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# *Exploring University Students' Experiences of Double Academic Statuses in Romania Who? When? Why?*



**Abstract** The paper offers insights into the views and experiences of DAS – double academic status – students at a Romanian university. This practice is discussed in the paper from the perspective of increased participation in higher education, when more and more people spend time and money not only on gaining qualifications, but also on boosting their credentials by participating in various extra-curricular activities with the hope of securing an advantage for their labour market entrance. The processes of who, when and why these students ended up in DAS will be explored along with reflecting on the local and national structural elements that allowed, and at times encouraged, such a practice.

**Keywords** extra-curricular activities; MSP – multiple status positions; DAS – double academic status; transitions; higher education; Romania; statistics; narrative analysis.

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## Introduction

One of the most significant trends impacting on the experiences of young people in recent years has been the increased participation in post-compulsory education (FURLONG – CARTMEL 1997, 2007; NAGEL – WALLACE 1997; WYN – DWYER 2000). From being a “minority pursuit for the privileged higher education became more and more a standardised part of the transitions process” (NAGEL – WALLACE 1997. 47.), and at the same time this led to a differentiation within the higher education system (between institutions, courses, qualifications). While some authors (like NAGEL – WALLACE 1997) stated that the investment in higher education had good returns in the labour market, others (like Dwyer et.al. 2005) argued that “the relationship between education and employment was complex and could be extended and unpredictable”. More recently, BROWN and colleagues (2011) even more pessimistically claimed that “the opportunity bargain has not extended individual freedom but has led to an *opportunity trap* that forces people to spend more time, effort, and money on activities that may have little intrinsic purpose in an attempt to fulfil one’s opportunities” (BROWN – LAUDER – ASHTON 2011. 12.). From this perspective, participating in higher education has become a defensive action, education is a necessary investment to have any chance of fighting for a decent standard of living, but it will result in “handsome rewards” only for a few. BROWN and colleagues (2011. 5.) argued that the belief that “education equals earnings” was unsustainable in a global economy because states failed to live up to their promise in the ‘opportunity bargain’. The authors stated that the competitions for jobs shifted from within national borders to a ‘global auction’ open to everyone and the original opportunity bargain turned into an ‘opportunity trap’ because as more and more people spend time and money to gain qualifications, the value of the credentials in the job market is reduced and no one is able to secure any advantage - “If everyone stands on a tiptoe, nobody gets a better view. But if you don’t stand on a tiptoe, there is no chance of seeing” (BROWN – LAUDER – ASHTON 2011. 135.). From this starting point it is crucial to know the perceptions and strategies of higher education students. How do they view their studies and what role (if any) do extra-curricular activities have in their student lives and future plans? Are they engaging in different extra activities to boost their credentials and earn an edge in the labour market to avoid this *opportunity trap*? Which students opt for DAS and what role does DAS play in these students’ lives? This article set out to answer these questions by looking at students’ experiences and perceptions in a university in Romania. In the following I present a brief overview of the literature, followed by the methods applied in the research. The main part of the article comprises of the presentation and discussion of the findings from the analysis followed by concluding remarks.

## Student experiences: MSP and DAS

Within the context of education to work transitions there are numerous studies on what happens to people after they graduate and enter working life. Length of time needed to secure a first job, returns to education after several years in employment, employability skills, graduate labour market characteristics, are all widely researched, especially in Western countries (see SHAVIT–MÜLLER 1998; OECD 2000; MÜLLER–GANGL 2003) but recently papers that include Eastern European countries (see BLOSSFELD et.al. 2008; KOGAN–GEBEL–NOELKE 2008; ROBERTS 2009b; BLOSSFELD et.al. 2011; KOGAN–NOELKE–GEBEL 2011; ROBERT–SAAR 2012) are also appearing. These studies looked at the outcomes of transitions in a sequential manner: education,

then graduation, and then work. But several authors wrote about the non-sequential characteristic of education-work life-events, and as DU BOIS-RAYMOND (1998. 67.) specified, “what used to be arranged in series – learning and then work – is currently becoming a double field and a double life for adolescents and young adults: learning and work, work and learning alternately.” She also pointed out that this started at an early age, for several people during school years because they wanted to supplement their pocket money. WOLBERS (2003) and more recently ROBERT and SAAR (2012) used the concept of ‘double status positions’ when talking about students who are engaged concomitantly in work and learning. Wolbers tried to determine whether being in a double status position was a step for young people towards stable employment or it was rather a kind of trap that placed young people in a persistent precarious working condition. He concluded that although double status positions were not a promise to secure, high-skilled jobs, they did act as a bridge between full-time initial education and stable employment for young people, especially regarded in the context of human capital investment that paid off later on (WOLBERS 2003. 153.). In a recent study ROULIN and BANGERTER (2013. 34–35.) explored students’ engagement in extra-curricular activities alongside their university studies and found that interest/passion, well-being, continuation of something started earlier in life, meeting other people, helping people, acquiring practical experience and the fact that it will look good on their résumé were all part of students’ motives for engaging in extra-curricular activities. Although these studies drew attention to the important fact that students, while enrolled in full time university courses, participated in other types of events as well, they neglected to present the multifaceted and complex nature of all the activities students were engaged in. Elsewhere (PLUGOR 2016) I have argued that there is a need for academic studies and discussions to catch up with the realities of student life, as university students were not living in a dualistic world of studies and work or studies and extra-curricular activities, they were actually engaged in more than one or two extra activities alongside their studies and therefore multiple status positions (MSP) was a more appropriate term to describe their university status and experiences. In that paper I presented the different activities these students were engaged in and among those was the double academic status (DAS) which denoted students studying concurrently for two different degrees. In the literature various names and various definitions have been used to denote this status: joint degrees, double degrees, dual-degree programmes, combined degrees etc. RUSSELL and colleagues (2008. 576.) defined double (dual, joint or combined) degrees as “undergraduate courses involving two bachelor degrees studied concomitantly over approximately five or six years” during which students receive “a ‘discount’ in terms of credit and time compared with the sum of two degrees”. Or as CULVER (2011. 42.) explained “dual-degree programs are undergraduate or graduate degrees in the same or similar subject area awarded by two or more institutions to students who have met the degree completion requirements for all participating institutions... their overarching objective has been to better prepare graduates to work in a global job market by imparting a more profound and extensive international awareness to them.” See KNIGHT (2011) for a full description about the various names and definitions used.

Research on student experiences of dual, joint, combined degrees proved to be surprisingly scarce even though there have been offerings of degree combinations for more than 30 years (MALONE 1985; WIMSHURST–MANNING 2015). There has been considerably more attention on researching double and/or joint degrees in Australia (RUSSELL–DOLNICAR–AYOUB 2008; HICKEY–SUMSION–HARRISON 2010; WIMSHURST–MANNING 2015) than in other parts of the world, but even in that context the main focus was more on programme rationales, administrative

problems, structures, and the supposed career ‘head start’ that double degree graduates might have compared to their colleagues who graduated with single degrees (WIMSHURST – MANNING 2015. 2.) and not necessarily on the student experience itself (except WEISSMANN 2013).

In this paper DAS refers to those students who concomitantly are enrolled in two separate degree programmes. Also included in this category are those students who already completed a degree course and decided to enrol for a second same level degree; while those students who after completing an undergraduate degree decided to continue their studies within the same field at masters level were not included in DAS. The definition used in this paper for DAS is similar to how double degrees are also perceived in the literature. Nevertheless, while double degrees enjoyed some level of integration, institutional framework and structure, albeit it differed between institutions and even fields of study within the same institution, in DAS in the Romanian context there is no institutional framework or integration of the two programmes of study. To the best of my knowledge no previous research exists specifically about DAS students, especially not in the Romanian context and for this reason I use the experiences of double/joint degree students as comparisons.

## Methodology

The field research was conducted in May-August 2011 and March-May 2012. In order to gain access to students and to collect some basic data about them and their university life I used an online questionnaire which was sent to final year BA and MA students (non-representative sample) via relevant gatekeepers (heads of career services, officials at the student services departments, lecturers and departmental managers and tutors at both universities). The online questionnaire included a series of questions relating to the students’ age, ethnicity, gender, subjective social status, parents’ and siblings’ higher education experience, motivation for choice of university, subject studied, future plans, views on their university experience and engagement in extra-curricular activities. At the end of the questionnaire students were asked to provide their contact details if they wished to elaborate further their experiences in a face-to-face interview. A total of 181 (out of which 38 DAS) students responded to the online survey and the cases were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22. Descriptive statistics were computed to gain insight into the frequency distributions of responses, and Chi-squares were used to determine whether there was a significant relationship between the independent variables (age, gender, subject studied, socio-economic status, home location, etc) and the dependent variable (DAS).

Similarly to CLANDININ and CONNELLY (2000. 19.) I believed that “educational experience should be studied narratively” and I felt that prompting for narratives in life history interviews with students could add important layers to understanding their experiences, their motivations, feelings and plans and facilitated the exploration of the interplay between structure and agency as embedded in students’ narratives. Through these narratives one could also gain a glimpse of how student experience as a phase of life was politically and socially constructed and we could describe their practices while preserving their voices. I gained narrative accounts from 29 (out of which 8 DAS) students, which were transcribed verbatim and then analysed in NVivo 10. For the qualitative analysis I combined two types of narrative analysis in order to present a holistic picture of the student experiences in the higher education contexts. Firstly, I carried out content analysis (LIEBLICH – TUVAL-MASHIACH – ZILBER 1998), focusing on the events and

experiences recounted in the narrative, and I complemented it with structure or form analysis (CORTAZZI 1993; RIESSMAN 2008), looking at how the stories were put together. The purpose of the analysis was to gain a detailed understanding of student experiences and the context in which their experiences and their decision-making occurred (for a full account of methods used see PLUGOR 2013, 2015). In the following in the results section I present first the university to situate my study within an institutional and national context, then I focus on the results of the quantitative analysis of the survey data to indicate some of the significant factors in determining whether a student becomes DAS, and finally I present the experiences and perceptions of DAS students as it emerged from the qualitative analysis. With this analysis my ultimate aim was to gain answers for the following questions: who are those students who opt to become DAS?; when, why and how do they make this decision?; what are their experiences of being DAS?; and what role does DAS play (if any) in these students' planned future careers?

## Results

### *The university context*

Situated in the north-western part of Transylvania, the city where the chosen university was represented the most popular city for university studies after the country capital, attracting annually around 70,000 students (Statistical Yearbook – Romania 2007. 23.). The chosen University was one of the 56 state HE institutions including universities, academies, polytechnic universities and institutes that operated in Romania along with the 35 accredited private institutions and 21 provisionally approved HE institutions (Bologna Report – Romania 2012. 2.). This University was part of a small group of so-called 'Level 1' universities in Romania, which could be considered models for other institutions across the country (EUA 2001. 22.). The university was one of the six public universities in the city, it had a multicultural and multilingual character teaching courses in Romanian, Hungarian and other European languages.

While some universities discourage their students to take on extra activities which would use up a significant amount of their time, the Romanian University, according to its official policies and guidelines (Romanian University 2013. 3.), allowed students to be concomitantly registered for two degrees, as it was seen as one of the fundamental rights of being a student. According to the Romanian *Law of National Education* (2011. 33.), a student "can be admitted and enrolled concomitantly in a maximum of two degrees, independent of the institution". The university where I did my research offered four types of incentives for DAS students: 1. financially these students benefited from a significant reduction of their fees (between 25-100%) depending on which departments they opted for; 2. the student could transfer some of his/her module credits from one department to the other; 3. the student benefited from reduced attendance to seminars; 4. the students could work on an interdisciplinary dissertation having supervisors from both departments. While joint degrees were common within the Romanian higher education field, the potential for DAS, embedded in the university habitus was present only at this university. This Romanian context differed from the double or joint degrees present elsewhere as there was no institutional framework for DAS. The students applied, attended and completed one degree separate from the other. They were enrolled as full time students in two different departments and there was no communication at departmental level about the student. Essentially these students had two full time academic statuses, hence the term DAS to describe them.

### *Which students engage in DAS?*

It is not known how many students at the Romanian university were engaged in double academic status, but in the online questionnaire that students completed (not representative of all the students enrolled at the university) 21.3% of the respondents stated that they were either enrolled in two degrees at that time or they already had a university degree and were studying for a second one. The majority of the students who filled in the online survey were females (69%), the mean age was 22.9 ( $s = 1.5$ ). Hungarian students were in slight majority (58.2%) compared to Romanian students (41.8%) and most of the students (80.7%) came from other counties within Romania, only 19.3% were from the same county as the university. Around one in three students had a parent or sibling with higher education experience, while if we included their partners as well, then the number increased to two out of three having someone in their vicinity with HE experience. The students were asked to rank themselves on a socio-economic scale (from 1 to 10) compared to their fellow students and the mean score was 5.2 ( $s=1.3$ ), while 75 percentile of the students placed themselves slightly above the middle, at position 6.

Seven out of ten students (70.9%) were studying an occupationally-oriented subject (business, sociology, politics, economics, computer sciences), two out of ten (20.6%) a discipline-based academic subject (geography, languages, history), while less than one out of ten (8.6%) were enrolled studying for a specialist vocational subject (law, engineering). Most of the students were enrolled at undergraduate level (75%) and correspondingly their highest educational qualification was the school leaving degree (60.1%), while the rest of them were in possession of an undergraduate degree (35.0%) or a masters degree (4.9%) already.

Table 1 below displays the socio-demographic characteristics of students either studying for one degree or being in a form of DAS. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the socio-demographic variables and students' engagement in DAS. The relationship between age and DAS was significant,  $\chi^2 (2, N=181) = 26.02, p < 0.001$ , older students were more likely to be engaged in DAS than their younger colleagues. Based on the odds ratio, the odds of older students of being in DAS was 5.66 times higher than if they were younger than 22 years of age. Similarly, the relationship between ethnicity and DAS was also significant,  $\chi^2 (2, N=181) = 6.50, p < 0.05$ , Hungarian students were more likely to be studying for a second degree or studying concomitantly for two degrees, while their Romanian colleagues were more likely to be enrolled for only one degree. If a student was of Hungarian ethnicity the odds of being in DAS was 2.69 times higher than if they were Romanians. The other socio-demographic variables (gender, parental HE experience, socio-economic status, home location) did not display a statistically significant relationship with DAS.

TABLE 1. ♦ *Students' academic status by socio-demographic characteristics (N=181); % / (n)*

		DAS			All students within category
		One degree	One degree (but already in possession of a degree)	Two degrees	
Ethnicity*	Romanian	86.7% (65)	6.7% (5)	6.7% (5)	100% (75)
	Hungarian	70.8% (75)	12.3% (13)	17.0% (18)	100% (106)
Age***	22 or younger	90.5% (86)	0.0% (0)	9.5% (9)	100% (95)
	23 or older	62.8% (54)	20.9% (18)	16.3% (14)	100% (86)

		DAS			All students within category
		One degree	One degree (but already in possession of a degree)	Two degrees	
Gender	Female	80.8% (101)	8.8% (11)	10.4% (13)	100% (125)
	Male	69.6% (39)	12.5% (7)	17.9% (10)	100% (56)
Parental HE experience	Yes	73.9% (51)	11.6% (8)	14.5% (10)	100% (69)
	No	79.5% (89)	8.9% (10)	11.6% (13)	100% (112)
Sibling HE experience	Yes	71.2% (52)	13.7% (10)	15.1% (11)	100% (73)
	No	81.5% (88)	7.4% (8)	11.1% (12)	100% (108)
Partner HE experience	Yes	78.4% (58)	10.8% (8)	10.8% (8)	100% (74)
	No	76.6% (82)	9.3% (10)	14.0% (15)	100% (107)
Home	Same county	82.4% (28)	2.9% (1)	14.7% (5)	100% (34)
	Different county	75.9% (110)	11.7% (17)	12.4% (18)	100% (179)
Socio-economic status	Low	82.7% (43)	9.6% (5)	7.7% (4)	100% (52)
	Middle	81.8% (45)	10.9% (6)	7.3% (4)	100% (55)
	High	70.3% (52)	9.5% (7)	20.3% (15)	100% (74)
All students		77.3% (140)	9.9% (18)	12.7% (23)	100% (181)

Note: \* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

Contrary to previous studies on similar topics (RUSSELL – DOLNICAR – AYOUB 2008) which displayed a predominance among female students for double degrees, in my sample (even though not statistically significant) males were present in higher numbers among those who were doing two degrees simultaneously as well as among those who were studying for a second degree, already having finished the first one. Controlling for age, I got the same results, male students were overrepresented in both the younger and the older student categories compared to their female colleagues.

Table 2 presents the characteristics related to students' educational background and students' engagement in DAS. The relationship between highest degree obtained by students and DAS was significant –  $\chi^2(4, N=181) = 37.032, p < 0.001$  – students who possessed MA degrees were more likely to be studying for a second degree or studying concomitantly for two degrees, while their colleagues who had a school leaving diploma were more likely to be enrolled for only one

degree. Based on the odds ratio, if a student had an UG or MA degree the odds of being in DAS was 2.71 times higher than if they had only a school leaving diploma; while if they already had an MA degree the odds of being in DAS was 4.72 times higher than if they had a lower degree.

While subject studied did not seem to display a significant relationship with DAS, whether students paid fees or not did seem to matter;  $\chi^2(2, N=179) = 9.19, p < 0.01$ . Those students who paid fees were more likely to be studying for a second degree or studying concomitantly for two degrees, while their colleagues who enjoyed free university education were more likely to be enrolled for only one degree. Based on the odds ratio, if a student was paying fees the odds of being in DAS was 3.21 times higher than if they were in a state funded university place.

TABLE 2. ❖ *Students' academic status by educational characteristics (N=181); % / (n)*

		One degree	DAS		All students within category
			One degree (but already in possession of a degree)	Two degrees	
Highest degree (school)***	School leaving degree	84.4% (92)	0.9% (1)	14.7% (16)	100% (109)
	Higher (UG/MA) degree	66.7% (48)	23.6% (17)	9.7% (7)	100% (72)
Highest degree (MA)***	MA degree	44.4% (4)	55.6% (5)	0% (0)	100% (9)
	Lower degree	79.1% (136)	7.6% (13)	13.4% (23)	100% (172)
Fees**	Pays fees	58.3% (21)	16.7% (6)	25.0% (9)	100% (36)
	Does not pay fees	81.8% (117)	8.4% (12)	9.8% (14)	100% (143)
Subject	Discipline-based academic subject	77.8% (28)	8.3% (3)	13.9% (5)	100% (36)
	Occupationally-oriented route	76.4% (94)	9.8% (12)	13.8% (17)	100% (123)
	Specialist-vocational subject	100% (15)	0% (0)	0% (0)	100% (15)
All students		77.3% (140)	9.9% (18)	12.7% (23)	100% (181)

Note: \* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

Although not statistically significant, it is probably worth mentioning that male students, with parents or siblings with HE experience seemed to be more keen to do another degree than their colleagues; and similarly students coming from outside the county to pursue their studies appeared to be staying on and enrolling for another degree in higher numbers than their colleagues; while opting to do two degrees concomitantly seemed to be higher among the higher

socio-economic status students, so these relationships could potentially be other significant indicators of DAS and would benefit from further analysis on representative samples. As the focus of the present paper is more on the experiences and views of students I will not present more in-depth analysis on the factors that determined DAS, but these are available if requested. In the following, using the qualitative data gathered in the study, I explore the reasons why students opted for DAS, their perceptions regarding this position and its role in their studies and future career plans.

### ***When and why do students do DAS?***

Additional knowledge and gaining specific skills, which would make them more employable were the main reasons given in previous studies for students opting for joint / double degrees (see RUSSELL – DOLNICAR – AYOUB 2008; WIMSHURST – MANNING 2015). In contrast in my study students spoke about being driven by intrinsic reasons like: interest, disappointment with previous course, needing to fill time wisely as well as taking advantage of a financial opportunity. Students displayed different reasons based on when they started their second activity. Previous studies rarely focused on timing of the joint / double status and understandably the reason could be because those students started their degrees at the same time. In my study, due to the fact that one course was independent from the other at my chosen university, the timing of students entering DAS was crucial and it was intertwined with their reasons for opting for DAS.

Two students opted to enrol in two courses at the same time in their first year (Székelyboy and Andreea) and their motivations were predominantly financial. Székelyboy<sup>1</sup> opted for the two courses before the admission process started, not as a result of it as was the case with Andreea. He thought he would not gain admittance to his first choice course and he accepted the scholarship offered by the Theology department: if a student was enrolled at their department and in parallel was a student on a different course, then the department would pay for that student's tuition fees. So in essence the student would benefit from attending two courses without paying tuition fees. Andreea<sup>2</sup> ended up in DAS as a result of the admission process as she did not secure a state funded place at her first choice course, while she did in her second choice. She knew that if she opted for both the university would give her a tuition fee discount, so she decided to take advantage of this opportunity.

Előd and SMRE started their second courses after the first year. Előd<sup>3</sup> was disappointed by the lack of practical experiences in his Politics course and he decided to study Law as it was an area he was interested in and he could see how he would be able combine the two fields together. He chose to study Law at a New University partly because he wanted to learn Romanian, but also because he wanted to be surrounded by people similar to him, with Hungarian mother language and studying in Romanian. For SMRE<sup>4</sup> his first course was Economics, while his second was Theology. He liked what he was learning in his Economics course and felt that lecturers were well-prepared and the theoretical aspects of the field were covered and also practical examples

<sup>1</sup> Székelyboy is male, Hungarian, age 21, no one with HE experience, position 3 on socio-economic scale, 2<sup>nd</sup> year studying occupationally-oriented subject & 2<sup>nd</sup> year studying discipline-based academic subject.

<sup>2</sup> Andreea is female, Romanian, age 23, parents & siblings with HE experience, position 8 on socio-economic scale, 3<sup>rd</sup> year studying occupationally-oriented subjects.

<sup>3</sup> Előd is male, Hungarian, age 23, parents & siblings with HE experience, position 8 on socio-economic scale, 3<sup>rd</sup> year studying occupationally-oriented subject & 1<sup>st</sup> year studying specialist vocational subject.

<sup>4</sup> SMRE is male, Hungarian, age 23, parents & siblings with HE experience, position 7 on socio-economic scale, 3<sup>rd</sup> year studying occupationally-oriented subject & 2<sup>nd</sup> year studying discipline-based academic subject.

mentioned. He also praised the extra-curricular activities organised by the department as he saw these as good skills-enhancing opportunities, but felt that these were not for everyone and consequently thought that there should be more practical focus in the curricula and not just in the extra activities. He explained opting for theology with his family background and the presence of a financial opportunity (the scholarship). His parents worked for the department so he has always been surrounded with theology-related topics, and additionally the scholarship which the department offered seemed a good option.

Eliza<sup>5</sup>, Pacheco<sup>6</sup> and Blanka<sup>7</sup> all opted for the second degree while in the final year of the first one and Ercsi<sup>8</sup> after graduating from her first degree and while doing a Masters. All four opted for the second degree due to interest, but while for Pacheco this was the only reason, both Blanka and Eliza opted for the second degree because they were disappointed by their first choice and felt that it was not connected to their chosen career paths. Blanka felt that she would not be able to cope in the world of work with an International Relations European Studies degree so she decided to opt for something which was more practical and also interested her for a long time, Sociology. Similarly, Eliza also started her second degree because she was disappointed by her first choice, not feeling Economics was “her world” although she did appreciate the mentality and the worldview she got from her course. Pacheco decided to opt for Geography as his second course, on top of studying Tourism. His rationale was different, he was finally pursuing his interests and during the interview he kept emphasizing that it was not the same as studying for two different courses. Ercsi opted for the double status position after graduating from her Economics degree as she was starting her MA course because she knew she would have spare time and thought she could spend it better (*{ne töltsém potyára itt az időt...}*) by opting for a second degree. Her second option was Geography as it was an area she was interested in.

Overall, students who engaged in double academic status in their first year opted for the position either because of the financial advantages or because they were not prepared to opt for just one subject, one career option at that moment in time. Those students who opted for the second degree later, in their second or third years made a conscious choice of doing something different or something extra mainly because they realised that their first option was not entirely fulfilling. Students talked about the challenges of combining the two degrees both from a time management perspective and in terms of the curricula, but generally highlighted that they were able to fulfil both commitments.

### ***What is students' experience of DAS?***

As others have also noted (see RUSSELL–DOLNICAR–AYOUB 2008), students have mixed feelings when asked about their experiences and opinion about DAS. They highlight the various positive aspects (broader worldview, more knowledge, extra skills, more people) but also the

<sup>5</sup> Eliza is female, Hungarian, age 22, parents with HE experience, position 4 on socio-economic scale, 3<sup>rd</sup> year & 1<sup>st</sup> year studying occupationally-oriented subjects.

<sup>6</sup> Pacheco is male, Hungarian, age 25, no one with HE experience, position 7 on socio-economic scale, 3<sup>rd</sup> year BA studying discipline-based academic subject & 2<sup>nd</sup> year MA studying occupationally-oriented subject, already in possession of a BA degree in occupationally-oriented subject.

<sup>7</sup> Blanka is female, Hungarian, age 24, siblings with HE experience, position 7 on socio-economic scale, 3<sup>rd</sup> year BA & 2<sup>nd</sup> year MA studying occupationally-oriented subjects, already in possession of a BA degree in occupationally-oriented subject.

<sup>8</sup> Ercsi is female, Hungarian, age 24, no one with HE experience, position 5 on socio-economic scale, 3<sup>rd</sup> year studying discipline-based academic subject, already in possession of a BA & an MA degree in occupationally-oriented subjects.

considerable challenges they encountered (time constraints, workload, conflicting expectations, administrative difficulties).

Andreea found both courses useful and was able to use the knowledge gained in one course at the other, but her preference remained the Communication & PR and she was planning to continue studying for a Masters in that area. Juggling between the two courses and marrying the two timetables for her did not seem a difficult task. She was aware that the university requirement of lecture and seminar attendance was lower for students who were enrolled in two courses and she negotiated her course attendance with her lecturers. The busiest and most difficult periods were the exams for her, because during the three weeks she had to study and pass more than ten modules. She took advantage of an incentive which the university system 'gave' to students enrolled in two courses: students had the option to have their final grades from one department equated at the other department, they did not need to attend similar modules in the two courses, nor pass exams in those.

Pacheco also used this option and had several of his modules equated, so his workload was not as high as for students studying at different departments and the amount of support received from his lecturers was also greater because they already knew him and 'he belonged' to that department. As he stated: "They overlooked if I didn't go to classes, they overlooked if I didn't submit my assignments in time, they overlooked if I didn't take my exams when the others did and I could negotiate a different date. They were absolutely flexible in this respect." For him the difficulty was that he needed to write his undergraduate and his postgraduate dissertation at the same time and he had to juggle the deadlines his lecturers gave him. But he saw the two as complementary and he was planning to engage in PhD studies and in an academic career. From this perspective he was similar to the girls, Eliza and Blanka, as he used his second degree for future career reasons.

Eliza did not feel that combining the two courses was very difficult due to the nature of the field and the courses, she did however complain about the rigidity of some lecturers and how she was penalised when she was not able to prepare for a course. Ercsi mentioned that although lecturers understood her situation, they did comment that it was not beneficial for her to "ride two horses at the same time {két lovat egyszerez megnyergelni}..." and she mentioned that it was a very busy period and her grades were not very good but she managed to pass all her exams. Although there were university policies in place for double academic status students, much depended on the department and especially on individual lecturers how they treated students in these situations. In Ercsi and Eliza's case the departments they were attending were less keen on having double status students.

Other departments (like Theology) on top of the special arrangements for DAS students at university level, at departmental level they were supportive and understanding of students enrolled in two courses when designing the course timetable and with essay deadlines or exams. For Székelyboy attending courses and passing exams did not seem to be problematic, but he mentioned that he struggled with the different epistemological positions of the two fields. He was the only student to talk about this aspect, possibly not surprising as similarly to the Australian students in the WIMSHURST and MANNING (2015) study, the students I interviewed also regarded their two degrees separately. They spoke about them individually as disciplines that offer them a set of skills and knowledge, but there were no attempts from their part to consider achieving an epistemological balance between fields and/or worldviews. Both Andreea and Székelyboy talked about how they found the double aspects of their experiences interesting, how they were able

to use or not use the knowledge gained in one course to help them in the other. They both liked above all the practical experiences which they had and felt they learned the most from those. Apart from doing two courses at the same time they were also engaged in other activities at the student union which they found beneficial both for their studies and their futures.

Blanka and Előd drew the most comparisons between their two courses. Blanka felt that there was a disproportionate focus on history topics that lecturers were familiar with and the course structure lacked modules about international relations and European studies. She also felt that she was not able to see the connection between what she was studying and how she could use it in the world of work as there were hardly any practical experiences organised. The sociology course on the other hand was more practice-oriented, she enjoyed studying it more, felt the lecturers were more approachable and they focused on presenting the practical aspects of the subject too, consequently she could see the practical use of what she was doing, she was more engaged in extra-curricular activities as well and she was planning to continue to focus on this field in the future. She engaged in double academic status as she felt that she had the extra time to devote to something she was interested in and as she found where her interests lied she became more engaged in extra-curricular activities too. Előd enjoyed his experiences in the New University more as it was an environment similar to the Waldorf School in which he grew up. He had a deep sense of community feeling, the social aspects of his studies were equally important as the knowledge that he gained by studying. He described the New University as “colourful” compared to the “grey” Old University. He mentioned the several benefits of doing the two courses and he projected his future as continuing with both and focusing on aspects that “have a bit of both in them”. Similarly to Előd, SMRE also highlighted that it was not difficult to combine his studies and that he enjoyed the different world-views the subjects offered. WIMSHURST and MANNING (2015) and WEISSMANN (2013) noted in their studies that although the students they interviewed were enrolled in double/joint degrees where they were supposed to receive an integrated experience of studying two different degrees, these students actually had to arrive at their own understanding of complementarity as it was not provided to them through the course.

### ***Was DAS beneficial?***

It was visible how the whole HE/university field in Romania was constructed and operated in a way to enable students to study for two degrees at the same time. Although the benefits for the university were not known specifically, it is possible that since a student was registered at two departments, the university counted them two times when reporting about the overall number of students registered at the university. In addition the student needed to pay a certain amount for the possibility to do two degrees at the same time, which although is a reduced rate, if there was no such opportunity then students would graduate only from one degree, so it would not be financially beneficial for the university. Students regard the possibility for DAS as a normal part of the HE system in Romania and were open about their positions. They told their lecturers and used the DAS to negotiate their levels of engagement with the course. Lecturers seemed supportive as they gave them absences or accepted delayed papers, although some might have been opinionated, like in Ercsi’s case or inflexible, like in Eliza’s case. DAS with all its implications was part of the university habitus.

All students highlighted the benefits of being in DAS. All of them spoke about the academic side, about what interested them and how DAS allowed them to build on those interests and

shape their future career plans, similarly to the students in RUSSELL and colleagues' study (2008. 582.) who highlighted the benefits in "mixing subjects and the associated diversity of perspectives and range of teaching styles". The students in my study also spoke about the monetary benefits while others focused more on the emotional side and the sense of belonging and community which they experienced with DAS. The main disadvantages that students highlighted, similarly to RUSSELL and colleagues' students (2008), were the increased workload particularly in the exams periods and clashes in timetables, but some of them spoke also about epistemological and theoretical differences between the subjects. Apart from the Theology department, which had a departmental policy to help DAS students, none of the other departments offered administrative or other kinds of support to the students so they were left to negotiate clashes in timetables and exams with individual lecturers and tutors. This was a problem mentioned in other studies as well (RUSSELL – DOLNICAR – AYOUB 2008).

Because these students were still studying and not in the labour market yet, the benefits of DAS for their future work was not possible to ascertain. Other studies, like RUSSELL and colleagues (2008. 580.) found that only half of double degree alumni found their degrees beneficial in their jobs. In terms of career plans and awareness about their skills and how they could capitalize on them, Russell's students highlighted that they would have benefited from tailored guidance and focus on their employability skills. The students in my study, particularly those who opted for DAS later in their studies because they were dissatisfied with their previous choice, had clearer ideas about what future career plans they had and what role the second degree and DAS played in that. Blanka and Pacheco were planning to continue their studies building on their second choice subject, Előd, Ercsi and Székelyboy were planning to combine both degrees in their career plans and were hoping that DAS will represent an advantage when looking for jobs. Most of the students spoke about their two degrees as completely separate, only Székelyboy and Ercsi were planning to combine both in their future careers. This resonates with what RUSSELL and colleagues (2008) also found, that most of their respondents experienced the two degrees separately, not 'fitting together'. These students highlighted that they would have benefitted from cross-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary subjects to help them link the two, which also coincides with what WIMSHURST and MANNING (2015. 15.) proposed: "introducing (structured) integrative activities into combined degrees" so that students could understand and explore the conceptual connections.

## Conclusion

In this paper my intention was to complement the existing literature on higher education student experiences by highlighting the existence of double academic statuses – DAS – using the example of a university in Romania. Although there were no official figures, based on the findings from an online survey (which was not representative of all the students enrolled at the university) it seemed that DAS was a practice that had an impact on a significant proportion of the students, 21.3% of the respondents stated that they were either enrolled in two degrees at that time or they already had a university degree and were studying for a second one. Further analysis exposed that Hungarian and older (23+) students seemed more likely to be involved in DAS, and similarly also students whose highest degree at the time of asking was a university degree, and those who were paying university fees for their studies were more likely to be in

DAS than their colleagues. The latter was not surprising given the fact that only one university place could be exempt from fees in the Romanian system, but the fact that the likelihood of DAS increased with the level of degree students reported having was an interesting finding. It would seem that for a significant proportion of students the practice was to gain multiple undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, a thought echoed by Blanka during her interview:

*I graduated from my BA and then came the Masters and I enrolled to the same department because, a normal person... if they didn't like the BA then they wouldn't go to the MA... but I went because if I'm here in [name of the city] because of the sociology course then I of course continue doing the Masters because that's an extra paper, an extra qualification... so this was my thinking... because it's not very difficult, it's not much effort knowledge-wise and time-wise to finish the Masters, it looks good that I completed 2 cycles of the same...*

As we saw from the narrative analysis, this was largely due to the fact that students were dissatisfied and disillusioned with their first choice of subject and were looking for alternative career options. This practice was similar to the 'fishing for activities' mentioned by BROOKS and EVERETT (2008. 383.) or the trendsetters of DU BOIS-REYMOND's (2004), but these students were rather 'fishing' for one different activity within the formal education sphere and not various activities outside of the curriculum to engage in. These were the students who reported being dissatisfied with their studies and wanted to change and learn something different (Blanka, Előd, Pacheco and Eliza). From this perspective DAS became an escape route for students who realised that they made the wrong choice with their first degree. But also emerging from their narratives was a realisation that actually DAS was highly beneficial for their future careers as it was part of their *economy of experience* (ROULIN – BANGERTER 2013. 25.) that could be used as a tactic by students to distinguish themselves from their peers in the increased competition in the labour market (BROWN – HESKETH 2004; BROWN – LAUDER – ASHTON 2011). Overall, this strategy of 'fishing for' activities (BROOKS – EVERETT 2008. 383.) or engaging in DAS and in MSP, seems to be on the rise and it could quickly become the contemporary student experience and mode of learning.

My study did not aim to specifically target students in DAS positions nor was this status the sole interest for the research, but it became an emerging topic shortly after beginning the field research. Conducting research on bigger and representative samples of students in Romania as well as more in-depth analysis specifically on DAS would provide more fruitful information both for academia and policy audiences. In this paper I did not have space to reflect more on the prevalence of students' 'sense of belonging', but this was apparent when students were selecting a subject and place of study, but also with regard to what activities they chose to be part of and which they disregarded or they gave up as it 'didn't feel right', and similarly with respect to where they could see themselves working and living in the future. Future research should explore students' attachment and detachment to places and communities. \*

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