE 2006). In Argentina, where public universities account for around 80 per cent of total enrolment and where access to these universities is for the most part open (a more thorough discussion of access is presented in Chapter 4), it could be expected that the system will experience higher than average non-completion rates.

Non-completion rates in Argentina, therefore, can be linked to higher education policy options and inherent values which, despite the 1990s government’s attempts to move towards a ‘performance framework’, still reflect concerns with equality of opportunity and social justice. Argentine commentators particularly reject the assumption behind non-completion as a

performance indicator that there is no gain, either for the individual or for society, from having students spend at least a short time in higher education (Abramovich *et al*, 2002; Rubinich, 2001). Rubinich (2001), for example, questions “how negative is it that students take longer to graduate, or that many of them drop out before getting a degree, when at least we are giving more students the opportunity of participating and graduating than if access was restricted?” This comment, again, illustrates the embeddedness of non-completion rates in wider perspectives concerning access to higher education. Therefore, non-completion cannot be seen as dissociated from policy options that are context-specific, which indicates that non-completion is better understood if looked at from contextual (cultural, political, economic, historical) perspectives.

However, despite the confrontation between government and universities and the various attempts to show the inadequacy of de-contextualised, de-socialised understandings of non-completion, most Argentine debate and writing on non-completion still remains at the level of discursive reasoning. Research has concentrated on uncovering the particular interests behind the World Bank’s diagnosis of the inefficiency of public universities as part of its more general critique of public provision but this has happened at the expense of refining the understanding of non-completion as such. In this context, key elements of non-completion at public universities remain poorly understood, which contrasts with the long standing acknowledgment in other parts of the world that failure to distinguish between different ‘forms of leaving behaviour [...] has often produced findings contradictory in character and/or misleading in implication” (Tinto, 1975p. 89).

## Research objectives and questions

In the light of the significance of non-completion within Argentine public universities and the limited understanding offered by existing approaches, in this study I attempt to examine the issues and factors that contribute to non-completion within public universities mainly (but not exclusively) by exploring the lives of students; the choices, difficulties, challenges, opportunities and losses they face if they are to leave the course.

As noted already, the student experience of non-completion within public universities remains poorly understood in a research environment dominated by the broader policy debate. In this context, I attempt to focus on the 'micro-level' (Ozga, 1990), that is, on the students' interpretations of their experiences of non-completion to understand the ways in which non-completion is played out in the lives of Argentine students. It is with the meaning of non-completion to those who have experienced it that this thesis is primarily concerned. However, I shall also consider the location of non-completion in wider social relations and examine students' experiences of non-completion in relation to their socio-economic backgrounds and within a broader context of families, communities, and national and international (economic and political) factors. Therefore, I attempt to explore non-completion in a specific social location and at a particular time in history. Finally, given the significance of the policy debate, any new view of non-completion within the Argentine context must necessarily address, respond to, and locate itself in relation to that debate.



The objective of this study, therefore, is critically to examine the concept of non-completion in Argentine higher education through investigating the university experiences and choices of students at one public university, by means of a case study. More specifically, the study attempts to provide an answer to the following overarching research question:

- How might student non-completion in Argentina be understood?

And to these specific questions:

- (i) How valid in the context of Argentina is the concept of non-completion as currently exhibited in the international literature?
- (ii) How might the decision-making processes of non-completing students be understood?
- (iii) How might the similarities and differences between completers and non-completers be explained?
- (iv) How do socio-cultural, contextual and institutional factors, both separately and together and in their different ways, affect the ways in which non-completion comes about?

In order to answer these questions, I have selected one particular faculty of a public university for an in-depth study of non-completion, as discussed in the methodology chapter.

## Plan of the thesis

I have organised the thesis into 10 chapters. In Chapters 2 and 3 I deal with theoretical discussions about non-completion, and introduce and critically review the international literature in the area, at the same time reflecting on the possible relevance of particular concepts and findings to Argentine non-completion. In Chapter 2, I review existing knowledge about non-completion from an international point of view, pointing to some of the limitations that international frameworks present for understanding Argentine non-completion. In Chapter 3, I attempt to introduce an alternative set of concepts that, within a critical research tradition, seem to offer better possibilities of insight and understanding of the topic at hand.

Chapter 4 has to be understood as a contextual chapter. It is divided into two parts: the first one deals with the socio-economic context within which university non-completion takes place. Focusing on actual students in particular social locations and at particular times, these chapters are designed to provide background information about the context in which young students make career decisions including the decision to drop out from a course. The second part deals specifically with the characteristics of the Argentine higher education system, and will serve to situate the experiences of students within Argentine universities. Chapter 5 sets out the methodology of the study. Here I discuss the appropriateness of the case study design and the particularities of the selected case study, as well as the appropriateness of interviewing for the collection of empirical data about non-completion and offer some reflections on my fieldwork.

From Chapter 6 onwards I present and analyse the evidence collected from the interviews. Each chapter addresses a specific theme and related sub-themes that emerged from the data about non-completion within the case study institution. In Chapter 10, I pull together the main

arguments made in the thesis and consider the possible contributions of this study to broader debates about non-completion.

## **The non-completion literature**

### **Where to start from?**

In this chapter, I examine the most influential ideas in the international debate about non-completion, those that have set the main lines of approach to the problem, as a way of delimiting and building the conceptual territory through which this research will navigate. The focus here is on considering the extent to which the literature has approached the problem in constructive ways. I also attempt to outline the basis for a reflection on the possibilities of existing literature to offer insight and understanding of Argentine non-completion, a task that is addressed more fully in the next chapter. This is important because the main body of research into non-completion comes from the North, namely the USA, Canada and the United Kingdom, although more recently, also from Australia, with the implications this carries for the transferability of research findings between national systems which differ in their provision of higher education (Yorke et al., 1997; Yorke and Longden, 2004) and their specific cultural and policy contexts.

In the USA, there has been a long history of preoccupation with the topic; Braxton (2002) cites reviews of student non-completion dating back as far as 1962. In fact, US higher education non-completion has been a long-standing issue. The overall non-completion rate in the US has remained constant over one hundred years at around 50 percent (Tinto, 1982; Tinto, 1988; Tinto, 1993). Over and against this there has been a steady 8 percent average first-year non-completion rate at those highly selective universities (Tinto, 1993) that carefully design their admission processes. This has raised significant research interest and become known as the

*departure puzzle* (Braxton, 2002). Issues of accreditation and funding (Yorke, 1999) have also contributed to the American tradition of investigating non-completion and retention (Peelo and Wareham, 2002) particularly so because, as noted already, non-completion rates have been used as indicators of performance of public higher education (Yorke and Longden, 2004).

Even though there is another more recent important body of research into non-completion that comes from the United Kingdom, the debate is still dominated by the Americans, which is where the most influential conceptual model has been developed. The fact that non-completion is quite a recent concern in the UK, compared to the long tradition in the area in the US, explains the much more limited development of non-completion research in the UK. Indeed, until recently, high graduation rates have been a feature that characterised the UK higher education system as a whole (Moortgat, 1996), something that has been attributed to the characteristics of the 'elite' system: highly selective admission policies with low participation rates; small class size; low student-teacher ratios; and the tutorial system (Benn, 1994). Non-completion studies began to be published in the early 1990s when policy changes triggered national and institutional concerns about growing rates of non-completion (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1997).

As noted, the moves to a mass HE system within the government agenda of widening participation in the UK has resulted – as intended – in changes in the demographic characteristics of higher education students that has made the tension between widening access and retention apparent (Longden, 2002). But despite the burgeoning interest in non-completion in the UK, research has been primarily based on institutional case studies (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998) that often lacked theoretical elaboration that could be used for further research. As Quinn et al. (2005a) observe, the focus of these studies has been 'narrow and

parochial' so the chances that this kind of research can contribute to conceptual understandings are limited, as are the chances of meaningfully applying this knowledge to other contexts.

However, a review of the findings from small empirical studies can help to isolate the major issues associated with non-completion that have been identified in different contexts. So in this chapter, I both examine the theoretical approaches to non-completion and summarize the knowledge gained from a review of smaller institutional studies which points to the factors that "consistently" appear in the literature as 'problem areas' of non-completion" (McInnis *et al*, 2000, p. 25). I reflect on the possible relevance of these factors to the Argentine context in the next chapter and take them into account in the analysis of my research data. Finally, the discussion in this chapter concludes with a taxonomy of approaches to non-completion that will serve to locate this study theoretically in the next chapter.

### **Tinto's 'interactionalist' theory of non-completion**

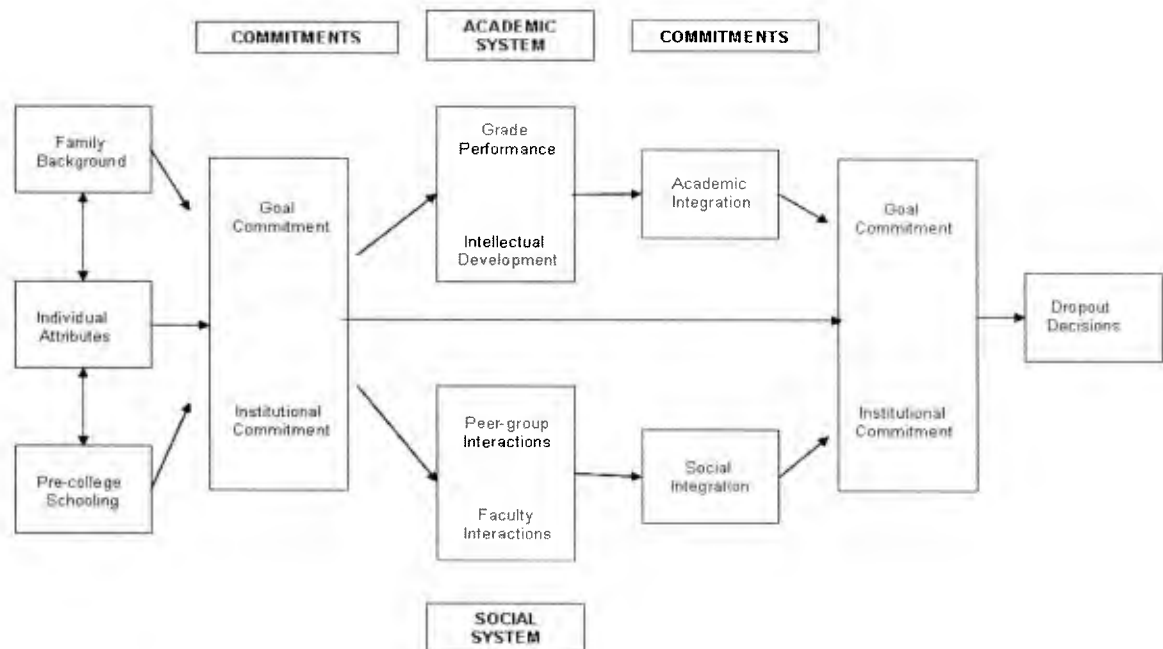
Non-completion is a research area where empirical evidence is more extensive than theoretical conceptualization. Yorke (1999) has referred to existing literature as 'a collection of disparate studies' with differing approaches, definitions and methodologies which work against the accumulation of knowledge in the area.

It is often argued that only with the work of Vincent Tinto (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1988; Tinto, 1993) has the topic acquired its first 'significant theoretical formulation' (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1979). Tinto's model of student non-completion (student departure in his terms) has been remarkably influential. It became the conceptual model for the bulk of subsequent extensive research in the area (McKeown, Macdonell and Bowman, 1993) and has dominated

the debate over the past three decades to such extent that it has been awarded ‘paradigmatic’ status (Braxton et al., 1997). In 1997, Braxton illustrated this point with a review of 400 citations and 170 dissertations pertinent to Tinto’s theory (Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson Jr., 1997).

Diagram 1 shows the main elements of Tinto’s model which is focused on the impact of institutional practices on non-completion:

**Figure 2: Diagram of Tinto’s model**



From Tinto, 1975, p.95

By concentrating on institutional factors, Tinto rejects what he regards as a ‘psychological view’ prevailing in non-completion studies, as they “invariably see student departure as reflecting some shortcoming and/or weakness in the individual. Leaving is, in this view, assumed to be reflective of a personal failure of the individual to measure up to the demands of college life” (Tinto, 1993, p. 85). Whether Tinto himself succeeds in offering anything different from a ‘psychological view’ of the problem will be discussed below. Another approach that Tinto rejects is the ‘environmental’ (or externalist) approach which, in his view, by emphasizing the impact of wider socio-economic aspects, neglects the central role played by institutional action in non-completion. Indeed, Tinto (1987) argues that “most voluntary departures from college reflect more what goes on within college following entry than it does either what has gone on before or what takes place outside college” (p. 129).

The primary idea in Tinto’s model is that of ‘integration’ (intellectual and social) into what he terms the ‘academic’ and the ‘social’ spheres of university life. Tinto claims to have drawn heavily upon two ideas of social theory: Arnold van Gennep’s study of the rites of passage to community membership in tribal societies (van Gennep, 1908); and Durkheim’s theory of suicide (1897). To unpack the argument, Tinto suggests that integration into the campus community depends upon a longitudinal process of separation from past associations to incorporation into new ones, in this case, into university life. This takes place over a period of time that involves different stages (separation-transition-incorporation), hence the analogy with van Gennep’s rites of passage. The contingencies that students face over the university years are seen as inherent in the process of moving from one community (such as the local high school and place of residence) to another (the university) (Tinto, 1988):



*it can be argued that the process of institutional departure may be seen as being differentially shaped over time by the varying problems new students encounter in attempting to navigate successfully the stages of separation and transition and to become incorporated into the life of the college (Tinto, 1988, p. 442).*

However, Tinto posits that these contingencies become particularly difficult for students whose background experiences are noticeably different from the social and intellectual orientation of the university (Tinto, 1988). In this first sense, the decision to withdraw from university is seen by Tinto as the product of a ‘mismatch’ or trouble in holding the new social values prevailing at university (Yorke & Londgen, 2004, p. 78). There seems to be a sound similarity to Bourdieu (on whose work I draw in later chapters) in this idea of cultural ‘mismatch’ (in Bourdieuan terms, between habitus and field; between family and school culture). But there also very important differences between Tinto and Bourdieu which I point out throughout the thesis.

To develop the idea of integration further, Tinto claims to have drawn on Durkheim’s “egoistic suicide” (1897). In his study of different types of suicide behaviours, Durkheim argued that individuals who committed egoistic suicide were those unable to integrate themselves into the social life of their communities (Giddens, 1978), either through sharing the community’s dominant values and beliefs (normative integration) or through the establishment of significant ties with other members of their communities (Braxton, 2002). In a similar fashion, as egoistic suicide emerged from the absence of integrative ties, Tinto regards non-completion as arising when the student becomes isolated due to poor interaction with peers or staff:

*Incongruence may also reflect a person’s experiences within the social realm of the college, in particular with one’s student peers. In this instance, it mirrors a perceived*

*mismatch between the social values, preferences, and/or behavioural styles of the person and those which characterize other members of the institution, expressed individually or collectively (Tinto, 1993, p. 53).*

Non-completion can also arise when a student embraces differing values and beliefs from those prevailing at university: “It may arise from a mismatch between abilities, skills and interests of the student and the demands placed upon that person by the academic system of the institution” (p. 51). Tinto therefore contends that non-completion is a function of negative experiences at university which prevent students from fitting in “the social or intellectual fabric of institutional life” (1993, p. 50)

A final element in Tinto’s theory is ‘commitment’, and this is relevant because it is through this notion that personal characteristics of the student, including socio-demographic factors such as social class and educational background, come into play. In quite simplistic terms, Tinto argues that previous educational experiences and background characteristics shape ‘varying levels and kinds of commitment’, dispositions and intentions that students carry when they enter university. Once at university, those ‘initial commitments’ are re-assessed on the basis of the kinds of interactions that they experience (the types of social and intellectual encounters on campus):

*As in the case of individual suicide, goals (intentions) and motivations (commitments) can be seen as helping to explain why it is that certain individuals, when experiencing the conditions of social and intellectual malintegration within the college, will choose to depart the institution (Tinto, 1987, p. 111) [...] Negative or malintegrative*

*experiences serve to weaken intentions and commitments, especially commitment to the institution, and thereby enhance the likelihood of leaving* (Tinto, 1987, p. 115).

In later work (Tinto, 1998; Tinto, 2000; Tinto, 2003), Tinto has emphasized the central role of classrooms in integration, particularly that of teaching, by claiming that “If students, especially those who commute, do not get engaged within the classroom, they are unlikely to get engaged beyond the classroom” (p. 82). He went on to point out that “College is an educational experience and [...] discussions about persistence that ignore important questions of educational practice are at best shallow” (Tinto, 2000, p. 92).

Most of the value of Tinto’s model lies in its highlighting of the relevance of looking not just at the academic aspect of the student experience, but also at what he calls ‘social involvement’ to understand non-completion - and their opposites ‘social incongruence’ or ‘social isolation’. His work pointed to the importance of students’ feelings of fit or isolation among peers with an emphasis on the role of institutional action to involve students into an academic and social community: “It requires a deeper understanding of the importance of educational community to the goals of higher education” (Tinto, 1993, p. 212).

Nonetheless, Tinto’s view of integration and ‘fit’ are problematic for a number of reasons that range from the over reliance on the impact of institutional practices on non-completion without acknowledgement of the significance of external influences, through to a limited understanding of ‘fit’ and ‘membership’ with no consideration of their social construction – that is, of how different groups of students are likely to feel more ‘at ease’ by virtue of their possession of relevant capitals and resources. I examine this in detail in the next chapter when I address some of the literature that has approached the issue of belonging in terms of ‘cultural match’. But

first it is important to discuss some of the criticisms that Tinto's model has provoked; not to re-examine the course of the debate as a whole, but to identify clues and issues for a more insightful and adequate understanding of Argentine non-completion.

## **Criticisms**

As noted above, the model created by Tinto has been so prominent that most of the current body of research into non-completion has related to it, either in the form of criticism or validation (among others, Pascarella et al. 1983; Mallette and Cabrera 1991; Nora, Attinasi and Matonak 1990; Pascarella, Terenzini and Wolfle 1986; Pascarella and Terenzini 1979).

An important problem with the model identified in subsequent literature is the difficulty it presents for testing empirically the relationship between institutional and social integration and commitment (Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda, 1993). Indeed, according to some commentators, at the basis of the contradictory results reached by different studies based on Tinto's theory is the high level of generality of the model, particularly its vagueness in relation to the selection of the relevant variables (in relation to student's backgrounds and what integration itself means) (McKeown et al., 1993).

Nonetheless, it is the very idea of integration that has raised more important concerns. In fact, in Tinto's model, external factors are only regarded as shaping initial commitments whereas all other external influences that might affect the socialization and academic experiences of students, and, in turn, their decision to withdraw from college, are neglected (Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda, 1993, p. 135). The model assumes that the student experience at university is dictated by the outcomes of social and intellectual engagements on campus as if these could be

isolated from a range of socio-economic and cultural influences, a point that has been made in several studies (Christie and Dinham, 1991; Johnson, 1994; Ozga and Sukhmandan, 1998; Yorke, 1999). This de-contextualized approach glosses over the role of factors such as financial and material constraints in non-completion, family commitments, pressures from work, and health issues among others. This limitation has not only been raised in studies in increasingly flexible higher education systems (McInnis et al., 2000; Yorke, 1999) but also in research with American non-traditional, commuter students (Bean and Metzner, 1985) which has pointed up the limited empirical basis of Tinto's work – described as “white, middle class, young American freshers in private, residential institutions” (Stage and Anaya, 1996). Yorke and Longden argue that it is therefore “risky to extrapolate [from this specific group] to a wider student population which includes ethnically diverse and older students, some studying on a part-time basis and/or commuting from home to the institution” (2004, pp. 75-6). This limitation is also relevant to a possible application of Tinto's model to Argentine higher education with its large numbers of working, part-time, and ‘older’ students and the impact of material constraints and work related pressures on students. These have a direct impact on the quality and nature of the student experience as I illustrate in later chapters.

On the other hand, Tinto's view of the student experience as substantially unaffected by external factors can be regarded as underpinned by a functionalist form of explanation that approaches social analysis from the perspective of individual integration and neglects the influence of broader social and cultural relations. A central problem for functionalist analysis is the idea of integration of the individual to social systems (as in Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons) or, in general, to any form of social interaction (Giddens, 1979). Functionalist perspectives situate their explicative models within the notion of equilibrium/harmony and adaptation to externally given environments, as taken from evolutionary biology (Giddens,

1977); individuals are seen as performing functions in society, whilst the structural, socio-historical components of social action are not acknowledged (Giddens, 1978). As Giddens (1977) argues, adaptation largely excludes the transformative capacity of action and self-reflexivity in human life. Tinto's model is based on the idea of integration as the extent to which a student shares prevailing values and attitudes of the university community thus we can see functionalist thought and Tinto's analysis as alike in according a priority to structure over agency.

This line of critique is that of Rendon et al. (2002) who, speaking of Tierney's view, argue that Tinto's model, as an exponent of a social integrationist approach, uses "anthropological terms in an individualistic rather than a collective manner. Individuals attend college, become integrated or not, leave or stay, fail or succeed". Thus, absent in traditional social integrationist views are "distinctions among cultures; differences among students with regard to class, race, gender and sexual orientation and the role of group members and the institution in assisting students to succeed" (Rendón, Jalomo and Nora, 2002, p. 144).

Some authors argue that the 'assimilation/acculturation' assumptions of Tinto's work are particularly flawed in relation to the experiences of minority students in the US (Attinasi (1989), Kraemer (1997) and Rendon et al. (2002)). They, as does Tierney to some extent (2002), contest the assumption underlying Tinto's view that minority students:

*must separate from their cultural realities and take the responsibility to become incorporated into colleges' academic and social fabric in order to succeed (with little or no concern to address systemic problems within institutions or to the notion that*

*minority students are often able to operate in multiple contexts*) (Rendon et al., 2002, p 129).

Therefore, Tinto's model can be regarded as not only making assumptions about a dominant culture to which minority students have to adapt, but also viewing contact as 'unidirectional' (Hurtado, 1997, p. 305). The minority culture group is assumed to have to change to reflect the mainstream culture (Hurtado, 1997), which neglects the likelihood that cultural contact can bring change in both minority and majority groups (Rendon et al., 2002).

This is related to another problematic aspect of Tinto's assumptions. Tinto criticizes psychological perspectives for seeing non-completion in terms of individual deficit, contending that those models "invariably see student departure as reflecting some shortcoming and/or weakness in the individual" (Tinto, 1993, p. 85). Yet, the emphasis on integration in his model can be seen as over-stressing individual responsibility for adaptation (Rendon et al. 2002) and therefore neglecting the influence of broader social and even institutional influences. By extension, rather than suggesting non-completion to be a product of a series of interactions between individual, institution and their wider social contexts, the integrationist view also implies that responsibility for departure unduly rests upon the student. In relation to this, there seems to be a 'calculative rationalism' in Tinto's subjects, or as Yorke and Longden (2004) argue, students who appear to base their decisions on a calculus of advantages and disadvantages.

In addressing the criticism that integration into college seems left rather exclusively to individual aptitudes, Tinto responded by shifting focus towards pedagogy, as noted, to suggest that classrooms as learning communities can have a positive impact on generating meaningful

attachments to the university. Yet, here again, pedagogical issues are only one part of the many influences affecting the student experience, with some studies showing the impact of the broader culture or ethos of an educational institution. I come back to this below - and discuss it more extensively in the next chapter - but reasons for non-completion may be associated with mismatches between students' cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and the ethos of different institutions (Ball *et al*, 2002; Ball, Reay and David, 2006; Reay, David and Ball, 2001).

Yorke (1999) has also criticized Tinto for his failure to acknowledge the impact of wider external influences on students' lives and choices, although Yorke's understanding of external influences seems to be limited to financial difficulties, health and family commitments. Nonetheless, some authors have demonstrated that students' perceptions, experiences and choices in relation to a particular educational institution are mediated by a mix of material and symbolic influences (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Reay, David and Ball, 2005). Students are "located within a complex matrix of influences represented by overlapping circles of individual, family, friends and institution" (Reay, David and Ball, 2001, p. 14) which render the conception of 'wider external influences' more complex than Yorke seems to suggest.

Another contentious aspect of Tinto's model embedded in his idea of integration is his assumptions about student conformity and adaptation which neglect contradiction and conflict as inherent in any social relation. As I have suggested, Tinto's functionalist explanation, perhaps basically through his use of Durkheim, prevents him from considering that disorder and rupture are aspects that characterize social life and that conflict, rupture and resistance are also part of educational settings and relations (Giroux, 1983). The failure of the functionalist analysis of Tinto to accord space to the transformative capacity of human action (Giddens,



1977; Giddens, 1979) ends up underplaying students as agents. Indeed, rather than viewing the learning and socialization processes in terms of passive adaptations, Giroux (1993) argues that “educating for difference, democracy, and ethical responsibility is not about creating passive citizens. It is about providing students with the knowledge, capacities, and opportunities to be noisy, irreverent, and vibrant” (p. 374). Uncertainty and fragility, then, are components of the experience of students in a higher education that encourages ‘critical being’ (Barnett, 1997) and “tension and contradiction become opportunities for learning and understanding, negotiating identities and ideas” (Ropers-Huilman, 2001, p. 391).

Another criticism of Tinto that comes from the *symbolic interactionist* perspective indicates that his analysis lacks an understanding of the point of view of the student in the analysis of the causes and meanings of non-completion (Brunsden *et al*, 2000; McKeown *et al*, 1993). Brunsden *et al*. (2000) point out the need to shift the focus of research away from ‘the broad influences of the institution’ towards the reasons and circumstances that surround a student’s decision to withdraw. However, there is a need to exercise caution before adopting such perspectives unthinkingly. First, it has been noted that research that relies exclusively on the views of non-completers has to deal with the likelihood of distorted or selective memory (Longden, 2006), as respondents are asked to reflect on a past experience. More importantly, there is the risk of eliciting retrospective self-justifications or morally acceptable versions of the experience of having dropped out. Second, the students’ interpretation of their experiences of dropping out as central to an understanding of the reasons of non-completion may risk the wider context of socio-historical influences within which these are located and that help to explain them being overlooked - an issue to which I come back at several points throughout the thesis.

One last controversial aspect of Tinto's position is the negative connotation he gives to non-completion, largely in his use of the analogy with Durkheim's egoistic suicide. However, as the literature shows, non-completion is no longer regarded as essentially negative for all students, a change that is reflected in the increasing use of new vocabulary in the international literature away from pejorative terms that reflect a sense of "failure" or waste (e.g., 'dropout', 'wastage', 'student mortality' and 'attrition' and their replacement by terms such as non-completion, withdrawal, and discontinuance (McInnis *et al*, 2000). This change is also reflected in a surge of studies that emphasize the value of short periods of study, and of non-completion as positive when desired goals have been achieved (Quinn *et al*, 2005b). As Nutt learnt from a study of non-completion within the University of Teesside (Nutt *et al*, 2005): "Leaving higher education should not necessarily be perceived as failure, indeed for many students leaving or suspending their studies is an appropriate choice at a particular time" (Diane Nutt in Tysome, 2005). This is particularly relevant to Argentine debates as the value of at least some higher education experience is used by many commentators to justify the continuing support to policies of open access (Abramovich *et al*, 2002; Abramzón *et al*, 1999; Rubinich, 2001).

On the other hand, as Peelo and Wareham (2002) note, failure might be acknowledged as a constitutive part of the learning process if looked at from a 'psychodevelopmental' point of view. In a collection of studies about failing students (not the same as non-completion) in higher education, some highlight the challenging character of learning as a risky experience that inevitably involves the 'tacit acceptance of present ignorance', and the value of acknowledging a series of failures along the way to success (Rogers, 2002). Failing then is an aspect of the educational experience rather than what characterizes a particular group of students.

Finally, the analogy with suicide fails to recognise that it is through decision-making that students enter higher education, while life is an un-chosen experience. Non-completion, therefore, cannot be paralleled with suicide, which indicates the need to analyse the complexities of choice of higher education in the first place, and possible discrepancies between expectations and experience.

### **Some empirical studies**

In the UK, the most comprehensive study of non-completion was commissioned by the HEFCE from Mantz Yorke (1999). Yorke studied 2,151 full-time and sandwich and 328 part-time students who had dropped out from six higher education institutions in the north-west of England. Yorke found that aspects of the 'student experience' such as 'quality of teaching', 'lack of support from staff' and 'the organisation of the programme' and 'class size' (1999, p. 60) were important contributory factors to non-completion but, in contrast with Tinto's model, he also identified the significance of reasons for non-completion that can be considered to lie outside of institutional control. Indeed, Yorke found 'wrong choice of field of study', 'lack of commitment to the programme' and 'financial problems' to be the higher scoring factors in non-completion for full-time and sandwich students. In turn, the study found that "the list of influences of non-completion acknowledged by the part-time respondents are headed by personal pressures that largely come from outside the educational system" (p. 58) with the 'demands of employment' scoring first for these students. Moreover, Yorke's study was conducted before the introduction of tuition-fees which suggests that the factors identified might be relevant to a greater number of students at present and, more generally, that these might be important issues to look at in increasingly flexible systems with large numbers of part-time and non-traditional students.

Again in contrast to Tinto's work, in another HEFCE commissioned study, Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) argue that contextual factors such as the economic circumstances of students and the influences of the institutional 'modes of operation' within the current increasingly 'competitive market' constitute central reasons of non-completion. Based on a study of 41 non-completers from a campus-based university in the UK, they found 'incompatibility of choice' (as the mismatch between students and their chosen institution and programme) and 'lack of preparedness for university' (or unrealistic expectations) to be central to non-completion:

*The importance of a student's level of institutional and course compatibility represented the two most typical reasons, often in combination, expressed by non-completers as significant in their decision to withdraw. Institutional incompatibility often related to the geographical location of the institution, the range of social facilities and the cultural environment; while course incompatibility included issues such as lack of interest, course content/ structure and the failure of courses to live up to students' expectations (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998, p. 325).*

Nonetheless, the authors emphasize the relational nature of these as unrealistic or misleading expectations may arise from the differential access of students to adequate and accurate orientation and information, particularly in marketised systems:

*Moving to a mass system within a managed market has encouraged institutions to adopt highly developed promotional strategies. This has produced some contradictory messages for consumers, and requires considerable sophistication in the calculation of best choice by the student (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998, p. 330).*

Thus, unlike the studies that narrowly focus on either individual or institutional responsibility for non-completion, Ozga and Sukhnandan see it in more appropriate terms as the product of a mismatch, as “part of a complex social process of student-institution negotiation” (1998, p. 319). Nonetheless, the two categories they concentrate on, ‘preparedness for university’ and ‘compatibility of choice’, still seem to over-simplify the multifaceted set of influences (material and symbolic) upon non-completion. In any case, a more explicative model would include an understanding of a less limited set of ‘negotiations’ (that is, student-institution-wider social context).

### *The main findings: a summary*

As Yorke argues, “much of what has been found in the United Kingdom relates to circumstances which were quite different from those of the present national context [including Yorke’s own study done before the introduction of tuition-fees in England] and much of what has been found in other countries suffers some attenuation in usefulness because of cross-cultural differences” (Yorke, 1999, p. 12), particularly so when most of the studies have focused on a single institution (Yorke, 1999) with no attempt at theoretical reflection and elaboration. In this context, the task of reviewing institutional case studies in detail is of limited value. However, a summary of the main findings from empirical studies can point us to the major factors which most frequently emerge as associated with non-completion in order to be able to consider their possible relevance and significance to the Argentinean context in subsequent chapters.

Firstly, emerging from the literature review, it is possible to identify a set of variables that appear to be relevant to an understanding of non-completion:

1. **Gender:** the likelihood of completing a degree has been identified as greater for women than for men except in subject areas in which they are a minority (DES, 1992; Liverpool John Moores University, 1995; Lucas and Ward, 1995), which might be related to differences in career orientation between men and women (women are overrepresented in professional/vocational courses) (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1997). Some other studies have also reported differences in the reasons for non-completion according to gender, with men tending to cite work issues more frequently than women do (for example, Power et al, 1986), and to be more affected by academic failure whilst ‘personal and other non-academic reasons’ appeared as more significant factors of disengagement among women (DES, 1992 in McGivney, 1996, p. 103). Accordingly, in a review of studies by McGivney (1996), more women than men appear to attribute their non-completion to family/domestic commitments (McGivney, 1996), “while men tend to stress course-, finance- and employment-related issues” (Wirral Metropolitan College, 1994 in McGivney, 1996, p. 103). The tension women experience between domestic responsibilities and higher education is evident in different studies, particularly in Edwards’ (1993) where mature women reflected on the conflicting and competing demands of the two ‘greedy’ institutions (family and higher education, p. 62) and the constant negotiation of different roles associated with combining the ‘two worlds’ (p. 72). However, it is important to note that the respondents in Edwards study were not only women but mature women, and I mention below the existence of evidence indicating that family commitments seem to affect the experience of mature students in general, compared to their younger counterparts.

2. **Age:** mature students have been found more likely to complete in arts and social sciences and least likely to complete in science and mathematics (Woodley and Parlett, 1983). Also, younger students have cited poor-choice as a reason for withdrawal more frequently than mature students have, and older students tend to cite family commitments as an important reason (Power et al, 1986).
  
3. **Subject-area:** there is some evidence indicating that reasons for non-completion vary across disciplines. In the UK, McGivney (1996) reports higher non-completion in science, engineering and technology subject areas than in arts, the social sciences and other vocational areas (McGivney, 1996, p. 62). Also, 'The heavy work load and busy timetable' of subjects such as health science courses has been found to be an additional contributing factor of discontent among students in this area (Schedvin 1986, in McInnis et al, 2000, p. 22). This is consistent with Seymour and Hewitt's (1997) large study of switchers from Science, Mathematics and Engineering areas in the USA, which argues that disciplinary cultures indifferent to students' learning are responsible for their decisions to withdraw from these subjects. The authors concluded that the nature of the educational experience in a particular disciplinary area is a relevant influence on non-completion.
  
4. **Time of non-completion:** factors leading to early non-completion tend to differ from those leading to later non-completion. Uncertainty about choice is predominant among early non-completers whilst changes in personal, financial and work circumstances prevail in later non-completers (McGivney, 1996).

Secondly, empirical studies about the reasons for non-completion have established the relevance of the following factors<sup>13</sup>:

**Table 1: Reasons for non-completion**

Reasons for non-completion		
The student	The institution	The environment/ the social
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of academic ability</li> <li>• Inappropriate choice</li> <li>• Life changes (work, family, health pressures)</li> <li>• Financial difficulty</li> <li>• Negative motivation/ study styles</li> <li>• Personality</li> <li>• Background (first generation HE)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor teaching</li> <li>• Lack of relevant feedback</li> <li>• Poor staff/student communication</li> <li>• Inadequate welfare provision</li> <li>• Unstructured courses/ lack of cohort or social identity</li> <li>• Cultural environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate information systems (statistics/performance indicators)</li> <li>• Inadequate resources</li> <li>• Changing employment market</li> </ul>

Source: Based on McGivney, 1996; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Yorke, 1997 and 1999; McInnis et al., 2000; Johnston, V. (2000); Davies and Elias, 2003; Nutt, D. et al 2003.

It is important to note that in almost every study, non-completion is portrayed as the product of an interaction of factors within these different spheres, although different studies emphasize



one sphere over the other. For example, in Australia the studies by Power et al. (1986) and Sharma and Burgess (1994, both reviewed by McNinnis et al, 2000) found that the reasons of non-completion ‘were primarily *personal*, relating to changing goals, financial reasons, work and family circumstances’ (my emphasis). In contrast, another study within a different Australian university (Monash) found that personal reasons and finance or job came after ‘factors associated with the institution, the course or students’ preparedness for study’ (West et al. 1986, in McNinnis et al., 2000, p. 20).

Importantly, the very delimitation of these different spheres is arguably problematic. McNinnis et al (2000) point out that it is difficult to see:

*Where the institutional responsibility begins and ends. For example, making wrong course choices may be attributed to the poor quality of information provided to prospective students, or the lack of career counselling. On the other hand, students can simply ignore expert advice and choose a particular course despite their lack of aptitude for the work (McNinnis et al., 2000, p. 33).*

To develop the example of McNinnis further, it is possible to argue that even access of prospective higher education students to relevant and accurate information, and to knowledge based on ‘direct experience’ as opposed to just ‘official information’ (Ball and Vincent, 2006, p. 240) is rooted in social relations. Research in the UK, for example, shows that “access to such ‘grapevine knowledge’ is unevenly distributed, so too are the time and resources available to commit to information and knowledge gathering and accessing professional support structures and expertise” (Ball, Reay and David, 2006, p. 232) all of which places “first

generation choosers without appropriate cultural capital or relevant social capital” at a higher risk of making the wrong choice (Ball, Reay and David, 2006, p. 232).

Something similar happens with the ‘lack of academic ability’, for example, when portrayed as pertaining to the ‘student’ sphere when educational achievement is, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) noted, to a large extent related to cultural capital transmitted within the family. Indeed, again in the UK, Knighton (2002) points out that “first-generation status is more indicative of educational disadvantage than parental occupation or income” (cited in Quinn et al., 2005, p. 1) which can be seen as illustrating the power of cultural capital to consolidate educational advantage. In Argentina, too, an important source of academic failure in higher education is linked to deficiencies of public secondary schooling which particularly affect poorer students who disproportionately come from public secondary schools (Etcheverry, 2000). Therefore, a perspective on non-completion that isolates the individual from broader social relations risks ignoring that “individual struggle is certainly essential in order for one to succeed; yet we cannot overlook the fact that individual actions exist within sociohistorical cultural constraints that have denied opportunity to some and afforded others great benefits” (Tierney, 2002, p. 216).

So, as will be argued throughout the thesis, these different spheres of influence upon non-completion are best described as mutually influenced and overlapping. Considering them in isolation from each other may mean missing the multifaceted and complex nature of non-completion. Indeed, as will be seen, the findings of this study suggest that non-completion is neither simply a personal nor an institutional phenomenon and cannot be reduced to or explained solely in either terms.

## Towards an alternative view of non-completion

In recent years, there has been a new line of research that has gone some way to recognising non-completion as a complex product of interacting personal and social circumstances and organizational practices (Thomas, 2002), particularly in work that has attempted to employ some of Bourdieu's concepts in the understanding of non-completion (Berger, 2002; Longden, 2002; McDonough, 1994; Yorke and Thomas, 2003). For example, Berger (2002) argues that a better understanding of non-completion would require a shift from causality based on socio-demographic factors towards a focus on the access of students to different kinds of capitals; principally, the role of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997) in higher education success whereby inequities in educational attainment might be regarded as products of a mismatch between earlier experiences and institutional educational environments.

In different forms, most of these studies have also used Bourdieu's notion of habitus which 'encompasses the universe of experiences and background characteristics of particular individuals' (McNamara Horvat, 2003, p. 6) to add to the understanding of individual choice and perceptions not just as driven by rationality but "in light of the structural context surrounding actor's lives" (Ibid, p. 4). What goes on at university, that is, students' perceptions and experiences of their studies at a particular institution, have been seen as mediated by the "dispositions and practical sense of habitus" (Ball, 2006c, p. 200), in turn, rooted in early domestic socialisation and socio-economic conditions.

Furthermore, in the UK, the research attention given to widening participation has led to a much greater emphasis on the cultural implications of the higher education experience, particularly for non-traditional students (for example, Stratta and MacDonald, 2001), in a

recognition that financial difficulties are limited in their capacity to explain non-completion (Thomas, 2002b). In this vein, Reay et al. (2001; Reay, David and Ball, 2005) argue that ‘institutional habitus’, or those substructural values and priorities that underlie higher education institutional practices, “have an impact over and above the direct impact of family background” (Reay et al., 2001, paragraph 1.3). Varying institutional habituses at different higher education institutions (Reay et al., 2001) make some institutions more “tolerant and inclusive of difference and diversity, where students from poorer backgrounds might feel accepted and respected for their own practices and knowledge, [which] in turn will promote higher levels of persistence” (Thomas, 2002).

All of these studies and their implications for an understanding of non-completion are considered more fully in the next chapter. However, this brief introduction has adumbrated some of the main ideas and concepts as an ‘alternative’ to the ‘mainstream’ approach represented by the work of Tinto. Hence I conclude by summarizing the discussion in this chapter in a matrix of contrasting approaches in existence in the literature:

**Table 2: Ideas underlying two contrasting approaches to non-completion**

“Mainstream”	“Alternative”
<p>Functionalist</p> <p>Order/harmony</p> <p>Integration</p> <p>Centred on individual</p> <p>Isolated individual</p> <p>Individual failure</p> <p>Academic skills &amp; background</p> <p>Focus on classroom practices</p> <p>Underlying concern about efficiency</p> <p>Static, external structure-environment as given</p>	<p>Critical*</p> <p>Conflict and struggle</p> <p>Cultural mismatch Material and symbolic influences</p> <p>Relational/ societal</p> <p>Socio-cultural influences</p> <p>Class habitus</p> <p>Cultural capital</p> <p>Institutional habitus / organizational cultural capital</p> <p>Underlying concern about social inequality</p> <p>Students as agents</p> <p>* I explain this in the next chapter</p>

In the next chapter, I reflect on this taxonomy to theoretically locate this study as I introduce the main ideas and concepts that guide the empirical investigation, while at the same time reflecting on the specific relevance of the different concepts to a the Argentinean context.

## A theoretical alternative

### Introduction

Building on some of the limitations of the current literature on non-completion examined in the last chapter, I now identify an alternative set of perspectives, ideas and concepts that can help to make sense of non-completion in the context of Argentine universities. In order to do this, *firstly* I attempt to make the theoretical affiliation of this study explicit by locating it within a particular tradition of educational research. It is widely accepted that research in the social sciences is underpinned by differing assumptions “of an ontological, epistemological, human and methodological nature” (Burrell and Morgan 1979, cited in Cohen *et al*, 2000, p. 7), assumptions that are grounded within researchers’ views on the structure of society and which, in turn, influence the kinds of questions asked and methods used. By reflecting on the assumptions that underpin this study in the first section of this chapter, I shall be able to locate it within a specific tradition of educational research while offering some background reflections/information for a better understanding of the research aims and methods. At the same time, in spelling out some of the broad theoretical understandings that inform this research, I shall also indicate some of the interests and assumptions beneath current frameworks for non-completion and the underlying value-positions embedded in current ‘knowledge’ claims about non-completion in Argentina.

*Secondly*, drawing upon concepts that belong to a “critical approach to educational research” (Scott and Usher, 2000) I discuss some of the specific concepts and ideas that will guide the analysis of my empirical materials. But, first, a slight digression into matters of personal

experience and my own interests and preconceptions, in order to locate myself in relation to the research topic.

### **A personal journey**

My interest in non-completion has been shaped over the years by a number of factors. Certainly, an important part of the stimulus for this study arose from reflection on personal experience, having been a student at an Argentinean public university myself.

The relationship between the researcher's past experience and the object of study is not without challenges and has been an important subject of debate in the social sciences. This is particularly so since one of the basic premises of research in the social sciences, as Becker (1998) points out, is the need for social scientists to redress their own daily experiences of the researched phenomenon in order to produce and refine its 'imagery'. Therefore, there are risks, as Brown and Dowling (1998) note, involved in the familiarity of the researcher with the research topic:

*The challenge is to be able to strip away our assumptions and everyday understandings to render the world around us 'anthropologically strange' (p. 43)[...] Ironically, perhaps, the more familiar a setting may seem, the greater the danger of bringing your own unexamined interpretive frameworks in making sense of what you see (p. 44).*

That is to say, when researching familiar topics, it is always possible for "our own beliefs about the world to enter into and shape our work – to influence the very questions we pose, our conception of how to approach those questions, and the interpretations we generate from our findings" (Du Bois, 1983, in Reay, 1996, p. 62). However, methods textbooks such as

Creswell's (1994) also identify important benefits which can arise when the researcher's own experiences bear on the topic of research. These can enhance the understanding of the subject (p. 147). Resonating with Creswell's point, I feel that my past experiences allow me to bring greater understanding, flavour, and passion to the story I tell in this study.

It is in the feminist literature that the role, self and social location of the researcher in the practice of research have been elaborated through a contestation of the principles of 'objectivity' 'distance' and emotional disengagement (Goodson and Sikes 2003 cited in Sikes, 2003, p. 247) in favour of biographical projects which entail greater authenticity (Coffey, 1999) and a deeper understanding of the role of the researcher in the research process (Reay, 1996). However, within the feminist literature, reflexivity also involves some commitment, as Barnard (1990) indicates, not just to writing the self into a research report but to "subjecting the position of the observer to the same critical analysis as that of the constructed object at hand" (cited in Reay, 1996, p. 61).

I am not claiming to be doing autobiographical research here, yet I find some of the reflexive elements of autobiography helpful in making my study more 'self-aware' (Hannabuss, 2000), in enabling me both to question preconceptions and interpretations internalized through personal experience as a way of 'seeing' the Argentine university 'afresh'; and in encouraging a reflection on my own "role in the research process" (Reay, 1996, p. 60). I come back to all of these issues in the methodology chapter.

Long before I started this research, my own experience as a public university student in Argentina made me aware of what I sensed to be a student's multi-layered struggle to stay 'on course', a struggle which is inherent in the passage to the 'new world' of higher education or



what Kuh and Love call the “negotiation with unfamiliar environments” (2002, p. 196). In other words, the ever demanding task of coping with the new academic and social demands of university and the various adaptations necessary and dislocations experienced along the way. I also felt a struggle with the many obstacles of bureaucracy, institutional disorganization, and anonymity typical of large, public universities in Argentina; and had a very real sense of the pressures coming from the diverse responsibilities and occupations students face while at university<sup>14</sup>. As important as these challenges were, I sensed an additional source of complexity: that is, the discouraging and debilitating socio-economic context<sup>15</sup> that is omnipresent in the lives of the students.

The idea of an ‘omnipresent’ social context seemed to manifest itself both in material and symbolic ways. In material terms, the most palpable consequence was the need for so many students to combine work with studies. This was for the main part precarious employment, which, in turn, had an effect on ‘precarious’ study, that is, an immediate effect on the amount of material and mental time available to study, and the disposition to study. In symbolic terms, the educational ambition and the belief in education as an agent for social mobility rooted in the Argentine idiosyncrasy - as will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 4 - was progressively losing ground during the *Menemismo*<sup>16</sup>. The economic, social, and political deterioration reflected in the rise of cases of corruption, the increase in poverty, general and graduate unemployment, etc. seemed to produce among Argentines a growing disbelief in education as an agent for economic, social or moral improvement. My sense was that this societal context had a direct influence on students’ motivations, dispositions, choices and decisions in relation to higher education<sup>17</sup>.

So, when some years later the debate arose prior to the higher education reform of 1995, I felt mismatch between what was being said by the reformers and my own experience of university life. In particular, I thought mainstream interpretations about non-completion were seriously over-simplifying the problem and I began to view the debate as highly ideological between a 'progressive' discourse that emphasized the exclusive responsibility of the state for sustaining public higher education and a 'pro-market' discourse of vilifying state intervention and its unavoidable ineffectiveness. Caught up in this debate, the nature of the students' personal 'struggles' were poorly dealt with.

My interest began to develop as a way of doing justice to my experience by understanding better the nature of the complex struggles that I had sensed, while at the same time addressing my concern with equality and social justice, and questioning the commitment of many progressive scholars to the concept of equality of opportunity (whose true realisation was debatable in the first place) despite the clear evidence of dramatic inequalities of outcome. Over time, I began to distance myself, not only from the World Bank's efficiency/productivity/market-driven view, so condemned by critical academics, but also from what I thought of as the dogmatic posture prevailing in progressive discourses about non-completion in which certain questions became suppressed. That is, questions about institutional responsibilities and individuals' psychology were accused of diverting attention away from social inequalities and the inalienable, exclusive responsibility of the state to provide democratic opportunities for all, whether they were being realised or not.

This research took shape in an attempt to revitalize the debate over non-completion by addressing, from a socio-historical perspective, the complexity and subtleties of a range of different levels and dimensions, the different facets of non-completion. Also, it took form in

my concern to explore processes of social inequality beyond taken-for-granted beliefs that can unintentionally serve to maintain the status quo, and in my sociological concern with those social inequalities which are potentially reproduced via non-completion.

### **A critical approach**

What I mean by a critical approach in this research is two-fold. On the one hand, it is critical in that it is embedded within a tradition of critical research and shares with it its fundamental concerns and epistemological perspective. On the other hand, being critical reflects a particular stance within the non-completion debate and international literature, as opposed to what I have called 'mainstream' approaches.

To begin with the first meaning, as Harvey notes "accounts of the essential nature of a critical approach are elusive" (Harvey, 1990, p. 15) although critical social research is always "concerned with revealing underlying social relations and showing how structural and ideological forms bear on them" (Harvey, 1990, p. 20). Among the basic premises and assumptions within a critical approach, as Peter McLaren (2003) points out, is that "men and women are essentially un-free and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege" (p.69). Individuals exist within a network of social relations and these are contradictory and unequal ones. Therefore, instead of supporting theories whose underlying assumptions are harmony and stability, critical researchers would endorse dialectical analyses. Critical researchers attempt to understand:

*Human existence and the contradictions and disjunctions that both shape and make its meaning problematic. Hence, the problems of society are not seen as mere random or*

*isolated events, but rather as moments that arise out of the interactive context between the individual and society* (McLaren, 1989 cited in Darder, Baltodano and Torres, 2003, p. 12).

Within this, knowledge is seen as socially constructed and never value-free for it is the outcome of social interactions in particular spaces and times, and is therefore embedded with power relations (Foucault, 1980). So, from a critical perspective, a dialectical view of knowledge “functions to unmask the connections between objective knowledge and the cultural norms, values, and standards of the society at large” (McLaren 1989, cited in Darder *et al*, 2003, p. 12). Furthermore, as Giroux (2003) argues, when writing about the Frankfurt School, a fundamental issue of a critical perspective is the aim to go beyond reified social relations to uncover through critical analysis concealed relations of power and privilege. Critical social research “goes further than a comprehensive review of accepted usages to investigate taken-for-granted underpinnings of the concept” (Harvey, 1990, p. 21) and “reveal underlying structures [...] which have themselves been assimilated uncritically” (Harvey, 1990, p. 21). It follows that a critical approach would contest theories that rely on social harmony at the expense of under-problematizing the fundamental contradictions of society (Giroux, 2003, p. 28).

A critical research approach would also reject a view of knowledge as instrumental rationality but would rather emphasize its transformational potential (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000; Scott and Usher, 2000). Critical research promotes an emancipatory knowledge that enables the exposure of practices and beliefs that curtail social justice, freedom and equality and can bring about collective action for a radical democratization of society (Held, 1980).

### *Critical research and non-completion*

In my attempt to situate a framework for non-completion within a broader epistemological and ontological perspective, I am doing a number of different things: First, I am framing this thesis within a particular tradition of educational research - one concerned with issues of social justice - and suggesting non-completion be regarded as constructed by the contradictions of the larger society. Therefore, I am adopting a 'totality' approach, which means understanding non-completion as any other social problem, that is, as socio-historically and culturally influenced. A totality approach in critical research means "to relate empirical detail to a structural and historical whole" (Harvey, 1990, p. 22), and in the case of non-completion, to the social relations within which non-completion lies. It entails consideration of the students in their overlapping social locations, within their 'multilayered contexts' (Bowe, Ball and Gewirtz, 1994a) of families, communities, and higher education institutions.

Furthermore, as Harvey (1990) points out, a 'totalistic' or totality perspective is not just a consideration of the larger social context but also "it requires that social phenomena should not be analysed in isolation" (Harvey, 1990, p. 21). For example, university non-completion, at least within the Argentinean context, cannot be understood in isolation from the trajectories of students in their previous education. As Etcheverry (2000) notes, students arrive at higher education unequally prepared in relation to their background education in the state versus private sectors.

Moreover, non-completion in Argentinean public universities, or at least its magnitude, has a discernible relation to the higher education policy framework. The tension between widening

access and higher education non-completion has manifested itself across different national contexts when formerly elitist systems became massified. In open access systems such as the Argentinean one, selection of the ‘most fitted’ occurs during the higher education process itself rather than at the point of admission (Altbach and Lewis, 1994). This form of ‘natural selection’ as opposed to initial selection results in higher non-completion rates, although at the same time it can be seen as consistent with an aspiration of equality of opportunity (Rubinich, 2001).

Certainly, only by relating the features of Argentine non-completion to its particular education policy, cultural context and prevailing values, as noted in the last chapter, can we understand the high rates of non-completion at public universities and the parallel endurance of non-restrictive access and tuition-fee policies. These suggest that there is a particular meaning of higher education participation and non-completion within that society, and that one phenomenon (non-completion) is not understandable in isolation from the other (policy and cultural issues). Therefore, non-completion has to be understood as a process in-context, and as a cultural construction. Within all this, what it means for an Argentine student to get a degree, to be in higher education and out of higher education, and to drop out – all are constructed within particular social relations and in particular social spaces.

Second, in my attempt to place a framework on non-completion within a broader epistemological and ontological perspective, I am also adopting a particular methodological position. I will discuss this more thoroughly in Chapter 6, but in broad terms, in doing a qualitative study of non-completion and adopting elements of an ‘interpretivist approach’ (Mason, 2002, p. 56) I try to understand non-completion through the meanings that students give to their situations (Blumer, 1969). This choice of method is critical in relation to

mainstream, large-scale, surveys of non-completion, or quantitative studies, which as Attinasi (1989) points out,

*... have been developed on the basis of, and tested with, data collected from institutional records and/or by means of fixed-choice questionnaires. These are methods of data collection that effectively strip away the context surrounding the student's decision to persist or not to persist in college and exclude from consideration the student's own perceptions of the process (p. 250).*

As McKeown et al. (1993) point out, most research of non-completion and even that which attempts to grasp the students' point of view rely on structured questionnaires at best. Through these techniques "matters of potentially critical importance in determining the connection of the student to the social and academic life of the institution were taken for granted" (McKeown et al, 1993, p. 71-72) and the elicitation of issues of meaning (Robson, 2002) and the achievement of inter-subjectivity are not feasible. This is a limitation that Tinto himself recognizes when he claims that:

*Researchers must also decide whether to strive for maximising a model's ability to statistically account for variation in behaviours or its ability to clearly explain the origins of various types of disengagement behaviours. The two are frequently mutually exclusive (Tinto, 1982, p. 688).*

There has been some criticism of Tinto's methodological approach from a symbolic interactionist perspective (see for example Brunnsden et al, 2000; McKeown, Macdonell and Bowman, 1993) which contends that "Tinto's model makes assumptions about how students

reach dropout decisions, without ever consulting any students as to whether these assumptions hold true” (Brunsden *et al*, 2000, p. 302). Yet there has also been the opposite claim over the reliability of findings that just rely on students’ responses. These are said to be influenced by what people think are ‘acceptable’ explanations of their behaviour, or as Spady (1970) put it, by the respondents’ desire “to avoid the stigma of being a failure” (p. 71).

This indicates the need to somehow cross-reference the students’ responses with other sources of information such as data on their academic performance, but by no means does it imply that the students’ interpretations of their life as students and their experience of non-completing would not provide the richer and more insightful understanding of the problem. Only by grasping individual interpretations can we understand the point made by McKeown *et al*. (1993) that some “students do, however, stay under what seem to be terrible financial burdens, while others who leave for financial reasons are actually much better off in some objective sense” (p. 79).

Nonetheless, at the same time that, in this study, I try to understand non-completion from the point of view of the student who has experienced it, I also attempt to examine the way in which ‘meanings are mediated by structural concerns’ (Harvey, 1990). As Harvey claims, writing about critical ethnography:

*the probing of the subjects’ meanings is not the end of the story. The group operates in a socio-historically specific milieu and is not independent of structural factors. Their meanings may appear to be group centred but are mediated by structural concerns* (Harvey, 1990, p. 12).



In relation to the previous point, insight into meaning and choice-making in this research are also critical in relation to the underlying instrumental rationality that dominates the understanding of non-completers in the literature (Yorke, 1999). Underpinning the most common approaches to non-completion decision-making, as noted in the last chapter, is a somewhat simplistic conceptualization of decision-making where students are seen as grounding their behaviour in strictly rational computations of advantages (although there are notable exceptions such as Berger (2002), Tierney (2002) and Thomas (2002b)). The non-completion literature mainly assumes rational utilitarian agents who ground decisions in the personal utility they extract from particular situations. As Yorke puts it,

*Tinto suggests that, where the experience of the institution is negative, the individual tends to experience diminished academic and/or social integration and may come to the conclusion that the costs (academic, social, emotional and/or financial) of persisting outweigh the benefits of persisting. At that point, the individual withdraws (Yorke, 1999, p. 9)*

Here, there are some aspects of the sociological debates on class decision-making that can provide insight into the complexities of decision-making and which include a notion of human agency, and a particular view of the dynamics of choice (complex and multi-faceted rather than the product of instrumental rationality), all aspects which are not properly dealt with in the non-completion debate. In particular, Goldthorpe's (1996) version of rational action theory to explain educational decision-making (which, in turn, he argues leads to the well documented attainment differentials across social classes) has been challenged by research asserting that rationality is not sufficient to explain the complexity of choice-making. Ball et al. (2002) showed the 'interplay of strategic rational action with non-rational or non-utilitarian goals' (p.

56) while others described non-rational, subconscious and even haphazard elements as frequently playing a part in educational decisions (Hatcher, 1998; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Within this, Reay et al. (2005) highlighted the influence of cultural capital and familial habitus and Ball (2006c) drew attention to the role of social values and principles - 'social justice in the head'- in educational choice making.

Indeed, Bourdieu (1990b) argues that the 'subjectivism' that can be attributed to rational instrumental explanations (such as in rational choice theory) has a finalistic connotation, where consciousness and preferences are seen as ultimately shaping the meaning of the world. In contrast, through his concept of 'habitus' practices are re-conceptualised as not depending:

*... on the average chances of profit, an abstract and unreal notion, but on the specific chances that a singular agent or class of agents possesses by virtue of its capital, this being understood, in this respect, as a means of appropriation of the chances theoretically available to all (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 63).*

Bourdieu once defined habitus as "a system of shared social dispositions and cognitive structures which generates perceptions, appreciations and actions" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 279) and which is embodied throughout the different stages of an individual's socialisation. Habitus relates to our dispositions to think and act in particular ways, it is our 'feel for the game' which is also "the social game embodied and turned into a second nature" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 63) where social past and present are connected and carried "at all times and in all places, in the forms of dispositions which are so many marks of social position" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 82). Habitus can therefore be a powerful concept to understand the way students make sense and make choices about their higher education experience by avoiding instrumentality and

understanding embodied structures of thought and behaviour where present and past social locations are incorporated and sub-consciously inform practice. It is a concept I apply to the analysis of my research data and therefore discuss further throughout the thesis.

Third, the view of knowledge as socially constructed and embedded within power relations, as well as the emancipatory knowledge potential to uncover reified social relations characteristic of critical perspectives, prompts an assessment of the current 'knowledge' about non-completion in terms of its underlying 'interests'. A first point to note is that the main theoretical contributions have been guided by the problems and characteristics of the societies from where the majority of the studies come (mainly the US, Canada, the UK and Australia). For example, it has been noted that Tinto's research is centred on "white, middle class, young American freshers in private, residential institutions" (Stage and Anaya, 1996), a universe that is relatively homogeneous in social composition, located within selective institutions and where issues of disadvantage and inequality are arguably not as relevant as elsewhere. Also, they start from assumptions about the societies, their students and universities that are, in principle, culturally and historically specific to those contexts. As I will show in later chapters, *collective/shared values* about what it is to be a student in Argentina, about the employment market and occupational insertion of the different subjects, and about the middle classes and social mobility via education seem to matter in the orientation and attitudes of young people towards higher education and cannot be taken for granted.

On the other hand, a critical perspective also points to the possible uncovering of underlying value-positions within the existent 'knowledge' claims about non-completion in Argentine public universities. As noted in earlier chapters, the official view that high non-completion rates illustrate the internal inefficiency of public universities is not value-free but can be seen as

echoing the perception dominant in international debates that non-completion entails a waste of private and social investment in higher education (Johnes and Taylor, 1991) in the context of a rising concern of governments with monitoring costs. So behind this 'truth' lies an economic view of higher education and of public finances and the interest of governments and funding agencies in measuring the efficiency of each institution as a means to allocate public resources.

In relation to the existent 'knowledge' on non-completion in Argentine public universities, the World Bank has systematically adopted a critical attitude towards public higher education claiming that public financing of higher education generates low economic returns and is inequitable (World Bank, 1994a). It has therefore advocated the expansion of private higher education institutions and the parallel diversification of funding sources to public institutions (McCowan, 2004). Reports produced during the 1980s and 1990s (World Bank, 1986; World Bank, 1994b) have made clear the Bank's view that high non-completion rates in Argentine public universities were primarily attributable to the universities' open access policy and their gratuitousness, and only secondarily to matters of course design, curricula, teaching methods and resources (World Bank, 1995).

High non-completion rates are an aspect of the larger crisis facing public higher education in Argentina. A political reading of the problem, however, would not ignore the fact that the current crisis within public universities can otherwise be attributed to the public under-financing of universities (Brunner, 1996; Gertel, 1991) that stems from the need of the state to reduce public spending, as well as the interest of the World Bank in the fiscal capacity of governments to repay loans (Abramzón *et al*, 1999; Mollis, 2000; Mollis and Carlino, 1999; Paviglianiti, Nosiglia and Marquina, 1996). So there are particular interests and values in evidence in the discourses of non-completion and inefficiency; the idea that non-completion

reflects inefficiency carries a particular stance regarding access to higher education, standards, quality and efficiency that are in tension with egalitarian concerns and democratic values that could furnish a counter-hegemonic view.

Finally, in my attempt to locate a framework for non-completion within a broader epistemological and ontological perspective, I am doubtful of the significance and value of ideas based upon the notions of 'integration' and 'adaptation' with their underlying implication of order and harmony, as noted in the last chapter, which are all central to mainstream studies of non-completion. If we understand higher education as a 'field' in Bourdieuan terms, the university will have to be seen as a "field of struggles aimed at preserving or transforming the configuration of [...] forces" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 101) where "those who dominate [...] are in a position to make it function to their advantage but they must always contend with the resistance, the claims, the contention, 'political' or otherwise, of the dominated" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 102). Rather than harmony and order, a more insightful understanding of the higher education experience would have to account for complex experiences of struggle and conflict, of power, advantage and disadvantage, of exclusion and also self-exclusion, of exclusive and unwelcoming institutional cultures and organisational practices, of power and authority in pedagogic practices and assessment - all notions and ideas to which I return below.

Bearing these considerations in mind, in the following sections of this chapter I go on to discuss at some greater length some of the concepts that provide the elements for a critical theoretical approach to understanding non-completion in the Argentinean context, and which I examine further in the chapters dealing with the analysis of research data.

## Non-completion and social inequality

An important element of a critical framework to the study of non-completion is the inclusion of a set of concepts that enable the exploration of the relationship between non-completion and social inequalities in the larger society. There is a range of research studies that indicate that “an individual’s ability to deploy knowledge, skills and competences successfully is powerfully classed” (Reay *et al*, 2005, p.21) so that ‘individual’ characteristics generally linked to success (i.e., ability/academic ability, intelligence, talent, self-discipline, resolve, motivation) can also be seen to reflect social conditions. As Tierney argues, in individualistic perspectives on non-completion:

*the assumption is that individual struggle is certainly essential in order for one to succeed; yet we cannot overlook the fact that individual actions exist within sociohistorical cultural constraints that have denied opportunity to some and afforded others great benefits* (Tierney, 2002, p. 216).

Indeed, it is possible to understand the influence of social class on higher education non-completion from a number of different angles. On the one hand, in accounting for the effect of social influences on ‘individual merit’, Reay *et al.* (2005) point out that “Bourdieu sees his concept of cultural capital as breaking with the received wisdom that attributes academic success or failure to natural aptitudes, such as intelligence and giftedness” (Reay, David and Ball, 2005, p. 19). Together with the other forms of capital (economic, social, symbolic), cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997) “serves as a power resource” (Dumais, 2002) or a resource for the consolidation and reproduction of advantage. As Bourdieu explained, “a capital does not

exist and function except in relation to a field” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 101) so, in the field of education, differences in cultural capital manifested in a “linguistic and cultural competence”, which is transmitted through the family, can work to partly explain the link between class disadvantage and academic disengagement.

Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction assumes that the academic culture is more easily understood and acquired by those already endowed with a cultural proficiency that includes particular attitudes, values and styles and which is shaped by family upbringing and past experiences and can therefore generate inequalities in educational achievement. In particular, in *Academic Discourse* (1994), Bourdieu focuses on the role of linguistic inheritance in academic success through an analysis of the influence that cultural heritage has on the students’ capacity to understand and master academic discourse in higher education.

On the other hand, the empirical study of higher education and social class in the UK carried out by Archer et al. (2003) found that the effect of social class on higher education is not only “symbolic” but also “material”. They identified patterns of class disadvantage around matters of university choice (identified also by Ball *et al*, 2002 and Reay *et al*, 2001) and participation and argue that higher education participation is a riskier option for working-class youngsters than for their middle-class counterparts, mainly because it implies an uncertain trade-off between current costs and future rewards.

In material terms, it seems clear that socio-economic deprivation has an impact on non-completion as “it constructs the material inequalities that make it more difficult to survive and prosper as a student” (Quinn *et al*, 2005a). Accordingly, the literature on non-completion cites financial constraints as among the main difficulties students mention (Ozga and Sukhnandan,

1997; Yorke, 1999; Yorke *et al*, 1997) with lower class students being those most severely affected by economic problems and so more likely to consider non-completion as an option (Callender and Kemp 2001, cited in Archer *et al*, 2003, p. 164).

At a symbolic level, and as Reay (1996) points out, “social class continues to be one of the major filters through which individuals make sense of the world” (Reay, 1996, p. 58). For example, issues of social identity researched by Reay and colleagues (2001; 2005) have been found to lie behind decisions regarding higher education choice and participation. They have used Bourdieu’s framework to conceptualize the way in which the psyche of students influences choices about the places they sense their own cultures could fit into or be welcomed, and conversely, how these perceptions sometimes lead to their ‘self-exclusion’. Therefore, matters of identity such as working-class students’ sense of “deficit in relation to institutional cultures” (Archer *et al*, 2003, p. 132) contribute both to rendering certain choices regarding higher education participation ‘unthinkable’ (Reay, David and Ball, 2005) as well as to putting students at a greater risk of dropping out once in higher education.

Some available data show that class matters in Argentine non-completion. As noted, Hidalgo (2001) found that an important reason of non-completion in higher education is linked to deficiencies that students carry from secondary schooling. Because the quality gap between the public and private sectors of secondary education has been widening during the last decade, these deficiencies affect particularly poorer students who largely come from public secondary schools (Etcheverry, 2000).

Furthermore, a recent survey reveals that 6 out of 10 graduates of the University of Buenos Aires are second-generation university graduates (Young, Savoia and Calvo, 2005), indicating



that the majority of those who manage to complete are also the most privileged in terms of family background. This is consistent with findings at an international level. The latest Joseph Rowntree Foundation report (Quinn *et al*, 2005a) on working-class non-completion in the United Kingdom refers to the finding by Knighton (2002) that “first-generation status is more indicative of educational disadvantage than parental occupation or income” (p. 1).

Nonetheless, as Archer *et al.* (2003) explain, “experiences of prior educational failure, racism, time and financial constraints, qualification routes, family and social demands and responsibilities” (p. 132), can all work as mechanisms through which disadvantaged students feel the completion of their studies is threatened. Yet there have been no studies in the context of Argentine universities that attempt to understand this complex combination of material and symbolic factors that might play a part in the students’ decisions to disengage from higher education.

Then again, it is important to keep in mind that not all who experience constraints drop-out of university, nor do all middle class and privileged students who start higher education complete their degrees. As Giroux (2003) puts it, critical views “recognize wider structural and ideological determinations while recognizing that human beings never represent simply a reflex of such constraints” (p. 53).

Additionally, there has been an acknowledgment that particular university cultures can make a positive impact on the university experience of disadvantaged students and therefore re-signify the link between social class and engagement/achievement. Drawing from Reay *et al.*’s concept of institutional habitus – the “educational status, organisational practices and ‘expressive order’” (2005, p. 39) of an educational institution – Thomas (2002b) argues that “methods of

teaching, learning and assessment provide sites for interactions between staff, students and their peers, and with institutional structures, and thus have a central role in both changing and reproducing social and cultural inequalities” (p. 433). This is another idea I discuss in more detail when I analyse the data of non-completion at my case study institution.

### **A critical student experience**

The nature of the students’ experience at university is widely recognized to have a direct effect on non-completion, with negative experiences, however they are understood, leading more directly to non-completion. As examined in Chapter 2, the leading model to explain non-completion (Tinto, 1988) conceptualizes experience in terms of the academic and social integration of students to their institution<sup>18</sup>.

However, Tierney points out that such perspectives centre on individualistic ideas by focusing on the individuals who non-complete rather than on the socio-historical conditions under which non-completion happens – i.e., “the culture that makes such acts possible or interprets them in a particular manner” (Tierney, 2002, p. 215). The bottom line is that the responsibility of students to adapt to the institution is over-emphasised, while that of institutions to transform themselves to welcome students, and their changing characteristics, is underplayed (Kuh and Love, 2002, pp. 197/8).

From a critical perspective, Zepke and Leach (2005) carried out an extensive synthesis of research on student completion and claimed to have found an emergent alternative to Tinto’s ‘integrationist’ approach to make sense of the student experience. In their paper, they distinguish between what they call ‘integrationist’ views which see integration as a function of

the students' assimilation of the culture of the university, and views which centre on what they call 'adaptation', an approach that attempts to understand the perceptions of students about what institutions do to fit their own needs and culture. There is a large number of studies (34) that according to the authors fall into this second group, either by showing how institutions are increasingly expected to respond to the complexity and diversity of today's students including their jobs, financial situation, and academic needs (McInnis 2000; Heverly 1999; Padilla *et al*, 1997); institutions' attempts to respond to different learning styles (Lizzio *et al*, 2002; Laing and Robinson 2004; Rabbitt 1999; Sanchez 2000; Szelenyi 2001); or institutional attempts to offer institutional *habitués* that welcome and respond to the prior cultural capital and background experiences of students (Thomas 2002; Berger 2000; Sanchez 2000- all cited in Zepke and Leach 2005, p. 52/54).

Unlike *integration*, the notion of *adaptation* enables an understanding of the inter-relational (student/environment) nature of non-completion. Yet, neither of these notions seems to provide an insightful view of how the students become engaged with knowledge and with their courses. Both perspectives seem to talk about fit (of the student to the institution in the case of integration, or of institution to student and student to institution in the case of adaptation). Missing, therefore, is a view of experience that problematizes how engagement comes about and enables an understanding of 'challenge' rather than 'fit' as sources of motivation and inspiration that attach students to the university.

Furthermore, drawing on a critical research tradition, universities can be understood – just as any other social institution – as sites of conflict. McLaren's description of life in schools can be illustrative of a corresponding way to see universities: "School life is understood not as a unitary, monolithic, and ironclad system of rules and regulations, but as a cultural terrain

characterized by varying degrees of accommodation, contestation, and resistance” (2003, p. 88). Bourdieu’s concept of field (see for example Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) is also relevant here, as noted already, in the recognition of higher education as a site where power is realised and through and in which social classes struggle for positional advantage with different forms and volumes of capitals at their disposal. Bourdieu’s framework is also relevant to help us understand experiences of ‘ontological complicity’ of privileged students who move in higher education ‘as fish in water’, and of others for whom higher education might involve struggle, identity negotiations and cultural dislocations and sometimes experiences of ‘self-exclusion’ and the symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 167) exercised upon the ‘self-excluded’.

Rather than de-socialised, naturalised or psychologised interpretations of engagement, a cultural understanding of match and mismatch indicates that the question about who adapts to whom (student/institution) and to what extent is extremely limiting when integration does not offer an insightful image of the student experience nor enables an understanding of the complexity and contradictions that characterize it.

### *Beyond integration*

Additionally, as noted, the idea of integration, fit and adaptation also responds to an underlying notion of ‘functional’ harmony and order that is at odds with the view of conflict and struggle as characterizing social interaction. In relation to education and learning, Freire’s critique of ‘banking’ education (1996) argues that ‘challenge’ rather than ‘integration’ shapes the kinds of experiences that can bring about a meaningful commitment to learning. As he put it:

*Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. [...] Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed* (Freire, 1996, p. 62).

In this vein, Mann (2001) points out that a language of integration implies the idea of ‘compliance’ which would, in turn, make up alienated student experiences and provide students with fewer chances of engagement with knowledge and learning. Mann goes on to argue that only the kinds of learning processes that involve the possibility of a more authentic and creative learning are those that promote experiences of engagement.

Furthermore, Freire (1996) makes the point that a focus on integration rather than on critique and challenge not only fails to recognize the way in which meaningful engagement takes place but also serves the purpose of maintaining the – unequal – *status quo* (Freire, 1996). Similarly, McLaren claims that a meaningful learning experience is connected to a notion of empowerment that involves:

*the process by which students learn to question and selectively appropriate those aspects of the dominant culture that will provide them with the basis for defining and transforming, rather than merely serving, the wider social order* (2003, p. 89).

These ideas suggest that there are different ways of understanding satisfying and rewarding student experiences at university, over and against integration, fit, match and compliance.

Bearing this in mind, it is important to draw attention to teaching and learning to see ways in which pedagogy can foster or hinder rewarding and satisfactory experiences.

A critical understanding of students' experiences of learning at university would resist considering innate ability as an immutable characteristic that students bring to different situations (Peelo, 2002) and acknowledge the effects that teaching and course design have on learning experiences and outcomes. Authors writing within a well-known perspective of teaching and learning in higher education (Biggs, 1987; Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle, 1984; Ramsden, 1992; Svensson, 1984) argue that variations in the students' 'approaches to learning' and in the quality of what they learn are closely related to differences in their teaching. In particular, they identify certain features within the pedagogical relationship as strongly related to the development of interest and commitment to learning such as: a reasonable amount of material being covered in the curriculum, a balance between structure and freedom in the curriculum and in the study methods, particular characteristics of the lecturers such as a combination between certain human qualities and teaching skills, their commitment and enthusiasm to the task, their interest in students, their building of a climate of trust, and a provision of extensive feedback on assignments (Ramsden, 1984; Ramsden, 1992).

Therefore, student engagement cannot be seen as unrelated to teaching and pedagogy and raises questions about pedagogical traditions, values and methods within an educational institution. However, even if the perspective of 'approaches to learning' is helpful in switching the focus from individual responsibility for engagement/disengagement and commitment towards the pedagogical relationship, it fails to provide an understanding of the social nature of teaching and learning. In this line, Malcolm and Zukas (2001) argue that the literature on teaching and learning in general and particularly in the UK is dominated by a psychologized view of the

teacher and learner that promotes “a limited conceptualization of pedagogy as an educational ‘transaction’ between individual learners and teachers, and an asocial construction of the learner” (p. 33).

In fact, dominant psychological approaches to teaching and learning do not just reflect a ‘narrow and technicist conception of pedagogy’ (Malcolm and Zukas, 2001, p. 37) by erasing the social ‘situatedness’ of the individual learner but they also ignore the potential influence of classroom processes and pedagogic practices in the reproduction of class differences in the classroom (Ball, 2004, p. 4). Such a perspective is well established in the sociology of education which has “problematized subject and school knowledge attending in particular to the underlying rules shaping the social construction of the curriculum and pedagogic practices” (Ball, 2004, p. 4).

Further, Bernstein’s concepts of classification and framing (1977) enable an understanding of the ways in which different pedagogies, through the particular rules that underlie the instructional order and curricular knowledge, have the capacity to assist or hinder the access of students from different social classes to academic knowledge – what Bernstein calls the ‘selective class-based acquisition’ of pedagogical practice (2000, p. 14). Drawing on Bernstein’s views of the effects of particular framing relations – that is, weak or strong control over the selection and sequence of content, pace and evaluation criteria (Hoadley, 2006) - in advantaging some students and disadvantaging others, in Chapter 9, I reflect on the effects of pedagogical practices within my case study institution and on whether these might have an impact on students’ perceptions about their student experience and on their staying or leaving. I will take up these issues and discuss the concepts more fully in later chapters when I analyse the data.

## Conclusion

Building on some of the limitations in the current literature on non-completion, in this chapter I have identified an alternative set of ideas and perspectives that can help make sense of non-completion within Argentine universities. I have attempted to make my own preconceptions in relation to the research topic explicit, as well as some of my epistemological assumptions, by locating this study within a tradition of critical educational research. Some of the broad theoretical understandings that inform this research have been spelt out providing the basis for an identification of the broad ideas, perspectives and concepts that will guide the analysis of the empirical data.

In the next chapter, I focus on the context within which Argentine students make career decisions which involves an examination of contemporary socio-economic and political trends as well as of the higher education system, its policy framework and functioning.



**Introduction**

In this chapter, I look at the broader context within which higher education non-completion in Argentina takes place. This is done by addressing the socio-economic, political and cultural context that surrounds the students' lives as well as by describing the central features of the higher education system itself.

I have therefore divided this chapter into two parts. In part 1, I try to identify the main features of the wider frame within which young Argentines live their daily lives by locating the research topic within the coordinates of a socio-economic and political space. I do this by outlining what I consider to be the central elements to understand contemporary society, although I also introduce some aspects of Argentine history to address the effects that a changed social structure is having on aspects of collective morals, ethics and expectations for the future. This will help to better understand the role of higher education in contemporary society and the ways in which Argentine students might make sense of their university experience. The underlying assumption is that university students are located within a complex network of family, community, institutional and broader social circumstances within which perceptions and choices about higher education arise.

In part 2, I describe the main characteristics of the higher education system in order to enable an understanding of the more immediate context within which non-completion takes place. I present some key facts about the system as a whole (types of institutions, participation rates,

organisation of academic degrees, the characteristics and conditions of university teaching staff, among others), briefly describe the higher education policy framework and funding, and try to identify the main elements of the Argentine ‘national tradition in higher education’ (Clark, 1983) by outlining, among other issues, its specific beliefs about accessibility. In doing all of this, I intend to provide the necessary background to understand the basics of student life in the country, which I address more fully in the next chapter as I describe the composition of public universities’ student bodies and provide details of the selection of the research sample.

## **Part 1: The broader context**

### **The broken economy**

One possible way of introducing Argentine socio-economics and politics is by emphasizing the quite recently changed shape of this society, a trend inaugurated in what some authors call a “great break” that started three decades ago. This break has meant that in just a few decades, Argentina passed from being a relatively prosperous country to one of progressive decline. This process has profoundly affected many different layers of Argentine society; that is, deterioration in the indicators of human development; in the quality of life of the population; in the indicators of wealth distribution; of trust in political parties leading to a crisis of representation, and more generally of the credibility and legitimacy of public institutions. All these changes began to develop since the time of the last military regime (1976-1983), the eradication of the political opposition initiated a process of structural change that profoundly altered the previous patterns of economic and social relations.

Some scholars of the Argentine economy see the process of deterioration as the product of a radical change in the country's social regime of capital accumulation (Nun, 1987), from an internal-market-oriented strategy of industrialization between 1940 and 1975 to one of deregulation and openness of the economy, financial reform, foreign indebtedness, state reduction, structural adjustment and privatization of public companies since the 1980s (Basualdo, 2001).

A significant basis of the earlier period of industrialization was the introduction of redistributive policies to induce internal demand of mass consumer goods (Aronskind, 2003). Economic expansion led to low unemployment rates and high levels of social integration. It also strengthened the bargaining power of workers and therefore their income (Barbeito and Lo Vuolo, 1993). Redistribution was also pursued through increases in the funding of public education, health, housing and social security. All in all, "stable work, wage homogeneity, and legal protection were part of the everyday life of most workers in Argentina" (Auyero, 2000, p. 37).

In contrast, the current state of the Argentine economy originated in the economic policies of the last military regime (1976-1983). The greater degree of openness of the economy led to a massive increase of imported manufactured products which has been the main factor contributing to the weakening of local industrial production and to the predominance of the financial sector (Azpiazu and Nochteff, 1994; Schwartzer, 1998). These policies also initiated the spiral of decline that currently affects the Argentine economy driven by the disintegration of the productive structure and foreign indebtedness (O'Donnell, 2001a).

During the democratic regime of President Carlos Menem (1989-2000), and as part of an agenda of neoliberal structural adjustment policies (Rofman, 2000; Sawers, 1996), the government embarked on a process of deep state restructuring that included deregulation of economic activities and privatization of public companies (Azpiazu and Nochteff, 1994). The economic policies of Menem's government facilitated the entrance of volatile capitals and encouraged the import of foreign products – whose prices were more competitive due to the overvaluing of Argentina's currency (García, 2002; Vitelli, 2002).

These policies have resulted in a steady increase in unemployment and the destruction of the rural social fabric – most privatized public companies were located in remote geographical areas where other employment opportunities were scarce (Rofman, 1997)<sup>19</sup>. Small producers have been expelled from their places of origin and have emigrated to urban centres where unemployment was already high. In addition, there has been a disintegration of the social fabric that resulted from the collapse in the social and labour structures of the communities that had grown and developed under the protection of the old, large public companies (Svampa and Pereyra, 2003). As a result, between the launching of the 'Convertibility Plan' in 1991 and 1995 unemployment rose 200% (Beccaria and López, 1996).

The decline of the manufacturing sector has been a central reason for the rise of unemployment, and at the same time, for the worsening position of unionized workers. The labour force has faced a general deterioration of wages, a deterioration of working conditions with growth of underemployment, and increasing insecurity due to the worsening of contractual guarantees (Nudler, 1996). Cieza and Beyreuther (1996, p. 3) argue that “the passage of thousands of workers from factory work to informal and precarious jobs is the most significant economic phenomenon of the past 15 years. The closing of numerous plants and massive layoffs

constitute the paramount experience of thousands of working families” (quoted in Auyero 2000, p. 31).

In this context, unemployment has now reached unprecedented levels. In 1976 the unemployment rate was only 2 percent (Vales 2001), while in 2002 it peaked 21.5 percent (Minujin and Anguita, 2004)<sup>20</sup>. Underemployment (calculated on the basis of hours worked) has also risen. Between 1991 and 1995, the number of underemployed increased by 70 percent (Auyero, 2000). Furthermore, the Argentine social structure has become increasingly polarized (Nun, 1987; Torrado, 1992; Villareal, 1996). With the regressive redistribution of income, the social gap has notably widened. The richest 10 percent of the population receives 35 percent of the national income, representing more than one-third of GDP, while the poorest 10 percent only receives 1.5 percent of total income (Sbatella, 2001). Given the strong correlation between unemployment and poverty, the increase in poverty has been a direct effect of the rise of unemployment: 60 percent of the current poor population (those living under the poverty line) belonged to the middle-class a decade ago (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo, 2003, May).

The growth of unemployment and underemployment is particularly affecting young people. The young make up the segment of the population that shows the highest levels of social exclusion. There are 1.4 million young people between the ages of 15 and 29 who do not study or work (Krakowiak, 2004). Furthermore, most of these young people have never been able to integrate themselves into the job market and usually come from impoverished households in which their parents’ studies and work have not allowed them to avoid calamity (Krakowiak, 2004).

Within a restricted labour market, higher education graduates have also been negatively affected. Their unemployment rate rose from 1.1 percent in 1990 to 7.8 percent in 2001 (Gomez 2001, in Marquis 2003, p. 54). However, higher education graduates have kept a relatively privileged position in relation to their employability with an unemployment rate that is one-third lower than that of the general population (Riquelme, 2000, p. 4) and half that of high school graduates (García de Fanelli, 2006a). In addition, compared to high school leavers, higher education graduates have greater access to less precarious jobs and are more likely to be in full-employment (67 percent vs. 61,1 percent) (Riquelme, 2000, p. 6). Finally, higher education degrees also lead to higher wages with three out of four university graduates in the highest earning quintile (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006a). As Garcia de Fanelli (2006a) points out, for a young person in Argentina completing higher education “might mean to widen significantly the chances of upward social mobility” (p. 11).

More recent data about the Argentine employment market reveal that despite the emergence of a new economic model since 2003 (what some authors call ‘*neodesarrollismo*’ as opposed to the neoliberal policies of the 1990s, which involves greater state intervention in the economy and active social policy), the high incidence of poverty has not been significantly changed. In addition, new job opportunities that have reduced the unemployment rate have only happened at the expense of the quality of the new jobs, leading to a renewed growth of precarious employment (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 2007).

Finally, alongside the economic changes of the last couple of decades, there have been important political transformations. Government policies, particularly since the *Menemismo* (1989-1999) have avoided the identification and solution of social problems and mostly attributed to the politicians’ search for power accumulation (Pírez, Gitelman and Bonnafé,

1999). Representation has been distorted from its meaning and aims, and, as Pucciarelli argues, it has been reduced to a scheme of “voting delegation that places traditional ways of building spheres of power and political/electoral representation under crisis” (Pucciarelli, 2001). President Menem’s talk to the press after winning the presidential election in 1989 –when he was asked about the marked divergence between the policies being applied and what he had advocated during the presidential campaign – is illustrative of this ‘distorted’ meaning of representation: “If I had revealed the intentionality of the plans to be applied, nobody would have voted for me” (Rajland, 2002). The lack of legitimacy of political parties has been part of a broader crisis of credibility and trust. The gradual loss of legitimacy of political parties became most apparent in 2001 when the results of the October election for members of the House of Representatives showed around half of the votes blank or void, what has been called “anger vote” (Vilas, 2001). It also led to the overthrow of three presidents in less than a month in 2001.

However, one of the most damaging effects of these political transformations, mainly through the rise of political corruption and crisis of legitimacy of political parties during the past 15 years has been the incapacity of the nation to create a project of common collective good and an atmosphere of mutual recognition and respect (O'Donnell, 2001b). Within this, new cultural understandings and a transformed collective ‘self-image’ have been emerging. Social values, moods, and idiosyncrasies have been transformed alongside the economic and political transformations of the last three decades which contributed to a collective sense of being in a place where nobody wants to be.

## **A changed society**

As the economic situation has changed in the last quarter of a century, so has society. The name “Argentina” comes from the Latin word *argentums*, a “precious metal, valuable in the market, and malleable” (Minujin and Anguita 2004); this indicates that Argentina was once a land that promised wealth and prosperity to the newcomers. Indeed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Argentina was among the 10 wealthiest nations in the world, and was even better-off than Italy and Spain. Millions of immigrants arrived in this ‘promised’ land dreaming of “conquering America”. It is calculated that between 1860 and 1939, around 10 million European immigrants (Italians, followed by Spanish, Russian, Polish, and others) arrived in Argentina, and a further 3 million after the Second World War (O'Donnell, 2002). The 1914 census revealed that 30% of the 8 million Argentineans were ‘foreigners’. Later, with the offspring of those recent immigrants, nearly half of the Argentine population turned out to be composed of recent European immigrants (Minujin and Anguita, 2004).

Until the mid-twentieth century, Argentina somehow was that promised-land. Immigrants could achieve better living conditions there than in their countries of origin<sup>21</sup> and their offspring could gain access to higher (and qualitatively better) levels of education. In fact, the first six decades of the past century were characterised by an upward mobility of social sectors that resulted in a significant improvement of the middle classes, both in size and in economic wellbeing (Minujin and Anguita, 2004). Through those processes of social upward mobility, a typical image of the country was that of the many ascending the social ladder from the working class towards the middle classes in just one generation. Significantly, Argentina’s middle classes were the largest across the continent.



Education has been central in shaping those middle sectors as it has been construed as the prime social equalizer. In fact, mass access to quality public education<sup>22</sup> was an important element of the social integration of the Argentine middle class. Since the 1940s, the Argentine population doubled the average expected years of schooling with massive participation in secondary and tertiary education (Minujin and Anguita, 2004)<sup>23</sup>. The relatively high levels of graduation among the middle classes partly responded to the aspirations of immigrants for their offspring: ‘own house and studies’. This privileged relationship with education was the main instrument of upward social mobility as well as the distinctive attribute of the middle class vis-à-vis the other social sectors. It also led to a huge expansion in the number of self-employed professionals (such as lawyers, doctors, psychologists).

However, the economic transformations reviewed in the last section have resulted in a marked impoverishment of former middle-class sectors since the 1980s, as a result of which Argentina has witnessed the emergence of what has been called the *new poverty* (Kessler, 1996; Minujin, 1992; Minujin and Kessler, 1995). The *new poverty* that currently represents 33% of the national population (Bermúdez, 2004), was non-existent in the 1970s. Significantly, electoral analyses identify these sectors as the most disenchanted with party politics, as volatile in voting behavior and responsible for the increase in blank votes and electoral absenteeism - all consequences of the broken expectations of consumption and social improvement (López, 1997).

Alongside the economic and political changes over the last three decades has come the vanishing certainty that each generation could improve on the previous one – the loss of the symbolic “old confidence in progress” of the middle classes (Minujin and Kessler, 1995). For it was not only the real existence of the middle class that was powerful, but also the belief that

improvement was possible for others. Both elements delineated the contents of the “Argentine dream” – that of a society with opportunities for individual and collective growth and with upward social mobility where individual and social efforts were rewarded by economic progress.

Bleichmar (2002) has created what she calls the “country-pain” index as a metaphor to illustrate the damaging effects that all these changes have had on the population, by using data on increased suicide, accidents, alcoholism, violence, sale of antidepressants, school dropout, emigration, abandonment of newborn children, etc. These figures are indicative of different layers or levels of poverty in the Argentine society, what Bleichmar calls “poverty of citizenship” (the loss of ethics in social and political life) and “poverty of future” (a sense of precariousness regarding the future, a sense that even holding a stable job is turning into an “anachronistic expectation” (Nudler, 1996)).

The reversal over the twentieth century from being a receiving (immigrant) country to an ‘exporting’ (emigrant) one is not trivial; it is associated with frustrated expectations of individual and collective economic and social development (Lattes and Oteiza, 1986). Since 2000, when massive emigration started, as many as 260,000 Argentines have emigrated. These emigration figures have had no precedent in Argentine history (O'Donnell, 2002). Significantly, most of the emigrants are from the Argentine middle classes, that emblematic sector that, as noted, has shrunk from representing 60% of the population in the 1960s, to 20% in 2003 (Clarín, 2003). Moreover, emigrants are mainly people between the ages of 18 and 40 and they are generally tertiary or university educated (Irigoyen, 2003). It has been estimated that, in the last 30 years, 50,000 university graduates have left and, among them, 20,000 doctoral graduates<sup>24</sup> (Pavón, 2003).

Such emigration contributes to a relatively widespread social mood of uselessness and undermined self-esteem. As Ernesto Calvo, director of a scientific Laboratory at the Faculty of Exact and Natural Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires, says: “within a couple of months in 2003, two members of our staff have left and one, even having being offered sponsorship for her whole PhD in Argentina, is trying to leave the country. They want to live in an organized society, one that takes care of its people, and with a future to look forward to” (La Nacion, 2003; my translation).

### **Society and higher education non-completion**

The evidence reviewed above is indicative of both the way in which the Argentine population lives, and the ways in which thinking is being transformed alongside the structural changes; issues of collective mood, of expectations about the future, of social horizons are changing. This seems to be affecting the young in particular, as millions of young Argentineans search for a job, or are condemned to precarious contracts of employment that are often monthly renewable, or subjected to exhausting working hours, or to a too costly university life, or - for those who finish higher education - to poor post-university prospects. Against this backdrop, and within family's biographies of un-rewarded effort, the inevitable questions arise: Why bother studying? Why bother working?

In addition, if, for most of the twentieth century, education was seen as a primary vehicle for upward mobility, and if huge expectations of individual and collective development have been invested in education, both the reversal of that mobility trend and the regression of the

Argentine economy and society may well be undermining the very particular and auspicious role of education. Furthermore, if the middle classes have traditionally been the main driving force behind mass higher education, it is legitimate to wonder whether the changed composition of the middle classes might also be affecting the dynamics of higher education participation and completion.

However, it is important to bear in mind that, as noted, despite the important changes in the Argentine social structure and the restricted and exclusionary employment market, there are still material benefits associated with the completion of a higher education degree. With the rise in the minimum qualifications required for unqualified jobs (Gallart, Moreno and Cerrutti, 1992), some research indicates that from being a vehicle for social mobility, higher education has become a sort of 'parachute' against relative deterioration (Filmus, 1999, p. 117). In this context, university graduates have more chances of becoming employed, of becoming higher earners and having stability and social security (currently linked to non-precarious jobs) than their non-graduate counterparts<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, higher education still plays an important role in the production/reproduction of social advantage.

## **Part 2: The Argentine Higher Education**

### **Structure of the higher education system**

Argentina has a leading position in Latin America in terms of higher education participation (Holm-Nielsen *et al*, 2005) with a gross enrolment rate of 48% in 1999/2000<sup>26</sup> (UNESCO, 2004). Higher education enrolments have been increasing during the past 25 years at a persistently high average annual rate of 7% (Etcheverry, 2000; Llach, Montoya and Roldan, 2000).

Diploma and degree programmes at the higher education level are offered by both public and private universities (offering programmes of study in a broad range of professional areas), by university institutes (focusing on only a few disciplines) and by tertiary, non-university institutions (mainly specializing in the training of teachers) (Reisberg, 1993). There are 37 public universities (36 national and 1 provincial) and 42 private ones together with a further 5 national and 10 private university institutes. The private university sector is larger in number of institutions although it is significantly smaller in student enrolment. The public sector accounts for 87% of total enrolment (Secretaria de Politica Universitaria, 2000).

Student enrolment is not just heavily concentrated in the public sector but is also concentrated in the few very large universities within it. By the year 2000, approximately 26% of the 1,124,044 students attending public higher education did so at only one university, the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), and another 10% at the University of Cordoba (Secretaria de Politica Universitaria, 2000). In fact, the UBA, together with the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), is among the largest universities in the world with

approximately 325,000 students (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006). This represents a remarkable difference in scale of student numbers in UBA in comparison with universities in other countries. For example, in the UK, the second largest university, Leeds Metropolitan University, has around 40,000 students (HESA) (The Open University is the largest university with 180,000 students although it is a distance learning institution)<sup>27</sup>.

However, there are only two public universities in Argentina (Buenos Aires and Cordoba) that have more than 100,000 students whilst twenty eight have less than 20,000 students and the rest are in-between. Private universities are significantly smaller with only eight universities with more than 10,000 (Marquis and Toribio, 2007).

This variation in size is related to the concentration of the population in the Capital and Greater Buenos Aires “together with the government’s policy in the early 1970s to establish at least one public university in each province regardless of the size of the population” (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 577). However, even if public universities have expanded in numbers since the 1990s with the creation of several new universities throughout the Greater Buenos Aires area, the three largest and oldest universities (Universities of Buenos Aires, La Plata, and Cordoba) still account for 37% of total enrolment (Coraggio and Vispo, 2001).

The creation of the private sector has been a contested development in Argentine education history. It was only after the military coup that overthrew President Perón in 1958 (through an alliance between the Catholic Church and conservative sectors) that private institutions were allowed to operate, under the regulation of the national government (Klein and Sampaio, 1996). The emergence of the private sector has made the higher education system more internally differentiated and heterogeneous “in size, scope and range of studies, commitment to research,

and their status in society” (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 573). However, it has not modified the concentration of student enrolment in a few public universities and in particular professional areas such as law, public accountancy, medicine, social communication, and psychology (Coraggio and Vispo, 2001).

Some factors have worked to limit the expansion of the private sector. Among them, the lack of public funding for private higher education has been crucial. Thanks to being fully/exclusively funded by the central government, public universities have been able not to charge tuition-fees to undergraduate students. In contrast, the private sector has always depended almost exclusively on student fees (Balán, 1993), and there has never been any public financial aid available for students within the private sector. In addition, the concentration of enrolment in the public sector has been facilitated by their open access policy, which has been in practice for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whereby access has remained open to every candidate holding a high school degree. In this context, enrolment in private universities increased whenever public universities established entry restrictions (particularly during military regimes), and have been stable or even declined whenever the open admissions policy was restored (Balán, 1993).

Furthermore, unlike other countries in Latin America (particularly Brazil and Colombia), in Argentina, private universities offer programmes in a more limited range of subject areas and have never achieved major academic reputation (Garcia de Fanelli, 2001). As Garcia de Fanelli points out, “of the 52 private universities and university institutes, only a few probably fit the elite type (with high expenditures per student, full-time professors and full-time students, research activities, high-quality facilities, and good libraries)” (2006b, p. 577).

Regarding the academic organization of Argentine universities, they have adopted the main features of the so-called “French Napoleonic model” (Rodriguez Gomez, 1998) or European continental tradition of loosely connected professional faculties (Brunner, 1990; Tünnermann Bernheim, 1998) where study courses assembled under the structure of faculties and chairs are the dominant mode of academic organization<sup>28</sup> (Brunner, 1990; Krotsch, 2001; Tünnermann Bernheim, 1998). Brunner (2009) refers to the predominant form of teaching organisation in Latin America, which is also illustrative of the Argentine model, as of a “stove-pipe” nature (one entry, one exit). This is characterised by rigid curricular structures within which “there are few possibilities for student mobility either within or between institutions, neither in horizontal nor in vertical directions” (p. 7). Clark (1983) points out that in this form of curricular organisation, students enter specialised faculties with no chance of moving across different subjects “hence, a commitment to general education is not found in thought or in structure” (p. 96). This curricular rigidity is regarded as aggravated by the absence of systems of credit accumulation which would enable a calculation of “studies already achieved, validate acquired skills, and define individual learning paths” (Brunner, 2009, p. 7).

Furthermore, as noted already typical Argentine undergraduate degrees are longer than average from an international perspective (see for example the European trends in the Bologna Declaration, 1999); the ‘*licenciado*’ degree in Argentina is usually awarded after an average of 5 years of study, and professional degrees in fields like Medicine, Engineering, Architecture, Psychology, Law and Public Accountancy, in general follow an average of 6+ years of study (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 578) although degree courses at private universities tend to be shorter. Both the long duration of undergraduate degree courses and their rigid curricular scheme at public universities have been associated by many commentators with higher than average non-completion rates (Brunner, 2009, p. 7). Particularly, the absence of intermediate



exit points (intermediate diplomas) is seen as a major problem mainly in the context of international trends toward so-called 3+2 or 4+1 schemes, e.g. Bachelor/Masters (Dams, Godfrid and Raffo, 2007).

Finally, despite research being one of the three basic functions that Argentine universities attribute to themselves (alongside teaching and ‘extension’), research is generally carried out in independent external institutes. By and large, Argentine universities are teaching-centred and have little tradition of research, an issue that is not unrelated to the chronically limited availability of public funding. As Rhoads et al. (2005) point out, “in the light of marginal economic support, the Argentine university in general and the UBA in particular face serious challenges in developing and sustaining scientists and scientific investigation”. They go on to say that “while it may be possible to support academic programs with part-time, ‘missionary-minded’ faculty, this is less likely to work with regard to the research function” (p. 136). The shortage of money for research is reflected in the low level of Argentinean spending on research and development (R&D) as a percentage of GDP at 0.44% (in 2002) compared to 1.05% in Brazil and 0.57% in Chile (SECyT, 2002, in Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 575), and an average of 2.25% among OECD countries (in 2002) (OECD, 2008).

## **Finance**

As noted already, Argentine public universities are financed by the central government. In contrast, private universities are financed by tuition fees and donations from private companies. The sector has not received any government financial support since the return of democracy in 1984 (Hidalgo, 1997, p. 760). Since 1992 public funding has been allocated to public universities in the form of a *block grant*, that is, with little provision as to the way in which the

money should be spent. This has given public universities “institutional autonomy thanks to their freedom to negotiate pay scales within government thresholds” (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 576). Budget amounts have been agreed upon at the beginning of each year on the basis of the shares traditionally received by each university, and subjected to negotiation in the National Congress.

This mechanism for the allocation of public budgets, sometimes called ‘incremental or inertial’ in the literature, was common among Latin American countries until the 1990s, that is, yearly *ad hoc* allocations based on negotiations and political agreements (Levy, 1986). However, since the 1980s, with the fiscal crisis of the states throughout the region these began to be regarded not only as increasingly unaffordable (Balán, 1993) but also as counterproductive in terms of encouraging university efficiency and improving performance. As a result, and in line with developments in industrialized countries, most Latin American states have introduced public funding based on competitive allocations (Diaz Barriga, 1997). Competition for financing, students and faculty became central to the new market-oriented policy environment (de Moura Castro and Levy, 2000).

In line with international trends, and as part of the “reform” of Argentine HE, the government attempted to introduce competitive allocations in the distribution of the public budget and to encourage private fund-raising at public institutions by allowing them both to raise revenue by selling services and also by charging tuition fees for undergraduate programmes, something that was previously forbidden by law. Accordingly, since 1997 a proportion of the public budget has been allocated on a competitive basis through a number of different programmes (for example, the Fund for the Improvement of University Quality - FOMEQ; the ‘incentive’ programme for teaching staff who also do research, and an attempt to use formula funding to

distribute a small share of the budget which was a trial introduced in 1997, 1998 and 2003 but later abandoned due to disagreements in the definition of indicators and political opposition) (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 576). These programmes illustrate the attempt to shift the way in which the public budget is allocated by introducing some 'objective criteria' (Becerra *et al*, 2003) amid increasing government concern with efficiency and value-for-money.

Nonetheless, money coming from these additional programmes still represents a small proportion of the total public funding available for public universities (7% in 2002) (Marquis and Toribio, 2007). As some of the advocates of more 'efficiency-oriented' funding put it, "the diversity of actors involved in the process of allocating resources, together with the autonomy that university institutions have and the context of budgetary restriction that is envisaged for Argentine economy in the coming years, have set, and will continue to set, important limits on the necessary process of designing and implementing this reform policy" (Becerra *et al*, 2003, p. 23). This means that, unlike elsewhere in the world, in Argentina there is no financial encouragement or pressure on universities to improve what dominant policy frameworks consider to be the main indicators of 'efficiency' - such as to retain more students (i.e., improve graduation rates).

However, what is most significant about government spending on education is its chronic incapacity to provide adequate funding for public universities in a context of rising student enrolment. Even though there have been very drastic changes in financing that accompanied changes in political regimes, with military governments significantly reducing higher education spending, the long-term trend has been one of an increasing student population with parallel reduction of public financing (Gertel, 1991; Balán, 1993; Garcia de Fanelli, 1997; Díaz Barriga, 1997). For example, from 1960 to 1990, the total student population grew at an

average annual rate of 5.9% whilst public financing diminished, in constant US dollars of 1987, at an average annual rate of 1.5% (Gertel, 1991, p. 64). The combination of both trends resulted in a significant decline in expenditure per-student, from an average of \$1,800 in 1963 to an average of \$225 in 1989 (Gertel, 1991, p. 64). The student population has continued to increase until the present (for example, between 1987 and 1998, it grew at an average annual rate of 5% (Sánchez Martínez, 1999, p. 357), yet the level of public expenditure on higher education has been affected by the 1990s volatility and economic cycles. As Garcia de Fanelli (2006) points out, “increasing enrolment within a context of scarce financial resources led to a gradual deterioration in teaching and research conditions, especially in the more solicited professional programs” (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 575). Becerra et al. (2003) indicate that between 1980 and 2003, expenditure per student within public universities decreased by 32.6%.

As a result of the deterioration of their budgets, national universities have faced a severe financial crisis with multiple negative effects on staff salaries, infrastructure, facilities, resources and equipment (Delfino and Gertel, 1996). Funding shortages and rising student enrolment, particularly within an ongoing open access system, have resulted in “a policy of hiring more part-time and volunteer staff, especially, but not only, for the lowest academic positions (junior teaching staff). In 2000, full-time faculty represented only 14% of the total” (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 581). Furthermore, teachers’ salaries represent nearly 75% of the total budget (Holm-Nielsen *et al*, 2005) which means that spending on salaries is happening at the expense of investment in other areas such as goods, services and infrastructure.

## **Higher education culture and beliefs**

In his classic book, “The Higher Education System”, Burton Clark (1983) refers to national systems of higher education as not just shaped by particular structures but also by identifiable beliefs. He draws attention to the importance of recognizing the specific cultures of national systems as they “bring to bear more general traditions, ideas, and categories of thought” that, in turn, “are also the environments of first importance for the more specialized units, exercising their own constraints and filtering the influences of the more remote parts of society and its general culture” (p. 76).

Clark goes on to identify different ‘national traditions in higher education’ which are primarily composed of beliefs about accessibility, the degree of specialization of the training provided, the kinds of occupations to which it prepares students and its balance between research and teaching. It can be argued that the particular Argentine commitment to access (wide, open) and governance (collegial, self-governance) have left an important imprint on the ‘character’ of the Argentine system, as I explain below.

## **Distinctive marks**

Some of the university practices that became paradigmatic of universities throughout Latin American were first launched in Argentina by the University Reform of 1918 (Levy, 1986; Ribeiro, 1971). The Reform firstly emerged in the old University of Cordoba as part of a cultural struggle of the youth against the society’s traditionalism and conservatism, and it became a source of democratization in the life of traditional and oligarchic modes of university

teaching and functioning (Brunner, 1990; Caldelari and Funes, 1998; Mariategui, 1976). Students at the University of Cordoba led a movement that regarded educational problems as intertwined with larger societal issues<sup>29</sup> (Arocena and Sutz, 2005).

First and foremost, the 1918 Reform introduced the principle of university self-and-co-governance (universities authorities appointed through the election of their own representatives into collegial bodies composed by faculty, students and alumni on university councils) (Garcia de Fanelli, 1998; Levy, 1986). The participation of students in the governance structures of universities was regarded as a democratizing factor which would counter traditional oligarchic practices of nepotism and safeguard academic freedom (Arocena and Sutz, 2005).

Importantly, this type of governance structure, combined with the chair system of academic organization, has shaped a higher education system of intense participation in the system's infrastructure – both by academics and by students (Clark, 1983; Garcia de Fanelli, 1998; Krotsch, 2001). Furthermore, given the conditions of academic work in Argentina where a large number of members of the academic staff are employed on a part-time basis, the 'personal mandate' of the professor that prevails in Chair-based systems (Clark, 1983) has been somehow weakened. This has given students an amplified leading role (Garcia de Fanelli, 1998). As Clark put it:

*politics, in the most direct sense of the word, is a principal activity of such student-politicized universities and university systems – a worthy contender against the knowledge activities elsewhere seen as central* (1983, p. 155).

Thus, politicisation has been a significant aspect of university life in Argentina, especially since unstable political climates and periodic authoritarianism have contributed to position universities as privileged safeguards of social critique and freedom. Furthermore, it can be argued that the participation of students in governance structures has been limited to the big political issues. As Altbach (2001) points out, “partisan politics continues to infuse campus elections and, in some universities, academic life generally” (p. 214), which somewhat mirrors my other point about the dominance within higher education research of the big policy debate.

### **Entrenched traditions**

A further element of the Argentine system since the 1918 University Reform has been the commitment of the federal government to guarantee tuition-free education exclusively sustained by the state (Oteiza, 1998; Schugurensky, 1997, p. 283). Tuition-free undergraduate education turned out to be an important symbol of Argentine public universities. Indeed, since the 1918 Reform and until the mid-1990s – with the exception of the military periods – student fees for undergraduate studies at public universities were forbidden by law. It is based on this that the government attempt to introduce cost recovery strategies by lifting the ban on charging tuition-fees has faced significant opposition.

Governments have argued for the need for public universities to generate new sources of income, after two decades of explosive student enrolment alongside fiscal constraints had resulted in a serious deterioration in per-student public expenditures (Ministerio de Cultura y Educacion, 1997). In addition, and endorsing the World Bank’s position, the government claimed that the free system, financed by all economic sectors as taxpayers, favours the middle-

and-upper-income sectors who are over-represented at universities and who could attend higher education even if tuition-fees were charged (World Bank, 1994b). As some of the advocates of the introduction of tuition-fees argue, “individuals attending the university belong to the top deciles of the income distribution and to relatively highly educated families” so tuition-free higher education for all “is an implicit transfer to the richest individuals in society” (Gonzalez Rozada and Menendez, 2001, pp. 341 and 349).

In this context, the 1995 Higher Education Act established that it is up to each public university to decide whether to charge fees to their students. However, as happened in some other Latin American countries:

*Reforms to increase reliance on cost recovery through student payment in one form or another are often politically contentious and are in many cases met with resistance. In 1999, for example, a move to raise tuition at Mexico’s largest university, the National Autonomous University of Mexico, was abandoned following a student strike that closed down the university for several months (Holm-Nielsen et al, 2005, p. 45).*

A large number of strikes, demonstrations, and continued debate followed the introduction of the Higher Education Act in Argentina, particularly in opposition to the introduction of fees on the grounds of equal opportunities. The opposition claimed that the introduction of tuition fees could be used to make the state funding shortage permanent, or even to justify further cuts (Balán, 1998), and have regressive effects on the social structure (de Moura Castro and Levy, 2000; Diaz Barriga, 1997). As a result, very low fees have been introduced in only a few national universities (for example, Cordoba, Villa Maria, Tres de Febrero, La Rioja) and on a



voluntary basis, that is, only for those who can and wish to pay (Marquis and Toribio, 2007). At present, both the Ministry of Education and the Rectors of National Universities assembled by the National Inter-university Council (Consejo Interuniversitario Nacional (CIN), are discussing a proposal for a new Higher Education Act to replace the 1995 one, in which the possibility of charging tuition fees is likely to be removed (Bruschtein, 2007; Casas, 2007a).

### **The access belief**

The predominant access mechanism in Argentine public universities is “unrestricted” meaning that there is no national evaluation system for university candidates (Theiler, 2005) and that completion of secondary education is the only qualification required to gain entry (Moreno, 2005). The ‘unrestricted’ mechanism was introduced in 1973 when the previous entry-examination system was lifted, then suspended during the years of the last military regime (1976-1983), and finally reintroduced in 1983 to remain in place until the present (Sigal, 2003). As Garcia de Fanelli (2006) points out, “after the experience in restricted access under military governments, the authorities at national universities – in particular bowing to the pressure of student movements - regarded the open admissions policy as a symbolic opposition to the previous system” (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 574). The fact that Uruguay and Bolivia are the only other countries in the world that have adopted this type of admission and selection mechanism (Sigal, 2003) is indicative of the quite distinctive nature of what Clark (1983) calls the ‘access belief’ in Argentina.

The democratization of higher education participation was a relatively early concern in the country. As early as 1918, the University Reform attempted to substitute a 19<sup>th</sup> century elitist system by one of widening participation “including all academically qualified aspirants”

(Marquis, 2003). By 1960, higher education enrolments in Argentina already represented 12 percent of the population aged 20 to 24 years old and it was the first Latin American country to achieve the transition to a mass higher education system<sup>30</sup> (Balán, 1993; Levy, 1986). Indeed, it is usually remarked that the rising levels of educational attainment and employment that characterized much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Argentine history with “a large, educated middle class, composed mainly of European immigrants, differentiated Argentina from other countries in South America” (Marquis, 2003, pp. 53-54). Open access to higher education was an important factor in the socio-educational mobility that has played such a central role in the social imagery of Argentines.

The Higher Education Act of 1995 de-regulated the access mechanism of universities in such a way that, at present, universities can set their own admissions policies. This Act has been regarded as an attempt to erode the deeply entrenched notion of equality of opportunity. Students as well as academics have mobilized to reject what they interpret as a restrictive conception of higher education that attempts to limit access in the name of quality, when, in their view, quality is not determined by the number of students enrolled but by the financial resources available to them. As a result of the antagonism created by the proposed changes to the access policy of public universities, only a minority of “universities or schools apply entrance examinations or require students to take specific courses - in particular, medical schools” (Trombetta, 1999 in Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 577) such as those at the universities of La Plata, Rosario, Cuyo and Tucuman (Bruschtein, 2007).

## **The Argentine lecturers**

As Garcia de Fanelli (2006) explains, there are two broad categories within the Argentine academic profession: professors (full, associate, and assistant) and junior teaching staff (senior and assistant). They can hold full-, half- or part-time contracts which specifies their weekly workload (40 hours on full-time contracts; 20 hours on part-time ones) (Marquis, 2003, p. 57). However, as noted, “to cope with the issues of demand pressure resulting from an open admissions policy and a context of public financial stringency, the public university has adopted a policy of hiring more part-time and volunteer staff” (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 581). As a result, again as noted before, only 14 percent of faculty members are in full-time positions<sup>31</sup> (Marquis, 2003).

In addition, a large number of teaching staff work without pay, a phenomenon that according to some studies represents as much as 25 percent of the total teaching staff at public universities (Marquis, 2003). Volunteer contracts are even greater at some universities where funding is particularly poor such as at the University of Buenos Aires, where according to some estimates, as many as 52.5% of total staff members work for no pay. As Albornoz explains, the number of students enrolled within the UBA grew by 64% between 1996 and 2004, while the increase in funding only enabled the number of lecturers to increase by 33%. In this context, the use of volunteer staff has been the only way this gap could be filled (San Martin, 2005a).

As some commentators note, this has only been possible thanks to a widespread conception of teaching ‘as public service’ in Argentine universities whereby, as Rhoads et al. (2005) argue, teaching is seen “as a contribution to the larger social good” (p. 136). However, the widespread use of teaching for no pay can also be explained by a quite perverse functioning of the

academic job market where a track record of teaching is usually a requirement for further work opportunities outside the university, as well as for research scholarships and grants (Doberti, 2006).

Furthermore, as Rhoads et al. (2005) go on to point out, “the tradition of teaching as public service certainly is admirable and the sentiment worthy of preservation, [but] running a university based on part-time professors may limit its intellectual vitality” (p. 136). Indeed, the poor terms and conditions of employment have meant that the requirements for the appointment of volunteer lecturers have had to be lowered which has raised significant concern about the quality of teaching at public universities (Casas, 2007b). The ‘regularisation’ of volunteer staff at public universities is one of the aims of the Ministry of Education of President Cristina Kirchner’s administration as part of a move to increase government financial support for public higher education, although it is anticipated that given the magnitude of the predicted funding expansion the problem might take a long time to be reversed (Casas, 2007b).

Funding shortfalls which have undermined the level of remuneration for academic work are also leading to the deterioration of infrastructure and facilities, which have become outdated and are poorly maintained (Altbach, 2003). There is also a significant shortage of office space for academic staff “limiting the possibility for academic work and for consultation with students and colleagues” (Altbach, 2003, p. 14).

The high reliance on part-time staff certainly places considerable limits on student/staff interaction. Furthermore, due to inadequate income levels for the academic profession, contract terms are frequently not enforced so lecturers normally take on multiple jobs which means they work fewer hours than specified in their lecturer contracts. The phenomenon earned the

Argentine faculty the label of 'taxicab professors' "given that so many of them must shuffle back and forth between different jobs just to make ends meet" (Slocum and Rhoads, 2009, p. 91). As a respondent in Rhoads et al.'s (2005) study commented, lecturers "are always travelling between jobs. They want to be exemplary professors, but they just don't have the time. They have other work to do" (p. 136). It is therefore common for foreign commentators to be astonished at "the ability of many academics to work effectively under such difficult circumstances" (Altbach, 2003, p. 14).

Another significant aspect of the structure of academic positions within public universities is that half of them are 'interim' (non-permanent) and that many lecturers are "under de facto permanent contracts without a periodic performance evaluation" (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 581). This, too, contributed to earn Argentina a top place in what Altbach and Musselin (2008) call the ranking for 'irrationality and complexity' in academic career structures:

*The minority who have full-time appointments face a bizarre career path. If a faculty member wishes to be promoted to the highest academic rank, he or she must submit to a 'conours' where the position occupied by the incumbent is open to applicants from all over the country or indeed the world. In other words, these academics are not promoted on the basis of their performance but may instead have to struggle for "their" job against other applicants. The only saving grace is that the system is often so inefficient that the 'conours' is not organized and the incumbent is promoted anyway (Altbach and Musselin, 2008).*

As a result, promotions generally occur with no evaluation of a lecturer's teaching, particularly when student evaluations of the faculty are only an embryonic process implemented at very few institutions and which still "require more effective instruments as well as skills to analyze and

make use of data collected” (Reisberg, 2008). This is in sharp contrast with the emphasis on student/consumer satisfaction within the rise of an ‘audit’ culture in higher education in several countries such as the UK (Morley, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

In the first part of this chapter, I have sketched the central elements of contemporary Argentinean society to identify the main features of the wider social context within which students live their daily lives. I have outlined the socio-economic and political context within which we have to understand what it is to be a young person in Argentina. Family social biographies of dispossession, frustration, disillusionment, material constraints, job insecurity, expectations of improvement through higher education, all recurred constantly in my research interviews and help in making sense of the meanings my respondents attribute to their higher education experience and to their completion and/or non-completion. I will return to all of these issues as I analyse the research data presented in subsequent chapters.

The account offered in the second part of this chapter is designed to set up a platform for the understanding of the immediate context within which non-completion takes place and provides the necessary background to understand the basics of student life. The various structural and financial characteristics of Argentine higher education are important in beginning to understand aspects of the student experience and thus completion and non-completion. These issues inform my discussion of the data drawn from my interviews with students and non-completers in the later chapters.

## Research Strategy and methodology

### General purpose

As I have argued already, a significant weakness of current frameworks for non-completion is linked to a methodological limitation, that is, to the inability of students' records and fixed-choice questionnaires to address or grasp student subjectivity. As a result, the students' interpretations of their experiences of non-completion, of the way they 'personally experience and understand' their non-completion remain poorly understood.

McMeown et al. (1993) indicate that, methodologically,

*...instead of beginning with an effort to discover what was of importance to students, those things were assumed [in most of the studies of non-completion]. Matters of potentially critical importance in determining the connection of the student to the social and academic life of the institution were taken for granted'* (pp. 70-71).

This has been particularly the case when the dominant approach to the problem has been based on a narrow definition of non-completion in terms of student failure, which has led to a consequent under-examination of the effects of interacting institutions and contexts (Yorke, 1999) and almost complete disregard for the complex and 'multi-layered' contexts (Bowe, Ball and Gewirtz, 1994b, p. 580) within which students make educational decisions.

In this study, as noted already, I attempt to examine the issues and factors that contribute to non-completion within public universities by exploring the lives of students, the choices they make and the difficulties, challenges, opportunities and losses they face if they are to leave the course. It is with the meaning of non-completion to those who have experienced it that this research is primarily concerned. Therefore, I draw on an alternative to the mainstream methodological approach, and one already adopted by a few studies that, even if in different ways and to different extents, have all highlighted the relevance of eliciting the point of view of the actor, in this case, the experience of students as they live it (Attinasi Jr., 1989; Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001; McKeown, Macdonell and Bowman, 1993; Moffat, 1989). This approach is particularly relevant in the Argentinean context as both government and universities have blamed each other for inefficiency, on the one hand, and inadequate funding, on the other, at the expense of listening to the student voices regarding their non-completion. As a result, the examination of students' reasons has been to a large extent rejected in favour of presumption and prescription.

Bearing this in mind, I attempt to focus on the 'micro-level' (Ozga, 1990), that is, on the students' interpretations of their experiences of non-completion to make sense of the ways in which non-completion is played out in the lives of Argentine students. Nonetheless, as noted in previous chapters, in my attempt to examine the actors' interpretation of their situations I also intend to locate these perceptions within a wider social context, as Lynch and Lodge put it, "to locate the micro within the macro, to locate the subjective interpretation within the wider structural frame" (Lynch and Lodge, 2002 in Sikes, 2003, p. 245). I undertake this task through the analysis of qualitative data using the particular concepts from social theory which I introduced in previous chapters.



## Methodological approach

As Ball and Gewirtz (1997) argue, “there are logical and methodological relationships between particular research topics and particular research methods” (p. 580). Central to this study is the attempt to examine non-completion ‘through the eyes’ of those who have experienced it. The methodology of this study reflects this approach. Indeed, research that aims to “understand [individuals’] interpretations of the world about them” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 23), or “to capture, describe, and understand the individuals’ own definition of a situation” (Gephart, 1999, p. 1) is normally associated with qualitative inquiry, underpinned by the belief that people act on the basis of their interpretations of particular situations and contexts. The meaning individuals attach to particular situations is regarded as having a constructive role in shaping their action (Blumer, 1969; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 1985), although also in qualitative research there is an “awareness of the interrelationships among conditions (structure), action (process), and consequences” (Strauss and Corbin, 2008, p. 9-10). In their use of qualitative inquiry methods researchers see individuals as acting within a reality that is ‘complex and multi-layered’ (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 22).

The qualitative tradition also acknowledges that understanding meaning and interpretation requires ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973) rather than ‘simplistic’ accounts (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p. 22) and there is therefore a special “sensitivity to the evolving and unfolding nature of events (process)” (Strauss and Corbin, 2008, p. 9). Becker’s (1998) reflections on the nature of sociological thinking are also helpful here. He reminds us that, in sociological explanations:

*Things don't just happen, but rather occur in a series of steps, which we social scientist are inclined to call 'processes,' but which could just as well be called 'stories' (p. 31).*

*[...] So the pathway that leads to any event can be seen as a succession of events that are contingent on each other in this way (p. 33).*

Thinking in terms of stories or processes should enable the treatment of non-completers not as a category of people, as has often been the case in the literature which depicts non-completers as possessing or lacking a set of specific personal attributes (Ott, 1988; Pascarella, Smart and Ethington, 1986). Rather, thinking in terms of stories can bring to light the complex array of different resources, perceptions and circumstances that surround students' lives and decision-making processes.

Furthermore, drawing again on Becker (1998), non-completion can be more adequately regarded, I would argue, as a series of gradual steps rather than as a moment or event. This conceptualisation encourages an appreciation of the complexities and nuances involved in the decision-making processes that ultimately lead to non-completion. Methodologically, then, I attempt to understand the students' stories by looking at individual trajectories, journeys, circumstances that precede and trigger these decision-making processes. However, as Cohen et al. (2000) point out:

*The danger of interactionist and interpretive approaches is their relative neglect of the power of external – structural – forces to shape behaviour and events. There is a risk in interpretive approaches that they become hermetically sealed from the world outside the participants' theatre of activity (p. 27).*

Therefore, to reiterate, in examining the students' interpretations of their experiences, I also consider the location of non-completion in wider social relations and examine students' experiences of non-completion in relation to their social backgrounds and within a broader context of families, communities, and national (cultural, economic and political) factors.

## **Research strategy**

### *Case study design*

A research design is the tool by which research questions are turned into research projects (Robson, 2002). The design that a study adopts directly depends on the questions that it attempts to investigate (Manstead and Semin, 1988). Thus, specific kinds of research questions favour particular methodological strategies over others (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2003). In his book on case study design, Yin (2003) argues that *how* and *why* types of questions preferably lead to case studies as these seek to understand individual perceptions and can interrogate specific situations to provide 'fine grain detail' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). Conversely, *what* and *how many* types of questions, in their attempt to describe incidence and prevalence, tend to favour survey designs that can provide a larger number of responses but necessarily more 'coarsely grained' information about them.

I have designed this research as a case study of non-completion in a single institution. Details of the selection of the particular institution are below, but first it is important to refer briefly to the way in which I understand this specific 'case study', particularly since the term is used in social research with various different meanings. As Gerring (2007) points out, case study can mean:

*...that its method is qualitative, small-N; that the research is holistic, thick (a more or less comprehensive examination of a phenomenon); that it utilizes a particular type of evidence (e.g. ethnographic, clinical, non-experimental, non-survey based, participant observation, process tracing, historical, textual, or field research); that its method of evidence gathering is naturalistic (a 'real-life context'); that the research investigates the properties of a single observation; or that the research investigates the properties of a single phenomenon, instance, or example (p. 94) .*

I draw on Merriam's (2009) definition of case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 43) or single unit of analysis (the case). That is, a case study as an intensive examination which attempts "to reveal the complexities of specific sites or processes" (Ball, 1996). In doing so, the case study focuses on "holistic description and explanation" (Merriam, 2009, p. 43), thus including contextual information about the phenomenon under study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). This makes case studies particularly suitable when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not obvious (Yin, 2003, p. 13). A case study, therefore, seeks depth of explanation over breadth of information (Yin, 2003) and enables a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of individuals' thoughts and feelings in their lived experiences.

My aim is "to explore intensively and analyse deeply" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000) the perceptions of non-completers about their experience of having being a student and their decision-making processes "within complex interactions of circumstances and relationships that shape the case" (Nisbet and Watt, 1984, p. 72). The holistic approach, or the inclusion of the context within which non-completion takes place, has a twofold meaning. First, as noted

already, the experiences of students at university cannot be isolated from either social, economic and familial circumstances or institutional logics or national education policies. Second, and referring to the meaning that is generally attributed to ‘context’ in the case study bibliography (that is, the “phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 2003)), I look at the institution (UBA’s Faculty of Social Sciences as I explain below), its practices and culture, as the immediate background against which non-completion occurs, and against which I analyse the students’ stories. This methodological approach distinguishes this study from most single institution studies which, as Attinasi (1989) indicates, are based on survey methods which “strip away the context surrounding the student’s decision to persist or not to persist in college and exclude from consideration the student’s own perceptions of the process” (p. 250). Yet, in distinguishing this study from what are sometimes called *institutional case studies*, the institution where I conduct this research is the context rather than the target (Yin, 2003) of the study. Therefore, I take institutional practices within UBA’s Faculty of Social Sciences, procedures and culture into account but do not devote a separate section of the thesis to describing the research site in detail; rather, this is done through the presentation and interpretation of the interview materials.

Yorke (1999) makes the point that “much of the research into retention and non-completion has been undertaken at the level of the single institution and therefore has limited generalizability” (p. 12). Indeed, in clarifying my methodological approach, it is important to refer briefly to what can be regarded as limitations of this study, especially because one of the main criticisms of the case study method is precisely its limited power to generalise. Yet, on the other hand, and as Robson writes in relation to case studies, “at the heart of it is the idea that the case is studied in its own right, not as a sample from a population” (Robson, 2002, p. 5) so case studies do not necessarily seek nor claim generalisability.

However, the way in which we understand generalisation and what we expect from it are not always clear-cut. As Yin (2003) suggests, generalisation can be based on statistical methods but there is also a form of generalisation that is 'analytic'. This is to say, generalisation does not have to be based on probability samples that give estimations of population parameters (Robson, 2002); rather, it is theory ('grounded theory') which is "the main vehicle for generalising the results of the case study" (Yin, 2003, p. 33). Writing about ethnography but with relevance to case study research, Ball (1990) points out that 'concepts are the goal rather than law-like generalizations' (p. 189) when the aim is "to capture, part at least, of a social totality" (Ball, 1990, p. 189). In sketching an alternative framework for the understanding of non-completion, my research can be seen as representing one move towards the development of a grounded theory but I am not claiming to establish a theory of non-completion as such.

The issue of statistical versus analytic generalisation then is directly connected to the purpose and nature of each particular piece of research. This study is not about *hypothesis testing*, but it is about exploration and discovery. Drawing on Bogdan and Biklen (1992), I do not attempt to claim that the reasons for non-completion I identify would necessarily apply to the larger universe of Argentine public universities.

Flyvbjerg (2006) points out the frequent underestimation, particularly within the positivist tradition, of 'the force of the example' (p. 228) and suggests, drawing on Popper's falsification law, that the discovery of a single black swan would falsify the proposition that 'all swans are white' and would therefore hold significance and be a basis for further research. He goes on to point out that "the case study is well suited for identifying 'black swans' because of its in-depth approach" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 228). Drawing on Flyvbjerg, I see this case study of non-

completion in a single institution as having the potential to question the way in which we currently understand non-completion and its meaning in the Argentine context (e.g. if non-completion within my research site is a ‘black swan’, then we need to re-think Tinto or re-think the category ‘swan’). And also, to show the limitations of other studies which have attempted to generalise.

### *The research site*

The literature on case studies identifies a number of different reasons why a single-case might be selected for study leading to what have been called the ‘critical case’; ‘extreme or unique case’; ‘typical or representative case’; ‘revelatory case’; and ‘longitudinal case’ (Denscombe, 2003; Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2003). I became particularly interested in the potential of what some authors call the ‘critical’ case, that is the purposeful selection of a case that “can be defined as having strategic importance in relation to the general problem” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229) so that insight into a particular issue can be developed from the study of that particular instance/case.

I selected the University of Buenos Aires (*Universidad de Buenos Aires*, UBA) as the research site. A number of aspects of UBA have influenced its selection for this study. Created in 1821, UBA is located in the capital, the largest city in the country, and is, in turn, the largest university with about 300,000 students (Kisilevsky *et al*, 1997). UBA can be considered as the most traditional university in Argentina, not just because it is “one of the oldest universities in the region, [and] it reflects more than most Latin American institutions the Napoleonic tradition of serving the state through the preparation and training of public servants” (Rhoads *et al*, 2006, p. 174) but also as it is still characterised as “the flagship of higher education in the Southern

Cone” (García de Fanelli, 2006b, p. 573). As Garcia de Fanelli goes on to point out, UBA “is emblematic of the democratic ideals of higher education, offering a high degree of access to the poor and lower-middle classes [...] With its open access policy, minimal fees, and coverage of the most advanced segments of science and technology in the country” (Garcia de Fanelli, 2006, p. 573).

UBA is the paradigmatic example of the Argentine university tradition. This is reflected, for example, in the endurance of open access policies, despite some other universities having introduced changes to admissions (entrance examinations or specific entry courses) (Trombetta, 1998), and of free tuition and traditional types of academic and curricular organisation. Smaller universities in particular have “managed to implement policies that would have been highly controversial in other universities, such as admission exams and quota and voluntary monthly fees” (San Martin, 2004, my translation). In addition, some of these smaller and relatively new universities have introduced shorter, vocational degree programmes, and more flexible curricular structures with initial general cycles which enable later choice of specialism and easier change across subjects (San Martin, 2004). They have also introduced forms of departmental organisation which are considered to enable a better use of available resources<sup>32</sup> (Storni, 2005, p. 7).

Indeed, UBA is seen as embodying the strongest opposition to government-led changes which have largely been construed as restricting institutional autonomy. This resistance is illustrated, for example, in UBA’s decision in 2000 not to apply for accreditation of its undergraduate programmes (those issuing degrees for government regulated professions) to the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation, a decision enabled by the Supreme Court of Justice ruling declaration of the unconstitutionality within UBA of articles 42, 43 and



46b of the Higher Education Act (Toscano, 2005, p. 362). The decision by UBA's University Council (*Consejo Superior*) was reversed after 2001 but it is indicative of the conflictual relationship between UBA and central authorities over the institution's particular definition of 'autonomy' (Finochiaro, 2003).

In addition, as part of the complexities of managing such a large university amid financial constraints, as noted already, some estimates indicate that UBA is the public university with the highest number of teaching staff working for no pay (52.5 per cent) (Casas, 2007b); it also has a large number of part-time professors (65 per cent) (San Martin, 2005b); and it has one of the lowest levels of per/student funding. Indeed, budget deterioration in the last few years has affected UBA in particular. As Rhoads et al. (2006) put it, "the economic fallout for the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) has been crippling" (p. 165) and some estimates place UBA as the third worst off national university in terms of per/student funding. All of this makes UBA a 'critical' site within which the interrelationships of the different spheres and levels at work in non-completion can be examined.

Within UBA, I have focused on non-completion in one academic unit in particular, the Faculty of Social Sciences. Feasibility and accessibility have been very significant in its selection for this study, and having been a student and member of staff at the site enabled me to gain access and get information which would both have been impossible otherwise. I explain this in more detail below, but besides these issues, there are other aspects of the Faculty of Social Sciences which make it a very pertinent site for my research.

Of the 13 Faculties under which UBA is organized<sup>33</sup>, the Faculty of Social Sciences has been the fastest growing in terms of student enrolment between 2000 and 2004 - just before

fieldwork was conducted (see Table 1). However, despite the growing interest of students in degree programmes within the social sciences, there is evidence that non-completion rates are higher in this subject area compared to all others except the *basic* (chemistry, mathematics, physics and biology) and technological sciences<sup>34</sup>.

**Table 3: Student enrolment by academic units (UBA)**

Faculty	Student Population		
	Number	%	Increase 2000/2004
Agronomy	3,831	1.3	32.5
Architecture, Design and Urbanism	23,818	8.1	32.1
Economic Sciences	44,609	15.2	8.6
Exact and Natural Sciences	6,023	2.0	26.2
<b>Social Sciences</b>	<b>25,298</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>51.6</b>
Veterinarian Sciences	4,675	1.6	31.2
Law	31,316	10.7	11.7
Pharmacy and Biochemistry	5,067	1.7	1.7
Philosophy and letters	14,262	4.9	33.8
Engineering	9,817	3.3	36.7
Medicine	25,552	8.7	16.9
Odontology	1,964	0.7	-20.8
Psychology	18,565	6.3	30.0
Introductory Course general to all faculties	79,199	26.9	3.8
Rectorado	42	0.01	N/A
<b>TOTAL UBA</b>	<b>294,038</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>16.3</b>

Source: UBA. Secretariat of Academic Affairs 2004 using data from Students' Census.

There is some evidence across different countries of a subject split in non-completion rates whereby, as within UBA, non-completion is highest in the sciences (McGivney, 1996; Longden, 2002). However, in the international literature, the social sciences are not associated with particularly high non-completion. For example, in the UK, McGivney (1996) reports higher non-completion rates in science, engineering and technology subject areas than in arts, social sciences and vocational (p. 62). Discontent among students created by “the heavy work load and busy timetable” of subjects such as health science (Schedvin 1986, in McInnis et al, p. 22), and disciplinary cultures indifferent to students' learning (Hewitt and Seymour, 1997) within science, mathematics and engineering have been identified as leading to students' disengagement from these areas. Johnes (1997) identifies ‘staff student ratio and the length of

the degree course' as factors influencing differences in non-completion across subjects, although there is no indication of specific sources of discontent among students in the social sciences.

So, it is significant that in Argentina there is a high level of interest among students in the social sciences, as mentioned above, which however, for many, is adversely effected by their student experience. There might be specific issues related to the opportunities of these subjects in the Argentine labour market (e.g. a difficult entry into the employment market) or, in relation to this, a perception of a lower status of the social sciences in society<sup>35</sup>, which might play a role in higher than average non-completion in these areas. However, if this were the case, it is not clear why the subject attracts so many students in the first place.

Within all this, I am aware that a comparison between subjects (one subject with high and one with low non-completion rates, one academic and one more vocational) would highlight subject specific reasons and cultures. Hence I had initially considered a comparison between three academic units; the schools of engineering, economics and social sciences but the comparison became unfeasible as I was denied permission to access the first two sites, as I explain below. Nonetheless, UBA's Faculty of Social Sciences (referred to as the Faculty, from now on), with fast growing subject areas and higher than average non-completion rates, seems a particularly rich site in terms of the opportunities it offers for examining the interplay of individual, institutional and larger cultural/societal factors in non-completion. Perhaps beyond being a 'critical case', UBA's Faculty of Social Sciences can be seen as a 'worst case' encapsulating the history, conflicts, problems and 'crisis' of Argentine higher education.

Subordinated to the ‘substantive’ selection criteria, however, the choice of a research site is often also influenced by considerations that are of a practical kind, that is, practical reasons that incline the researcher toward one setting over other equally suitable alternatives (Denscombe, 2003). Some of these reasons are identified in textbooks as ease of travel and cost, although the likelihood of gaining access to the research site/field can often be the most problematic and defining issue.

In fact, given the nature of this research, the capacity to negotiate access was a decisive element in defining the feasibility of the project. It is common for research on non-completion to report several kinds of difficulties. Among these, there are ‘legislative restrictions linked to issues of data protection’ (Davies and Elias, 2003, p. 1) which can lead institutions, in protecting the confidentiality of students’ records, to deny access. This happens unless, as in the case of Davies and Elias’ (2003) study for example, clerical availability enables the institution to contact the ‘target population’ themselves (to “mail blank questionnaires supplied to them [by the research team] for this purpose” (Davies and Elias, 2003, p. 3)).

I only found out about Argentine legislation on data protection affecting the universities’ capacity to disclose students’ information to a third party upon my requests to access the three UBA Faculties where I intended to explore non-completion. The legislation (Data Protection Act 25,326) was relatively recent (November 2000). Amid serious financial restrictions and with underpaid administrative staff at UBA, the possibility that administrative staff would be able to identify a sample of non-completers and request their consent to take part in the study was highly unlikely, particularly so at the two Faculties within which I did not have any prior contacts. In fact, citing data protection, I was categorically denied access at both UBA’s Faculty of Engineering and Faculty of Economic Sciences. Hence, my personal knowledge of

UBA's Faculty of Social Sciences and of staff still employed at the site became major factors in enabling access. This was arranged informally through my personal relationships with members of the staff (I come back to this below when I describe the difficulties and challenges I faced in the early stages of data collection) and the Dean of the Faculty agreed to make staff available within the Academic Secretariat to help to request participants' consent prior to disclosing any contact information to me, and therefore overcoming the confidentiality obstacle.

### **Difficulties and challenges in data collection**

An important feature of qualitative inquiry is that it is done flexibly and creatively. The qualitative research process has often been conceptualized as an "open contract" (Locke, Spirduso and Silverman, 1993) in the sense that:

*Unlike the typical quantitative investigation, the qualitative research worker sometimes must move back and forth between data sources and ongoing data analysis during the period of data collection. Initial questions are progressively narrowed or, on occasion, shifted entirely as the nature of the living context becomes apparent through preliminary analysis (p. 111).*

This study was devised and conducted in these terms. Indeed, as the research progressed, the notion of "open contract" took on a very significant role as I was forced to shift and accommodate the research questions and strategy to the difficulties and challenges that I was presented with. Firstly, the decision to focus my study on the social sciences was made following the denial of permission to study the other two selected subject areas. Secondly, difficulties in identifying non-completers and in contacting a significant number of them, as I

explain below, led me to reassess the exclusive focus of my interviews on the narratives of non-completers. In this sense, the fieldwork journey served as a testimony to the frequent gap between ideal, predictable, off-the-shelf techniques recommended by methodology textbooks in which “complex and difficult processes involved in the selection of a case, gaining entry, being accepted, establishing rapport, and beginning to be able to record, let alone understand, data are reduced to mere technicalities” (Ball, 1990, p. 168) and the challenges and creativity demanded by real world research (Robson, 2002).

I often thought of Wright Mills’ (2000) classic view of social science as “the practice of a craft” (p. 195), particularly at the times when the fieldwork demanded resilience and flexibility to deal with unexpected obstacles in creative ways. Yet through the difficulties I confronted there came significant learning and new insight, and I ended up regarding the obstacles I faced while trying to do the research as an illustration of some of the difficulties students themselves encounter in their university experience.

A telling example of what I mean with the parallel between my difficulties and those of the students is in the procedure UBA’s Faculty of Economic Sciences followed to deny my request for permission to undertake my study. I had managed to secure an interview with a high ranking member of staff within the Academic Secretariat to whom I explained the research proposal and showed the letter requesting permission. He made clear that the decision was down to the School Council (*Consejo Directivo*) but that he could put my request forward for consideration at the next Council meeting within the following two weeks; yet I still needed to follow the formal procedure and send my request via the ‘Intake Office’ (*Mesa de Entradas*), the little window where every letter is transformed into a file (*expediente*), given a number, and starts its journey through the building for appropriate stamps. As it turned out, it took the

Faculty of Economics thirteen months to reply negatively to my request (something similar happened at the Faculty of Engineering although in this case the process was more expeditious).

However, over and against the concern with the confidentiality of students' personal data, it is common practice within the Faculty and at UBA at large to post exams, papers and assignments results as well as final grades for courses on public notice boards in corridors, particularly at the end of each academic term. This not only runs counter to the best interests of students as the provision of feedback on written work is a central element of forms of assessment that enhance learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998) but is also most certainly a form of disclosure of personal data – although no one in authority appears to be concerned by this.

Furthermore, to take over a year to process such a request seems both to indicate the existence of internecine bureaucratic procedures and illustrate a more fundamental problem of unintended outcomes of institutional practices. For even if the rejection of access is made in the name of protecting the interests of students (e.g. their right to confidentiality), it could be argued that such a study would illuminate the problems experienced by the most vulnerable students and enable the consideration of appropriate changes to institutional practices, particularly, given that financial constraints make it impossible to conduct this type of research internally. The rejection gave me a feel for something that I found later during fieldwork, that is, institutional procedures and practices that work, albeit unintentionally, to disadvantage those whom they are supposed to benefit. I will illustrate this with extracts from the interviews in the following chapters.

Even in the Faculty of Social Sciences there were difficulties such as identifying non-completers through students' records and extracting contact data. It is common for surveys of non-completion to have problems in "defining and sampling a population of non-completers" (Davies and Elias, 2003). One frequent problem relates to the difficulties in discriminating 'withdrawers' from 'transferers' or 'interrupters'. As Yorke explained, "a significant number of those who do not continue a particular course of higher education will continue their studies elsewhere or will resume full-time study after a short break" (in Davies and Elias, 2003, p. 3).

The difficulty of identification was exacerbated by the way students' records are kept within the Faculty and the limited capacity of these records to discriminate between current students and non-completers, partly a result of the flexibility in attendance patterns and the loose definition of 'active' (or 'regular') student status<sup>36</sup>. In addition, the database supports a limited search function whereby it is not possible to sort those who have not registered for a number of academic terms/years. The only search option is by surnames, that is, if a certain surname is searched, data for a person or list of people with that surname would be retrieved, with their corresponding academic records (courses taken and dates of registration). Given this, I decided to use the telephone directory as a guide to popular surnames to perform the searches. Also, for the purposes of initial contact, I decided to ask the administrative staff in charge of requesting consent to participate in my study to contact those who had not registered as students during the previous two years. Out of these searches, and due to outdated contact details, people who could not be reached, and others who indicated they had not withdrawn from the course, I was finally given 20 names and contact details of non-completers who had initially consented to participate in the study.



However, as the official processes of identifying non-completers and contacting them was becoming difficult and time consuming, I also tried other strategies in order to reach non-completers, principally snowballing through the Students' Union and participants themselves as they were being interviewed. That meant that I was able to carry out a first stage of fieldwork in July/August 2005 while I was waiting for the results of the process of identification and initial contact by the Academic Secretariat, but with limited success since only 8 non-completers were interviewed as a result.

Difficulties in tracking down research participants are common when research attempts to deal with an 'elusive' population such as that of non-completers, especially when their contact details are often outdated due to the high incidence of temporary accommodation among students. In addition, Davies and Elias (2003) note that "people are less willing to provide information about activities that they did not complete" (p. ii) so response rates tend to be low<sup>37</sup>. However, my experience of response rates has been different: most of the people with whom contact was made were willing to participate in the study and, later during the interviews, were very keen to share their experience of non-completion with me. Indeed, these people not only displayed a great willingness to be interviewed and seemed keen to share feelings and thoughts about their higher education experience but also seemed to have displayed considerable familiarity with the interview situation, something that might be related to the effects of what Fontana and Frey (2003) call the "interview society" (p. 63). Talking about the US, they observe the extent to which "as a society we rely on the interview and by and large take it for granted [...] rules and norms are known and shared" (Fontana and Frey, 2003, p. 64) among a general sense that "one cannot escape being interviewed" (p. 63). Some of this probably explains the familiarity and ease that my respondents displayed at the idea of arranging a meeting and being interviewed (on a couple of occasions I was even reminded to

activate the tape recorder), although some other possible reasons of this willingness to participate are offered below.

In turn, the difficulties in tracking down non-completers highlighted the relative ease of reaching current students, not just because they could be approached on the site (in the classroom, corridor, cafeteria) but also because contact records about them tend to be updated. This triggered a consideration of whether current students could contribute anything of relevance to the understanding of non-completion. Why don't students drop out? What is different and what is the same about completers and non-completers? Ultimately, the inclusion of students who are still at university, or had just graduated, allowed me to get 'the other half of the story', to drive in from different angles and build up a richer picture around the data from the non-completers. As a result of this shift, I conducted 9 semi-structured interviews with current students and recent graduates whose stories were used as a means for comparison and as a triangulation element which can add "rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 5). I do not devote a specific part of the analysis to the stories of these students, rather I use these data sporadically throughout the different chapters to contrast and compare - as a counter-point of the non-completers.

A second stage of fieldwork took place in December 2005/January 2006. In total, I was able to interview a total of 20 non-completers (withdrawers for the year 2003/4; 2002/2003 although I later discovered that some of the respondents had already dropped out from other subject/s in the past) and 9 current students and recent graduates. All the non-completers in the sample had been at the Faculty for no less than 1 year although the majority of them (14) had studied at the Faculty for over 2 years before withdrawing. The respondents were as follows:

**Table 4: The participants in this study**

Name	Sex	Age	Generational status <sup>38</sup>	Subject	Enrolment status
Analía	F	24	1st generation	Sociology	Non-completer
Carolina	F	25	1st generation	Sociology	Non-completer
Dana	F	22	1st generation	Social communication	Non-completer
Darío	M	23	1st generation	Political Science	Non-completer
Eugenia	F	26	2nd generation	Sociology	Non-completer
Federico	M	26	1st generation	Social communication	Non-completer
Fernando	M	23	1st generation	Labour relations	Non-completer
Gabriela	F	25	1st generation	Sociology	Non-completer
Inés	F	26	2nd generation	Sociology	Non-completer
Julia	F	22	2nd generation	Political Science	Non-completer
Lala	M	24	2nd generation	Social communication	Non-completer
Laura	F	25	1st generation	Political science	Non-completer
Lucía	F	22	1st generation	Social communication	Non-completer
Manuel	M	26	1st generation	Social communication	Non-completer
María	F	22	1st generation	Sociology	Non-completer
Natalia	F	22	1st generation	Sociology	Non-completer
Octavio	M	22	1nd generation	Sociology	Non-completer
Pablo	M	28	2nd generation	Sociology	Non-completer
Paola	F	24	1st generation	Social communication	Non-completer
Pedro	M	25	1st generation	(many subjects)	Non-completer
Ana	F	25	2nd generation	Labour relations	Long term student
Kike	M	25	2nd generation	Political Science	Student
Juan	M	24	2nd generation	Sociology	Student
Victoria	F	22	2nd generation	Political Science	Recent graduate
Verónica	F	26	1st generation	Sociology	Recent graduate
Valeria	F	25	2nd generation	Political Science	Recent graduate
Martín	M	26	1st generation	Political Science	Advanced student
Carol	F	24	2nd generation	Sociology	Advanced student
Tomás	M	24	2nd generation	Sociology	Advanced student

The sample is homogeneous as regards the respondent's ethnic background, consisting only of white Argentines. This is not surprising if regarded within the context of what official sources describe as an ethnically homogeneous larger population: "Most sources report Argentina's population as 97 percent white (mostly of Spanish and Italian descent) and three percent *mestizo* [mixed white and Amerindian ancestry] or other non-white groups"<sup>39</sup> (Human Rights Documentation Center, 2001).

Bearing in mind my attempt to capture depth and richness of data and considering the difficulty in locating non-completers, I was not as concerned with the size of the sample as I was with trying to ensure "range and diversity" (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, p. 277) which, according to qualitative researchers, "optimises the chances of identifying the full range of factors or features that are associated with a phenomenon" (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, p. 83). As the analysis took place alongside data collection (between the two stages of fieldwork and alongside each stage – I describe this below), the issue of "data saturation" or 'theoretical saturation', that is, the "point when no new insights would be obtained from expanding the sample further" (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, p. 80) became more relevant than the size of the sample in defining data collection. So the sample was considered to represent the range of degree programmes offered within the faculty; students' educational background in the public and private sectors of secondary schools; full time and 'working' students and gender.

In addition to the non-completers and students, I interviewed two senior members of staff who were also lecturers. One was a high-ranking member of the Faculty management within the Academic Secretariat and also held a Chair in the Sociology programme. The other was also a member of staff within the Academic Secretariat and a junior lecturer in Social Communication. The interviews with these managers/lecturers provided information on aspects

of the procedures of the Faculty as well as the constraints in which the Faculty operated, which, in turn, provided more context to the stories of non-completers and students, and fitted with one of the basic rules of the case study method which is the use of “multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (Yin, 2003, p. 14).

### **The interviews**

The main strength of interviews has been described as the ‘richness’ and ‘vividness’ of the material they collect (Gillham, 2000). Because interviews allow for greater depth than other methods of data collection, they are seen as the best tools for eliciting subjective accounts of emotionally loaded topics (Morrison, 1993). Depending on the skills of the interviewer, interviews might enable respondents to talk freely and emotionally about their experiences, in a rich, authentic and honest way (Oppenheim, 1992). Thus, whenever participants are accessible, interviews are the privileged tools for data collection when depth of meaning, insight and understanding are central to the purpose of the research (Gillham, 2000).

In order to explore the decision-making processes of students at the Faculty, I needed a tool for data collection that had the potential to explore the students’ subjective accounts of their experiences of non-completion. As Brunsten et al. indicated, interviews are “likely to offer a richer and more sensitive understanding of the dropout process” (Brunsten *et al*, 2000, p. 307) than has often been achieved in the study of non-completion through the use of surveys and questionnaires which are unsuited to explore human subjectivity and provide depth of explanation (Drever, 1995).

The interviews were conducted in cafes except for two that took place at the participants' homes at their suggestion and participants were offered flexibility of timing for the interviews. Within the Argentine culture, with its "long tradition of long nights of coffee and debate on absolutely everything from football to quantum mechanics" (Edwards, 2008, p. 218), cafes are seen as natural places for a broad range of human interactions. As Foster et al. note, "social life and to a great extent business life revolve around the cafes of the capital" (Foster et al., 1998, p. 47) a phenomenon that in its origin is believed to have been associated with "the need to have a meeting place outside of the home" (Foster et al., 2007, p. 47). Therefore, even if creating difficulty for transcription in terms of background noise, I assumed cafes would be perceived by my respondents as natural and unthreatening environments for establishing rapport and that they would be crucially 'neutral' in relation to the university.

The interviews lasted between one and two hours. They were all tape-recorded with the consent of participants, and fully transcribed, although not translated (only extracts quoted to illustrate the analysis were translated into English). The confidentiality of the respondents was protected through the use of pseudonyms. Comments were jotted down at the end of each interview in order to try to capture issues that were raised before or after the tape recorder was switched on, and general feelings and thoughts about the encounters were noted down.

I used an interview schedule or topic guide (Patton, 1980) with a number of topics and issues specified in advance, which helped me to ensure coverage of the most important issues I wanted to raise (Drever, 1995) and to make collection somehow systematic for each respondent (Patton, 1980). However, in the attempt to understand the complexities and nuances involved in non-completion as a process rather than as a abrupt break, I tried to encourage respondents to "describe their experience in the form of a story" (Guenette & Marshall, 2009, p. 86) and get

them to engage in self-reflective storytelling about their student trajectories and journeys. Among the topics covered were the instances of ‘opportunities’ and ‘crises’ for them in higher education within a consideration of background experiences, motivations and aspirations in relation to higher education and the different aspects involved in their educational decision-making processes. The open-endedness of questions enabled the questions to flow naturally and following the thread of the respondents’ stories/arguments, new questions were introduced as the interviews proceeded, allowing important, yet unforeseen, issues to be raised (Silverman, 1993). Prompts and probes were used to clarify ideas where appropriate. This was particularly so in the (few) cases of less forthcoming respondents who were not as willing (or able) “to take up the invitation to become a narrator of his or her [...] experience” (Guenette and Marshall, 2009, p. 86).

My attempt to elicit narrative accounts was also related to, as Elliot (2005) put it, “the aim of empowering respondents” (p. 29), something that according to Mishler (1986) is encouraged when respondents are invited to ‘speak in their own voice’. Indeed, during the interviews most, if not all, of my respondents displayed a quite remarkable eagerness to share their perceptions and feelings about their experience of non-completion with me, and seemed quite thrilled that someone was interested in and listening to *their* particular stories. This seemed to have been particularly so following their portrayal of themselves as ‘voiceless’ in the context of the university, as having borne the burden of an anonymous and unnoticed presence within a huge institution (I support this point with several extracts from the interviews in the following chapters). Yet they were equally interested in hearing from me, particularly in relation to my thoughts about the topic and more specifically on hearing about the experiences of other respondents, in turn perhaps an expression of a need to validate or legitimise their own experience with that of others.

Given that the interviews were conducted ‘after-the-event’, a consideration of some of the difficulties involved in the analysis of post-hoc rationalisations becomes important, particularly in the ways in which respondents would have sought to give morally adequate accounts of themselves. Yorke and Longden (2008) address this issue by arguing that “however, some respondents made it clear that they appreciated the opportunity to communicate (perhaps ‘get off their chests’) why they had decided to discontinue their programme of studies” (p. 12). This returns us to the point made in the last paragraph, and somewhat supports Yorke and Longden’s point, that being finally listened to is likely to be seen as an opportunity to gain a voice, a sentiment that, as noted, my respondents quite clearly displayed. Furthermore, as I exemplify with quotes throughout the text, rather than justifying their behaviour, my respondents tended to be highly self-critical and to attribute their incapacity to sort out problems and difficulties presented by the Faculty to their own sense of ‘inadequacy’ and ‘individual failure’. In turn, this is a phenomenon that I interpreted as evidence of the symbolic violence of institutional practices within the Faculty, as I explain in the remaining chapters.

In addition, the issue of the accuracy of respondents’ descriptions, particularly in retrospect which make them also liable to the influence of forgetting, is not necessarily a drawback of oral sources. As Portelli notes, oral sources “are not always reliable in point of fact. Rather than being a weakness, this is however, their strength: errors, inventions and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings” (Portelli 1991, cited in Elliott, 2005, p. 26). Furthermore, misrepresentation and distortion in the students’ accounts are possible but by no means necessary; and here the interviews with continuing students and recent graduates were of help as they could provide some triangulation of research data.



The use of narratives and the corresponding attempt to empower respondents were also related to ethical issues and the concern, which I share with feminist research methods, with minimizing power asymmetries in research relationships (Ribbens and Edwards, 1997). I was particularly aware of the differences between my respondents' lives and mine, interviewing them about not having finished an undergraduate degree for the purposes of my own doctoral studies. Most respondents were quite curious about me and I was asked several questions about the PhD at the end of each interview (some mentioned they had had thoughts about doing a PhD but things turned out differently for them), particularly in the context of my studies abroad which adds a new dimension to the issue of how I could be perceived by them. It was not just the natural curiosity about how things are different abroad but an underlying sense that they could not but be better, which, as I noted in the last chapter, often goes with a sense of inferiority of those who stay in the country vis-à-vis others who leave. I do not have a straightforward answer to the extent to which all of this can impose limits on the validity of this study, but it does highlight the need "to appreciate how I am perceived" (Ball, 1990) and interpret the respondents' stories bearing this in mind and in that particular context.

Finally, it would have been an advantage to be able to interview my respondents more than once, for example, after having sent the transcripts to them to see whether this could trigger further reflection. However, not all of the respondents were willing, or perhaps had the time, to agree to read the transcripts. Some of those who were sent the transcripts, however, responded saying that they did not have further comments to make but rather had questions about my research, and were interested in hearing my views about the topic. I did not interpret this as a sign of weakness in the empirical material; on the contrary, I thought it confirmed my own view that the interviews provided comprehensive, detailed, rich data in the first place.

## Analysis of data

In this final section, I describe the procedures involved in moving “from the raw data to the research findings” (Denscombe, 2003, p. 273) and the approach I took to the analysis of the data.

The first stage of data management consisted of the attentive reading of the interview transcripts in the attempt to identify themes and sub-themes and refine them through the process of increasing familiarisation with the data. I uploaded the interview transcripts into NVivo but as I started the coding process I discovered that meaningful connections were still taking place in my mind, and that I felt more comfortable handling hard copies with coding on the margins, highlighted sections, scribbles and a code notepad - so I resorted to traditional hand-coding. Manual coding was also enabled by the relatively small sample size.

At the initial stage, the interviews were ‘open coded’ to identify key concepts and themes (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). However, data analysis did not begin only when all data was collected but took place alongside data collection. This meant that each stage of fieldwork was increasingly focused on exploring further some of the themes and categories that were emerging from the analysis of data already collected. This ‘iterative’ process, which is basic to the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), is seen as letting “the fieldworker cycle back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting-new, often better quality-data” (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p. 49).

The first stage of interpretation thus focused on making sense of each respondent's distinctive way of looking at the Faculty and their experiences of non-completion. Subsequent analysis progressively focused on the notions of complexity and process and led me to increasingly concentrate fieldwork on making sense of the *interplay* and *intricacy* of the different levels at work in non-completion *throughout* the students' journeys, that is, on the complex and process-nature of disengagement and decision-making.

Drawing on studies of social class and educational choice in other contexts (among others: Ball, 2003; Ball *et al*, 2002; Ball, Reay and David, 2006; Reay, David and Ball, 2005), I was increasingly interested in the extent to which the ability to activate a range of capitals and resources was significant in defining those student journeys. Particularly, I was looking at whether and how those capitals and resources that were differently available to students influenced the ways in which different groups of students were able to sort out the many obstacles presented by the Faculty and facilitated different outcomes at moments of crisis throughout the journey. This encouraged me to try and use a version of the 'critical incident' technique in subsequent interviews whereby respondents were asked to reflect on something that had struck them, either positively or negatively, throughout their student experiences, and construct meaning about their particular way of looking at and perceiving their experience from those incidents. This provided insight into how different groups of students defined significant moments in their journeys and dealt with and placed themselves in relation to these. As a result, respondents mentioned and reflected on a range of issues from life-changing lectures to failed exams and the emotional costs involved. This helped me to make sense of the way respondents were seeing themselves in relation to higher education and their senses of self-confidence, belonging, isolation and inadequacy.

Yet my approach to coding the interviews was relatively ‘heterodox’ in that I drew on some of the coding techniques recommended by qualitative researchers such as Strauss & Corbin (2008) but did not attempt to establish a theory from data as assumed in the coding procedures within grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In this sense, inductive analysis was used in open-coding the transcripts so that “the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (Patton, 1980, p. 306). In other words, there was a deliberate attempt not to restrict the analysis to existing theory, particularly in the context of the weaknesses identified in mainstream approaches to non-completion in previous chapters, but to engage in a sort of ‘dialogue’ whereby data could be interrogated in the search of relationships and connections that were not foreseen. Yet data analysis did not take place in a theoretical vacuum. As Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) point out:

*Patterns, themes, and categories do not emerge on their own. They are driven by what the inquirer wants to know and how the inquirer interprets what the data are telling her or him according to subscribed theoretical frameworks, subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological positions, and intuitive field understandings (p. 77).*

Indeed, deductive or theory-driven reasoning was used as a means of relating emergent ideas to theoretical tools from which data were looked at. Some of Bourdieu’s concepts such as habitus, the forms of capitals and their existence and functioning in relation to particular fields and symbolic violence, as well as a set of ideas and perspectives from critical approaches, informed the analysis and were particularly helpful in enabling me to make sense and interpret the respondents’ narratives. This is the task that I undertake in the next four chapters.

## Complex trajectories

*The truth is that I still continue to fight because I want to study and I want to learn. I don't know if it is me, the country, the Faculty itself, but I know it is complicated for me, it's not that I don't have the will (Dana, Social Communication non-completer)*

## Introduction

The analysis of the interview data indicates that non-completion at the case study institution is the product of an interwoven mix of circumstances that cannot easily be separated out. The respondents in this study mentioned a variety of reasons that prompted their decision to withdraw from university, as I will come back to discuss in more detail: the demands of work might become too high making studies incompatible with work; students might discover that they do not like their chosen subject and decide to do other things in life; they might find it too difficult to satisfy the academic demands of university; or increasing family commitments make it difficult to keep up with studies.

However, the respondents' accounts also suggest some ambiguity in relation to their motives and rationales, for example, with doubts as to what would have happened had the university experience offered them something different, or had the country provided more encouraging prospects of professional realisation. Under those circumstances, as many non-completers observed, the reasons why they withdrew could have been counterbalanced in such a way that they would have continued. So it is not in the isolated factors but in their interaction and interconnectedness that non-completion arises.

To begin the presentation and discussion of the interview data, in this chapter I focus on one area of disengagement that relates to the so-called 'external factors'. As noted in earlier chapters, Tinto's theory has been criticised for ignoring the role of 'external factors' in non-completion, and these ranged from the students' social backgrounds and financial situations through to their external commitments of different kinds (such as dependents or health-related), and the ways these influenced the chances for students' continued engagement with their courses. In this chapter, I particularly focus on the students' relationship with work, as it emerged as a central theme from the analysis of the interview data. The 'financial' need to work and what comes with it in terms of responsibilities, demands, commitment, and dedication, appear as a very significant issue in the lives of students and the interviews show that, for many of those who withdraw from university, the challenges in balancing work and studies can become impossible to cope with.

However, a view of external commitments as constraint or obligation fails to recognise that external commitments are at times the product of choices made out of perceptions, beliefs and values about higher education and about the external world and their relative importance. Some of these are socially constructed and need to be taken into account as these can play a role in disengaging from higher education even those students who do not struggle financially. James (2001), writing about the Australian context, points out that "It is easy to uncouple from the university experience if the academic and social net allows you to slip through, perhaps more so when the external world offers multiple distractions and opportunities" (p. 77).

This sort of 'competition' between college and the external world appears to be an important feature of student disengagement from the Faculty. It seems to be present, too, among

persisting students within the two-way relation in which engagement takes place, not only on the basis of what the university offers to and requires from students, but also on what students expect and the kinds of engagements they are able and prepared to develop. Therefore, through the relationship between students and work, in this chapter, I explore a set of interconnected issues: beliefs about what work and higher education mean in the lives of students; beliefs and expectations about the labour market and professional accomplishment; beliefs about the value of higher education and of a university qualification; and the impact of these on the students' trajectories in terms of time.

### Working students

*Those who complete are those who somehow manage to link the university to other aspects of their lives* (Juan, Sociology student)

A first approximation to the lives of the students as reflected in the interviews suggests that being students is only part of the range of activities (and identities) in which students at the Faculty engage. Indeed, in the respondents' accounts of their student experiences, external activities appear as the dominant aspects of their social lives, and particularly and principally being workers in addition to students.

Working alongside studying is a common practice among Argentine students, especially among those in certain subjects. For example, in a survey carried out in the late 1990s, 51 per cent of students at the UBA Faculty of Social Sciences reported being employed in full-time jobs (more than 27 hours per week) and 27 per cent in part-time jobs (of up to 27 hours per week). Significantly, of the 21 per cent of students who were not working at the time of the survey, 50 per cent said they were actively seeking work (Toer, 1998, p. 244). This means that there is a significant proportion of students who work long hours.

These figures are considerably higher than those in other countries. For example, a comparison report of university education in the UK and the US using data of 1998-1999 identifies the US as having higher number of students engaged in paid term-time work, with 73 per cent of full-time students working an average of 21 hours per week (compared to 46 percent of UK full-time students who worked an average of 11 hours per week). Weko argues that “taken by itself, this difference is part of the reason that US university students less frequently complete their studies than do those in the UK” (p. 8). However, changes in the financing of higher education have created a different scenario for UK students where “employment has emerged as a common aspect of student lives” (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006, p. 30). According to the recent UK Youth Parliament survey of over 1,000 young people “almost 9 out of 10 expected to get paid work while at university” (BBC News, 2009). Similar trends are happening elsewhere; for example, in Australia, the “jump in the number of full-time students engaged in part-time work as well as the increase in the number of hours they worked”, were the main trends identified in Australian higher education according to a 1999 report (McInnis in University of Melbourne, 2000). Perhaps the most significant aspect of term-time employment among Argentine students is not just that it is undertaken by a large proportion of students but the number of hours that paid work involves: arguably students, at least in some disciplinary areas, can be best described as full-time workers.

The trend to increasingly combine studies with work in other countries is mainly attributed to changes in the funding of higher education with students having a greater role in financing their studies. For example, in the UK, Curtis and Shani (2002) point out that “the reason for such a marked increase in students taking part-time work is largely financial” (p. 130), as paid term-time work has increased following “the increased financial pressure on students” (Moreau and



Leathwood, 2006, p. 23) which has resulted from the replacement of students grants with loans and tuition fees in the context of the massification of higher education.

In turn, the amount of work undertaken by students at the Faculty can be explained by the financial needs of students derived from the social composition of the student body. According to a calculation that measured the socio-economic status of students by family income and parents' education, over half of the students at the Faculty of Social Sciences belong to middle to low and low income families<sup>40</sup> (Toer, 1998, p. 19). This means that even if undergraduate studies at UBA are tuition-free, with maintenance scholarships being marginal<sup>41</sup>, a large number of students would struggle to afford the direct and 'opportunity costs' of studying without working.

The extent and intensity of work among students was very evident among the participants in this study. All those who withdrew from the Faculty as well as the current students I interviewed had combined their studies at university with employment, some working longer hours than others. Some interview respondents emphasized that they could not have studied without working and at least four respondents started working as soon as they finished secondary school, not only in order to fund their own higher education, but also due to their families' need for them to fully support themselves on their income ("I started working when I was 18, my parents were struggling and couldn't support me any longer" (Pablo, sociology non-completer)). In two other cases, students were expected to contribute financially to the family. However, the remaining three quarters of the respondents talked about their having taken on employment as related to issues beyond the financial need derived from their economic situation:

*When I started my degree, I also began working. I don't know if at that time I really needed to work or ...well, my parents were not well enough off to completely fund my studies but I would say that I wanted to work anyway. I had kind of learnt it from childhood, work as... and I felt it was a priority (Natalia, Sociology non-completer).*

*When I was in 4<sup>th</sup> year of secondary school I started working because I wanted to work, and also because the situation of my father...he wasn't comfortable. But at the same time, I don't know if this is a justification or what, but I always handled myself more or less on my own, and I realise that this is my own decision more than the product of a need - this thing of wanting to be always independent (Gabriela, sociology non-completer).*

Illustrating a view that was common in the interviews, Natalia and Gabriela related work with a need for 'independence'. Indeed, the interviews suggest that work, beyond the monetary reward that it carries, is seen by many students as a (much valued) vehicle for independence from their families and a sense of social self-affirmation. In a study of the experiences of working students in an English university, Moreau and Leathwood (2006) also found that working was partly related to a 'desire to become more independent' among their respondents and related this with the effects of the "neo-liberal discourse of the self-responsible citizen as a worker, that is, as someone who takes full responsibility for providing for and maintaining themselves, now and in the future" (p. 27).

Drawing from Moreau and Leathwood (2006), the extent of paid work alongside study among the participants in this study can be seen as reflecting the effects of the neo-liberal discourse of the worker as 'the universal social subject' (Fraser, 1997 in Moreau and Leathwood, 2006, p.

27) underlying the views of what is acceptable and desirable for Argentine young adults, both within the university and outside. Apparent in the narratives was a sense of security that came with being an income earner that was not offered or achieved by being a student. An identity based on economic self-sufficiency appears as stronger, or more valued, than one associated with being a student. When talking about their student status many respondents seemed hesitant about whether to think about and present themselves as students or workers.

Furthermore, some of the respondents displayed an internalised belief about the responsibilities of becoming mature as being linked to employment, and in some cases as Natalia (above), it relates to values embedded in their families. Inés also refers to her motives for working in terms of a need for independence, one that was also shaped by family upbringing. Yet it is significant that even in the case of Inés, who comes from a highly educated family within which higher education was greatly valued, working (from an early age) was seen as much a responsibility as studying itself:

*I wanted to work. My mother told me since I was very little that the true independence of a person comes when she has economic independence, that while you depend financially on someone you have to comply with the norms and rules of the person on whom you depend. It was something that marked me, and so I've always sought my independence (Inés, sociology non-completer).*

Indeed, Inés had all the economic and cultural attributes to ensure a smooth passage through higher education as part of a 'normal biography' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). In this context, one of her main disappointments when she decided to withdraw from the course was her sense

of betrayal of a sort of 'tradition' of university studies that was like family patrimony, as she explains:

*The highest cost was related to the idea that I wasn't going to be a university graduate. Yet I come from a university family, my grandparents are university graduates, imagine! My grandmother went from Rojas to Rosario to study Pharmacy, and she is 90 years old now, imagine at that time... at home, the value of university is very high and I felt that I was dispossessing all that, that I decided to break with all that.*

Inés did not withdraw from the course as a result of financial pressures nor because her work made it impossible for her to keep up with her studies, rather among the complex set of issues she mentioned when talking about her decision, it was her mistaken choice of subject that was crucial. Some years later she sees herself as a talented cook and is pleased with her new occupation. Yet her case indicates the sometimes contradictory kinds of messages available to students. Even in the cases of students who come from family backgrounds highly supportive of university studies, there seems to be another (social or family related) message about economic independence as expected and important from quite an early age, a dominant set of values the effects of which might be reflected in the fact that young adults in Argentina normally do not delay the search for economic independence until the end of their undergraduate cycle, even when family financial circumstances would permit them to do so (Mollis, 2001b).

There were some indications in the interviews of other factors which bear upon the significant role of work in the lives of students. It might be that the importance of work is related to the uncertain character of what comes afterwards in terms of employment opportunities, wellbeing

and stability. Indeed, some respondents related their desire to participate in the labour market to an uncertainty about whether they would ever be able to find a job that is related to their studies and therefore to a need to secure an early labour market attachment. There were also hints of the effects of a perceived social devaluation of knowledge and education in Argentina, as noted in Chapter 4, with some mentioning the diminished status of higher education in society today compared with in their parents' generation, when studying was seen as highly regarded and more directly leading to material wellbeing.

In any case, working long hours and studying simultaneously contributes to shape a 'mode of being' a student, which, as Moreau and Leathwood found in their study, contrasts starkly with the image of the student as "someone who has few demands and responsibilities beyond their studies" (2006, p. 37). Yet also influential in the constitution of this busy student who is 'weakly attached' to his/her studies is the way in which the higher education experience is structured.

James, writing from Australia, points out that "the opportunity to disentangle oneself from the university seems to be less of a problem in highly intensive, highly structured academic courses, especially those with small cohorts allowing the development of strong interpersonal rapport between staff and students" (James, 2002, p.77). This situation, as I examine in Chapter 9, is the antithesis of the reality of students' life within the Faculty, with its huge class sizes, inaccessible lecturers and the fact that cohorts do not progress together through the course, due to the different pace at which students are allowed to study. In this sense, the English "model of progression that is continuous, intensive, and exclusive of other obligations" (Weko, 2004, p. 5) until quite recently assumed the higher education experience as a 'complete' project; a sort of total life, framed by the identity of being a student. In that context, higher education could be

conceived as a 'rite of passage' between childhood and adult life, whereas among the respondents in this study, there seems to be no such social function of transition, rather higher education takes place alongside other projects. In this context, the daily experience of students is one of negotiation and competition between multiple identities.

### **A difficult balance**

Within all this, working appears to be as much a project of the students as is studying itself. Carol, a sociology continuing student who handles both commitments together, explains how her studies squeezed into her full schedule:

*I work from 10am to 5 or 6pm and I do other things that come up from time to time as well. I always try to accommodate my studies; I work during the day and go to university in the evening (Carol, sociology student).*

The idea of accommodating studies to work and not vice-versa again illustrates the sense of a main responsibility. In this context, the student trajectory, as such, is highly infused by developments in other spheres of the students' lives. Far from being confined to the boundaries of the college, the student experience is complex and multi-faceted. The following quote from a social communication non-completer illustrates this intertwining of factors nicely; the multiple commitments, interests and identities of students, their complex lives:

*I took some courses, then I stopped for one year for work related reasons, then I became involved in politics as a civil servant in the Alianza government, which was a lot of work and I did it with a high commitment. And then I tried to take some more*

*courses but I found it difficult because of changes at work, a difficult schedule, I don't know... and then the last truth is that my daughter was born, approaching the first exam of the course I was taking... in the same week my daughter was born and my mother died. From then on, I couldn't imagine myself going to university after work, four hours to the centre of the city, three times a week (Federico, social communication non-completer).*

The complexities associated with working through their studies are not exclusive to Argentine students. There is evidence in the literature across different countries that taking on employment during term-time has specific effects on the student experience. In the UK, Curtis and Shani (2002) argue that “tiredness, lack of time to study, increased stress, and the need for money are the main negative effects of working” (p. 134); Moreau and Leathwood (2006) emphasised “the ongoing struggles and negotiations of managing the demands of work and study, and points to the class-based aspects of these processes” (p. 38), and Edwards (1993) stressed the women’s struggles (in particular those of mature women returning to education) and emotional costs of trying to reconcile work, study and family. Furthermore, in Weko’s comparison of the levels of paid term-time work among American students with those of English ones, he argues that the higher levels of work among the former put them “at a measurably increased risk of being unable to continue with their studies” (Weko, 2004, p. 8). However, as Curtis and Shani (2002) point out when reviewing the literature, “it may be that it is not the employment itself that adversely affects academic results, but the number of hours worked (Ford et al., 1995; Steinberg et al., 1982, cited in Curtis and Shani, 2002, p. 130) evidenced, for example, in the fact that English students are increasingly working yet non-completion rates remain relatively low.

Indeed, in the interview data, the handling of both work and study appears as relatively straightforward in some cases but highly challenging in others: “It’s difficult, it’s truly difficult having to work, study and live on your own” (Dana, Social Communication non-completer). Certainly, for some students, time, energy, and money restrictions would put work and study in tension and even in direct competition with each other and create significant difficulties. Natalia reflected on the slow but steady process by which her work ended up taking over her studies:

*I couldn't study without working but I took it [work] as something very important. In other words, I dedicated much energy to it, even if I didn't care too much about the kind of work I was doing. I also used to go to the university because I wanted to study as well, but when I started doing both things together, I realised that I was dedicating much more energy and time and will and effort to work than to my studies (Natalia, Sociology non-completer).*

I have been suggesting that the motives students have for maintaining a degree of detachment from the Faculty are rooted as much in their inescapable commitments as in particular beliefs and expectations about what it means to be a young adult and about the meaning they attach to their experiences of study. Indeed, participants frequently commented on the way these beliefs underlay the way they approached their university experience, as I examine in the next section.



## Meanings and value of higher education

Most of the respondents mentioned the discouraging effects of the national reality, mainly in terms of their concerns and fears about the difficulties that graduates face in the labour market and the limited employment opportunities for graduates of the social sciences. Against this backdrop, some articulated a demoralized, disenchanted view about what higher education might provide in return for the effort required. Paola commented on this with a hint of sadness:

*It is a pity that here it is as if we saw everything very dark, very pessimistic. The fact that you have to make an effort to study, to graduate and, on top of that, if you manage to graduate, then you have to make another effort to find a job and be able to live with dignity from that job. I think that's really very discouraging at the time of having to choose a degree (Paola, social communication non-completer).*

The high level of uncertainty about the occupational opportunities for graduates is a concern that most respondents in this study mentioned. Some mentioned seeing it as a discouraging factor as regards their completion of the course, and others commented on the course requiring too much effort for no guaranteed reward:

*It's a great effort, in terms of time, money, many things, and at the time of having to think about a job, you can't see positive prospects very clearly (Pedro, non-completer from different subjects).*

In this context, the qualification itself no longer seems to students to be a passport to professional employment and therefore has a lesser value compared to the study process itself.

Carol commented on this:

*In this subject, I think, the important thing is not to graduate to get the diploma, what is nice is the process in itself. You have the diploma and it's not: 'oh, ready, done' like with doctors, who get the diploma and are able to practise. Here what is important is all the growth that you experience during the programme, it's not the diploma (advanced sociology student).*

As Carol implies, in many cases among both non-completers and continuers, study appeared to be related to aims and motives that are not, or at least not exclusively, of an instrumental nature. Indeed, it was common for respondents, in the context of a perceived difficult employment market for graduates, to portray higher education as valuable in itself and not just in relation either to the future or to a material reward. To quote Carol again:

*There are some courses that are bad and there is a stage in your programme when it's good to take courses that you like because you are doing this degree because you like it. You don't choose this degree thinking that you will become rich - not precisely with Sociology.*

In this context, the university journey was repeatedly depicted as leaving 'marks' on those who have experienced it, whatever students ended up doing in life. Moreover, there was a sense that the knowledge, intellectual growth and cultural capital acquired through having been in higher

education not only made them more ‘complete’ persons but was also related to a sense of ‘ownership’:

*I think that the value of university has to be with the fact that it gives you tools that nobody will take away from you. My grandfather, who was prosecuted for being a communist and had to burn books and so forth, always said to my mother that they can steal everything from you but not what is inside your mind. And I agree, I believe that's the fundamental value that human beings have (Inés, sociology non-completer).*

Inés’ remark about the university providing something ‘nobody can take away from you’ is meaningful if considered in the light of the Argentine national history and recent developments in national politics. When the economic crisis of 2001 led the government to confiscate the people’s savings that were in the banks<sup>42</sup>, it was seen as the culmination of a series of misfortunes experienced by the Argentine middle-classes. The confiscation of savings established the sense that anything, and particularly further misfortune, was possible in the country. Somehow then higher education appeared to some of the respondents as something that is permanent and that remains, no matter the various economic, political and moral dissolutions that take place around them:

*After a while my sense was that, as I was telling you, I might not end up working in anything related to this [what she studied], so that, in relation to work, I might do something different, but what I have received and internalized at university was already mine. It was already an extra, regardless of what might happen afterwards, it was good and worthwhile in itself (Victoria, political science recent graduate).*

These appreciations are particularly significant in the cases of current students who, in almost all cases, showed an acute awareness of the probability that their future working life might not do justice to their university studies. Tomás was one of those who expressed such awareness, yet he remained determined to complete his studies, perhaps a reflection of the value he attached, again, to the process in itself:

*I remember talking to a friend who was about to complete his degree, and I was telling him that I think that even if one day I realize that, in relation to work, I finally do another thing, something totally different from what I studied, and if I become a farmer and go to the countryside, even so, it is great to have done what I did, study what I studied (Tomás, sociology student).*

This means that, amid a prospect of occupational uncertainty where the possibility of transferring knowledge from the course to work is uncertain, the university journey becomes a project that for many students is seen as primarily of intrinsic value and not just or mainly an investment in future opportunities. Furthermore, students who are not instrumental in their approach to higher education seem to have a particular conception of the study timeframe, as I discuss in the next section.

## Winding trajectories: timeless meaning

As evident from the interviews, in the students' intricate trajectories the time devoted to study occupies a small portion within the whole range of different activities in which students are engaged. Most respondents related this to a view of a course of study as a project that can legitimately encompass a long period of time to be achieved:

*I felt like a student but I didn't identify myself only with studying, with being a student. I did other things as well. That's why, in fact, there are people who dedicate themselves to their studies full-time and do it like all straight on, but as I dedicated myself to working and doing other things, it kind of took me longer... studying is not my only thing (Victoria, political science recent graduate).*

Particularly given the appreciation of study as intrinsically valuable, some indicated that it was important for them to do it unhurriedly:

*I wasn't interested in the 'degree'. I wasn't doing it because I wanted to get a job as Sociologist – not at all! That's why I took it easy and did it slowly, just for pleasure (Gabriela, sociology non-completer).*

The flexibility that the Faculty allows in terms of enabling students to complete within a considerably long timeframe<sup>43</sup> fits Gabriela's, as well as many others', life projects and expectations and beliefs about higher education. Ultimately, students are allowed to, and do, come in and out of the course and delay completion well beyond the stipulated duration of their programmes.

Another reason why some students do not strive for speedy completion relates to a conception of learning as a process that takes time to accomplish, as in Gabriela above. This was hinted at by several other respondents, for example Kike, who connected his enjoyment of the subject with a rejection of the idea of taking the maximum number of courses allowed per term in order to graduate quickly:

*In this subject, I think, the important thing is not to graduate to get the qualification, what is nice is the process in itself [...] I talked to many classmates about this, that it is good to enjoy the programme, and that's why I take it calmly and don't want to pass 20 courses together to graduate (Kike, political science student).*

So learning is seen as a journey that warrants time, and a distinction was made by some between wanting to learn and just wanting to 'make the grade'. Federico somehow connected all of these issues in the following comment:

*I started taking courses, was doing relatively well, was always also working, and always saw my studies as something about which I was not in a hurry. 'Licenciado' in Social Communication: I always saw it as something more related to self-fulfilment than to monetary usefulness. So within this frame, I was trying to be a good student as a matter of dignity, but never to feel pressurised about it (Federico, social communication non-completer).*

This conception of the student career contrasts markedly with experiences in some other countries, where students are expected - and they themselves expect - to confine their student

experience to a definite and concise period of time. Until recently students in France and Germany did have more elongated undergraduate careers but the harmonization of European degrees within the Bologna process has changed this. This is, for example, reflected in the use of performance indicators of completion as in the UK where, as Moreau and Leathwood (2006) put it:

*government performance indicators, used to rank higher education institutions in published league tables, reward those institutions deemed most 'efficient', that is, those with the higher proportion of students who successfully complete within this three-year time period (p. 38).*

However, as noted, it is common for students in Argentina to extend the period of their studies well beyond the stipulated 4-5 years, a practice that is reflected in the fact that students at UBA take on average 1.7 times the full-time pace to complete a degree, and in the official acknowledgment of a significant number of students who would complete within a 10 year period. In this vein, the former Minister of Education, Graciela Decibe, pointed out that the calculation method for completion rates used in 1996 (number of students per 100 entrants who complete their degree within 5 years) “does by no means imply that the students who did not finish within that period of time had dropped out” (Lorca, 2001).

Students certainly delay completion without necessarily giving up, and there were many examples of this in the interview data. Only three of the non-completers interviewed said their decision to withdraw from higher education was irreversible, whilst for all the others the possibility of returning to study was seen as open. So if time is not a vital issue in the careers of students, and taking their time and even moving in and out of higher education fits the needs

and life choices of students: perhaps non-completion is not such an appropriate category here, and we should think about a 'mode of being' a student where non-and-late completion are customary and natural stages of a 'lifelong' higher education process. Furthermore, this particular 'mode of being' students, also raises questions as to how to define 'success' in the context of such higher education.

### **Individual 'will' and inequalities**

In the context of the narratives reviewed so far, it is perhaps surprising that any students at the Faculty complete their courses. So how can we begin to understand who, and under what circumstances, are those who do complete their degrees?

Many respondents made reference to individual motivation and the capacity to 'pull through' as crucial elements for 'success' in higher education. In this sense, talk about the need to have a very specific willingness to 'make the effort' was common in the interviews. This idea also came up in an interview with a member of staff, who depicted the Faculty as a 'hostile' place that replicated the outside 'hostile' world of work and which highlighted the significance of an individual 'will' to be there:

*If you are working eight or ten hours, and work is an hostile place [...] you come to another place that is not a place of encounters but another hostile one, where you have to struggle to get the photocopies [reading materials for the course], struggle because your marks for one of the courses you've taken do not appear in the registry, and you don't know where you have to go to make the complaint, and you come out from work at 7pm but the Students' Office closes at 7pm so you must dash to be there on time, or*



*leave work early... everything is so complicated... So, this is a place where no one wants to be unless they really have a will to study (Staff member).*

The sense of difficulty with which many respondents portrayed the complexity of their 'external' lives was also employed in their depiction of the experiences within the Faculty, something illustrated for example in Pablo's comment that "you get to the Faculty tired and stressed from a long working day... and the university doesn't make things easy for you!" (sociology non-completer). This is an issue that I will deal with in detail in the next three chapters. Yet it was the combination of external and internal difficulties/complexities that most respondents saw as transforming the student experience into a "one-sided effort" on the part of students:

*In other countries they pay for you to study, so they really believe that people who study are going to do positive things for the country, and they invest in them [...] But I think that here in this country things are seen from a different angle so you are the one who has to make all the effort really (Natalia, sociology non-completer).*

In this context, personal capacity, will or resolve, what is sometimes called 'resilience' in the educational research literature (Wang, Haertel and Walberg, 1997) appeared at the centre of how and why respondents saw the university project as still working for some but not doing so for others. Carol pointed to her 'internal' resources as key elements to her staying the course:

*It's something internal in you. It's not that the Faculty holds you, on the contrary, if you let yourself be carried along by what happens at the Faculty, you say 'goodbye, I'm*

*off'. It's a very personal decision to do it whole heartedly* (Carol, advanced sociology student).

Valeria also highlighted the significance of the individuals' personal capacity to devise and open up their own paths to success:

*You have to try to open up a range of options by yourself. You have to see where you can go yourself* (Valeria, political science recent graduate)

The reliance on 'highly individual strategies' for success and engagement can be seen as an expression and result of the 'individualized society' where "the individual must therefore learn, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive of himself or herself as the centre of activity, as the planning office with respect to his or her own biography, abilities, orientations, relationships and so on" (Beck 1992 in Ball, 2006b, p. 266). Yet as Ball, drawing on Beck, argued, "such conditions of responsibility give rise to a new form of inequality, 'the inequality of dealing with insecurity and reflexivity'. These conditions call up particular resources and skills which are unevenly distributed across the population" (Ball, 2006d, p. 140).

Indeed, within highly individualised 'strategies of survival' (except for those students who can rely or draw upon significant others of some kind, as I show below), some seemed to find success and engagement easier, more at hand and natural than others. Dario, for example, mentioned his feeling somehow 'overwhelmed' by the responsibilities of having only 'himself' to rely on:

*At university I felt like they were treating me in a more mature way, more like an adult. I'm not sure if I liked it, it made me feel grown up, with more responsibilities. It was all left to me; it all depended on me (Dario, political science non-completer).*

Dario felt the reliance on 'individual resources' and effort to be a heavy burden, one that in the end proved to be more than he could intellectually and emotionally bear. Pedro, a non-completer from different subjects, talked about his sense of the operation of the 'principle of devil take the hindmost' both at the national level and within the Faculty, and like Dario, mentioned having felt 'alone and overwhelmed by responsibility'.

Within the highly uncertain environment both outside and within the Faculty, what some of the respondents and the member of staff quoted above mentioned as the crucial 'resource' required for success, seems, in many cases, to be the product of resources, dispositions and attitudes acquired over time, principally within the students' families. This is evident, for example, in the way some respondents mentioned the significance of the 'domestic transmission of cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986b, p. 244) in Ball, 2006, p. 265) for success. This involved the 'transmission' of the belief that higher education is important and beneficial and worth the effort, and a resulting disposition to continue and persevere at moments of difficulty:

*Socially speaking, it is as if it has to come to you from the tradition that studying is something good, you have to kind of inherit it... the value of studying and of knowledge is underestimated. And then there is an economic situation, so to speak, that it's also true that often you won't be able to do anything with your degree (Lala, social communication non-completer).*

Similarly, in her interview, Inés connected students' chances of success at university and the ability to benefit from the university experience with previous educational and family experiences, and to their cultural capital as "the ensemble of cultivated dispositions that are internalized by the individual through socialization and that constitute schemes of appreciation and understanding" (Swartz, 1997, p. 76). Inés summarized her view of cultural capital with the metaphor of the 'fertile soil' where knowledge can blossom:

*The University of Buenos Aires is like... if you have a fertile soil, the seeds are very good but only if you have that good field where to grow all these seeds, then the UBA can make of your head a great mind. But, if you don't bring like the soil removed and fertile where to plant the seeds, then I see it as very difficult (Inés, sociology non-completer).*

Therefore, the framework of individualization seems to enable those with these particular resources and dispositions to gain advantage over others. This is illustrated, for example, in the way the lack of a particular disposition to higher education within Gabriela's family, as well as the lack of more specific sources of guidance and support, were felt by her as having put her off the effort and sacrifices required to persist, in particular at those stages of the course when study was not as enjoyable and demanded hard work:

*The problem is that that was missing at home: there wasn't that support; they didn't know so they couldn't teach me the value I was looking for. So I think I have started a search on my own (...) Anyway, I also think that if my life, if my family had been another one, our economic situation, I don't know, maybe I would have been something now, personally speaking. It's not right to think counter-factually but when one begins*

*to daydream... well, maybe my parents... there are families that put some pressure in order for their daughter to finish studying. There are others that put pressure in the sense of trying to mould them into what they are themselves, the parents. And that's good, instead of letting them read Harry Potter they encourage their children to read Dickens. And that's good because on the radio they listen to classical music, but at home my mother listens to radio 10 [a popular sensationalist radio station], do you see what I mean? And so I had to open up and search and search, and perhaps it's taking me longer for that reason, because the tiniest thing that causes me discomfort, a little dislike, I drop it! (Gabriela, sociology non-completer).*

This quote is illustrative of the position of disadvantage Gabriela felt at in relation to others who have higher education “inculcated into their thinking as something ‘automatic’, obvious” (Ball, 2006, p. 265) and would more easily find the motivation, encouragement and emotional strength to persevere. The quote highlights several of the other ways in which institutional and pedagogic practices within the Faculty work to link success to ‘individualised’ strategies and resources that are unevenly distributed among students and that can unintentionally work to reinforce inequalities generated elsewhere. This is a theme that I return to in the following chapters.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I began the presentation and discussion of the interview data. The students’ accounts of their experiences of study and of non-completion revealed that higher education is a personal and social project that takes place alongside others, and paid work appeared as one of the main sources of competition with higher education in terms of students’ time, family

commitments, energy and identities. Material constraints, as well as cultural values and expectations about higher education, about what it is to be a young adult, about the labour market, about the value of a degree, and about the employment opportunities of the chosen subjects were all mentioned as having influenced the way students construe their university experience. The life of the students is lived across and between multiple identities and within social and economic complexities - involving location, learning, identity, and time.

In all of this, the instrumental, customer orientation that sometimes appears in the higher education literature to represent the behaviour and preferences of students in other contexts hardly seems applicable to the context of this study. The lesser value attributed to the university degree in itself, which resulted from it not being regarded as the key to rewarding employment opportunities, means that the completion of a degree is not necessarily the best measure of 'success' within this context. Non-completion is not regarded as eliminating the value and benefits of higher education. Higher education can be a long-term project and even one that is always unfinished. This both gives a very specific meaning to learning and offers the possibility of thinking about non-completion in a different way, that is, as 'not yet completed'.

Finally, I have finished this chapter by beginning to adumbrate some of the complexities of the students' experience within the Faculty which, as evident in the interviews, respondents feel have replicated the complexity of their outside lives. I have indicated, therefore, that it is in the intertwining between external and internal sources of difficulty that the perceptions and meanings that students attach to their student experience are constructed. Furthermore, most respondents commented on the 'internal resources' (e.g. resilience) and strategies that were required from them in dealing with the difficulties presented by the Faculty. Hence, I have begun to identify a framework of 'individualisation' within the Faculty which emphasizes the

need for resources, dispositions and attitudes that are acquired over time and within the students' families, and thus enable those who possess those particular resources to gain advantage over others. These are important themes that I continue to address through the presentation and discussion of further data in the following chapters.

**‘A machine of discouragement’**

*I like studying, I want to study, but I think that the student has to make all the sacrifices really and has to overcome all sorts of barriers that don't have anything to do with the studies themselves - bureaucratic barriers, infrastructure barriers, having to work all day...(Natalia, Sociology non-completer).*

**Introduction**

In the last chapter, I indicated how my respondents combined paid work and education in ways which led the majority of them to experience competing demands upon their time and dedication. Yet despite the detrimental effect these competing demands might have had on their studies, paid work was regarded as providing a sense of ‘social identity’, economic independence from parents, and reality, which many respondents sensed they could easily have otherwise lost while in the position of being more fully immersed in higher education. There seemed to be no regret about the way work responsibilities prevented students from fully immersing themselves into university life and joining in with the social aspects of being a student. These young people’s ways of being a student cannot be easily accommodated within models that accord centrality to the social aspects of the university in the student life world, as portrayed in mainstream theories such as that of Tinto. It is at a rather more complex set of engagements that we have to look at in order to understand the students’ attachments to the university, and their disengagement.



In the last chapter, too, I examined this ‘partial’ engagement from the standpoint of the personal and social conditions under which people make career decisions, considering the meanings and values students attached to being a student and gaining higher education. This chapter is concerned with the ways in which higher education itself, specifically here through the organisational practices within the Faculty, plays a part in shaping this ‘partial’ rather than ‘whole’ immersion. The idea of a ‘retreat’ of higher education from an all-encompassing function is explored through an analysis of the students’ accounts of their lives at the Faculty.

As I argue throughout the thesis, student choice regarding higher education non-completion comes as the culmination of an eventful journey where factors of different kinds interact. Through the discussion in this chapter, I add new evidence to the idea of ‘complex trajectories’ as I address the students’ experience of the organisational aspects of the Faculty and explore the ways in which these function as the background against and in interaction with which we have to understand the processes of non-completion decision making.

### **Organisation in context**

It can be argued that part of the difficulties students experience at the Faculty – as I will examine in this chapter - are related to the financing of a mass access system. The former Dean (1990-1998) of the Faculty, Juan Carlos Portantiero, wrote on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its creation that “... one needs 25 years to be able to consolidate an institution so particular, so conflictive and so dynamic as a Faculty where academic and administrative problems, political claims and corporatist demands coexist, all within the frame of self-governance” (Portantiero, *Los primeros diez años*). It has been less than 20 years since the establishment of the Faculty in September 1988 and, alongside this structural complexity,

student enrolment has risen from 6,000 at the beginning of the 1990s to nearly 25,000 in 2004 (Censo de Estudiantes, UBA, 2004). Portantiero went on to say:

*All this has happened within the dramatic backdrop of a budget that still undervalues the spectacular increase in teaching and building needs and that has placed the Faculty at the edge of collapse. The opening, last year [1997], of the branch at Ramos Mejia Road has partly eased the pressing situation but the claim for an only branch continues to be urgent; to get an infrastructure that enables the normal development of academic activity (Portantiero, Los primeros diez años, 1998).*

The struggle for the allocation of a single, proper space for the Faculty has gone on ever since. It was not until 2007 that a generously proportioned building was allocated to the Faculty, with the prospect of full operation by 2009 (Downes, 2007). Meanwhile, infrastructural deprivation and financial stringency remain major problems for the Faculty. 90 per cent of the public universities' income is spent on salaries, which leaves only 10% for their costs of operation (Lorca, 2007). The figure looks even worse at the UBA's Faculty of Social Sciences where in 2006, 97% of its income was spent on salaries, with only 2.65% remaining for its running-cost and 0.34% for equipment (Secretaria de Hacienda and Secretaria Academica, 2006). Furthermore, budget stringency is also reflected in shortage of staff. For example, the Registrar (*Departamento de Alumnos*) has only 12 members of staff appointed to cater for the Faculty's 25,000 students.

However, problems with the organisation of the Faculty cannot simply be associated with financial issues but have to be seen against the backdrop of a bureaucratic inertia and persisting resistance, at public universities in general, to the introduction of 'managerial' principles of

administration. The following story told to me by a senior member of the management of the Faculty serves to illustrate some of the rigidity that this resistance creates in terms of welcoming change:

*You will laugh: the student movement rejected the changes in the registration system arguing that students didn't have computers. So we put computers at their disposal that nobody used. Everyone has a computer! And also it is cheaper to go to a cyber cafe and register online than to travel to the Faculty. There were also people swearing that they didn't know how to use the Internet! In fact, it was opposition to change. And so we moved forward with that because the problem didn't really exist, it wasn't a real one. But that's why I say it's opposition to change; everything you want to do is first rejected, then we see why. These things happen; it's already part of the folklore (Senior member of management)*

As noted in earlier chapters, one of the influences upon current educational reform across the Western developed world has been the introduction of “*new managerialism*, that is the insertion of the theories and techniques of business management and the ‘cult of excellence’ into public sector institutions” (Ball, 2006a, p. 71). This has happened as part of a discursive undermining of the “welfare tradition of public sector provision” (Ball, 2007, p. 3) and the “re-narration of the public sector in terms of economism, competition, performance and individuation” (p. 7). However, the attempts to implement a public education reform in Argentina have clashed with established policy traditions at national universities (Rhoten, 2000).

Particularly, at traditional universities such as UBA, the changes towards managerialism in organisational practices have confronted the collegiality tradition of academic bureaucracy, one

that shapes organisational cultures and practices that are change averse. As Burton Clark argues, “traditional universities are resistant to change because of an infrastructure of rooted forms and interests – vested interests and sunk costs in spades -” (Clark, 2004, p. 5). At UBA, this structural condition, together with lack of resources have encouraged the taking up of entrenched positions, yet as Coraggio argues, these are “reactions that, unintentionally, might result in a defence of the university *status quo*” (my translation) (Coraggio, 2001, p. 17). So how do students experience these tensions within the Faculty?

### **Life at the Faculty**

Institutional shortcomings within the backdrop of a ‘chaotic’ organisational culture became apparent in the respondents’ recollections of their lives as students and anecdotal reporting of incidents. The infrastructure, principally the building’s inadequacy and poor maintenance; and what was called “bureaucracy” and poor organisational practices were mentioned by all of the respondents as particularly wearying aspects of their experiences. Both were also related to comments about the effects of mass enrolment, even if the latter was regarded as simultaneously bad and good: as individually harmful but still socially desirable or as a distressing outcome of a moral principle of democratic participation that is still endorsed. This reveals a tension between an instrumental orientation and a conception of public good in the minds of the students whose ramifications will be teased out throughout the thesis. Significantly, the interplay between the respondents’ perceptions of institutional provision and the politics of mass participation and, as will become apparent, with university funding considerations, are indicators that the Faculty – and its organisational practices - was not regarded as a detached entity with attributes of its own but as a manifestation of overlapping institutional practices and national politics. I will argue that this blurred boundary between

institutions and national policies contributes to blurring the attribution of responsibilities (who is responsible for what), which results in the internalisation of social circumstances as unique individual inadequacies.

### *All sorts of barriers*

The interview transcripts paint a ruinous picture of the Faculty's physical space and its maintenance. Basic conditions for teaching and learning are almost non-existent: outside noise, lack of cooling and heating systems (combined with broken windows that would not shut properly); poor layout of classrooms with excessive distance between students and teacher and blackboard, and columns that obstruct visibility; unsuitable toilet facilities (lack of doors, toilet blockages and lack of toilet paper, among others); insufficient chairs and desks; lack of chalk; blockage of corridors and stairs at peak hours and broken lifts were all pointed out by respondents. Eugenia's account below is particularly comprehensive of the scale of deprivation and the intertwining of different factors, although all of these came up as distressing factors in almost all of the interviews:

*It was shocking when I started. Well, I knew what I was going to find, it wasn't surprising, but the building in Marcelo T. de Alvear is something you have to have a lot of patience to tolerate. I knew the place because, as a journalist, I had been there in the past, but being inside and having to tolerate it is different. There were lots of difficulties like getting there and finding that classes had been suspended, that lecturers were on strike, or, if you were lucky enough to have classes, students interrupted it every five minutes to talk about a demonstration; well, classes that started late; in winter you got really cold and in summer you suffocated; the noise from the street; that you couldn't*

*shut the windows and couldn't hear what they were saying. And the library, which is not provided with the materials you need, and you don't have a quiet room to study in, you have to share huge tables with groups of people who are working and you got to be very patient and try to concentrate... lifts don't work... the physical place is awful, it doesn't stimulate you at all!* (Eugenia, Sociology non-completer).

The negative first-impression regarding the academic environment that respondents, like Eugenia, described is particularly significant when the literature suggests that the first year, and especially the first term (Allen, 1999), is critical for retention (Mackie, 2001; McInnis, 2001; Oldham, 1988; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Yorke *et al*, 1997). When “students are at their most vulnerable [...] in terms of their likelihood of academic failure and they are most at risk with respect to a range of potential social, emotional, health and financial problems” (McInnis, 2001, p. 106). Research on the first year experience of students at universities in industrialised countries indicates that access to and the quality of institutional facilities and student services and the availability of non-teaching staff have positive impacts on the initial adjustment of students about their universities (Harvey, Drew and Smith, 2006). Highlighted as central to the retention of students in these settings is a focus on facilitating their “transition” (Moxley, Najor-Durack and Dumbrigue, 2001, p. 85). That is, assisting them to settle in through induction strategies (including orientation programmes that extend over the first semester (Tinto, 1988)), strong student support and monitoring of the system (Astin, 1993; Blythman and Orr, 2003; Johnson, 1994; McInnis and James, 1995; Tinto, 1996).

The international evidence on the significance of the first year for retention is supported by data on Argentine non-completion that indicate that nearly 60% of students do not re-enrol after their first year of studies<sup>44</sup>. The ‘supported’ transition advocated in the literature is at odds with

the kinds of student journeys depicted in the interviews. In stark contrast with institutional supports of “informational”, “instrumental” and “emotional” kinds (Moxley, Najor-Durack and Dumbrigue, 2001, p. 27), the respondents’ perceptions of the Faculty portray disorganisation, messiness, neglect, disinformation, and struggle. Hence it is not just that the physical space and facilities are inadequate but that the organisational culture is seen as fundamentally unwelcoming:

*What happened to me is that the infrastructure, the building space of the Faculty particularly is devastating. Really having to squeeze into the classroom pushing people at the entrance door, because there are students seated at the door, because there are no chairs, because there are 400 people in the first few lectures of the first year, where you can't get much from the lecturer ... you got to have the will to get there early, but I always had 8 hour jobs (Julia, political science non-completer).*

Central to the image of an unwelcoming culture is the fact of the huge number of students with the result that you can neither ‘get much of the lecturer’ nor be known to her, creating a sense of anonymity that is a defining feature of both the pedagogical relationships and the administration and management framework within the Faculty. This sense of anonymity is customary at public universities and was articulated in identical language among the respondents in this as among those in other studies (e.g., Veleda, 2002, p. 114): “here, you are just a number” (Kike, political science student).

According to Longden’s (2004) definition, a supportive organizational culture is one that embraces mechanisms explicitly developed by the institution “to ensure that the student needs

are understood and where possible addressed” (2004). In contrast, the Faculty’s overcrowding is perceived as undermining the possibilities of grasping students as individuals:

*It’s very disorganised. It’s as if the university was not looking at the individual student but at a mass, and it didn’t understand the mass! (Dario, political science non-completer)*

There were further glimpses of the respondents’ sense of an unreceptive environment in comments expressing frustration with what is perceived as a constraining and highly regulated bureaucracy blended with profound disorganisation and laxity in the fulfilment of guidelines and procedures (no smoking ban in the classrooms; unclear regulation regarding teachers’ absences; informality in the provision of course bibliography; among other issues). Even political activism was mentioned by many as running counter to the interests of the students and creating an additional source of distress rather than support. Indeed, at least half of the respondents mentioned that ‘internal’ politics was focused on ‘external’ issues (national and international) thus failing to address the pressing needs of the Faculty and its students. There were frequent portrayals of militants as not being on the side of the students but as disrupting their learning, largely by using class time to pass ‘irrelevant’ political messages:

*What always makes me complain about the Faculty is the issue of the political parties. I never got into anything but I sensed they were all talking about the IMF, blah, blah, blah but at the Faculty there are more basic things which they don’t address, like for example having toilet paper in the toilets, or seats, nobody... This takes your enthusiasm away! (Dana, Social Communication non-completer)*



Analia significantly picks up the Faculty's ineffectiveness in a comparison between private and public sector provision:

*And then the typical, you go to buy the reading material and they tell you it's still not ready, they tell you the lecturer hasn't supplied it, yet the lecturer tells you that he had supplied all the material for the entire course a week before... it has to be more... I talk to people who study at private universities and, in this sense, they get like a service, so you only have to go at the time of your lecture but you don't have to worry (Analia, Sociology non-completer).*

The idea that at private universities there is no further source of anxiety than the one created by learning itself was common among my respondents. Indeed, the transcripts convey the stereotypical image of private universities as performing market efficiency and service as against the public sector's ineffectiveness, informality and unresponsiveness, a finding already reported in Veleda's study on Argentine students' choice of higher education (2002). Yet it is the very market orientation and emphasis on customer relationships of private universities that is seen as limiting their ability to offer unbiased and quality education. Indeed, among almost all of the respondents, private universities were completely dismissed as worthwhile educational options both socially (for their elitist bias) as well as individually (as desirable projects for themselves in terms of academic quality and reputation).

So, despite the widespread criticism of the organisational aspects of the Faculty, this factor did not appear to challenge personal commitments to state provision. As Veleda illustrates, the rejection of private universities may illustrate a naturalization of the good academic reputation of public universities and a crude judgement - and frequently lack of understanding - of the

different options available within the private sector of higher education (Veleda, 2002). However, this image is the backdrop against which judgements about the Faculty seemed to be formed. Furthermore, I will argue that this unquestioned commitment to state education, in many cases, leads to an ultimate acceptance of the way in which state higher education is currently provided and that this has implications on the way many non-completers end up attributing their leaving to individual inadequacy rather than to the ‘chaotic’ organisational culture and practices that they themselves describe in this study.

### *The ‘tetris’ game*

As Reay et al. have argued (2005), organisational practices, together with the educational status and ‘cultural and expressive characteristics’ of an institution, are among the elements that make up its institutional habitus (p. 37). Institutional habitus then “refers to relational issues and priorities, which are deeply embedded and sub-consciously informing practice” (Thomas, 2002, p. 431). Thus organisational and management processes enable us to glimpse the ‘workings of aspects of institutional habitus’ (Reay et al. 2005). These are nicely captured in the following extract from the interview with a senior member of the Faculty’s management:

*Here, it is a terrible machine of discouragement, a permanent one, in every sense. A student has to provide himself with a map to know where to go to – as you know, this Faculty has three branches – then, you never know where you have your lecture, you can’t find a signpost, the walls are covered by posters, first issue. Second issue, you need a manual on how to deal with everything; nobody ever knows how you should process your paperwork. They kick you out from one office to the other. Third, in a mass situation like in here, you are exposed to the arbitrariness of the lecturer: he gives*

*you a fail grade; you don't know to whom to complain. Think about it: there are courses with 1,000 students.*

The organisational processes he describes here are illustrative of a management style that can be thought of as a “management of omission” where deliberate actions to ‘signpost’ and support students’ journeys are completely missing. This is partly related to the highly bureaucratised structure and to the established culture of staff inaccessibility and disinformation. The institutional habitus of the Faculty is at the antithesis of welcoming habituses that promote diversity through “timetabling, availability of staff and services, [...] role models in terms of staff and other students” (Thomas, 2002b, p. 440). Many students here feel, both by omission and by action, left adrift, something that came up in almost all of the interviews. Dana, for example, illustrated these issues, particularly the difficulties surrounding the registration process, with the metaphor of the ‘tetris’ game:

*The other day I was thinking that the registration process is like the ‘tetris’ game: you have to register, spend two hours or more thinking and checking which courses to register for, which were first option, which were second option; you have to make calculations... Well, once you’ve done all this, it’s very likely that you won’t get what you need according to your schedule... it was demoralising! (Dana, Social Communication non-completer)*

Dana uses the ‘tetris’ metaphor to illustrate her disappointment at the unpredictable and ineffective allocation of courses and timetabling. But the ‘tetris’ also conveys the idea of a puzzle in which there are complex engagements to be sorted out amidst uncertainty. Here, students seem to be faced with a giant puzzle that they have to fit together on their own, while

some of the pieces fall down around them. This is not just evocative of a sense of uncertainty and fortuitousness but also of loss, because, as in the tetris game, the blocks that fall past them inevitably get missed. Indeed, this seems to be a journey that involves a sense of loss - of disillusion, of envisaged educational trajectories and of enthusiasm as Ana describes:

*For me the UBA was a bit of a disillusion, when all I liked... well, for me it still is... I love the UBA on the one hand, but on the other, the disorganisation that there is, there are like too many obstacles, it's not that one can make a fluid career, it's like it's difficult to get a sense of flow. Because of the timetabling of classes, because of lack of quota, because you register for a class but then can't take it because there was no quota... It's not easy, because you can try to plan ahead, plan a schedule of what courses you want to take... I used to have a schedule of courses fixed on my wardrobe door, with numbers, dates when I was going to take each class, etc. But then you can't plan because very often there was no quota! So you get worn out. It's far too complicated (Ana, Labour Relations long-term student).*

The 'management of omission' seems to reinforce the sense of an uncertain environment which produces student careers that are troubled, eventful, rough processes. Furthermore, this organisational culture pushes students into a journey where they are not just expected to be academically able but also 'administratively' able. An accomplished trajectory, then, requires more than being endowed with relevant cultural capital. Many respondents made references to these 'additional' resources they saw as required for 'success' within the Faculty as evidenced in Manuel's story of mixed-up records:

*Well, one day in my second year I went to the Students Office for a routine procedure and the guy asked: 'But are you a student here?', and I said: 'Yes, I have been for two years already', and he replied: 'But you cannot take any courses here because you didn't finish the CBC [initial general courses taken before access to the Faculty is granted], it appears on the computer that you still have to take CBC courses'. 'But I'm sure that I submitted all the paperwork, otherwise, you wouldn't have allowed me to register on any course here at the Faculty so you are telling me that you are ineffective yourself, because you are implying that I've been studying here for two years without finishing the CBC' ... So I had to go to the CBC, ask for my student record, come back, legalise it, twice, go back to hand it in... And everything is like this, like you go for a simple silly thing and... all this really drains you. Because usually all that you have to do in order to retrieve those papers has to be done in working hours, and if you are working, it's a pain in the neck (Manuel, social communication non-completion)*

Embedded in almost all the quotes is the idea that succeeding entails the capacity to sort out impediments, and this aptitude is central to the students' chances of getting a degree. In effect, Tomás subtly hints his sense of pride when he remarked that the Faculty's "disastrous" organisation gives you "a sense that if you manage to graduate, it is because you are able to stand up to bureaucracy and defeat it".

That there are issues of strength of personality involved in getting through is not exclusive to this Faculty, nor to Argentine higher education. In the international literature on non-completion there is considerable space devoted to personal characteristics – 'dispositions', according to Tinto (1993, p. 37) – that individual students bring to higher education and significantly influence their decisions about whether to stay or leave the course. 'Adjustment'

and ‘adaptation’ to higher education, that is the ability to cope with the transition from the highly structured environment of the high school to one where greater personal responsibility for learning is necessary, are functions of a certain ‘preparedness’ for higher education that is, in turn, associated with particular personal traits (Tinto, 1993). So “going to university presents personal challenges that some students are not going to be able to meet” (McInnis *et al*, 2000, p. 34). Among the personal resources required by higher education are a will to achieve (Digman, 1989), decisiveness and industriousness (Johnson, 2003) and emotional capital or emotional stability (De Raad, 2000).

Certainly, it has been noted that coping with the difficulties and dislocations of attending higher education is considerably more difficult for first-generation students who are embarked on ‘social’ as well as ‘academic transitions’ (Pascarella *et al*, 2004) which indicates the social roots of such ‘traits’. Hence privileged students are generally able to deploy a range of social and cultural capitals at these stages of transition and adjustment that help them to secure the continuation of their higher education projects.

Bourdieu argues that “the value of a species of capital (e.g. knowledge of Greek or of integral calculus) hinges on the existence of a game, of a field in which this competency can be employed” (Bourdieu in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 98); any capital, therefore, “is relative to the field in question” (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p. 36). Indeed the ‘survival of the fittest’ environment created by the ‘management of omission’ within the Faculty as depicted in the interviews seems to require very specific resources and capitals (e.g., to be able to cope with blockages, disappointment, competing priorities, obstructive bureaucracy and administrative disorganisation) over and above those normally required for success in higher education.

Among these, the interviews suggest that central to the 'struggle' within the Faculty is the notion of time. Time is a precious resource that enables students to come to the lectures early and get a seat; to stay late so as to be able to engage with the lecturer more personally; to queue at the photocopying shop and get the reading material on time; to be able to get to the registry during office hours and even to travel to the university and to study. The following story is among many anecdotes about mixed-up student records resulting in long hours having to be spent on administrative proceedings; proceedings that involve several complicated bureaucratic instances of stamps, signatures, note numbers, etc., passing from one office to the other; a registration process that leads to inconvenient allocation of courses where the sense is that there is nobody accountable for the faults; staff unavailability and ineffectiveness.

*Everything is very uncertain. Sometimes one of the courses you've taken doesn't appear on your records and you have to start proceedings... In fact, it happened to me. I went to see what courses I had on my record and found out that there were two that didn't appear. And I had to go and try to find the lecturers, courses that I took two years before, and ask them to go and look at the records... it's like a whole thing... these things sort of wear you out, they tire you (Lala, social communication non-completer).*

I have experienced these aspects of the university in the process of doing this research, when it took the UBA's Faculty of Economic Sciences thirteen months to turn down, in writing, my request to carry out research among their non-completers.

Time then seems to be a vital resource in dealing with the Faculty administration. Bourdieu has already drawn attention to the relevance of time as a demarcator of social advantage: at its most

basic level, “time free from economic necessity [...] is the precondition for the initial accumulation” of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986b, p. 250) and its permanent enlargement. But what is significant about the extraordinary demands that the Faculty exerts on the students’ time is that this is the one resource that is in most limited supply across the student population. Indeed, as I have discussed in earlier chapters, labour market commitments make so many students ‘time poor’ (Reay, Ball and David, 2002, p. 10), a poverty that, under the current functioning of the Faculty, is bound to affect the trajectories of many students in very practical ways. The Faculty’s ineffective administrative procedures affect the most disadvantaged students in particular – those for whom time is in the shortest supply.

### *Juggling fragmentation*

In a study of mature mothers in higher education, Edwards (1993) noted that women were “juggling themselves between two greedy institutions, each requiring their attention and affiliation to the exclusion of the other” (p. 105). The commitments that family and education required of women is characteristic of what Edwards, drawing on Lewis Coser’s concept, calls ‘greedy’ institutions. Accordingly, the women’s narratives in her study illustrated the way in which outside of term times “there was an expansive movement of one greedy institution (family needs and domestic chores) to fill the vacuum left by the retreat of another greedy institution (education)” (p. 78).

Drawing on Edwards’ study, another way of thinking about the institutional habitus of the Faculty might be in terms of the incomplete or fragmented ‘greediness’ that it exerts on the students. As has been shown, students feel deflated by an organisational culture and practices that understand, care for and support them too little. But if the kinds of engagements



encouraged by the Faculty are not all-encompassing ones, it follows that students' weak engagements with their studies are not just due to their extensive labour market commitments, as is frequently portrayed in the literature. Paid work is best regarded as both cause and effect of the loose relationships between students and the Faculty.

However, the negative perceptions of the organisational aspects of institutional provision, that most of the respondents pointed out, were not, on their own, sufficient to make any of the respondents in this study leave their course. In fact, the narratives do not convey a sense of radical turning points but of journeys where decisions were crafted out of complex and multifaceted processes.

Inés' case is relevant here. As noted in last chapter, sometime along her student journey she discovered she was not passionate about Sociology but rather wanted to become a professional cook. Yet Inés' vocational crisis was set within an organisational framework of disincentives and lack of support; speaking about the difficulties within the Faculty, she commented that: "all this [the difficulties as described above] was obviously tiring and tiring me and tipping the balance with regard to why I wasn't happy. Had all these difficulties not existed probably I would have finished".

So the students' experiences and their educational decision-making processes were certainly infused by developments in different spheres of their lives (finances, jobs, family responsibilities, health, and even changing vocational interests). This supports research findings on non-completion at US, UK and Australian universities where "for the individual student it is relatively unusual for any single factor or event to be defined as the sole cause of non-completion" (McInnis et al., 2000, p. 25). It is then the amalgamation of different factors that

contributes to shape a state of mind where non-completion begins to take shape as a viable option:

*I was tired, working a lot, and I was not getting the courses I wanted to take [because of the quota system] and so I was like losing... also the financial issue: I earned little, I had to support myself, buy photocopies, commute. Then the last couple of years I was going and not talking to anyone, which makes it tougher as well! (Maria, sociology non-completer).*

However, what seems to be particular about the Faculty is that the complexities that I have been examining seem to work as amplifiers of the external difficulties rather than as soothers. The Faculty is not a protecting environment where there are few concerns beyond the challenges of learning and 'critical being' (Barnett, 1997). This explains the references so many respondents made to a daunting sense of reaching the Faculty already tired from long working hours only to find out they could not get a proper place to sit or from where to hear the lecture.

Yet, on the other hand, what is also significant is that most of the completers and non-completers respondents showed a sense of accommodation as regards the unwelcoming environment that they found within the Faculty:

*The building is cold in the winter; in the summer it's suffocating... it's like that. But you try in some way to get abstracted from that, but yes, you live it. Sometimes there are 200 people in the classroom, they don't fit in. Some people remain outside, it is like that, it's not good but it's the way it is (Martin, advanced political science student)*

At least discursively, respondents were able to isolate the institutional discomforts from their educational decision making given their expectations of what was realistic and available to them.

*The thing is that I don't expect so much from a university like this one, here at the UBA, where the classes are massive, there aren't enough seats, you have to sit on the floor, you can't hear what they say ... so it's a bit impossible ... (Laura, Political Science non-completer)*

To a large extent these allowances appear to be based on an internal negotiation between an individual/instrumental and a social orientation in the students' minds, as I examine in the next section.

### **Some tensions: it might not be good for me but it's the way it has to be...**

There is considerable overlap between the different issues at stake in the stories quoted in this chapter. In Eugenia's quote above she mentioned the cancellation of classes due to lecturers' strikes as an example of her sense of disorganisation and difficulty in the Faculty. Yet not only in Eugenia's case but generally among the respondents, there was a perception that teachers' strikes were not only a response to external circumstances in relation to which the room for manoeuvre of the Faculty was limited (e.g. the national university budget)<sup>45</sup>, but also that the teachers' claims were legitimate ones. For example, talking about the disturbing effects of industrial action at the Faculty, Pablo still showed a sympathetic understanding of the lecturers: "In general, teachers somehow suffer from the same problems as we do. Like - they themselves

are also subjected to all this administrative apathy; they don't even get paid" (sociology non-completer).

This awareness of internal and external enmeshed factors underlies the interviews and was evident in the many cases when respondents talked about institutional provision with mixed feelings. In their stories, there was frustration regarding the existence of organisational practices that were individually undermining, yet there was also recognition of the large extent to which these practices are tangled with broader issues that touched upon national politics and social understandings. This tension was hinted at by Julia when she described her unease at being expected to empathize with a cause that she sensed as socially legitimate but still individually damaging:

*Everything was difficult, and the lecturer was on strike because he didn't get paid, so I had to understand that it wasn't his fault. But because he was on strike, I was missing important classes before the exam which I needed to clear any doubts, etc (Julia, political science non-completer).*

We can think further about this tension as an expression of the conflict of interests between individual/instrumental and social principles in the students' minds that I have already referred to. This conflict creates internal dilemmas. I have already quoted Darío but it is worth quoting him in full now, for he points to a kind of ideological negotiation between individual needs and ideals here:

*It's very disorganised. It's as if the university was not looking at the individual student but at a mass, and it didn't understand the mass! I'm not saying things have to be*

*individualised because it would be too difficult, but at least trying to get deeper and understand* (Darío, political science non-completer).

Even if Darío related his reasons for having left the course to a gradual loss of interest in his chosen subject, he mentioned the lack of individual attention that he got and the enormous size of the Faculty as daunting, and at some point, he explained how these turned out to be more than he could cope with. He therefore admitted having suffered the negative consequences of not feeling supported in his individuality, yet he did not think ‘things have to be individualised because it would be too difficult’ particularly, as he mentioned later in the interview, in keeping with the principle of open access. In Darío, as in many other respondents, there is a sort of personal grievance alongside political and social awareness.

In this context, the Faculty and its organisational practices is not seen as an entity with qualities of its own disconnected from its social and political context. One of the significant implications of this tension is that it blurs the definition of what is attributable to the Faculty – and its organisational practices – and what is part of larger societal issues, either in the form of state under-funding or as side-effects of policies aimed at realising the ideal of the university as a public good, e.g., open access and free tuition. Under these circumstances, it was common for respondents to end up making allowances and adopting a compliant and tolerant attitude towards the difficulties they experienced in the Faculty. For example, when Gabriela was asked whether all the factors she listed to illustrate poor institutional provision were relevant to her decision to leave her course, she responded: “No, no, no, no, actually; no because I accept them, they are a condition that arises from the funding, evidently, with a few things badly managed also, surely” (Gabriela, sociology non-completer).

The difficulty in demarcating limits and establishing responsibilities (what is attributable to whom) serves as fertile ground for individual self-blaming. Indeed, it was common for respondents to blame themselves for not having been able to ‘cope’ with the ‘chaotic’ organisational culture. Therefore, the acceptance of damaging organisational practices as conditions that arise out of externally driven circumstances (e.g. state funding) seems to help the current status quo within the Faculty to remain fundamentally unquestioned in a context where non-completers themselves have to absorb all the costs of coping with bureaucracy, poor timetabling, inadequate physical resources and institutional disorganization. In this way, the Faculty’s inability to improve the organizational experiences of students indirectly contributes to self-blame by the victims. This stands in contradiction with the rhetoric of democratic opportunities for all, because it means that only those who would find ‘coping’ easiest (i.e., have the kinds of capitals required including emotional capital and time) are able to continue in such an environment. This initial conclusion will be explored further through examination of other aspects of the experiences of non-completers in subsequent chapters. But before concluding this chapter it is worth incorporating a final twist to what has been suggested so far.

### **Virtue in chaos**

That public universities, particularly the largest and more traditional ones, are uncaring about student retention is a commonplace observation. Research on Argentine students’ choice of higher education across the public/private sector split (Veleda, 2002, p. 115) suggests that private universities are seen as providing significantly greater support through strategies such as smaller class size; easier and more regular contact between lecturers and students; student cohorts that keep together along the course; greater structure in terms of schedules; and ‘family-like’ environments (or greater match between the secondary school environment and

that of the university). Nonetheless, Veleda (2002) remarks that, in her study, these features were considered as appealing only by low-income participants while dismissed as overly supportive and hindering of “maturity” and “personal independence” by middle and high income respondents (p. 115). This led her to conclude that perceptions of different institutions are not ‘universal but relational’ according to individual characteristics and needs. Even if my sample does not give rise to a neat distinction between different income groups, all of the respondents in the present study portrayed the protective approaches of private universities as neither important nor attractive qualities of a university. In effect, most respondents managed to take the struggle they experienced at the Faculty for granted and, in many cases, even considered this struggle as a virtue. To quote Tomás at greater length now:

*At the beginning I found it weird but interesting... then sometimes I was getting there too tired, from work or wherever, and didn't want to have to stay standing... but well, I thought it was good, a sense that you had to really fight to push forward; it was good, I liked it... I think that to some extent UBA gives you that, at least in some of the Faculties in particular which are the most disastrous ones at the organisational level, they give you this, a sense that if you managed to graduate it was because you could stand up to bureaucracy and defeat it (Tomás, advanced sociology student).*

Tomás' comment also hints at the idea which was common in the data set that there is a virtue to the extraordinary effort and struggle involved in getting through the student journey: that of acquiring and enlarging abilities of a non-academic nature; having the capacity to become seen, acknowledged or listened to within the mass; being able to overcome multiple hurdles and carry on; being able to live and survive within uncertainty; being able to gain a place and a voice:

*There is a virtue in all of this. It teaches you that those who have the will can win a position [...] And actually that is my understanding, also on the basis of my expectations when I chose the public university, it had a lot to do with this - with gaining my place for my own merit, development, energy or whatever. I don't think that this is a virtue in itself, I think that it is a virtue given the circumstances. I don't think: 'oh, it's wonderful that we have 3,000 people and so you'll gain your place'. No, I would love the university to have excellent infrastructure conditions, and that there were more paid-for lecturers, and that the classes were smaller, and that all worked much closer to the ideal or what higher education should be. But because this doesn't happen within the conditions of the public university at present, I say: 'well, this also has a virtuous aspect. I think this is a learning that one has to do in life. Whether or not we do it at the university... is by chance! (Victoria, political science recent graduate)*

Student development research has paid a great deal of attention to the different aspects of student change through higher education and has established that change at university is not just attributable to learning and cognitive developments but also to psychosocial changes - in students' self-concepts and identities and in moral development including attitudes and values (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). However, American research findings highlight the importance of the development of students' identities (principally those relating to race-ethnicity and sexual orientation) whereas few significant changes have been found in other psychosocial aspects such as the students' sense of independence or control over their lives (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, p. 575). Somewhat echoing these findings, Perry's (1999) influential 9-stage model of student development argues that the greatest change that students undergo in higher education is "in the forms in which a person perceives his world rather than



in the particulars or ‘content’ of his attitudes and concerns” (p. xliii). More than anything else, then, higher education stresses “the student’s ability to construct meaning and to shift or change those constructions or standpoints to developmentally accommodate uncertainty, paradox, and the demands of greater complexity in knowledge and learning” (Knefelcamp, 1999, p. xii).

The quotes above might be seen as giving some support to the students’ perceptions of studying at the Faculty as improving their capacity to handle complexity and uncertainty not just in learning and knowledge but also in broader life experiences. Indeed, it was common for respondents to talk about UBA in general and the Faculty in particular as a sort of mirror of the larger world – as sites that reflect the messiness of the Argentine society at large. And rather than this being a discouraging feature, it was regarded as worthy to the extent to which it provided preparation for the ‘real world’:

*All these obstacles transform you into a stronger and more responsible person; there is nothing that will come to you on a plate in life, that’s like the grand philosophy of the UBA, that if you want something you have to work your ass off. Whatever it is, in this country, if you want something you have to work your ass off and that is translated into the UBA (Paola, social communication non-completer)*

But this learning is to a large extent regarded as coming about through struggle and discomfort – through a somewhat perverse kind of meritocracy. The perceived disorganisation, hugeness and complexity of the Faculty are seen as helping to reinforce a strength of character, determination and resolve that are valuable capitals to secure positional advantage later in life, or to what Bourdieu (1993) calls the conversion of capitals into other forms. Mainly, I refer here to the conversion of cultural capital into a sort of emotional capital that would enable those

who have acquired it to handle uncertainty and adversity in the larger society with increased personal resources and capability.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have examined the students' experiences of the organisational aspects of the Faculty and the role these play in non-completion decision making processes. The organisational practices which respondents described as 'chaotic' and as complicating students' trajectories rather than supporting them, included the imposition of highly bureaucratic, ineffective and daunting administrative procedures, institutional disorganisation and poor timetabling, etc. In this context, dealing with the administration of the Faculty, according to most respondents, demanded particular tactical skills and a great deal of time and self-efficacy. Yet these skills can themselves be regarded as related to cultural and emotional resources, not least to a strong sense of confidence and competence, purpose and determination. It is in this sense that I have argued that the 'survival of the fittest' organisational environment within the Faculty reinforces the role of particular capitals and resources: mainly a dimension of 'emotional' capital — related to familial and peer support, and integrally linked to other resources (economic, social and cultural). Therefore in this chapter I have added new elements to the characterisation of a framework of 'individualization' identified in the previous chapter which seems to enable those with particular resources and dispositions to gain advantage over others, a theme that I will continue to elaborate through further analysis of the interview data in subsequent chapters.

It is important to point out before concluding that the non-completers in this study did not directly attribute their withdrawal from the Faculty to any of the obstacles reviewed in this chapter, yet all of these were portrayed as creating very specific sources of complexity and

discomfort. By locating the personal, vocational and financial circumstances of students within an organisational framework of disincentives and lack of support, this chapter has also provided further elements to the idea of 'complex trajectories' and the intertwining of life choices, socio-historical context and institutional factors in non-completion decision making.

## Introduction

In the previous chapters I have examined different sources of student disengagement from the Faculty that arise from social and cultural (Chapter 6) as well as institutional/organizational conditions (Chapter 7). Indeed, the foregoing discussion has made student non-completion appear as a more logical outcome than their completion. The question emerges then as to how it is that the Faculty continues to function (i.e., huge numbers of students graduate every year) despite all that conspires against it.

A somewhat taken-for-granted explanation of why it is that so many students still complete their degrees, is that of individual will, i.e., the existence of a will to learn on the part of students, accompanied by a will to teach by teachers; the existence of a 'moral force' that drives the heavy machine. The senior member of the Faculty's staff I interviewed put it in the following terms:

*I believe that, and I have talked about this with many people, especially European academics who can't understand how this works, that there is a moral force here! And you can infer this from the figures. When we took over the management of the Faculty, 32 percent of the teaching staff here were teaching for no pay.*

I have already introduced the idea of a 'will to be there' in Chapter 6, particularly in relation to what some respondents highlighted in the interviews as a necessary will to 'make the effort'

amid difficult and discouraging external circumstances and future labour market opportunities. Yet the central element of the argument of the students' 'will to be there' as an explanation of their continued attachments to the Faculty assumes the existence of forms of pedagogy and curriculum that provide students with opportunities for engagement. This raises the relevance of exploring the pedagogic relation in the Faculty.

The evidence I present in this chapter delineates two different 'versions' of the Faculty's learning environment among my respondents: what can be termed as a 'comfortable' and an 'uncomfortable' version. As Archer puts it (THES, 14 December 2001), "there is no single higher education experience [...] Even within institutions experiences vary". The contradictory and, at times, ambiguous set of evidence on the learning environment suggests that some students feel they 'fit in' better than others. The experiences of the group portraying the 'uncomfortable' version of the learning environment contrasts, not just with the view of 'comfortable' respondents, but also with the ideal of the Faculty as an inclusive and democratic learning environment, and might therefore provide some further clues for the understanding of the processes of disengagement.

### **The comfortable version: pedagogy and engagement**

In the last chapter I examined the students' experiences of the organisational aspects of the Faculty. As was shown, despite the difficulties caused by the Faculty's administrative disorganisation and bureaucratic procedures, some respondents tended to regard the strengthening of emotional capital – one that can be valuably used throughout life and

potentially converted into other forms of capital - as a positive by-product; as performing the role of a sort of 'rite of passage' into the complexity of Argentinean society.

However, it is a different sort of learning that lies at the heart of the higher education experience and views about teaching and learning appear at the centre of the respondents' judgments about the Faculty. This is supported by the international literature where, for example, "matters connected with physical facilities seem to be ranked lower by students than issues directly related to teaching and learning" (Temple, 2007, p. 66). An extensive survey at a US public university found that the key predictor of student satisfaction was "Faculty preparedness", while "different perceptions of campus facilities and services have relatively little affect on the varying satisfaction of students" (Thomas and Galambos, 2004, p. 266). Likewise, in the UK, where a large number of universities survey the value students attach to the different aspects of their experiences (Green *et al*, 1994), Douglas et al. showed that "the physical aspects of the University services are not important with regards to student satisfaction" (Douglas, Douglas and Barnes, 2006, p. 263).

The centrality of teaching and learning in the students' judgments about their higher education institution seems to have particular qualities among the Faculty of Social Sciences' students. Because the institution is regarded as seriously ineffective on several dimensions, even greater expectations seem to be invested in learning; significantly, some of my respondents portrayed aspects of the pedagogic relation as sources of engagement capable of redressing difficulties arising on other fronts.

Kike, among others, attributed his staying on the course to his strong sense of intellectual growth, despite discouraging conditions:

*At 7.00am the conditions to take the course were terrible, it was cold, dark in the winter... if you liked it, it was because... there were these guys teaching some courses who were able to make connections between the texts and concrete situations and I remember having left the class thinking: 'wow, now I have a new tool to think about this in another way', it's wonderful, it amazed me (Kike, political science student)*

The conditions to which Kike refers include a lack of resources to support teaching that create a situation where, as a senior member of management put it, teaching becomes more of a form of 'craftsmanship' and students just try to cope with the consequences:

*For the course I teach [Sociology of War] I would need a projector to show movies... or in this Faculty there is no map collection so there are certain parts of the world that people don't know where they are. So you tell them that Chechnya is related to what happens in Georgia and they don't understand, then you tell them that they are neighbours. So, there are very severe scarcities that make us work harder and achieve less... but anyway here there is something that is very strong in some cases: the will to learn. There are some people who manage. I believe that - and I have talked about this with many people, especially European academics who can't understand how this works - that there is a moral force here! (Lecturer and member of management)*

The centrality of teaching-and-learning related issues is fuelled by a belief in the inevitability of organizational precariousness and ineffectiveness: these are taken to be a natural consequence of mass higher education, a social goal that has not been questioned by any of the respondents (as I examined in the last chapter). At the same time, organisational ineffectiveness is, to a

large extent, linked to a budget tightness that is beyond the Faculty's control which, in turn, reinforces the tendency to take organisational ineffectiveness for granted. Within all this, the students' difficult experiences with the organisational aspects of the institution appear to some of them to be counterbalanced by other factors. In this context, a group of my respondents reported having found great motivation in the sense of developing higher critical capacities and gaining broader understandings of their chosen subject and more generally of the world around them:

*I used to have a one-hour trip back home from the Faculty and it happened to me coming back at 11.00pm, when you least expect to keep thinking about what happened in class, coming back thinking about what the lecturer had said. And then I began to realize that the course was moving things within me... not just knowledge but giving me different views about things, saying: 'this guy changed the angle for one instant and I began to see everything in a different light (Tomás, sociology advanced student)*

In effect, among some respondents, certain features of the Faculty were consistently highlighted: the sense of it being 'mind broadening'; the sense of criticality; the contestation of established ideas; the sense of intellectual pluralism. Eugenia's comments on these themes are illustrative of a common view among this group of students:

*I think that the great majority of people don't have a second reading of what they get, and I feel I do, the Faculty gave me seconds, thirds and more readings, like the possibility of always giving it another shot. Even if in some sense it flooded me with lots of questions that I was not asking, that was good, it gave me the possibility of, without giving me closed answers, the possibility of thinking a bit further, or thinking about it*



*from the other side, at least in this degree [sociology] I sensed this very much (Eugenia, sociology non-completer)*

In particular, the provision of opportunities to engage with multiple perspectives within a plural intellectual environment is what the majority of completer and non-completer respondents in this group stressed as the most satisfying aspect of their student experience:

*It broadens your horizons, another way of looking at things, whether you agree or not. Another way of looking at things which really helps you, what it means and what it conveys (Valeria, political science recent graduate)*

Within an organizational framework of disincentives and lack of support, the discussion in the previous chapter has not enabled us to characterize the university habitus other than by contrasts (e.g. as not welcoming; as not supportive; as not effective). Yet the quotes above are hinting at positive features of the institutional habitus and therefore reveal the existence of students who find spaces of freedom in the interstices of disorganization from which they seem to derive great motivation.

Perhaps here a Bernstein-influenced perspective can help us to better understand the views that these students expressed in relation to the institutional habitus of the Faculty. To this group of students, and in Bernstein's vocabulary, plurality expresses a weak framing in the hierarchical rules of the pedagogic practice within which students feel free to question, challenge and share ideas and perspectives; teachers are not, or at least not visibly, 'power figures' (Gorder 1980, p. 338). Victoria hints at elements of Bernstein's (1971) weak framing of the pedagogic relation<sup>46</sup>:

*[Curiosity] is something I've always had but was deeply awakened in that environment. In that sense, I think that a more delimited, restricted, directive environment, as I was telling you that happens in other universities, would have played against me. It is the curious aspect in me that would have been discouraged in a more directive environment. That is the greatest value that the university has for me, without doubt, it has deeply aroused my curiosity throughout these 5 or 6 years (Victoria, political science recent graduate)*

Victoria's view of a "non-delimited, non-restricted and non-directive environment" suggests her sense that the power and control relations in the pedagogic practice are weakly defined (Gorder, 1980). It is precisely the sense of not being simply a subject of a heavily authoritarian education system that seems to make it more appealing and make her more committed to it. Nonetheless, this view that was expressed by some respondents like Victoria was challenged by others who depicted constraining elements of the institutional habitus. These opposing perspectives suggest that there are two contrasting versions of the Faculty and its institutional habitus among my respondents, an issue that I will address in more detail later in the chapter.

But there is a further element that some respondents mentioned in the interviews as adding to the sense of a 'non-restricted' environment and that is social mixing. 'Social mixing' lies in the public imagination as characteristic of a public university, particularly as opposed to a private one. It refers to diverse life trajectories and particularly socio-economic backgrounds that are to be found as a result of these universities being non-selective and tuition-free<sup>47</sup>. Comments on social mixing as intellectually stimulating were common across the interviews but were particularly highlighted by middle class respondents educated in private secondary schools. Some commented that they had felt amazed at being, for the first time, in touch with people

holding different perspectives; what they regarded as people coming from ‘different worlds’. Victoria hints at the sense of having found these unfamiliar realities quite exotic and her amazement at this:

*It was not just that I went to a private school but also that it was a small school and so I had a very rooted identity, all the teachers knew me... So my first impression at the Faculty was of a very cold and anonymous place, but at the same time it was fascinating, as if behind every wall you could find a completely different world. Today I think of it and it sounds silly but I remember in a class I started talking to a girl who came from Lanus [a lower middle class area outside the capital]. I had never seen anyone who came from Lanus, to me it was like ‘wow’ (Victoria, political science recent graduate)*

Research into higher education and diversity indicates that it is common for students to find interacting with diverse peers beneficial (Orfield & Whitley 1999 in Gurin *et al*, 2002). A socially diverse environment is regarded as bringing about new intellectual horizons and therefore contributing to shaping a learning environment where the students’ minds can broaden considerably. But the highlighting of the self-developing effects of social mixing by respondents coming from privileged private secondary schools can also be regarded as representing a further form of capital for these students. Just as Bourdieu (1986a) explained the potential of certain ‘investments’ to translate into other forms of capital - as when he exemplifies ‘engagement parties’ as being ‘an excellent investment in social capital’ (p. 375) – here, again, it seems that the Faculty represents to some the opportunity of getting a form of knowledge and experience that they consider will be useful in later life ‘in the real world’ and which they could not get from their usual circles of family and friends.

### **On value-laden judgements and choices: values and commitments**

Most of the positive comments respondents made about a ‘plural’ learning environment highlighted a perceived space of intellectual challenge and dispute as particularly appealing aspects of the pedagogic approach within the Faculty:

*I think that the level of education is really good. It's better than at private universities, it's different, it's another perspective about things. At private universities it is as if things were seen from only one side. They study the authors who see things from that perspective and those who see reality in another way probably are not addressed or only in passing. At UBA it's as if you see both sides of the coin (Juan, sociology student)*

Significantly, all of the respondents who commented on their sense of appreciation of the ‘pluralist’ relation of UBA to knowledge contrasted this with the more strongly defined pedagogic environment of private universities:

*I think now that I'm talking to you that even if I was mad I wouldn't go to a university with a strongly defined character, because I think that's what happened to me when I meet political scientists from Di Tella, UCA or San Andres [private universities], that because they are so focused on one specialization actually for them that is the ultimate meaning of the course. They miss thinking and seeing a lot of other issues (Martin, advanced political science student)*

The respondents' highlighting of the importance of a disinterested education as well as their valuing of intellectual challenge, criticality, plurality and contestation as important aspects of their sense of satisfaction with the university experience is again illustrative of the meaning of higher education for these students. These judgments can be seen as reflecting an ideological commitment to public education which has also been noted in other studies (Veleda, 2002), one that is underpinned in the disbelief in the capacity of the private sector to provide disinterested education due to the customer nature of the pedagogic relation. Whether these values are specific to Argentine students is difficult to establish because the international literature is particularly unforthcoming in this respect; perhaps this is not even an issue that has occurred to researchers in other contexts. As Temple argues, most literature on student satisfaction "deals only with the methodology used and general organisational implications, not mentioning at all the substantive comments made by students" (Temple, 2007, p. 67). In addition, when literature deals with the students' perceptions of the academic environment (academic workload, teaching methods, course structure, course assessment) (Biggs, 1987; Ramsden, 1991) it generally does so to assess their impact on academic outcomes (Entwistle, Hanley and Hounsell, 1979; Lizzio, Wilson and Simons, 2002; Mollis, 2001b) rather than to engage with the nuances and complexity of student perceptions about their experiences.

It has been suggested though that in countries where the 'extrinsic value of education in terms of its employment outcomes' have been stressed within the drive to 'make higher education relevant to national economic needs' the liberal idea of 'the pursuit of education for its own sake' has been undermined (Winn, 2002, p. 447). Within this scenario, pursuit of disinterested intellectual development is becoming appealing to only a minority of students, as Winn argues is the case in the UK<sup>48</sup> (2002). But the quotes in this chapter paint a rather different image of at least one group of my respondents (one third of non-completers and half of the current students

and graduates). Their judgments about the Faculty suggest that their satisfaction was largely related to an engagement in critical thinking and intellectual nurturing that sits uneasily with notions of utilitarian advantage. As Veronica commented:

*Because it gives you tools to become more critical, to be able to see things in a different way. That's why, beyond being able to work as a Sociologist, which would be the ideal, it is useful for your personal life, in my view. It broadens and opens your mind. This is what it has to offer, this is why I like it (Veronica, sociology graduate)*

It has to be borne in mind, however, that these comments might reflect subject specificities in relation to different orientations to university study in the different subject areas. For instance, it is possible that expressive or intrinsic orientations are perhaps more common orientations among those choosing the social sciences while more instrumental orientations may occur in other subject areas such as the sciences. Yet the literature appears to have ignored or overlooked this possibility.

### **The uncomfortable view: contradictions in the learning environment**

As I have shown, some respondents attached great value to what they perceived as theoretical and intellectual pluralism and criticality in the learning environment at UBA. They talked about being pleased by the challenges of what they regarded as a nurturing and liberating experience. They even felt that the Faculty provided a framework that enabled intellectual growth and self-affirmation through the development of higher critical capacities and broader understandings. However, the evidence here is highly mixed with some interviews showing that for a

considerable number of respondents the handling of the learning environment posed important practical and emotional dilemmas. Two thirds of my non-completer respondents and at least half of the students seemed much less 'comfortable' within the learning environment and, unlike the other group, pointed to aspects of the pedagogic relationship that they found not just non-liberating, but even constraining and exclusive. I examine this in the following sections of this chapter.

### *Freedom and necessity?*

Indeed, comments by some respondents on the virtues of an open and challenging learning environment have to be seen over and against the concerns of others about the weak relation between university teaching and the requirements of later professional life. The strongest criticism of the Faculty's curricula (common to respondents in the different subjects but more markedly among those taking Political Science, Sociology and Social Communication) is related to what is regarded as a wide gap between what is seen as a liberal curriculum and the knowledge and skills demanded by the world of work:

*Here there is a huge gap between the university course and what you will find in the labour market later, in the professional field, there is a huge gap and that makes things difficult, because ok, if you get the chance of not working while you are studying, then you finish the course and start working and realise that things are not the way you thought (Natalia, sociology non-completer)*

In some cases, then, the fulfilment of the ideal of intellectual development for its own sake comes to be at odds with the practicalities of future professional life and employment. Unlike the previous quotes on intellectual disinterestedness by some of the respondents, others talked in a more utilitarian fashion about preparation for 'the world of work' and the 'need to get a job' as important concerns. This tension is hinted at by Carol in the following comment:

*It is as if you were fulfilling a personal goal, on the one hand. It strengthens you, it helps you to keep on. I think it is useful for your life too. But the problem is that, ok, everything is very nice with your life and with the criteria that the course gives you, and with the openness and breadth of viewpoints that it gives you, but at the time of having to work, to get a job... (Carol, sociology student)*

Particularly, some regarded the college curriculum as highly theoretical, lacking connection to the empirical world, and outdated. They talked about having felt that topics relevant to contemporary society were not sufficiently dealt with and, within this, they found themselves not only struggling to make meaningful connections between university knowledge and their lives but also losing interest, as is illustrated in the following quotes by Dana and Pablo:

*The bibliography is outdated; there is so much old stuff. Time goes on and also the world in relation to what they give us to read... one also has to keep up with reality, because to read texts that have been written 100 years ago, ok, but reality has deeply changed and exigencies and activities of today are different. What touched me more deeply, things that still remained in me, are like this short documentary that they asked us to make in one of the classes about December 20<sup>th</sup>, or in another class the texts on globalization, hunger, I don't know... There are more contemporary issues than sitting*



*reading things written 100 years ago, that are also too dense, too difficult to understand*  
(Dana, social communication non-completer)

*For example with the course 'Introduction to Sociological Knowledge II', they used to teach Parsons and teach the Parsons' 'little schema', a ridiculous thing. I felt it didn't reflect reality at all!* (Pablo, sociology non-completer)

It was common for respondents who expressed concern with their difficulty in finding a link between class knowledge and outside life to praise the exceptions where this connection was more clearly made; these teachers were portrayed as rare sources of inspiration and motivation:

*There was one of the teachers who really impressed me, I really admired him. He was the guy who talked about reality the most - it was quite weird because at a Faculty of political science, in a university so politicised as this one, at least in my years, or in my view, the social and political issues of the present were not addressed, and this guy was like the one who used to talk about probably the most common things that were happening, about the 'piqueteros', the politicians, the Ministers fighting with each other...* (Natalia, sociology non-completer)

Several studies have stressed students' interest in relating course material and teaching to real-life situations, like Kuh et al.'s (1991) notion of "seamless learning environments" which attempt to merge classroom and out-of-the-classroom experiences by making classroom practices more relevant to students' outside lives. But the boundary between the highly theoretical/outdated curriculum and practical/contemporary kinds of knowledge that Dana refers to can be also understood in terms of Bernstein's rules that underlie the instructional

order and curricular knowledge. In this sense, this separation can be regarded as an expression of strong framing, in this case between university knowledge and everyday knowledge (Bernstein, 1971). Writing about school contexts, Bernstein argued that when this boundary or framing is strong “it often means that images, voices and practices the school reflects make it difficult for children of marginalized classes to recognize themselves in the school” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 14) which is then related to the ‘selective class-based acquisition’ of such pedagogical practice. As Young put it, “Hierarchy and boundary between school and everyday knowledge – as different from knowledge which emphasises its power to give learners a sense that they can act on the world” (1999, p. 469).

Dana and Darío, the ones who expressed the greatest dissatisfaction with the university curriculum and questioned the ‘usefulness’ and relevance of that knowledge to their outside and future lives, were both first-generation higher education students juggling busy working lives and financial constraints. In clear contradiction with the set of respondents quoted earlier, Darío highlighted his sense of boredom and apathy which he attributed to the lack of clear links between his present effort and a work future. In contrast to the earlier discussion on disinterested intellectual enquiry, these respondents talked about their interest in the applicability of the knowledge gained at university hinting therefore at a form of utilitarianism that was absent from the others’ perspectives.

Darío’s concerns might be a reflection of some very real constraints – and probably necessities – he faced that are not present in the lives of economically more privileged students. As Bourdieu (1986a) pointed out, the lower classes have a more acute sense of the time and economic capital invested on each venture so they tend to show preference for functionality and taste for the necessary: “necessity imposes a taste for necessity which implies a form of

adaptation to and consequently acceptance of the necessary, a resignation to the inevitable” (Bourdieu 1986, p 372). Perhaps a ‘taste of necessity’ can be glimpsed in the following comment by Darío, revealing a more pragmatic or ‘utilitarian’ concern that contrasts with the more liberated ‘tastes of freedom’ or ‘luxury’ hinted at in previous extracts, therefore suggesting decision-making is carried out differently by different kinds of students:

*I think the teachers had a very high intellectual level, they had a great deal of subject matter knowledge, and some made the classes really exciting but others (the majority) were very tedious... Even if I felt I was learning a lot, I only learnt what aroused my interest, and what I thought was useful for my future, because there were so many things that I considered superfluous and boring, unnecessary ones (Darío, political science non-completer)*

Similarly, some other respondents started to question the value and ‘utility’ of the knowledge they were gaining following an initial period of satisfaction with the course. Natalia, for example, talked about how she “started to feel it wasn’t enough for me, I started to feel the course was very theoretical, too theoretical” (Natalia, sociology non-completer). Questions began to take shape then regarding the translation of conceptual knowledge into the world of practice. Octavio, for example, talked about how what had fascinated him at the beginning of the course, gradually started to lose meaning:

*In that sense the Faculty operated as a trigger of many curiosities and the will to learn and read and constantly challenge. I read a lot, wanted to learn more every day, especially in the first few years. But later what happened was that I couldn’t find ways of applying all that wealth of knowledge and started to feel desperate. I reached like a*

*point of saturation because I wasn't able to use what I was reading, and that was part of my crisis in the last two years of the course. That the course did not facilitate, did not help me to develop tools to apply all what I was learning. But especially in the first few years I was really curious, I had very encouraging teachers who gave us lots of complementary bibliography, who emphasised other types of readings, trying to get deeper into the foot-notes, trying to grasp the texts in different ways (Octavio, sociology non-completer)*

Octavio's reference to a crisis is important because a similar state of mind was mentioned by most respondents as a stage they experienced along their passage through higher education (this is an issue that I examine in the next chapter). But to reflect back on the tensions and dilemmas students experience in their choice making, the judgements and 'tastes' of my respondents can be regarded as being dominated by two distinct sets of concerns, which can be viewed in turn as related to different material conditions and constraints. Indeed, material conditions seem to place students in dissimilar positions to be able to assess the Faculty's pedagogy in intrinsic or instrumental terms and within shorter-or-longer term considerations (as in Darío and Dana above), again reflecting the greater attachment of economically disadvantaged students to the more immediate and 'functional'.

#### *Opportunities or constraints?*

The different elements outlined so far help us to begin to identify both the opportunities and constraints of the learning environment as perceived and expressed by different students. Firstly, just as some were positive about the challenges involved in developing their own

critical voice within what they felt was a stimulating environment, others conveyed a sense of loss and anxiety at not being critical enough:

*I felt that I was afraid of talking, I was worried that my questions would be 'silly' ones so I didn't participate in class, something that I had never experienced in my secondary school (Lucia, social communication non-completer)*

Lucia's experience hugely contrasts with that of Valeria, for example, for whom contestation and criticality, and her exposure to them, were not intimidating and self-threatening instances but inspiring and probably even self-affirming ones:

*I think it was wonderful because there were lots of people, lots of different viewpoints and a lot of very radical people... 'radical', I don't know, but they talked a lot in class, they discussed. And I thought there were lots of issues opening up (Valeria, political science recent graduate)*

Within the huge classes in the Faculty, with abstract talk going on, and the permanent challenge of having to be challenging enough, many of my respondents felt they would rather stay quiet than subject themselves to harsh scrutiny. This supports Coate's (2006) point that "invisible pedagogies can enable a surveillance of individual behaviours that can become stressful: the constant worrying over what to 'oppose', or the anxiety of not being 'clever enough'" (Coate, 2006, p. 419). Indeed, the interviews show that many students felt hugely anxious about participating in class, worrying that their questions might appear as too simple and not critical enough, in a context in which, as they perceived it, being critical is equated with being clever. Yet criticality, or the ability to do critique is itself a product of cultural capital and schooling, as

Bourdieu (1986a) exemplifies in relation to the differences between social classes in their appreciation of art (receptive versus more critical stances). Indeed, relevant cultural capital provides resources that advantage their possessors within the 'field' of higher education; it translates into the possession of specific skills that enable some to represent themselves as a particular kind of educational subject and these are the students who are likely to feel more comfortable with the form of engagement that is expected from them within the Faculty as a social field.

This discussion raises questions as to whether the learning environment in the Faculty actually involves exclusive elements which stand in contradiction to a pedagogic project of the public university that presents itself as widely inclusive. This, in turn, indicates some further aspects of the institutional habitus which arise from contradiction between the rhetoric of democratic opportunities that underpins open access and the reality of exclusive practices of the organisational environment, an issue to which I now turn to examine further.

### *Exclusion in context*

Discussion of the exclusive aspects of the Faculty's curricular and pedagogic practices requires some further contextualization. It has been noted that the marketization of higher education in advanced industrial societies has subjected curricula to conflicting demands: "The desire to maintain the depth of a university education, to preserve the disciplines and to produce disciplinary specialists are often set against external demands for a 'useful', functional curriculum product" (Barnett and Coate, 2005, p. 38). Within this, "courses are designed to offer the kinds of skills and knowledge that attract students who anticipate having to compete in the labour market" (Barnett and Coate, 2005, p. 37). In effect, in increasingly market-

oriented systems (Edwards, 2000), “students have been explicitly constituted as ‘customers’, a development that further reinforces the idea that a degree is a commodity (or ‘meal ticket’) that (hopefully) can be exchanged for a job rather than as a liberal education that prepares students for life” (Willmott, 1995, p. 1002).

Within all this, Trice and Deay (2001) point out that students have been increasingly showing preference for obtaining “practical training for employment” (cited in Donald and Denison 2001 p. 481), a finding that is supported by some non-completion research that highlights the importance of “subject matter to the practicalities of and relevance to future employment” as important to student retention (Trotter, 2006, p. 2). However, “faculty teaching goals have remained relatively stable over the past two decades, with highest priority given to facilitating students’ intellectual development” (cited in Donald and Denison 2001 p. 481) thus creating a widening gap in the “educational goals of faculty and students” (p. 481). It can be argued that the gap which some respondents complained about between teachers’ traditional academic values and their own employability concerns underpins the uneasiness of some about the college curriculum which was apparent in the foregoing discussion. Yet other issues that came up in the interviews suggest that the college pedagogic practices and curriculum can also be regarded as playing a role in the preservation of the authority structure of the pedagogic relationship, contradicting the views of those respondents who depicted the learning space as contested, and power relations as weakly framed.

Indeed, in advanced industrial societies there has been an erosion in “the belief that universities require a relative independence from political and corporate influence to function optimally, which was, in turn, linked to the need for guaranteed state funding, academic tenure and professional autonomy” (Naidoo, 2004, p. 469). Within this context, “the authority of the

professors to determine the direction of the university, to develop the curriculum, and ultimately to maintain full control in the classroom and in the selection and implementation of research topics [have been] compromised” (Altbach, 2001, p. 216), leading to what has been called the ‘decline of donnish dominion’ (Halsey, 1982). Put in Bourdieu’s terms, there has been an erosion in the conditions for the relative autonomy of the field of higher education (Naidoo, 2004). However, there are certain structural conditions of the Argentine higher education system that can be seen as favouring the ability of the ‘academic oligarchy’ (Clark, 1983) to remain relatively insulated and therefore enabling academic values to continue to have the major influence on teaching practices and the curriculum. So the gap which some respondents complained about between teachers’ traditional academic values and their own employability concerns can, in turn, be related to the more ‘classical’ model of academic autonomy and pedagogic authority in Argentina vis-à-vis those of ‘marketised’ higher education systems (Naidoo, 2005), which imply different teacher-student relations.

In line with Moscati’s observation about the Italian professoriate, the fact that the Argentine professoriate “has been able to resist state pressure as well as market enchantment” has enabled the academia “to remain largely independent of external pressures” (Moscati, 2001, p. 126). The 1990s attempts to alter the weight of authority between Burton Clark’s poles of higher education coordination: the state, the market and the academic oligarchy, following the introduction of accountability mechanisms, have not seriously infringed academia autonomy (Schwartzman, 1993). As a result, the Argentine professoriate has managed to protect its position of dominance in the field of higher education.

Within this situation of relative insulation, teachers’ practices have been left largely unscrutinised, either by external forces or by the students themselves, a situation that can be seen



as underlying the gap that some respondents mentioned between the traditional academic/theoretical values of faculty and their own practical concerns. Tomás was among the respondents who, again, referred to these issues:

*If there is anything that I can criticise about the Faculty it's this matter of not offering real links or like a channel a bit more institutionalised for people to relate the university a bit more with their work and with other aspects of their lives that are not only studying. And that it is only the academic side that is addressed. It seems as if the Faculty will only take you down the right road if you want to become a theoretician*  
(Tomás, sociology advanced student)

In fact, I have already referred to the unhappiness of some respondents about the highly theoretical orientation of the curriculum in general and particularly of some of the lectures and this sentiment also led to observations about the common use of an obscure vocabulary:

*And with this guy I felt something that was hard to find in the rest of the courses, that it was obvious that he was a very knowledgeable guy but he also had the ability always to stuff what he was saying with a language that was not necessarily academic, filling it or exemplifying with concrete situations [...] Because sometimes you find people who are very academicist, in their way of teaching, because they make the exegesis of the text, and they don't give you a clue with more contemporary or concrete situations* (Manuel, social communication non-completer)

The teachers' reluctance to draw practical connections between theory and concrete situations in a way that all students can meaningfully incorporate; the combination of a highly theoretical

curriculum with the use of technical jargon; these can be seen as forms of exclusion and delimitation. Indeed, some respondents remarked that lecturers at the Faculty not only approached the topics with high levels of abstraction, frequently making use of obscure academic terms, but they felt it was done so on purpose, hinting here at the workings of exclusive practices:

*... there were teachers who always managed for you not to find that connection, somehow you were saying 'what am I reading, what is all this telling me?' Later probably you realised that there was something you could get out of it, but at the time many courses felt like very tough, like 'I have to pass because I have to pass' (Federico, social communication non-completer)*

Bourdieu has drawn attention to the relation between academic language and social reproduction. The studies brought together in *Academic Discourse* stressed “the decisive role of linguistic inheritance in academic success” by showing that “it is the nature of university language and how it is applied which are the most critical, but least cited, causes of the breakdown in the teaching relationship” (Bourdieu, Passeron and de Saint Martin, 1994, p. 4). A highly theoretical content of lectures delivered in obscure technical language can be seen as a form of authoritarianism in the pedagogic relation and therefore as a mechanism of social exclusion or at least, in Bourdieu’s terms, as a further element that helps reinforce the power of the pedagogic relation to legitimate inequalities. On the other hand, these practices can also be seen as playing a role in selection and exclusion that contributes to the reproduction of academic capital as a product of the autonomy of the field of higher education.

Finally, another consequence of the relative insulation of teachers' practices is that students remain more subject to teachers' arbitrariness, a situation that is also reinforced by the large class sizes in the Faculty. As the senior member of staff quoted in the last chapter mentioned: "in a mass situation like here, you are exposed to the arbitrariness of the lecturer: he gives you a fail grade; you don't know to whom to complain". Ultimately, the relative insulation of the Faculty's teachers is a factor that increases teachers' power and control over the pedagogic practice. This is illustrated in the ways students' learning at the Faculty is assessed, Bernstein's third message system (alongside curriculum and pedagogy) which is the subject of the last section of the chapter.

#### *Assessment as exclusive*

Those respondents who failed examinations indicated in the interviews that they were left in a position of distressing uncertainty as to the reasons for such an outcome. Eugenia's quote below is one of the various stories that illustrate the students' confused and mortified state of mind following failed exams or written assignments:

*It was in Epistemology, a disastrous course. The guy [chair], they say he's a star but I don't know, I never saw him in a class because the only one he taught in the term I just missed it. But they told me everyone fell asleep in his class. And then in the practical classes, I used to have a teacher ....I usually understood what she was saying and I was really on top of the reading material and everything. But then when we had the first and second exams [parciales], I don't know what she was expecting. Because I wrote everything I... I don't know because I don't study by heart, I try to understand and put things in my words. But it's very difficult to understand their criteria. What they expect*

*or... And I could never ask because there were strikes, then she fell ill, then she missed a class, then she went on a trip, so she missed like 10 classes out of 30. Then when I found out about my marks I had my soul on the floor... I said 'that's enough' and never returned* (Eugenia, sociology non-completer)

Respondents talked about failure as a shocking experience, especially so because of the lack of feedback about their performance as they progressed along a particular course. Some have mentioned having found out about their failing mark not by having being given their written work back with teachers' comments but by seeing it on a list attached to a notice board after the term had finished. The lack of feedback and the impersonal situation surrounding the return of tests were further aspects of the arbitrariness of assessment which respondents experienced as demeaning.

Assessment has been identified as one of the elements of the student experience that can have a positive effect on retention, as well as on their enhanced learning (Black *et al*, 2002). Tinto argues that "students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide frequent and early feedback about their performance as they are trying to learn and persist" (Tinto, 2003, p. 3). Yorke (2001) makes the point that the advantages of formative over summative forms of assessment lie in that "the student receives feedback on his or her performance from the teacher. The exchange between teacher and student is (ideally) mutually hermeneutic, in that each is seeking to interpret and understand the communications of the other with the aim that the student will become better equipped to deal with the challenges of future study (and life in general)" (p. 117). That the way in which learning assessment is "reported back to the pupil (feedback) affects motivation to learn" (Assessment Reform Group 2002, p. 5) and that feedback "that focuses on how to improve or build on what has been done [...] is associated

with greater interest and effort” (Assessment Reform Group, 2002, p. 6) have been established in school research. Without intending to go over the vast literature on forms of assessment that enhance learning, there is a sense of self-affirmation, fairness and respect in the provision of feedback on students’ work that students at the Faculty have to live without.

Five of my respondents have never resumed their studies after failing exams in conditions they regarded as inexplicable. Even if they did not attribute their departure decision solely to these particular experiences, these came to be seen as the last in a series of misfortunes, one that was felt to be confusing and emotionally diminishing. Significantly, Zepke et al. (2006) have shown that ensuring that students feel valued, fairly treated and safe is central to their retention.

There are structural conditions within the Faculty that conspire against the provision of appropriate feedback; comments on each student’s work is impracticable within the overcrowded conditions of several courses. It can be argued that the way assessment is usually carried out at the Faculty is an unintended outcome of the policy of mass participation. But these forms of evaluation also play a role in maintaining the prevailing power and control relations whereby teachers strongly control the transmission of educational knowledge.

Finally, why is it that these curricular, assessment and pedagogic practices can be regarded as containing exclusive elements? And who are these practices likely to affect the most? As discussed in earlier chapters, there are students whose motivation is almost given or automatic and for whom going into higher education in the first place was part of a ‘normal biography’ (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998), almost a ‘non-decision’ (Ball et al 2002). These are the students who move in higher education as ‘fish in water’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) and do not need exceptional encouragement to realise it. Completion, rather than non-completion, seems

part of the realization of a taken-for-granted project. This automatic disposition to higher education *completion* is illustrated in Tomás' (sociology student) case when he commented that: "If you enter university and are really committed to finish, you will finish no matter what happens or what the university does or does not do"; or in Carol's (sociology student) comment: 'I never thought about dropping out. In fact, in my family, studying at university is something that you start and you finish"; a disposition reproduced within the family.

It is, then, as if this type of student hardly needed any encouragement to keep going. On the other hand, the interviews show that pedagogic practices within the Faculty, such as the lack of feedback, the privileging of abstract knowledge and valuing of criticality and use of esoteric language undermine those learners who are venturing into higher education as an unknown quantity, whose cultural capital is ill-adapted to the demands of the traditional academy; these practices have a negative influence on their motivation and self-esteem and put them at higher risk of non-completion. This shapes a situation that reinforces a perverse logic identified in previous chapters whereby mainly those who find learning easiest are best catered for.

## Crisis, accommodation, rejection

*Here it is as if teachers were very conductist – like assuming that the student doesn't have any learning problem; that the student who picks up quickly will blossom, despite the teacher. Well, the very clever one, the one who is really decided, all fine, all perfect, he goes to UBA and is very successful, isn't he? But my case wasn't the ideal. It is ideal only if you have money, if you are committed and decided, if you are supported: then all is perfect. If not, you are left outside*  
(Carolina, sociology non-completer)

## Introduction

This chapter focuses on the Faculty as a site where personal crises arise, crises that are partly related to the particular experience of studying there and to broader factors that compound and contextualise that experience. The conditions under which these crises develop and are dealt with is the main focus of the chapter. Building on previous chapters, I argue that these 'crises' appear as critical instances when a student's set of capitals and resources are particularly tested. Drawing further on Bourdieu's framework, the crises and their outcomes are explored through the students' differential capacities to mobilize appropriate capitals, highlighting here the particular significance of social capital to consolidate advantage. The interrelated workings of the students' mix of capitals plays a central role in the way they deal with practical and emotional difficulties within the Faculty and help some to secure the endurance of their higher education projects.

## On the crises

In previous chapters I showed that the students' decisions to withdraw from university rarely appeared as smooth, instant or straightforward. Rather, they were the result of a complex intersection of factors and emotions extending over periods of uncertainty and frustration, which were in many cases quite painful. Yet it was not uncommon for these decisions to be taken following a critical incident. Nutt et al. (2005) identify 'critical moments' of the academic year like "transition stages within a programme, and assessment points which have the potential to greatly influence retention outcomes". A frustrating experience of assessment, for example, was one of the critical points that some non-completers in my sample felt to be 'the last straw'; the last disappointment within an already troubled student trajectory. Some respondents, too, found transition between the first stage of compulsory courses (generally lasting for at least two years) and the second one of optional courses as a critical time that compelled them to re-assess decisions and options. Having being at the Faculty for quite a few years, they faced the reality of still having an entire, equally long, new phase ahead. Andres expressed a feeling that was common among my respondents: "the course starts to feel too long and you say: 'ugh, it's like I never finish'" (Andres, political science advanced student).

At least two respondents, however, saw the transition to the second phase as central to the renewal of their enthusiasm, as it enabled them to gain a sense of active choice that they had longed for during the initial stage of mandatory courses: "And then, when you reach the point of the optional courses, it's like you begin to choose and that is more motivating" (Carol). In any case, what is significant is that almost all of my respondents - non-completers, students and graduates alike - talked about having gone through a period of 'crisis' at some point as students



within the Faculty. In general, these periods of crisis came about at the time when they were reaching the middle of their programme of studies:

*Like half-way into the compulsory courses, approaching the elective ones... I guess they must also be related to personal matters but, I don't know, for some reason everyone gets through something similar, they get like into a crisis half-way in the course. There are classes that are not so good and the time comes when it is good to take classes that you like, because you are doing this because you like the course (Kike, political science student)*

Kike's quote is evocative of a sense of languishing along on an interminable course. Indeed, embedded in almost all the comments on the 'half-way' crisis is the respondents' perception of the course as excessively long. The duration of the degrees at the Faculty, and in Argentine higher education more generally, is an important matter of contention (an issue discussed in Chapter 3). Respondents talked about feelings of 'never ending', of having made huge effort and seeing so much more in front of them:

*I'm not sure I could handle giving up something that took me so many years and which I really liked and which gave me so much, but suddenly you feel the need to bring it to an end, to close it. When I was half-way in the course I had like a crisis... I felt that it had been quite some time since I had started, a few years, and still had more to go (Tomás, sociology advanced student)*

But, as the interviews suggest, it is not just the burden of time and effort invested that the respondents find wearing, crises arise out of a mixture of several issues. This complexity is nicely captured in Carol's comment:

*You start to question many things, whether to continue or not, how to handle it, also because of the work issue that is not easy, so you start thinking that you want to do something that is related to what you are studying and you see that it's complicated*  
(Carol, sociology student)

The sense of crisis, then, seems to be an all-encompassing state. Added to the perceptions of the poor quality and relevance of institutional provision, there are insecurities derived from a difficult labour market and a sense of anxiety about the prospects of professional realisation. Also at stake in the students' dilemmas are issues of effort and reward, expectations and reality, and practical concerns. Nutt et al. (2005) point out that "how a student copes with those critical moments varies depending on how much support they receive from the institution itself, and from their peers and their family". However, most of the respondents in this study did not think the Faculty played any significant role in providing the support they would have needed to cope with their crises successfully. Indeed, Tomás eloquently grasps the problem when he portrays the Faculty's role in supporting students in difficulty as negligible. In turn, he emphasizes the particular significance of *individual* resources in filling the vacuum left by the institution and remediating the difficulties:

*It's good to work on something that is related to what you're studying – it makes transition towards what happens after graduation easier, it helps to connect the course*

*with concrete practice. But this connection is an individual project, not an institutional response that is there for everyone* (Tomás, sociology student)

Indeed, the accounts of successful resolution of the transition to work, one of the issues of most concern to my respondents, seem to draw upon highly individualized strategies where the activation of relevant capitals becomes paramount in defining and assisting that transition. Furthermore, like Tomás, most respondents showed great awareness of the extent to which the individual resources on which the outcomes of the crises rely so heavily are unequally distributed among them (I come back to all of this below).

### **Insiders out**

The experiences of some of my non-completer respondents support the view that a student's trajectory in higher education is hardly ever unproblematic. In the UK, Power et al. (2003) found in their study of middle class students that 'although almost all our respondents did well at school, and most came from middle-class homes, their progress was more vulnerable to interruption and diversion than the image of the rite of passage suggests' (2003, p. 150).

There is particularly one case in my sample, that of Inés, that is worth some detailed discussion for it provides insight into the relevance of mistaken choice and vocational crisis as important sources of student non-completion. In addition, Inés represents a paradigmatic case that warns against the mechanistic association of non-completion with social disadvantage and financial necessity and throws light on the complexity of the different dimensions at work in non-completion.

Inés clearly displayed within higher education the characteristic ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu) of middle class habitus:

*My university journey was strangely very harmonious, as opposed I think to what the majority of the population who finish secondary school experience. I went to the Carlos Pellegrini so at 12 years of age they had already structured and prepared my mind to go to UBA (Inés, sociology non-completer)*

Coming from a high middle-class family with a long tradition of higher education (both parents are lawyers and all grandparents are university graduates), she told me with pride how her grandmother ‘went from Rojas to Rosario [from a small village to a distant, large city] to study Pharmacy, she’s almost 90 years old now, imagine at that time... the value attached to university at home, it’s very important”. Inés was destined for university from early on, a route that was clear since she attended Carlos Pellegrini, one of the two most prestigious secondary schools in the country which belongs to the University of Buenos Aires. Leaving the course represented for her an important rupture in terms of her ‘class’ background:

*I felt I was dispossessing myself of all of that, I decided to break with all that, to say: ‘you know what? I’m not going to be a university graduate but I don’t care’. The most difficult thing for me was to break with the fact that I was not going to be ‘universitaria’ [a university graduate]. That I was going to stop belonging... (Inés)*

The sense that she would ‘stop belonging’ was seriously distressing: “It was a difficult change for me to leave university from that point, from saying ‘I will not be a university graduate’; I will be many other things but not a university graduate which was almost a mandated plan in

my life". Indeed, the choice of higher education in the first place was for Inés "simply the next stage in a seamless, taken-for-granted, middle class trajectory" (Reay, David and Ball, 2005, p. 32), or in Bourdieu's terms, what 'people like us' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p. 64) do. She remembered having had heated arguments with her mother about her career decisions and having told her, in tears:

*I'm not going to be a sociologist, I can't, I don't like it. I don't see myself producing something I can't touch, something whose benefits are not visible. I don't want to have to write books on theories about society, I don't want to have to be someone else' (Inés)*

Fulfilling others' expectations was endangering Inés' sense of authenticity. It was not just that she had to discover her true self but to construct her new identity in opposition to family expectations. In the end, Inés was passionate about cooking and before deciding to leave the Faculty, she started to train to be a sommelier (wine taster). Eventually, she dropped sociology and set up a small business involving wine tasting and food preparation.

Inés' non-completion is a case of mistaken vocation with major implications regarding cultural ruptures which supports Power et al.'s finding that "higher education careers are often complicated or uncertain even for those who might be expected to glide through university like 'fish in water' (Power et al, 2003, p. 81). Indeed, the issue of mistaken vocation occupies a very important place in the non-completion literature. In the UK, wrong choice of field of study has been identified as a leading cause of university non-completion (Davies and Elias, 2002; Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Yorke, 1999). There are a number of different possible sources of wrong choice identified in the literature: rushed decision-making (McGivney, 1996, p. 116); choice made under family or peer pressure (McInnis et al, 2000); the lack of appropriate

information at the time of choosing (McInnis *et al*, 2000) although this has to be understood in relation to the unequal access to relevant information (Ball, Reay and David, 2006); and unrealistic expectations about higher education (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998).

Wrong choice of field of study seems to be a significant factor in the high rate of subject transfer among students in Argentine higher education or in their leaving higher education altogether (García de Fanelli, 2006a) yet the information required to produce an accurate figure is not readily available. Critics of the higher education system argue that the high volume of transfers is rooted in the rigid structure of the degrees (discussed in Chapter 3) (Marquis, 2003), where students are required to choose a subject before entering the corresponding Faculty. This contrasts with systems where students can experience different fields before choosing their specialization such as the 'major concentration' US system where students usually do not choose their specialism before the second year of a four-year programme. In addition, university departments in the US generally do not define the student's full course of study but allow them considerable freedom both within their field and in their courses (Regel, 1992). The Argentine curricular model, in contrast, requires a minimum (full-time) of 5, 6, or even 7 years to be completed, depending on the university degree, and courses of study are generally rigidly defined throughout their full length (Coraggio and Vispo, 2001). Proposed changes to the system to shorten the length of the programmes of study and increase curricular flexibility have been criticized as imposing foreign traditions while diminishing the value of the Argentine degree, which is comparable to a 4-year university course plus a master's degree in the Anglo-Saxon model (Fernandez Lamarra, 2002).

The rigid structure of the programmes of study and, in relation to it, the young age at which final career decisions have to be made were mentioned in the interviews as having led many of

the respondents to transfer between subjects. Indeed, the feeling of having picked the wrong course was quite common among my non-completer respondents (one of the non-completers, Carolina, transferred between three different subjects before dropping out from Sociology, and 5 other non-completers had started another subject before transferring to one within the social sciences from where they also dropped out) and transfers were frequent among current students and graduates in the sample (3 of the current students and 2 of the graduates had started another programme before transferring to the one about which I interviewed them). Some talked about their 'immaturity' at the time when they had to choose their subject, about the hurried character of their choice and the poor information and support they obtained from secondary schools in their transition to university.

Tinto warns against the dangers of treating different types of 'dropout behaviour' equally (Tinto, 1983). In his classification, voluntary withdrawal (as opposed to withdrawal forced by the institution for academic failure, a form non-existent at UBA) can be permanent, temporary or due to transfer between programmes or institutions. Tinto argues that understanding all these forms as just 'dropout' neglects their different causes and institutional and policy implications. Mansell and Parkin (1990) point out that transfers should be seen "more as a vindication of the colleges procedures than a slur upon the original course. Yet, without an adequate tracking system, such students will show up as just another drop-out statistic" (cited in McGivney, 1996, p. 26). In Argentine higher education, mistaken choice is a highly significant factor associated with both non-completion and transfer (García de Fanelli, 2006a; Jewsbury and Haefeli, 2000). Indeed, the incapacity of the systems in place at public universities to enable the distinction to be drawn between permanent non-completion and transfer are known to result in an important overestimation of the non-completion phenomenon (Landi and Giuliadori, 2001) and in misleading attribution of responsibility.

However, the interviews reveal that it is only in Inés' case among the non-completers in my sample that mistaken choice can be regarded as a primary reason for 'dropout' and as uninfluenced by other factors (relatively uninfluenced because she admitted that, had the conditions at the Faculty been more welcoming, she would have finished just for the sake of the diploma, yet certainly with no 'soul' involved). All other cases are more complex. While many expressed having lost interest in their subject of choice, these sentiments were compounded by feelings of isolation, of being unsupported, of being 'out of place', of being confronted by practical difficulties. It is a mix of these factors in different degrees and compositions that contributed to the students' sense of crisis.

### **Outsiders and isolation**

The importance of student's networks of relationships is a well established finding within the international literature on non-completion, particularly after Tinto's influential thesis on social integration as central to student retention (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) found that socializing together increases the students' chances to complete their degrees, while others such as Dalziel et al. (2001) showed that "the establishment of social networks was beneficial in terms of social and academic adjustment, and in some instances indicated that their new friendships helped them in their studies and helped address the problems of isolation and anxiety" (Peat, Dalziel and Grant, 2001, p. 207). Social relationships and networking between students have also been found to serve as social support systems that can assist the transition to university life and enhance commitment to the university (McInnis, James and McNaught, 1995). Particularly during the first year of studies, relationships within the classroom such as those cemented in



learning groups and learning communities are claimed to advance learning (Tinto, 2000) “and enhances psychological well-being” (Ederer, 1993).

In the UK, research looking at the experiences of non-traditional students following widening participation (Longden, 2004; Thomas, 2002b) “suggested that social networks and friendships were of paramount importance to the decisions people make about staying or withdrawing from higher education” (Thomas, 2002a, p. 5). In a 2002 paper, Thomas draws attention to the role that the students’ availability of a network of relationships plays in providing:

*advantages to them within different spheres: the academic (relationships with teaching staff improve motivation and confidence ‘to seek help’ and academic performance); the economic sphere (‘relationships with friends and acquaintances’ can give students ‘information to improve their financial situation’ such as scholarships, job opportunities etc); and the social sphere (‘social networks provide friendship and support, information and exchange of ideas and experiences’) (p. 9).*

An exploration of the interviews along these lines reveals that social relationships was an issue of paramount importance to many of my respondents. But, as noted earlier, while international research indicates that social networks can enhance the learning and emotional experience of students in higher education (Tang, 1993), in Argentina it seems likely that isolation would be more typical due to the high incidence of employment, non-residential higher education, and the extended part-time study mode. Given that many students find themselves rushing in and out of lectures, limited social contact both between peers and with teachers is part of the everyday reality of a significant number of students within the Faculty. Within all this, there are no studies that look at whether the experience of weak social interaction at the Faculty and,

more broadly, at university level has detrimental effects on the student's academic and emotional wellbeing. However, many respondents said they would have found greater interaction with peers and teachers extremely helpful and motivating. This was particularly evident when respondents reflected back on their university experience from the point of view of their later experiences within the tertiary sector:

*I liked the conservatoire [piano] better because you kind of integrated yourself better at the conservatoire, it was more like a family, you became a friend of the teachers, you had t close contact with the teachers, you were next to them, they asked you things... we had a good relationship with the teacher and used to go to her home to study... we were few students. The Faculty was a bit like arriving, seeing what the teacher was going to talk about, blah, blah, blah, and leaving. And so things started to go wrong for me at the Faculty (Pablo, sociology non-completer)*

Pablo's quote also indicates another issue in that he links his difficulties to isolation and the sense of being anonymous. Significantly, he described his feelings of being identified/acknowledged within the piano conservatoire and contrasted it with the development of a sense of detachment from the Faculty, and a lack of interest in the lectures which led him ultimately to academic failure. The idea of isolation and anonymity as factors related to the decision to dropout was suggested by several respondents. Dana, for example, commented on the way her outside (work-related) commitments kept making it difficult for her to establish contact with her peers, an isolation that, in turn, marginalised her further in relation to the Faculty:

*I missed one class and didn't have anyone to ask what they did, no one I knew, not one phone number. It happened once and I didn't have anyone to ask; then you miss another class and you're already out (Dana, Social communication non-completer)*

So the quotes raise questions as to whether the social framework of interaction within the Faculty contributes to make the already vulnerable even more so. Some background to Dana's quote helps to better grasp this issue. Dana used to live on her own, far from the Faculty, and juggled her studies with a very busy work schedule in a radio station and a permanent struggle to make ends meet. These circumstances shaped her frequent sense of being different, quite 'out of place' at the Faculty, an issue that is illustrated in her having left the course for difficulties she could perhaps have sought help with, had she thought her needs were legitimate enough:

*Dana: The first time I left, it was because we had a group exercise to do for one course and they asked us to watch something on TV and record it. But at that time I didn't have a TV, never mind a VCR, and least of all time to record anything... And so it was as if I felt a bit embarrassed... not embarrassed but the truth is that I couldn't... I couldn't add anything to the group. Question: Did you tell the teacher you didn't have the means to do the assignment? D: no, no because there were many cases like mine or worse.*

Here Dana lacked the confidence to explain her situation or to seek help. This supports Thomas' (2002) point when writing about institutional support services that "there is evidence that those who are most in need of support are the least likely to seek it out" (p. 10). Within the context of the Faculty, seeking help appears to be seen as selecting you out as in some way 'not fitting in', as not having the requisite personal, social and cultural resources. A while after

withdrawing from the course for the first time, Dana made an attempt to resume her studies and it was then when her feelings of being an outsider became even greater as she realised she had fallen behind her student cohort. Dana's case suggests that the experiences of feeling isolated within the Faculty contribute to reinforce the student's external difficulties and therefore particularly affect those most vulnerable. In other words, the lack of social relationships on which to draw for support, advice, company and so on, particularly affect those whom for different reasons would find isolation more difficult.

The idea of isolation working to reinforce existing difficulties was evident in several interviews. Analía, for example, commented on how the poor relationship between peers within the Faculty has contributed to strengthening her feelings of insecurity and self-doubt:

*I was really not participative in class... it was a personal issue, like feeling insecure, or doubting and not daring to say the things I wanted to say [...] And now I realise, now that I'm doing a tertiary course, that I've changed... the relationship between people, because it is a tertiary there's more relationship, more continuity with people. At UBA there's the problem that if you don't have a group and that group progresses compact and together... that's what happened to me... (Analía, Sociology non-completer)*

Other respondents talked about the way in which an environment of social isolation and anonymity contributed to making their insecurities stronger, particularly their apprehension about speaking out. Feeling unidentified and anonymous among the 'masses' inhibited the less confident even more. These issues were vividly expressed by Carolina when she spoke about the forms of 'de-humanization' performed by the university: "But the problem is that it [UBA] needs to change drastically and stop de-humanising so much, this thing about 'come, register,

take courses, but we don't know who you are, nothing'" (Carolina, sociology non-completer). As several others implied, anonymity and isolation are wearing aspects of the Faculty's culture of minimal support, care, and guidance:

*I felt really isolated, that's what happened to me. It's a pity, isn't it? But it doesn't surprise me: at primary school, they put your head like this; at secondary school, like that; at university, sort it out as best as you can!* (Fernando, labour relations non-completer)

Thus underlying this culture of anonymity and isolation is the unspoken assumption that other sources of support, capitals or resources are there. In fact, a small number of students have the resources, time and competence to address this culture of anonymity and isolation. Yet for the rest, acknowledging the need for help emphasizes a sense of individual student deficit and does symbolic violence to those who need help (I return to this in the next chapter).

### **Contacts and networking**

Thomas (2002) argues that higher education institutions should contribute to the development of social capital to "help to overcome social exclusion in all aspects of higher education" (p. 12). In her conceptualization, social capital is understood as the "social networks, relationships and contacts, often based on norms and shared values, and which can be used to provide support and access to other opportunities" (p. 5). However, as criticism of 'functionalist' approaches to social capital has pointed out, such a definition fails to "take account of differential access that groups in society have to various capitals" (in Blaxter and Hughes, 2000, p. 80). Bourdieu's (1986b) conceptualization, in contrast, points to the unequal

possession of such capital within the uneven mix of capitals that make up social classes and class fractions for “it is in the interrelationship of these various capitals within relations of class [...] that inequalities are reproduced” (Blaxter and Hughes, 2000, p. 83). In Bourdieu’s (1986b) terms, social capital is:

*The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (p. 248).*

Bourdieu’s conceptualization of social capital is ‘instrumental’ in that it focuses on “the benefits accruing to individuals by virtue of participation in groups and on the deliberate construction of sociability for the purpose of creating this resource” (Portes, 1998, p. 3). As Portes asserts, social capital, then, is not just equal to the resources that can be gained through the possession of social capital but “the ability to obtain them by virtue of membership in different social structures” (Portes, 1998, p. 5). However, social networks are not just out there but “must be constructed through investment strategies oriented to the institutionalization of group relations, usable as a reliable source of other benefits” (Portes, 1998, p. 3).

As Ball (2003) indicated, “different social capitals are brought into play within specific fields as part of a struggle between classes and class fractions to maintain or improve their social position or advance and defend their interests” (p. 81). One of the functions of social capital, Ball pointed out, arises at ‘critical moments’ such as “moments of difficulty or crisis in the educational career of the child” (Ball, 2003, p. 92). At such moments, the mobilization of social

capital can significantly facilitate “the construction of an educational trajectory that insulates the child from others who face similar difficulties but lack remedial resources” (Ball, 2003, p. 92).

As noted earlier, capital is “relative to the field in question” (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p. 36); indeed, within the Faculty’s framework of relationships, social capital of the right sort is a powerful demarcator of social advantage. Respondents, in general, expressed impressive awareness of the value of belonging to different networks illustrated in Eugenia’s comment on the usefulness of joining the ‘right’ people: “Joining the right people at the Faculty is very important. Joining people who... can help you and whom you can help is great” (Eugenia, sociology non-completer).

However, for many students within the Faculty, there are several sources of difficulty which Carol nicely hinted at: a sense of fragility about professional working life within a complex labour market; the difficult transition to work intensified by the structure of the Faculty’s curriculum and institutional habitus; an unsupportive and unwelcoming environment. In particular, there were frequent references in the interviews to the non-transparent allocation of opportunities (e.g. internships, scholarships, teaching assistantships, research assistantships) that respondents regarded as having the potential to narrow the gap between the course and work:

*But well, this half-way crisis happens because you don’t see everything clearly, to say ‘I finish and it’s done’. You have to keep opening your way, which is not easy. And it’s difficult to get into places, many get through networking which is a whole issue (Carol, sociology advanced student)*

The 'whole issue of networking' that Carol mentions is illustrative of the sense that these opportunities are beyond everyone's reach. The way in which some benefitted from these opportunities is regarded as bearing upon a person's network of acquaintances and contacts rather than on institutional mechanisms open to all. Paola's comment on this respect is eloquent:

*I think it has to be like more open, I never found out about anyone who came and told the students about a scholarship ... I know there are some scholarships but you find out... internships or agreements with charities that fund scholarships but who gets access to them? Many times you find out that someone got one because he found out because someone told him that somebody else told him that this existed... but it is not publicised, it's not an issue that is well organised for you to say: 'oh, there's this opportunity' (Paola, social communication non-completer)*

Social capital here is not a collective attribute of the Faculty but an individual instrumental resource, as in Bourdieu's conceptualization. Through the activation of appropriate social capital, some students can access opportunities that enable them to smooth the transition to work and reduce the risks and uncertainties associated with gaining access into the academic work. As respondents remarked, central to the advantages that the activation of social capital produce is the access to critical information, 'hot knowledge' (Ball, 2006) (e.g. first-hand knowledge, as opposed to 'cold' knowledge from official sources which appears publicised) which acts as a gateway into the academic work. As we can glimpse in Victoria's quote below, by making links with knowledgeable academics she can obtain 'word of mouth' information or



“experience qualities” (Moogan, Baron and Harris, 1999, p. 213) which not only can provide valuable information but also place her in a more confident position to make career decisions:

*I think that it's a resource that is available and it is one who decides if one uses it or not. In general all the lecturers that I found, even the more prestigious ones, always had a good predisposition, when one approached them at the end of the class, they took 20 minutes to finish discussing a burning issue... but not everybody approaches them, because of lack of interest, shame or whatever reason, not everyone approaches them. And I built - but this is because of the way I am- I built very personal bonds that were not strictly related to academics, I found lovely people with whom I felt comfortable, having a coffee together, talking about other issues. But yes, I think the Faculty does not offer that to everyone unless one specifically seeks it out (Victoria, political science graduate)*

Victoria attributed her success in approaching her teachers to aspects of her personality such as her interests and drive. It is precisely the relation that she establishes between daring to approach lecturers and the benefits that accrue from engaging with them that illustrates the interrelationship between different forms of capitals to create and reproduce advantage. Certainly, feeling comfortable when socializing with lecturers, having a coffee with them, building relations of mutual recognition require certain attributes and modes of being: being at ‘ease’ within that environment at the least. It is evident that this active engagement with lecturers is something many students would feel to be largely out of reach. Darío is one example:

*There are others who squeeze lecturers more and communicate more and then... maybe it was me. I didn't try to approach lecturers and to say... I didn't try it so I'm not sure whether they would have responded or not... (Darío, political science non-completer)*

Approaching and relating to teachers in Victoria's way also requires a great deal of confidence and self-efficacy (Morrow, 1999), but these are not just "individual traits of personality" as Victoria regards them "but the product of social relations" (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003, p. 609). 'Confidence' and 'entitlement' are important aspects of cultural capital (Reay et al., 2005, p. 27). The way in which these students engage in higher education is rooted in a 'feel for the game' (1992) that delineates those who feel they 'fit in' from those who feel 'out of place'. Natalia, for example, has never felt comfortable within that environment; she maintained a sense of detachment from what she regarded as an alien, elitist territory:

*I think people who study at the University of Buenos Aires and, for example, in subjects related to the social sciences and humanities, all have something in common. They all belong to a particular social class and a particular ideology. The University of Buenos Aires is like the college of a certain social group, that's my sense [...] I never identified myself with the typical student, I found them quite snobbish with their 'morrales' [see below] and drinking 'mate' in class (Natalia, sociology non-completer)*

Natalia used the 'mate' (the popular Argentine drink) and the 'morral' (a type of 'hippie' or revolutionary style handbag) to sarcastically symbolize the snobbism of the 'progressive intellectual' she thought characterized the prototypical social background of the Faculty's students from whom she felt excluded. These feelings prevented her from developing a sense of

belonging within the Faculty. There are then interdependent relationships between the different types of capitals in evidence here which I continue to examine in the next section.

### **Capital interrelationships**

Unlike Natalia's sense of clear social boundaries between her and the prevailing culture within the Faculty, others like Victoria managed to feel among lecturers as 'one of them'. Her considerable self-assurance facilitated her capacity to create bonds of 'mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 119) from which she could extract a greater sense of confidence and motivation, and the encouragement and advice she needed to complete her degree:

*The last few years, especially since I started working at the Argentine Association of Political Science, I started to meet many lecturers, I started to build a good relationship with many of them [...] And by the end of the course I realised that I had lots of doubts and started to share my doubts with them and found many lecturers insisting that I finished. I managed to build a good bond... and in that sense, I did have some support. I think that my belonging... it is arrogant but... no, because maybe I wasn't on the side of the students but more on the side of the lecturers (Victoria, political science recent graduate)*

Victoria's engagement with lecturers illustrates "the embodied cultural capital that underpins social capital" (Ball, 2003, p. 82). She relates to teachers with a sense of "the certainty of possessing cultural legitimacy" (Bourdieu, 1986a, p. 66). This, too, was the case with several other continuing students in my sample who not only displayed the ability to know where to

ask for help and advice but “the confidence to regard it as within reach” (Power *et al.*, 2003, p. 83). Ana, for example, proactively approached lecturers for direct involvement in her career decisions and advice on work difficulties:

*I remember that more than once I asked the lecturer of Business Administration for help, I told him: “Prof., I have this problem at work, how can I solve it?”, and the truth is that he really supported me and helped me find solutions. Because I was very young and had lots of responsibilities at work and I felt supported by teachers at the university, because I asked many of them, I don't know, if I had a doubt I used to go and tell them: ‘look, I have this situation, what do you think?’ And in fact one of them gave me an exercise to try with the people at work and it went really well (Ana, Labour Relations long-term student)*

Research with non-traditional students in UK higher education found that, within the ‘struggle against the odds’ that often described their student trajectory, lack of ‘confidence’ was a significant factor affecting some of them (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003, p. 609). Also, Roberts (1998) found that ‘self-confidence’ was an important reason why middle-class young people were more likely to progress through higher education or a skilled job than working class children of similar above-average academic ability (in Hatcher 1998, p 8). More recently, Thomas has argued that a students’ enhanced relationships with teachers can help to remediate these imbalances and improve students’ motivation and confidence (Thomas, 2002a, p. 5).

But the problem here is that within the environment of isolation and anonymity that was the norm in the Faculty, the very ability to engage with lecturers effectively seems to require the sense of “confidence, certainty and sense of entitlement that is generated through high levels of

cultural capital” (Reay, David and Ball, 2005, p. 21). Indeed, several of my respondents have expressed feelings of inadequacy that would barely enable them to approach a teacher, even when in legitimate need (for example, Dana’s apprehension to disclose to the lecturer her lack of resources to do the required assignment and her decision to drop out from the course instead). Self-esteem and self confidence, therefore, and the feeling of finding oneself ‘out of place’ come into play in the way students construct their own opportunities or limits. Maria’s case illustrates the creation of boundaries ‘from within’ when she was given “an amazing opportunity not to have to wait until graduating to do something related to sociology”, an opportunity she eventually sensed was not ‘for her’. She commented:

*I didn't feel secure and I couldn't write what I had to, I couldn't do my part, insecurity beat me [...] I think what bothers me about UBA is that issue of UBA being like UBA (with capital letters) and people and teachers enacting that, they put themselves on that side of 'I hold the truth' [...] It's like sometimes I feel that I can't approach someone, a lecturer whom I find really interesting, because... I feel like I have to put on the wisdom hat because with plain asking I feel really embarrassed [...] I felt that I didn't belong there because I felt, nothing, a small thing within such big structure, and inferior to some other people (Maria, sociology non-completer)*

This is, in Ball et al.’s words, “an aspect of social-class self-reproduction and the maintenance of class demarcations by ‘self-exclusion’” (2002, p. 68). Within all of this, the relationship that Thomas establishes between student/teacher relationships and boosted confidence seems to be working the other way around. The confidence that underpins students’ cultural capital plays a crucial role in their capacity to build meaningful relationships with teachers. Support, motivation, opportunities and advice that such bonds provide seem to be reserved to those for

whom this capacity “results from the unintentional learning made possible by a disposition acquired through domestic or scholastic inculcation of legitimate culture” (Bourdieu, 1986a, p. 28).

## Introduction

As this study has shown, non-completion is neither simply a personal nor an institutional phenomenon. It cannot be reduced to or explained solely in either of those terms (or solely at those levels). Non-completion has to be understood within a broader context of families, communities, social class and national and international (economic and political) factors both in relation to individual and institutional action. However, as mentioned in previous chapters, the perspectives on non-completion currently in play within Argentine public universities are dominated by a broader policy debate. Thus, any new view of non-completion within the Argentine context cannot but necessarily address, respond to, and locate itself in relation to that debate.

Hence in bringing together the main arguments of the thesis and the key points I make, in this final chapter I give emphasis to three sets of factors that need to be addressed in understanding the complexity of non-completion: contextual factors (economy and politics, and here I address the specificities of the Argentine controversy over non-completion and its meanings, and the implications of this study in relation to this dispute); institutional factors (habitus, bureaucracy, pedagogy, curriculum); and individual factors (capitals and resources). I explore each of these and consider how they are related to each other and, at the same time, attempt to show the inadequacies of the existing accounts of non-completion. Finally, I reflect on the study as a whole, and address some of its limitations but also suggest that it makes some contributions to Argentine understandings of non-completion and to the more general field of study of higher education non-completion.

## Ways of completing

*Not all that can be counted counts, and not all that counts can be counted* (Albert Einstein, quoted in Boron, 2006, p. 157)

Within Argentine public universities, non-completion has been commonly linked to the constraining consequences of university under-financing – or at least as one of its various side-effects. However, the underfunding of public universities is an aspect of national higher education policy and planning; it has been both part and instrument of the broad reform of higher education since the 1990s within an “increasing colonisation of education policy by economic policy imperatives” (Ball, 2006a, p. 70). As Santos (2006) pointed out, in the last couple of decades:

*the state’s disinvestment in the public university and the mercantile globalization of the university [have been] the two pillars of a huge global project of university politics destined to profoundly change the way the university-as-public-good has been produced, transforming it into a vast and vastly profitable ground for educational capitalism* (Santos, 2006, p. 64).

And, as Santos goes on to remark, the corollaries of the global crisis of the public university “are significantly different at the core, the periphery, and the semiperiphery of the world system” (Santos, 2006, p. 65).



In Argentina, the 2001 economic crisis resulted in severe cuts to the budget of public universities but these had already suffered serious cutbacks as part of the Argentine government's decreased support for higher education throughout the 1990s "in keeping with the structural adjustment programs of the IMF" (Rhoads, Torres and Brewster, 2006, p. 176). On the whole, "spending for tertiary education in Argentina has been dropping in terms of 'per student costs' even though the total budget has increased" (Holm-Nielsen and Hansen, 2003, p. 23). The public university (structural) underfunding has become the norm of university management<sup>49</sup>. As has already been noted, all this has resulted in a budget situation for universities whereby 90% of their income is spent on salaries (Lorca, 2007).

It would be surprising if these changes and constraints had no effects on students, especially since there is evidence across different contexts that the level of funding is associated with the quality of the educational experience which is, in turn, identified internationally as bearing upon non-completion (Yorke, 1998a). In the UK, for example, Leathwood (2004) states that "the success of elite institutions in the league tables [in which dropout rate is one of the categories] is not unrelated to their resource levels" (p. 35)<sup>50</sup>.

Furthermore, as I have indicated, the underfunding of Argentine public universities within a growing mass system creates several very specific difficulties for the Faculty of Social Sciences. Some of these were reflected in the interviews as creating multiple sources of discontent among the students: high student/staff ratios, especially within first-year courses; limited investment in, and increasing deterioration of the physical space; lack of teaching resources; under-provision of books and library resources, among others.

In considering the implications of the state disinvestment in public higher education, the most widely-held position within the Faculty and in public universities in general is that it not only conspires against the satisfactory functioning of universities but also restricts the chances of the public university being able to realise the democratic mission reflected in its open admissions policy. As one of the respondents in Rhoads et al.'s (2006) study pointed out, "this emergency budget situation impedes us from attending to the university's central problems and keeps us from making the changes we need to make, such as the rigidity of degree and course requirements, the low rate of graduation, and the high rate of dropping out, principally in the first year" (quoted in Rhoads et al., 2006, p. 179). The lack of induction programmes, and systems of advice, counselling, tutoring and other support strategies – which have been identified across a range of universities in different parts of the world as positively related to student retention (Johnson, 2002)– is straightforwardly attributed to the shortage of financial resources.

Nonetheless, the central role that the university community attributes to the externally/ financially driven nature of institutional inefficacies and inequalities conveys a rather simplistic conceptual understanding of non-completion and, indeed, a misleading image of the complexity of difficulties that students experience within the Faculty – two issues I return to below. Yet putting all the blame on an outside source is also a defensive, 'local' response from the university to what have been perceived as 'global'/ 'foreign' positions and impositions; it illustrates 'one of the ways in which global ideals are always inflected through local realities and the importance of comprehending the geographic specificity of globalisation" (Forsey, Davies and Walford, 2008, p. 11).

Writing about the UK but with relevance to international education policy trends, Ball (2006) observed how “a critique of the press for equity and social justice as part of the diagnosis of the existing ‘inadequacies’ of education” has been central to the establishment of “the new orthodoxy in education” (p. 72). As has been noted in earlier chapters, in Latin America the World Bank played a significant role in providing “the rationale for reform and, with its conditionalities, forced governments to adopt proposed reforms even if they were not totally willing to do so” (Boron, 2006, p. 148). This has resulted in strong opposition to the education reforms implemented by the Argentinian government from university rectors, staff and students (Marquis, 2003). Particularly at stake within the education sector were notions of the public university with its free-and-open-to-all tradition of education as a public good against the World Bank’s view of education policy along market lines where equity became just “one of the residual concerns of governments in marketised education systems” (Ball, 2006, p. 74).

Indeed, within the more general critique of the public provision of social services, “the university’s institutional weaknesses [...] instead of serving as justification for a vast politico-pedagogical reform program, were declared insurmountable and were used to justify the generalized opening of the university-as-public-good to commercial exploitation” (Santos, 2006, p. 63). Holm-Nielsen and Hansen’s (2003) comment in a World Bank paper illustrates the application of this rationality to the mass-public Argentine HE model:

*High dropout rates and low graduation rates in especially the public university system suggests that the ‘mass university’ approach has failed in the sense that it is unable to monitor and assist students in a way similar to the smaller, private universities. High dropout rates might also suggest that the quality of teaching is poor and student motivation is low (p. 21).*

The Argentine mass system, then, has been portrayed by its critics as inefficient and extremely costly, as having ‘failed’ (see also World Bank, 1994b; World Bank, 1995) which has reinforced the idea of an obsolete, unviable democratic agenda over and against the expansion of the university market and the imposition of limits on free public higher education (Santos, 2006, p. 66). Within all this, the resistance of universities to budget cuts involves a refusal to accept that the detrimental effects that budget cuts have had on salaries, infrastructure, educational quality, effectiveness and efficiency are a product of the universities’ own creation.

Non-completion is a significant element within this highly politicised territory. This partly reflects the fact that non-completion rates are an element of the new ‘policy instruments’ (Neave and van Vught, 1991) of market reformed education systems where forms of state “indirect steering, or steering at a distance [...] replaces intervention and prescription with target setting, accountability and comparison” (Ball, 2006a, p. 71). Governments in different parts of the world now look to performance indicators like non-completion rates to evaluate institutional effectiveness and decide on the allocation of funding (Yorke, 1998a, p. 45).

However, the use of non-completion statistics as a performance indicator is viewed as controversial by some commentators as it ‘implicitly reflect[s] particular interests’ (Yorke, 1998a, p. 46). In the UK, concerns have been raised regarding the ability of performance indicators to reflect the performance of the institution and any notion of quality within it (Harvey, 1998). For example, Leathwood shows how ‘high entry requirements’ of elite universities mean these “cream[...] off those students most likely to do well” (2004, p. 36) and therefore “students at the elite institutions are far more likely to achieve first and upper-second class honours degrees, and to complete on time” (p. 36). In Argentina, this tension is reflected

in the battle over how and who defines quality and efficiency (Schugurensky, 1997), and within public universities it is insisted that non-completion rates should not be simply attributed to institutional failure but assessed within the context of access policies and students' lives (Abramovich *et al*, 2002).

In considering these tensions, it is possible to conceive of Argentine public universities as enacting a 'counter-hegemonic' model that is at odds with the market vocabulary of value for money, performance, measurable and quantifiable outcomes of highly performance-driven university cultures such as in the UK (Beck, 1999) and that relates itself more to social than to economic needs and values. Yet, importantly, the evidence of high non-completion at least questions the veracity of the fulfilment of the social justice aspirations and values that the inclusive model acclaims. I can illustrate this as I review the data on non-completion within the Faculty.

### Complex processes

Policy frameworks, and the values and sensibilities they reflect, all are features of a system within which non-completion rates are produced and which help to define their meaning. Furthermore, my research interviews also indicate a number of further elements to add to Tierney's (2002) view of non-completion as culturally – or better *socially* – defined. That is to say, the *social specificity* of non-completion is not simply reflected in the policy frameworks within which non-completion arise but also in the students' ways of being students and engaging with higher education – in their ways of completing and non-completing.

As noted throughout the chapters, for most of my respondents, higher education was a project that took place alongside other projects in their lives (principally but not only, paid work). It was not just the power of the university to retain or exclude students that determined the students' judgments and perceptions about their university trajectory but the strength or demands of the other projects – employment certainly but also broader social horizons including, in some cases, considerations on the future exchange value of a degree in the labour market. As Douglass (2008) shows, the “demand for higher education generally goes up during economic downturns” (p. 1) and in Argentina there is evidence that suggests a positive relationship between periods of high unemployment and an increase in higher education participation (Mollis, 2003), although this is a participation that can be thought of as unstable as it is closely tied to developments in the labour market.

Furthermore, given the flexibility in attendance patterns and the high frequency of ‘stop-outs’ (intermission) within the Faculty (and in Argentine public higher education in general, it can be argued), many talked about their aspiration to come back to studies later on in their lives and saw their withdrawal from a course as a temporary stage rather than as an definite outcome. Within all this, higher education was not a bounded experience for any of my respondents but a more fragmented one, one in relation to which they often juggled multiple identities (students/workers/husbands and wives/mature learners).

Moreover, in almost all of the interviews with those who withdrew from the Faculty, non-completion was depicted as better than having not participated in higher education at all. And the journey through the Faculty itself was typically portrayed as valuable in itself, above and beyond instrumental concerns<sup>51</sup> and despite its outcome. Perhaps a (completed) degree, then,

cannot be thought of as the most significant measure or indication of success for these young people, as the rationality of performance indicators and quantifiable outcomes implies.

Rather, higher education seems to be regarded by many young people as a life-time project and even one that is always unfinished, always 'not yet completed'. Here the findings of this study parallel those of others that have challenged the existence of a univocal meaning of non-completion. Writing about the Australian context, McInnis et al. suggest that "Given that many students return to study fairly soon after withdrawing from a course, and a substantial number return at some time later, the notion of non-completion from a lifelong learning perspective is less meaningful than it once was" (2000, p. 1). In turn, the highly flexible patterns of enrolment and attendance within the Faculty blurs the distinction between 'dropping-out' and 'stopping-out' (Tinto, 1975) and raises questions as to the risks involved in paying undue attention to non-completion to the detriment of understanding the complex, multiple 'ways of completing' that are evident among students.

Indeed, the multiple 'ways of completing' in evidence among my respondents also pose challenges to some established negative views of non-completion in terms of 'failure', an issue that is becoming increasingly common in the international literature. For example, in relation to community colleges in the States, "Cohen and Brawer (1996) discuss in some detail the positive roles a college programme may play for those who do not complete that programme". Studying then can take up different roles in relation to different people's life projects like 'employment agency'; 'career advancement'; or 'study advancement' (in McInnis et al., 2000, p. 9).

Certainly, the different 'ways of completing' in evidence in this study also illustrate what appear to be quite particular motives for studying among my respondents, most of whom emphasized the value of the higher education experience in its own right - its use-value rather than its exchange-value (Sayer, 2005). It is possible to see glimpses of a 'counter-hegemonic' student culture taking shape within all of this too, a student body that somehow resists fitting in within the 'tyrannies' of (economically defined) measurable outcomes; some resistance to the enactment of the 'one size fits all' economically efficient model of higher education through the students' values and practices. This was also apparent in at least two further issues that were raised in the interviews: First, in the politically aware choice of the *public* university (as noted in different chapters) in opposition to the negatively perceived 'business orientation' of private universities. Second, in the prolonged time students normally take to complete a degree within the Faculty (1.7 times the stipulated in the programmes of study (Anuario 2006 Estadísticas Universitarias, Ministry of Education); or an average of 7.7 years (Young, Savoia and Calvo, 2005), a trend that is also apparent in some other national settings with growing numbers of non-traditional students (e.g. Australia (McInnis et al. 2000)).

The 'social context' within which young people make career decisions appeared quite powerfully in the interviews, and this gives support to the importance of understating the social reality and 'imaginary', as discussed in Chapter 4, within which non-completion is constructed. The social specificity of non-completion and its meanings that the foregoing discussion suggests raise questions, too, about the explanatory value of narrowly defined institution-integration approaches to non-completion and more generally of the discourse of non-completion as an indicator of inefficiency and failure. Again then, in the UK, research which suggests that students' decisions to withdraw are complex and multi-dimensional processes (literature discussed in Chapter 2) has led to criticism of the mechanistic connection between



non-completion and institutional failure implicit in the use of non-completion as a performance indicator (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001). Furthermore, in Argentina there is a particular difficulty in drawing clear delimitations between completion and non-completion, as previously discussed, given the various ways in which people relate to higher education.

This is the argument expressed by Argentine commentators such as Rubinich (2001) and Abramovich et al. (2002) to defend a culturally-specific approach to success and failure. Such an approach would take into consideration social justice values and, in turn, privilege the lack of controls on admissions, despite what in other political settings is commonly regarded as “waste of institutional resources, especially in an environment of limited financial and other resources” (Ramsay *et al*, 1996) and sometimes as resulting in a decline in academic standards.

Nonetheless, it is important to be wary of the dangers of celebrating non-completion as a reflection of ‘diverse ways of being students’ (of completing and non-completing) at risk of tacitly neglecting the conditions under which some types of students withdraw more than others - in relation to their uneven possession of volumes of the relevant capitals and resources required to succeed in the field of higher education. As McInnis et al. (2000) also note, “There is, however, considerable danger in being overly positive about non-completion”, not just because they remain “particularly low for minority students” (Grubb 1995, p.28) but also because it “assumes sophistication among students that we cannot take for granted. Not all dropouts enrol knowing exactly what benefits they can expect to get from their course and exactly when to maximise these benefits by a strategic withdrawal” (In McInnis et al, 2000, p. 9-10).

Indeed, the Argentine public university ‘counter-hegemonic’ open access/free-of-charge model as it is manifested within the Faculty of Social Sciences is not without paradoxes and contradictions and can be seen as failing its own tenets when high rates of non-completion mean that students who, under the right circumstances, might have completed become disengaged from the Faculty. I argue that embedded within the Faculty’s pedagogic and administrative practices and academic culture are mechanisms of exclusivity that, despite the social justice rhetoric of the admission and tuition policy, operate as yet another mechanism through which advantage is consolidated and consequently social inequalities reproduced, as I discuss more thoroughly below. Overemphasising the different ways of being students; treating non-completion as positive; and inefficiency as externally driven, risks tacitly neglecting the role of internal practices and culture in disengaging students and reproducing advantage between them.

### **Paradoxes, inequalities**

Some authors have demonstrated that class inequalities have not been eradicated despite widening participation in the UK (Archer and Hutchings, 2000). Instead, new forms of ‘inequalities’ have emerged whereby working class and minority ethnic students’ participation are concentrated in less prestigious institutions in the status hierarchy of universities (Leathwood, 2004) and particular working class ‘risks’ and ‘costs’ associated with participating in higher education have been identified (Archer and Hutchings, 2000).

Furthermore, the evidence of remaining inequalities, despite widening participation, indicates that with widening participation, non-completion might represent the new channel for the reproduction of class inequality (Christie et al., 2004). Consequently, “Widening participation

initiatives which focus on raising the aspirations of non-traditional students without tackling university culture” have been strongly criticised (Thomas & Cooper, 2000; Thompson, 2000 in Christie et al., 2004, p. 619).

Within this, Read et al. (2003) have highlighted the significance of “‘cultural’ aspects of the academy such as methods and styles of teaching and learning [and] the important effects of dominant academic culture(s) on student experience” (p. 275). In a similar vein, some have tried to show how “different institutional practices [...] can have an impact on the extent to which students feel they are accepted” (Thomas, 2002, p. 431). As Thomas puts it, “If a student feels that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early” (Thomas, 2002b, p. 431).

Yet despite all the evidence from other countries about the impact that university culture can have on non-completion, particularly in wide access systems with large numbers of ‘non-traditional’ students, as noted in Chapter 3 there is a striking lack of Argentine research of student experience as opposed to policy. Within the Faculty of social sciences, the fact that the ‘institutional habitus’ is unwelcoming, uncaring and unsupportive for many is plainly apparent to students, academic staff and administrators themselves as expressed by most respondents in this study. Yet, again, this issue is addressed within the political debate from two different stances towards understanding the institutional habitus: Firstly, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, there is an argument that claims that university staff are aware of the need for reform of university culture to address the quality of the student experience but find this “implausible amid economic calamity”, a view expressed by most of the ‘high-ranking officials’ affiliated

with UBA and the Ministry of Education and professor respondents in the Rhoads et al. study (Rhoads, Torres and Brewster, 2006, p. 196).

However, some, but certainly not all of non-completion is to do with the complexities of funding a mass higher education system. What is less remarked upon is the fact that the staff's ultimate attribution of non-completion to financial constraints can work to avoid giving attention to the way in which their own practices pose threats to the hoped-for social justice agenda, and sustain a status quo that reinforces patterns of social disadvantage. A similar point is made by Altbach (1999) in a short paper. Altbach argues that UBA operates a sort of Darwinian natural selection of the 'fittest' whereby academic and administrative obstacles serve to offset the lack of entry restrictions under a more democratic façade. He goes on to claim that because open access does not enable the university to "control the quality of its entering students, its only power is to eliminate students through examinations, attrition, or inattention" (Altbach, 1999, p. 2).

The second stance towards understanding UBA's institutional habitus would be that the university institutional habitus is a reflection of a tacit and deliberate mechanism of adjustment, screening, and selection. This perspective is shared by Sigal (2003) in his point about the existence of mechanisms of 'deferred selection' – 'filter courses' and academic and administrative difficulties – that perform "the inevitable process of selection triggered by mass participation under limited educational capacities" (in del Bello, 2002, p. 8). Ultimately, both arguments (under-financing and 'deferred selection') refer to the problems created by the financing of a mass system, albeit in one case the university is seen as willing but unable to redress university culture and in the other as deliberately keeping that culture unchanged.

Altbach (1999) further remarks that “The students who do well tend to be those from well-off families. In this way the university contributes to social inequality even though it has an ideology of egalitarianism” (p. 2). Although there is a sort of ‘functionalist’ argument in Altbach’s thesis of adaptation between social needs and practices/behaviour, and a rather crude treatment of the mechanisms through which this adaptation takes place, there are, however, some parallels to be drawn between his thesis and what I want to argue here. Indeed, the interviews have shown very specific ways in which the ‘survival of the fittest’ game within the Faculty works to reinforce the role of students’ capitals and resources and, as a form of symbolic violence done to some, contributes to the reproduction of inequalities in society at large. These are less definitive and clear-cut processes than Altbach suggests. Yet the arguments are similar in their implication that there is a rather perverse form of meritocracy at work within the Faculty.

### **Revisiting theory**

The interviews have lent further support to the finding from several studies across different countries that students themselves explain non-completion “as the result of a series of interconnected factors, a succession of ‘biographical disruptions’” (Christie, Munro and Fisher, 2004, p. 623). Respondents rarely portrayed their withdrawal from the Faculty in terms of any single variable and, when prompted to reflect on their journeys through higher education, they identified several factors that had eroded their commitment over time until, perhaps, a critical incident triggered the decision to disengage. The notion of ‘process’ then emerges as a significant element of non-completion, and one that has implications regarding possible retention strategies as it suggests there are several ‘alarm signals’ which can be responded to; and this relates to the other overarching idea that runs over the thesis - that of ‘complexity’. It is

within a complex interaction of events, feelings, and dislocations over time within a particular set of relationships between the student, the social world and the institution that non-completion within the Faculty arises.

Indeed, the idea of complexity indicates that there is more to understanding non-completion within the Faculty than student integration models imply. Tinto's self-termed 'sociological' theory, in fact, relies heavily on the capability of individual students to assimilate themselves into the dominant academic and social values of the university. However, these are students who deal with institutional practices that seem taken out of any social space – they are de-contextualised students. It seems logical to challenge the value of such theories when applied to rates of non-completion in the Argentine public universities, not least when part-time students with extra-university commitments make up the bulk of the student population (which represents a sharp contrast with the white young middle-class, full time, residential students on whom Tinto bases his theory).

Most of the respondents in this study certainly commented on their various responsibilities other than studying, and how these made significant demands upon their time, dedication and commitment. Moreover, the complexity that this creates when interpreting non-completion is likely to have increasing relevance to different national settings where there has been a tradition of full-time studies but whose modes of attendance are becoming increasingly varied, such as the UK “where full-time attendance is slowly breaking down into something less than that because of, inter alia, the pressure on students to obtain jobs to subsidise their studies and the opportunity for greater flexibility in study offered by modularised schemes” (Yorke, 1998a, p. 54).

A further observation about Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975) that the idea of complexity suggests is the absence of a consideration of the role played by the socio-economic backgrounds of the students and their locations in non-completion despite his claim that "background characteristics and individual attributes also influence the development of the educational expectations and commitments the individual brings with him into the college environment" (Tinto, 1975, pp. 95-96). But once initial commitments are formed, Tinto argues:

*It is the person's normative and structural integration into the academic and social systems that lead to new levels of commitment. Other things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion (1975, p. 96).*

The problem then is that the decision to withdraw from a course earlier, or persist until the completion of a degree, appears in Tinto's view as formed within the narrow limits of the higher education experience itself, within the student/university interaction. This ignores the role of, at the most tangible level, material factors such as financial difficulty, an aspect that has been found to be significant, not just among undergraduates in developing countries but also, for example, in the UK (financial difficulty "was the second most cited influence on withdrawal" in Yorke's study of 1478 full-time and sandwich students (Yorke, 1998b, p. 62). Indeed, the sociological literature in the UK has been helpful in researching the complex range of constraints less privileged students are subjected to: "a relative lack of material and cultural resources, such as money, mobility, and formal qualifications (see Reay et al., 2001; Hutchings & Archer, 2001)" (in Read *et al*, 2003, p. 269).

Certainly, the role of material barriers appeared as very significant in my interviews. As examined in previous chapters, these functioned very decisively to deter some of my respondents from continuing any further. But there were less tangible forms of exclusion where the relative lack of relevant cultural and emotional resources seemed as powerful as economic capital in determining one's fate within the Faculty. Before getting further into this, however, it is important to note again that in putting the interviews in the context of the existing dominant international approaches to non-completion, complexity, process, and the significance of the 'social world' stand out, particularly in relation to the complex interplay of dimensions and levels that constitute and affect the experience of students within the Faculty.

The fact that so many respondents asked themselves: "Is it all worthwhile?" serves as further illustration of how the 'social' cuts across the 'personal' and the 'institutional' in non-completion. Experiences, difficulties and accomplishments within the higher education experience were perceived, considered and assessed against the backdrop of a specific social reality where the past, present and perceived future of the labour market played an important role. The loss of certainty that education could be a channel of upward social mobility was also mentioned as fuelling questions as to the value of the effort involved in getting through the difficulties experienced within the Faculty.

The significance of the students' shared social values was also reflected in the fact that, while not all of my respondents were in financial need, almost all of them had chosen to engage in paid work alongside their studies. It may be that there are normative paradigms, cultural and idiosyncratic values playing a part in the students' motives, values and orientations towards higher education; social expectations that contribute to moulding their ways of being students. This lends some support to the significance of what existing Argentine literature vaguely



defines as the ‘social context’ (Abramovich *et al*, 2002) in the shaping of non-completion – albeit a refined understanding of the ‘social context’ is needed. Indeed, the different ways in which the social world, through beliefs and perceptions of society and the economy, plays a part in choices within higher education in Argentina deserves further research.

Having established some of the limitations of Tinto’s work to understand non-completion within the Faculty, however, does not mean his theory has to be discarded altogether. His focus on the institution “in promoting an environment for student persistence and integration” (McInnis *et al*, 2000, p. 16) may still throw some light on the institutional practices that impinge on the student experience (including not just pedagogic, curricular and administrative ones but also dominant values and discourses). This does help us understand non-completion in its complexity and, at the same time, overcome the ‘economic determinism’ embedded in the idea that exclusions are simply externally provoked (by students’ financial needs; by the socio-economic complexities of the country; by institutional underfunding, etc). The next section focuses on these institutional processes.

### **Of capital significance**

As noted, the interviews show that the particular social circumstances of the students, including material factors, clearly played a part in non-completion, but interwoven with these was the role of the institutional habitus underlying the culture, values, methods, relationships and expectations of faculty, which highlighted the significance of the particular sets and volumes of capitals and resources differently available to, held by and embodied in the students. The significance of those capitals begins with the students’ experience of the administration.

As noted already, respondents vividly portrayed the intricate and obscure nature of administrative procedures and daunting bureaucracy which, they observed, required a great deal of time and self-efficacy to deal with. Indeed, there were several instances where 'time' was mentioned as a significant resource. This is, time free from work which could be invested within the Faculty: to attend classes amid rigid timetabling; to endure administrative procedures and overcome bureaucracy and its inefficiencies; to get to lectures before all seats are gone and stay afterwards to clear doubts and get relevant, first-hand information from tutors; to engage with tutors; to build a network of relevant relationships; even to be able to work for free as a teaching assistant within a course team.

Time, then, was a key element for success within the Faculty, central therefore to the creation of advantage. But the availability of time is one resource which many students, by economic necessity, possessed only in small quantities. As Bourdieu (1986b) argued, time is a significant factor in the perpetuation of social advantage as it plays a crucial role in the transformation of capital/s into its different forms. In the most basic form of reconversion of economic capital into cultural capital (Bourdieu and Boltanski, 2000), the availability of time "to delay entry into the labour market through prolonged schooling, [is] a credit which pays off, if at all, only in the very long term" (Bourdieu, 1986b, p. 253). Only those initially endowed with economic capital can afford to wait. It is therefore highly significant that success within the Faculty was seen as so heavily influenced by the availability of time to invest in it.

Time was also necessary when dealing with the administration of the Faculty and its slow and heavy bureaucracy but this also required particular tactical skills, with the data providing various examples of the complexities of making sense and sorting out administrative procedures (registration; re-registration; ballots; timetabling; paperwork). Indeed, these skills

can also be regarded as in turn related to cultural and emotional resources, not least a strong sense of confidence and competence, purpose and determination.

Apart from the discouraging effects of experiences with the administration of the Faculty, curricular and pedagogic practices were also portrayed as significant factors of 'exclusion'. This finding is in line with the recent focus of some non-completion literature on "the importance of cultural experiences [...] as a driver of inequalities which ultimately lead to limited and restricted opportunities for higher education" (Longden, 2006, p. 176). Most common in this literature is the use of cultural capital to illustrate advantage, as in Collier and Morgan's (2008) point that "variations in cultural capital, based on parents' educational experiences, correspond to important differences in each group's mastery of the student role and, thus, their ability to respond to faculty expectations" (p. 425). This can serve as a general observation of higher education given that, as Bourdieu and Passeron put it, "The university sector, more than any other educational sector, epitomizes middle classness" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977 cited in Reay, 2001, p. 338).

This seemed particularly significant within the strong 'classification' of the Faculty's curriculum. As discussed in Chapter 9, several respondents talked about their sense of alienation arising from what they sensed as a total separation between the 'academic' orientation and discourse prevailing in the classrooms and the 'real' world. There seems to be a boundary between these within which ultimately students also seem to be narrowly treated in terms of their intellect while their condition of whole persons is neglected.

There are a number of implications of this separation. Firstly, again it produces advantage for those students who are more comfortable and familiar within these forms of academic

discourses. In fact, the ability to do critique, according to Bourdieu, is acquired through cultural capital and schooling and those endowed with larger amounts of the relevant cultural capital would certainly display the ‘ontological complicity’ that arises when habitus “is ‘at home’ in the field it inhabits” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 128). In his work on *Distinction* (1986a), Bourdieu makes a point about the difference between social classes in their stances towards, and engagements with art in terms of receptive versus critical. In particular, the pressure for criticality, being critical meaning being ‘clever’, reinforced for some students their sense of being different – *unable*. Some commented on this pressure as the basis of their anxiety about participating in class discussion, asking questions and approaching teachers, which resulted in intellectual and social isolation and eventually marginalised them further than they felt they already were in relation to the Faculty.

Secondly, the separation between the ‘student’ and the ‘person’ as a whole tacitly assumes that students are all similar (Dana’s story in Chapter 9 provided an eloquent example of this). Hence there is a double-endedness to seeking help within this: the fact that you need help reinforces the sense of being a ‘fish out of water’. It emphasizes the sense of alienation and difference for those who do not see an obvious relationship between participating in higher education and their personal academic success, but experience higher education as a crisis of confidence and competence. Treating everyone as the same, in effect, does symbolic violence to those who are not, or do not feel, the same.

## The weakest link

Christie et al. (2004) question what it is that makes the same difficulties bearable for one student but not for another. Here, the comparison between non-completers and completers has offered some insight. In particular, it highlights the difference between those who seemed to have been simply pre-destined for success within the Faculty (Tomás, Carol, Valeria) and all the rest for whom nothing seemed quite so straightforward. Indeed, some of the students and graduates I interviewed, such as Tomás, referred to the sense of knowing they would “finish no matter what happens or what the university does or does not do”. They showed that sort of predisposed behaviour that leads to particular outcomes in terms of previous experiences, an issue illustrated, for example, in Carol for whom – and for whose family, as she emphasized – “studying at university is something that you start and you finish”; a disposition reproduced within the family. As Bourdieu put it, the “sense of the probable future is constituted in the prolonged relationship with a world structured according to the categories of the possible (for us) and the impossible (for us), of what is appropriated in advance by and for others and what one can reasonably expect for oneself” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 64).

Over and against this relatively predictable passage to success and successful passage for some through an otherwise difficult journey within the Faculty, many others confronted deep crises. Yet the lack of a general structure of support made the resolution of crises heavily dependent upon individual strategies, the individual possession of the necessary amounts of relevant capitals and resources. The uneven distribution of these is a key factor in advantaging some students more and disadvantaging others. As discussed in detail throughout the chapters, the interviews offered several instances where the activation of economic, cultural, social and

emotional capitals was significant in remediating intellectual, practical or emotional difficulties.

Stanton-Salazar and Dornbush (1995) have emphasized the extent to which “success within the educational system, for working-class and minority youth, is dependent on the formation of genuinely supportive relationships with institutional agents” (p. 117) crucially because working-class and minority students may not be able to obtain these supportive ties within the family. Given that social capital, and the distribution of significant resources and opportunities that come with it, is not a collective attribute of the Faculty but an individual instrumental resource, social capital turns into one of the most powerful axis of exclusion within the Faculty. Respondents regarded social capital not just as having the potential to ‘unlock the code’ for success within the Faculty but also in getting hold of the “non-transparent allocation of opportunities” that could significantly narrow the gap between the course and an uncertain labour market. But the availability of a personal network of relevant acquaintances and contacts, and the capacity to continually expand it through the consolidation of close relationships with staff, as we saw, was completely out of the reach of many students.

In all of this it becomes clear that there is a rhetorical celebration of difference in the opening of the Faculty’s doors to the many, yet a learning environment that assumes a bright, committed, problem sorting, resilient, self-confident and perseverant student. This translates into a lack of institutional support that only those who find learning easiest would feel able to cope with.

## Concluding thoughts

Finally, I would like to turn now to a reflection of the project overall. To begin with, I want to reflect on some of the questions I would have liked to address but have been unable to. Then, to emphasize, however, what I consider to be contributions that this research can make to Argentine understandings of non-completion, and, more generally, about non-completion on the basis of my research.

This research project has focused on one Faculty in one university, and there are, therefore, some questions that remain unanswered. A comparison with another Faculty may have offered some insight into whether the particular characteristics of the social sciences (especially in relation to the labour market) were more influential factors in terms of student success than in other subject areas. A comparison with a private university may have opened up insights into the policy debate about the public funding of Argentinean universities. And a comparison with a smaller university, on the other hand, may have indicated some of the factors related to size and anonymity.

Certainly some institutional aspects of the Faculty of Social Sciences reflect its location in the wider socio-political space, principally the Faculty's structural underfunding amid mass and growing enrolment<sup>52</sup>. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that at least some of the problems experienced by students within the Faculty are not confined to Argentine universities. Similar difficulties are being experienced by students within widening participation institutions in other countries such as the UK and these are likely to develop in still other higher education systems that are expanding access amid financial restrictions.

Research in English post-1992, mass-era institutions, for example, has looked at some of the effects of “the current material and discursive context, when ‘the under-resourcing of teaching has meant a shift from ‘fat’ to ‘lean-and-mean’ pedagogies, with reduced tutorials, increased tutorial size, and less student contact” (Blackmore, 1997 in Read *et al*, 2003, p. 272). As Read *et al.* (2003) and to some degree Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) have shown, the notion of the ‘independent learner’ with its ‘lack of direct guidance from lecturers’ assumes ‘someone who can succeed in the shortest possible time with few demands on institutional resources’, which has led to an increased sense of ‘distance’ between lecturer and student (Read *et al*, 2003, p. 270). Research suggests that this distance affects non-traditional students in particular who tend to feel greatly alienated, isolated, and un-supported.

Indeed, as I have demonstrated, some of this is also true of UBA’s Faculty of Social Sciences where understaffing and heavy workloads of lecturers within mass enrolment contribute to the creation of a framework of isolation and anonymity in which the more vulnerable students appear to have more difficulties as a result of the limited contact they are able to have with teachers and peers. Furthermore, as examined throughout the thesis, this framework is mixed with institutional practices, discourses and values that create social patterns of advantage and disadvantage among students. All of these issues indicate that there is no straightforward link between widening participation and equality, as is also evident in other higher education systems where inequalities have persisted, despite widening participation (as mentioned above, in the UK, for example, it has been claimed that the “numerical growth in participation in higher education has not been matched by equitable outcomes” (Robertson, 1997, p. 15)). These issues also draw attention to the gap, very particularly within the faculty of social sciences’ context, between a rhetoric of social justice and genuine commitment to equity materialised in institutional action. The findings of this research, therefore, highlight the need



for institutional action in relation to academic and institutional culture and practices that address the needs of those for whom participation in higher education is an on-going struggle between conflicting demands, and beset with problems of 'fitting in' and feeling inadequate and not capable enough.

Nonetheless, some would rightly argue that university comes too late in the educational experience of students to be able to redress inequalities that have developed through the previous education levels within the Argentine system. Certainly, recent data indicate that only 48 percent of Argentine young people finish secondary school (Pagina/12, 2008) and show the link between secondary school dropout and poverty (27 percent of students from low income families finish secondary school as compared to 74 percent of those from high income families (Toronchik, 2005)). Low-income students in higher education are thus, as Bourdieu (2001) put it, "lucky survivors [...] coming from social categories particularly improbable for the posts which they hold". Yet among those who enter higher education, there is still another 'class gap' between the less privileged who attended public secondary schools and those who have been privately educated and who are, in turn, better prepared to succeed in higher education due to the large and growing quality gap between state and private secondary schools (Etcheverry, 2000; Kligberg, 2009). The poor preparation that students from public secondary schools bring into higher education is an important source of concern (tests show young students lack basic spelling, reading and understanding skills) (Etcheverry, 2000) and commentators identify this as perhaps the greatest challenge universities face (Llach, Montoya and Roldan, 2000).

Higher education institutions certainly cannot redress inequalities in isolation from the rest of the education system. This refers us back to the policy debate and indicates that placing the onus of non-completion 'elsewhere' (a strategy used both by government and universities) is a

highly misleading strategy. This is particularly so when, as I have tried to show, non-completion is neither simply a personal nor an institutional phenomenon but is embedded in the broader context of families, communities, social class and national and international (economic and political) factors both in relation to individual and institutional action. Thus non-completion cannot be reduced to or explained solely in any single one of those terms as the universities/government dispute assumes.

Yet at the same time, this study shows that universities cannot claim to have no responsibility. For the findings also suggest that within this complex intertwining of factors and levels that underlie non-completion, there still seems to be some significant scope for institutional action. In this respect, there is a need for further research which moves away from an exclusive focus on policy and closer to institutional practices (including institutional and academic culture underlying and informing them) to examine how these practices, sometimes in unintended ways, can work to systematically advantage some students to the detriment of others within public universities. Research into ways of making institutional practices more inclusive and socially just is important. Inclusivity needs to be taken more seriously if democracy via mass higher education, open access and free-of-charge tuition is not just going to be empty rhetoric.

As examined throughout the chapters, it was notable that even if most interviews showed non-completers would have greatly benefited from a more inclusive, supportive, attentive and caring environment, they displayed a marked resistance to express their need for support. This illustrates how, as examined in the last chapter, acknowledging the need for help underlines a sense of individual student deficit within the Faculty and does symbolic violence on those who need help. Mass higher education and open access help fulfill its rhetoric of equality of opportunity, while at the same time naturalizing non-completion as individual failure by

ignoring the association between success and the individual possession of relevant capitals and resources. The paradox is that enormous discursive energy is invested in defending the state commitment in Argentina to providing equality of opportunity through open and free-of-charge HE, while at the same time the Faculty operates a ‘survival of the fittest’ regime equivalent to that embedded in the culture of the ‘markets’; and we know from other contexts how the ‘market’ in education tends to generate advantage to the already advantaged (Ball, 2003).

This does not mean I am arguing for a removal of open access, which would be likely to only worsen inequality through restricting access to those who are able to afford private schooling and excluding “the less well prepared students, those who went to a lower level secondary school” (Ines Dussel, in Young, Savoia and Calvo, 2005) as in Brazil (McCowan, 2007). What I am suggesting here is the need to reconsider the blind commitment to policies that, when not accompanied by deliberate institutional action, have damaging effects on those who are supposed to benefit.

Finally, bearing in mind the specificity of my study and its location, it is possible to offer some contributions to more general conceptualizations of non-completion. The findings indicate the weakness of the narrow focus on ‘psychological’ issues of existing non-completion literature which tends to neglect the significance, not just of material issues, but also of individual resources and capitals (economic, cultural, social and emotional) in assisting a successful passage through higher education. Furthermore, the study highlights the role that institutional habitus can play in making those individual capitals and resources relevant. Therefore, at a time when so much energy across the world is invested in providing equality of opportunity in higher education, the findings draw renewed attention to the need to interrogate the complex relationships between equity processes and processes of equality (opportunity and outcome).

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## Notes

### Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> For example, an UNESCO/OECD's (UNESCO/OECD, 2002) study on 16 emerging countries, including Argentina, claims that half a percentage point in the annual growth rates of those countries over the past two decades is explained by investments in human capital.

<sup>2</sup> Even if 'non-traditional' is generally used to refer to mature, ethnic minority and working class students, as Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) note, this "label may be applied to mature students, those who have entered through alternative routes, those with qualifications other than the standard A levels, those with a long-term disability, students from working-class backgrounds and students from minority ethnic groups" (p. 599).

<sup>3</sup> However, the participation rate has doubled from 15 per cent to 30 per cent during the same period which has been regarded as "demonstrating that a movement to a more inclusive system of higher education in the UK has not resulted in a comparable increase in non-completion" (HEFCE, 1999). Nonetheless, Quinn et al. (2005) report on research that indicate higher drop-out rates among 'inclusive', widening participation institutions.

<sup>4</sup> There are two different perspectives or levels of analysis on non-completion: institutional and system (McInnis et al, 2000). These, in turn, shape what have been called as three categories of non-completion: 'system attrition' (students who leave higher education altogether), 'institutional attrition' (students who leave an institution either to transfer immediately or after some time, or never, to another institution) and 'internal attrition' (students who transfer between programmes of study within the same institution) (Price, Harte and Cole, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> This study excluded the universities of Buenos Aires and La Rioja due to data unavailability.

<sup>6</sup> However, the authors of this graph note that the total number of students is likely to be overestimated by around 20 percent (Becerra et al., 2003). This happens because the figure does not distinguish between active students (those enrolling and actually taking and passing courses) and inactive students (those who enrol but do not take or pass any course).

<sup>7</sup> In this document the World Bank argued that higher education in the developing world was in a state of crisis produced by the combined effects of an enrolment expansion within limited economic resources; inefficiency in the use of public funding resulted from the lack of accountability procedures/high institutional autonomy, where non-completion rates were used as indicators of inefficiency; and inequity resulted from the fact that public financing of higher education represented a subsidy to upper and middle sectors who were overrepresented at this level of education, therefore diverging resources that could be used in a more equitable way if spent on basic and secondary education (Kent, 1996; Rodriguez Gomez and Alcantara, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> This antagonism is likely to ease after 2008 following the election of President Cristina Kirchner who intends to review the current higher education legal framework. In acknowledging the controversial character of the 1996 HE Act, the Secretary for University Policy, Alberto Dibbern, pointed out in a recent interview that: "It is fundamental that the law

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emerges from a consensus between all the players: the National Inter-University Advisory Council; the private rector; the trade unions; the students; alumni; and industry" (Mitchell, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Some authors have addressed the complex way in which the recommendations of supranational agencies such as The World Bank relate to the implementation of national education policies in Latin America (Rhoten, 2000; Vanegas, 2003). In the area of Higher Education, Rodriguez Gomez and Alcantara (2003) show how "[m]ultilateral agencies, through recommendations, their own policies and their programs, have assumed a leading role in shaping the higher education reform agenda in Latin America" (p. 19). The Argentine higher education system has been encouraged to converge with current paradigms and discourses of international organizations, crucially via the power of these agencies to transform their views into the implementation of policy through their provision of funding (Rubinich, 2001). In fact, the WB has funded the Argentine Higher Education Reform through a US\$165 million loan to the government (Banco Mundial and Gobierno Argentino, 1990) and so has been a key player in setting the orientation of that reform.

<sup>10</sup> In Chapter 4, I review data on university funding which indicates that the proportion of budget allocated through this mechanism is still negligible.

<sup>11</sup> There is no full-time or part-time status at registration in Argentine public universities so the proxy indicator for dedication to studies used in most studies is whether student are in paid employment while they study.

<sup>12</sup> As I show in chapter 4, access to Argentine public universities is predominantly open as the group of universities that concentrate the higher number of students operate a non-selective and open-to-all system of admission whilst only a few of the more recently-created (1990s) universities in the Great Buenos Aires area and some medicine degree programmes in a few 'traditional' universities have established some kind of selection criteria (Trombetta, 1998).

## **Chapter 2**

<sup>13</sup> Some of the evidence that I summarize below has been taken from literature reviews carried out by other authors such as the comprehensive review of international literature on non-completion by McInnis and colleagues (2000) in Australia, which in turn cites the review by Long et al 1995; and those by McGivney (1996); Ozga and Sukhmandan (1998); Yorke (1997 and 1999); Johnston, V. (2000); Davies and Elias (2003) and Nutt, D. et al (2003).

## **Chapter 3**

<sup>14</sup> There is data available that show that, at the University of Buenos Aires, 60% of students combine university studies with work and, among them, 55.3% work between 26 and 40 hours per week (San Martín, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 4 for an extended account of this claim.

<sup>16</sup> The presidency of Carlos Saul Menem, 1989-1999.

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<sup>17</sup> The idea that a university degree was not necessarily leading to employment was taking shape based on the evidence about the evolution of the employment market, a trend which continue after the end of Menem's presidency. For example, the proportion of university graduates among the unemployed grew from 4.7% in 1998 to 8.2% in 2003 (Bermúdez, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> In Tinto's more recent work (1997) he has somehow modified his notion of integration making it closer to the notion of 'involvement' (Tinto, 1997) or just 'interaction' (Tinto, 1998). He has also emphasized the nature of the classroom experience as the instance that can best develop student involvement; he contends that, as a learning community, the classroom experience can lead to greater involvement in the broader social and academic life of the university (1997), crucial for commuters students as this is their main source of social encounters within the university.

#### **Chapter 4**

<sup>19</sup> For example, 6,500 workers were downsized after the privatization of Somisa (largest industrial company in the country), and YPF (former state oil company) reduced its employees from 51,000 to 5,600 (Svampa and Pereyra 2003). Significantly, YPF was the first state oil company in Latin America (created in 1921/22), and yet no other Latin American country has privatized its national oil company (Svampa and Pereyra 2003).

<sup>20</sup> The effects that these policies have had on the labour market have been vast: not only unemployment has increased to exorbitant levels but also the creation of formal employment has dramatically dropped, real (after inflation) salaries have fallen, and labour precariousness has increased as well as the earnings gap between qualified and un-qualified workers and between the different sectors of the economy (Beccaria and Lopez 1996).

<sup>21</sup> For example, infant mortality in Argentina was 92 per 1,000 for men and 79.3 for women, while in Italy it was 106.9 and 92.4 respectively, and in Spain 175 and 148 (Minujin and Anguita, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, education has been central to citizenship foundation and to the consolidation of the Argentine nation state. It was considered a "state issue" – the need to "educate the sovereign"-, and a "public good", and was expressed in the civic conscience as an obligation of the state and a right of the people (Grassi, Hintze and Neufeld, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> For someone born between 1910 and 1919, the average expected years of schooling was 5.27, compared to 7.15 for those born between 1930-1939 and 9.37 for those born between 1950 and 1959 (Minujin and Anguita, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> As an indication of the significance of this figure, Rhoads et al.'s study (2005) cites the estimate of an expert on Argentine higher education that Argentina 'presently produces only about 500 doctoral graduates in all the sciences every year'.

<sup>25</sup> The term 'precarious job' is used to refer to those jobs that are temporary, self-employed, low-paid, and not covered by the social security system.

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<sup>26</sup> Gross enrolment rate is the number of people enrolled in higher education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population in the official relevant age group (UNESCO, 2004), 18-24 in Argentina.

<sup>27</sup> This data excludes the Colleges of the University of London which is a confederal organisation with a total of 123,370 listed separately in HESA tables, and the University of Wales which has a total of 90,830 students at its nine accredited institutions, and another 28,290 at the affiliated Cardiff University. HESA lists these as individual institutions (HESA Online Statistics, notes).

<sup>28</sup> The departmental organization type that prevails in the North has only been introduced to Argentine higher education in the last decade and is still confined to just a few new institutions.

<sup>29</sup> The association between national politics and university life was such that the Reform movement received the support of broader social sectors such as workers' organizations, progressive political parties, and large sectors of the media; and it faced antagonism from conservative sectors including the catholic church (Liebman, Glazer and Walker, 1972).

<sup>30</sup> According to their enrolment rates, higher education systems have been typified by Martin Trow as elite (up to 30% of the age group in higher education), mass (more than 30% of the age group in higher education) and universal (more than 50%) (Trow, 1974).

<sup>31</sup> Data for 1998.

## **Chapter 5**

<sup>32</sup> I am aware that these differences set up a rationale for comparison between UBA and a small university, which I originally attempted. I even did some interviews with a few non-completers from a small, relatively new university in the Greater Buenos Aires area but practical constraints were difficult to overcome. Given that there is not a strong qualitative research tradition and research infrastructure in Argentina, there are no precedents of this kind of research, procedures take a long time and there is limited institutional cooperation, so I had to develop an alternative research strategy.

<sup>33</sup> Agronomy; Architecture, Design and Urbanism; Economic Sciences; Exact and Natural Sciences; Social Sciences; Veterinary Sciences; Law; Pharmacy and Biochemistry; Philosophy; Engineering; Medicine; Odontology; and Psychology.

<sup>34</sup> Among the few studies of non-completion across subjects in Argentina, a study in three different Faculties of UBA (social sciences, law and economics) reported that social sciences have the lowest graduation rates with an estimated graduation rate of 22 percent as compared to 33 percent for economics and 75 percent for law (Toer, 2000). Landi and Giuliadori's study (2001) confirms the particularly low graduation rates exhibited by the social sciences when compared to the humanities and the medical sciences: graduation rates are around 52 percent in the social sciences but above 70 percent in the humanities and the medical sciences (p. 101).

<sup>35</sup> The perception of a lower status of the social sciences was mentioned by respondents in the interviews in relation to differences in resources and opportunities available to the Faculty of Social Sciences compared to other UBA academic units.

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<sup>36</sup> According to the academic regulations of the Faculty, in order to be considered a regular or 'good standing' student a person must pass a minimum of two courses in two consecutive academic years. Once a student loses his or her regular student status, he or she may request reincorporation as long as it has not been over four years since the regular student status was lost - and the process of re-incorporation can be done no more than twice in total.

<sup>37</sup> In a former Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) commissioned study of early leavers, Davies and Elias (2003) report a 10 per cent response rate to their postal questionnaire.

<sup>38</sup> First generation students are generally defined as those with "neither parent [who] has had access to a university education and completed a degree" (Thomas, Thomas and Quinn, 2006, p. 50). Second-generation or non-first generation students (Billson and Terry, 1981) usually refer to those with at least one parent who had completed higher education. On this table, 1<sup>st</sup> generation refers to those who have neither parent who completed a university degree (even if some of them had attended university for a short period of time) and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation includes those with at least one parent who completed a higher education degree.

<sup>39</sup> Even if, as the Human Rights Documentation Center report goes on to indicate, this figure also reveals the "lack of adequate information about the population, particularly the indigenous and immigrant communities". Up to the 2001 National Population Census data was collected "using the category of national origin rather than race in Argentina, leading to undercounting of Afro-Argentines and *mestizos*". Therefore, as different sources suggest, the white population is likely to be overestimated in official figures yet "they certainly reflect the normative perception that the country is predominantly 'white' [and in turn makes it difficult to assess and address] persistent forms of racial discrimination in Argentina" (Human Rights Documentation Center, 2001).

## Chapter 6

<sup>40</sup> According to this measurement, the social composition of the Faculty is as follows: 44 percent of students come from middle-lower sectors, 12 percent from lower, 10 percent from upper and 34 percent from middle-upper sectors (Toer, 1998, p. 19).

<sup>41</sup> The coverage of financial aid is limited: only 1.31 percent of students at public universities in the country get some kind of financial support. This figure includes the scholarships awarded by the Ministry of Education as part of the National Programme of University Scholarships (PNBU) (6,530 scholarship in 2006), and the scholarships given by public universities themselves (nearly 10,000 in total) (Boletín IESALC 128/129).

<sup>42</sup> "In mid December, Cavallo [the Finance Minister at the time], faced with a run on the banks announced the freezing of Argentines' savings accounts and the effective confiscation of their privatised pension funds. On 19th December, a wave of looting broke out across the country, to which De La Rúa responded with the declaration of a state of emergency. Minutes after his speech, the pots and pans began to sound, first in a few homes and neighbourhoods, and then in a deafening wave that crossed the city from the middle class areas of the north to the working class strongholds of the south" (Blackwell, 2001).



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<sup>43</sup> As noted, according to the Academic Regulations of the Faculty the only requirement on students to keep their 'good standing' status is for them to pass two courses every two academic years. There are two terms in an academic year and a full-time student would take between three and four courses per term depending on the subject (Communication Sciences, 4 courses per term; Political Sciences, 7 per year; Sociology, 3 courses per term; Labour relations, 3 courses per term; Social Work 4 courses per term).

## Chapter 7

<sup>44</sup> This figure does not include the Universities of Buenos Aires (UBA), General Sarmiento and Lujan (Secretaria de Politicas Universitarias, Ministerio de Educacion, Ciencia y Tecnologia, <http://www.mcve.gov.ar/spu/>).

<sup>45</sup> Teachers' salaries at public universities are fixed by national law (Braslavsky, 1998).

## Chapter 8

<sup>46</sup> Framing refers to "the degree of control teacher and pupil possess over the section, organization, pacing, and timing of knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship" (Bernstein, in Walford 1995 p. 192). On the other hand, Bernstein argued that "where classification is strong, contents are well insulated from each other by strong boundaries. Where classification is weak, there is reduced insulation between contents, for the boundaries between contents are weak or blurred. *Classification thus refers to the degree of boundary maintenance between contents*" (Bernstein 1971, cited in Walford, 1995 p. 192).

<sup>47</sup> Even if this might be just a perception that differs from the real figures as research indicates that only around 13 percent of UBA's students come from low income families (Toer, 1998, p. 19).

<sup>48</sup> To support this point, Winn cites evidence indicating that, "in a study commissioned by the NCIHE, only 15% of full-time students said that interest in the subject was their most important reason for entering higher education, and 10% said that their main motive was to continue studying. In a question about what they wanted to gain from higher education, 23% of students said they did not want 'to experience intellectual growth and stimulation' and 32% did not want 'to learn about and discuss new ideas'" (Winn, 2002, p. 447 citing NCIHE, 1997b, p. 23).

## Chapter 10

<sup>49</sup> This has a specific relevance to the different Faculties of UBA even if there is a degree of variation in the budget distribution across the Faculties with some being 'richer' than others (Lorca, 2002), and a more general relevance to all public universities (yet there is variation too in the per-student budget across universities with new universities created in the 1990s comparatively better-off than the traditional ones (Coraggio and Vispo, 2001). Large universities get an average \$1,600 per student compared to \$2,700 p/s of medium size and \$3,000 p/s of small size ones (del Bello, 2002, p. 22).

<sup>50</sup> To make this assertion Leathwood employs data from a 'prosperity index' constructed by Watson and Bowden (2002) where, for example, Oxford and Cambridge rank third and fourth respectively compared to 97<sup>th</sup> Thames Valley University. Both universities' projected drop-out

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rate for 2001-02 entrants was below 2% compared to 25% of Thames Valley University (The Guardian, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> Even if, as noted, low middle-class students expressed more concerns of an utilitarian type when making choices and judging their educational experience than their high middle-class counterparts, an issue that Reay et al. also found in their more “driven by necessity” working class students (Reay, David and Ball, 2005, p. 161)

<sup>52</sup> As I am writing this chapter, lecturers from 12 national universities including UBA are starting a 48-hour strike demanding better pay (after inflation eroded a 24% salary gain awarded in early 2008) and a new retirement law. It is the second strike action in 15 days (Clarín, 2008), which follows a difficult first half of the year with a number of other 48-hour strike actions (Casas, 2008). On the other hand, the Faculty of Social Sciences main building is on the verge of collapse with urgently needed improvements halted in wait of completion of building works at the future site, which in turn are held-up following budget problems (Faculty of Social Sciences website <http://www.fsoc.uba.ar>)

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