

## EXPANSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND CAREER CONSTRUCTION: MULTI-CASE STUDY WITH UNDERGRADUATES

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### ABSTRACT

The expansion of higher education in Brazil in recent decades has produced distinct and heterogeneous contexts, contributing to the change in the sociodemographic profile of students. Within the scope of studies on career construction in higher education and based on the Life Designing model, this investigation examined the process of career construction of undergraduates from public institutions in Alto Uruguai gaúcho, a region affected by the expansion and establishment of universities in the interior of the states of Brazil. This is a multiple case study with six undergraduates who showed different levels of career adaptability. Based on the emerging categories of analysis, the results indicated that the proximity of Higher Education institutions, the family context, the need to reconcile study and work and the perspective of social mobility associated with the transition to adulthood are relevant themes in the process of participants' career construction, highlighting the importance of public policies for higher education.

**Keywords:** professional development; higher education; university students

### Expansão da educação superior e construção de carreira: estudo multicasos com graduandos

#### RESUMO

A expansão da educação superior no Brasil nas últimas décadas produziu contextos distintos e heterogêneos, contribuindo para a modificação do perfil sociodemográfico dos estudantes. No âmbito dos estudos sobre construção de carreira no ensino superior e com base no modelo *Life Designing*, esta investigação examinou o processo de construção de carreira de graduandos de instituições públicas do Alto Uruguai gaúcho, região atingida pela expansão e interiorização da educação superior. Trata-se de um estudo de casos múltiplos com seis graduandos que apresentaram diferentes níveis de adaptabilidade de carreira. Com base nas categorias de análise emergentes, os resultados indicaram que a proximidade das instituições de Ensino Superior, o contexto familiar, a necessidade de conciliar estudo e trabalho e a perspectiva de mobilidade social associada à transição para a vida adulta são temas relevantes no processo de construção de carreira dos participantes, evidenciando a importância das políticas públicas para a educação superior

**Palavras-chave:** desenvolvimento profissional; ensino superior; estudantes universitários

### Expansión de la educación universitaria y construcción de carrera: estudio múltiples casos con graduandos

#### RESUMEN

La expansión de la educación universitaria en Brasil en las últimas décadas producido contextos distintos y heterogéneos, contribuyendo a la modificación del perfil sociodemográfico de los estudiantes. En el ámbito de los estudios sobre construcción de carrera en la enseñanza universitaria y con base en el modelo *Life Designing*, esta investigación examinó el proceso de construcción de carrera de graduandos de instituciones públicas del Alto Uruguay gaúcho, región alcanzada por la expansión e interiorización de la educación universitaria. Se trata de un estudio de casos múltiples con seis graduandos que presentaron distintos niveles de adaptabilidad de carrera. Con base en las categorías de análisis emergentes, los resultados indicaron que la proximidad de las instituciones de enseñanza universitaria, el contexto familiar, la necesidad de conciliar estudio y trabajo y la perspectiva de movilidad social asociada a la transición a la vida adulta son temas relevantes en el proceso de construcción de carrera de los participantes, evidenciando la importancia de las políticas públicas a la educación universitaria.

**Palabras clave:** desarrollo profesional; enseñanza universitaria; estudiantes universitarios

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## INTRODUCTION

The number of registrations in Brazilian public and private institutions of higher education has grown expressively in the last two decades. Between 2007 and 2017, for example, the number registrations in this type of education rose 56.4%, while 53.1% were in the private network and 41,7% were in the public network (Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Studies and Research [INEP], 2018). There was also great expansion in the number of institutions, especially in the public network and outside major capital cities, by means of the opening of courses in regions that had been historically unassisted by public education. The implantation of higher education in rural areas is fundamental for fighting against inequality in regional development and for reaching students who lack the conditions to move to other regions. It also leads to democracy in access, decentralization of knowledge, and the social inclusion of sectors that historically had no access to this stage of the schooling process (Ministry of Education & Higher Education Bureau, 2014).

The process of expansion and rural implantation of higher education relies on spaces with actors and structures that are increasingly distinct and heterogeneous (Silva, 2014). This process, just like affirmative action for entrance in public institutions of higher education and programs by the ministry of education that provide financial support to graduate students, has contributed to the diversification of the students' profile. The literature has shown that the needs and characteristics of higher education students in the country are still unknown, which is evidence of the importance of studies that aim at understanding the peculiarities of the academic world and the characteristics of the students' profiles (Santos, Polydoro, Scortegagna, & Linden, 2013; Silva & Bardagi, 2016). As a result of the rupture from the elitist model of access to higher education and to specialized knowledge (Silva, 2014), it was possible to observe meaningful changes concerning the graduates' profiles that until then predominated in higher education, including the possibilities for professional choice and for expression of aspirations regarding occupations (Buscacio & Soares, 2017; Bardagi & Albanaes, 2015).

Considering that Higher Education consists of an important environment for personal and professional development, it is important to highlight the need for studying the processes of career construction in the context of the modifications of the socio-demographic characteristics of the graduates. The interest for the comprehension of aspects related to the construction of the students' careers during the realization of the course in higher education has been crescent in literature. Such studies contribute to the comprehension of conditions related to the

permanence, evasion, performance, satisfaction, and psychosocial development of students. Although they do not refer specifically to the phenomenon of expansion of higher education, many research works indicate the influence of socio-demographic and psychosocial variables in the processes of career construction that include socio-economic conditions, professional situations, and family (Ambiel, Martins, Tofoli, & Campos, 2019; Buscacio & Soares, 2017; Cardoso, Garcia, & Schroeder, 2015).

Quests realized in the National Literature<sup>3</sup> demonstrate, also, that there are few studies of qualitative nature on the theme, with the predominance of quantitative research works, which had already been demonstrated in the review by Zatti, Luna, Silva and Feigel (2017), and it is a recurrent perception in analyses on the scientific production in professional and career orientation (Ambiel, Campos & Campos, 2017). However, studies that approach the experiences of the students, based on a qualitative perspective, are relevant in the area, especially after one considers the nature of the studied phenomenon and the used theoretical approach.

The Life Designing model used by this study highlights the current socio-economic context and subsidizes the practical application of the Theory of Career Construction (Savickas, 2005, 2013). In this perspective, career is understood as a subjective construction that is constituted by significations attributed to past memories, current experiences, and future aspirations (Savickas, 2005; Savickas et al, 2009). Thus, it emphasizes the narrative as a theoretical and practical tool of great relevance (Savickas, 2013).

In the Life Designing model, there is a highlight on career adaptability, a construct that is studied in several countries, including the context of higher education, in order to understand its relation with academic and career variables (Ambiel, Santos, & Dalbosco, 2016). It is a psychosocial construct that denotes individuals' promptness and resources to handle current and predicted tasks, transitions, and negative emotional experiences related to career development (Savickas, 2013). The most adaptable individuals are the ones who possess the capacity to think and get ready for career challenges, who try to increase personal control over their professional futures, who have curiosity to

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<sup>3</sup> The search was operationalized with the combination of the term "career" with "higher education" and with "university students" in the SciELO and Pepsic databases. Out of the 35 studies that fit into the scope of the theme (with the exclusion of literature review articles, experience reports, and the construction or validation of instruments, and the exclusive inclusion of Brazilian empirical studies), it was possible to verify that 21 were of quantitative nature, 12 were qualitative, and 02 were mixed.

develop self-knowledge and explore possible career scenarios and believe in their own capacity to make choices and implement professional plans (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). It is possible to observe that distinct socio-economic contexts tend to demonstrate different levels of the capacity for career adaptability, since they lead to specific opportunities and resources (Fiorini, Bardagi, & Silva, 2016).

Thus, considering the scarcity of studies on career development that take as a starting point the expansion of higher education, the most important objective of the present investigation was to understand the process of career construction by students from higher education courses in public institutions of the Alto Uruguai of Rio Grande do Sul, a region that was affected by the expansion and rural implantation of public higher education. Specifically, we tried to identify, additionally, differences in this process that were caused by the general score of career adaptability by the participants. In the intersection between education and career, this study considers that the context in which individuals are inserted is essential for the comprehension of processes involved in career construction, while analyzing more comprehensive social dimensions as well as individual aspects of the significations constituted in the singularities.

## METHOD

### General characterization of the study

In order to understand the career construction of students from higher education regarding the expansion and rural implantation of public higher education, researchers used a method of qualitative and cross section. The investigation was conducted by means of the outlining of multiple-case study (Yin, 2015).

### Study Context

The Alto Uruguai region is located in the north of the state of Rio Grande do Sul and comprehends 32 municipalities (Economy and Statistics, 2019). The expansion of higher education has a recent history in the gaúcho Alto Uruguai, which until 2001 had only one institution, of private nature, offering higher education courses: the Regional Integrated University of the Alto Uruguai and of the Missions - URI. Nowadays, besides the private institutions, the region is provided with three public institutions offering courses in higher education (UERGS, implanted in 2001; UFFS, implanted in 2010; IFRS implanted in 2011). The city of Erechim, "Capital of the Alto Uruguai", which offers the greatest number of vacancies in higher education in the region, is third in the general ranking of gaúcho municipalities with over 100 thousand inhabitants in the Index of Socio-economic Development (Idese), referring to 2015, which considers the socioeconomic situation of the municipalities regarding education, income, and health. The city occupies first place in the education block (Economy and Statistics Foundation, 2020).

### Research procedures and participants

The participation in the study took place voluntarily in accordance with the ethical precepts for research with human beings, with approval by the Committee for Ethics in Research with Human Beings of the Federal University of Santa Catarina. Initially, the selection of participants was realized by means of results obtained from a sociodemographic questionnaire and from the CAAS/*Career Adapt-Abilities Scale* (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) validated for Brazil by Teixeira, Bardagi, Lassance, Magalhães, and Duarte (2012). Such instruments were applied on the students who attended public institutions of higher education in the Alto Uruguai region. The inclusion criteria determined that participants were supposed to be aged between 18 and 29 and to be

Table 01. Characterization of the participants.

Participant	Age	Gender	Father's schooling	Mother's Schooling	Works/Has worked	CAAS general score	Course	Phase
P1	24	Male	E.F	E.F	Yes	61	Engineering	6 <sup>a</sup>
P2	19	Female	E.F. I	E.M/EJA	Yes	115	Engineering	4 <sup>a</sup>
P3	25	Male	E.F. I	N/A	Yes	67	Administration	4 <sup>a</sup>
P4	23	Male	E.F.I	E.M/EJA	Yes	117	Engineering	9 <sup>a</sup>
P5	25	Female	E. M	E.F.I	Yes	70	Engineering	4 <sup>a</sup>
P6	23	Male	E. M	E. M	Yes	118	Administration	6 <sup>a</sup>

Note. Consider EF (Elementary school); EFI (Incomplete Elementary School); EM (High School); EJA (Education of young people and adults); N/A (Not literate); CAAS (*Career Adaptability Scale*).

residents in the region for at least 5 years. The total number was 592 respondents.

Among the participants, six graduate students were selected for the realization of case studies, based on two criteria: polarization in general indexes of career adaptability and residence in the Alto Uruguai since their birth. Concerning the first criterion, six participants were selected, with scores situated in the extreme limits obtained in the CAAS scale, with three at the lowest levels and three at the highest levels (the scale ranges from 24 to 120 points in the general score, while the average is 92.32 and the standard deviation is 12.32 among the 592 respondents). Table 01 presents the characterization of the participant students.<sup>4</sup>

### Instruments

For the gathering of data, in addition to the sociodemographic questionnaire and the Career Adaptability Scale (CAAS) used in the process of selection of participants, semi-structured interview of flexible script. The items that composed the interview script comprehended the investigation on the career construction of participants, considering individual as well as contextual dimensions, by means of four guiding themes: general life context, process of choice of higher education course, experiences in higher education, life, and career projects.

### Data Analysis

The content of the interviews was analyzed by means of Content Analysis (Bardin, 1977/2011). Based on the *Life Designing* model (Savickas, 2005; 2013; Savickas et al., 2009) and research results on the process of career construction of graduates, the analysis of the material collected in the interviews led to the organization of three emerging theme categories: a) Process of choice of higher education course: includes the manner and the criteria used in the choice of course and educational institution, the role of the family, and perceived support; b) Experiences in higher education: course adaptation, experienced difficulties, satisfaction with the course and activities developed in this period; Life and career projects: students' life and career projects after course conclusion as well as future projections. During the analysis, in every one of the categories, researchers attempted to observe possible differences among the groups that concentrate the participants with higher and lower levels of career adaptability.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the guiding themes of the interviews and on the emerging theme categories, researchers investigated the processes of professional choices

by the participants, their academic trajectories, and their life and career projects, in accordance with the proposal of the *Life Designing* model, the focus of which is not exclusively found on the comprehension of how individuals develop and evolve in their careers, but also on factors and processes related to the construction of life (Duarte, 2009), approximating, therefore, the career notion to the life notion (Savickas et al., 2009). Thus, it was possible to get to know life contexts and characterize family, school, and occupational aspects related to career construction, as well as verifying the existence of differences among the participants with greater adaptability career (P6, P4 and P2) and with less adaptability (P1, P3 and P5), and cross check the obtained results with other results on career construction in higher education.

### 1. The process of choice of higher education course

The reasons for choosing a course are basically related to geographical location, to the positive assessment of opportunities for professional insertion, to taste and interest in the area, to incentive by family members and family, and to previous contact with professionals. Thus, the preference for a course located in the region was one of the reported reasons for choice. P1, who presented the least index of career adaptability among participants, reported that he felt insecure regarding the separation from family in order to study, therefore the choice for a course at a nearby institution. P5, who also belongs to the group with the least adaptability, mentions that she did not think of going for a course somewhere else for financial reasons. If she had to move to another city, she would not have the means to support herself, neither did her family have the resources to help her. On the other hand, P2, who belongs to the group with greatest adaptability, justifies the preference for a course located in the adjacent region in order to avoid leaving her mother alone at home.

As we can see, the choice of higher education course was based on different motivations. Concerning P1, the insecurity to consider another city to graduate is consistent with the result indicated in the scale (CAAS), because it seems to evidence low levels of confidence, one of the dimensions of career adaptability. Low confidence can lead to difficulties to take action because individuals do not feel capable of realizing their projects and can present a shy, inhibited demeanor regarding career demands (Savickas, 2005). In turn, P5 and P2 made it evident in their choices that they were influenced by context aspects related to financial and family matters, situations that also seem coherent with their positions in the scale. The first one does not seem to explore the possibilities to conciliate work and study in another city (curiosity dimension) and the second one, by demonstrating a commitment to the future

<sup>4</sup> The participants were identified by the letter "P", followed by numbers 1 to 6, which will make it possible to identify each participant.

wellbeing of her mother (preoccupation dimension), highlights the integration of career with other life spaces, according to the *Life Designing* model (Savickas et al., 2009).

In addition to the fact that one of the most important reasons for choosing a course was location (P1, P2 and P5), the fact that the institution is public and offers free courses proved a major reason participants reported for making their choices (P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6). It is possible to observe that, even though it is for free, if the course is located in another region, a series of additional costs for accommodations, food, and transportation need to be considered. Besides that, according to the narrative by P6, it is most often not enough. In addition to being public and for free, the university needs to offer evening courses so that students can conciliate study and work time. Thus, the considered course options were the ones existing in the public institutions of the region, which, in spite of making these options circumscribed, present themselves as a factor that encourages the realization of higher education and an effective mediation for career construction, according to what was possible to observe in the participants' narratives.

The context opportunities reverberate in career construction when the demands of social order are incorporated by individuals in the process of construction of beliefs, expectations, and values regarding the working world. Thus, the conditions present in the social context are core elements in the definition of meanings attributed to personal trajectories, composing the career biographical dimension (Savickas, 2013; Super, Savickas & Super, 1996). Thus, career adaptability relies on the interaction among subjective and social dimensions, and is strongly connected with specific roles and context contingencies (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

In the process of circumscribing and eliminating options, the individuals can exclude alternatives in their occupational maps in a non-reflected way, while disregarding occupations that are potentially congruent with interests and skills (Gottfredson, 2002). This might lead to a previous commitment with options considered more accessible, at the expense of other possible alternatives. In this sense, although individuals actively organize their experiences in unique life histories, and building meanings that can be reinvented at every moment (Savickas, 2013), acceptable alternative zones most often tend to crystalize (Gottfredson, 2002).

Thus, the existence of public higher education courses in regions that are close to the residences of students might benefit the inclusion of projects of higher education formation in their occupational maps. Considering that the entrance into higher education is connected to the possibility of social mobility (Dias & Sá, 2014), for some families, according to P6, "what really matters is to study and to be doing something".

This conception seems to be associated with challenges posed by nowadays' working world, that increasingly demands that people elevate their qualification levels (Cardoso & Duarte, 2019), as well as the available formation opportunities. Such scenario, present in our current turbulent, unstable society, frequently demands adaptative capacities (Savickas, 2005), which are essential for individuals to build their careers in a non-linear world context and environment, in constant change (Savickas et al., 2009).

Thus, a segment of the population attributes more importance to the mere entrance into a higher education course than to the choice itself of a certain course. Consequently, the choice of a course that is compatible with personal preferences might assume a secondary role (Bardagi & Albanaes, 2015). Nevertheless, taste and interest in the area have been among major motivations for the participants' choices, which is already recurrently reported by the literature. The predilection and facility regarding certain subjects (P1 and P2), the previous experience in technical or vocational courses (P5 and P6) and experiences of work and contact with professionals (P3 and P4) were criteria for the professional choices made by the surveyed undergraduates.

The reasons for choice presented by the participants refer to the importance of exploratory behavior in process of decision-making. The curiosity dimension of career adaptability expresses this exploratory capacity of individuals regarding themselves and the occupational universe, and it consists of the search for knowledge and for the initiative to investigate options in order to identify activities in which they would like engage. When the curiosity resource is not sufficiently developed, individuals might demonstrate naïve postures, poor exploration, and low self-awareness and awareness of reality, which leads to inconsistent career decisions and a limited vision of the world of work (Savickas, 2005). On the other hand, the people who are more aware of their choices tend to more often explore professional options, engage in planning activities and career planning, and are more able to face career challenges (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996).

It is important to emphasize that all six participants work or have already worked, which is commonplace among undergraduates in the region (48.48% of the respondents of the initial sociodemographic questionnaire of the research reported keeping jobs, while 25.9% reported working over 40 hours a week). Despite the need to conciliate jobs and studies frequently produces a negative effect on school performance and is associated to failure and evasion (Junior, Santos, & Maciel, 2016), in certain cases the work experiences are related to the development of responsibility, autonomy, and confidence (Ambiel et al., 2019), which are associated to career adaptability

and might contribute to the process of professional choice. In this sense, student-workers have a peculiar career development when compared to the people who play these roles in a non-simultaneous way. The management required by the simultaneous roles influences the way student-workers organize their diverse roles and the relevance of these roles, while establishing a characteristic standard that, connected to career adaptability, determines their engagement in the social context (Saldanha, 2013).

Although the conclusion of higher education has ceased to be a determining factor when it comes to guaranteeing a job (Cardoso & Duarte, 2019), it was possible to identify, among the reasons for choosing a course, the positive evaluation of opportunities for professional insertion (P1, P3 and P6). The assessment of professional possibilities (the curiosity and preoccupation dimensions of career adaptation), towards a favorable market, contributes to expectations of safety connected to professions and the transition of career tasks (Styker & Burke, 2000).

When it comes to family matters, the participants indicated a perception of freedom for choice and of support (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6). However, they also provided evidence of the scarcity of discussions on the possibilities and decisions related to career construction in the family environment. It is possible to observe that half the participants' parents attended only elementary school and none of them went into higher education, which is also a characteristic of the schooling level of the parents of the undergraduates in the Alto Uruguai region. According to data from the sociodemographic questionnaire, schooling levels concentrate around complete or incomplete elementary school (51.35% of parents and 45.61% of mothers).

The family discourse interferes in a fundamental way in the process of self-construction, to the extent that the self is co-constructed in interpersonal relations (Savickas, 2013), especially with the other significants. Thus, the way families perceive individuals and relate to them contributes to the formation of their self-concept systems (Lassance, Paradiso, & Silva, 2011; Savickas, 1997). Therefore, families have a lot of relevance in the process of professional choices, and in the development of career adaptability, from childhood until adult life, towards providing emotional and material support, encourage the exploration of interests, support choices, dialogue and protect from insecurity (Buscacio & Soares, 2017).

Analyzing the career construction of participants from the perspective of the career adaptability construct, it was verified that the three participants with the lowest scores for adaptability (P1, P3 and P5) reported significant questions regarding the choice of course, as well as little exploration of the environment

and of themselves in this process. Most often, the entrance into higher education is not accompanied by a more accurate identification of what individuals truly want in their professional lives, leading to unwise decisions. The information on the courses and professions tends to be superficial and stereotyped, and exploratory behavior previous to decision making is limited (Silva & Teixeira, 2019). Consequently, the career adaptability dimension named curiosity, which concerns exploratory behavior, is fundamental in the process of professional choice (Savickas, 2013).

In this sense, it was also possible to observe difficulties in the sense of confidence regarding career decisions, especially concerning participants P1 and P3. The confidence resource of the career adaptability involves the belief in individual capacities to realize activities, handle adversity, and reach goals, while applying personal competences. Deficits related to lack of confidence might result in inhibition, which delays realization and the reaching of goals (Savickas, 2005).

## **2. Experiences in higher education**

After making their choices, students enter higher education, when significations are attributed to academic experiences and to the decision of permanence in higher education. It is an important period in career construction and in the development of career adaptation (Ambiel et al., 2019), which was analyzed by means of the second theme category in this investigation.

The adaptation of the participants in higher education involved most importantly the perceived changes concerning previous formation experiences. The initial contact with the new teaching mode was marked by the perception of a different context regarding the characteristics of the group, the age heterogeneity of the classmates, and the methodology used by the teachers (P1), the challenge of integration with peers (P2), and the importance of participating in non-mandatory academic activities (P4). In the case of P5, her previous familiarity with the institution was described as a facilitator of adaptation, because she had already attended a technical course in the same institution.

The phase of entrance in higher education, given the particularities and inherent challenges in this transition period and the inherent challenges of this transition period, requires from students a diversity of adaptation capacities. In periods such as these, the career adaptability resources are fundamental for managing challenging situations, because they help in the constitution of strategies used to guide adaptation behaviors (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

When it comes to the difficulties experienced in the realization of the course, there was a highlight of the lack of study habits (P1), low performance problems,

lack of motivation and identification related to certain disciplines (P3, P4 and P5) and the need to conciliate working and studying (P1, P3 and P6). P1, for example, reported that in the period of the interview, he already felt more adapted to the routine, in view of the fact that he has been working for a long time. However, at the end of the course, the difficulties were more significant.

In the group of students with lower scores for adaptability, it was possible to observe difficulties in the organization and planning of activities related to the course and to the disciplines, which reverberate in performance, which they consider unsatisfactory. On the other hand, in the group of students with more elevated scores, it was possible to observe a greater sense of control and organization regarding the demands and difficulties of the course. It is possible to observe that control dimension of career adaptability highlights the individuals' responsibility in the construction of their career, and, in this sense, involves self-regulation, sense of self-direction, and personal responsibility over the future (Savickas, 2005), which benefits the exploration of opportunities present in higher education. In another direction, when the control resource is still underdeveloped, it is possible to verify undefinition, procrastination, indecision, and low personal engagement in career construction. This also leads to hesitation and uncertainty in career choices (Savickas, 2005).

Thus, specifically concerning career decisions, P1 and P5 reported having questions regarding the choice of course and also reported that they had already thought of the possibility of dropping out. P3, in his turn, declared that even regarding emerging difficulties, dropping out never crossed his mind because he considers higher education formation as fundamental to get a more qualified job. In his own words, "if I stop studying, I will be working in a factory for the rest of my life." It is important to remember that P1, P3 and P5 belong to the group with the least career adaptability, according to the CAAS scale. The identification with the course and with the profession reflect themselves in the commitment and in the probability of evasion or permanence, so that more satisfied students with a stronger sense of identification can assess difficulties and barriers in a more positive way (Bardagi & Hutz, 2010).

Besides the matters that involve the control dimension, the described difficulties can also be related to the curiosity dimension of career adaptability. The curiosity associated with the exploratory behavior, benefits knowledge over the world of work and self-knowledge. Lack of curiosity, on the other hand, limits exploration and leads to unrealistic expectations and aspirations for the future (Hartung & Cadaret, 2017).

Concerning the participation in non-mandatory extracurricular or curricular activities, which contribute

to the development of career adaptability (Ambiel et al., 2019), of exploratory behavior, and of self-knowledge (Bardagi & Hutz, 2010), it was possible to identify, in the group of interviewees, students that participated in regular activities, such as monitoring, research, and extension (P2, P4 and P5), the students who participated only in sporadic activities, such as lectures and events (P1, P3 and P6). The type of participation was associated to the occupational situation of the students because they kept jobs and reported the impossibility of participation due to work responsibilities and little time.

Thus, it is possible to observe the need to conciliate working and studying restricts the university experience, and it most often gets reduced to classes given at pre-established times. As a result, this necessity might make it impossible for students to develop by means of non-mandatory academic activities (Ronsoni, 2014), which might contribute to the development of the four dimensions of career adaptability (preoccupation, control, curiosity, and confidence) (Ambiel et al., 2019).

In addition, Cardoso et al. (2015) observed, in an investigation with undergraduates in psychology, with psychology undergraduates, that the students who work present themselves as less competent concerning study habits and time management. The simultaneous performance of these roles (student and worker) demands an intense mobilization of adaptation resources (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996; Savickas, 2005), that, when they are not sufficient, might lead to difficulties and result problems of a different order, including course evasion.

However, according to the results obtained in the research by Ambiel et al. (2019), with university students from assorted courses, working during graduation might lead to opportunities for development of personal resources connected to career, specifically of the control (responsibility and autonomy) and confidence (capacity to believe in themselves and reach professional goals) dimensions. Depending on the nature and area of professional practice, work might also benefit the development of the curiosity resource, by amplifying visions on the world of work, and lead to the search for further information concerning the chosen profession (Savickas, 2013).

### **3. Life and career projects**

The third emerging theme category in the investigation refers to life and career projects by the students after the conclusion of the course, once the future aspirations and expectations, besides past memories and current experiences, compose one's career, in accordance with the *Life Designing* model (Savickas, 2005; Savickas, 2013; Savickas et al, 2009). The expectations that the students have concerning their career in the future might be related, in addition, with decisions for permanence or dropping out of the

course (Ambiel et al., 2016).

The professional projects after graduation involved different possibilities. The projects were outstandingly different from the reality experienced in the family contexts of the interviewees and of a large contingent of young people in the region. In this sense, higher education courses prove potentializing factors for new life and career perspectives in this context. Despite this fact, only two participants (P1 and P4) report that working in another region is a career goal.

It is important to mention that P1, before entering the course, did not consider realizing the graduation on another locality, because he did not feel confident to do that. Approaching the end of the course, however, he started considering the option of professionally operating in another region. It is possible to observe, in this sense, that career adaptability is strictly related to specific roles and context contingencies and develop by means of the interaction of the subjective and social dimensions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The contexts, on the other hand, made themselves different because they propelled the advancement of adaptability, in accordance with the requirements, opportunities, and conditions for the development of adaptation competences (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). In this sense, the experiences of graduation in higher education might contribute to the development of resources for career adaptability, especially confidence, by modifying the individuals' system of self-concept (Savickas, 1997).

It is important to highlight that some initial difficulties became clear in view of the proposed theme, especially concerning participants P1 and P5, who belong to the group with the least career adaptability values. By requiring from participants a future projection of 10 years, P1 and P5 did not manage to describe how they imagined themselves. It is observed that the difficulty to explore future career scenarios represents one of the characteristics of people with less elevated indexes of adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The other participants described their projections on the occupational, family, and financial dimensions, which included getting a more qualified job that requires a university degree (P2, P3, P4 and P6), being an entrepreneur (P3, P4, P6), getting married and/having children (P2, P3, P4, P6), and purchasing assets, including a house and car (P3).

In the narratives of the students who described their future plans, it was possible to observe that the conclusion of the higher education course appeared associated with the transition to adult life. According to Arnett, Zukauskienė and Sugimura (2014), when dealing with emerging adult life, the implementation of professional projects, as well as the love choices, and the choices related to values and beliefs, is a task that leads to the definition of what it means to be an

adult. Thus, the professional projects described by the interviewees, associated to personal projects, such as getting married, having children, purchasing stuff, and having a stable life, refer to the acquisition of the role of an adult person, and consequent independence. The transition towards adult life by the surveyed young people, is also evidence of the expectation to reach life conditions that are different from the ones experienced in their families of origin in the Alto Uruguai region. In this sense, the academic trajectory in higher education presents itself as associated with a perspective of social mobility, related to new opportunities of professional formation and career construction provided by the expansion of public higher education.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present investigation confirmed some results from previous research works concerning career construction and higher education, and, specifically, evidenced issues connected to new conditions for formation and career provided by the expansion of higher education. Concerning the process of choice for the course and for the institution, besides taste and interest in the area and the assessment of the opportunities for professional insertion, there was a highlight on issues related to new possibilities for formation that appeared with the expansion and rural implantation of higher education. The proximity of public institutions of higher education, previous work experiences, and family support conditions, considering the level of schooling at the families of origin, were emerging themes and demonstrated the unbreakable connection between individuals and their context in career construction (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Concerning the experiences of higher education and the literature on the topic, researchers revealed the significance of themes such as the process of adaptation of the participants to the new higher education context, integration with peers, identification, and motivation related to disciplines, to the course itself, and to the possibility in of participation in non-mandatory extracurricular and curricular activities, due to the necessity to conciliate working with studying. Then, it is possible to observe the relevance of public policies that benefit the access of young people from different regions of the country into higher education. This level of education proves an important context for personal and career development (Silva & Teixeira, 2019), which demands adaptability resources and, at the same time promotes them.

Concerning participation in non-mandatory academic activities and work experiences, both situations might prove opportunities for the development of career adaptability, according to studies on career construction. However, work demands, most often necessary to realize higher education, might also compromise or even



lead to evasion from formation due to requirements inherent to the roles played by the students and by the workers who mobilize diverse adaptation resources (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996; Savickas, 2005).

This is a complex phenomenon in contexts of expansion and rural implantation of higher education, especially considering that the higher education system is often structured to contemplate students who have plenty of time, rather than students who now compose one of its largest contingents, the student-workers and the working-students (Vargas & Paula, 2013).

The analysis of the participants' narratives on their life and career projects revealed that the course conclusion is associated with the transition into adult life, as well as the fact that their plans are significantly different from the plans of their origin families, by the fact that their plans include the mediation of higher education in the development of their careers and, a perspective of social mobility that is aligned with the current demands of the working world. Regarding the sociocultural of the public that attends higher education in the past few years and the context of transformations and instability that involves life trajectories nowadays (Cardoso & Duarte, 2019), evidence the relevance of investigations on career development that integrate the processes of professional formation and of work with other life dimensions, from a psychosocial dimension.

Concerning career adaptability, which is determined by socioeconomic factors as well as psychosocial ones and involves the preoccupation, control, curiosity, and confidence dimension, it was possible to observe a tendency for participants with less adaptability, according to the (CAAS) scale, to present further questions concerning the choice of course, the limited exploration and of themselves, low sense of confidence regarding career decisions, greater difficulty related to the organization and the planning of the activities and disciplines of the course and, specifically concerning P1 and P5, difficulties to imagine and plan future scenarios for life and career. Such observations become consistent with the findings by previous investigations on the *Life Designing* model and the career adaptability construct and evidences their pertinence and relevance for the comprehension of the processes of career and current times and, thus, towards the advancement of knowledge regarding the theme and the elaboration of career interventions (Teychenne et al., 2019; Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2012; Savickas, 2005).

The study of the processes of career construction by undergraduate students considering the new opportunities for formation in higher education as a multidisciplinary research agenda. With a focus on career theories, involves areas of psychology, education, and work, because the development of career, and of adaptability resources are determined

by the psychosocial context. Thus, the results of this investigation might contribute to the comprehension of the processes of career constructions and other contexts in which public higher education might present itself as recent reality.

The knowledge produced on career construction in higher education reinforce the need for educational institutions to develop policies for child support and evasion prevention (Ronsoni, 2014), favor the participation of students in non-mandatory academic activities and promote career interventions with undergraduates (Silva & Bardagi, 2016) and of professional orientation in partnership with high schools. Researchers finally reveal the importance of public policies for education that promote more egalitarian access and permanence in higher education for a greater number of young people, and consequently, increase their possibilities to develop careers that are in alignment with their life projects.

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